The Colorado Health Foundation™

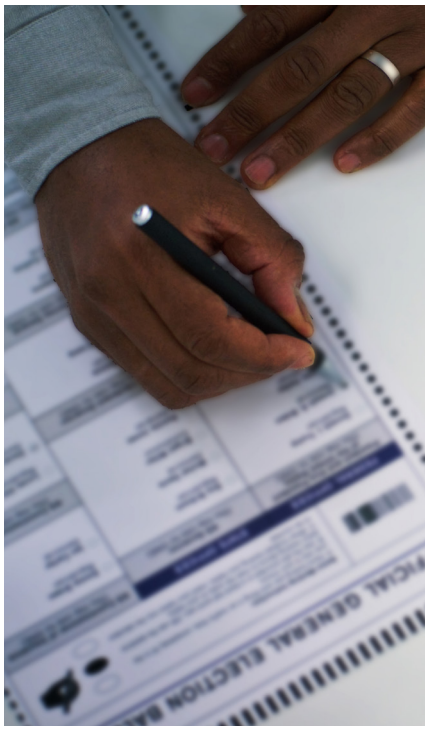
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Making Sense of the Local Ballot Process

BALLOT INITIATIVES — SOMETIMES CALLED BALLOT MEASURES, REFERENDUMS, OR DIRECT DEMOCRACY — ARE CHANGES TO PUBLIC POLICY THAT VOTERS GET TO DECIDE DURING LOCAL OR STATEWIDE ELECTIONS. THEY ARE A POWERFUL TOOL THAT LET VOTERS PROPOSE AND SHAPE THE LAWS THAT AFFECT THEIR LIVES.

People across the political spectrum have used ballot initiatives to push important issues forward. The initiative process is one way communities can take action and pass laws that reflect what they want and need.

In Colorado, citizens have the right to petition for a change in their local laws, and voters have the right to approve or deny the change. But how does that process work, and who can start it? What are the steps that community members must follow to use this tool to enact change? What's the difference between a "citizen-initiated" or "referred" measure? This resource, written in partnership between The Colorado Health Foundation (CHF) and the Colorado Health Institute (CHI), strives to answer some of those questions by detailing how these measures come to be placed on an Election Day ballot. This report also analyzes data from the Colorado Local Ballot Measure Tracker[1] so that people can see how communities across the state have used the local ballot as a tool for policy change in recent years.



[1] The Local Ballot Measure Tracker is a resource freely provided to the public to track city and county-level ballot measures across Colorado. Launched in 2020, it is a one-stop shop that can be used to gain insight into the issues within specific communities or to track patterns in issues statewide. Every year, it is updated as new ballot measures are proposed and decided by voters.

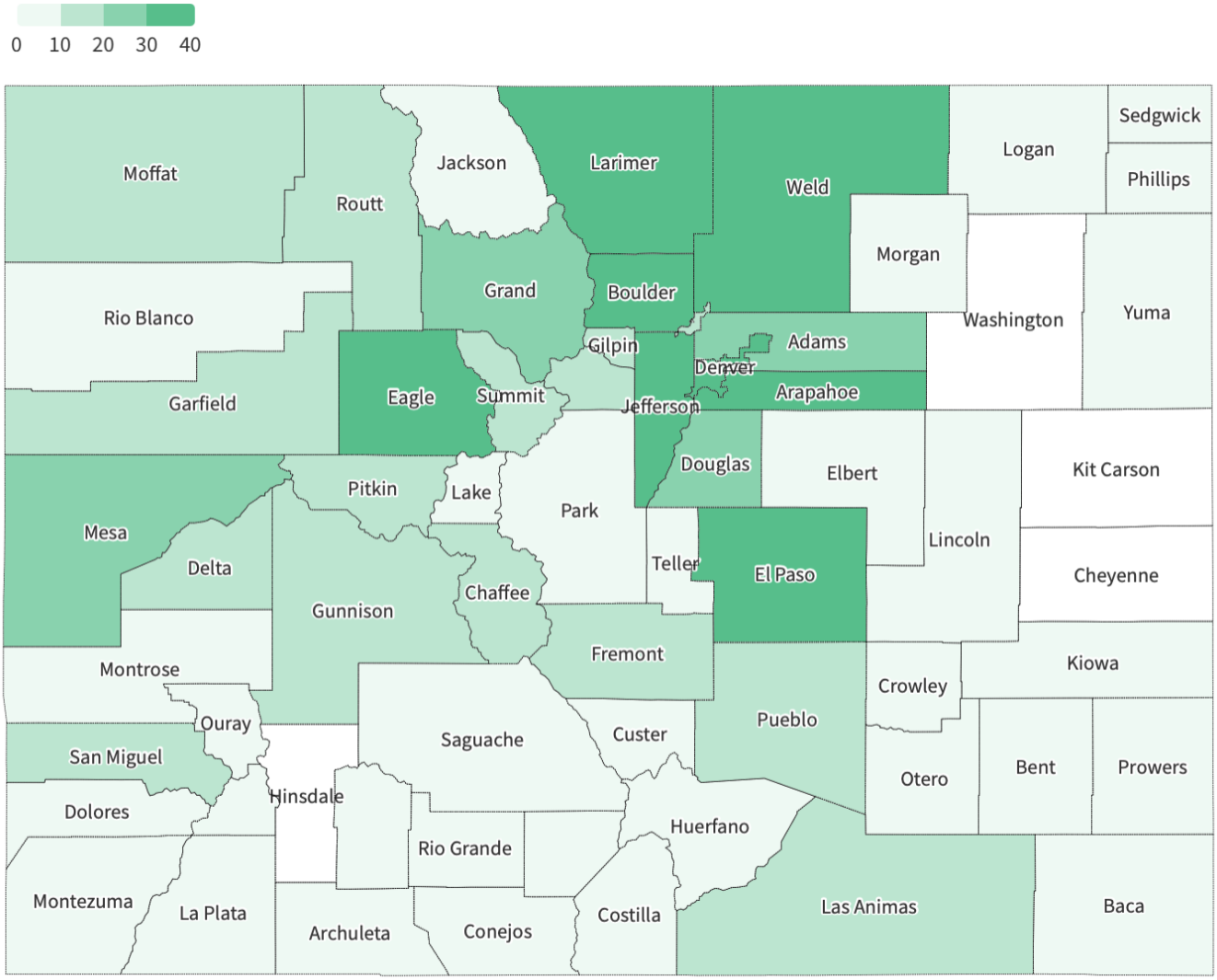
Who Uses the Local Ballot

Some cities and towns frequently use the local ballot process, while others go years without voting on any local measures.

Map 1 shows that Front Range communities have put forward the most ballot measures since 2020. Boulder and Weld counties had the most local ballot activity since 2020, with 72 and 70 measures, respectively. In rural Colorado, communities in the central mountains tend to use the local ballot more than those in the Eastern Plains, San Luis Valley, and southwestern Colorado.

MAP 1. LOCAL BALLOT MEASURES BY COUNTY, 2020-2024

Includes municipal and county measures



What Coloradans Vote on in Their Local Elections

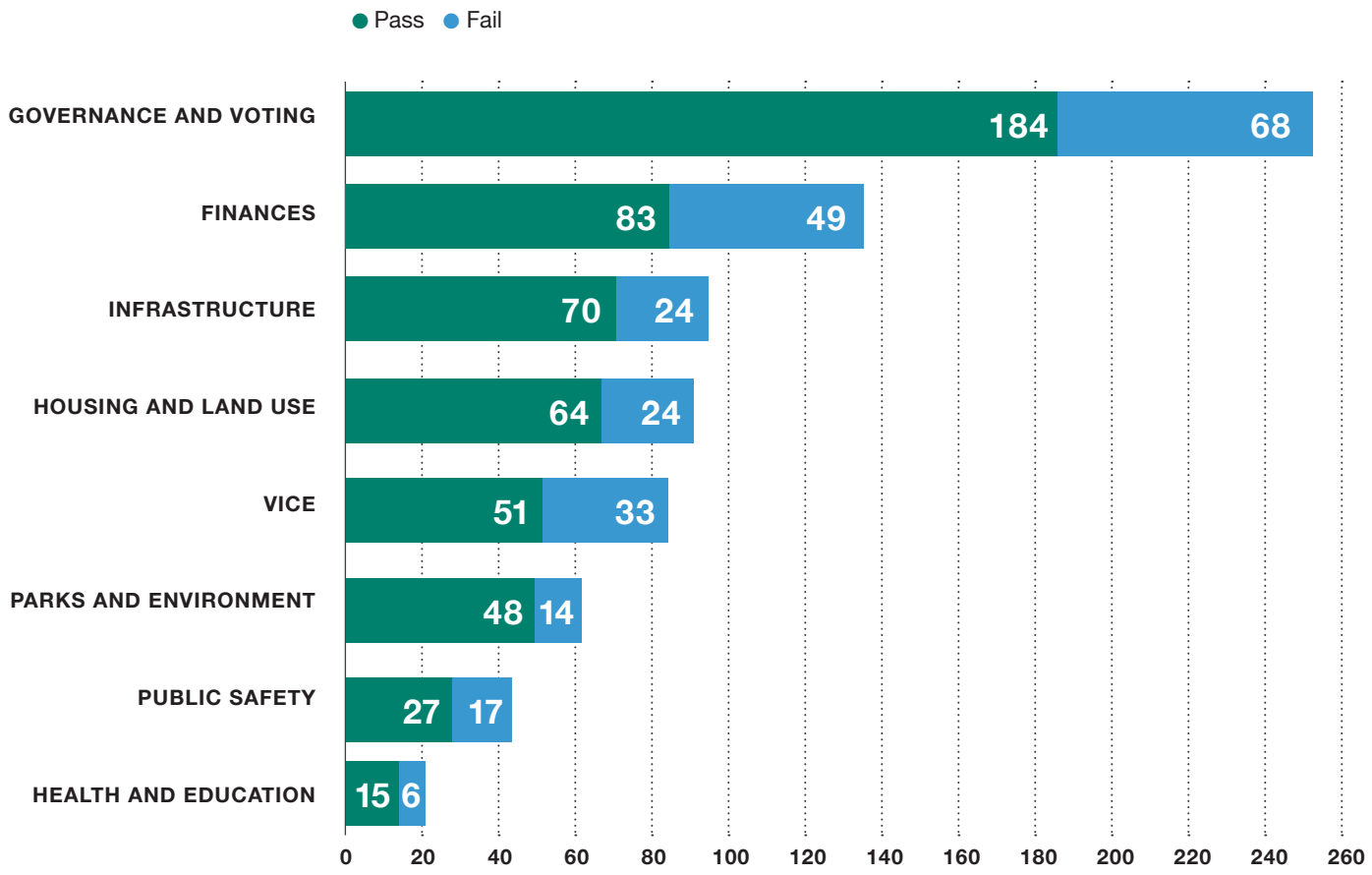
Colorado's state constitution requires that cities and counties seek voter approval for specific topics, including changing how local government operates, raising taxes, or taking on debt. Governance and finances have been the two most common topics for local ballot measures since 2020.

Voters also weigh in frequently on community issues that affect quality of life, such as housing and the environment. For example, 37 measures since 2020 have asked local voters to increase taxes on short-term vacation rentals, often with revenues dedicated to affordable housing. About four in five of these measures passed.[2]

Since 2020, local voters have only rarely weighed in on health care policy. There have been just four health care-related local ballot measures around the state, including a 2021 sales tax in Lafayette to pay for mental health and human services.

[2] For a deeper look into housing-related local ballot measures since 2020, check out Housing on the Ballot: Analysis from the Colorado Local Ballot Measure Tracker.

FIGURE 1. LOCAL BALLOT MEASURES IN COLORADO BY TOPIC AND RESULT, 2020-2024



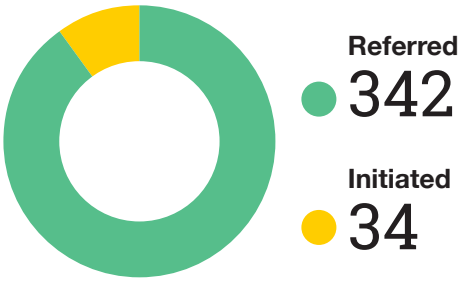
Withdrawn measures not included



Initiatives and Referendums

- **Initiative:** Voters circulate petitions and collect signatures to place an initiative on the ballot.
- **Referendum:** A city council or county commission places a referendum on the ballot.

FIGURE 2. LOCAL BALLOT MEASURE SOURCES, 2020-2024



How to Get Your Policy on Your Local Ballot

COLORADANS HAVE OPTIONS FOR CHANGING POLICIES IN THEIR CITIES AND COUNTIES.

Method 1: Work with Elected Officials

Contact your city council members or county commissioners and ask them to put a policy change on the ballot as a referendum. Most local ballot questions are referendums, rather than voter-initiated petitions.

If your policy idea does not require voter approval — for example, if it does not require new taxes — the council or commission can enact the law on its own, eliminating the challenge and expense of a ballot campaign.

Method 2: Organize an Initiative

If a majority of your elected representatives on your county commission or city council do not support your idea, you can launch a campaign to place it on the local ballot for voters to decide. You will need to circulate official petitions to place your question on the ballot.

Campaigns must file their proposed ordinance with the city or county clerk. They then have 180 days to gather signatures from at least 5% of the jurisdiction's registered voters. Contact your city or county clerk to obtain the correct forms and find out how many signatures are required and when the petitions are due.

You will also need to build a coalition and campaign for your idea. A 2018 report from The Colorado Health Foundation, Ballot Measures: Reflections and Lessons Learned, offers recommendations and ideas gleaned from case studies across the state for running an effective ballot campaign.

LEGAL RESOURCES

The state laws that govern local elections are found in Colorado revised Statutes **Section 30, Article 11-103.5** (county elections) and **Section 31, Article 11** (city elections).

This Alliance for Justice **Ballot Measures Toolkit** helps nonprofit organizations understand how they can engage in ballot measure work.

How the Local Ballot Measure Tracker Can Help

The Colorado Health Foundation's Local Ballot Measure Tracker contains information about every city and county ballot issue since 2020. The tracker can help you in several ways:

- Look to it for policy ideas.
- Learn what has worked in other communities — or what hasn't yet been tried.
- Use other communities' successes to make the case to your neighbors.
- Find out which communities are working on similar issues and start building coalitions.

We invite you to use the Local Ballot Measure Tracker and to tell us how it could be even more useful to your community.

Contact: Emily Mae Rader, policy officer erader@coloradohealth.org