

# Unraveling The Vote

By Kate Dufour, Legislative Advocate, MMA

On November 4, 2003, an unprecedented number of Maine voters for an off-year election (509,450) participated in the statewide polling. In addition to taking positions on three bond issues for environmental, higher education and transportation purposes, voters also had

the opportunity to weigh-in on three citizen-initiated bills promoting tax reform, a resort casino and the use of video gambling terminals at harness racing facilities.

Although the supporters of each of the three initiatives met the same requirements to place their bills on

the November ballot, only the tax reform measure put forth by the Citizens to Reduce Local Property Taxes Statewide, a coalition made up of Maine Municipal Association, Maine Education Association, Maine School Management Association, and several other groups, had to compete against the legislature's own tax reform proposal. While Maine's constitution clearly authorizes the legislature to compete with any citizen-initiated bill, it is an option that is seldom used. Since 1911 only three of the 44 citizen-initiated bills submitted to Maine voters have had to contend with legislative competition.

Competing measures sometimes confuse voters by providing choices rather than a simple up-or-down vote based on the initiative's merits. In order for the tax reform initiative to become law after the November election, municipal and school officials would have had to convince over half the voters that Question 1A, not questions 1B or 1C, was the best for option for Maine residents.

What made the task even more difficult is that the citizen-initiated bill and the competing measure were similarly phrased. The citizens initiative, Question 1A, asked "Do you want the State to pay 55% of the cost of public education, which includes all special education costs, for the purpose of shifting costs from the property tax to state resources?" The competing measure, Question 1B, asked "Do you want to lower property taxes and avoid the need for a significant increase in state taxes by

**FIGURE 1**  
**Countywide Results**

|              | #<br>1A | #<br>1B | #<br>1C | %<br>1A | %<br>1B | %<br>1C |
|--------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Androscoggin | 12,941  | 11,897  | 11,921  | 35.2    | 32.4    | 32.4    |
| Aroostook    | 9,464   | 7,838   | 4,135   | 44.1    | 36.6    | 19.3    |
| Cumberland   | 34,947  | 37,468  | 33,732  | 32.9    | 35.3    | 31.8    |
| Franklin     | 4,264   | 3,576   | 3,049   | 39.2    | 32.8    | 28.0    |
| Hancock      | 7,844   | 7,678   | 5,193   | 37.9    | 37.1    | 25.1    |
| Kennebec     | 16,379  | 15,789  | 11,753  | 37.3    | 35.9    | 26.8    |
| Knox         | 6,411   | 4,659   | 4,122   | 42.2    | 30.7    | 27.1    |
| Lincoln      | 5,951   | 5,218   | 4,363   | 38.3    | 33.6    | 28.1    |
| Oxford       | 8,243   | 6,682   | 5,452   | 40.5    | 32.8    | 26.8    |
| Penobscot    | 18,824  | 20,155  | 12,233  | 36.8    | 39.4    | 23.9    |
| Piscataquis  | 2,834   | 2,095   | 1,607   | 43.4    | 32.1    | 24.6    |
| Sagadahoc    | 5,323   | 4,611   | 4,234   | 37.6    | 32.5    | 29.9    |
| Somerset     | 7,494   | 5,268   | 3,967   | 44.8    | 31.5    | 23.7    |
| Waldo        | 6,965   | 4,519   | 2,720   | 49.0    | 31.8    | 19.1    |
| Washington   | 4,914   | 3,556   | 2,289   | 45.7    | 33.1    | 21.3    |
| York         | 30,138  | 28,235  | 20,644  | 38.1    | 35.7    | 26.1    |
| Total        | 182,936 | 169,244 | 131,414 | 37.8    | 35.0    | 27.2    |

Source: Bangor Daily News 2003 Election Results

phasing in a 55% state contribution to the cost of public education and by providing expanded property tax relief?"

Both questions to the voters focused on getting the state to pay 55% of the cost of K-12 education with the ultimate goal of relieving property tax burden. The specifics of how this would be done was in the fine print and most likely not entirely understood before voters made their decision. It is fairly evident that many voters made their choice based on heavy advertising by proponents of both the initiative and the competing measure. Advertising, by its very nature, does not get into the substantive issues of referendum questions. It is also likely that many voters made their decision on the tax reform issue in the ballot box, by simply choosing between the similarly worded questions or selecting neither (i.e., voting for 1C).

The citizen-initiated bill not only held the state accountable to its 20 year promise to fund 55% of the total

cost of K-12 education, but also directed the legislature to provide that relief immediately and to work on a plan to reform Maine's tax structure and reduce the overall (state and local) tax burden on Maine residents. The competing measure required the state to pay its 55% share of K-12 education according to a new education funding model (EPS), but sought to achieve that goal incrementally by increasing its share of the cost of education over five years. The legislature's competing measure was silent with respect to the goals of tax reform and overall tax burden reduction.

If voters were confused about the differences between 1A and 1B, they had the 1C (do nothing) option. This option attracted 27% of the voters; a "do nothing" turnout that might be expected given the confusion generated by the competing measure. At the end of election day, the citizen-initiated proposal garnered a plurality of the votes (38%) rather than a majority (over 50%).

Under the state constitution, when neither the citizen initiative nor the competing measure receives more than 50% of the votes, the proposal receiving the most votes, and at least 33% of the total votes, must be placed on the next statewide election ballot, on its own for a straight up-or-down vote.

Although the citizen-initiated tax relief and reform proposal did not receive over 50% of the votes in the November election, municipal and school officials have cause to celebrate the victory. Not only did the campaign behind the citizen-initiated bill have to contend with the complications of a competing measure, it also faced formidable opposition from the governor, legislature, business community, and news media.

In spite of those hurdles, municipal and school officials were successful in sending a message to state policymakers that property tax relief is needed. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the voters supported one of the two tax relief plans offered on the ballot. Of the 483,594 votes cast on the tax reform question, Question 1A (citizens' initiative) received 182,936 (38%), Question 1B (competing measure) received 169,244 (35%) and Question 1C (the "none of the above" option) received 131,414 (27%) votes.

The tax relief provided in the citizens' initiative struck a chord with the most voters, in a majority of municipalities and in a majority of counties. Fourteen of the sixteen counties supported the citizens' initiative, with only the voters in Cumberland and Penobscot counties supporting the legislature's competing measure (see Figure 1). Seventy-three percent of all Maine communities voted in support of the citizens' initiative (see Figure 2). Furthermore, 69 communities supported the citizens' initiative at a rate of over 50% (see Figure 3). Eighty-three percent (83%) of the voters in Bancroft supported 1A. In the towns of, Moose River, Wellington, Deblois, Beals, St Agatha, Frye Island, Wade, Haynesville, Garfield Plantation and Mechanic Falls, over two-thirds of the voters supported the citizens' initiative.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Municipal Support for Citizens' Initiative**

|              | Municipalities<br>In County | Municipalities<br>Supporting 1A | % of Total<br>Supporting 1A |
|--------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Androscoggin | 14                          | 11                              | 79                          |
| Aroostook    | 66                          | 52                              | 79                          |
| Cumberland   | 27                          | 11                              | 41                          |
| Franklin     | 21                          | 18                              | 86                          |
| Hancock      | 37                          | 24                              | 65                          |
| Kennebec     | 29                          | 17                              | 59                          |
| Knox         | 18                          | 17                              | 94                          |
| Lincoln      | 19                          | 12                              | 63                          |
| Oxford       | 39                          | 26                              | 67                          |
| Penobscot    | 60                          | 38                              | 63                          |
| Piscataquis  | 19                          | 14                              | 74                          |
| Sagadahoc    | 10                          | 7                               | 70                          |
| Somerset     | 33                          | 31                              | 94                          |
| Waldo        | 26                          | 25                              | 96                          |
| Washington   | 47                          | 41                              | 87                          |
| York         | 29                          | 19                              | 66                          |
| Total        | 494                         | 363                             | 73                          |

**Source:** Bangor Daily News 2003 Election Results

Although it is clear that the tax reform plan provided in the citizens' initiative was supported by a majority of the communities, there were other factors that stopped the initiative short of receiving over 50% of the votes statewide. Factors impacting the outcome included the high voter turnout, the opponents of the casino referendum, renters and population.

**Voter Turnout & Casino Referendum Link**

Undoubtedly, the casino referendum had an impact on the results of the tax reform referendum. According to David Emery of Demographic Strategies, 49% of the casino bill proponents supported Question 1A, while only 30% of the casino bill opponents supported the citizens' initiative. In addition to opposing 1A, the opponents of the casino bill had

the impact of significantly increasing voter turnout and negatively impacting the outcome of the citizens' initiative.

According to the countywide voter turnout figures, the citizens' initiative received greater support in counties with lower voter turnouts (see Figure 4). In the four counties with the lowest voter turnout rates (Aroostook, Hancock, Somerset, and Washington), 1A received 43%, 1B received 35% and 1C received 22% of the votes. In the four counties with the highest voter turnout rates (Knox, Lincoln, Sagadahoc, and York), 1A received 35%, 1B received 36% and 1C received 29% of the votes.

**Home Ownership Rates**

As would be expected, voters in counties with higher home ownership rates were more supportive of

Question 1A's offer for immediate tax relief (see Figure 5) than the voters in counties with lower home ownership rates. The debate that ensued around the citizens' initiative and the competing measure seemed to naturally pit homeowners against renters. The promise of 1A to provide immediate and substantial tax relief, the cost of which would be paid with state resources, seemed to resonate with homeowners, while the promise of incremental property tax relief, along with the significant expansion of the state's "circuit breaker" property tax and rent rebate program, seemed to appeal to renters. In the four counties with the highest home ownership rates (Lincoln, Piscataquis, Somerset and Waldo), 1A received 44%, 1B received 32% and 1C received 24% of the votes. In the four counties with the lowest home ownership rates

**FIGURE 3  
Municipalities Garnering Over 50% Support for Citizens' Initiative**

|                | % of Votes<br>for 1A |                 | % of Votes<br>for 1A |                  | % of Votes<br>for 1A |
|----------------|----------------------|-----------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| BANCROFT       | 83.3                 | FRENCHBORO      | 58.3                 | STOCKTON SPRINGS | 52.1                 |
| MOOSE RIVER    | 73.6                 | TROY            | 58.1                 | BROOKS           | 51.9                 |
| WELLINGTON     | 73.2                 | FREEDOM         | 57.6                 | EAGLE LAKE       | 51.9                 |
| DEBLOIS        | 72.2                 | DETROIT         | 57.5                 | ABBOT            | 51.8                 |
| BEALS          | 70.3                 | NEW PORTLAND    | 56.9                 | BINGHAM          | 51.7                 |
| ST AGATHA      | 69.8                 | WESLEY          | 55.3                 | BRIGHTON PLT     | 51.6                 |
| FRYE ISLAND    | 69.0                 | THORNDIKE       | 55.3                 | NORTH BERWICK    | 51.4                 |
| WADE           | 67.1                 | SEARSMONT       | 55.2                 | WASHBURN         | 51.3                 |
| HAYNESVILLE    | 66.7                 | MOSCOW          | 55.0                 | ISLE AU HAUT     | 51.3                 |
| GARFIELD PLT   | 66.7                 | UPTON           | 54.3                 | SEARSPORT        | 51.1                 |
| MECHANIC FALLS | 66.2                 | PERHAM          | 54.2                 | LIBERTY          | 51.0                 |
| TALMADGE       | 65.2                 | LOWELL          | 54.1                 | HOPE             | 51.0                 |
| NASHVILLE PLT  | 64.7                 | FRENCHVILLE     | 53.9                 | JACKSON          | 51.0                 |
| MEDFORD        | 63.9                 | ORIENT          | 53.7                 | BELFAST          | 50.9                 |
| OXBOW PLT      | 62.1                 | NEW CANADA PLT  | 53.7                 | CHARLOTTE        | 50.8                 |
| WOODVILLE      | 61.8                 | WINTERVILLE PLT | 53.6                 | PHILLIPS         | 50.7                 |
| DENNYVILLE     | 61.3                 | MACWAHOC PLT    | 53.6                 | WESTPORT         | 50.7                 |
| KNOX           | 60.3                 | GREAT POND      | 53.6                 | ROME             | 50.7                 |
| ALLAGASH       | 60.0                 | BELMONT         | 53.4                 | ANSON            | 50.5                 |
| WEBSTER PLT    | 60.0                 | STONEHAM        | 53.3                 | SOLON            | 50.5                 |
| WAITE          | 59.5                 | SURRY           | 53.1                 | MARIAVILLE       | 50.3                 |
| WALDO          | 59.4                 | TOPSFIELD       | 52.7                 | CHERRYFIELD      | 50.3                 |
| AMITY          | 59.3                 | ASHLAND         | 52.1                 | STOCKHOLM        | 50.0                 |

Source: Bangor Daily News 2003 Election Results

**Figure 4  
Voter Turnout**

|              | % Support<br>for 1A | Voter<br>Turnout |
|--------------|---------------------|------------------|
| York         | 38.1                | 64.2             |
| Lincoln      | 38.3                | 59.1             |
| Knox         | 42.2                | 56.6             |
| Cumberland   | 32.9                | 54.0             |
| Sagadahoc    | 37.6                | 54.0             |
| Oxford       | 40.5                | 53.4             |
| Kennebec     | 37.3                | 53.0             |
| Androscoggin | 35.2                | 52.1             |
| Penobscot    | 36.8                | 52.1             |
| Piscataquis  | 43.4                | 52.0             |
| Waldo        | 49.0                | 52.0             |
| Franklin     | 39.2                | 51.2             |
| Hancock      | 37.9                | 50.2             |
| Somerset     | 44.8                | 47.7             |
| Washington   | 45.7                | 47.5             |
| Aroostook    | 44.1                | 43.8             |

Source: Bangor Daily News 2003 Election Results

(Androscoggin, Cumberland, Kennebec, and Penobscot), 1-A received 35%, 1-B received 36% and 1-C received 29% of the votes.

**Population**

Although voter turnout, the ca-

**FIGURE 7  
Results in Maine's Largest Communities**

|             |      | %<br>1-A | %<br>1-B | %<br>1-C |
|-------------|------|----------|----------|----------|
| PORTLAND    | CUMB | 34.5     | 35.2     | 30.4     |
| LEWISTON    | ANDR | 30.7     | 34.1     | 35.2     |
| BANGOR      | PENO | 31.1     | 44.6     | 24.3     |
| SO PORTLAND | CUMB | 30.7     | 34.5     | 34.8     |
| AUBURN      | ANDR | 31.9     | 32.6     | 35.6     |
| BRUNSWICK   | CUMB | 27.6     | 34.9     | 37.5     |
| BIDDEFORD   | YORK | 38.7     | 35.9     | 25.5     |
| SANFORD     | YORK | 31.3     | 42.3     | 26.3     |
| AUGUSTA     | KENN | 31.5     | 39.8     | 28.6     |
| SCARBOROUGH | CUMB | 32.5     | 35.1     | 32.3     |
| SACO        | YORK | 36.0     | 37.6     | 26.4     |
| WESTBROOK   | CUMB | 33.4     | 36.5     | 30.1     |
| WATERVILLE  | KENN | 38.7     | 35.2     | 26.1     |
| WINDHAM     | CUMB | 34.8     | 38.3     | 26.9     |
| GORHAM      | CUMB | 33.8     | 37.0     | 29.2     |
| YORK        | YORK | 43.7     | 31.3     | 25.0     |
| KENNEBUNK   | YORK | 35.8     | 32.4     | 31.9     |
| FALMOUTH    | CUMB | 25.7     | 37.5     | 36.8     |

Source: Bangor Daily News 2003 Election Results

**FIGURE 5  
Home Ownership**

|              | %<br>Support<br>for 1A | Home<br>Ownership<br>Rates |
|--------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Lincoln      | 38.3                   | 83.0                       |
| Waldo        | 49.0                   | 79.8                       |
| Piscataquis  | 43.4                   | 79.5                       |
| Somerset     | 44.8                   | 77.8                       |
| Washington   | 45.7                   | 77.7                       |
| Oxford       | 40.5                   | 77.0                       |
| Franklin     | 39.2                   | 76.1                       |
| Hancock      | 37.9                   | 75.7                       |
| Knox         | 42.2                   | 74.0                       |
| Aroostook    | 44.1                   | 73.0                       |
| York         | 38.1                   | 72.6                       |
| Sagadahoc    | 37.6                   | 72.1                       |
| Kennebec     | 37.3                   | 71.2                       |
| Penobscot    | 36.8                   | 69.8                       |
| Cumberland   | 32.9                   | 66.8                       |
| Androscoggin | 35.2                   | 63.4                       |

Sources: Bangor Daily News 2003 Election Results/US Census

sino referendum and home ownership rates all had some level of impact on the tax reform initiative, the most significant factor in the election was population. The voters in communities with less population were more likely to support the citizens' initiative than the voters in more populated communities.

In communities with populations greater than 10,000, 1-A received 33% of the votes, while in communities with populations less than 10,000, 1A received 40% of the votes. The highest level of support for the citizens' initiative came from municipalities with populations less than 1,000. Forty-four percent (44%) of the voters in those communities supported 1A. As shown in Figure 6, there exists a direct correlation between population and support for 1A; that is, as the population increases, the support of question 1A decreases.

Somewhat surprising in the data is the fact that voters in communities

with the most to gain under the citizen initiative voted against it. It was projected that if the citizens' initiative had been in effect today, Maine's largest communities would have received \$61 million in additional state funding for K-12 education. The Department of Education's own data on the competing measure showed that several large communities would have significant decreases in education funding for FY 05 and 06. Nonetheless, voters in 14 of Maine's 18 largest communities supported the competing measure (see Figure 7).

Explanations for the role population played in the results of the citizens' initiative are abundant. Some public policy experts link support for 1A in rural communities to the strong relationship and trust that exists between municipal officials and residents in smaller communities. These observers also suggest that the stronger support for 1B in the more urban areas is connected to a greater

**FIGURE 6**  
**Results by Population Category**

|                 | #      | #      | #      | %    | %    | %    |
|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|------|------|------|
|                 | 1-A    | 1-B    | 1-C    | 1-A  | 1-B  | 1-C  |
| 20,000 +        | 25,993 | 29,355 | 25,065 | 32.3 | 36.5 | 31.2 |
| 10,000 - 19,999 | 20,510 | 21,405 | 17,435 | 34.6 | 36.1 | 29.4 |
| 5,000 - 9,999   | 42,430 | 40,649 | 30,494 | 37.4 | 35.8 | 26.8 |
| 3,500 - 4,999   | 23,923 | 21,235 | 16,200 | 39.0 | 34.6 | 26.4 |
| 2,000 - 3,499   | 28,132 | 24,480 | 18,520 | 39.5 | 34.4 | 26.0 |
| 1,000 - 1,999   | 25,349 | 20,086 | 14,508 | 42.3 | 33.5 | 24.2 |
| Under 1,000     | 16,599 | 12,034 | 9,192  | 43.9 | 31.8 | 24.3 |

**Source:** Bangor Daily News 2003 Election Results

influence of state governmental leaders in the cities, the “circuit breaker” connection that is popular with renters and landlords, and the greater influence of social service agencies, higher education facilities and industrial corporations, all of whom were under the belief that 1A represented a threat to their state-funded resources.

Whatever the reason, it is clear that

population was a key factor in the tax reform referendum. It is also clear that without the support of the rural communities, the citizens’ initiative would not have succeeded. It is because of the grassroots support for and promotion of the citizens’ initiative in rural communities that the initiative was successful, and for these efforts municipal and school officials state-wide are appreciative. m