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INSIDE  
act2

# SCHOOL VOTERS GUIDE

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WHY YOUR VOTE CAN MATTER  
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**PLUS**  
YOUR SCHOOL BUDGET  
AND CANDIDATES

**ELECTION NIGHT** Get Tuesday's results online [newsday.com/votersguide](http://newsday.com/votersguide)

3

## INDEX

<b>Inside</b>	
Comsewogue	E4
Fishers Island	E4
Greenport	E4
Longwood	E6
Mattituck-Cutchogue	E8
Miller Place	E10
Middle Country	E8
Mount Sinai	E10
Oysterponds	E10
Port Jefferson	E11
Rocky Point	E18
New Suffolk	E10
Sachem	E18
Riverhead	E17
Shelter Island	E18
Southold	E19
Three Village	E19
Shoreham-Wading River	E18

## A LEADING VOICE



Ellen Hershkin, who has been a member of Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America for 45 years, became the group's national president in 2016. Today, she advocates for Hadassah's positions on women's health equity, gun control and other issues. **See Act2.**

LlLife and Act2 content is condensed in this week's School Voters Guide. Look for **Garden Detective, On Faith, Winners, Seniors, Veterans, exploreLI weekly planner,** and the **Act2 feature story.** All regular LlLife and Act2 features will return next Sunday.

## ABOUT THE CANDIDATES

In districts where candidates are competing for seats, information on backgrounds and issues is offered to help voters make decisions. Information for unopposed candidates is not provided. Background information provided by the candidates is not independently verified.

## SCHOOL VOTERS GUIDE



Voters cast their ballots in Greenport for the budget and the board of education in last year's school election.

# HIGH STAKES, LOW TURNOUT

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND  
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Number of voters in last year's elections was down 40 percent from 2011

**V**oter turnout on Long Island for school elections has plummeted in recent years, with a cumulative loss of more than 100,000 participants, even as growing numbers of school budgets won voter support.

About 171,700 residents cast ballots in Nassau and Suffolk counties in last spring's voting on proposed budgets and school board candidates, down from nearly 289,700 in May 2011, according to figures provided through the New York State School Boards Association.

That represented a drop of more than 40 percent regionally in a vote that has a significant impact on taxpayers' bottom line. School taxes account

for more than 60 percent of homeowners' assessment bills on the Island, which consistently ranks among the highest-taxed regions in the nation.

Yet, less than 9 percent of registered voters Islandwide participated in district balloting in May 2017 — a huge decline from the nearly 20 percent who voted in 1996. That was the first year that all 124 districts on the Island held votes on the same day.

By comparison, more than 65 percent of registered voters across Nassau and Suffolk counties went to the polls for the November 2016 presiden-

tial election.

Tuesday is the date for school voting this year.

## TAX CAPS' IMPACT

Dwindling numbers of voters reflected no lack of support for school spending. To the contrary, the portion of district budgets approved in the two-county region rose from 96 percent in 2011 to 100 percent last May.

The two diverging trends — lower voter turnout versus higher rates of budget approval — are no coincidence, experts said.

Analysts for state-level school

organizations said both trends can be traced largely to the impact of state tax caps, first imposed in 2012. Caps restrict the size of annual revenue increases that school systems raise through property taxation.

On one hand, caps appear to be boosting public support for school budgets by keeping costs under control, analysts said. On the other hand, caps seem to contribute to a growing sense of complacency, as evidenced by the larger number of citizens staying home during elections.

"I guess it's a double-edged sword," said David Albert, a spokesman for the state school boards association.

Declining voter participation on the Island is echoed statewide. In 2011, turnout across New York State was about 877,400. By last spring,

turnout was 557,600 — down more than 35 percent.

This troubles education leaders, who say low participation makes it easier for special interests to call the shots on Election Day.

“Low voter turnout is not a good thing for our democracy, whether you vote for or against,” said Michael Borges, executive director of the New York State Association of School Business Officials. “Voters elect school board members and vote for their budgets and, if their participation is low, then a smaller group of people will decide who runs your school district and how your money is spent.”

Both the business officials organization and the school boards group are based in the Albany area, where they provide advocacy and research on education issues.

### DRAWING VOTERS

Traditionally, districts have done what they could to draw supporters to the polls — notably, by holding spring concerts and other student performances on the same day as school budget votes. That’s a definite draw for parents and grandparents.

Political analysts noted, however, that the broader public thinks of November as the time for elections and that rounding up voters any other time is bound to be an uphill struggle.

“The first Tuesday after the first Monday in November is the only day in people’s minds when you go out and vote as a civic duty,” said Michael Dawidziak, a political consultant and pollster whose office is in Sayville.

Any thought of moving district voting to November usually is dismissed as impractical because it would collide with the traditional statewide school budgeting cycle. That starts in January, when the governor proposes a financial-aid package for school districts, and ends in June, when districts hold revotes on any budgets rejected by local residents in the May vote.

Many experts also doubt that placing school board candidates on the same ballot

as politicians with a party label is a good idea.

“I think there’s a good question about whether you want to do that and have intensely local school elections get caught up in state and national issues that have nothing to do with that,” said Lawrence Levy, executive dean of the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University.

### LOWER THE VOTING AGE?

A better approach, some said, would be to expand the voting population by allowing people younger than 18 to participate in local elections.

Rachel S. White, a researcher at the University of Southern California who has studied the issue, presented the case for voting participation by 16- and 17-year-olds in a blog posted in 2017 by Education Week, a national news organization covering K-12 education.

“We’re continuing to think of schools as being laboratories where we can teach students to engage in a democratic society,” White said in a phone interview last week. “By allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, we’re providing a unique learning experience.”

White, who works at the university’s Rossier School of Education in Los Angeles, said students of that age are at least as prepared for voting as older people, because civics lessons are fresh in their minds. Moreover, she said, voting at a younger age than 18 can help develop a lifelong habit of participation.

Several municipalities across the country already permit such voting, the researcher noted.

Takoma Park, Maryland, a city of about 18,000 in the Washington, D.C., suburbs, opened its polls to residents ages 16 and 17 in 2013. While overall municipal voting is relatively light, officials there said the younger residents participate in elections for mayors and council members at rates more than double that of older neighbors.

“I think they do see it as a privilege they want to take advantage of,” said Jeremy Dickey, a city spokesman.



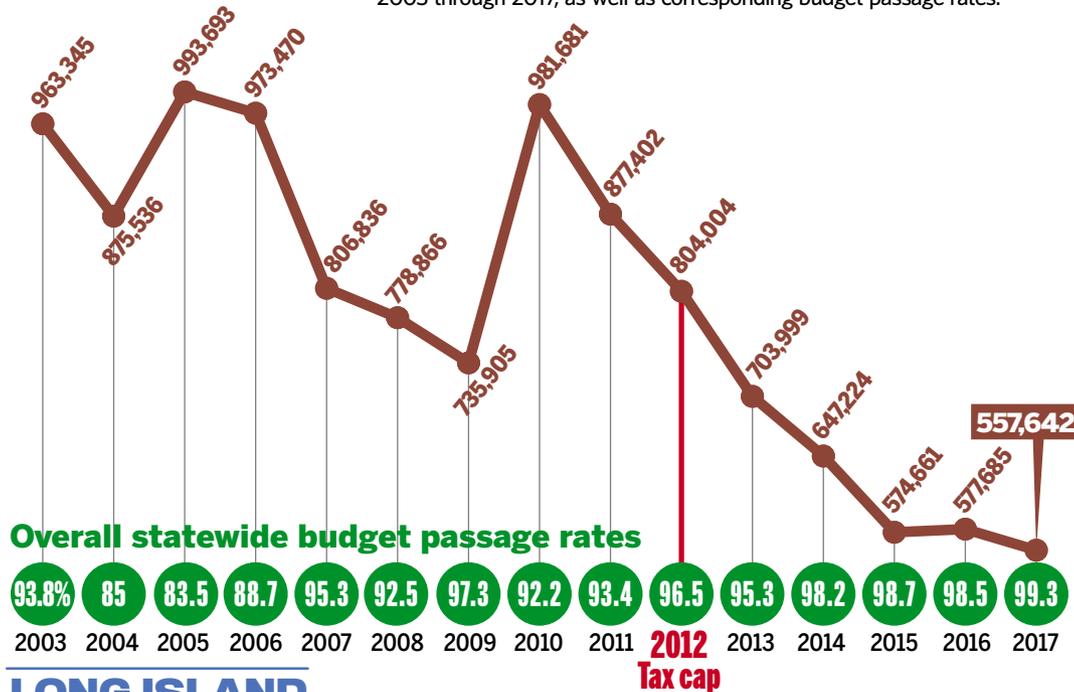
RANDEE DADDONA

A mom brings her kids along on voting day at the Tuckahoe School in Southampton.

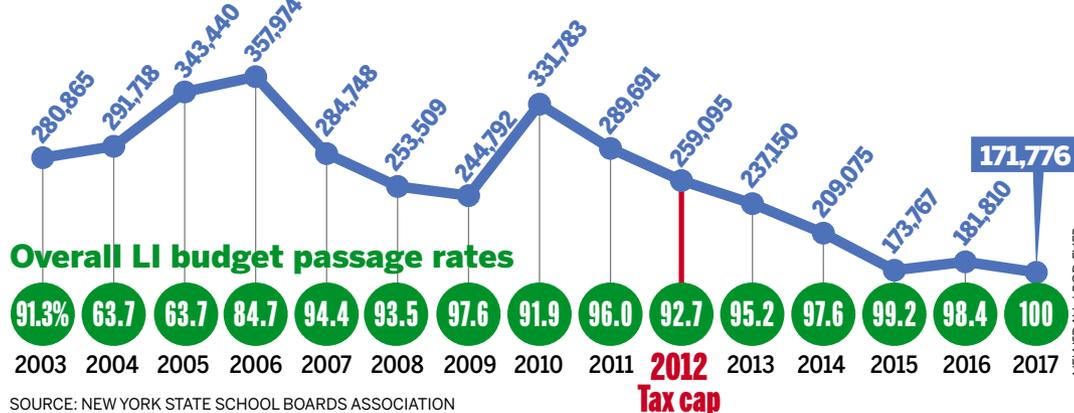
## TALE OF THE TURNOUT

Since 2003, voter turnout for May votes on school district budgets and board elections has dropped precipitously, statewide and on Long Island. This chart shows numbers of voters each year from 2003 through 2017, as well as corresponding budget passage rates.

### STATEWIDE Voter turnout



### LONG ISLAND Voter turnout



SOURCE: NEW YORK STATE SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

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