



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

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Cook County Treasurer Maria Pappas

## **Executive Summary**

In a first of its kind analysis, the Cook County Treasurer's Office found that voters from majority-white communities are more likely to vote and determine the outcome of critical property tax-related referendums. The same is true for voters who own their homes or who earn more than the median household income for Cook County.

Findings from the 2024 presidential election year include:

- Wealthier residents are more likely to vote. In the county's wealthiest taxing districts, average turnout topped 60% but was only 34% in districts where median household income fell below the county median of \$81,797;
- White residents are more likely to vote. On average, turnout in majority-white districts was more than 20 percentage points higher than in Black, Latino and majority-minority districts;
- Homeowners are more likely to vote. In taxing districts where 80% or more of residents own their homes, average turnout exceeded 55%. Turnout, on average, was just 30% in districts where over 20% of residents rent.

Two March 2024 primary referendums — one in a low-income south suburb and the other in a high-income North Shore suburb — highlight these voting trends.

Robbin's Park District lies in a majority-Black south suburban area where the median household income is \$38,000, and less than 73% of residents own their homes. In the district's primary referendum, only 14% of voters weighed in — one of the lowest turnouts in the primary.

In Kenilworth — a majority-white North Shore suburb where the median household income is higher than \$250,000, and more than 97% of residents own their own homes — the participation rate was more than double, with over 33% of voters turning out for a \$2.5 million bond issuance.

The Treasurer's analysis also shows that residents across the county in 2024 tended to skip voting when given the chance to decide whether to increase their own property taxes. A majority of voters turned out for property tax-related referendums in less than half of cases. This perpetuates a pattern of frequently leaving crucial pocketbook decisions up to a tiny segment of voters.

The analysis of the 35 referendums in 2024 found:

- Overall average property tax-related referendum turnout increased slightly, to 45.9% from 43%, from the last presidential election year;

- For the March primary election, average turnout was only 20.9%;
- For the November general election, average turnout increased to 62.6%.

Drop-off voters, who go to the polls but skip the referendum questions farther down the ballot, further suppressed overall participation. During the primary, the median drop-off rate was 3% and increased to 8.7% in the general election — for an overall median drop-off rate of 6.2%.

Those who did weigh in approved 26, or 74%, of the referendums on ballots in 2024. The approved referendums gave cities, villages, schools, park districts and other local governments authority 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.

Voters will again have a say on referendums in the upcoming April 1, 2025 consolidated election. They will be asked to decide whether to raise new taxes and increase government debt by hundreds of millions of dollars. These races, in which people vote solely on local issues, tend to have poor overall turnout.

If the Treasurer's findings are any guide, little will have changed and only a few will still decide for the many.