

Annual Town Budget Referendum Basics

All Connecticut towns annually adopt a budget that details the expected revenues and expenditures of a town for a fiscal year starting July 1st. Preparing a budget for adoption is a long process which involves various levels of town staff and elected officials. The actual final adoption of a budget is done by an elected board such as a Town Council or Board of Finance or by a town's registered voters and taxpayers in either a Town Meeting or Referendum vote. Town Meeting and Referendum votes are preceded by the adoption of a proposed budget by an elected board of the town. In the Town of Windsor, that elected board is the Windsor Town Council.

Over the last 10 years, on average, 46% of Connecticut towns had a town budget referendum, which if successful would adopt the town budget. About 26% of towns use a Town Meeting vote to adopt a budget. The remaining 28%, generally larger populated towns and cities, do not have citizen votes in the budget adoption process and rely solely on an elected Board of the Town to adopt the budget. Referendum voting involves machine ballot voting that is offered for many hours on a particular day as opposed to Town Meeting voting that occurs at a point in time at a Town Meeting. Voter turnout for a Referendum vote is significantly higher than for a Town Meeting vote. The Town of Windsor uses a referendum for the final adoption of a town budget. The vast majority of towns that have a budget referendum vote process do so automatically as part of the annual budget process, but a small number of towns require citizens to petition for a referendum vote. The Town of Windsor referendum process is automatic per town charter and does not require petitioning.

If a budget does not win adoption using a referendum vote, the elected board revises the budget and the revised budget is usually put to another referendum vote. A small number of towns limit the number of referendum votes. Additionally, a small number of towns have minimum referendum voter turnout requirements, that if not met causes the budget up for vote to be adopted regardless of the results of the referendum. Many towns have advisory questions on the ballot to help the elected board adjust the budget if it fails at referendum. Such advisory questions generally relate to the expenditure level being too high or too low or about right and are often asked of education and non-education expenditures separately.

The town budget referendum vote is generally a NO or YES vote, to approve a specific dollar expenditure total for the budget. If a town is part of a Regional School District, each member town of the District votes to adopt the Regional School District budget as well as their own town budget. The vast majority of Regional School District budget votes are referendum votes. Windsor is not part of a Regional School District, but like most other CT towns, it does have a local town school district. Since the school district budget is usually the largest department budget of a town's budget, the local education budget is often voted on separately from the non-education portion of the town budget. About 43% of towns split out the local Board of Education expenditure of a town's budget from the rest of the town's budget, resulting in two figures being voted on at referendum (3 if the town is also part of a Regional School District). Some towns also vote on a separate capital expenditure budget. If one part of the split budget vote fails at referendum, most towns only vote again on the portion of the budget that failed. The Town

of Windsor referendum vote is on the grand total of the town's General Fund budget and not on any portions of the budget separately or any other budget of the town.

Below are some town budget referendum statistics covering the 10-year period from Fiscal Year 2006-7 thru Fiscal Year 2015-16. 38.9% of all binding town budget referendum votes have resulted in proposed budget rejections. For Windsor, the rejection rate has been 50.0%. On average, it has taken 1.53 referendum votes to complete the budget adoption process for a town that uses the referendum vote. For Windsor, over that same period, it has taken 2.00 votes. 34.0% of budgets voted on at referendum have been rejected on the first vote. For Windsor, the corresponding figure is 40.0%. Median budget referendum turnout has been 18.3% for all town budget referendums and the median for Windsor has been 14.7% over that period, although last year's turnout in Windsor rose to 18.0%.

Voter Turnout as a percent of Registered Voters in Windsor, like other CT towns, varies based on the type of vote. For example, here is how Windsor voters have turned out to vote in these elections when aggregating the election years specified below:

Presidential: 78.93% (2004, 2008, & 2012)

State (non-Presidential): 58.76% (2006, 2010, & 2014)

Municipal (i.e. Town Council): 23.98% (2007, 2009, 2011, & 2013)

Budget Referendum: 15.21% (2006 thru 2015)

It is sometimes argued that because budget referendum turnout is low, budget adoption should be left solely to elected town officials. The above figures indicate however that turnout for municipal elections is also relatively low. **Does this mean that municipal elections should be decided by elected officials at the state level instead of the citizens of the town?**