

What Bonds Hold?

An Examination of Statewide Bond Referenda in Maine and Other States

by James P. Melcher

Since 1990, Maine has held votes on statewide bond referenda than any other state. In this article, James Melcher tackles three main questions: (1) How often do voters approve bond proposals in Maine, and how does this compare to other states? (2) Are some types of bond referenda more likely to pass than others? (3) Does a bond's placement on the ballot make it more, or less, likely to pass?

Several times a decade, Maine and other states hold a variety of votes on statewide issues. Typically, the initiatives and referenda that draw the most attention are votes on controversial issues such as bear hunting, same-sex marriage, and gun control. But another type of statewide referendum vote, while usually less controversial and little publicized, can have great importance for a state's finances and its ability to fund a variety of long-range projects: statewide bond referenda. There is no better opportunity for voters to shape how their states spend their tax dollars. These elections have received relatively little attention from the media and from scholars alike. So, this article will address the following questions:

1. How often do voters approve bond proposals in Maine, and how does this compare to other states?
2. Are some types of bond referenda—say, transportation bonds—more likely to pass than are others?
3. Does the spot on the ballot in which a particular bond appears make it more, or less, likely to pass?

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There has not been much research on statewide bond elections, but related issues have been studied extensively. For instance, there has been extensive research over the past 50 years on local bond elections, especially school bond elections. Edward Muir and Krista Schneider published the most widely cited scholarly

article on statewide bond referenda in 1999, which examined statewide bond referenda from 1980 to 1990. They found that 75 percent of the bonds in that period passed and there appeared to be a trend of increased support for such referenda, which received an average of 56 percent of the vote. Their other findings included decreased support for any given initiative the more such issues appeared on the ballot and that certain types of referenda outperformed others. Bonds supporting health and human services, followed by transportation bonds, received the highest share of the vote, with a whopping 97 percent of health and human services bonds passing. In contrast, bonds for parks and historic preservation, along with bonds for judicial and correctional facilities, fared the worst, with passage rates close to 50 percent. Another study by Leslie McGranahan (1998) covering statewide bond referenda from 1968 to 1998 offers similar findings, both on the overall success rate of bond passage and on the types of bonds that are more likely to win.

Importance of Ballot Order

There has not been much research on ballot order and bond elections. The order in which candidates, parties, or issues appear on a ballot may seem trivial to the casual observer. However, fears of being disadvantaged by an unfavorable spot on the ballot, or concerns that election officials did not act properly, have led to many lawsuits in recent years in several states. Although the public might pay little attention to the controversy of ballot order, political scientists have been studying it since the 1920s. Many studies argue that first place on the ballot has a small positive effect on vote share in a

variety of elections, especially in races with large fields, nonpartisan races, or races with high turnout (Chen et al. 2014; Meredith and Salant 2011). Other research claims that the candidates listed last on the ballot may have an advantage similar to that enjoyed by the candidates who are listed first (Koppell and Steen 2004).

Although research on ballot order has not been conducted for statewide bond referenda, research offers some clues about what we might expect. The effects of ballot order are more likely to appear in primary elections than in general elections, in part because voters do not get to separate candidates out by party label in these races (Koppell and Steen 2004). Similarly, nonpartisan races are also more likely to see ballot-order effects (Alvarez, Sinclair, and Hasen 2006). In both primary elections and nonpartisan races, voters are responding to electoral choices in which they lack the information and partisan cues that are available in a more visible race with candidates for president or governor on the ballot. Since bond referenda often do not provide much information for voters and are always nonpartisan, they are exactly the type of race in which ballot-order effects would be relatively likely. Unlike a crowded primary field where voters usually are asked to choose one candidate from a list of many, in state bond referenda voters are usually asked to make one choice after another to approve spending money on a series of bond packages. Just as a parent might finally say “no” to the fourth request by a child for a favor, voters may do likewise and be more likely to say “no” to the bond referenda lower on the ballot.



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In Maine, initiatives are given higher numbers (e.g., “Issue 1”) than referenda, so bond referenda are always listed on the ballot *after* initiatives. According to a press release by the Maine Secretary of State’s Office (August 30, 2013), “Maine law...requires the questions to be organized on the ballot by category as follows: people’s veto questions first, then citizen initiatives, followed by bond questions, referendum questions proposed by the Legislature, and finally, resolutions to amend the state Constitution.”

Expectations about Maine

What should we expect to find about state bond elections in Maine? We would expect, above all, that most bonds would pass. Furthermore, the research on other types of elections would suggest that ballot-order effects would be relatively likely to appear in statewide bond elections. In most cases, these elections are low-visibility races, overshadowed by campaigns up the ticket, and like most nonpartisan elections, they are lower-information races than partisan ones. Additionally, transportation bonds in Maine have had a reputation as hard to beat (Russell 2013; Goble 2013), so we can expect that will be the case in this study. As a *Bangor Daily News* (December 18, 2009) editorial noted, “people intuitively understand that commerce relies on strong transportation links; that’s why transportation bond requests almost always win approval at the polls.”

Timing of Bond Referenda

Research shows that school bond votes do better when major election choices (president, governor, US senator) are not on the ballot because motivated school supporters turn out even when the big races are not on the ballot. One study found that school bond referenda passed at a rate almost 20 percentage points higher in odd years (when major elections are not on the ballot) than in even years (when major races are more likely on the ballot) (Meredith 2009).

Why Do Bonds Tend to Pass?

Unlike ballot initiatives, which may reflect the position of a vocal minority, Maine state bonds must be approved by a supermajority of both legislative houses, with further authorization needed by the governor in some cases. This suggests that bonds already enjoy a broad level of support even before they get on the ballot. Another key reason for bond success is that backers of a particular bond referendum typically organize and campaign to publicize their cause. Unlike nearly all other types of elections, however, statewide bond referenda seldom spur organized opposition.

Maine Compared to Other States

In the period from 1990 through 2014, Maine held more votes on statewide bonds than any other state. Why? First, most other states have constitutional hurdles in place as a check on state borrowing and bonding.

These have been common since the Panic of 1837, which left many states unable to pay off bonds that they had issued in large numbers following New York's success with its bond-supported Erie Canal project. In 1842, Rhode Island became the first state to put limits on state bonding in its constitution (McGranahan 1998). Additionally, many states use other means besides public approval to limit bonding such as limiting guaranteed debt to a percentage of a certain dollar amount (for example, a percentage of state tax revenue). While current data are difficult to find, as of 1996, only 20 other states featured statewide bond referenda (Kiewiet and Szakaly 1996). Maine has long been a leader in offering a relatively high number of bond referenda. McGranahan (1998) found that Maine accounted for 20.1 percent of all statewide bond referenda between 1968 and 1988; Maine was a part of a group of five states in that era (which includes California and Rhode Island, two states discuss later in this article) that accounted for almost 80 percent of all state bond referenda.

Another reason for Maine's large share of statewide bond referenda is that the Maine Constitution sets a relatively low threshold for requiring voter approval for bonds. Maine general obligation bonds that borrow more than \$2 million require public approval (except under unusual circumstances). The constitutional limit on Maine state borrowing was raised to \$2 million in 1934, and until 1950, the only way Maine could borrow more than that was to amend its Constitution. Several measures that passed in Maine during the first half of the twentieth century that look like modern bond referenda were actually state constitutional amendments. (Some states—Alabama, for example—still pass bonds by passing a constitutional amendment for each one.) Concerns about constitutional clutter led to an amendment of Article IX, Section 14 of the Maine State Constitution in 1950. Now, to borrow more than \$2 million, a supermajority (two-thirds of both houses) of the legislature (after negotiating the details of the bond packages with the governor) must pass the package, which then goes to approval by voters. A simple majority is required for passage by the voters (Tinkle 2013).

THE STUDY

The best state for comparing bond referenda to Maine is Rhode Island, partly because Rhode Island has among the highest number of statewide bond referenda in recent years and because it is the only other

New England state that holds bond referenda. I have identified all 379 cases of bond referenda in the United States between 1990 and 2014 and compared the winning percentages of the nation as a whole to Maine and Rhode Island. The question, then, is, Will these two states be typical of the rest of the nation, or will they be outliers not just in how *often* they vote on bond referenda, but on how they vote on them, too?

This article presents information on bond referenda elections that authorized new spending in Rhode Island and Maine from 1990 to 2014 and basic data about the outcomes of statewide bond elections nationally from that same period. The article also examines the proposition that ballot position may play a role in victory (in particular that being listed first may be advantageous). Finally, the paper examines whether certain types of bond referenda (particularly transportation bonds) experience greater success than other types of bonds.

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THE NATIONAL PICTURE

I compiled every statewide referendum issuing specific bonds from 1990 to 2014, as listed on National Council of State Legislatures' Ballot Measures Database.¹ During that period, 25 states held a total of 379 statewide bond referenda (Table 1).

This average of 79.2 percent represents a slightly higher percentage of victory than in the Muir and Schneider (1999) research, which found that 76 percent of the 319 statewide bond votes passed between 1978 and 1990. (However, they also predicted that based on recent bond referendum success, the rate of bond victory was likely to go up in the future).

Maine and Rhode Island held more bond referenda over this period than any other states (with California in third place). Both Maine and Rhode Island have low thresholds for issuing statewide bonds without voter approval (\$2 million and \$4 million, respectively), so in

TABLE 1 **Success or Failure of Statewide Bond Referenda by State, 1990–2014**

State	Win	Lose	Percentage passing
Maine	84	19	81.6
Rhode Island	54	14	79.4
Alabama	7	0	100.0
Alaska	7	0	100.0
Arizona	1	0	100.0
Arkansas	6	0	100.0
California	41	26	61.2
Colorado	1	2	33.3
Hawaii	7	1	87.5
Louisiana	1	0	100.0
Michigan	2	0	100.0
Missouri	3	1	75.0
Nevada	3	0	100.0
New Jersey	12	2	85.7
New York	3	1	75.0
New Mexico	29	5	85.3
North Carolina	5	0	100.0
Ohio	8	2	80.0
Oregon	0	1	0
Pennsylvania	2	0	100.0
Texas	19	2	90.5
Utah	0	1	0
Virginia	2	0	100.0
Washington	1	1	50.0
West Virginia	2	1	66.7
ME/RI	139	32	81.3
Others	162	46	77.9
TOTAL	300	77	79.2

(N=379)

other states a bond may not require a referendum. Maine and Rhode Island are not necessarily borrowing more money than other states or even more money per capita; rather, they are seeking voter approval more often because they have to do so. In fact, Kiewiet and Szakaly (1996) found that states that require state bond approval take on a smaller percentage of debt than states that borrow money with other procedures.

California: The Big Outlier in Bond Elections

While Maine and Rhode Island have held more bond referenda over the past 24 years than other states, the percentages of the bonds approved in these two states are close to both each other and the average of the other states, with all three figures clustering around 80 percent. By contrast, the chief outlier among the states with enough cases from which to make inferences is California, which has passed bond referenda at a rate about 20 percentage points lower than the other 25 states. Why? The biggest reason is California's bond elections commonly have two features not common in other states: bonds that come attached to major policy changes and counterinitiatives, a practice in which "business groups and issue activists increasingly propose alternative initiatives to counter those they oppose" including bonds (Kruse 2001: 142). A good example featuring both phenomena was "Big Green," a major environmental bond and policy change which gained only 35.7 percent of the vote in a heated, expensive contest in 1990 (Skelton 1990).

Like most states, Maine and Rhode Island place bonds with a limited focus on the ballot. The bonds do not introduce new policies; they simply request money for a particular category of projects. As such, there is relatively little incentive for groups to oppose these votes because they offer either incremental change or money to maintain the status quo. It is unlikely that the California trend of mixing bonds with other policy proposals will be seen in Maine and Rhode Island.

BOND ELECTIONS IN RHODE ISLAND

Since 1990, Rhode Island has held elections to authorize 68 different bond proposals for new spending. Unlike Maine, Rhode Island's bond referenda are only held during November general elections in even-numbered years, ensuring a relatively high turnout compared to elections held at other times. Like other states, Rhode Island has passed the most proposed bonds: 54 of the 68 bonds in this period passed (79.4 percent). Although this percentage is high, it may *understate* the current probability of bond passage in the Ocean State because it includes a period in which numerous bonds were defeated. These defeats were most pronounced in 1992 when four of the five bonds on the ballot were defeated; three of those four did not even reach 40 percent support. Across the elections of 1992, 1994, and 1996, eight bonds won and nine were defeated. Since then,

only five statewide bond votes have lost in Rhode Island, with a bond passage record of 39 (wins) to 4 (losses) (90.5 percent). Only one statewide bond has been defeated in Rhode Island since 2006, and that one defeated bond—a \$4 million bond to “restore, improve and expand recreational facilities at the Fort Adams State Park in Newport” (Winograd 2006)—received 49.4 percent of the vote.

Why did Rhode Island have such a tough period for bond votes in the early 1990s? First, the national economy soured after 1991. Second, at that time Rhode Island voters had extra cause to be skeptical of new government spending for three reasons: recent government corruption and abuse of power; Rhode Island’s high level of per capita debt; and criticism of bond spending by a prominent business group (Donovan 1994; Jones 1992). Also, in 1990, Rhode Island voters passed the highest amount of debt in bond referenda in the state’s history (\$197 million), which may have made voters in the next two elections hesitant to add more (Garland 1996).

BOND ELECTIONS IN MAINE

From 1990 to 2014, Maine held statewide referenda on 103 proposed bonds. Of these, 84 bonds (81.6 percent) won. Unlike Rhode Island, Maine can hold bond elections at any time of year. While many of Maine’s bond referenda are held in November of even-numbered years, they are more common in November general elections in odd-numbered years.

The timing of these elections matters because referendum supporters—who are particularly motivated to show up—are advantaged when elections are held when other voters are less likely to vote. Examples include non-November elections, when primary elections are being held, and in odd-numbered years, when candidates for president and governor are not on the ballot (Anzia 2011).

Presidential election years in Maine, as elsewhere, draw the most voters, followed by gubernatorial general election years, with other election years well behind. The people who vote in these nongeneral elections differ from those who turn out for more publicized races, which might help bond referenda do better in such races. Following this theory, we would expect that bond referenda in Maine do best in elections without a general election, followed by in November elections when there is no general election for president or

governor, then by gubernatorial general elections, and finally presidential election years. Table 2 shows that this tends to be in the case.

Since 1989, Rhode Island has only held statewide bond referenda in November general elections in even-numbered years (Garland 1996), but the pattern is similar to Maine’s: a slightly higher level of success for gubernatorial year votes (27–5, 84.4 percent) than for presidential year votes (28–8, 77.8 percent). Table 3 adds Rhode Island bond numbers to Table 2.

So while bond elections held at any time are likely to succeed, they win more often as turnout goes down from higher-participation elections to lower ones.

Winning Bond Issues

Maine shows similar patterns in its statewide bond elections to Rhode Island. In both states, most types of bonds have a high winning percentage and a high average percentage of the vote. Table 4 presents bonds divided into several basic types and listed in descending

TABLE 2: Success of Maine Bond Referenda by Month and Type of Election Year, 1990–2014

Month	Won–lost	Percentage winning
November, presidential election year	10–5 (N=15)	66.7
November, gubernatorial election year	20–8 (N=28)	71.4
November, neither	39–7 (N=46)	84.8
January or June	15–0 (N=15)	100.0

TABLE 3: Success of Bond Referenda in Maine and Rhode Island by Month and Type of Election Year

Month	Won–lost	Percentage winning
November, presidential election year	38–13 (N=51)	74.5
November, gubernatorial election year	47–13 (N=60)	78.3
November, neither	39–7 (N=46)	84.8
January or June	15–0 (N=15)	100.0

TABLE 4: **Maine and Rhode Island Statewide Bond Referenda Outcomes by Type, 1990–2014**

Bond type	Number	Won–lost (%)	Mean percentage of vote
Natural resources			
Maine	34	28–6 (82.4)	58.4
Rhode Island	15	13–2 (86.7)	64.6
Total	49	41–8 (83.7)	60.3
Transportation			
Maine	18	15–3 (80.0)	63.3
Rhode Island	13	13–0 (100.0)	64.6
Total	31	28–3 (90.3)	63.9
Education			
Maine	20	16–4 (80.0)	55.4
Rhode Island	15	15–0 (100.0)	59.6
Total	35	31–4 (88.6)	57.2
Economic development			
Maine	18	16–2 (88.9)	55.3
Rhode Island	5	3–2 (60.0)	52.4
Total	23	19–4 (82.6)	54.9
Arts/historical			
Rhode Island	8	3–5 (37.5)	46.8
State facilities			
Maine	5	1–4 (20.0)	41.1
Rhode Island	8	3–5 (37.5)	49.8
Total	11	4–9 (30.8)	47.5
Health			
Maine	6	6–0 (100.0)	57.8
Rhode Island	1	1–0 (100.0)	66.0
Total	7	7–0 (100.0)	58.1
Public housing*			
Rhode Island	3	3–0 (100.0)	56.3
Agriculture			
Maine	2	2–0 (100.0)	59.1

* The public housing category includes one bond referendum in Rhode Island, which would have supported funding for both public housing and state land acquisition.

order of frequency: natural resources (purchase of public lands, environmental protection, water quality); transportation; education; economic development; arts and history (such as historic preservation projects for historic buildings); state facilities (such as rehabbing current state office buildings, prison construction, personnel training); health (such as state support for construction at medical research facilities); public housing; and agriculture.

Table 4 shows just how well most types of bond referenda did at the polls, but at the same time confirms Muir and Schneider's (1999) observation that voters are sensitive to the type of bond they are approving. Work on state buildings, for example, proved unpopular in both states. In the 1990s, each state soundly rejected bonds that would have renovated state buildings to bring them into compliance with Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) regulations. Additionally, votes for building at correctional facilities also fared badly.

Transportation Bonds

Transportation bonds have a reputation as being the most bulletproof bonds in Maine. Transportation bonds in Maine and Rhode Island were victorious 90 percent of the time and had the highest average percentage of the vote (63.9 percent). Yet, Table 4 shows that other categories of bonds also perform well (education, natural resources, economic development, and health).

Why is this? First, nearly all bonds perform well under normal circumstances, so it is hard for one type to appear distinctively successful when the overall average success rate hovers around 80 percent. The case of the three failed transportation bonds, however, is a good example of the proposition that voters support bonds in which they can see a personal benefit and may not support them if they do not see a personal benefit. An editorial in the *Westerly Sun* (October 30, 2014) written just before the election noted this tendency in Rhode Island:

However, even though the last zoo bond easily passed eight years ago, the record has shown that standalone projects are more vulnerable to voter rejection than bonds that cast a wider net. In the last 10 general elections since 1994, the voters have approved 41 of the 52 bond issues....Those that have failed were most often individual buildings or projects like the 2000 election's Heritage Harbor Museum bonds for Providence. The last

bond to be voted down in Rhode Island was in 2006, \$4 million for renovations at Fort Adams State Park.

Presumably, what most voters want out of transportation bonds is *better roads that they can use*. Voters may not see transportation projects intended chiefly for business use or facilities for the state transportation department as directly beneficial to them. All three transportation bonds that failed in Maine since 1990 were these sorts of bonds. The losing bonds (in November 1992 and 1994) dealt with matters such as port facilities (rejected twice), removing oil tanks and building salt and sand facilities for the Maine Department of Transportation, and restoring freight rail service in three Maine counties. Some of these bonds also had other obstacles. The failed 1994 bond, at \$21.3 million, was the most expensive on the ballot. The two transportation bonds that failed in 1992, however, were the two cheapest bonds on the ballot out of six, while the most expensive (a \$42 million bond issue “to create and protect jobs through capital improvements in transportation facilities”) passed. The single worst bond issue performance at the ballot box in either state was the 1992 transportation bond to repair and improve municipal port facilities, with barely one voter in four (25.4 percent) backing it. Of course, the early 1990s were an exceptionally difficult time to get any bonds passed in Rhode Island or Maine. Transportation bonds normally win, but particularly if they offer motorists the promise of better roads.

Even with roads, however, when voters perceive a measure as benefitting only one relatively sparsely populated part of the state, the bond can fail. An example from the late 1960s and early 1970s is instructive. Two measures designed to improve Maine Route 6, a two-lane state highway that stretches across Maine from Vanceboro to the Quebec border north of Jackman, failed. According to the *Milo Town Crier* (August 31, 1967), supporters hoped that an upgraded Route 6 would attract international through-traffic from Canada and spur economic development along its corridor. In a letter to the editor of the same paper, Ronald “Tinker” Richards (*Town Crier*, August 31, 1967) anticipated the opposition a project directly benefitting only part of the state can receive. He directed his critique at the Maine State Jaycees, who voted to support all of the 1967 bond referenda except the one for Route 6, which travels through Milo, but his plea is one that could be echoed by many other referenda with a local benefit:

As an ex-President of the Milo Jaycees, I would like to apologize for the action of the State Jaycees who voted to support all questions on the up-coming referendum except the one concerning the repair of Route 6. The majority of the State Jaycee membership is consolidated in Southern and urban areas of the state.... It would seem that they are not interested in the improvement of any part of the state other than their own....It is a shame if the Maine Jaycees begrudge the central area of the state \$3,000,000 for “improving hazardous conditions on Route 6” which cuts from east to west right through the center of the state....This particular area needs the boost that a good highway would provide. In this state we have got to learn to share. If only those with children in school voted for money for education, if only those who fly voted for airport money, if only Bangor residents voted money for the retarded center and only Lewiston-Auburn voted for their bridge, it is highly unlikely that anybody would get anything. I wonder if the Maine Jaycees have thought about that.

The 1967 referendum, which would have spent \$3 million on improvements to Route 6, failed, getting

The November 2016 election brought many changes to Maine—legalization of marijuana, ranked-choice voting, Maine’s first electoral vote split since it adopted the district plan in 1969, and the first Republican electoral vote from the Pine Tree state since 1988. One thing did not change, however: a transportation bond referendum won in a landslide. Issue 6 was the only bond issue on Maine’s 2016 ballot, and it called for \$100 million to support transportation in the state. As usual, no major organized opposition arose for the transportation bond, unlike most initiative proposals on the ballot. The bond referendum outperformed all five initiatives, receiving 61.2 percent of the vote and carrying all 16 Maine counties. Even Piscataquis County, which voted “no” on all five initiatives, gave Issue 6 a slender victory with 51 percent of the vote. Looking down the road, there’s no reason to expect that Maine voters will put up a stop sign anytime soon in transportation bond votes.³

only 44.1 percent of the vote. Three years later, backers of a \$30 million proposal for Route 6 experienced one of the worst electoral defeats in Maine bond history when the bond garnered only 28.5 percent of the vote.² In the same era, bonds for other narrowly defined transportation projects also failed: bridge and causeways for Chebeague Island (1963), dock facilities on Matinicus Island (1969), airport improvements at the Auburn-Lewiston and Oxford County airports (1972), and a proposed toll bridge between Waterville and Winslow (1972). A bridge project connecting Lewiston and Auburn lost in both 1951 and 1967, before finally passing in 1968 (<http://legislature.maine.gov/9198/>). Since 1972, most transportation bonds have funded projects statewide and have had a high degree of success.

Effect of Ballot Positions

I coded each bond according to where it appeared on the list of bonds—which is not necessarily the number it appeared under on the ballot. For example, the first bond listed on the ballot might come after three initiatives and

be known as Issue 4, but, it is coded here as position “1” because that is where it is on the bond list. Table 5 examines the won-lost record and winning percentage of bond referenda by ballot position in both states.

The first three ballot positions are relatively similar in voter support. Additional choices generally and gradually lose a small amount of success and vote share as voters go down the ballot. However, these data do not show a clear cut-off point after which voter support drops sharply. Muir and Schneider (1999) argued that the more statewide bonds voters have to choose from, the lower the chance that any of them would win, and the findings from my analysis are consistent with that. However, it is possible for bonds to win from any position on the ballot relative to other bonds, even in a crowded field. In 2004, when Rhode Island voters faced choices on 12 bonds, they approved all but two of them. On the other hand, there were cases in which the lone bond referendum on the ballot lost. It is not clear that voters are more cautious about voting for referenda simply because there are a high number of them.

Narrowly Focused Bonds

As we have seen, voters look skeptically on bonds that seem to benefit only one narrow place or interest. The story of Issue 4 in Maine’s 2014 election (which won 62.7 percent of the vote) shows, however, that it is possible to win a statewide bond referendum that directly benefits only one location *if the backers of the referendum can show how it will benefit others*.

Issue 4 asked the following: “Do you favor a \$10,000,000 bond issue, to be awarded through a competitive process and to be matched by \$11,000,000 in private and other funds, to build a research center and to discover genetic solutions for cancer and the diseases of aging, to promote job growth and private sector investment in this State, to attract and retain young professionals and make the State a

TABLE 5: **Bond Ballot Position in Maine and Rhode Island, 1990–2014, with Winning Percentage and Average Vote Share**

Position among bonds	Won-lost and winning percentage (%)			Average percentage of vote	
	Maine	Rhode Island	Total	Maine	Rhode Island
1	25–3 (89.3)	13–0 (100.0)	38–3 (92.7)	58.4	63.4
2	22–2 (91.7)	11–2 (84.7)	33–4 (89.2)	57.4	61.5
3	15–3 (83.3)	10–2 (83.3)	25–5 (83.3)	60.5	58.6
4	12–2 (85.7)	4–5 (44.4)	16–7 (69.6)	57.3	53.3
5	4–5 (44.4)	6–2 (750.0)	10–7 (58.8)	54.9	56.6
6	4–2 (66.7)	3–1 (750.0)	7–3 (70.0)	49.6	59.1
7	2–1 (66.7)	2–1 (100.0)	4–2 (66.7)	55.5	48.6
8	0–1 (0.0)	2–0 (66.7)	2–1 (66.7)	48.9	57.0
9–12*	No cases	3–1 (75.0)	3–1 (75.0)	—	52.8

*There was only one year in the data set in which either state had a bond election with more than eight bond issues on the ballot: Rhode Island (November 2004), which had 12. As all of these come from one year, and the number of cases is so small, I have combined 9–12 in this table.

Two-state average, positions 1–5: 58.3 percent of the vote

Two-state average, positions 6–12: 52.8 percent of the vote

global leader in genomic medicine?” As Issue 4 shows, bond proponents in Maine have become more aware of the politics of wording proposals more persuasively. Compare the Issue 4 of 2014 to the dry (typical for the era) wording of the ill-fated Maine Route 6 bond in 1970: “Shall a bond issue be ratified for the purposes set forth in ‘An Act Providing for a Bond Issue in the Amount of Thirty Million Dollars to Reconstruct Route 6,’ passed by the 104th Legislature?”

The key point is that the direct beneficiary of the 2014 referendum was a single entity in a single location. While the language of the bond mentioned a “competitive process,” it was widely understood that only one facility had the ability to compete for this funding: the Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbor (Bell 2014). Commentary on the issue generally assumed or explicitly stated this (see, for example, Bell 2014; Connors 2014; Levin 2014). In fact, the chief website advocating for Issue 4 was hosted by Jackson Laboratory, featured pictures of Jackson Laboratory, and under the category of “About Us,” discussed exclusively the work of Jackson Laboratory.

At \$10 million, Issue 4 was tied for the most expensive with a bond for protection of drinking water that year. Yet, only the drinking water bond did better at the polls, with both getting well over 60 percent of the vote. The success of Issue 4 shows a path to victory for bonds directly benefitting only one location: emphasize how the bond will help on matters that voters statewide care about (cancer and jobs) more than the specific mechanics of the proposal.

CONCLUSIONS

Statewide bond referenda around the country succeed the vast majority of the time. Maine’s rate fits broadly into the national figures and is similar to Rhode Island’s, with about four out of five bonds passing. Since the mid-1990s, Maine and Rhode Island bond referenda have enjoyed an even higher rate of success. The era of relatively high rates of failure in the early 1990s seems to suggest that voter mood and the condition of a state’s economy could be as significant as other factors (such as the type of project under consideration) in bond success. Certain types of bonds, including transportation bonds, perform better than bonds for other subjects. More often than not, the bonds pass at the polls, and we can often tell when they are likely not to do so. 🐟

ENDNOTES

- 1 National Council of State Legislatures’ Ballot Measures Database is available at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/ballot-measures-database.aspx>
- 2 Information about the Route 6 referenda can be found on the Ballotpedia website: “Maine State Route 6 Reconstruction, Referendum Question No. 1 (1967).” [https://ballotpedia.org/Maine_State_Route_6_Reconstruction,_Referendum_Question_No._1_\(1967\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Maine_State_Route_6_Reconstruction,_Referendum_Question_No._1_(1967))
- 3 “Maine State Route 6 Reconstruction, Referendum Question No. 1 (1970).” [https://ballotpedia.org/Maine_State_Route_6_Reconstruction,_Referendum_Question_No._1_\(1970\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Maine_State_Route_6_Reconstruction,_Referendum_Question_No._1_(1970))
- 4 Election results for 2016 drawn from “November 8, 2016—Referendum Election”, spreadsheet of election results from the Maine Department of State.

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