

Voter Survey Results

Town of Harvard FY2009 Budget

April 30, 2008

THE HARVARD PRESS 

League of Women Voters of Harvard 







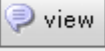
Overview

The survey conducted by the *Harvard Press* and the League of Women Voters of Harvard is complete, with 571 responses or 15% of Harvard registered voters. The responses are consistent with the failure of the Proposition 2½ override question in the recent town election. Many people are strongly opposed to overrides and that sentiment increases with the amount of the override. A plurality (less than a majority; many are unsure, or need more information) would support the lowest proposed override amount. People also expressed a strong preference for override “menus”, rather than “tiers”, preferring to be able to choose each item they would or would not support. Nearly 300 respondents added comments for town officials to consider, 200 gave feedback comments about the survey, and almost 400 entered their email address to receive survey results.

The defeat of the override at the polls on April 1 left Harvard without an approved budget for the fiscal year starting July 1. The *Press* and the League decided to conduct a survey with the dual purpose of informing town officials about voter sentiment and informing voters about the decisions that need to be made. We did our best to write survey questions that were not biased either way, but that simply tried to learn what items voters will or won’t support in a new budget.

We gathered information about the budget choices from town officials, wrote the survey and mailed a letter inviting registered voters to participate. Due to the length of time it would take to use statistical sampling, we decided instead to go for as much participation as possible from all registered voters, accepting the possibility that self-selection might bias the results toward particular interests.

To avoid the possibility of anonymous “stuffing”, we mailed letters to all voters, containing their Voter ID, and asked that they enter the ID when taking the survey. Although we did not require the Voter ID, eighty-seven percent of respondents did provide it, and we were able to verify the IDs as being valid. Anonymous responses were tabulated separately, and the results were summarized both ways-with the anonymous responses and without. There were no material differences in the distribution of responses, so the report includes all responses.

| 4. Which of the following most closely reflects your viewpoint? | | | |
|--|---|------------------|----------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| I would not support an override for any reason |  | 33.8% | 175 |
| I would support an override to maintain all services at existing levels (so-called "level service" budget) |  | 11.2% | 58 |
| I would support an override to add or improve services |  | 9.5% | 49 |
| I would support an override to add or improve some services; I would prefer to have choices |  | 34.2% | 177 |
| I would not support an override to add or improve services |  | 6.6% | 34 |
| I would not support an override to maintain all services at existing levels |  | 4.8% | 25 |
| Is there a different statement that more closely reflects your viewpoint? |  | | 92 |
| | answered question | | 518 |
| | skipped question | | 53 |

Question 4 – This question required a single response, i.e. the “best fit” to the respondent’s view of overrides.

Nearly 34% said they would not support an override for any reason. Nearly 7% said they would not support an override to add or improve services, and 5% said they would not support an override to maintain all services at existing levels. A total of 45% of responses to this question were not to support an override. 34% said they would support an override to add or improve services, and would prefer to have choices. An additional 11% said they would support an override to maintain services at existing levels, and nearly 10% said they would support an override to add or improve services. A total of 55% of responses to this question would support some form of override.

| 5. Please choose one response for each of the following statements: | | | | | | |
|--|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| | Strongly agree | Agree | Not sure | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Response Count |
| A no-override budget will not affect delivery of services. | 10.9% (56) | 22.6% (116) | 12.3% (63) | 30.7% (158) | 23.5% (121) | 514 |
| A no-override budget will adversely affect services for all residents | 13.0% (65) | 17.4% (87) | 19.6% (98) | 36.9% (184) | 13.0% (65) | 499 |
| A no-override budget will adversely affect services for some residents | 20.2% (101) | 44.6% (223) | 10.8% (54) | 18.0% (90) | 6.4% (32) | 500 |
| | <i>answered question</i> | | | | | 537 |
| | <i>skipped question</i> | | | | | 34 |

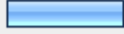
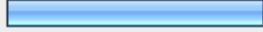


Question 5 sought to find out what the respondent thinks would be the impact a no-override budget. To simplify the results, we combined “Strongly Agree” and “Agree”, and we combined “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree”.

- 54% disagreed with the statement “A no-override budget will not affect delivery of services”, 35% agreed, 12% were unsure.
- 50% disagreed with the statement “A no-override budget will adversely affect services for all residents”, 31% agreed, 20% were unsure.
- 65% agreed with the statement “A no-override budget will adversely affect services for some residents”, 24% disagreed, 11% were unsure.

A clear majority agrees that a no-override budget would have adverse impact, and the impact would not be felt equally by all residents.

| 5. Please answer the following questions as they pertain to your participation in Harvard's financial decisions. | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| | Yes | No | Response Count |
| Do you regularly attend Town Meeting, and vote in Town Elections? | 80.5% (437) | 19.5% (106) | 543 |
| Did you participate more actively in the past than you do now? | 28.2% (152) | 71.8% (387) | 539 |
| Do you participate more actively now than you did in the past? | 27.0% (144) | 73.0% (390) | 534 |
| Did you attend the March 29, 2008 Town Meeting? | 39.9% (218) | 60.1% (328) | 546 |
| Did you vote in the April 1, 2008 Town Election? | 88.6% (484) | 11.4% (62) | 546 |
| Do you feel your vote is important in deciding Harvard's finances? | 92.0% (497) | 8.0% (43) | 540 |
| Do you feel your needs are adequately considered in setting Harvard's budget? | 43.3% (227) | 56.7% (297) | 524 |
| | <i>answered question</i> | | 549 |
| | <i>skipped question</i> | | 22 |

Question 6 asked about participation in town affairs. Most respondents do participate. A large majority, 60%, did not attend Town Meeting, but a vast majority of respondents, 89%, voted in Town Election. However 57% do not feel their needs are adequately considered in setting the budget.



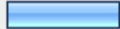

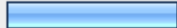

| 7. If overrides are recommended by boards, which approach would you prefer? | | | |
|---|---|---------------------------------|----------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Tiered |  | 24.7% | 130 |
| Menu |  | 55.3% | 291 |
| Not sure |  | 8.7% | 46 |
| Doesn't matter |  | 11.2% | 59 |
| | | <i>answered question</i> | 526 |
| | | <i>skipped question</i> | 45 |


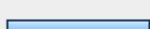
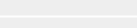
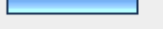
Question 7 asked about override menus vs. tiers. Twice as many voters preferred a menu of overrides, rather than tiers. This is consistent with the response to question 4, where those who would vote for overrides expressed a strong preference for choices.

8. In current budget discussions, the boards have suggested a first tier of \$200,000, to add to the base budget the amount voted to fund contracts at last fall's Special Town Meeting, which was funded by free cash. A second tier would be to fund a specific set of services that are part of the omnibus budget passed at Annual Town Meeting. Additional tiers may be added to fund the three additions to services (Library, Schools, COA).


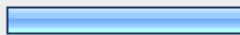
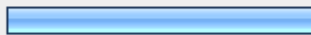
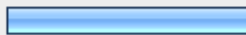


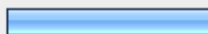
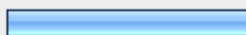
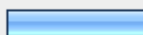
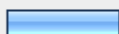


| | Yes | No | Not sure | Need more information | Response Count |
|---|---------------------------------|------------------------------|------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| How would you vote on a \$200,000 override question, to add this year's contract settlements to the base budget? | 46.9% (251) | 38.7% (207) | 8.4% (45) | 6.0% (32) | 535 |
| How would you vote on a second tier override question (\$248,000 or less), to fund some or all of the rest of the services that are part of the omnibus budget passed at Annual Town Meeting? | 27.6% (147) | 52.8% (281) | 12.4% (66) | 7.1% (38) | 532 |
| How would you vote on override question(s) (total of \$102,000) to fund one or more of the additions to services passed at Annual Town Meeting? | 25.1% (134) | 53.7% (286) | 12.6% (67) | 8.6% (46) | 533 |
| | <i>answered question</i> | | | | 538 |
| | <i>skipped question</i> | | | | 33 |

Question 8 asked about the different override levels that were being discussed - \$200,000, \$448,000, \$550,000. None of the questions got a clear majority of “yes” responses, but nearly 50% said they would vote “yes” on a \$200,000 override question, while the other two levels got nearly twice as many “no” responses as “yes” responses.


| 9. In what part of Harvard do you live (see map)? | | | |
|--|---|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Harvard Water District |  | 6.0% | 32 |
| Area One |  | 2.3% | 12 |
| Area Two |  | 24.1% | 128 |
| Area Three |  | 17.3% | 92 |
| Area Four |  | 36.5% | 194 |
| Area Five |  | 13.7% | 73 |
| | | <i>answered question</i> | 531 |
| | | <i>skipped question</i> | 40 |


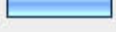



| 10. How long have you lived in Harvard? | | | |
|---|---|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Fewer than 5 years |  | 8.0% | 43 |
| Five years or more, but fewer than fifteen years |  | 30.5% | 163 |
| Fifteen years or more, but fewer than twenty-five years |  | 28.0% | 150 |
| Twenty-five years or more |  | 33.5% | 179 |
| | | <i>answered question</i> | 535 |
| | | <i>skipped question</i> | 36 |

Questions 9 and 10 asked respondents in what part of Harvard do they live, and how long have they lived in Harvard. The responses to these questions do not indicate any concentration of responses or groups not participating.

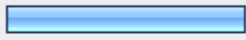



| 11. Why did you choose Harvard as a place to live (check all that apply)? | | | |
|---|---|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Family history |  | 13.8% | 74 |
| Quality of Schools |  | 50.5% | 271 |
| Character of Town |  | 66.5% | 357 |
| Location |  | 51.8% | 278 |
| Housing cost/availability |  | 26.4% | 142 |
| Tax rate |  | 10.6% | 57 |
| Size of town |  | 43.9% | 236 |
| Open space |  | 52.0% | 279 |
| Size of lots |  | 29.8% | 160 |
| Outdoor recreation areas |  | 24.2% | 130 |
|  view Other (please specify) |  | 18.4% | 99 |
| | | <i>answered question</i> | 537 |
| | | <i>skipped question</i> | 34 |

Question 11 asked why voters chose Harvard as a place to live. Multiple responses were allowed. The top four reasons were Character of Town, Open Space, Location, and Quality of Schools. Other comments to this question can be downloaded from www.harvardpress.com.

| 12. Do you have school-age (K-12) children? | | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|---|---|--|--------------------------|----------------|
| No |  | | 33.8% | 178 |
| Not now, but in the past |  | | 27.1% | 143 |
| Not now, but in the future |  | | 2.1% | 11 |
| Yes, for another 1-3 years |  | | 9.3% | 49 |
| Yes, for another 4+ years |  | | 27.7% | 146 |
| | | | answered question | 527 |
| | | | skipped question | 44 |

| 13. Do you have children attending local public schools? | | | Response Percent | Response Count |
|--|---|--|--------------------------|----------------|
| No |  | | 40.9% | 218 |
| Not now, but in the past |  | | 22.1% | 118 |
| Not now, but in the future |  | | 3.0% | 16 |
| Yes, for another 1-3 years |  | | 9.0% | 48 |
| Yes, for another 4+ years |  | | 25.0% | 133 |
| | | | answered question | 533 |
| | | | skipped question | 38 |

Questions 12 and 13 asked about school-age children and children attending local public schools. These distributions seem proportional, with 34% of respondents reporting children attending local schools.

| 14. How long do you expect to remain in Harvard? | | | |
|--|---|--------------------------|----------------|
| | | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Indefinitely |  | 51.5% | 269 |
| Fewer than 5 years |  | 12.8% | 67 |
| Five years of more, but fewer than fifteen years |  | 22.4% | 117 |
| Fifteen years or more |  | 13.2% | 69 |
| | | answered question | 522 |
| | | skipped question | 49 |

Question 14 asks about expectation for remaining in Harvard. More than half expect to remain indefinitely, only 13% expect to leave with 5 years.

Questions 16 and 17 invited comments for town officials, and feedback on the survey. More than 60% of respondents wrote comments in one or the other, or both. A small sample is included here; all of the comments can be downloaded from www.harvardpress.com, from the links on the right side of the Budget Survey page.

This sample is not meant to be representative, or balanced. It appears that people against overrides are more motivated to speak out than those who support them. Many of the comments are thoughtful, well-reasoned, and deserve consideration. They should be required reading for all who are making decisions about the current budget deliberations, and perhaps more importantly, may contain seeds of ideas for ongoing consideration as Harvard’s long-term financial plan is developed.

“Am assuming the town sent out an info flyer about the override. Guess I missed it. Please remember that only a smaller number of people attend town meetings, most drop in and out depending on the articles/vested interests and most people never attend at all. I prefer to vote at elections.”

“Consider the seniors...There should be some tax breaks so they do not have to pay for the education of the neighbor’s children. The best benefits for Harvard seniors are the wonderful new library and the COA.”

“Due to the increased costs of energy and food, and minimal annual salary increases, I don’t personally have a level-services budget. I don’t think that level services should be the starting point for the town budget.”

“How about more fees for service, such as for parents using the library for free day care and after-school care?”

“How can we expand sources of tax revenues in town beyond the property tax? Can we make Harvard part of a larger, regional area that helps a number of communities identify as an economic block so we have local food, shopping, medical care, schools all tie more closely together?”

“I personally would prefer a menu override, but unfortunately, they tend to draw out special interest groups to support specific items only.”

“I would really appreciate understanding why Harvard can’t make its budget and needs to ask for overrides year after year. I am not criticizing the town officials—I just truly don’t understand why that can’t happen and would appreciate a basic understanding. Perhaps I’m missing something? Thank you.”

“Keep the ceiling fans—keep up the good work.”

“Pay for bags to use at transfer station, so that the bigger users pay more, and to encourage recycling.”

“Please be more explicit what are we voting for. Break down how the money would be spent.”

Conclusion

The Harvard Press and League of Women Voters would like to sincerely thank everyone for their participation in this survey. We feel that an informed electorate will lead to informed decisions regarding our budget situation. Furthermore, we hope town officials will find these opinions of use in their current budget deliberations.

The *Press* will maintain an ongoing discussion forum on the Budget Survey page, to foster continued dialog among voters and with town leaders. We hope this survey will be a catalyst for better communication about Harvard’s financial future.