

Special Report

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READY FOR CHANGE

A Statewide New York Voter Survey

EMPIRE  CENTER
FOR NEW YORK STATE POLICY

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READY FOR CHANGE

A Statewide New York Voter Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By E. J. McMahon
Director, Empire Center for New York State Policy

Looking ahead to a watershed election year, most New York voters are dissatisfied with the performance of their state government, according to the Empire Center's statewide voter survey. Large majorities also believe that state leaders are more responsive to special interests, or to their own personal interests, than to the voters' interests.

By large margins, survey respondents indicated that they were ready to embrace sweeping and fundamental changes in the way the state operates. They also supported constitutional limits on spending by state and local governments. And, defying conventional wisdom, a huge majority agreed that the way to improve schools is not to spend more but to spend existing education funds more effectively.

Conducted by the Siena College Research Institute, the survey was designed to determine New Yorkers' attitudes toward Albany and their opinions of the state's future. Questions were also asked about some other current issues, particularly education. The survey sample consisted of 620 registered voters reached by phone in December 2005. The margin of error for the total sample is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points.

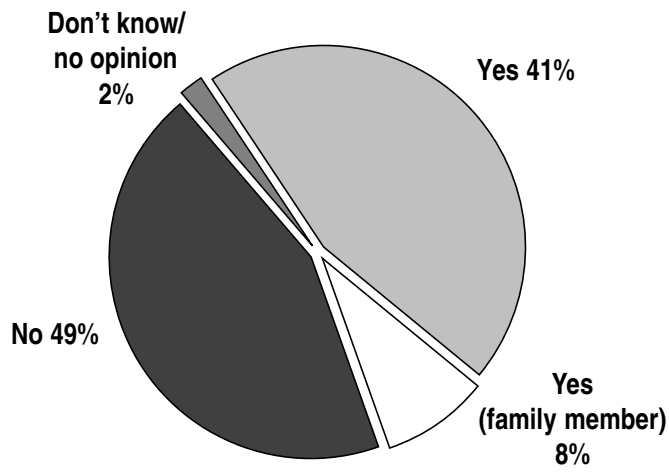
More detailed survey results are presented in the attached report section. A summary and analysis of highlights follows.

Voting with their feet?

Nearly half of the respondents in the total sample said that they either had personally considered moving from New York (41 percent) or had a relative who had considered moving from the state in the past year (8 percent). On a regional basis, the number of voters who had personally considered moving ranged from a low of 39 percent in New York City to 44 percent in western upstate New York. These findings are consistent with recent demographic trends as tracked by the Census Bureau, which recently released estimates showing that New York was one of only three states to suffer a population loss between 2004 and 2005.

READINESS TO LEAVE NEW YORK

Have you personally considered moving from New York State in the past year? (If not) Has a family member?



Asked whether New York would be a better or worse place to live in five years, nearly one-quarter said that they thought it would be worse – slightly exceeding the one-fifth who said that they expected it would be a better place to live. Roughly half thought that it would be about the same.

Pessimism about the state’s future was strongest among upstate respondents, especially in the western region. Thirty-five percent of the western New York residents surveyed said that they expected the state to be a “worse” place in five years, well over double the 14 percent who expected it to be better. Residents of both New York City and its suburbs had a brighter outlook, with more expressing a “better” rather than a “worse” outlook. These findings generally reflect the recent economic growth trends in each region.

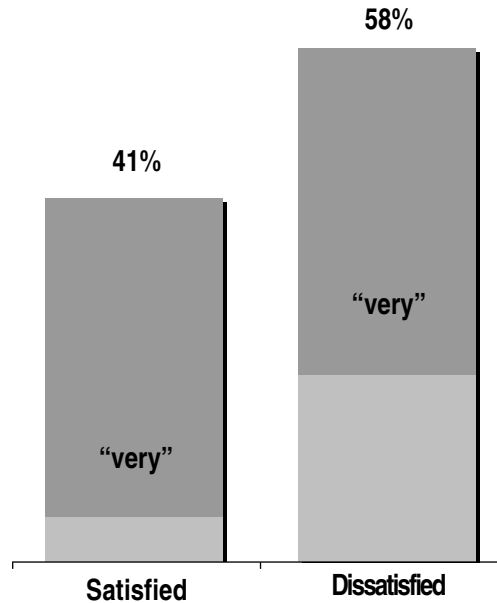
Thumbs down on Albany

By a roughly three-to-two margin statewide, survey respondents expressed some level of dissatisfaction with the performance of state government. There was little difference in this result based on party affiliation. On a regional basis, however, negative feelings about Albany were lopsidedly concentrated upstate, where respondents expressed dissatisfaction with state government’s performance by roughly a three-to-one margin. New York City and suburban residents were more closely divided on the issue, with just over half in both regions expressing satisfaction with state government.

Fifty-eight percent of statewide respondents said that special interests, such as labor unions, trial lawyers and business groups, have too much influence on elected officials in state government. However, Republicans and independents were much more likely to feel this way than Democrats and New York City residents.

STATE GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE

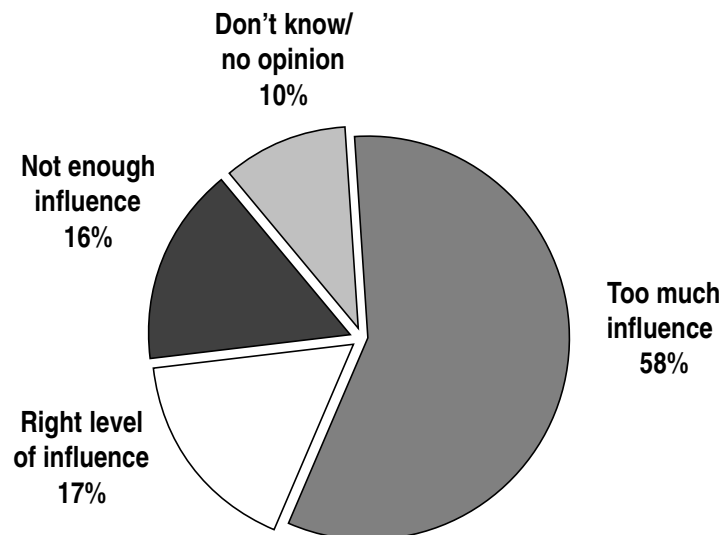
Looking at the performance of New York State government, would you say you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the performance of state government?



Roughly two-thirds of the people in this survey said that they believed that neither the governor nor legislative leaders were acting primarily in the voters' best interests; rather, large majorities said, they felt that these state officials were acting primarily for special interests or in their own self-interest.

SPECIAL INTEREST INFLUENCE

Do you believe that groups such as labor unions, trial lawyers, and business organizations have too much influence, not enough influence, or the right level of influence on elected officials in New York State government?



More than half of the survey respondents said that they were paying too much in state taxes for the quality of services provided. Unhappiness with tax levels was greatest in the western portion of upstate New York.

Resounding sentiment for reform

The survey also revealed a broad degree of support for a trio of reforms instituted in at least some other states but long resisted or ignored by elected officials in New York's capitol.

- Term limits for elected state officials were favored by just over two-thirds of the survey respondents.¹
- Allowing voters to place proposed laws on the ballot – also known as initiative and referendum, or I&R – was favored by a three-to-one margin.²
- Establishment of an independent, nonpartisan commission to draw new legislative district lines was also favored three to one.³

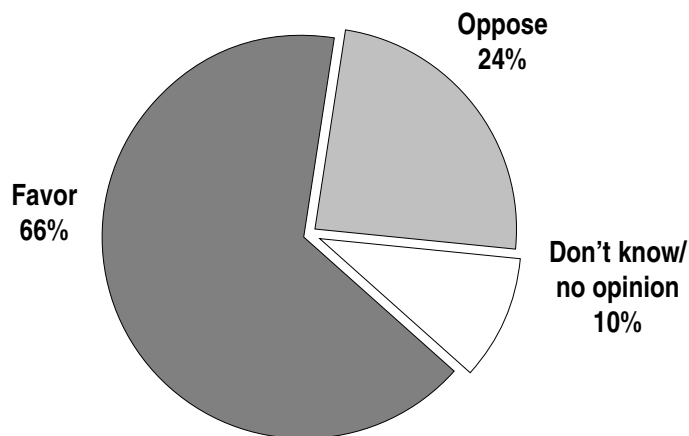
The responses in favor of these reforms were consistent across all groups. Upstate and down, regardless of party affiliation, a large majority of voters backed term limits, I&R and nonpartisan redistricting.⁴

A willingness to set limits

The survey found solid backing for greater fiscal restraint in government. The results also call into question the level of popular support for more money as an education cure-all – the notion at the heart of a recent court decision ordering billions more in spending on New York City schools.

LIMITS ON STATE AND LOCAL SPENDING

Would you favor or oppose a state constitutional amendment to limit spending increases to the rate of inflation for state and local governments in New York State?



Fully two-thirds of all the survey respondents favored a state constitutional amendment limiting spending increases to the rate of inflation for state and local governments in New York. The favorable response ranged from 56 percent in New York City to 78 percent in western upstate New York.

Asked whether future state deficits should be closed through spending cuts or tax increases, 64 percent favored spending cuts. Among New York City residents, spending cuts were favored over tax hikes by a ratio of 59 percent to 9 percent; in western upstate New York, the ratio was 70 percent to 3 percent in favor of reducing spending.

A final question began by noting that New York public schools now spend about \$12,000 per pupil. The question continued: "Some argue that New York State should spend more money to improve the quality of public education. Others argue we already spend enough but have to spend it better. Which view is closer to your own?"

A whopping 81 percent – the strongest response for any item in the survey – replied that existing school funding should be spent more effectively. Even among New York City residents, 74 percent said that more effective spending was a better approach than more money, which was favored by just 21 percent.

Education: thinking locally

Voters were almost evenly divided on the quality of public schools generally in New York State, with 46 percent calling them "good" or "excellent" and 47 percent calling them "poor" or "fair."

When the question was focused closer to home, survey respondents had more positive feelings. Fifty-nine percent assigned their local schools a positive rating, compared to only 33 percent that rated their schools lower. There were significant regional differences in responses to this question, however. Upstate and suburban residents overwhelmingly assigned positive ratings to their schools, but only 38 percent of New York City residents described their local schools as "good" or "excellent." Nearly half of city respondents said that their schools were only "fair" or "poor."

While most suburban New York City residents assigned a positive rating to their local schools, a solid plurality of 42 percent of suburban respondents also said that they thought that their school property taxes were too high for the level of services provided. Upstate residents, more negative on other subjects, generally evinced less unhappiness with the level of their school taxes.

Nearly half of all respondents (49 percent of the total sample) favored a law providing tax dollars to parents to allow them to send their children to the schools of their choice. Unsurprisingly, in view of the weaker quality ratings for New York City schools, support for school choice was strongest among city residents, with

54 percent in favor. Yet even in regions where satisfaction with local public schools was higher, support for tax-funded school choice ranged between 46 and 47 percent.

As noted above, when people in the survey were informed of the average level of per-pupil spending in public schools in New York, four-fifths of the respondents said that more effective spending, rather than more money, was needed to improve school quality.

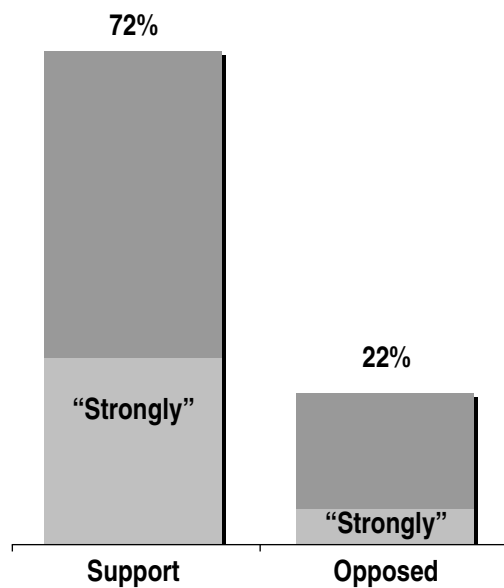
Other issues

Medicaid was very much in the headlines last summer, after a series of stories in the *New York Times* pointed to evidence of billions of dollars of waste, fraud and abuse in the program.⁵ In the wake of these articles, the governor and legislative leaders agreed on new steps to fight the problem. But voters, so far, are skeptical; 76 percent in this survey said that they didn't think the state was doing enough to reduce waste, fraud and abuse in Medicaid.

Rising pension costs, like Medicaid, have played a major role in driving up local taxes across the state in recent years. But without being presented with any comparative information on public versus private retirement benefits, only 27 percent of statewide survey respondents thought that public pensions were too high.⁶

INITIATIVE AND REFERENDUM

One proposal some believe would improve the way state government operates is to have "initiative and referendum," where citizens can place proposed laws on the ballot and voters can decide whether or not they should be approved. Do you strongly support, support, oppose or strongly oppose initiative and referendum?



Implications for 2006

In many respects, the survey confirms the impressions left by election returns for the November 2005 statewide referendum on Proposal One, a constitutional amendment that would have greatly strengthened the budgeting power of the state legislature.

The referendum effectively gave voters a chance to side with or against the Albany legislative establishment, which had promoted the amendment as a “reform” that would put an end to late state budgets. Although proponents had a head start and waged a better-funded campaign, Proposal One was soundly defeated in every county outside New York City, by margins ranging from two-to-one in downstate suburbs to three-to-one (or worse) in upstate counties.

The upshot of the survey is this:

From one end of the state to the other, most voters of every party affiliation (or no affiliation) would be open to a public-policy agenda that encourages more direct democracy, more competitive elections, limits on politicians’ tenure in office, and fiscally conservative approaches to reining in governmental excesses.

ENDNOTES

¹ Thirty-six states have term-limited governors and 18 states have term-limited legislators. Term limits also are in effect in New York City.

² Twenty-eight states currently allow for some form of voter initiative or referendum process to create new laws.

³ Promoted as a way to curb partisan “gerrymandering” of district lines, models for such commissions now exist in Iowa and Arizona.

⁴ Some of these ideas have already been embraced by leading 2006 gubernatorial candidates. For example, Republican hopeful William Weld has proposed a constitutional limit on state and local spending, and Democrat Eliot Spitzer backs nonpartisan legislative districting. Then again, George Pataki was a proponent of term limits when he first ran for governor in 1994 – but never seriously pushed the idea once he took office, and ended up breaking his own original two-term limit.

⁵ “New York Medicaid Fraud May Reach Into Billions,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2005, p. A-1.

⁶ It’s worth noting that these survey results were tallied just before the pension issue was highlighted by the New York City transit workers’ strike, which centered on workers’ refusal to alter their generous retirement benefits.

Empire Center for New York State Policy Survey of New York State Voters



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Survey of New York State Voters

Overview:

1. **Generally, voters do not believe that New York will be a better place in which to live five years from now, and nearly half of them have considered – or have had a family member consider – moving out of state in the last year.**

2. **Voters largely have negative views of the way state government operates in New York.**
 - 58% are dissatisfied with the performance of their state government.
 - Similarly, 58% believe that special interest groups have too much influence over state government.
 - By a four-to-one margin, voters who think that the standard of ethics of state officials have changed in the last five years believe they have gotten worse.
 - 65% believe the Governor primarily represents special interests or his own self-interests, compared to 26% who believe he represents his constituents' interests.
 - 67% believe the leaders of the State Legislature primarily represent special interests or their own self-interests, compared to 17% who believe they represent their constituents' interests.

3. **There is overwhelming support for a variety of measures that would change the way state government operates.**
 - 74% of voters favor having redistricting of legislative districts carried out by an independent, non-partisan commission.
 - 72% support initiative and referendum.
 - 68% would like to see term limits for state elected officials.
 - 66% believe the state constitution should be amended to limit spending increases by state and local governments to the rate of inflation.

Overview, continued:

4. **New Yorkers want state leaders to address key fiscal issues by controlling state spending practices.**
 - Four-fifths of voters believe New York State spends enough money on education but has to spend it better.
 - Three-quarters think that the state is not doing enough to reduce fraud, waste and abuse in the Medicaid program.
 - Nearly two-thirds believe that the best single way to close large state deficits is to reduce spending.

5. **Voters consistently have a better view of the way their local governments operate vs. the way state government operates.**
 - While 46% think the quality of public schools in New York generally is excellent or good, 59% feel that way about the quality of their local public schools.
 - More than half (54%) believe they pay too much in state taxes for the quality and quantity of services provided, however, only 36% believe they pay too much in property taxes for the quality of services provided by their local school districts.
 - While approximately two-thirds believe that the Governor and legislative leaders primarily represent special or their own self-interests, less than half (46%) feel that way about their local elected officials.

This survey was conducted by phone calls to 620 registered New York State voters in December 2005. The margin of error is +/- 3.9 percent for the total sample.

Hello, this is _____ from the Siena College Research Institute. We are talking with people like yourself today about important issues in your area, and would like to ask you a few questions on a confidential basis.

Thinking about the future, do you think New York State will be a better place to live five years from now, a worse place, or will it be about the same as it is now?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E*	Up-W*		Dem	Rep	Ind
Better place	20%	26%	20%	23%	14%		22%	18%	22%
Worse Place	23%	16%	16%	29%	35%		22%	23%	26%
About the same	48%	49%	57%	40%	43%		46%	52%	44%
Don't know/no opinion	8%	9%	7%	7%	8%		10%	7%	8%

Have you personally considered moving from New York State in the past year? (IF NO, ASK :) Has a family member?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Respondent has considered moving	41%	39%	41%	39%	44%		37%	40%	54%
Family member has considered moving	8%	4%	10%	4%	11%		8%	8%	5%
Nobody has considered moving	50%	56%	48%	51%	43%		54%	49%	39%
Don't know/no opinion	2%	2%	1%	6%	2%		1%	3%	2%

Looking at the performance of New York State government, would you say you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the performance of state government?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
TOTAL SATISFIED	41%	52%	52%	28%	23%		40%	41%	42%
Very satisfied	5%	6%	7%	5%	1%		4%	5%	5%
Somewhat satisfied	36%	46%	45%	23%	22%		36%	36%	37%
TOTAL DISSATISFIED	58%	46%	44%	70%	77%		58%	57%	58%
Very dissatisfied	21%	18%	10%	26%	32%		23%	18%	23%
Somewhat dissatisfied	37%	28%	34%	44%	45%		35%	39%	35%
Don't know/no opinion	2%	2%	3%	2%	0%		2%	2%	0%

* See List of Counties Included in Upstate-East and Upstate-West on Page 18

In the last 10 years, do you think the standard of ethics of officials in New York State government has gotten better, gotten worse, or has stayed the same?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Better	9%	14%	13%	7%	2%		9%	11%	10%
Worse	39%	34%	30%	46%	49%		38%	40%	37%
Stayed the same	49%	49%	56%	44%	46%		51%	46%	52%
Don't know/no opinion	3%	3%	1%	2%	3%		2%	4%	1%

I'm going to mention several elected officials and for each, I'd like you to tell me whether you believe they primarily represent your interests, special interests, or their own interests. (ROTATE ORDER)

The Governor

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Your interests	26%	23%	32%	28%	23%		22%	37%	21%
Special interests	25%	26%	27%	17%	27%		26%	22%	27%
Own self-interest	40%	40%	32%	43%	43%		42%	35%	43%
Don't know/no opinion	9%	10%	9%	12%	7%		11%	7%	9%

The leaders of the state legislature

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Your interests	17%	19%	20%	18%	12%		18%	16%	15%
Special interests	26%	23%	28%	23%	29%		26%	31%	24%
Own self-interest	41%	36%	40%	43%	46%		37%	40%	49%
Don't know/no opinion	16%	23%	12%	16%	13%		18%	14%	11%

Your local elected officials

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Your interests	45%	48%	38%	61%	42%		45%	53%	35%
Special interests	12%	15%	12%	4%	12%		12%	8%	14%
Own self-interest	34%	30%	39%	21%	39%		32%	32%	41%
Don't know/no opinion	9%	7%	12%	15%	7%		11%	7%	9%

Do you believe that groups such as labor unions, trial lawyers, and business organizations have too much influence, not enough influence, or the right level of influence on elected officials in New York State government?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Too much influence	58%	45%	63%	59%	64%		49%	69%	58%
Not enough influence	16%	22%	11%	21%	14%		19%	10%	23%
Right level of influence	17%	24%	19%	12%	10%		19%	14%	13%
Don't know/no opinion	10%	9%	7%	9%	12%		12%	7%	6%

One proposal some believe would improve the way state government operates is to have “initiative and referendum,” where citizens can place proposed laws on the ballot and voters can decide whether or not they should be approved. Do you strongly support, support, oppose or strongly oppose initiative and referendum?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
TOTAL SUPPORT	72%	68%	70%	70%	79%		70%	75%	77%
Strongly support	27%	30%	22%	32%	27%		26%	29%	29%
Support	45%	38%	48%	38%	52%		44%	46%	48%
TOTAL OPPOSE	22%	23%	25%	24%	19%		25%	20%	14%
Strongly oppose	5%	6%	6%	4%	5%		7%	3%	3%
Oppose	17%	17%	19%	20%	14%		18%	17%	11%
Don't know/no opinion	6%	9%	5%	7%	3%		5%	5%	8%

Currently, state lawmakers draw the boundary lines for all state Senate and state Assembly districts in New York. In some other states, independent, non-partisan commissions draw legislative district lines. Who do you think should create districts for New York’s senators and assemblymembers – state legislators themselves or an independent commission?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
State legislators	16%	18%	15%	16%	16%		15%	19%	18%
Independent commission	74%	73%	71%	73%	77%		74%	71%	75%
Don't know/no opinion	10%	10%	14%	11%	7%		11%	11%	7%

Would you favor or oppose a state constitutional amendment to limit spending increases to the rate of inflation for state and local governments in New York State?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Favor	66%	56%	65%	63%	78%		65%	72%	67%
Oppose	24%	32%	27%	24%	15%		24%	22%	26%
Don't know/no opinion	10%	11%	9%	12%	7%		11%	6%	7%

In general, do you favor or oppose limiting the number of terms state elected officials are allowed to serve in office?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Favor	68%	65%	70%	66%	71%		67%	71%	66%
Oppose	26%	32%	24%	28%	20%		28%	24%	26%
Don't know/no opinion	6%	3%	6%	6%	8%		5%	5%	8%

State government funds many services and programs, including education, health care, roads, and prisons. To fund programs, state government collects a variety of taxes and fees. Thinking about the balance between the taxes you personally pay and the quality of services provided by the state, which comes closer to your opinion (Rotate):

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
I pay too much in taxes for the quality and quantity of services provided	54%	47%	52%	50%	63%		52%	59%	48%
I pay the right amount of taxes for the quality and quantity of services provided	26%	25%	29%	29%	21%		20%	31%	30%
I would pay more in taxes to get increased or higher quality services	15%	21%	11%	15%	12%		20%	6%	13%
Don't know/no opinion	6%	7%	9%	6%	4%		7%	4%	8%

New York State government could face large budget deficit in the next few years. What would be the *single* best way for elected officials to close such deficit (ROTATE:) cut spending or increase taxes?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Cut spending	64%	59%	62%	68%	70%		61%	74%	66%
Increase taxes	6%	9%	7%	5%	3%		9%	4%	4%
(Both)	21%	23%	22%	18%	20%		21%	17%	23%
(Neither)	5%	5%	6%	4%	5%		4%	3%	6%
Don't know/no opinion	4%	5%	3%	5%	2%		5%	2%	1%

The majority of property taxes paid by homeowners outside New York City go to local school districts. Thinking about the balance between the property taxes you and your family pay and the quality of services provided by your school district, which comes closer to your opinion (Rotate):

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
My taxes are too high for the quality of services provided by my school district	36%	38%	42%	26%	34%		37%	36%	40%
My taxes are the right level for the quality of services provided by my school district	37%	20%	37%	51%	49%		31%	46%	42%
I would pay more in taxes to get higher quality services	10%	11%	7%	13%	10%		12%	8%	6%
I don't pay property taxes	8%	19%	6%	4%	2%		12%	5%	6%
Don't know/no opinion	8%	12%	8%	6%	5%		9%	5%	5%

Medicaid, the government program funded by federal, state and local taxes in New York, pays for health care for the poor, disabled and elderly. Do you think state government is currently doing enough to reduce the amount of fraud, waste and abuse in the Medicaid program?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Yes	14%	20%	12%	10%	10%		14%	10%	12%
No	76%	67%	75%	79%	83%		74%	83%	79%
Don't know/no opinion	11%	13%	13%	11%	7%		12%	8%	8%

Thinking about public education, do you think the quality of the public schools generally in New York State is excellent, good, fair, or poor?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Excellent	8%	4%	9%	10%	9%		8%	8%	8%
Good	38%	27%	34%	51%	46%		33%	48%	34%
Fair	33%	41%	30%	23%	32%		35%	27%	40%
Poor	14%	20%	16%	9%	8%		17%	11%	11%
Don't know/no opinion	7%	6%	12%	7%	5%		8%	7%	6%

How about your local school district – is the quality of your local public schools excellent, good, fair, or poor?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Excellent	20%	9%	27%	27%	23%		17%	25%	23%
Good	39%	29%	38%	49%	45%		33%	46%	39%
Fair	22%	28%	18%	15%	22%		26%	17%	25%
Poor	11%	20%	9%	5%	7%		14%	7%	9%
Don't know/no opinion	8%	13%	8%	5%	4%		11%	5%	4%

The statewide average spending in New York public schools is about \$12,000 per pupil. Some argue that New York State should spend more money to improve the quality of public education. Others argue we already spend enough but have to spend it better. Which view is closer to your own?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Spend more money	15%	21%	12%	11%	13%		19%	8%	12%
Spend existing money better	81%	74%	83%	85%	84%		76%	89%	86%
Don't know/no opinion	4%	5%	5%	4%	4%		5%	3%	2%

Would you favor or oppose a law to provide education tax dollars to parents to allow them to send their child to whatever school they choose – public, private or religious?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Yes	49%	54%	47%	46%	47%		47%	54%	47%
No	45%	42%	48%	46%	44%		47%	38%	52%
Don't know/no opinion	6%	4%	4%	7%	9%		6%	8%	1%

One of the fastest growing expenses for state and local governments in New York over the past few years has been the cost of pension benefits for public employees. Do you think that pension benefits provided to public employees are too high, too low, or just about right?

	Total	NYC	Burbs	Up-E	Up-W		Dem	Rep	Ind
Too high	27%	16%	26%	28%	36%		20%	36%	27%
Too low	14%	23%	13%	10%	8%		18%	8%	14%
Just about right	44%	45%	43%	50%	41%		45%	43%	43%
Don't know/no opinion	16%	16%	17%	12%	15%		17%	13%	15%

Counties in Upstate-West

- Allegany
- Broome
- Cattaraugus
- Cayuga
- Chautauqua
- Chemung
- Chenango
- Cortland
- Delaware
- Erie
- Genesee
- Herkimer
- Jefferson
- Lewis
- Livingston
- Madison
- Monroe
- Niagara
- Oneida
- Onondaga
- Ontario
- Orleans
- Oswego
- Otsego
- St. Lawrence
- Schuyler
- Seneca
- Steuben
- Sullivan
- Tioga
- Tompkins
- Wayne
- Wyoming
- Yates

Counties in Upstate-East

- Albany
- Clinton
- Columbia
- Dutchess
- Essex
- Franklin
- Fulton
- Greene
- Hamilton
- Montgomery
- Rensselaer
- Saratoga
- Schenectady
- Schoharie
- Ulster
- Warren
- Washington

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