

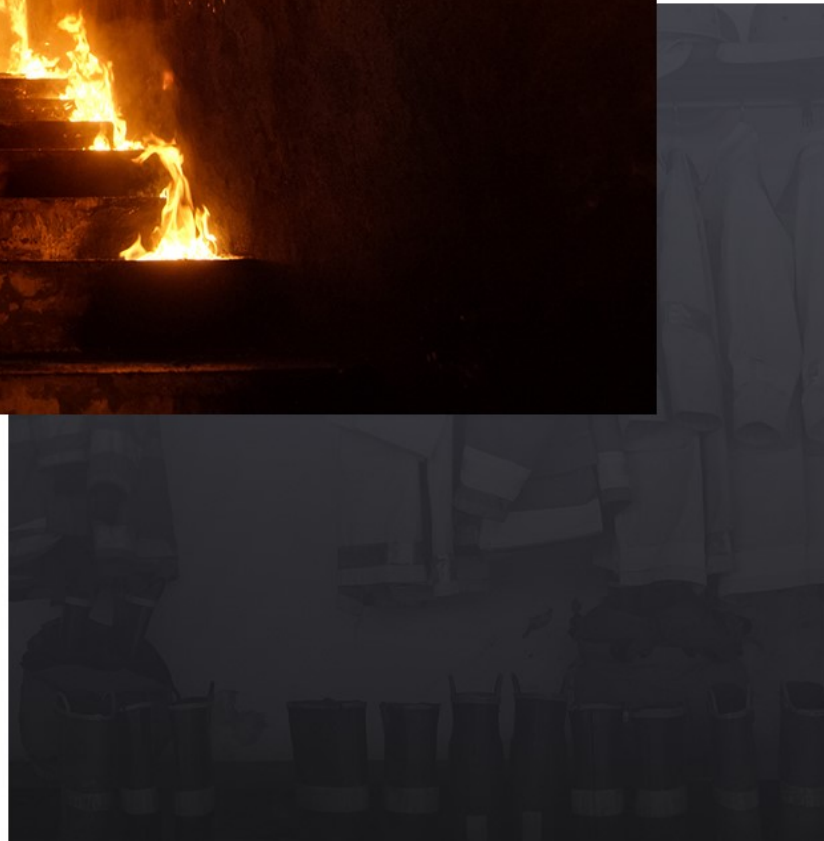


**FIREFIGHTERS
AND EMS FUND.**

2020

FIRE REFERENDUM REPORT

By Firefighters and EMS Fund





SUMMARY

Following the 2018 election cycle, Firefighters & EMS Fund presented its first ever Fire Referendum Report. This report will serve as the second installment of this series looking at the results of legislation affecting the Fire & EMS communities around the country.

Like the first iteration, this installment does not represent every referendum voted on, however, this year our study has expanded to cover larger ground than the 2018 edition. For the 2020 report, we studied the results of 84 ballot measures spread across 18 states, in both primary and general election voting.

Our findings were made through referencing media coverage, press releases, ballot measure texts, and other data readily available to the public to present a larger picture of the state of fire services around the United States and how the public voted in support or opposition to legislation impacting it.

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FIRE SERVICES & COVID-19

An examination of the ballot measures put forward in 2020 can only be considered complete when done within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The human toll of the virus is undeniable, with hundreds of thousands of lives lost just in the United States alone. However, the worldwide economic impact of the pandemic was equally disastrous for industries across the country, especially Fire & EMS services.

For years, public safety agencies have struggled with inadequately funded budgets, which has resulted in a glut of firehouses in need of replacing, ever-aging equipment, and dangerously understaffed departments, especially in rural areas. The lost tax revenues from the economy being shuttered would lead to departments across the country being faced with cutting these budgets even further, going without needed supplies, and facing the prospect of laying off workers.

The catastrophic impacts of Covid-19 on fire funding made 2020 a year in which proposed ballot measures, particularly addressing increased revenues, were essential for operations of departments nationwide.



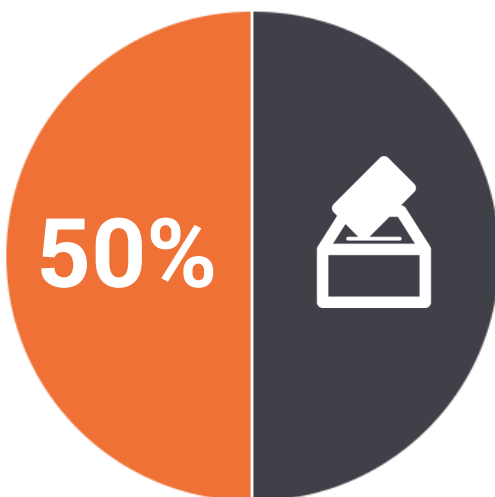
BY THE NUMBERS

Looking back at 2020, 72% (61/84) of referendums related to fire jurisdictions that we studied were able to pass. Like in 2018, more ballot questions appeared in the state of California than any other state. However, referendums in the state saw mixed success, with only 7 of the 16 passing, and 4 of the successful ballots being approved before November.

While in 2018 we noticed a pattern which placed the higher number of ballots being voted on in the Western United States, 2020 was more diffused. The state with the next most ballots voted on in 2020 was Ohio (6), followed by Maine, New York, and Missouri, who all had 5.

California topping the list yet again is likely a testament to the stress under which their fire services are under year after year. In recent memory, the wildfire season has continued to grow increasingly intense, creating greater stress on the limited personnel there to combat the fires and demanding more and more financial resources to contain them.

Covid-19 may have also played a significant role in where ballot measures were popping up to secure increased funding. This may explain why the number of measures were not as isolated to one geographic location, like in 2018, as states who were financially debilitated by lockdowns and lost revenues sought out critical resources.



More than half of the measures voted on in 2020 were budget related.

What Were the Objectives of The 2020 Referenda?

Over the last two election cycles that we have studied, the common theme of ballot measures put forward is securing funding. Once again, more than half of the measures voted on in 2020 were budget related. But where 2018 requests sought to maintain present funding levels, the majority of budget related measures in 2020 sought to secure additional funding.

These included: general revenue increases, funds to upgrade or build new stations, and requests to purchase new heavy equipment such as engines or other specialized rescue vehicles.

Like in 2018, requests to secure additional funding for firefighter pension benefits were approved 100% of the time.



How Voters Responded?

In total, there was over \$255,297,660 on the line across all the ballot measures presented in 2020. Voters approved funding roughly \$224,235,387 of the requested money, which amounted to an approval of 87% of the funds requested. \$90 million was approved in just Alameda County, California alone for long term repairs or replacements to the county's fire houses.

The preferred vehicles to fund the levies remain unchanged from 2018 to 2020. Often, we saw bond sales or marginal increases in property taxes as some of the most frequently used mechanisms.

Statistically referendums held to increase staffing and purchase equipment found roughly equal or greater success than the 72% total success rate found across all ballots. This may have something to do with the high rate of success ballot measures with targeted or more specific language have as opposed to those who made more general requests for money.

Ballot measures which specifically requested additional funding for new fire stations succeeded 71% of the time (5 out of 7) in the ballot measures we studied. 75% of ballot measures requesting money for equipment passed (6 out of 8).

Below is a further breakdown on what was voted on:



Operations:

Unlike 2018, where most ballot measures asked voters to maintain current levels of operational funding, 2020 was a year where departments across the country were asking for more. In 2020, there were 65 ballot measures asking for an increase in operational funding, of which 54 were approved, resulting in a success rate of 83%.



Staffing:

Staffing shortages and overworked fire houses are common problems plaguing fire services across the country. Much of this can be linked directly back to funding issues, which were only exacerbated Covid-19. Luckily, the departments which got staffing increase requests on the ballots this year found success. Of the ballot measures we studied, six proposals dealt with the issue of staffing. Five of those passed, a success rate of 83%. One such measure Firefighters and EMS Fund supported was in Grand Chute, WI, approved increasing local levy limits to hire an additional nine firefighters and paramedics, with an estimated cost of \$974,200. These measures succeeded in 83% of ballots (5 out of 6).



Staffing shortages and fire houses spread thin is a common problem plaguing fire services across the country. Much of this can be linked directly back to funding issues, which were only exacerbated Covid-19. Luckily, the departments which got staffing on the ballots this year found success. Of the ballot measures we studied, six proposals dealt with the issue of staffing. Five of those passed, a success rate of 83%. One such measure in Grand Chute, WI, approved increasing local levy limits to hire an additional nine firefighters and paramedics, with an estimated cost of \$974,200. These measures succeeded in 83% of ballots (5 out of 6).

Staffing issues are a fundamental problem for fire departments in America, but the success rate of staffing referendums in 2020 is a welcomed sign that voters understand the crisis that understaffed fire departments can create in their own communities.

To provide context to the success of 2020, we conducted a random sampling of six ballot measures asking to increase funding for fire department staffing in recent years, spanning from 2017 until 2020. The data from this sample provides further insight into the general trend noticed in the larger study of 2020 ballot measures. In this random examination, four of the six measures we studied passed. This equals a success rate of 66%. While this is lower than the outcomes of 2020 alone, it does help to indicate the success rates of any of the given years individually, and highlights voters' general willingness to staff their departments.

Ultimately, the referendums which were successful here adequately communicated the need for additional staffing to their communities. These fire departments made clear what was on the line if the measures were to fail. In all cases, voters were more willing to accept a modest increase in taxes in exchange for bolstered fire services.

Of note in an analysis of these referendums is that the two ballot measures defeated in our random analysis were defeated during the November general elections of their respective years. Historically we have found that ballot measures often have higher success during primary season and special elections where turnout is not as politically charged by party politics.



Facilities:

Of the seven ballot measures specifically asking for additional funding to repair, rebuild, or open new stations in the 18 states we covered, 5 passed (71%). One case of note occurred in Alameda County, CA. The county put Measure D on the ballot in March of 2020 to approve the issuance of \$90 million in bonds to repair and/or replace all the firehouses in Alameda. They proposed increasing property taxes by \$16 for every \$100,000 in value over 31 years. Measure D failed to gain the requisite 2/3 voter approval in March, but was reintroduced as Measure X on Election Day, November 3rd, where we believe higher turnout resulted in a victory for the ballot measure.



Equipment:

In 2020 there were eight ballot measures asking voters to specifically approve additional funding for equipment. Six of those measures passed supporting the requisition of a wide range of equipment- from new pagers in New Hampshire, to new fire apparatuses in multiple other states. In total, the six successful measures produced \$21,385,555 in equipment related funding for these departments in need.



Benefits

One of the issues which received overwhelming approval in the ballots we studied in 2020 was that of pension benefits for firefighters. Three that we studied occurred in the state of Missouri. The Cottleville, Central County, and O'Fallen fire protection districts each voted on modest increases to local property taxes to further fund the fire pension programs. Residents in Central County and O'Fallen agreed to pay \$3.17/month per \$200,000 home, and residents in Cottleville an additional \$3.56/month per \$250,000 home.



TIMING

Forty-five of the referendums referenced in this report were voted on during the November 3, 2020 general election. Of those, 73% passed (28/39). In comparison, 71% (33/45) of the referendums voted on prior to the November 2020 general election were approved by voters.

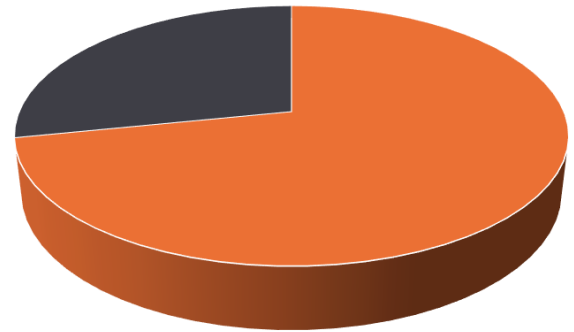
Primary vs. General Election Voter Behavior

What explains this voter behavior? Studies show that primary voters tend to sway more towards party lines and show a higher general level of interest in politics. However, these voters may also be more resistant to concepts such as tax increases or supporting government services in general. This may serve as some explanation for why A) more referendums were presented in the general election and B) why a higher percentage of the referendums presented during the general election were passed.

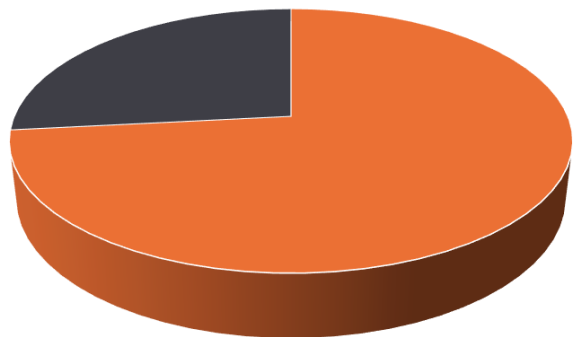
Social Media Influence

In the digital era, having a social media presence is an imperative for any business or organization looking to create positive outreach to their target audience. This is true for fire departments looking to raise awareness and create participation in ballot measures as well.

Our research has found that committees or departments who had social media presence were likely to be successful in getting a proposed ballot measure to pass. In 2020, we found that 60% of these departments with a vested interest in passing a particular ballot measure had at least a Facebook page where they could raise awareness, many were on other platforms, such as Twitter.



73% passed (28/39) of the referendums were voted in November 2020



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1. Ordway, Denise-Marie, "Primary voters aren't that different from general election voters", <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/politics/primaries/primary-election-voters-research/>



CONCLUSION

In many ways, as society begins to return to normal function along with the economy, the worst effects of the Covid-19 pandemic may very well be behind us, but the downstream effects of severe economic damage inflicted during the height of the virus has not been immediately identifiable will likely continue to play out for many more years. Fire and Emergency Services were some of the hardest hit professions, as they rely almost solely on public revenues to function.

The ballot measures and referendums of 2020 are a reflection of the urgent need for funding across the country, as agencies everywhere lack the resources to simply bring their facilities up to code, and provide up to date equipment for their staff.

In addition to the structural needs felt all around the country, the fallout of Covid-19 may also come to threaten the livelihood of firefighters across the nation. The International Association of Fire Chiefs recently projected that up to 30,000 firefighters could be furloughed by 2022 as a direct result of lost funding during the pandemic.

Moving forward, jurisdictions around the country must continue to find a balance between acquiring funding they desperately need and not asking the individual citizen for what could be perceived as “too much”. This can be achieved with continuous outreach and communication of developments within the department and language that assures voters their money will go to something that they or their community will directly benefit from. The hundreds of millions of dollars approved by taxpayers in 2020, and the high success rate of ballot measures, proves that the American public values the work of first responders and is there to support them in their time of need.



About Firefighters and EMS Fund

Firefighters and EMS Fund is dedicated to advocating for the safety and well-being of firefighters and their families in our political process. This group of public servants deserves a unified voice in government. Our coalition of everyday citizens, public officials and organizations are dedicated to providing that voice for firefighters, the local heroes across our country that require the support of

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