SHALL WE OVERRIDE?

PROPOSITION 2 ½ VOTES OCCURRING MORE OFTEN IN WORCESTER COUNTY

INTRODUCTION

Proposition 2 ½ was a 1980 ballot initiative that limits the amount municipalities can collect in property taxes each year in Massachusetts. The Research Bureau previously wrote about Proposition 2 ½ in 2025's *Casting Ballots on Taxes: Town Meeting, Local Governance, and Proposition 2 ½'s Limits*. That report focused on the communities surrounding Worcester, examining ten-year trends in expenditures and revenues, override votes, and new growth.

As of October 9th, 15 of Worcester County's 60 communities have turned to voters to raise taxes in 2026, offering 25 different vote options. One has to go back to 2003 to find a year in which there were more override voting options and 1994 to find a year in which there were more communities voting on overrides.

Communities across Massachusetts are under enormous pressures from inflation, rising health care costs, stagnant state aid, and sometimes anemic new growth. On the following pages, this brief will examine recent override voting patterns in Worcester County.

WORCESTER COUNTY TAX OVERRIDES

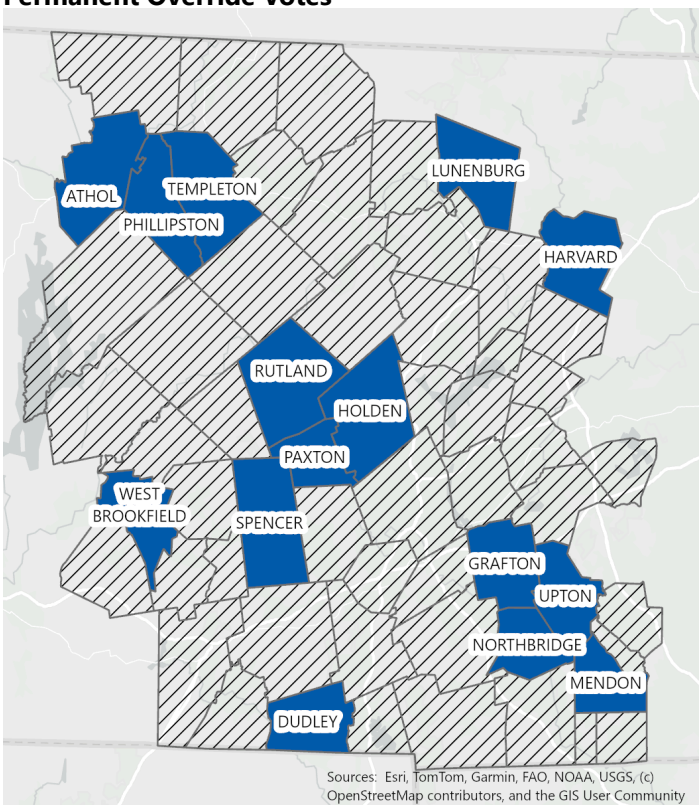
Fifteen Worcester County municipalities held Proposition 2 ½ override votes for operating funds between April and September 2026. Overall, these communities provided 25 voting options to their residents. **Some votes included multiple options for funding, and some communities returned to voters later after an initial rejection.**

Communities across Worcester County have had to turn to override votes more often in recent years, especially post-COVID. **In many cases, operating overrides are intended to keep services at the same funding level as the prior year, especially in the face of rising costs.** Failed overrides can lead to budget cuts if the community does not have the free cash to temporarily cover them. Deficits compound yearly. Communities often offer explanations of how a failed override vote will affect services. Rutland, for example, announced it would have to cut town hall hours to just two days a week, reduce weekly library hours to 32, and cut five firefighter/paramedics and four police officers. Many communities are facing rising health care costs, pension obligations, and inflation that exceeds Proposition 2 ½'s limits.

Communities where overrides passed saw an additional $17,948,090 added to their allowed FY27 levies. In six of those communities, only one override vote option was provided. In Spencer, there were two votes, one for schools and one for firefighter funding; the latter won while the former lost. **On average, 20.7% of registered voters turned out for these particular votes** (using September 2026 registered voter counts from the Massachusetts Secretary of the Commonwealth). Overrides passed by a median of 336 votes.

Communities where votes failed often offered alternatives or returned to residents later. Athol, Lunenburg, Templeton, and West Brookfield offered two alternative funding levels to their residents. Rutland offered three votes for a multi-year override starting with a vote for $3 million for FY27. Dudley and Paxton both rejected earlier votes and returned to residents later, as did Templeton. **On average, 21.7% of registered voters turned out for these failed votes. The median margin of defeat was 367 votes.**

Map 1: Worcester County Communities that Held Permanent Override Votes



Source: Massachusetts Division of Local Services

On this page, several charts illustrate this year's data.

Chart 1 shows total override votes taken in the last ten years, showing a steady increase in the number of votes and municipalities since 2021. The "total vote options" line does include elections where voters were given multiple alternatives for funding levels.

Chart 2 shows overall voter turnout of all registered voters and the percentage of the total vote that the final outcome represented. Each circle represents one vote option. Orange circles represent overrides that were approved and blue those that were rejected. Circles are sized proportionally to the funds requested, ranging from $135,370 in Harvard to $5.5 million in Holden. Three outliers are labeled for each outcome. The trendlines **indicate that higher overall voter turnout generally led to more votes in favor of approving an override.**

Chart 3 shows the general "departments" that money is classified under by the Division of Local Services for the seven overrides that were approved. For the most part, money goes to the areas described. In the case of "general operating," funds were split in Holden for both local and school operating funds, while in Harvard funds were described as being for local operating funds.

Finally, **Table 1** shows failed votes and their amounts in Worcester County. Many of these votes were for both local and school operating funds. Dates are shown for municipalities that held more than one override vote.

This brief is the first in a series from The Research Bureau regarding Proposition 2 ½ trends in Worcester County.

Table 1: Failed 2026 Vote Options and Amounts

	General Government	General Operating	School
Athol	-	$1,800,000	-
	-	$2,900,000	-
Dudley	$1,985,187 (6/15)	$717,630 (9/29)	-
Lunenburg	$2,400,000	-	-
	$3,300,000	-	-
Paxton	-	$640,000 (5/11)	-
	-	$386,289 (8/10)	-
Rutland	-	$3,000,000	-
	-	$1,100,000	-
	-	$1,000,000	-
Phillipston	-	-	$208,020
Spencer	-	-	$264,456
Templeton	-	$2,000,000 (5/18)	-
	-	$4,000,000 (5/18)	-
	-	$1,388,534 (9/28)	-
West Brookfield	$1,600,000	-	$1,100,000

Source: Massachusetts Division of Local Services

A Note on Terms

Free Cash: At the end of the fiscal year, changes in expected revenues and expenditures from the previous year are certified and can be expended for any purpose

Levy: Tax collection

Operating Funds: Funds to be spent on daily operations

Chart 1: Ten Years of Overrides in Worcester County

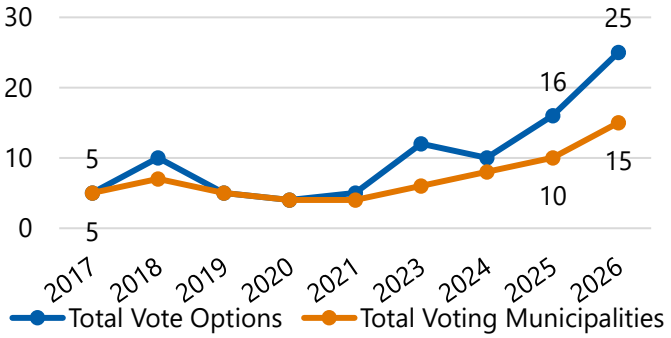


Chart 2: Margins and Turnout of 2026 Override Options

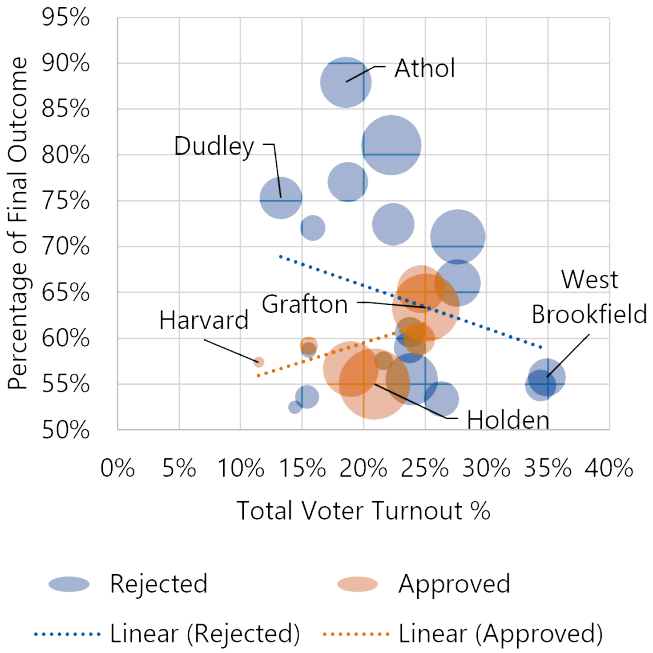


Chart 3: Total Funding by Category Across all Seven Communities that Passed Overrides in 2026

