

# Analysis of Suburban Cook County Referendums

Feb. 1995 — Feb. 2005



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## **Introduction**

The Office of Cook County Clerk David Orr is issuing its first-ever analysis of referendums appearing on suburban Cook County ballots.

This report, “Analysis of Suburban Cook County Referendums: Feb. 1995 – Feb. 2005” shows that jurisdictions in suburban Cook County have put 891 referendums before voters during elections in the past decade, with 57.2 percent winning voter support.

This examination of referendums — beginning with the primary election of 1995 and ending with the primary election of 2005 — studies support for referendum questions by each jurisdiction type for townships; cities and villages; the county; and park, library, school, fire and sanitary districts.

For more information about this report, call Cass Cliatt in the Clerk’s office, (312) 603-0931.

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## *The questions put before voters: Categorizing the data*

### **60.3 percent -- Tax-related referendums**

At 60.3 percent, the large majority of referendums on suburban ballots since 1995 were solely tax related. These 537 ballot questions included referendums seeking voter approval for adjustments to tax rates, tax caps and tax extensions, as well as ballot questions that would affect taxes through the issue of bonds.

### **11 percent – Government referendums**

Government-related referendums -- dealing with such issues as term limits, changing how elected officers are appointed, consolidating units of government, changing the form of government, and establishing home-rule authority – numbered 98 over the past decade, or 11 percent.

### **7.7 percent – Infrastructure referendums**

Almost 8 percent of referendums dealt with infrastructure improvements. There were 69 ballot questions asking voters solely if they approve of the construction of new buildings, street maintenance, development plans, water systems or other capital projects. The wording of many of these referendums was advisory in nature and did not focus on the cost of funding the improvements. Again, ballot questions focusing on collecting funds for the improvements were counted among tax referendums.

### **4.8 percent – Service referendums**

The smallest number of referendums, 4.8 percent, asked voters to support changes in the services offered by city, village, township and county governments. Included in these 43 ballot questions were such services as establishing senior housing, residential parking, ambulance service, fee-based recreation, expanding emergency 911 operations and library service for towns with municipal libraries.

School, park, fire and library jurisdictions did not appear in this category – although the argument could be made that they are exclusively service-based institutions – unless their ballot questions dealt with changes to a specific service program.

Also, while costs may have been associated with the service initiatives, the dominant service language for referendums in this category overshadowed references to the cost to voters. Referendums in which funding for these improvements dominated the ballot question were placed in the tax category.

### **16.2 percent – Miscellaneous referendums**

Defying definition were 144 referendums presented to voters in the past 10 years that were mostly advisory in nature. These asked voters if they would support annexations, airport changes, gambling

expansion, residency requirements for municipal staff and scores of other wide-ranging initiatives. Also included were referendums for which the dated records for the ballot questions were incomplete or unclear.

## The numbers – A quick view

In every reference to voter support, the analysis counts the majority referendum votes cast only in suburban Cook County. For ballot questions posed by jurisdictions that cross county borders, the Cook County Clerk's analysis examines only the approval rates for voters in suburban Cook County.

### Referendums per calendar year<sup>1</sup> – 1995-2005 (Feb.)

Calendar year	Ref. requests	Passed	% Passed
1995	100	53	53.0%
1996	88	47	53.4%
1997	83	51	61.4%
1998	82	50	61.0%
1999	42	16	38.1%
2000	101	67	66.3%
2001	58	33	56.9%
2002	133	69	51.9%
2003	76	55	72.4%
2004	123	65	52.8%
2005 – Feb.	5	4	80.0%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>891</b>	<b>510</b>	<b>57.2%</b>

<sup>1</sup>Multiple elections (primaries and general elections) were held in most years

### Referendums by jurisdiction type – 1995-2005 (Feb.)

(See report detail: How residents voted)

Jurisdiction type	Ref. requests	% of all refs	Passed	% Passed
Countywide	6	0.7%	6	100 %
Fire districts	55	6.2%	30	54.5%
Library districts	73	8.2%	43	58.9%
Municipal (city & village)	336	37.7%	197	58.6%
Park districts	111	12.5%	50	45.0%
Sanitary districts	2	0.2%	0	00.0%
School districts	280	31.4%	163	58.2%
Townships	28	3.1%	21	75.0%
<b>Totals – all refs</b>	<b>891</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>510</b>	<b>57.2%</b>

### Approval rates by referendum request type – 1995-2005 (Feb)

(See report detail: The questions put before voters)

Referendum type	Requests	% of Total	Passed	% Passed
Infrastructure	69	7.7%	44	63.8%
Government	98	11.0%	64	65.3%
Service	43	4.8%	33	76.7%
Tax & Bond	537	60.3%	274	51.0%
Miscellaneous	144	16.2%	95	66.0%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>891</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>510</b>	<b>57.2%</b>

## *How residents voted*

Over the past 10 years, suburban Cook County voters overwhelmingly supported referendums for more services, infrastructure improvements in their local communities and initiatives they thought may streamline local governments.

However, tax-related referendums to fund some of these initiatives suffered the least popular support over the past decade, winning, “yes” votes barely half the time.

The elections from 2002 to 2004 enjoyed the highest approval of referendums. Almost 38 percent of all referendums winning voter support in the past 10 years were approved in that three-year period.

A summary of notable findings for referendums over the 10-year period:

- Suburban cities and villages put the most referendum questions on ballots over the past 10 years, 37.7 percent. School districts were a close second at 31.4 percent.
- Tax and bond-related referendums accounted for a large majority of all ballot questions, 60.3 percent.
- Winning the most popular support were service-related referendums, for which a majority of residents voted “yes” almost 77 percent of the time.
- Tax-related referendums fared the worst with an approval rate of 51 percent.
- Voters were 26 percent more likely to support tax increases through bond issues than direct tax adjustments, voting “yes” for 69 percent of bond-issue referendums, versus 43 percent for strictly worded tax referendums.
- Referendums asking voters for tax increases to pay for services also enjoyed higher support than strictly worded tax referendums, 62 percent versus 43 percent.
- Suburban voters were most supportive of ballot questions posed countywide and by townships, supporting these referendums 100 percent and 75 percent of the time respectively. Approval ratings didn’t reach 60 percent for any other type of jurisdiction.
- Park district referendums, which usually called for tax increases, were the least popular at 45 percent approval.
- Referendums posed to voters in primary elections won approval almost 5 percent more often than those during general elections.
- Voters approved changes to city and village government only 53.5 percent of the time, but support for government-related changes for every other jurisdiction was almost 100 percent.

**For taxes, wording made a difference**

Tax and bond requests made up the majority of referendums for almost all the district governments – fire, library, school and park districts. The only exception was sanitary districts. [See Appendix i]

Analysis showed that the way all jurisdictions presented a tax increase significantly affected its chance for winning voter approval.

Both bond questions and those for tax rates or tax extensions generally have the similar affect of raising residents’ property taxes. However, voters were consistently more willing to favor increases in their property taxes when referendums were presented as bond questions, rather than upward adjustments of tax rates.

Voters agreed to the issue of bonds 69 percent of the time over the past 10 years, while referendums worded strictly as tax increases were favored by voters only 44.4 percent of the time.

<b>Tax vs. Bonds</b>			
<b>Referendum type</b>	<b>total</b>	<b>passed</b>	<b>% passed</b>
<b>Tax</b>	392	174	44.4%
<b>Bond</b>	145	100	69.0%
<b>Tax &amp; bond refs</b>	537	274	51.0%

With the exception of 1999, approval rates for “bond” referendums ranged from 58 percent to 81 percent, while the approval for referendums with dominant “tax” wording was only 27 percent to 70 percent [Appendix ii]. School districts in particular fared better when proposing bonds, gaining support from voters 81.7 percent of the time [Appendix iii].

When the strictly worded tax increases were examined separately, voters were swayed to support these referendums more if they had service-oriented wording. Tax increases with wording to pay for such items as ambulance service, 911 surcharges, water service and police patrols earned a “yes” from a majority of voters 62 percent of the time, compared to 43 percent for those tax referendums that did not.

The referendums posed exclusively as service questions (e.g., shall the district expand street cleaning to the west side of town ...) seemed to further distance voters from the idea of paying for the initiatives they were voting on, resulting in even higher approval ratings (76.7 percent) than for the

tax-for-service ballot questions. This despite the fact that costs for the service initiatives were often implied or minimally stated.

**Municipal voters stand out in opposition to government changes**

For every election for every year over the past 10 years, voters overwhelmingly approved referendums relating to changes in appointing officials and managing government. Residents said “yes” to all government-related referendums every year for townships and park, library, fire and school districts that put the question on the ballot.

Available data show the only jurisdictions in which voters opposed these changes were sanitary districts and cities and villages.

<b>Government-related referendums - 10 years</b>			
<b><i>Jurisdiction</i></b>	<b><i>Total gov refs</i></b>	<b><i>Gov passed</i></b>	<b><i>% passed</i></b>
<b>county</b>	0	0	n/a
<b>fire</b>	2	2	100.0%
<b>library</b>	0	0	n/a
<b>municipal (city &amp; village)</b>	71	38	53.5%
<b>park</b>	1	1	100.0%
<b>sanitary</b>	0	0	n/a
<b>school</b>	21	21	100.0%
<b>township</b>	2	2	100.0%
<b>All government refs</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>66.0%</b>

**How tax caps and tax appeals affected referendum requests**

There was an expected spike in tax referendums after the state’s tax cap law took effect in 1995. However, tax requests fluctuated upwards and downwards after the initial increase. [See Appendix ii]

The tax cap law limits property tax increases to 5 percent over the previous year or the rate of inflation. The cap, however does not apply to home rule jurisdictions like Cook County, towns with

populations over 25,000 or communities granted home rule authority by voter referendum. This might explain the spike in referendums seeking home rule status in 1995.

<b>Home rule referendums by year</b>			
<b>Year</b>	<b>requests</b>	<b>hr passed</b>	<b>% passed</b>
<b>1995</b>	6	2	33.3%
<b>1996</b>	2	2	100.0%
<b>1997</b>	2	1	50.0%
<b>1998</b>	2	1	50.0%
<b>1999</b>	1	0	0.0%
<b>2000</b>	0	0	0.0%
<b>2001</b>	0	0	0.0%
<b>2002</b>	3	2	66.7%
<b>2003</b>	2	0	0.0%
<b>2004</b>	8	3	37.5%
<b>2005</b>	0	0	0.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>42.3%</b>

There were surges in suburban Cook County tax requests in 2000, when districts anticipated a decline in state revenue to help fund schools, and also in 2002 and 2004, coinciding with reports from school districts across the suburbs about the financial affects of local tax appeals.

School districts accounted for 31.4 percent of all referendums from 1995 to 2005, but posed 41 percent of all tax- and bond-related ballot questions. *[See Appendix iii]*

### *The affect of voter participation on approval rates*

There is no clear correlation between the number of registered voters participating in elections and the percentage of voter-approved referendums in those elections. *[See Chart, Appendix v]*

While elections with the lowest turnouts did have among the highest rates of referendums winning “yes” votes, when a higher percent of registered voters headed to the polls, the higher voter turnouts did not consistently result in fewer referendums being approved.

Even looking at total ballots cast — the actual number of votes, rather than participation as a percentage of registered voters — there was no clear correlation between the number of residents voting and how often referendums were approved. Approval rates for elections with fewer than

350,000 ballots cast ranged widely (38 percent to 80 percent). Voter approval fluctuated almost as widely for elections with more than 350,000 ballots cast (37 percent to 63 percent).

<b>Comparing ballots cast to referendum approval rates</b>							
<i>Election</i>	<i>1996p</i>	<i>1996g</i>	<i>1998p</i>	<i>1998g</i>	<i>1999p</i>	<i>1999g</i>	<i>2000p</i>
<b>Ballots cast</b>	309,772	872,447	322,970	367,931	11,083	262,568	282,041
<b>% ref passed</b>	40.0%	62.3%	75.0%	55.2%	n/a	38.1%	68.5%

<i>2000g</i>	<i>2001p</i>	<i>2001g</i>	<i>2002p</i>	<i>2002g</i>	<i>2003p</i>	<i>2003g</i>	<i>2004p</i>	<i>2004g</i>	<i>2005p</i>
954,769	37,318	377,595	438,844	697,872	24,149	300,484	406,115	1,024,867	49,136
63.8%	n/a	56.9%	67.2%	37.7%	n/a	72.4%	54.8%	50.0%	80.0%

The data suggest that the number of *rac*es on the ballot may have a small effect on the likelihood of success for referendums. Ballot questions posed to voters in primary elections won approval almost 5 percent more often than those during general elections. Primary ballots are typically much shorter than ballots for general elections.

<b>Primary vs. General Elections</b>			
<b>Primary requests</b>	247	<b>General requests</b>	644
<b>Primary passed</b>	150	<b>General passed</b>	360
<b>% passed</b>	60.7%	<b>% passed</b>	55.9%

## Conclusion

The general data indicate that how and when a voter is asked to support a ballot initiative can affect the likelihood of approval.

Limits in availability of digitized historical data prevent analysis of referendums on a jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction basis at this time. Requests, for example, for information on voting trends for tax referendums in Des Plaines or infrastructure referendums in School District 123 would require resources that are currently unavailable.

However, it is important to note that local laws and the state election code often dictate how jurisdictions present ballot questions to voters. Laws governing sanitary districts, for instance, required a majority “no” vote in a recent election for residents who supported keeping the Old Town Sanitary District.

The Cook County Clerk’s analysis does not attempt to gauge the impact of local ballot questions, but simply examines whether voters decided to support them.

Interested individuals should consult their local jurisdictions to learn more about how local factors might affect how and when referendums appear on ballots.

Appendix i

PROPORTION of referendum requests by type and jurisdiction 1995 - 2005							
<i>Jurisdiction type</i>	<i>Requests</i>	<i>Bond</i>	<i>% of requests</i>	<i>Tax (non bond)</i>	<i>% of requests</i>	<i>Tax &amp; Bond</i>	<i>% of requests</i>
county	6	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
fire	55	4	7.3%	44	80.0%	48	87.3%
library	73	16	21.9%	52	71.2%	68	93.2%
municipal (city & village)	336	36	10.7%	66	19.6%	102	30.4%
park	111	25	22.5%	61	55.0%	86	77.5%
sanitary	2	1	50.0%	0	0.0%	1	50.0%
school	280	60	21.4%	160	57.1%	220	78.6%
township	28	3	10.7%	9	32.1%	12	42.9%
<b>Total all referendums</b>	<b>891</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>16.3%</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>44.0%</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>60.3%</b>

<i>continued</i>	<i>Service</i>	<i>% of requests</i>	<i>Infrastrct</i>	<i>% of requests</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>% of requests</i>	<i>Misc.</i>	<i>% of requests</i>
county	3	50.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	50.0%
fire	1	1.8%	0	0.0%	2	3.6%	4	7.3%
library	0	0.0%	1	1.4%	0	0.0%	4	5.5%
municipal	32	9.5%	29	8.6%	71	21.1%	102	30.4%
park	1	0.9%	7	6.3%	1	0.9%	16	14.4%
sanitary	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	50.0%	0	0.0%
school	0	0.0%	32	11.4%	21	7.5%	7	2.5%
township	6	21.4%	0	0.0%	2	7.1%	8	28.6%
<b>Total all referendums</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>4.8%</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>7.7%</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>11.0%</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>16.2%</b>

## Appendix ii

<b>Tax referendums by year</b>			
<b>Year</b>	<b>total tax</b>	<b>tax passed</b>	<b>% passed</b>
1995 tax	33	9	27.3%
1996 tax	25	10	40.0%
1997 tax	27	10	37.0%
1998 tax	36	19	52.8%
1999 tax	16	5	31.3%
2000 tax	38	17	44.7%
2001 tax	33	14	42.4%
2002 tax	74	27	36.5%
2003 tax	47	33	70.2%
2004 tax	61	29	47.5%
2005 tax	2	1	50.0%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>44.4%</b>

<b>Bond referendums by year</b>			
<b>Year</b>	<b>total bond</b>	<b>bond passed</b>	<b>% passed</b>
1995 bonds	24	14	58.3%
1996 bonds	19	14	73.7%
1997 bonds	16	12	75.0%
1998 bonds	11	8	72.7%
1999 bonds	7	3	42.9%
2000 bonds	16	13	81.3%
2001 bonds	7	5	71.4%
2002 bonds	24	18	75.0%
2003 bonds	4	2	50.0%
2004 bonds	17	11	64.7%
2005 bonds	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>Totals</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>69.0%</b>

<b>Tax &amp; bond referendums by year</b>			
<b>Year</b>	<b>total t&amp;b</b>	<b>t&amp;b passed</b>	<b>% passed</b>
1995 tax & bonds	57	23	40.4%
1996 tax & bonds	44	24	54.5%
1997 tax & bonds	43	22	51.2%
1998 tax & bonds	47	27	57.4%
1999 tax & bonds	23	8	34.8%
2000 tax & bonds	54	30	55.6%
2001 tax & bonds	40	19	47.5%
2002 tax & bonds	98	45	45.9%
2003 tax & bonds	51	35	68.6%
2004 tax & bonds	78	40	51.3%
2005 tax & bonds	2	1	50.0%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>51.0%</b>

Appendix iii (a)

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<b>Referendums by type and jurisdiction — '95-'05</b>					
<b>Type of referendum</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>Fire</b>	<b>Library</b>	<b>Municipal</b>	<b>Park</b>
<b>Tax bond (bond refs)</b>	0	4	16	36	25
<b>passed</b>	n/a	4	12	19	13
<b>%</b>	n/a	100.0%	75.0%	52.8%	52.0%
<b>Tax for service</b>	0	n/a	n/a	26	1
<b>passed</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	16	1
<b>%</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	61.5%	100.0%
<b>Tax strict (all other tax)</b>	0	44	52	40	60
<b>passed</b>	n/a	19	26	17	20
<b>%</b>	n/a	43.2%	50.0%	42.5%	33.3%
<b>Tax All (total of all ABOVE tax refs)</b>	0	48	68	102	86
<b>passed</b>	n/a	23	38	52	34
<b>%</b>	n/a	47.9%	55.9%	51.0%	39.5%
<b>Service (service only, no tax)</b>	3	1	n/a	32	1
<b>passed</b>	3	1	n/a	23	1
<b>%</b>	100.0%	100.0%	n/a	71.9%	100.0%
<b>Infrastructure</b>	0	n/a	1	29	7
<b>passed</b>	n/a	n/a	1	21	4
<b>%</b>	n/a	n/a	100.0%	72.4%	57.1%
<b>Government</b>	0	2	n/a	71	1
<b>passed</b>	n/a	2	n/a	38	1
<b>%</b>	n/a	100.0%	n/a	53.5%	100.0%
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	3	4	4	102	16
<b>passed</b>	3	4	4	63	10
<b>%</b>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	61.8%	62.5%
<b>Total refs</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>Total passed</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Total passed %</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>54.5%</b>	<b>58.9%</b>	<b>58.6%</b>	<b>45.0%</b>

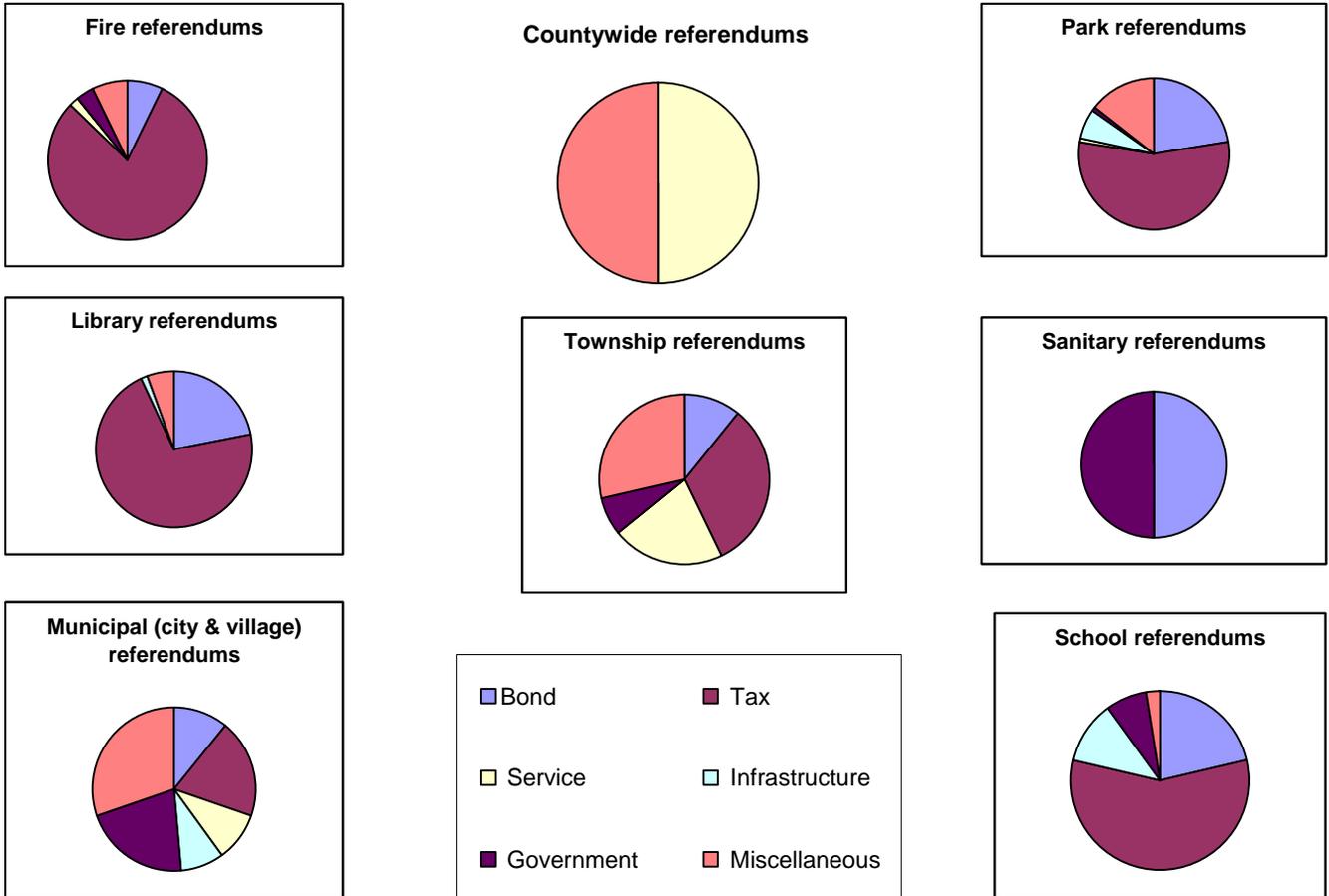
Appendix iii (b)

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<b>continued</b>				
<b>Type of referendum</b>	<b>Sanitary</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Township</b>	<b>Totals</b>
<b>Tax bond (bond refs)</b>	1	60	3	145
<b>passed</b>	0	49	3	100
<b>%</b>	0.0%	81.7%	100.0%	69.0%
<b>Tax for service</b>	0	0	2	29
<b>passed</b>	n/a	n/a	1	18
<b>%</b>	n/a	n/a	50.0%	62.1%
<b>Tax strict (all other tax)</b>	0	160	7	363
<b>passed</b>	n/a	71	3	156
<b>%</b>	n/a	44.4%	42.9%	43.0%
<b>Tax All (total of all ABOVE tax)</b>	1	220	12	537
<b>passed</b>	0	120	7	274
<b>%</b>	0.0%	54.5%	58.3%	51.0%
<b>Service (service only, no tax)</b>	0	0	6	43
<b>passed</b>	n/a	n/a	5	33
<b>%</b>	n/a	n/a	83.3%	76.7%
<b>Infrastructure</b>	0	32	n/a	69
<b>passed</b>	n/a	18	n/a	44
<b>%</b>	n/a	56.3%	n/a	63.8%
<b>Government</b>	1	21	2	98
<b>passed</b>	0	21	2	64
<b>%</b>	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%	65.3%
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	0	7	8	144
<b>passed</b>	n/a	4	7	95
<b>%</b>	n/a	57.1%	87.5%	66.0%
<b>Total refs</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>891</b>
<b>Total passed</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>510</b>
<b>Total passed %</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	<b>58.2%</b>	<b>75.0%</b>	<b>57.2%</b>

*Appendix iii (c)*

*Charting referendums by type and jurisdiction – 1995-2005*



*Appendix iv*

<b>Ratio of jurisdiction tax requests to all other tax requests</b>						
<i>Jurisdiction type</i>	<i>All tax requests</i>	<i>Jurisdiction tax requests</i>	<i>% of tax</i>	<i>All bond requests</i>	<i>Jurisdiction bond requests</i>	<i>% of bond</i>
county	392	0	0.0%	145	0	0.0%
fire	392	44	11.2%	145	4	2.8%
library	392	52	13.3%	145	16	11.0%
municipal- city & village	392	66	16.8%	145	36	24.8%
park	392	61	15.6%	145	25	17.2%
sanitary	392	0	0.0%	145	1	0.7%
school	392	160	40.8%	145	60	41.4%
township	392	9	2.3%	145	3	2.1%
<b>Total tax/bond referendums</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

<b>continued</b>			
<i>Jurisdiction type</i>	<i>All tax &amp; bond</i>	<i>Jurisdiction tax &amp; bond</i>	<i>% of tax &amp; bond</i>
county	537	0	0.0%
fire	537	48	8.9%
library	537	68	12.7%
municipal (city & village)	537	102	19.0%
park	537	86	16.0%
sanitary	537	1	0.2%
school	537	220	41.0%
township	537	12	2.2%
<b>Total all tax/bond referendums</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Appendix v

Comparing turnout & referendum approval for primary and general elections							
	1996 p	1996 g	1998 p	1998 g	1999 g	2000 p	2000 g
<b>Voter turnout</b>	25.5%	65.7%	23.9%	54.0%	20.1%	23.1%	72.9%
<b>% ref passed</b>	40.0%	62.3%	75.0%	55.2%	38.1%	68.5%	63.8%
<b>% difference</b>	14.5%	-3.4%	51.1%	1.2%	18.0%	45.4%	-9.1%

<i>continued</i>	2001 g	2002 p	2002 g	2003 g	2004 p	2004 g	2005 p
<b>Turnout</b>	28.1%	33.4%	51.1%	22.7%	31.0%	74.0%	17.2%
<b>% ref passed</b>	56.9%	67.2%	37.7%	72.4%	54.8%	50.0%	80.0%
<b>% difference</b>	28.8%	33.8%	-13.4%	49.7%	23.8%	-24.0%	62.8%

\*Primary elections= p

General elections= g

Charting comparisons of voter turnout/referendum approval

