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COMMENTARY

Maine's 2018 Election: Bonds Continue to Hold

by James P. Melcher

Since 1990, Maine has held more statewide bond votes than any other state (largely because Maine requires voter approval for a lower amount of borrowing—\$2 million or more—than any other state). Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of Maine bond proposals sent to voters since the mid-1990s have been approved. I discussed this and many other aspects of Maine's statewide bond votes in an article in *Maine Policy Review* after the 2016 elections. It examined bond elections in Maine and chronicled how Maine compares on this score to other states (Melcher 2016). This commentary follows up on that work, and it finds that these and other past tendencies in Maine bond voting held true once again in 2018.

In the November 2018 election, Maine voters were asked to approve four bond referenda—the most in one election since November 2014 when they considered six. By timing alone, my previous research suggests that we should expect that statewide bond elections in a nonpresidential election year—such as 2018—would have a higher rate of success than bond votes in a November election in a presidential year such as 2012 or 2016. And true to form, all four 2018 proposals passed. This fits with recent trends of Maine statewide bond success. No statewide bond referendum in Maine has failed since a higher education bond was narrowly defeated in November 2012.

Since then, counting the 2018 votes, all 20 of Maine's statewide bond referenda have passed.¹ Table 1 shows the percentages of the vote for each of the four bond referenda and which counties it carried.

Maine's four bond votes did not attract a great deal of attention nor controversy. In fact, Ballotpedia (https://ballotpedia.org/Maine_2018_ballot_measures) reported that no money was spent on either side in any of the races, while Question 1 drew more than \$3 million in combined spending. Other fall 2018 races in Maine drew much more focus and money, such as the Second District congressional race between incumbent Bruce Poliquin and challenger Jared Golden—in which ranked-choice voting played a prominent

role and which was not finally settled until December. The open seat race for governor and Question 1, an initiative that would have funded home healthcare services with an income surtax of 3.8 percent on high-income households (Arnold 2018), also received considerably more attention than the bond votes.

The first of the bond referenda was Question 2, which requested money for state wastewater projects.² This type of bond, for protection of the environment, without providing new things used directly (like roads in a transportation bond) or promising new jobs, has tended to succeed at a high rate, but with a lower percentage of the vote than transportation bonds (Melcher 2016). As expected, it passed, but by a relatively

TABLE 1: Statewide Bond Races by County, November 2018

	Question 2: Wastewater Improvements	Question 3: Transportation	Question 4: Public Higher Education	Question 5: Community Colleges
Statewide	Won (54.6%)	Won (67.7%)	Won (54.2%)	Won (64.9%)
Androscoggin	Lost	Won	Lost	Won
Aroostook	Won	Won	Won	Won
Cumberland	Won	Won	Won	Won
Franklin	Lost	Won	Lost	Won
Hancock	Won	Won	Won	Won
Kennebec	Won	Won	Won	Won
Knox	Won	Won	Won	Won
Lincoln	Won	Won	Won	Won
Oxford	Lost	Won	Lost	Won
Penobscot	Won	Won	Lost	Won
Piscataquis	Lost	Won	Lost	Won
Sagadahoc	Won	Won	Won	Won
Somerset	Lost	Won	Lost	Won
Waldo	Won	Won	Won	Won
Washington	Lost	Won	Won	Won
York	Won	Won	Won	Won

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narrow margin, garnering 54.6 percent of the vote. Its pattern of success by county was similar to that of successful Democratic gubernatorial candidate Janet Mills. All nine counties carried by Mills also were carried by Question 2, except for Mills's home county, Franklin, where Question 2 lost but Mills won.

Transportation bond proposals have long had a reputation in Maine as being nearly invincible at the ballot box (see, for example, Russell 2013). Since transportation bonds moved away from funding just one or two highly localized projects at a time to funding statewide improvements, they have run very well. No statewide transportation bond has failed in Maine since 1994 (Melcher 2016). This trend continued in 2018 with Question 3, which carried all 16 Maine counties.

The weakest-performing bond issue was Question 4, the one benefiting the University of Maine System. This, too, fit in with past patterns, in which higher education bonds have generally passed, but with narrower margins than other kinds of bonds. Unlike the failed 2012 University of Maine System bond, the 2018 bond included language that suggested the funds would benefit economic development and jobs—perennially important issues in Maine. Question 4 carried 10 of Maine's 16 counties. Curiously, two of the six counties where Question 4 lost were Franklin County (home of the University of Maine at Farmington) and Penobscot County (home of the University of Maine).

The community college bond, Question 5, did better. Keeping with the tendency to explain benefits of passing bonds, the measure asked voters, "Do you favor a \$15,000,000 bond issue to improve educational programs by upgrading facilities at all 7 of Maine's

community colleges in order to provide Maine people with access to high-skill, low-cost technical and career education?" Perhaps because of attention given in Maine to shortages of skilled workers in some trade fields (e.g., Cough 2018; Frye 2018), this referendum ran well statewide, carrying all 16 Maine counties. It will be interesting to see whether community college bonds continue to win more support than public university bonds in the future.

In sum, the November 2018 Maine statewide bond referenda followed the patterns of the recent past—both in terms of passage and in terms of what kinds of referenda found an easier path to victory. Statewide bonds in Maine continue to hold their support. 🐟

ENDNOTES

1. All election tabulations come from the Maine Secretary of State, Bureau of Corporations, Elections and Commissions (<https://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/results/>).
2. Maine law sets the ballot placement on referenda and initiatives based first on category and then within categories by a random drawing by the Secretary of State's office. Initiatives are placed on the ballot ahead of state referenda. The lone initiative on the ballot was listed first as Question 1, with the four bond referenda listed as Questions 2 through 5.

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