



Voter Turnout, Race, Income and the Fate of Property Tax Referendums

2024 Presidential Election Year

More Voters Show Up to Decide Fate of Cook County Property Tax Referendums; Still, Less than Half Vote in Most Cases

March 2025

Cook County Treasurer Maria Pappas

Introduction

Voters who live in largely white communities, who are more likely to own their own home or who reside in areas with higher median household incomes vote at higher rates when asked whether to increase their property taxes.

Conversely, voters who are from predominately Black and Latino communities, who are more likely to rent or who live in areas with lower median household incomes tend to skip voting on property tax questions, a Cook County Treasurer's Office analysis of 2024 referendum turnout shows.

The analysis also shows that on average the percentage of Cook County voters weighing in on property tax-related questions increased significantly from the previous four years' average and slightly from the last presidential election year's average.

However, in less than half of cases a majority of voters turned out for those referendum questions. That continued a yearslong pattern of voters often allowing the few to decide for the many — a trend first identified by the Treasurer's Office in March 2024.^{1,2} This perpetuates a pattern of leaving crucial pocketbook decisions up to a few motivated voters.

During 2024, elected officials and residents in Cook County placed a total of 35 property tax-related referendums on ballots during the March primary and November general election.³ Of those, all but five asked voters to approve tax increases.

¹ "The Few Decide for the Many: Only One in Three Registered Voters Determine the Fate of Cook County Property Tax Referendums," March 2024. ([LINK](#))

² The appendix contains the Treasurer's methodology for this latest analysis.

³ The Treasurer's Office analysis focused solely on binding referendums with a direct impact on property taxes, not advisory questions designed only to gauge voter sentiment.

Voters approved 26 referendums⁴ that allowed local governments to:

- Proceed with 14 bond issuances that created \$563 million in new debt;
- Exceed state caps on tax levy increases by more than \$4.5 million across three taxing districts;
- Establish two mental health service programs in Chicago and a new park district in University Park;
- Dissolve one taxing district;
- Adopt home rule powers — which give municipal officials greater power to impose new or higher taxes — in three suburbs.⁵

Turnout⁶ ranged from 4.3%, for a primary ballot question that asked northwest suburban voters whether to dissolve an already defunct fire protection district, to 76%, for a general election question asking voters to issue nearly \$90 million in debt for park improvements in a far west suburb that straddles Cook and DuPage counties.

The average property tax-related referendum turnout for the 2024 primary was 20.9%, but increased dramatically to 62.6%⁷ for the general election — mirroring overall voting trends. Primaries determine candidates for general elections later in the year and typically attract fewer people to the polls. Voters in general elections then determine the leaders at all levels of government, spurring a higher turnout.

For the entire year, average referendum turnout was 45.9%, compared to 33.7% for the previous four years — and 43% for 2020, the last presidential election year. A larger number of referendums on general election ballots and a few referendums with notably high turnout likely drove this increase. The increase came even though overall countywide turnout⁸ in 2024 was the lowest for a presidential election in over three decades.

Across all taxing districts, turnout for referendums is lower than overall election turnout because some voters choose to ignore the ballot questions. These drop-off voters, who go to the polls but skip questions farther down the ballot, continued to suppress referendum participation. The median drop-off rate — the percentage of registered voters who

⁴ The overall 74.3% approval rate for property tax-related referendums in 2024 was about 3.6 percentage points higher than it was for property tax referendums during the previous four years.

⁵ Home rule municipalities in Illinois are given more taxing powers than non-home rule cities, villages and towns. Municipalities with more than 25,000 residents are automatically home rule, unless voters strip away that authority in a referendum. Smaller municipalities can become home rule if voters approve that change in a referendum. 65 ILCS 5/1-1-9 [[LINK](#)]

⁶ Turnout was calculated by dividing the number of votes cast for each referendum by the number of registered voters in the taxing district.

⁷ During the previous four years, average property tax-related referendum turnout was 28% for primaries and 50% for general elections. ([LINK](#))

⁸ Overall turnout is the percentage of all registered voters in Cook County who showed up at the polls and cast a ballot. Some of these voters chose not to vote on referendums so are not counted in the “referendum turnout.”

submitted a ballot and skipped the referendum question — in the primary was 3%, compared to 8.7% in the general election.⁹

The higher average turnout numbers last year suggest more voter participation in determining the outcome of property tax-related questions on the ballot. But the fact that in a majority of cases, less than half of eligible voters weighed in is worth noting as governments continue to seek voter input, including in the upcoming April 1, 2025 consolidated election.

In presidential election years, voters are drawn to the polls in higher numbers to determine a combination of national, state and local issues and races. In comparison, odd-year consolidated elections only focus on local issues. This means voters drawn to consolidated elections typically the small number of residents who are more attuned to local politics, which historically results in lower overall turnout rates.

On average, only one in five voters determined the outcome of 23 referendums in 2021 and 2023. This included approving over \$275 million in new debt and increasing tax levies by \$7.1 million above state caps.

If turnout trends continue, a distinct minority of voters on April 1 will decide whether to:

- Increase taxes to expand mental health services in Palatine Township;
- Issue nearly \$222 million in new debt across Western Springs and two school districts that cover Northbrook, La Grange, La Grange Park and Brookfield;
- Increase tax levies for another Northbrook school district by \$2.7 million above the amount allowed to pay off bonds they can issue without a referendum;¹⁰
- Exceed state caps on tax levy increases by nearly \$3.5 million across Northfield Park District, Prospect Heights School District 23 and the Roselle Fire Protection District.

Referendums: Income, Race and Homeownership

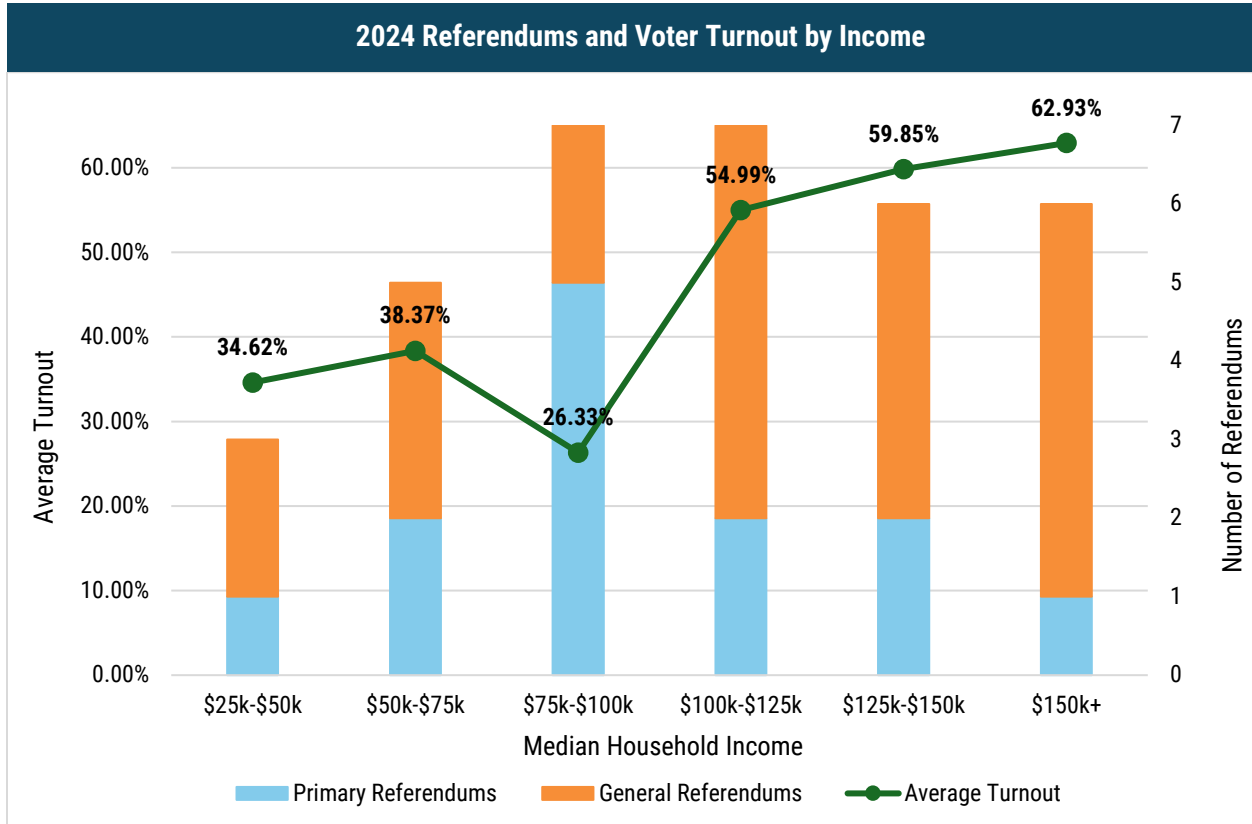
For this analysis, the Treasurer's Office for the first time compared income, racial and homeownership characteristics of taxing districts with referendum turnout.

In 2024, the average turnout for property tax-related referendums only exceeded 50% in taxing districts where the median household income was greater than \$100,000. This

⁹ Ballot drop-off rates calculated as the percentage difference between ballots and votes.

¹⁰ Suburban non-home rule governments may issue general obligation bonds without seeking voter approval based on the value of district's taxable property. Under PTELL, taxes levied to pay this non-referendum bond debt is limited to what's known as a debt service extension base. Annual increases to that base, like other annual property tax increases, are limited to the increase in the consumer price index or 5%, whichever is less. To exceed those limitations, officials must seek voter approval. In this case, Northbrook School District 27 is looking to establish a debt service extension base to provide a consistent source of funding. 35 ILCS 200/18-185 [\[LINK\]](#)

average increases to 60% in taxing districts where the median household income¹¹ was at least \$150,000. Voters in less wealthy taxing districts turned out at significantly lower rates. Average turnout was 34% in areas where median household income fell below the county median of \$81,797.



Wealthier taxing districts placed more of their referendums on ballots in the general election, which typically has substantially higher turnout — a fact that explains part of the turnout difference. Nevertheless, voters in wealthier districts also turned out at higher rates than voters in less-affluent areas during the primary.

The Treasurer’s analysis found a similar correlation for ballot drop-off rates. Voters in the lowest-income taxing districts tended to complete ballots less often than voters in the wealthier taxing districts.

¹¹ Median household income was determined using 2023 U.S. Census American Community Survey 5-year estimate data. S1903 – Median Income in the Past 12 Months ([LINK](#)). This data is unavailable for the Elk Grove Rural Fire Protection District.

Household Income and Average Turnout in 2024				
Median Household Income	March Avg. Turnout	November Avg. Turnout	Total Avg. Turnout	Median Drop-off Rate
\$25k-\$50k	14.1%	44.9%	34.6%	15.7%
\$50k-\$75k	18.5%	51.6%	38.4%	5.4%
\$75k-\$100k	16.9%	50.0%	26.3%	7.6%
\$100k-\$125k	25.5%	66.8%	55.0%	5.1%
\$125k-\$145k	33.9%	72.8%	59.9%	4.8%
\$150k+	33.5%	68.8%	62.9%	6.2%

Majority Black, Latino or majority-minority populations¹² tend to make up lower-income taxing districts, and the analysis of voting data highlights this correlation.¹³ Referendum turnout in majority white taxing districts was significantly higher than it was for Black, Latino and majority-minority districts.

However, voters in majority white and Black districts skipped fewer referendum questions. The median referendum drop-off rate in largely white taxing districts was 5.9% and 5% in majority Black districts. The median ballot drop-off rate increases to 11% in majority Latino districts and nearly 13% in majority-minority districts.

Race and Voter Turnout				
Majority Racial Makeup	March Avg. Turnout	November Avg. Turnout	Total Avg. Turnout	Median Drop-off Rate
White	27.5%	68.1%	55.2%	5.9%
Majority-Minority	16.5%	48.0%	32.3%	12.7%
Black	17.0%	49.6%	33.3%	5.0%
Hispanic or Latino	11.0%	47.3%	29.2%	10.6%

Similar patterns were identified when the Treasurer’s Office reexamined tax-related referendums held from 2020-2023. During those years, suburban voters in wealthier, whiter taxing districts also turned out at slightly higher levels on average. Across all elections, majority white districts with median household incomes greater than \$100,000 had the strongest voter turnout.¹⁴

¹² Majority-minority refers to districts where most of the population is a combination of either Black, Hispanic, Latino or another racial/ethnic minority.
¹³ Race and ethnicity data is from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2023 American Community Survey 5-year estimates. DP05 – Demographic and Housing Estimates [[LINK](#)]. This data is unavailable for the Elk Grove Rural Fire Protection District.
¹⁴ Data from 2020-2023 comes from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (5-year estimates) for municipality, township or school district that best fits the taxing district from the appropriate election year.

Consider Robbins, where the park district during the primary sought to increase its property tax levy above state limits, and Kenilworth, where village officials sought approval for a \$2.5 million bond issuance.

Turnout in south suburban Robbins, where median household income falls below \$38,000, was just 14.1% — one of the lowest in the primary. In Kenilworth, a North Shore suburb with a median household income above \$250,000, turnout was 33.5% — one of the highest in the primary.

In addition, the Robbins Park District has a relatively low percentage of homeowners compared to high-income taxing districts — less than 73% of the district’s residents own their home while the remaining 27% rent. In Kenilworth, over 97% of residents are homeowners and less than 3% rent. Areas with higher percentages of people renting also tended to have lower turnout and higher drop-off rates, the Treasurer’s Office found.¹⁵

Voter Turnout, Homeownership and Income					
Percentage of owner-occupied units	March Avg. Turnout	November Avg. Turnout	Total Avg. Turnout	Median Drop-off Rate	Median Income
Above 80%	30.5%	69.6%	58.8%	5.9%	\$142,637
Below 80%	16.9%	51.1%	34.0%	8.2%	\$73,429

Homeowners are taxed directly, paying bills twice a year. Renters pay indirectly through monthly lease payments that don’t break out property tax costs. That may motivate homeowners more than renters to turn out for referendums that directly affect their pocketbooks.

Referendums that Affected Property Taxes

Borrowing Above State Limits

Local taxing agencies — such as school districts, park districts and non-home rule cities and villages — must win voter approval to increase debt above state-imposed limits.

During 2024, 15 agencies asked voters to approve bond issuances. Fourteen passed, for an approval rate of 93%, compared to an 80.5% approval rate during the previous four years. Average turnout for bond referendums also increased to 54% from 33%.

The single referendum that failed was an \$89.8 million bond issue for Avoca School District 37, which operates three elementary schools on the North Shore.¹⁶ In the March primary, voters rejected the referendum by a 3-1 margin.

¹⁵ Data from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2023 5-year estimates. B25008 - Total Population in Occupied Housing Units by Tenure [\[LINK\]](#). This data is unavailable for the Elk Grove Rural Fire Protection District.

¹⁶ Avoca School District 37 covers portions of Glenview, Northfield, Wilmette and Winnetka.

Only one other taxing agency, the Elmhurst Park District,¹⁷ sought to borrow more money than Avoca. In the November general election, Elmhurst voters approved the issuance of \$89.95 million in bonds. More than three-quarters of eligible voters weighed in — the highest turnout since 2020. The money will be used to improve many of the district’s parks and recreational facilities.

Approval for another major bond issue was secured by Barrington Community Unit School District 220. Voters in November 2024 approved \$64 million in new debt to renovate its high school — less than four years after winning voter approval for a \$147 million bond issuance in the 2020 primary election that led to other facility upgrades in the school district.

Two taxing agencies showed that the second time may be the charm.

After north suburban Golf School District 67 in the 2022 primary election lost a \$56 million bond referendum to pay for new elementary and middle school buildings, voters in November 2024 approved a scaled-back bond issuance of \$26.3 million.

West suburban Roselle Public Library District also had a successful re-do after voters rejected a \$22 million bond in the 2023 consolidated election for a new library building. In November 2024, voters approved the same proposal.

Getting Around PTELL

Non-home rule taxing districts are restricted by how much they can raise their property taxes under the [Property Tax Extension Limitation Law](#), or PTELL. This law restricts increases in most property taxes to no more than the prior year’s increase in the consumer price index, or 5%, whichever is less.¹⁸ But governments can tax more than that if voters agree.

Eight local governments in 2024 asked voters to approve increases that exceeded PTELL caps. Average turnout for those referendums increased to 42% — 13 percentage points higher than it was for those questions from 2020 to 2023.¹⁹ Voters passed three, or 37.5%. That is significantly lower than the passage rate of 73% in the previous four years. The three that passed were for the Robbins Park District, the village of Riverside and Palos Community Consolidated School District Number 118.

The Robbins Park District held its referendum during the primary, and only 14.1% of its voters weighed in. The district will use the levy increase to build up to four new parks and a

¹⁷ A small portion of Elmhurst is in Cook County; the rest is in DuPage County. When referendums straddled jurisdictions, vote totals from neighboring counties were added to Cook County tallies.

¹⁸ PTELL also allows taxing districts to increase taxes above limits to capture the assessed values of newly constructed properties, but that has no effect on existing taxpayers. 35 ILCS 200/18-185 [\[LINK\]](#)

¹⁹ The average voter turnout for tax levy cap questions from 2020-2023 was 29%.

multipurpose recreation facility.²⁰ It is estimated that the levy increase will add \$132 to a property tax bill on a \$100,000 home.

Riverside held its referendum in the 2024 general election. Even with approval, the district's overall property tax levy will not go up. That's because the \$265,000 increase for annual street improvements equals the amount the village was spending on now-retired debt.²¹ Taxpayers, however, would have seen a tax decrease if the referendum had failed — a point that taxing agencies don't typically note when explaining what could be called a tax-shift referendum. The referendum generated a lot of interest with a voter turnout rate of 72.2%. It passed by 66 votes out of 4,974 cast, the narrowest margin of all 2024 referendums.

Palos Community Consolidated School District 118 also proposed a tax-shift referendum in the March primary, aiming to swap \$4.35 million previously spent on retiring debt for annual operating expenses. The referendum passed with 25.1% of registered voters taking part.

Voters repeatedly rejected measures to exceed tax caps in two taxing districts. The Northlake Public Library District failed to win approval twice in 2024 for its tax-shift referendum.²² In the March primary, the proposal failed by 77 votes, and failed again in the November general election by 156 votes.

Prospect Heights School District 23 also tried to pass a levy increase after failing to get enough votes in the 2023 consolidated election.²³ However, the measure failed again by a 270-vote margin among 3,202 votes cast.

Control Over Their Own Affairs

Three municipalities asked voters to take a stance on home rule powers, which give municipalities greater flexibility in how they run their governments. This includes the power to enact a broader array of taxes, issue additional debt and exceed property tax increase limitations. All three passed.

In the 2024 primary, voters in Richton Park and Roselle narrowly approved those expanded powers, with 52% and 59% voting yes respectively. However, voter turnout was relatively low with only 21.2% of Richton Park voters and 25.9% of Roselle voters weighing in.

In November 2024, 71.3% of Glencoe voters weighed in on new home rule powers, and the measure easily passed with a winning margin of 27-percentage points.

²⁰ Alexandra Kukulka, "Robbins Park District seeks property tax increase for playgrounds, multipurpose recreation facility", *Daily Southtown*, March 7, 2024. [\[LINK\]](#)

²¹ "To fund street repairs, Riverside wants new method to pay the costs," Trend Brown, *Riverside-Brookfield Landmark*, June 13, 2024. [\[LINK\]](#)

²² Northlake Public Library District, "Referendum 2024." [\[LINK\]](#)

²³ In 2023, the school district asked to increase the levy \$2,662,604 above the capped amount. In March 2024, the school district asked to increase the levy \$3,325,403 above the capped amount.

Create or Dissolve Taxing Districts

To create or to get rid of a taxing district, such as a park district or fire protection district, a majority of the agency's voters must approve. Creating a new taxing district results in additional property taxes.

Local governments also can ask voters to approve new boards to oversee and fund expansion of mental health care. The new boards have property tax collection powers to fund mental health care — increasing taxes for homeowners. Governments in the suburbs may increase their tax rates by 0.15% for these programs.²⁴ Such a referendum may be initiated by government officials through a resolution or by citizens through a petition.²⁵

In Thornton Township, voters rejected a mental health tax by 24 percentage points with a turnout of only 15.8%. Township Supervisor Tiffany Henyard proposed the tax after voters rejected an identical measure by a 2-percentage point margin in 2023.

In Chicago, referendums to expand mental health services within a designated territory²⁶ can be placed on the ballot by the city or by voter petition.²⁷ If approved, a tax rate of between 0.025% and 0.044% is levied to expand services.

Voters in Chicago continued to support mental health services in 2024 by approving two of the Cook County's newest taxing districts. Overwhelming majorities in Englewood, Greater Chatham and the Near Southwest Side agreed to establish and fund two mental health care programs.²⁸ Since 2011, voters have approved six other mental health care programs across the city, including one in 2020 and two in 2022.²⁹

Another successful effort to create a new government agency occurred in University Park in the 2024 general election. Voters approved establishing a park district by a 12-percentage point margin. An identical referendum failed on a tie vote in the 2022 general election. The

²⁴ 405 ILCS 20 [[LINK](#)]

²⁵ Under the Community Mental Health Act, the petition requires signatures from enough registered voters to at least equal 10% of the total votes cast for the office that received the most votes at the last general election for the governmental unit. (405 ILCS 20/6 [[LINK](#)])

²⁶ Territory is defined as a "geographically continuous area with a population of 75,000 to 250,000 based on the most recent decennial census" (405 ILCS 22/10 [[LINK](#)]). These territories are a group of contiguous community areas.

²⁷ Under the Community Expanded Mental Health Services Act, the petition must be signed by a number of registered voters equal to at least 8% of total votes cast for governor in the last gubernatorial election within the proposed program area. (405 ILCS 22/15 [[LINK](#)])

²⁸ Voters are asked to approve two separate questions — one to approve the tax rate (405 ILCS 22/15 [[LINK](#)]) and the other to establish the maximum levy. (35 ILCS 200/18-210 [[LINK](#)])

²⁹ This includes Expanded Mental Health Services Programs for: North River (est. 2012); West Side (est. 2016); Logan Square, Avondale and Hermosa (est. 2018); Bronzeville (est. 2020); West Town-Humboldt Park (est. 2022); and Southeast (est. 2022).

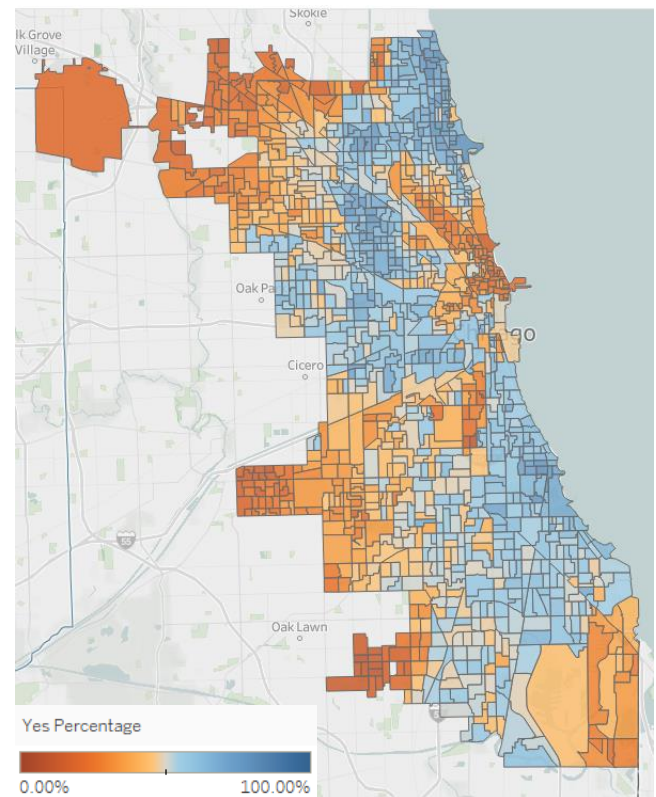
referendum’s approval paved the way for up to \$800,000 a year in additional University Park property taxes.

Concerns were raised about the way the University Park referendum was staged. According to the Illinois Association of Park Districts, when voters are asked to create a park district, they also must be asked to vote for board members who are then installed if the referendum passes. In this case, no candidates were placed on the ballot. Mayor Joseph Roudez said he would appoint the members.³⁰

In 2024, voters were asked whether they wanted to dissolve two taxing districts. In the general election, Worth Township voters agreed to get rid of their road district. The township plans to move control of road maintenance to the township board.

In the primary election, just 4.3% of voters weighed in on whether the Elk Grove Rural Fire Protection District should be dissolved. Only five of 53 voters said yes, even though the financially challenged fire protection district halted operations several months earlier, with the Mount Prospect Fire Department taking over its duties. Because operations had already been transferred, officials turned to the state government for help. The state enacted a law dissolving the district as of July 1, 2024.^{31, 32}

Bring Chicago Home Referendum Results



The Millionaire Tax

The city of Chicago proposed increasing the real estate transfer tax in 2024. The proposal would have imposed significantly higher transfer taxes on properties that sell for \$1 million or more, while lowering taxes on properties that sell for less. The so-called millionaire tax would have helped address homelessness.^{33, 34}

The Bring Chicago Home initiative, considered something of a litmus test on freshman Mayor

³⁰ Samantha Moilanen, “University Park Mayor Joseph Roudez says he will appoint board for new park district,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 26, 2024. [\[LINK\]](#)

³¹ Steve Zalusky, “Wheels in motion for dissolving the Elk Grove Rural Fire Protection District”, *Daily Herald*, Apr. 25, 2024. [\[LINK\]](#)

³² Gov. JB Pritzker signed Illinois House Bill 5166 into law on July 1, 2024. [\[LINK\]](#)

³³ The “Bring Chicago Home” referendum relates to the city’s transfer tax, charged each time a property is sold. There is disagreement whether a transfer tax is a property tax, but this update includes it without making a judgment.

³⁴ Tessa Weinberg and Mariah Woelfel, “What voters need to know about the Bring Chicago Home referendum,” *WBEZ Chicago*, Mar. 18, 2024. [\[LINK\]](#)

Brandon Johnson, failed by a 4-point margin. Although the referendum was in the news far more than any other property tax-related question during the March 2024 primary, only 23.5% of Chicago voters weighed in.

Election Results & Conclusions

March 2024 Primary Election Results

Property tax-related referendum turnout for the March 2024 primary was low. An average of 20.9% of voters had a say. This means that key taxing decisions were left to a distinct minority of voters. Yet again.

Referendum turnout in the primary ranged from a paltry 4.3% to 42.9%, reflecting the overall low election turnout across Cook County. The overall turnout in Chicago was 25.9% and in suburban Cook County it was 18%. Overall turnout in the county was 21.8%, the lowest presidential primary turnout in at least 32 years.^{35,36} The two major parties' presidential candidates were already set, and no significant statewide race was on the ballot — two factors that suppressed turnout.

March 2024 Referendum Turnout and Results Compared to 2020-2023 Elections			
	All Elections	Primary Elections	March '24 Primary
Average Referendum Turnout	33.7%	28.0%	20.9%
Passing Rate	70.7%	83.3%	57.1%
Median Ballot Drop-off	5.1%	4.0%	3.0%
Average Number of Referendums	12.5	12	14

Of the 14 referendums on primary ballots, voters approved eight. Voters approved four bond issues totaling \$62.5 million, two levy increases \$4.6 million above state limits and two home rule referendums. They rejected the Bring Chicago Home real estate transfer tax, an \$89.8 million bond issuance in the north suburbs, the dissolution of an already defunct fire protection district, a new taxing district and two levy increases that would exceed tax caps by an additional \$4 million.

November 2024 General Election Results

Referendum turnout for the November general election was far higher. With a range of 44.8% to 76.3%, the average turnout rate increased to 62.6%. With more referendums on ballots and a few highly engaged districts, the average turnout surpassed the previous two general elections by nearly 13 percentage points.

³⁵ Chicago Board of Elections, "Percentage of Voters Casting Ballots at Elections (1942 - Present)." [\[LINK\]](#)

³⁶ Cook County Clerk, "Voter Registration and Turnout 1990-202." [\[LINK\]](#)

Still, referendum turnout was substantially lower than the overall voter turnout. It was 67.9% in Chicago and 66.5% in suburban Cook County. Overall countywide turnout was 67.2%, the lowest presidential general election turnout since at least 1992.^{37, 38}

November 2024 Referendum Turnout and Results Compared to 2020-2023 Elections			
	All Elections	General Elections	Nov '24 General
Average Referendum Turnout	33.7%	49.8%	62.6%
Passing Rate	70.7%	67.9%	85.7%
Median Ballot Drop-off	5.1%	6.5%	8.7%
Avg. Number of Referendums	12.5	14	21

In the general election, voters approved 18 of 21 property tax-related referendums. As a result, taxpayers in future years will be on the hook for more than \$500 million in new debt for park, library and school improvements in several suburbs.



They will also pay for two Chicago mental health programs and face extra taxes for a new south suburban park district and Riverside road improvements. Voters also dissolved a road district in south suburban Wheeling Township and granted home rule powers to the village of Glencoe.

All three rejected referendums sought to increase levies above state-imposed limits. If approved, these taxing districts would have increased their levies by a total of \$6.3 million above state-imposed caps.

Drop-off Votes and Suppressed Turnout

Poor referendum turnout is in part due to drop-off voters, those who go to the polls to vote but skip the referendum question farther down the ballot. During the primary, the median rate of drop-off decreased to 3% — lower than the 4% median drop-off rate for primaries in the previous four years. However, in the general election, the median drop-off rate increased to 8.7% — higher than the 6.5% drop-off rate for the previous four years.

Those patterns pushed up the general election rate of drop-off votes over the last five years, while lowering the drop-off rate during primaries. There is no change to consolidated election drop-off because there were no consolidated elections in 2024. More voters are choosing to skip referendum questions during general elections:

Ballot Drop-off by Election Type (2020-2024)	
Election Type	Median Percentage of Voters who Took Ballots but Skipped Referendum
General	6.9% 
Primary	3.9% 
Consolidated	3.8%

³⁷ Chicago Board of Elections, “Percentage of Voters Casting Ballots at Elections (1942 - Present).” [\[LINK\]](#)

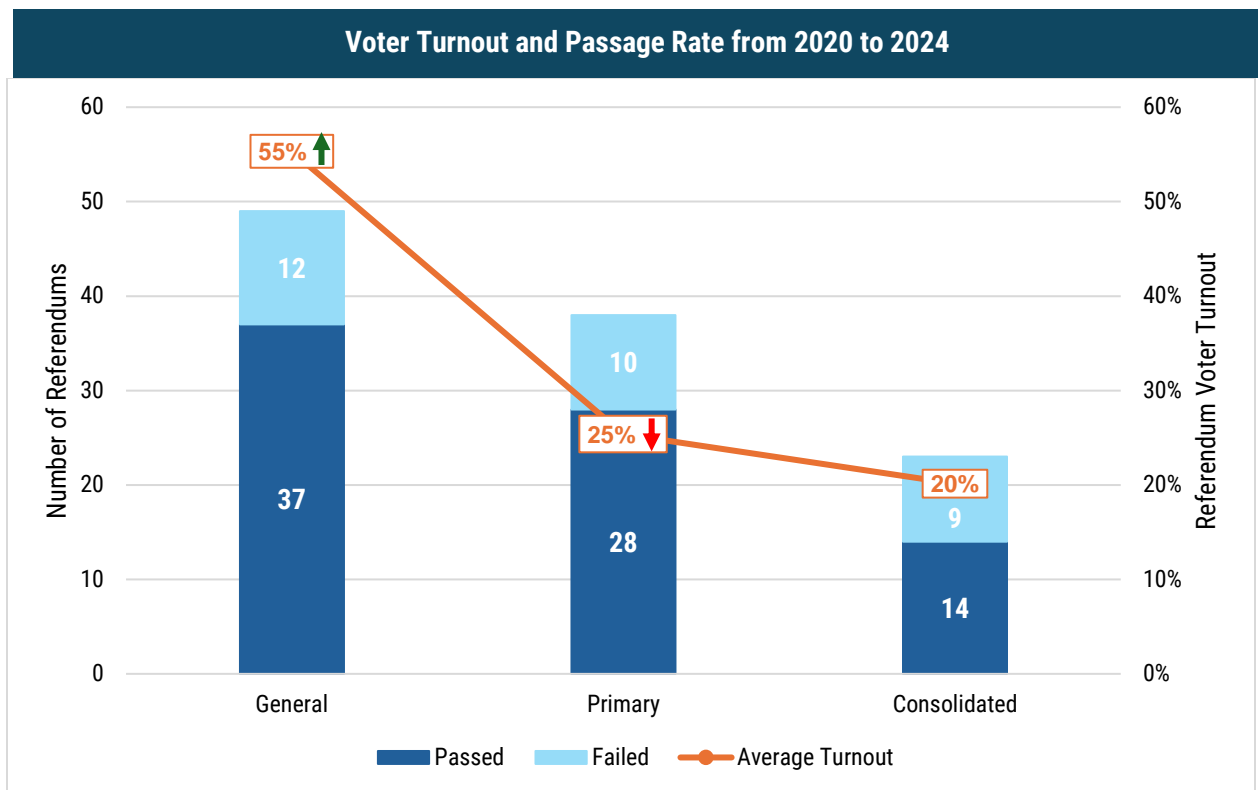
³⁸ Cook County Clerk, “Voter Registration and Turnout 1990-2024.” [\[LINK\]](#)

Conclusion

Voting matters and voting for all the items farther down the ballot matters. The few continue to decide the fate of crucial property tax referendums.

Turnout in the March 2024 primary for property-tax related referendums was low, with just 20.9% of registered voters having a say on average. This turnout was about 7 percentage points lower than the average for primary elections during the previous four years.

Average turnout for property tax-related referendums in the November 2024 general election was significantly higher at 62.6%, which was about 13 percentage points higher than general elections held from 2020 to 2023.³⁹ The chart below shows how those results lowered the average primary turnout from the past four years, but increased the rate for general elections:



For all of 2024, the average property tax-related referendum turnout across Cook County was 45.9%, an increase of 12 percentage points from the previous four years and a 3-percentage point increase from the 2020 presidential election. That's a slight improvement. Still, less than half of eligible voters weighed in on referendums in a majority of the year's 35 property tax referendums, with less than a third of eligible voters taking part in 12 of the year's referendums.

³⁹ Average turnout for general elections from 2020-2023 was 49.8%.

It's noteworthy that there were no consolidated elections in which people vote solely on local issues in 2024. Those races, where the electorate is more keyed into local issues, tend to have lower overall turnout rates. In 2021 and 2023's consolidated elections, 20% of registered voters turned out for property tax referendums on average.

The next consolidated election is April 1, 2025. With eight property tax-related referendums on those ballots, voters get another chance to make key local decisions that will affect their pocketbooks. But history indicates that turnout is likely to be very low — allowing few to decide for the many.

Appendix

Methodology

To calculate referendum results, voter turnout and ballot drop-off, the Treasurer's Office used precinct-level data from the Cook County Clerk's Office, which runs suburban elections, and the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners, which runs Chicago elections. When referendums straddled jurisdictions, totals from neighboring counties were added to Cook County tallies.

In some cases, this precinct-level data does not accurately represent the total number of registered voters and ballots in each taxing district. Some precincts are partially in the boundaries of a taxing district. This means that although all registered voters and ballots are counted in the precinct's total, they are not all attributed to the taxing district's referendums.

Cook, DuPage, Kane and Will counties provide accurate registered voter and ballot counts for each taxing district in their official canvass reports to account for this discrepancy. The Treasurer's Office also obtained accurate canvass reports from the Chicago Board of Elections. To accurately represent turnout and ballot drop-off, the Treasurer's Office used these lower counts instead of the precinct-level data. With this updated methodology, 27 voter turnout rates and 15 ballot drop-off rates from 2020-2023 changed. All numbers, graphs, charts and analysis account for these changes.

This data was unavailable for Lake and McHenry counties. In some cases, the Cook County Clerk's office provides accurate counts for Lake and McHenry counties. For all other cases, the Treasurer's Office used the precinct-level registered voter and ballot counts to estimate voter turnout and ballot drop-off. This affects the 2023 referendums for Barrington Park District and Long Grove Fire Protection District.

All income, race, ethnicity and homeownership data for the 2024 referendums is pulled from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2023 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates. The U.S. Census Bureau collects this data at various levels — including the municipal, township and school district levels. However, this data is not collected for other taxing district levels like park, library or fire districts. For these taxing districts, the Treasurer's Office used data for the municipality mostly served by the taxing district. However, this data is unavailable for

taxing districts that cover unincorporated areas — parts of the county that do not fall under the jurisdiction of a municipality. For referendums from 2020-2023, the Treasurer’s Office used American Community Survey 5-year estimates from the appropriate election year (i.e. referendums from the 2021 consolidated election use the ACS 2017-2021 estimates).

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