



2018 Fire Referendum Report

By Firefighters and EMS Fund

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SUMMARY

Following the 2018 election cycle, and taking into account referendums both on local ballots during primary and general elections across the country, Firefighters and EMS Fund has conducted a study of ballot measures designed to assist fire services. We referenced media coverage, press releases, and ballot measure text to present a larger picture of the state of fire services around the United States and how voters supported or opposed these services.

The referendums studied do not represent every referendum presented for voting in 2018, but a total of 62 in 16 different states were studied using data collected from media sources and general information available to the public.

ANALYZED REFERENDUMS IN 16 STATES



Data source: <https://www.fireandemsfund.com/2018-referendum-data>

Main Takeaways

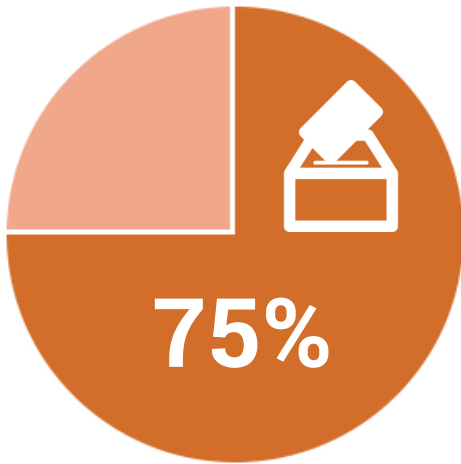
- About 2/3 of annual referendums are placed on the ballot during the general election vs. primary elections.
- Over 80% of referendums put to a vote in the general election passed, versus only 55% of referendums that were voted on prior to the general election
- Nearly 80% of the more than \$224 million dollars requested through these referendums were approved by voters
- Voters are more willing to increase funding to maintain current operations and to get their firefighters the benefits, training, equipment, and protection they need than they are funding to new fire stations and staff.

BY THE NUMBERS

73% of referendums relating to fire jurisdictions passed in 2018 (45 of the 62 studied). Ballot measures appeared more frequently in California, Colorado, and Illinois, making up the majority of the referendums studied. Since many Western states have stronger direct democracy institutions practices, allowing voters to directly decide on policy, these measures here have a strong chance of passage, which can have an effect on the number of referendums appearing. Additionally, recent struggles with natural disasters, such as a high number of fires in recent years, may have triggered some measures intended to raise more funding for capital improvements and staffing.

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Of the 32 operations-based referendums presented, **24 (75%)** were passed.

What was the overall purpose of these referendums?

Upon review, it appears that half of the referendums put forth were to assist fire jurisdictions with operations – mainly budgets and costs. Interestingly, most of these operations-based referendums were simply a request for assistance in maintaining the current costs of operations and to prevent further budget cuts. Of the 32 operations-based referendums presented, 24 (75%) were passed.

In addition to operations, some fire jurisdictions requested increases for firefighter benefits. Those requests passed 100% of the time in the cases we studied. Requests for updating or purchasing new equipment for firefighters passed over 75% of the time in the cases we studied.

Voters Push Back

Voters responded kindly to most requests from fire jurisdictions in 2018, except in a few instances. Of the referendums we studied, ballot measures requesting funds specifically for staffing needs failed more than 30% of the time.

The area that received the most pushback from voters were on ballot measures requesting funds to build, staff, and maintain new fire stations. These requests failed nearly 60% of the time. This was the only type of referendum that we studied that seemed to fail more often than not.



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WHAT WAS APPROVED

Budgets and financing were a major player in determining the viability of a referenda. Upon study of the 62 measures presented, an overwhelming majority of them were focused on budgets.

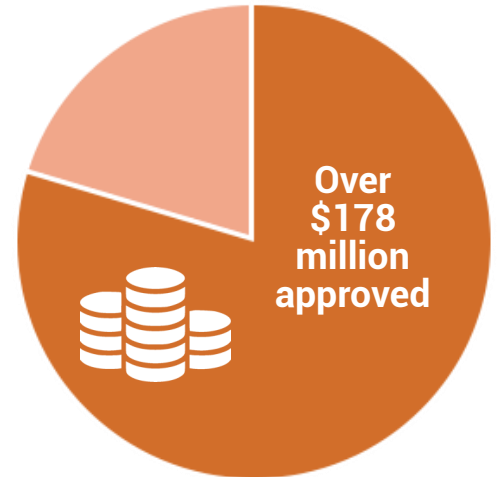
Why were these budget initiatives needed?

In total, over \$224 million was on the line in 2018 to bolster fire and police operations. At the end, over \$178 million (nearly 80%) was approved with over \$100 million of the total being approved in Houston alone. Let's break down how these budget-focused referendums will help improve their subjects:

Operational budget referendums were prominent fixtures in the 2018 election cycle. Generally speaking, operational budget requests were simply to maintain costs as-is, rather than seeking increased funding. For example, many of these referendums proposed bond sales or marginal increases in property taxes as a way to maintain costs. These increases were minimal while still allowing jurisdictions to improve capital or retain staff.

The operational struggles of many fire jurisdictions have resulted in the layoff of staff and closure of stations. In New Lenox, Illinois, a referendum requesting fire department funding failed in March 2018, resulting in a station closure. This referendum would be brought back and passed in November of the same year. However, this is not the case for every failed measure. Some simply sought to reopen stations that had been closed and re-hire displaced staff members. Others needed to replace aging or broken ambulances and equipment.

Overall, a general increase in population size in many of the districts in which these referendums were presented is an underlying cause of this need for stronger financial support. In addition, the 2008 recession and its resulting lower tax income for cities meant departments such as fire took a substantial hit. Now, these departments are tasked with trying to get back in the black while also facing population growth and higher demands for the services provided.



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WHAT WAS APPROVED (cont.)

Operations

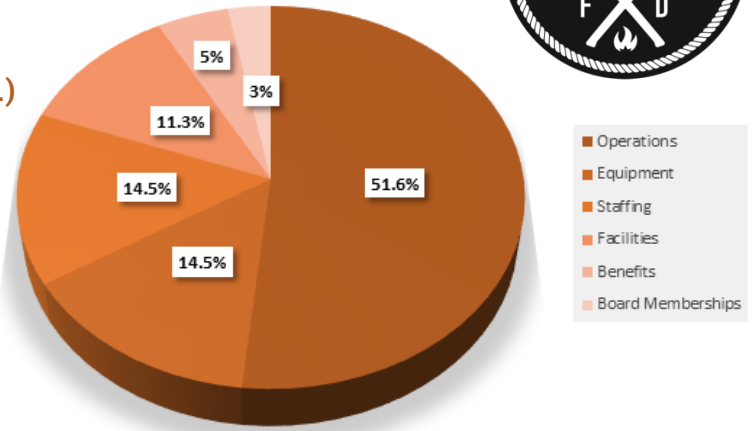
While operational needs were the primary focus of the majority (32/62) of the referendums studied, other functions played a role in the election cycle. These functions included:

Facilities

Of the seven referendums listing the construction of new fire stations as the primary capital improvement, three passed. One such referendum in Elgin, Illinois, passed a ballot measure allowing for the sale of construction bonds and a marginal property tax increase to fund a division of a busy fire district. This essentially allowed residents of Elgin to get a “two for one” deal by approving these two new stations to serve a greater geographical area.

Staffing

Staffing is another function of the ballot measures studied in 2018. Nine of the 62 referendums studied had to do with staffing, as many departments were having to cut staff in the face of budget troubles. While several of these types of referendums failed, 6 out of the 9 presented were passed, allowing departments to hire support staff that would enable them to cover larger territories and ease the workload strain on those who had been working through understaffing problems.



Equipment

Many of the equipment-focused measures were geared towards replacing old and worn vehicles such as ambulances and fire trucks. In total, over \$25 million dollars in equipment measures were passed of the 62 referendums studied.

Benefits

An interesting referendum in Rockland County, New York, was focused on monthly retirement benefits for volunteer firefighters. Since the 1990s, this fire station has retained and thanked its volunteer firefighters by allowing them to accrue monthly retirement benefits for time served. This referendum, put before voters in the November 2018 election, passed and will allow this fire department to increase its \$500 monthly benefit for eligible volunteer firefighters to \$600.

Board Memberships

Two referendums studied, both in California, dealt with board membership numbers. Both referendums proposed reducing the number of board seats, and both measures were passed.

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TIMING

Forty two of the referendums reviewed for this report were put forth on ballots during the November 6, 2018 general election. Of those, 81% passed (34/42). Comparatively, just 55% of the referendums presented in 2018 prior to the November general election passed (11/20).

Primary vs. General Election Voter Behavior

What explains this voter behavior? **Studies show¹** 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.



Over 8/10 referendums reviewed passed during the November election



Less than 6/10 referendums reviewed passed prior to November election

CONCLUSION

As U.S. municipalities continue to recover from the last recession, which ended in 2009 but still has far-reaching effects, many referendums were put to a vote in 2018 to bolster the efforts of fire services. Ranging from budgetary and operational requests to retirement benefits, the overwhelming majority of the 62 referendums studied showed a need for improvement in facilities and staffing for many fire stations and their jurisdictions.

With population increase and heightened fire risks in certain areas, the ability of a fire jurisdiction to adequately provide services is critical. By proposing referendums that would not ask an exorbitant amount from voters, fire jurisdictions mostly requested support for maintaining their current costs or improving facilities and equipment desperately in need of help. These referendums were not money grabs – they were simple calls for support, a way to allow these service providers to properly serve their communities.

Data source: <https://www.fireandemsfund.com/2018-referendum-data>

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

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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 their fellow citizens and public officials.

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