

EDUCATION

Executive Summary

New Yorkers want better educational outcomes, more flexibility for families, and meaningful academic standards, according to new Empire Center poll results.

Voters overwhelmingly believe New York should improve student performance, and most oppose replacing graduation exams with alternative pathways.

Most respondents support giving families more educational options, including choosing public schools outside their district, requiring schools to accept out-of-district students, and using education vouchers.

The findings are drawn from a statewide survey of 600 likely 2026 general-election voters conducted by Cygnal on behalf of the Empire Center. This report focuses on education-related findings. Additional results from the survey will be released separately.

The results suggest that New Yorkers are open to reforms that expand educational opportunity, but still place a high value on academic achievement and accountability.

The detailed findings follow below.

Only 4 percent of respondents want New York's education system to continue on its current course. After being told that New York spends approximately \$36,000 per student while producing average academic results, 94 percent said schools should improve student performance, reduce spending, or do both.

Most New Yorkers support giving families more flexibility to choose public schools. Respondents support allowing students to attend schools outside their home district by nearly two to one, and most also support requiring schools to accept students from other districts.

School vouchers receive more support than opposition statewide. Half of respondents support giving families a voucher that could be used at a public or private school of their choice, while 41 percent oppose the proposal.

Most New Yorkers oppose replacing graduation exams with alternative pathways. Roughly two-thirds reject allowing students to graduate without passing required exams, even when alternatives such as projects, presentations, or community service are offered.

Only 4 Percent Want New York's Education System to Stay the Course

After being told that New York spends approximately \$36,000 per student each year while producing average reading and math results, 94 percent of respondents said the state should improve student performance, reduce spending, or do both. Only 4 percent said the current approach should continue unchanged.

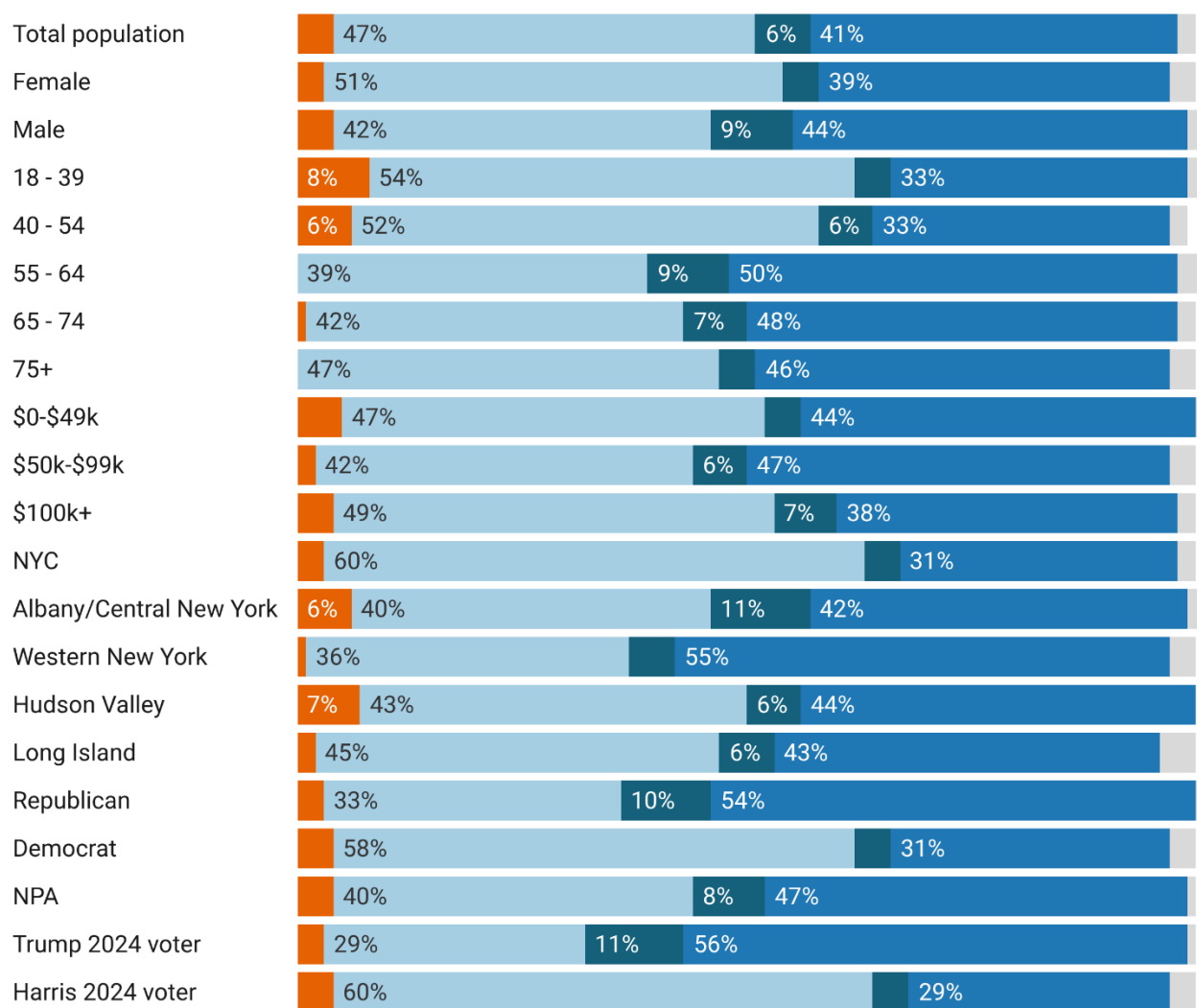
Forty-seven percent of respondents want New York schools to do better, while 41 percent want schools to do better and spend less. Democrat-leaning groups tend to prefer the former, while Republican-leaning respondents and those with no political affiliation tend to prefer the latter.

The finding shows overwhelming demand for change. Only 4 percent of respondents said the state should continue on its current course.

Achieve more, spend less or continue as is?

Survey question: New York spends about \$36,000 per student each year, roughly double the national average, while its students' reading and math scores are about average nationally. Which of the following comes closest to your view?

- This is fine, and New York should continue as it is
- New York should work to improve reading and math results
- New York should work to spend less
- New York should both improve results and spend less
- Unsure



N=600, margin of error ±4.0%. Percentages are calculated within each demographic group and may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding. Party identification includes Republican, Democrat, and No Party Affiliation (NPA). Geographic categories follow the survey definitions: Albany/Central New York, Western New York, Hudson Valley, Long Island, and New York City.

Chart: Empire Center, Cygnal • Created with Datawrapper

New Yorkers Back Letting Students Attend Schools Outside Their District

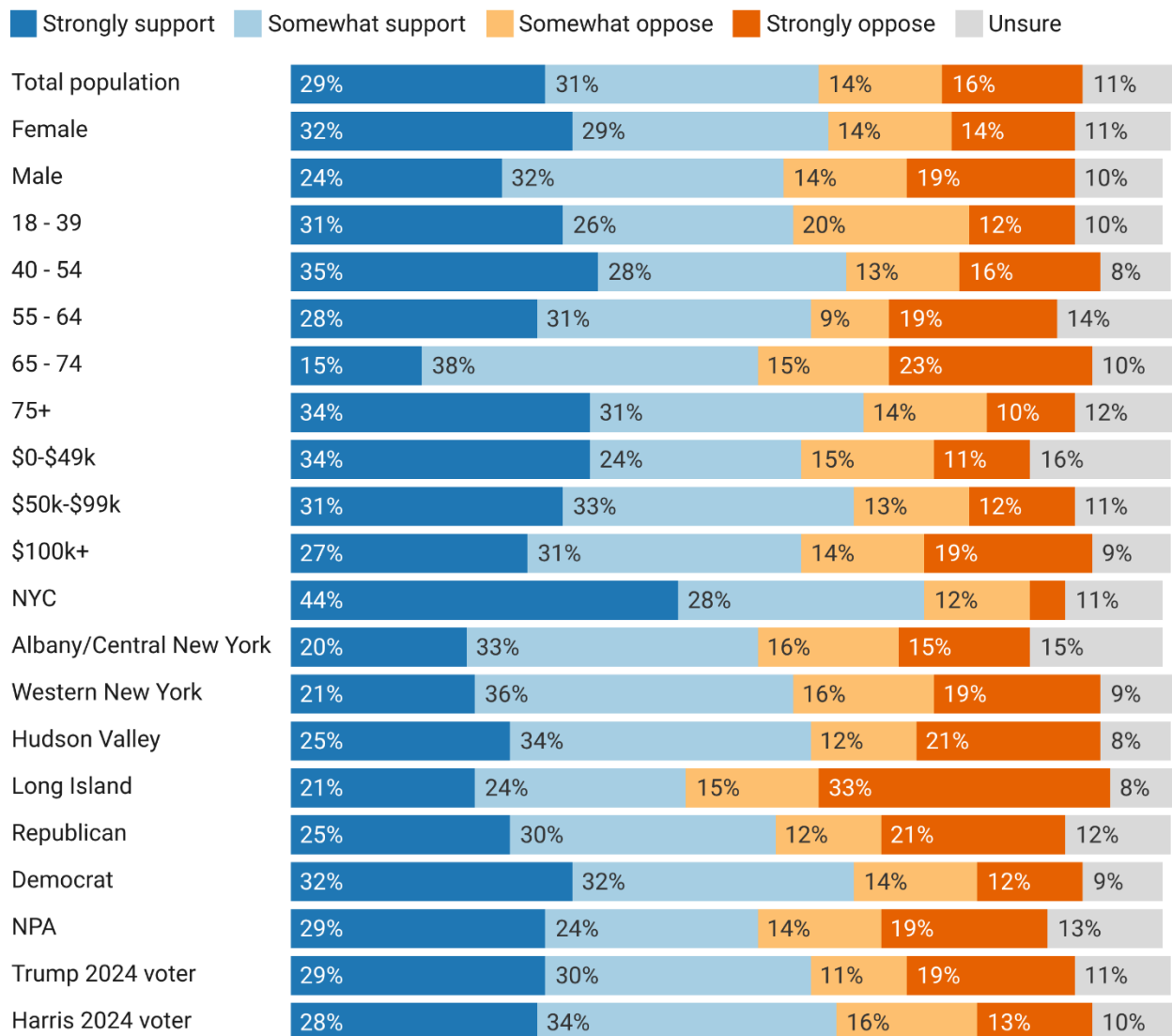
Most New Yorkers support allowing families to send their children to a public school outside their home district. Statewide, respondents support the policy by nearly two to one, 59 percent to 30 percent.

Support cuts across political, geographic, income, and age groups. New York City residents are especially supportive, with nearly three-quarters favoring the policy. Opposition is highest on Long Island, though support remains competitive even there.

The results suggest broad support for giving families greater flexibility within the public-school system. That support continues when voters are asked whether schools themselves should accept students from outside district boundaries.

Allowing students to attend public schools outside their home district

Survey question: Do you support or oppose allowing New York families to send their children to a public school outside of their own school district?



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Most New Yorkers Say Schools Should Welcome Students from Other Districts

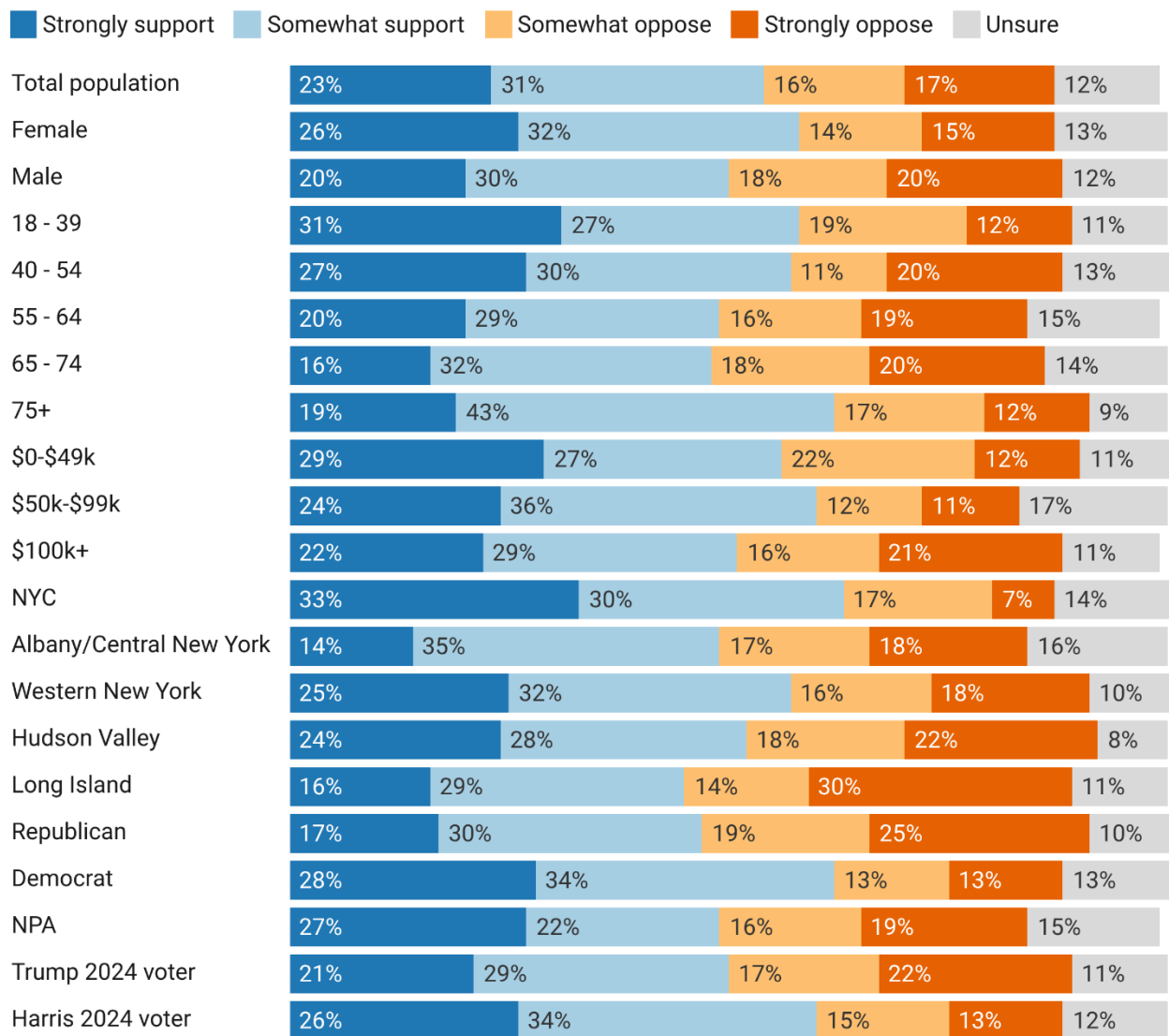
Most New Yorkers support requiring public schools to accept students from other school districts. Statewide, support exceeds opposition by roughly 20 percentage points and leads across every major demographic group.

Support is strongest in New York City and among adults age 75 and older. Long Island stands out as the most skeptical region, but even there, the results show a near-even split.

The findings suggest that voters are generally receptive not only to expanded family choice, but also to policies that make those choices more widely available.

Requiring schools to accept out-of-district students

Survey question: Do you support or oppose requiring New York public schools to accept students from other New York school districts?



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More New Yorkers Support School Vouchers Than Oppose Them

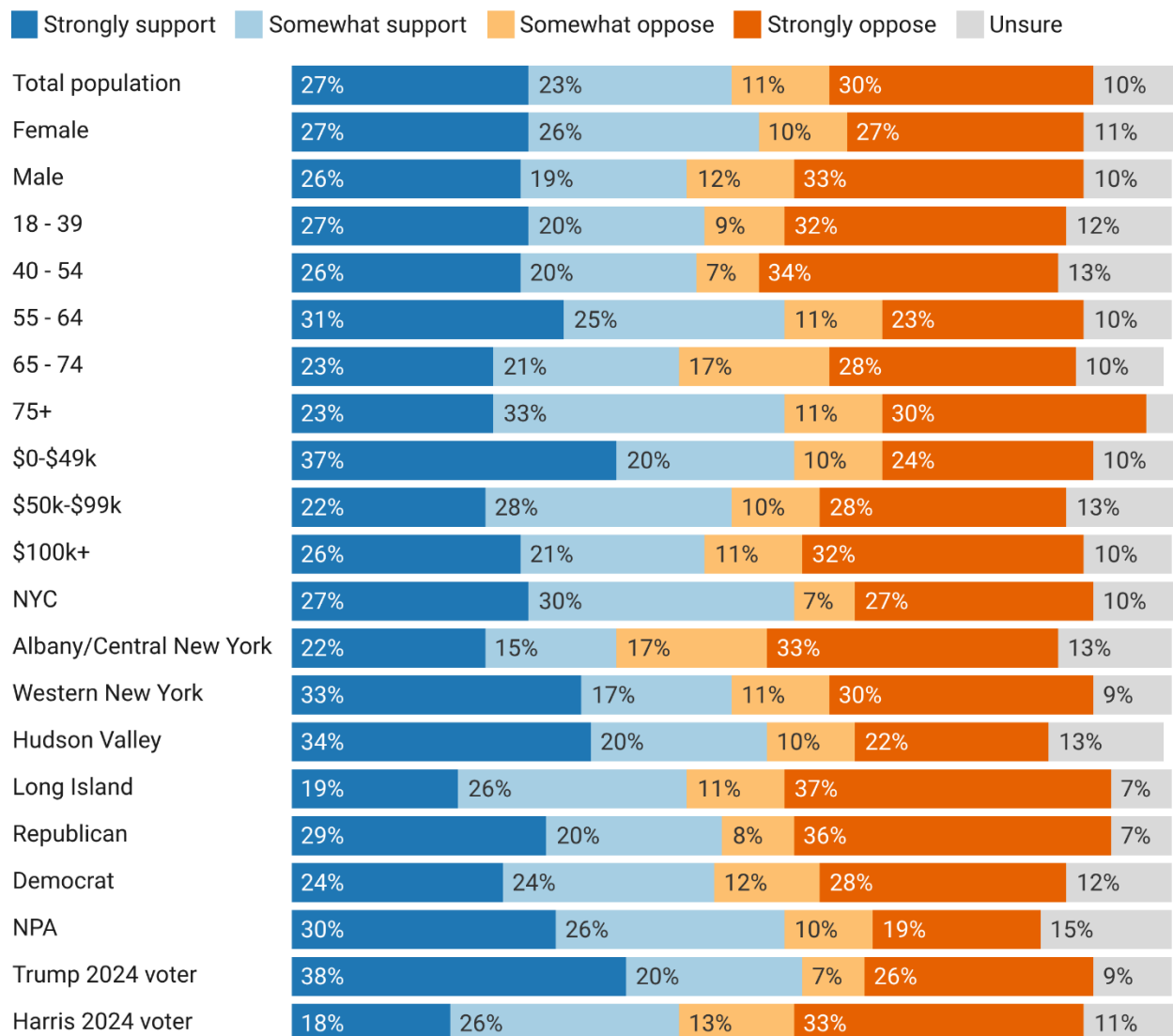
Statewide, 50 percent of respondents support giving families a voucher that could be used for a public or private school of their choice, while 41 percent oppose the proposal.

Support is strongest among lower-income households, New York City residents, and respondents with no political affiliation. Republican- and Democrat-leaning respondents expressed nearly identical levels of support, with roughly half of each group backing the idea.

While opinion is more divided on vouchers than on other forms of school choice, supporters outnumber opponents statewide.

Vouchers to families to pay for a school of their choice

Survey question: Do you support or oppose giving each New York family a voucher they could use to send their child to a private or public school of their choice?



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Chart: Empire Center, Cygnal • Created with Datawrapper

Most New Yorkers Want Graduation Exams to Stay

Most New Yorkers oppose allowing students to graduate without passing required exams. Statewide, roughly two-thirds of respondents oppose replacing exam requirements with alternatives such as community service, personal projects, or presentations.

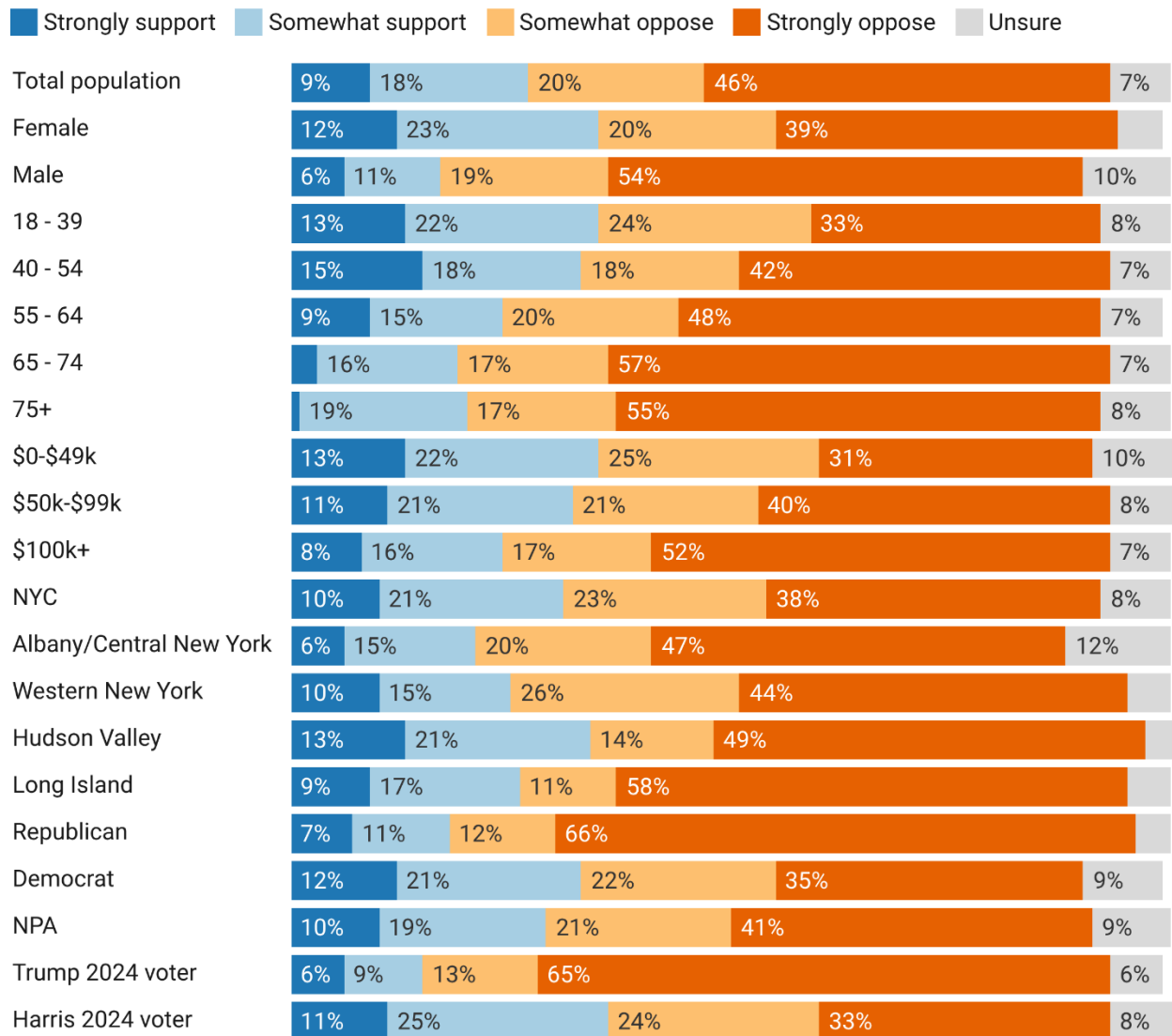
Opposition exceeds support across every major demographic group. Republicans, Trump voters, Long Island residents, and higher-income households are particularly opposed. Younger adults and Democrats are somewhat more supportive, but opposition remains the majority view even among those groups.

The results suggest that New Yorkers continue to view academic standards and measurable achievement as essential to earning a high school diploma.

Taken together with the other education findings, the survey points to broad support for improving educational outcomes while maintaining clear expectations for student performance.

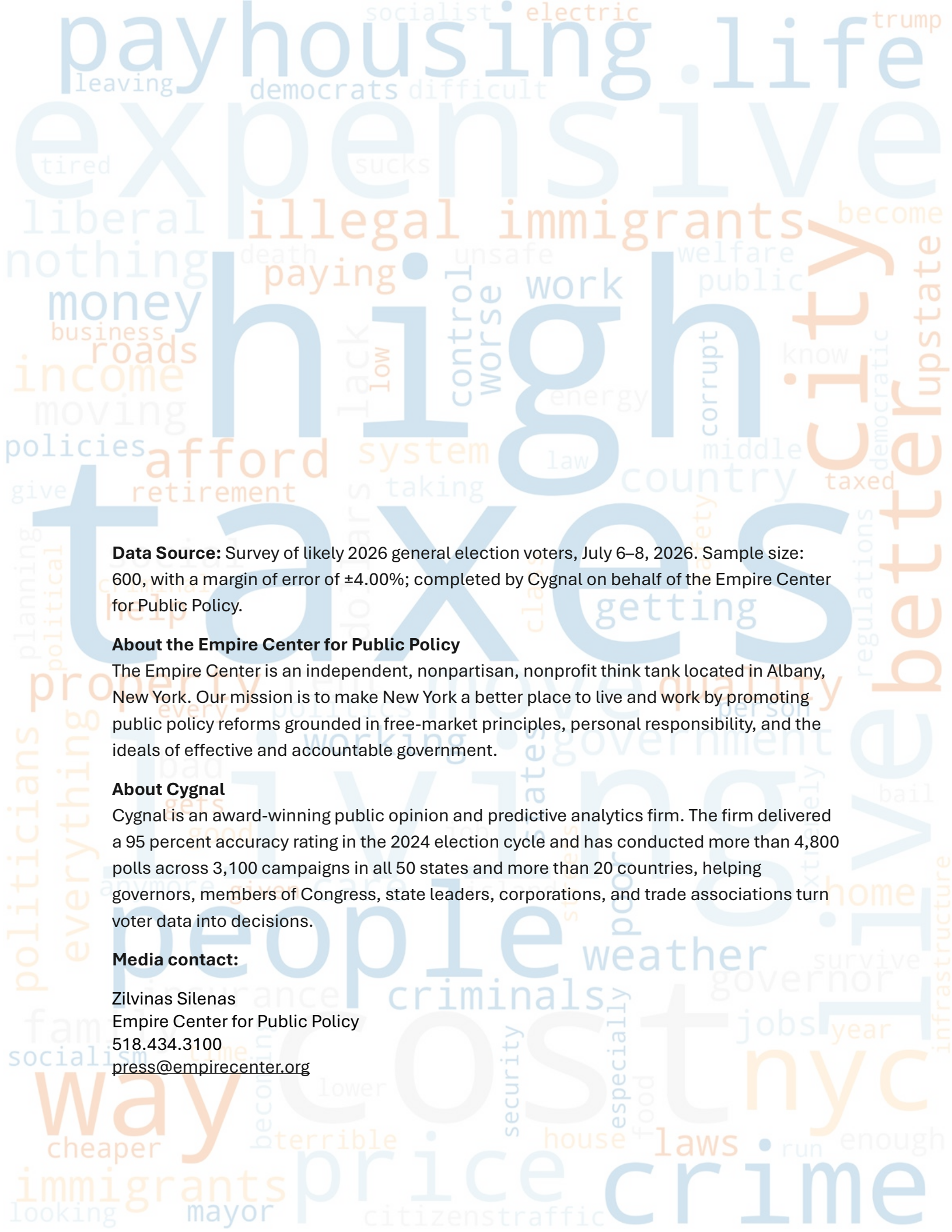
Alternatives to exams

Survey question: Do you support or oppose allowing students in New York to graduate without passing exams, instead allowing them to graduate through community service, personal projects, or presentations?



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Data Source: Survey of likely 2026 general election voters, July 6–8, 2026. Sample size: 600, with a margin of error of $\pm 4.00\%$; completed by Cygnal on behalf of the Empire Center for Public Policy.

About the Empire Center for Public Policy

The Empire Center is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank located in Albany, New York. Our mission is to make New York a better place to live and work by promoting public policy reforms grounded in free-market principles, personal responsibility, and the ideals of effective and accountable government.

About Cygnal

Cygnal is an award-winning public opinion and predictive analytics firm. The firm delivered a 95 percent accuracy rating in the 2024 election cycle and has conducted more than 4,800 polls across 3,100 campaigns in all 50 states and more than 20 countries, helping governors, members of Congress, state leaders, corporations, and trade associations turn voter data into decisions.

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