

# Rent control stopped in Massachusetts – 5 times!

Rent control has been defeated in Massachusetts on five occasions, not just the 1994 statewide referendum, but three defeats in Boston and one defeat in Cambridge.

## 1994: Rent control ended in Massachusetts by popular vote

When “Question 9” appeared on the 1994 statewide ballot, only three cities had rent control: Boston, Cambridge, and Brookline. Yet, voters across this very liberal state voted to end it and outlaw it.

News stories of small landlords viciously abused by rent control had spread across the state: the Bolognas, the Petrillos, the Javorskis, African American Barbara Pilgrim, to name a few. So also did stories spread widely of wealthy people living in rent-controlled apartments: including the lawyer-mayor of Cambridge, a Supreme Judicial Court justice, and the wealthy owner of a sprawling, oceanfront estate who had rent-controlled apartments for guests. Studies showed that most rent-controlled tenants were white, middle-class, well-educated, and 49% of all Cambridge rent-controlled units were inhabited by a single person – because space was so cheap. At rent control’s end, the State Legislature gave one or two more years of rent control to low- and moderate-income, elderly, or disabled tenants. **Only 6% of rent-controlled tenants qualified for it!**

These stories convinced a majority of the state’s voters that rent control had to go. We won by a slim 51% to 49% margin in this very liberal state – quite an accomplishment.

## Boston: Rent control’s return stopped 3 times in a row

In the years after the “Question 9” defeat of rent control, tenant activists in Boston brought three proposals to the City Council, calling them “collective bargaining,” “community stabilization,” and a third similar title, hoping to conceal what they all were: **rent control**.

Three times in a row, the Small Property Owners Association responded by mailing a four-page leaflet to every residential property owner in the city, explaining how rent control would hurt each property owner group: single-family, condo, owner-occupied two- and three-family (exempt from rent control), four-unit and larger (rent-controlled). *See impacts below*.

When all these Boston residential owners – and taxpayers – learned how rent control would impact them, they flooded Boston councilors with phone calls and email messages. And the councilors voted these proposals down – three times in succession.

## Cambridge: A landslide vote stops rent control’s return

Old-guard tenant activists in Cambridge mounted a citywide referendum in 2003, which aimed to bring rent control back to the city that had lo-o-o-ved rent control, with heavy support from West Cambridge’s cultural elites. As SPOA did in Boston, it mailed a four-page leaflet to all Cambridge residential owners, explaining impacts by owner type.

A critical voter group were the rapidly growing number of condo owners, who were reminded of Cambridge’s condo ordinance enacted near rent control’s end. Tenant activists always viewed condos as “stolen” from tenants, and the Cambridge condo ordinance rectified this loss. The ordinance required that, after all future condo sales, the condos were limited to **tenant occupants only and permanently rent-controlled**, a huge loss of value to all condo owners. Thanks largely to condo owners, the city voted in a landslide **61% to 39%** against rent control – by the city that once-upon-a-time loved rent control.