

# Voting From Home: Summary of the 2020-21 School District Budget Vote

## Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school district operations has been substantial, driving unprecedented changes to many core functions and processes, including the annual school budget vote.

By law, all school districts in New York State (with the exception of the large city school districts of Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester, Yonkers, and New York City) must put their proposed budgets up for public vote.<sup>1</sup> A budget must receive a majority vote in order to pass; if the district seeks to override the property tax cap, a supermajority of favorable votes (at least 60 percent) is required in order to pass.<sup>2</sup>

This year, in response to the pandemic, school districts in New York State were required to provide all residents with an absentee ballot. Subsequently, the number of votes cast per budget increased significantly in almost all districts statewide, more than doubling in the majority of them.

However, even with this significant increase in voter participation, the ultimate results were similar to those of last year's traditional voting process: nearly all budgets were approved on the first vote.

This report summarizes the statewide trends. For district-level information, please visit our online dashboard: <http://wwe1.osc.state.ny.us/localgov/research-budget-votes/budget-votes.cfm>.

## Highlights

**Executive Order 202.26** temporarily suspended in-person voting for school district budgets and elections and required districts to use the absentee ballot system for all qualified voters.

**The number of votes cast statewide tripled** to nearly 1.6 million for the 2020-21 school budget vote, with significant regional variation in the year-over-year growth.

**Western New York** saw the largest percentage growth in votes cast, up more than 300 percent over last year.

**While all regions saw the share of "no" votes increase**, the Southern Tier had the highest percentage of "yes" votes cast, at 73.5 percent.

**11 budgets failed** on the first vote, a comparable number to the 12 defeated in 2019-20.

## New York State 2020-21 School District Budget Vote Process

Executive Order 202.26 temporarily changed the statewide uniform voting day established in the Education Law as the third Tuesday in May (this year, May 19) to June 9, 2020 and required each district to mail all eligible voters an absentee ballot.

In past years, absentee ballots had to be hand delivered by 5:00 p.m. on the day of the election, or postmarked no later than the day before the voting day and received by the day of the election. This year, ballots could be hand-delivered until 5:00 p.m. on June 9, 2020, while mail-in ballots would be accepted until 5:00 p.m. on June 16, 2020 (pursuant to Executive Order 202.39). If these conditions were not met, the ballot would not be considered valid and would not be counted.

Executive Order 202.47, which was signed on July 3, 2020, allowed for the school district in which budgets were defeated to hold a revote on July 28, 2020, after the start of the school district fiscal year, but still in time to send out tax notices. In the interim period, these districts were required to operate on a contingency budget.

If the district did not hold a revote, or if the district's budget was not approved upon revote, the contingency budget – with no increase in levy – would be continued for the full fiscal year

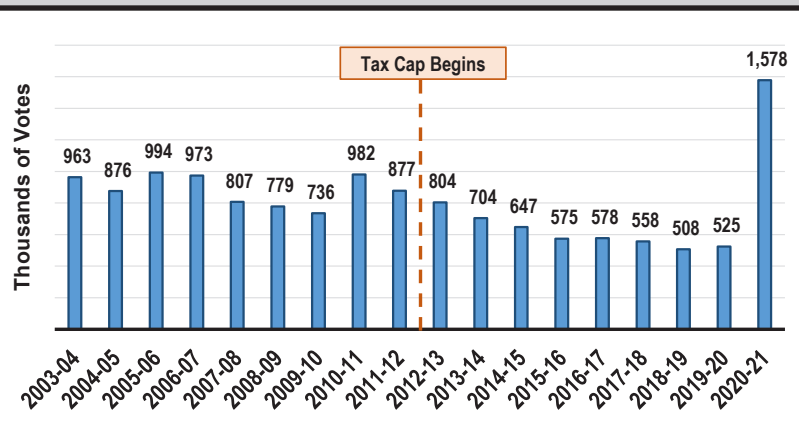
## Impact on Number of Votes and Outcome

Historically, participation in school district budget votes has been relatively low and declined steadily since the implementation of the property tax cap, which became effective starting in the 2012-13 school year. The tax cap law generally limits levy increases to two percent or the rate of inflation, whichever is less, with some exceptions.<sup>3</sup>

In years prior to the implementation of the tax cap, when property tax increases were higher, the number of votes tended to be higher as well. These pre-tax cap years generally saw higher rates of budget defeats, especially in years when levy increases were relatively high.

Figure 1

### Total Number of Ballots Cast Statewide in School District Budget Votes in Thousands, 2003-04 to 2020-21



Source: New York State Education Department.  
Note: Does not include revotes on defeated budgets.

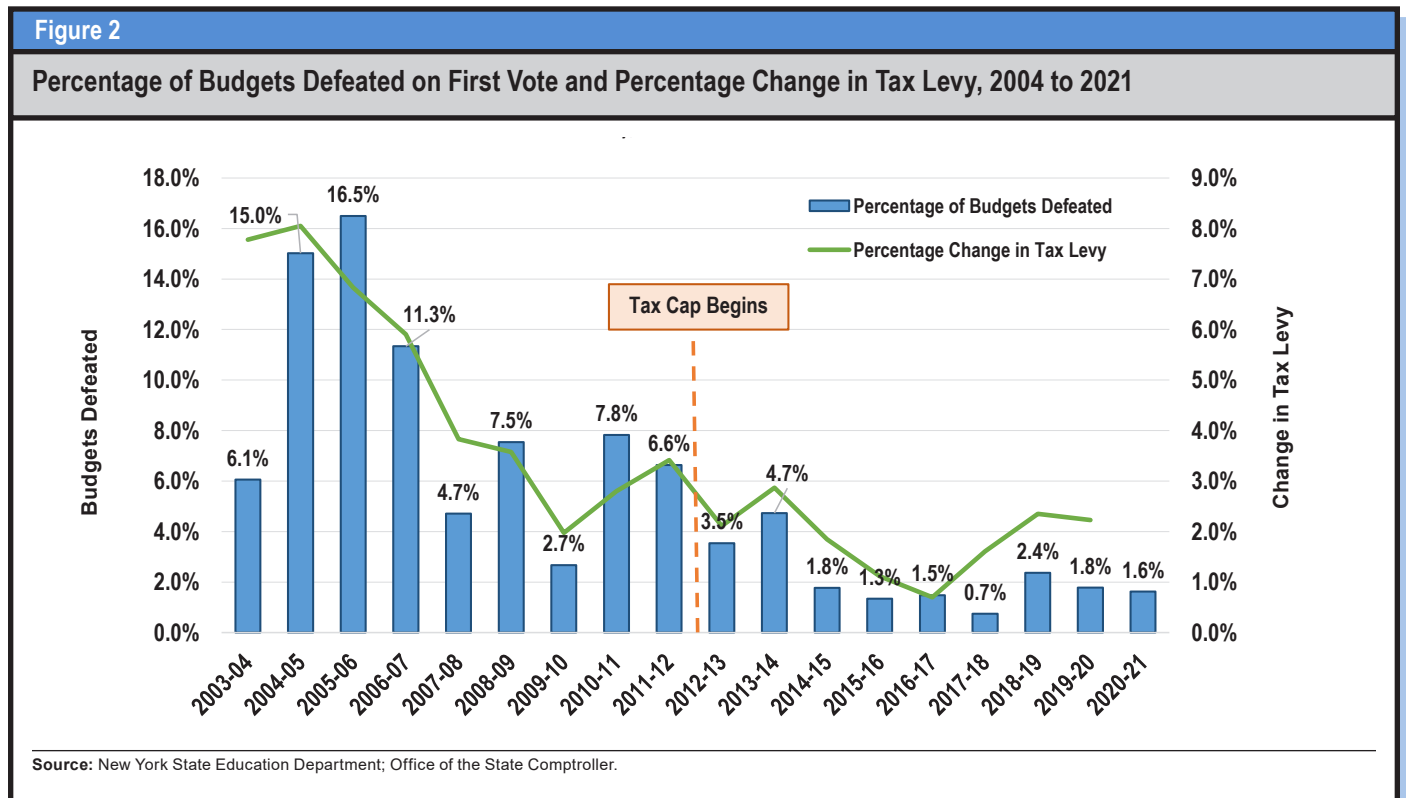
This year's delayed budget vote and the subsequent implementation of district-wide absentee ballots were followed by a three-fold increase in the number of votes. (See Figure 1.) Nearly every school district saw an increase in the number of ballots cast. In fact, only nine of the 675 school districts included in this analysis (1.3 percent) experienced a decrease in the number of votes compared to last year.

## Budget Defeats

The increase in participation did not result in an increase in the number of budget defeats. (See Figure 2.) Of the 675 district budgets that were voted on, only 11 failed on the first vote, which is similar to the 12 defeats from last year. Of the 11 defeats that occurred this year, seven passed on revote, three (Rensselaer City School District, Riverhead Central School District and Fort Edward Union Free School District) were defeated again, requiring a “zero-growth” contingency budget, and one district (East Ramapo Central School District) opted to go directly to a contingency budget rather than hold a revote.<sup>4</sup> In the case of East Ramapo, the proposed 2.7 percent spending increase, which would have resulted in a tax increase of 1.3 percent, failed by a 2:1 margin.

Thirteen budgets required a supermajority vote to pass, reflecting districts seeking to override the property tax cap, only slightly fewer than the 18 needing one in 2019-20. Of these, four were defeated on the first vote, highlighting the risk that school districts take on when advancing a budget to the voters that exceeds the tax cap. On revote, two (Rensselaer and Fort Edward, mentioned above) were defeated again, while the other two (Dolgeville Central School District and Johnstown City School District) passed. Dolgeville reduced its budget to be within the cap, thereby requiring only a simple majority vote in favor on revote. Johnstown, however, kept its budget the same, and was able to obtain the required supermajority support for the budget on its second vote—receiving 65.4 percent of votes in favor of the budget which included a 5 percent tax levy increase.<sup>5</sup>

While the number of budget defeats did not increase from 2019-20 to 2020-21, the overall percentage of votes in support of the budget did experience a modest decrease — with 73.1 percent of those casting a ballot voting in support of the 2019-20 budget and 69.0 percent voting in support of the 2020-21 budget — a 4 percentage point drop in the overall level of support.



## Effect of Voter Turnout on Percentage of “Yes” vs. “No” Votes

Although the number of votes increased statewide, the increase was much greater in some districts (and some regions) than in others. (See Figure 3.) The number of votes cast for Western New York’s budgets grew fastest, quadrupling between the two years.

In districts where the number of votes increased most, the percentage of “yes” votes tended to decline to a greater extent, although not enough to change the ultimate outcome of the votes. This pattern was observable at the regional level as well. For example, in Western New York, the percentage of ballots in support of the budget decreased by 8.5 percentage points – the greatest decrease among the other regions. However, in the Mohawk Valley, which had the smallest increase in the number of votes cast, support for the budget saw only a slight 0.9 percentage point reduction. Overall, support for budgets was greatest in the Southern Tier, where 73.5 percent of ballots were cast in favor of the schools’ budgets.

**Figure 3**

**Change in the Total Number of Votes and Percentage Voting in Support of the Budget, 2019-20 and 2020-21**

Region	Number of Votes			Percentage Voting “Yes” to Budget		
	2019-20	2020-21	Percentage Increase in Votes	2019-20	2020-21	Change in Percentage of “Yes” Votes
Western New York	43,476	175,941	304.7%	75.9%	67.4%	-8.5%
North Country	19,599	63,836	225.7%	76.9%	71.1%	-5.7%
Finger Lakes	47,753	159,867	234.8%	76.0%	70.4%	-5.6%
Central New York	28,390	93,916	230.8%	77.2%	71.6%	-5.5%
Long Island	162,129	460,985	184.3%	70.7%	67.5%	-3.2%
Mid-Hudson	109,904	315,285	186.9%	70.9%	67.8%	-3.1%
Capital District	57,767	157,672	172.9%	74.6%	70.5%	-4.2%
Southern Tier	31,514	89,934	185.4%	75.8%	73.5%	-2.3%
Mohawk Valley	24,283	60,456	149.0%	72.6%	71.8%	-0.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>524,815</b>	<b>1,577,892</b>	<b>200.7%</b>	<b>73.1%</b>	<b>69.1%</b>	<b>-4.1%</b>

**Source:** New York State Education Department.  
**Note:** Totals do not include revotes on defeated budgets.

## Very Large Increases in Voting Seen in Some Districts

The largest increase in votes cast was in the Kiryas Joel Union Free School District, located in Orange County, which experienced a 22-fold increase in the number of votes cast.<sup>6</sup> (See Figure 4.) In 2019-20, the district received a total of 54 votes for its budget, with all votes in favor. This year, 1,216 voters cast ballots, and several (95 votes, or 7.8 percent of the total) were against the budget.

The number of votes cast grew by 500 percent or more in 22 school districts around the State. In most cases, part of the reason for the magnitude of the increase was extremely low vote counts in 2019-20.

**Figure 4**

**Selected Voting Data for School Districts with the Largest Increases in Total Participation**

School District	County	Population Residing in District (2019)	Total Votes		Percentage Change	Percentage of "Yes" Votes Cast 2020-21
			2019-20	2020-21		
Kiryas Joel UFSD	Orange	20,743	54	1,216	2152%	92.2%
Victor CSD	Ontario	23,125	778	8,656	1013%	60.5%
Scarsdale UFSD	Westchester	18,233	452	4,153	819%	78.4%
Watertown City SD	Jefferson	29,749	406	3,655	800%	75.2%
Valley Stream CSD	Nassau	60,673	521	4,664	795%	52.0%
Crown Point CSD	Essex	1,900	92	778	746%	61.8%
Jamestown City SD	Chautauqua	30,836	437	3,542	711%	68.6%
Cheektowaga CSD	Erie	21,111	277	2,161	680%	48.9%
Allegany-Limestone CSD	Cattaraugus	9,064	150	1,161	674%	87.4%
Camden CSD	Oneida	13,029	258	1,974	665%	77.7%
Amherst CSD	Erie	23,950	560	4,067	626%	78.5%
Saranac CSD	Clinton	12,834	266	1,898	614%	69.2%
South Jefferson CSD	Jefferson	10,789	262	1,776	578%	68.5%
Depew UFSD	Erie	16,202	338	2,261	569%	55.9%
Rensselaer City SD	Rensselaer	9,374	253	1,690	568%	33.1%
Windham-Ashland-Jewett CSD	Greene	3,093	127	836	558%	50.0%
Hornell City SD	Steuben	10,406	287	1,817	533%	64.6%
Massena CSD	St. Lawrence	16,646	396	2,490	529%	63.2%
Lafargeville CSD	Jefferson	2,969	92	566	515%	84.5%
Lewiston-Porter CSD	Niagara	18,318	630	3,827	507%	69.1%
Union-Endicott CSD	Broome	30,230	819	4,974	507%	74.0%
Nyack UFSD	Rockland	24,591	656	3,971	505%	76.1%
<b>Total</b>		<b>407,865</b>	<b>8,111</b>	<b>62,133</b>		

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau; New York State Education Department.  
**Note:** Results shown are first vote only. Cheektowaga CSD and Rensselaer CSD budgets were defeated on the first vote. Cheektowaga's passed on the second vote, while Rensselaer was defeated for a second time.

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## Conclusion

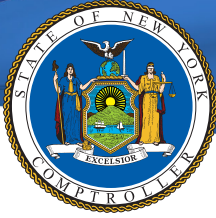
In recent years, participation in school budget votes had been declining, particularly since the implementation of the tax cap. This general trend was reversed for the pandemic-disrupted 2020-21 school budget vote, which was conducted entirely by absentee ballot. This new process likely contributed to an increase in participation: triple the number of votes were cast compared to the prior year, with a slightly higher percentage of votes cast against the budgets. However, the number of school district budgets that passed was comparable to last year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions about how to conduct civic responsibilities in a safe, yet still transparent and equitable manner. The Executive Orders relating to allowing people to vote from home presented new challenges. School districts were guided by their existing absentee ballot processes, election law, executive orders, procedural guidance issued by school district associations and their own legal counsel. Schools had to quickly mail ballots to every qualified voter and receive and count those ballots in a safe, transparent and secure manner. Continued attention to issues of voting integrity is essential to promote public confidence in the school budget voting process and to improve voter participation.

# Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> New York State Education Law (Education Law) Section 2022. Also excepted are some special case districts that were created through special legislation.
- <sup>2</sup> Education Law Section 2023-a.
- <sup>3</sup> Office of the State Comptroller, Property Tax Cap, Summary of the Legislation, available at: [www.osc.state.ny.us/sites/default/files/local-government/documents/pdf/2019-02/legislationsummary.pdf](http://www.osc.state.ny.us/sites/default/files/local-government/documents/pdf/2019-02/legislationsummary.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> New York State Department of Education (SED), New York State Property Tax Report Card, 2020-21 Re-vote, available at: [www.p12.nysed.gov/mgtserv/propertytax/](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/mgtserv/propertytax/) and SED, Budget Vote Results, available at: [www.p12.nysed.gov/mgtserv/votingresults/](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/mgtserv/votingresults/).
- <sup>5</sup> SED, New York State Property Tax Report Card, 2020-21 Re-Vote; SED, Budget Vote Results; and Jason Subik, "Johnstown School Budget Passes in Re-vote," The Daily Gazette, July 29, 2020, available at: [www.dailygazette.com/article/2020/07/29/johnstown-school-budget-passes-in-re-vote](http://www.dailygazette.com/article/2020/07/29/johnstown-school-budget-passes-in-re-vote).
- <sup>6</sup> As a result of the 2019 creation of the Town of Palm Tree, the Kiryas Joel Union Central School District gained 220 acres from the Monroe-Woodbury Central School District in July 2019. As this change in district boundaries happened after the 2019-20 school budget vote (held in May 2019), there were more potential voters in the Kiryas Joel Union Central School District for the 2020-21 budget vote than there were the year prior.



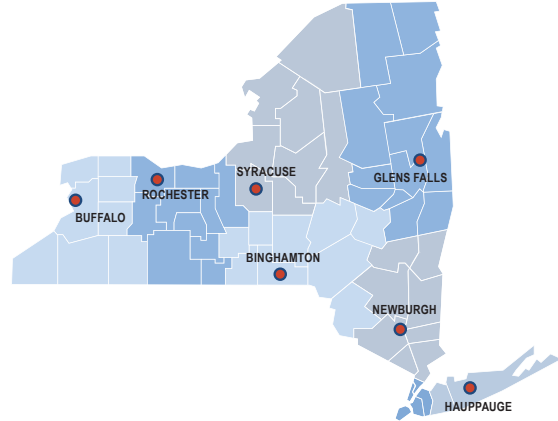
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