



Telephone Survey of Santa Clara County Voters Regarding Parcel Taxes for Education



Prepared for
Santa Clara County Education Coalition & CTA



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Methodology

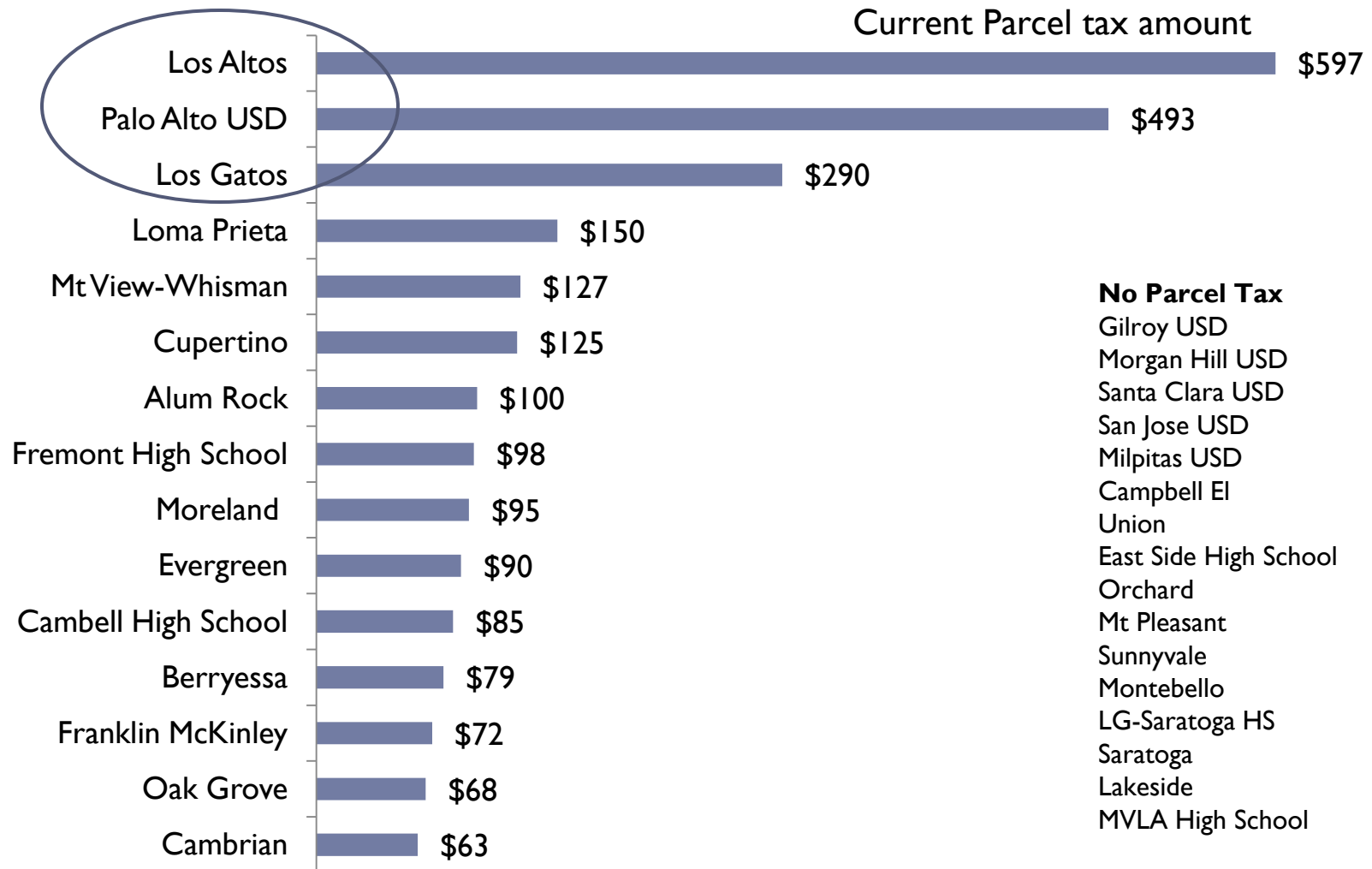
- Telephone survey
- October 7-13, 2009
- Random sample of 900 likely voters in Santa Clara County
 - *School districts with a parcel tax of over \$200 per parcel per year were excluded from the sample (Los Gatos Elementary, Palo Alto Unified and Los Altos Elementary)*
 - *Voters in the Santa Clara Unified were excluded since they were in the middle of a Nov 2009 parcel tax campaign*
- Overall margin of error $\pm 3.3\%$ points

As with any opinion research, the release of selected figures from this report without the analysis that explains their meaning would be damaging to EMC. Therefore, EMC reserves the right to correct any misleading release of this data in any medium through the release of correct data or analysis.

Please note that due to rounding, percentages may not add up to exactly 100%

Given the high level of their existing tax compared to other districts, Los Altos Elementary, Los Gatos Elementary and Palo Alto Unified were taken out of the survey

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Project Purpose

- ▶ Gain an understanding of the overall opinions of voters regarding school parcel taxes and the need for school funding
- ▶ Evaluate messages and themes that can be used to gain support for local measures
- ▶ Identify target audiences for messaging
- ▶ Designed to evaluate general attitudes about parcel taxes, not to test support for a specific tax level or proposed measure in any specific district

Key Findings

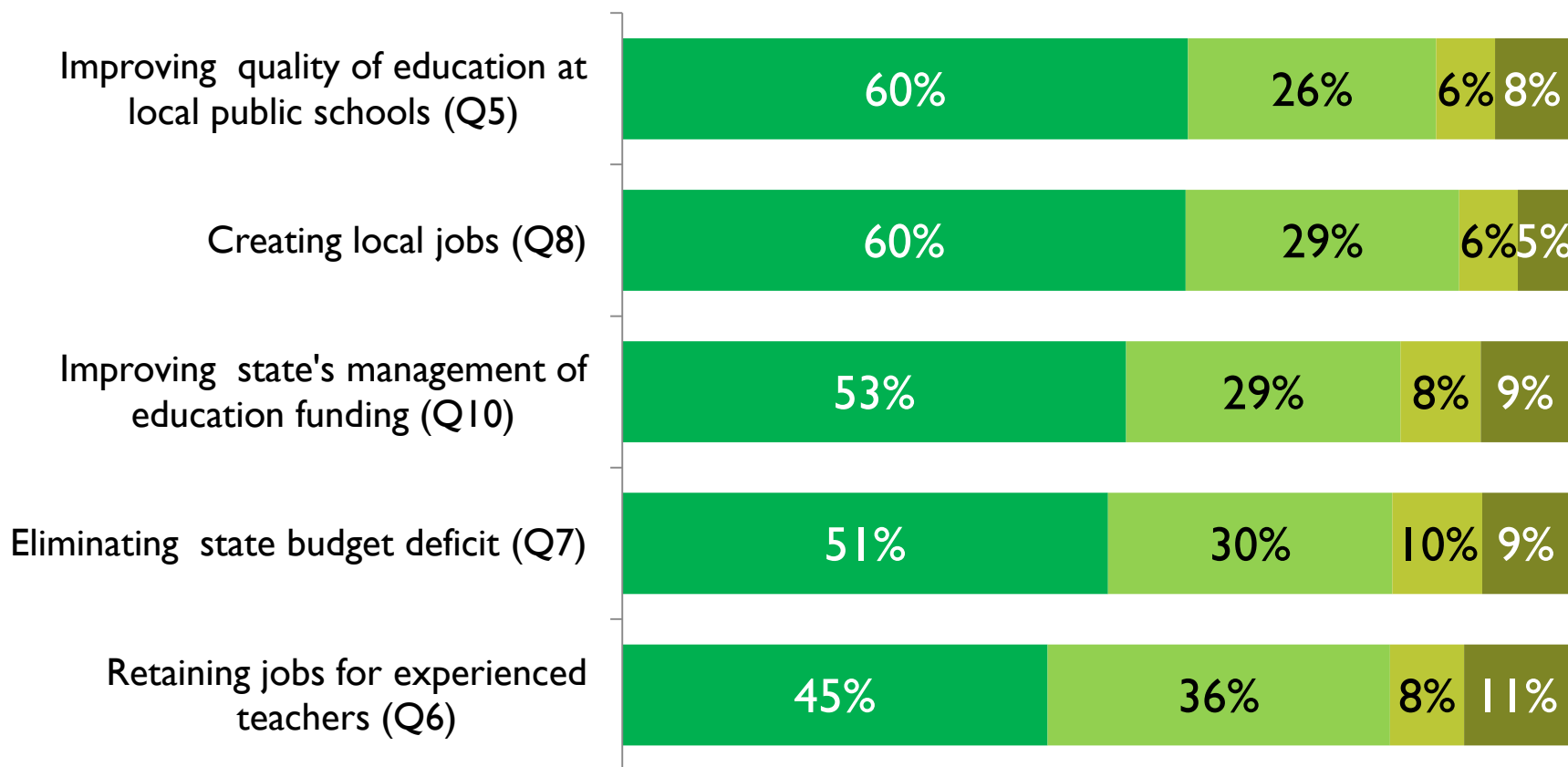
- ▶ Voters are concerned about improving schools despite the economy
- ▶ The vast majority of voters in the area are supportive of increasing local funding for schools and would likely support a tax, but reaching two-thirds is not universally easy
- ▶ There is significant anti-tax sentiment, but low tax amounts are well-received
- ▶ Core academics and keeping experienced teachers are top priorities for funds
- ▶ Messages about protecting programs and improving education are recommended over threatened cuts
- ▶ Blaming the state is not a solution

Voters feel improving education is as important as creating jobs

6

On a scale of one to seven, where one is not important at all and seven is extremely important, how important do you feel each of the following should be right now:

■ 7 - Extremely important ■ 5-6 - Important ■ 4/Don't know ■ 1-3 Not important

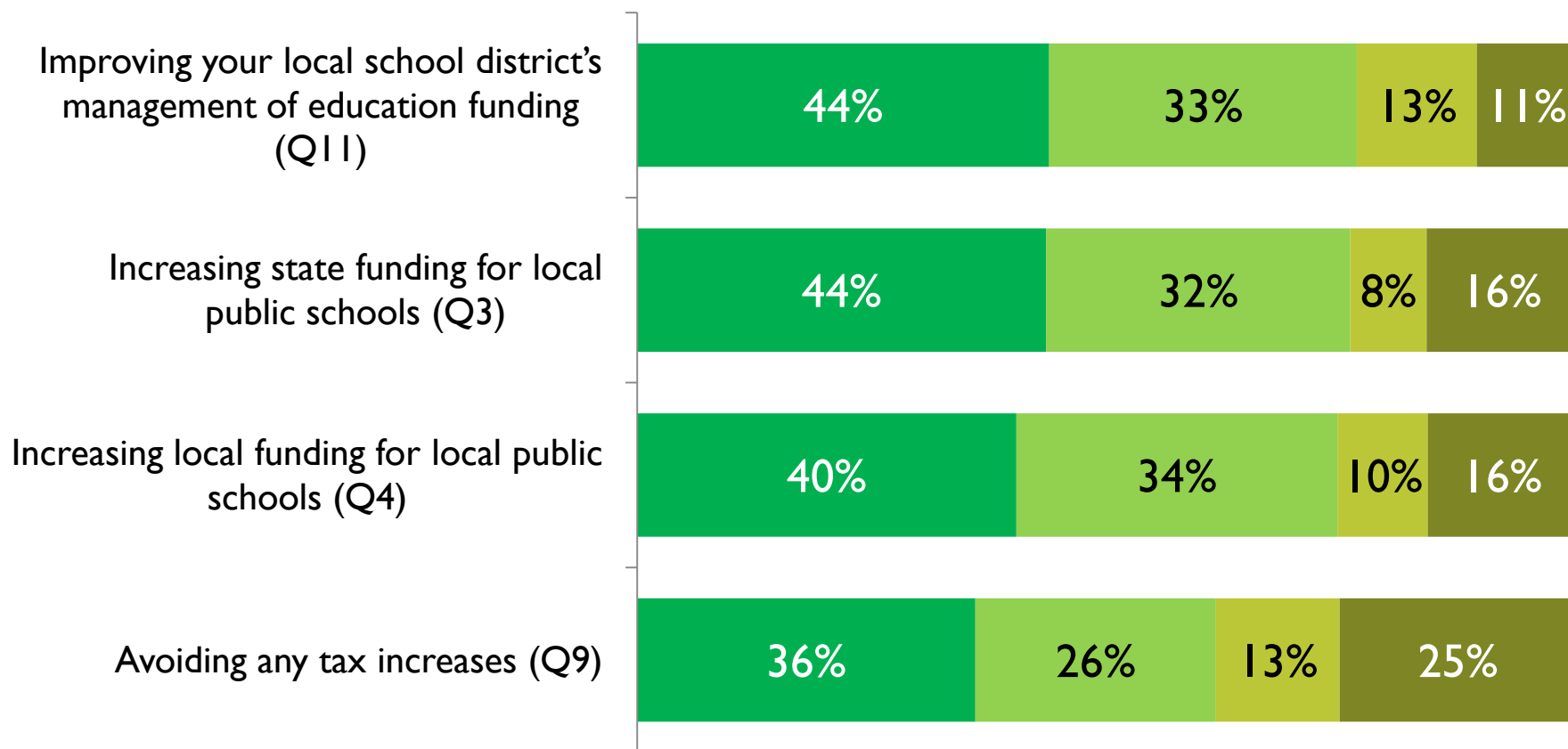


Increased funding is important, but so is improving money management and avoiding tax increases

7

On a scale of one to seven, where one is not important at all and seven is extremely important, how important do you feel each of the following should be right now:

■ 7 - Extremely important ■ 5-6 - Important ■ 4/Don't know ■ 1-3 Not important



4 in 10 voters say they will oppose any tax increase.

8

Which of the following is closer to your opinion? (Q17)

Taxes are already high enough; I'll vote against any increase in taxes.

40%

It is crucial to have high quality local public schools, even if it means raising taxes.

54%

Both/Neither/Don't Know

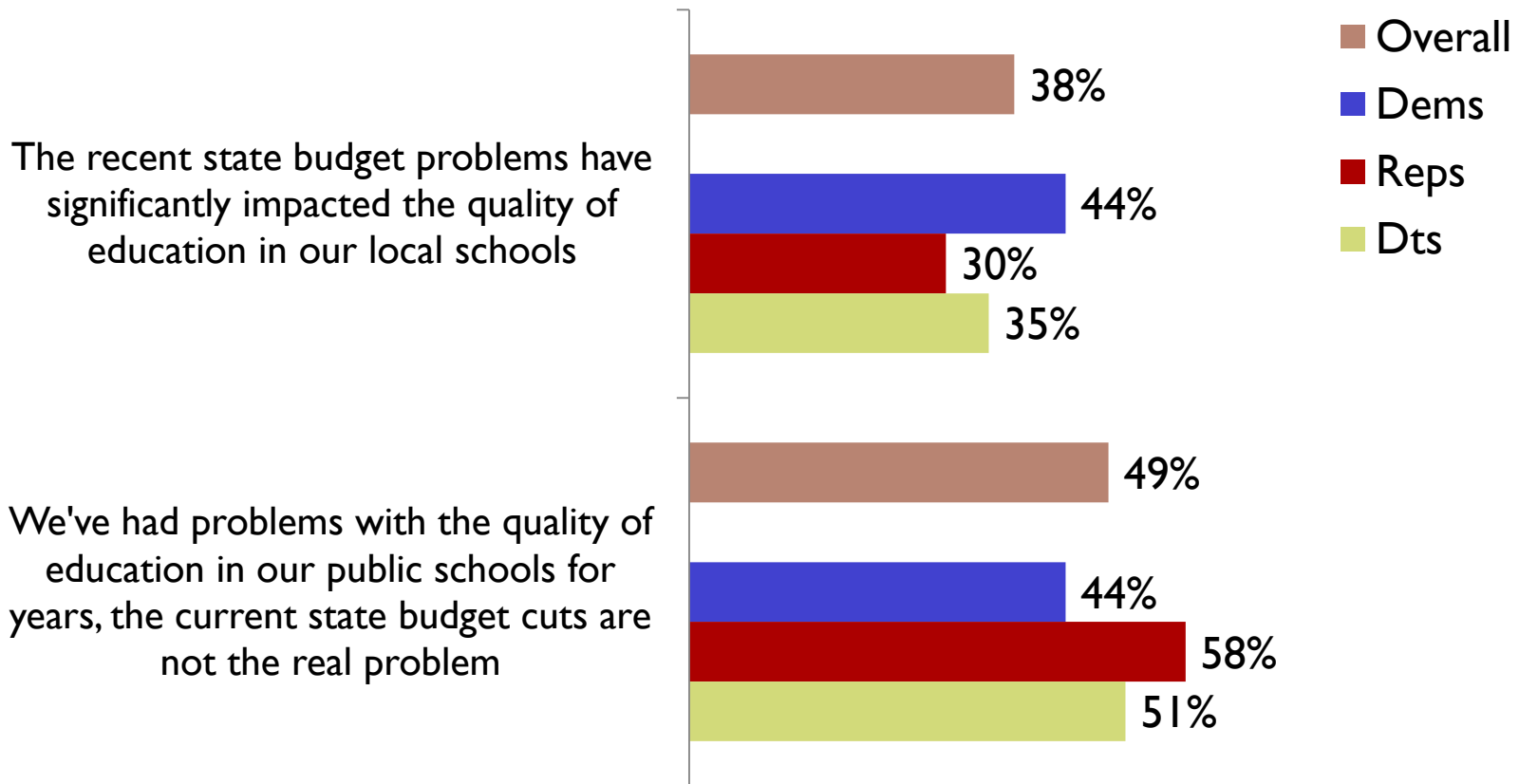
6%

- ▶ *Most voters are unaware of existing parcel taxes:* Half of all voters don't know if there is an existing parcel tax in their District. Almost one in ten think there's a tax when there isn't.
- ▶ *Most voters don't feel the impact of budget cuts:* Only one-quarter of voters think the quality of education today is worse than it was a few years ago. 42% think it's the same and 17% say it's better.
- ▶ *Awareness of financial need is high, but not intense:* While 71% say that their local school district needs more money, only 36% say there is a great need. 21% say there is no need and another 7% don't know.

Half of all voters say problems in education are not the fault of current state budget cuts. Even Democrats divided.

10

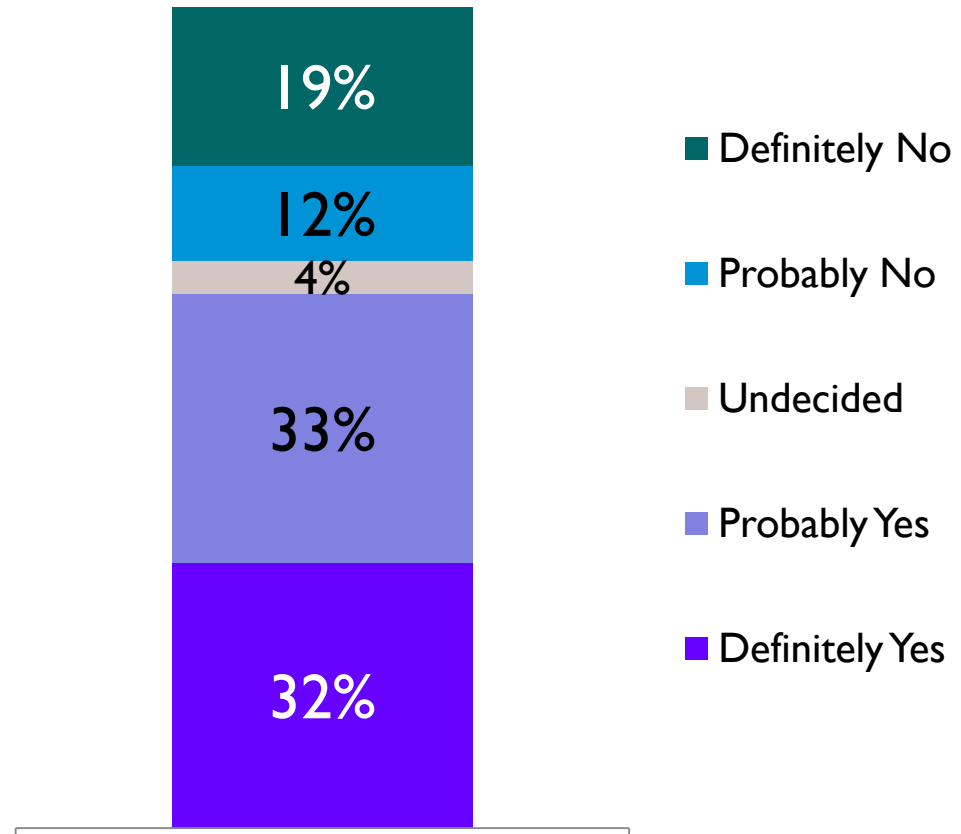
Which of the following is closer to your opinion? (Q15)



Support for a potential parcel tax (with no dollar amount given) falls a hair short of 2/3, but firm support is only one-third

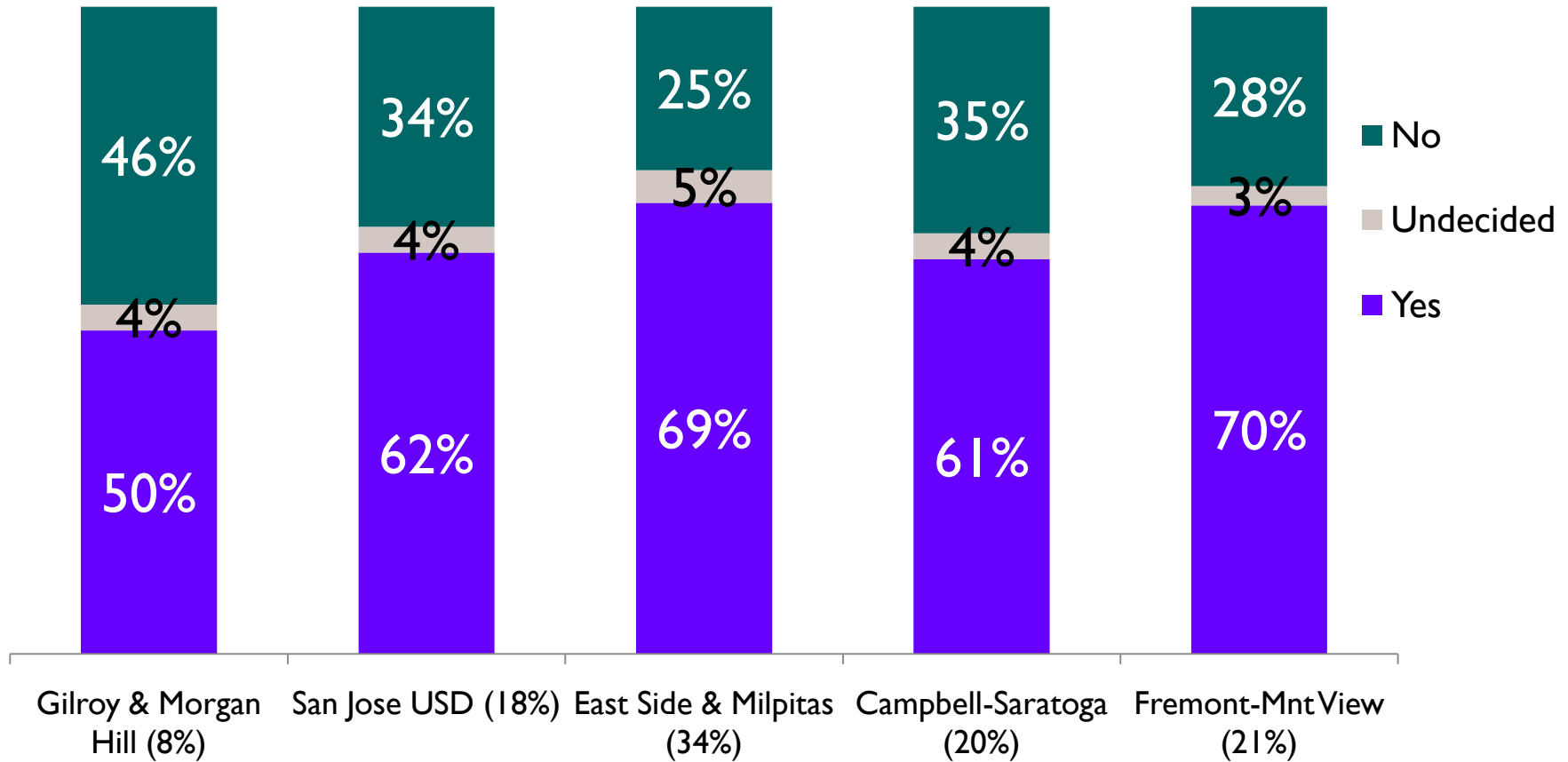
11

Would you definitely vote yes, probably vote yes, probably vote no, or definitely vote no on a parcel tax for your school district that would be used to support high academic achievement for local students with small class sizes, teacher training and support, and with educational programs that enhance student achievement? (Q14)



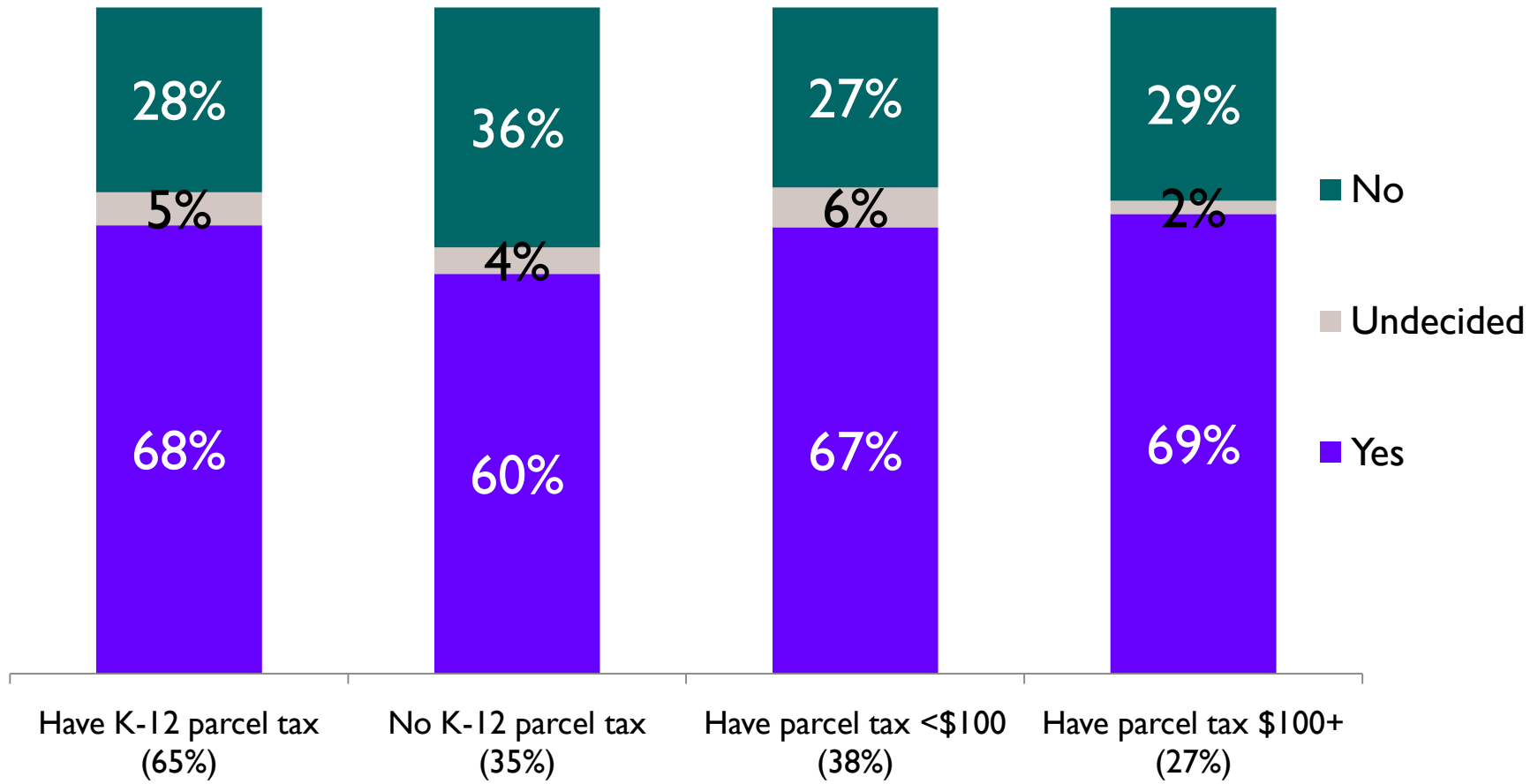
Some areas of the county or more supportive of a parcel tax than others

12



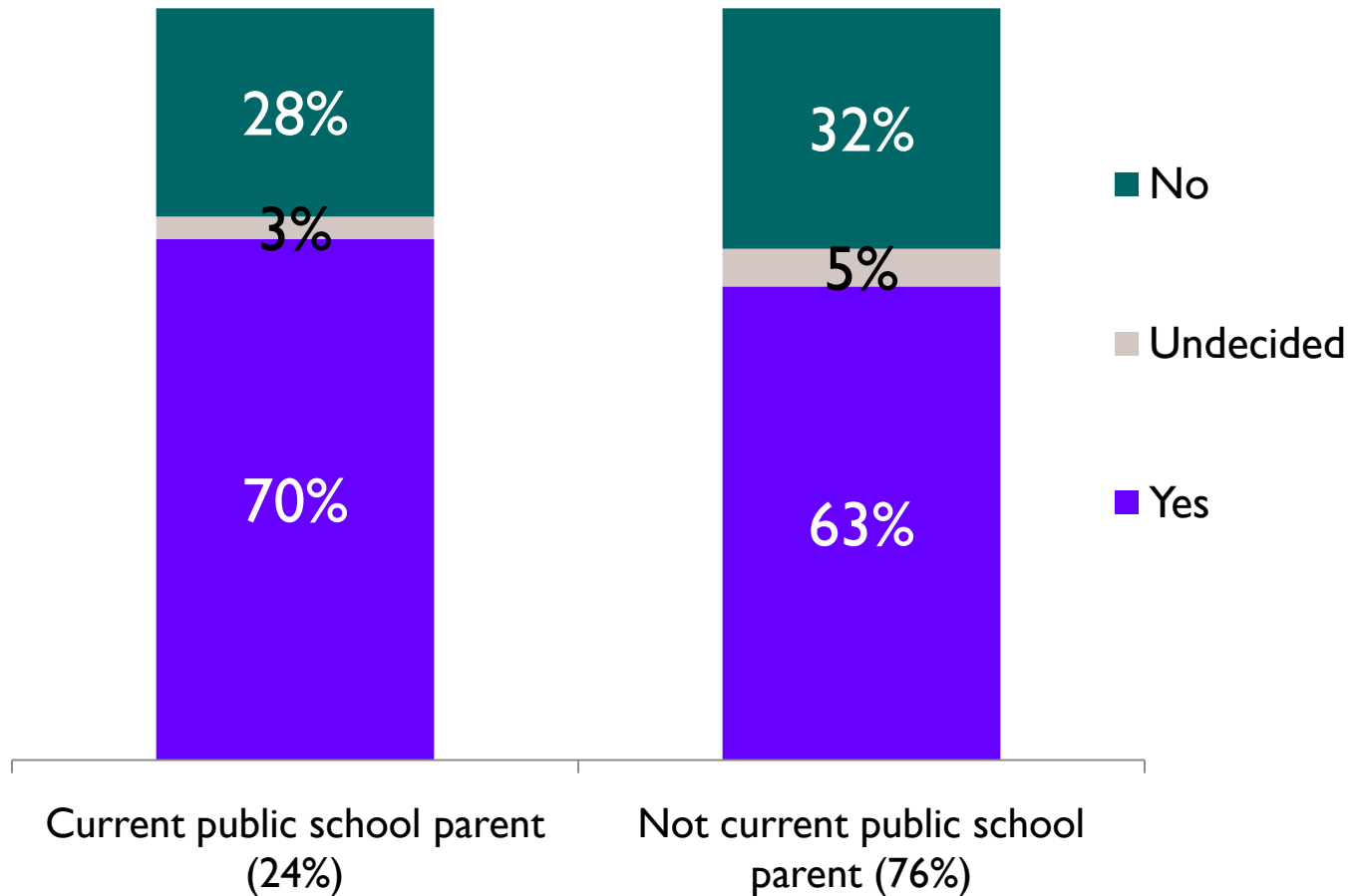
Voters in districts with parcel taxes already in place are more likely to vote for a parcel tax

13



More than a third of current public school parents support a tax for their district, but 28% do not

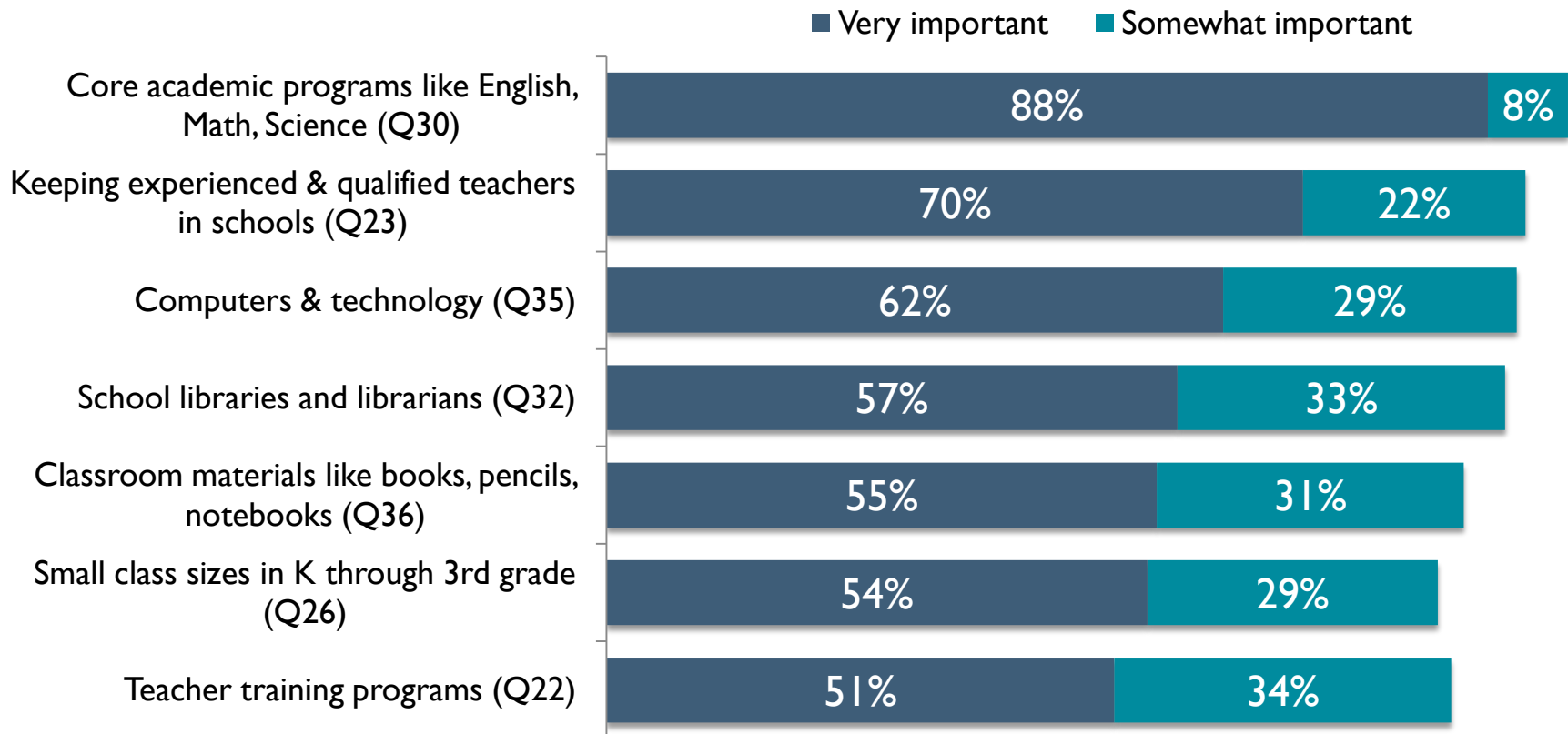
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Voters want strong core academics and qualified, experienced teachers

15

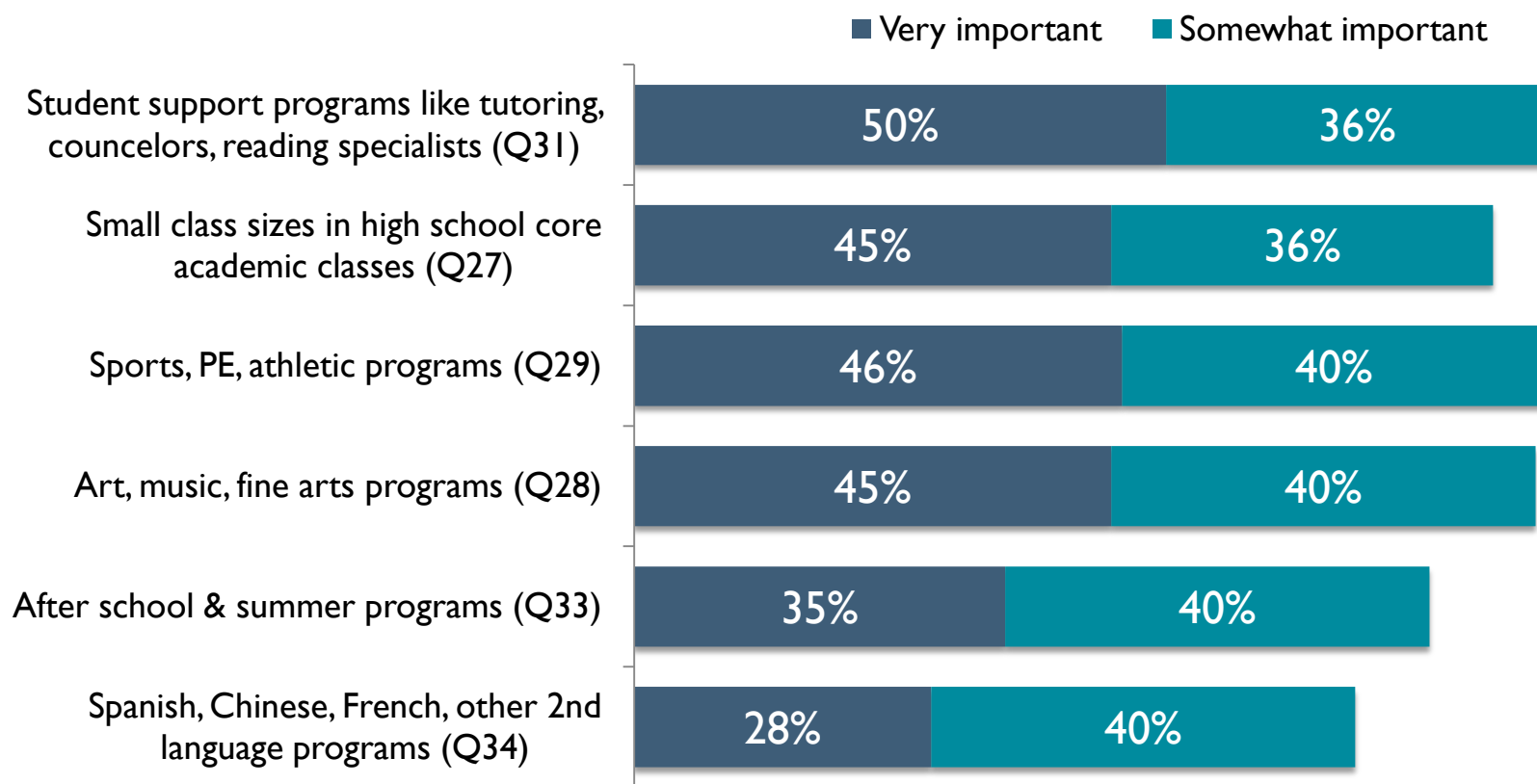
Now I'm going to read you some projects that can be funded with a local school parcel tax. For each one, please tell me if you think it should be very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important for your local schools



Most school programs are important to voters, but some don't get the intensity of concern

16

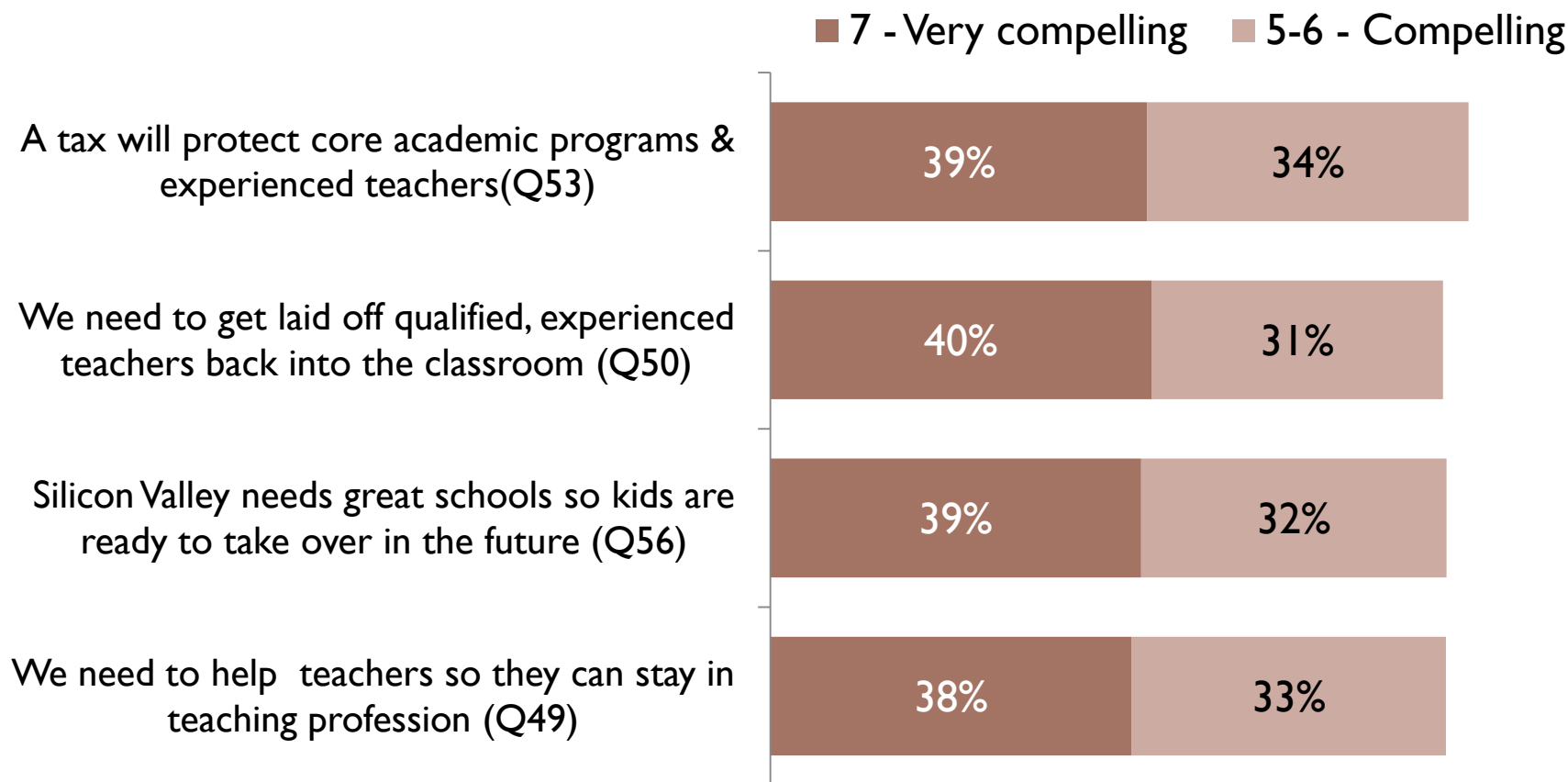
Now I'm going to read you some projects that can be funded with a local school parcel tax. For each one, please tell me if you think it should be very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important for your local schools



The most effective messages are about proactively retaining good teachers, preserving core academics

17

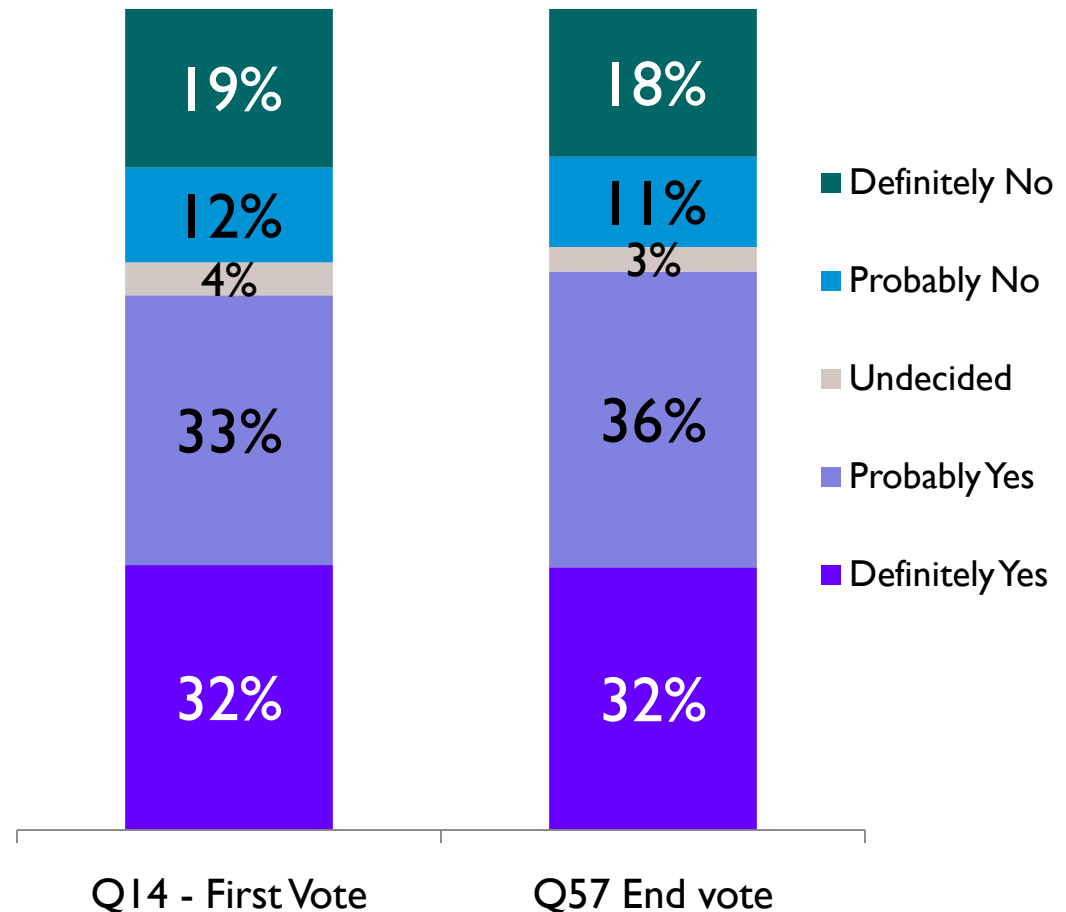
I'm going to read you some things people have said in support of a local parcel tax for schools. For each statement please tell me how compelling this is as a reason to support a school tax measure:



After all of the information is presented, support inches over the two-thirds threshold with 68% supporting a measure

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*Given what you've heard, would you definitely vote yes, probably vote yes, probably vote no, or definitely vote no on a parcel tax for your school district that would be used to support high academic achievement for local students with small class sizes, teacher training and support, and with educational programs that enhance student achievement?
(Q14 & Q57)*

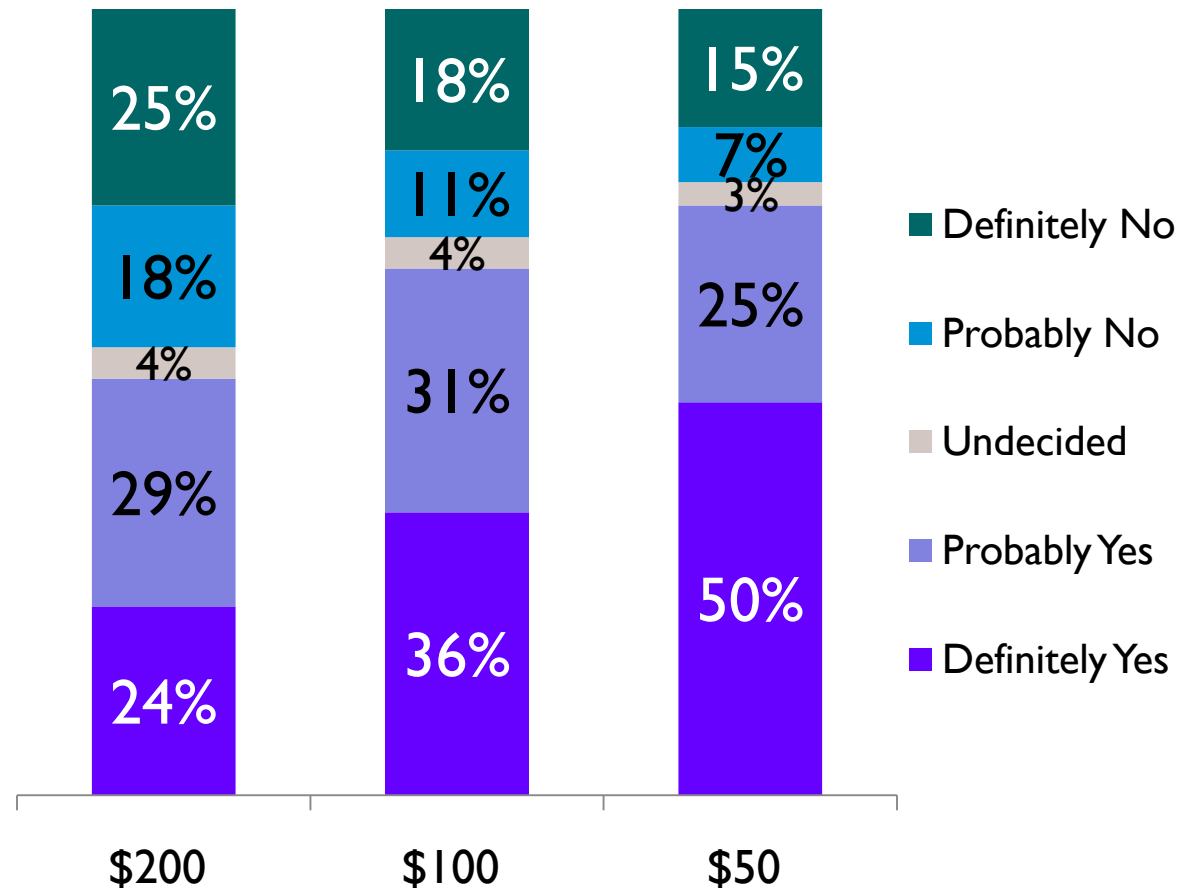


There is clearly price sensitivity when voters hear various tax amounts. \$200 seems too high for most, but 75% support \$50.

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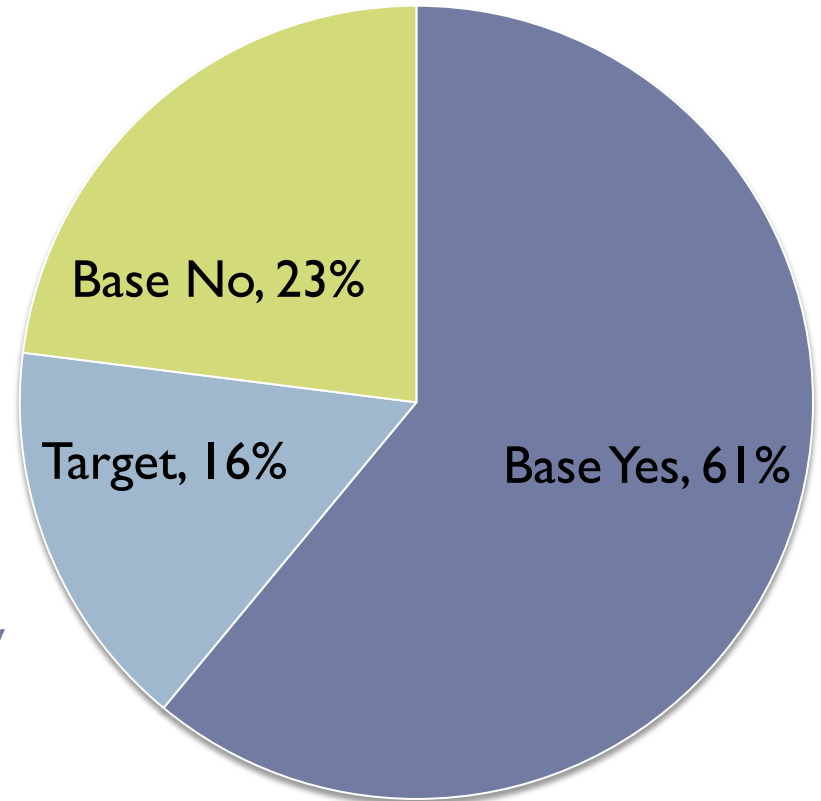
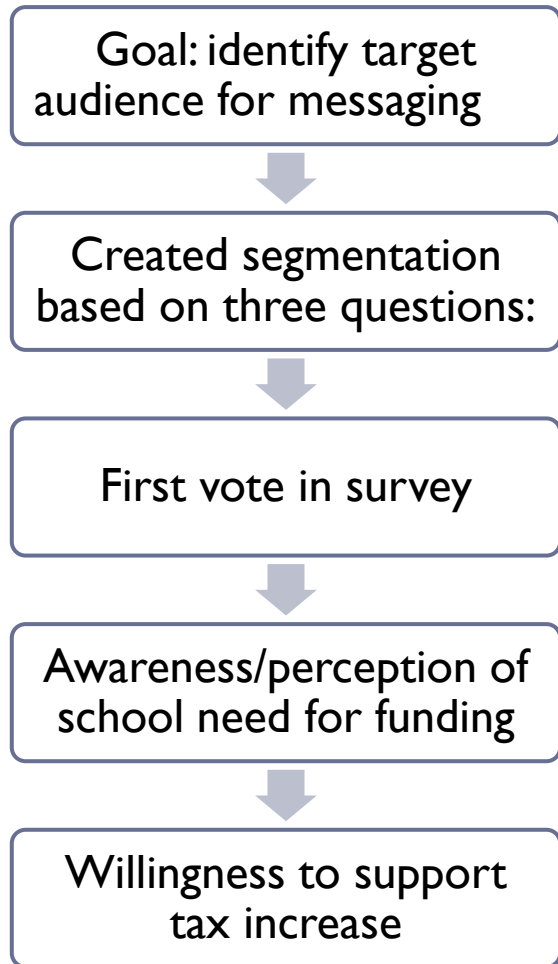
*What if the parcel tax
would cost homeowners
around ____ per year?*

*Question order
randomized*



Identify target audience

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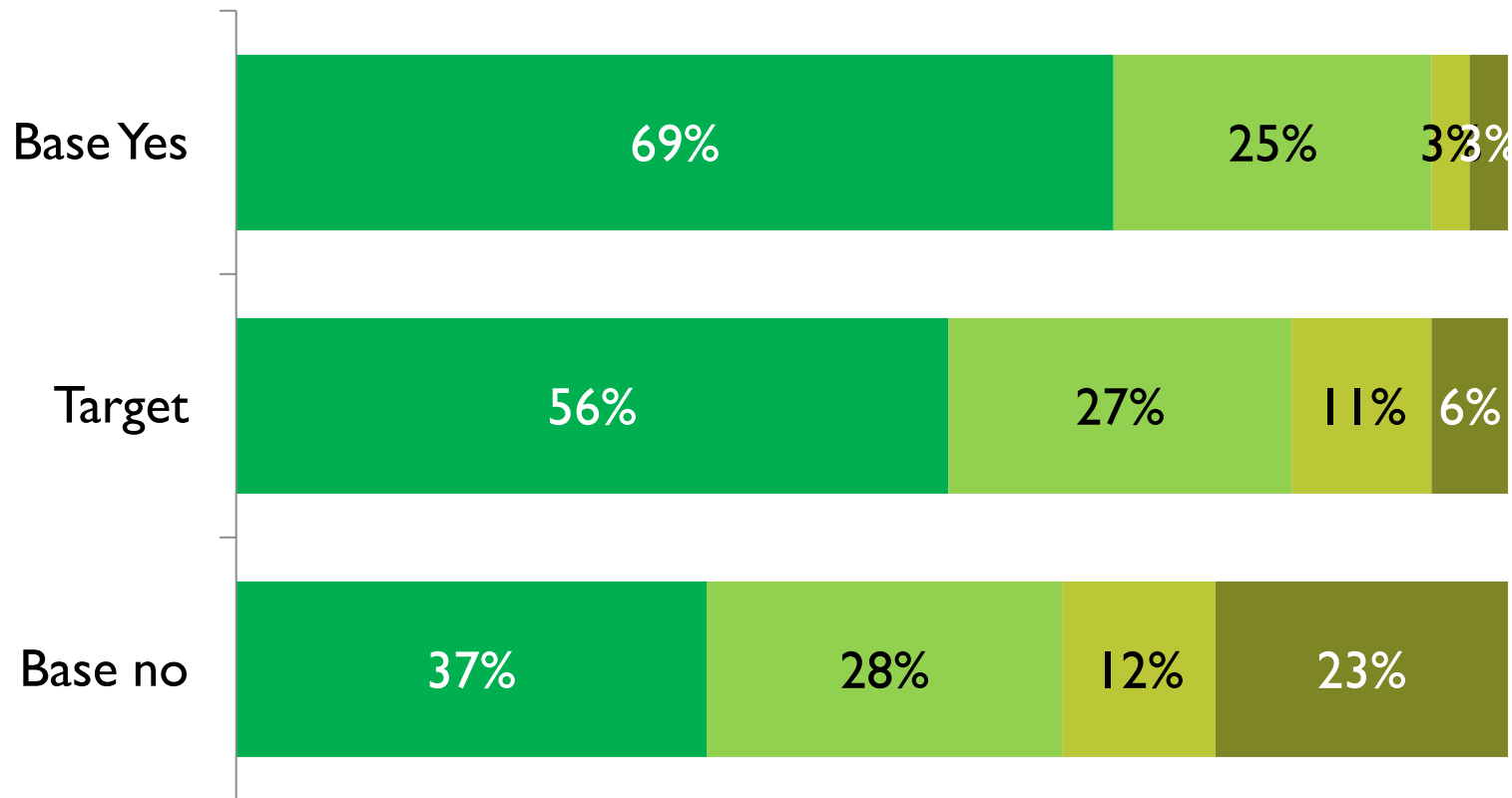


Most want to improve the quality of education, even those in the Base No

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Improving the quality of education at local public schools (Q5)

■ 7 - Extremely important ■ 5-6 - Important ■ 4/Don't know ■ 1-3 Not important

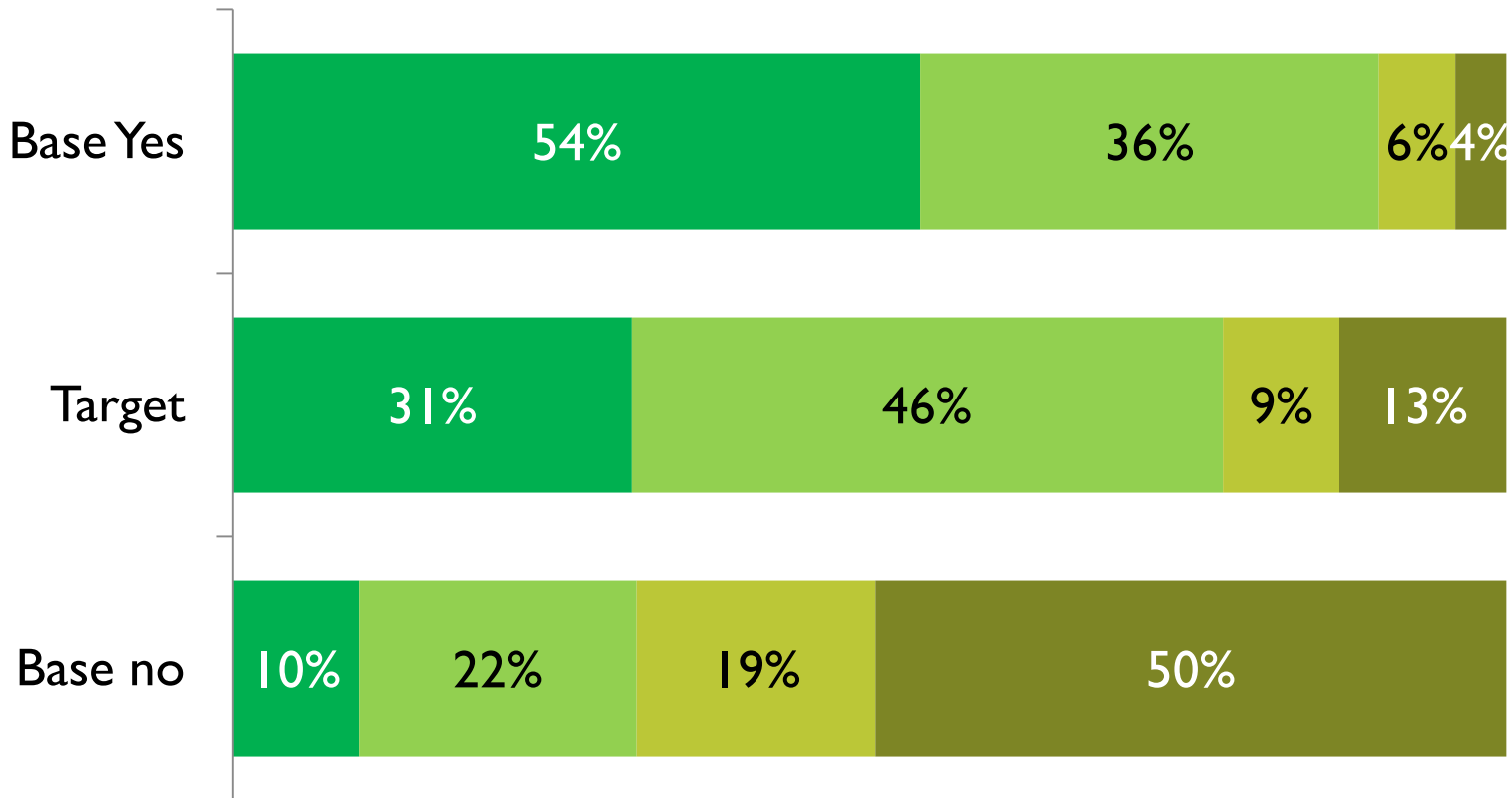


Those in the Base Yes are in favor of increased funding for schools, while Base No voters are not -- both are unlikely to change

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Increasing local funding for local public schools

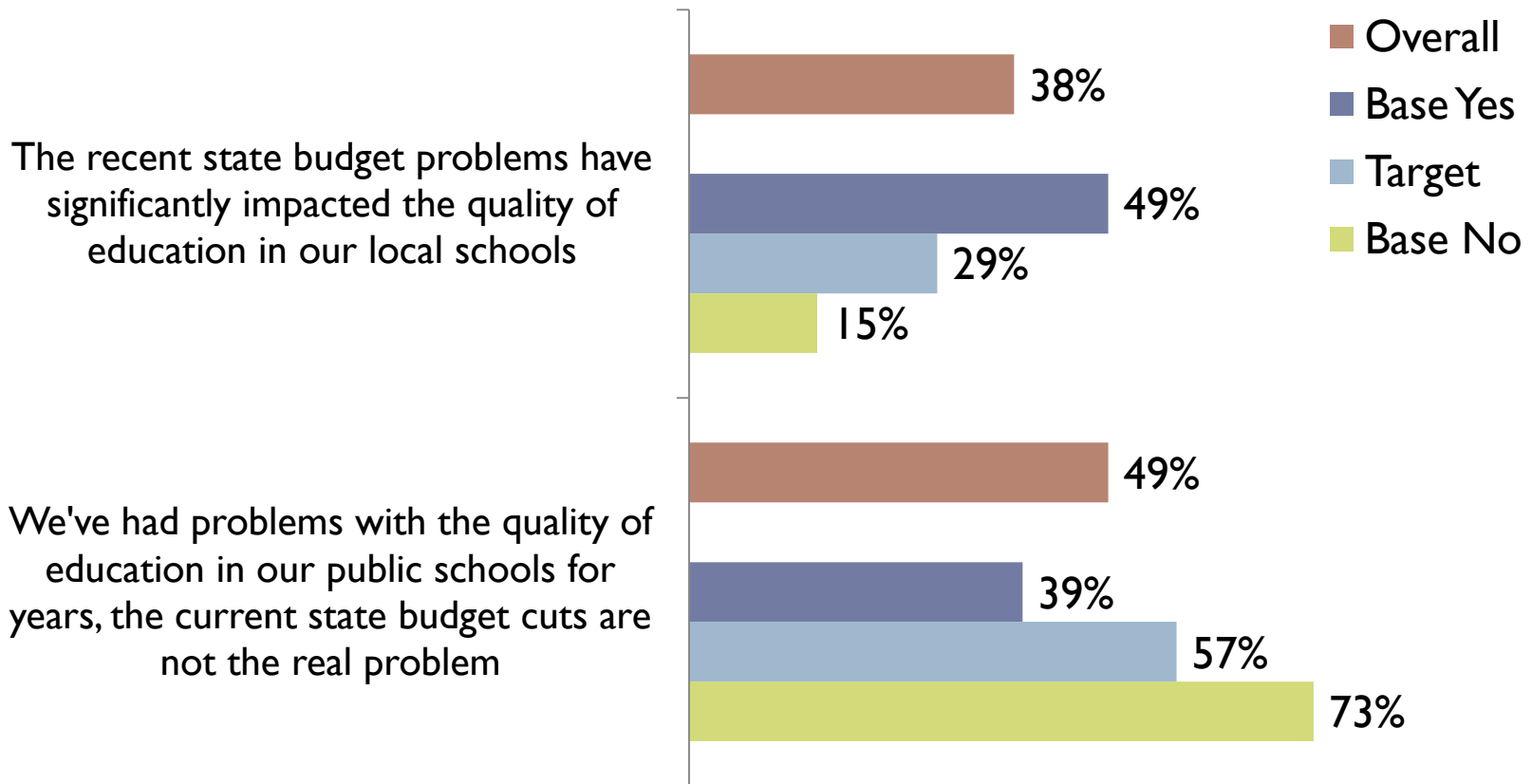
■ 7 - Extremely important ■ 5-6 - Important ■ 4/Don't know ■ 1-3 Not important



A majority in the Target believe the problems in education can not be blamed on recent state budget issues

23

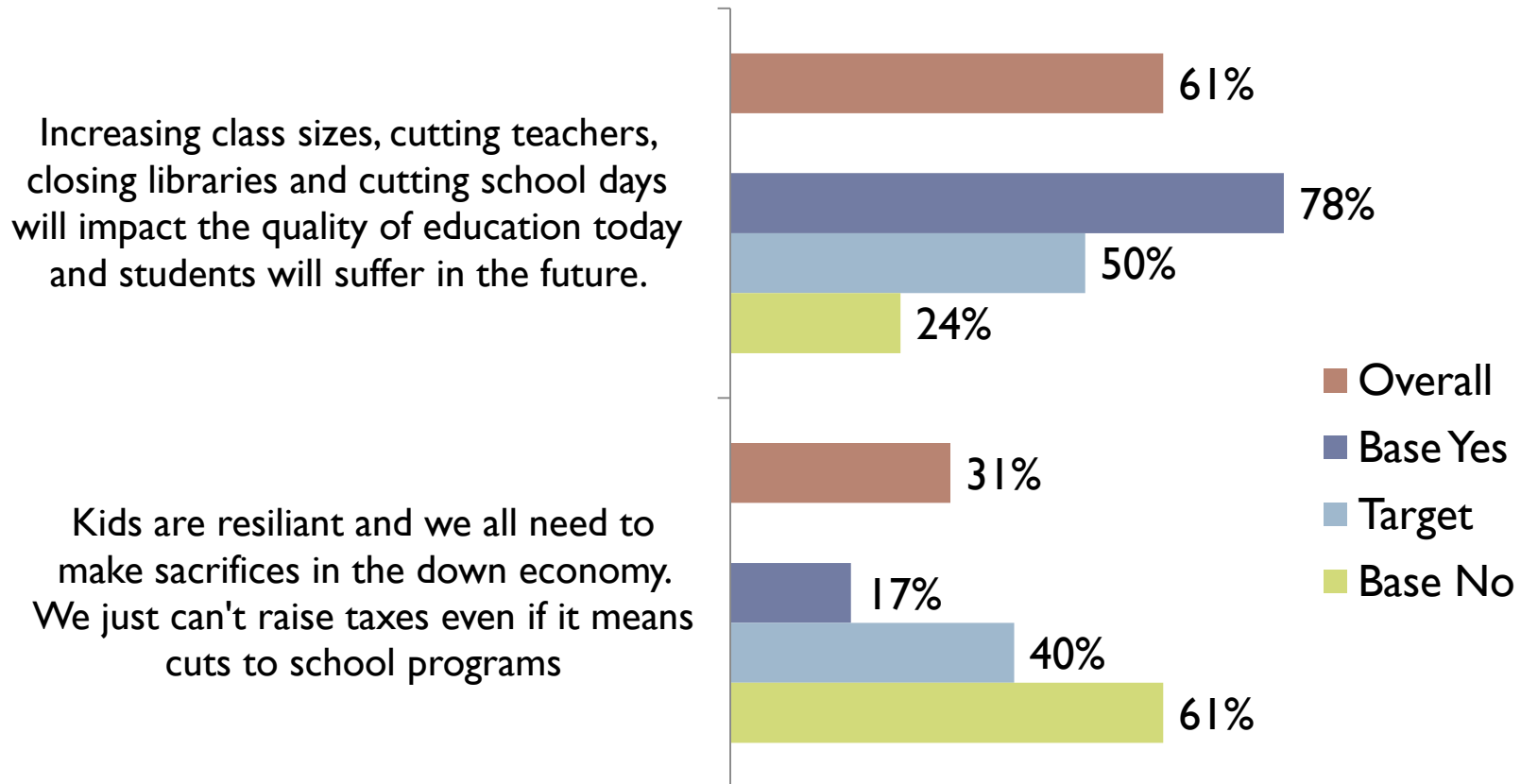
Which of the following is closer to your opinion? (Q15)



The Base No prefers cuts to raising taxes, the Base Yes is opposite. The Target is divided.

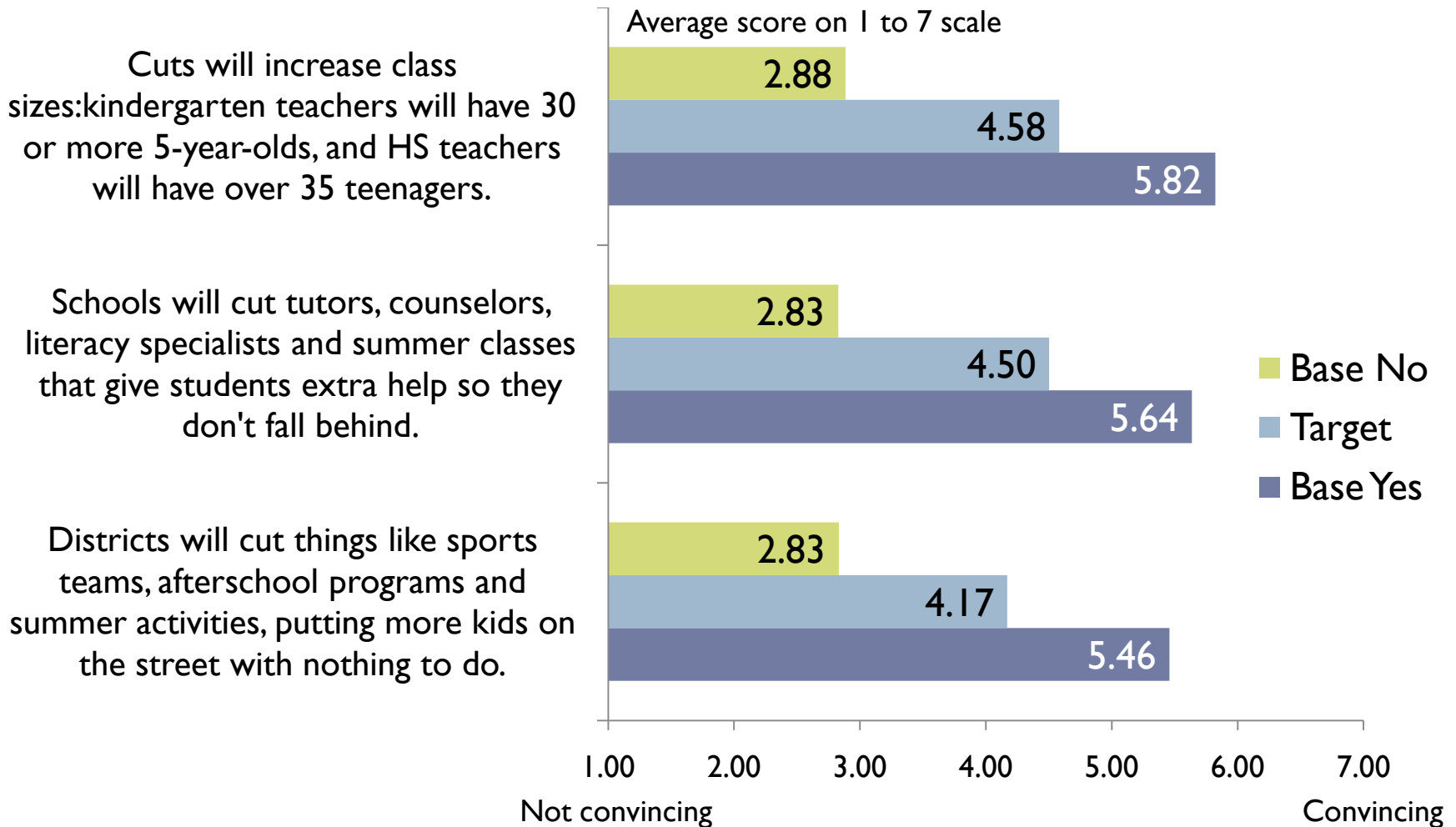
24

Which of the following is closer to your opinion? (Q19)



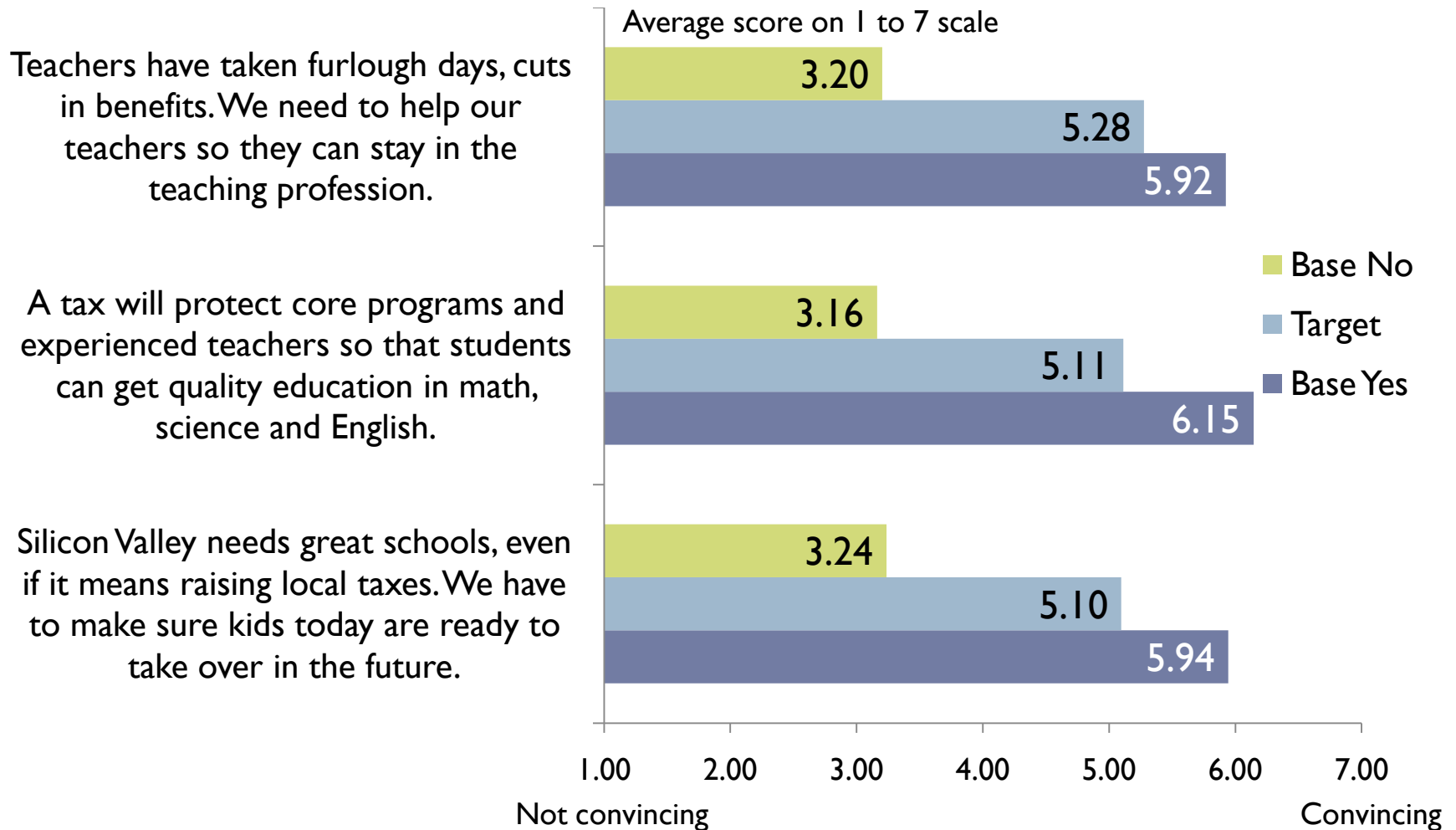
Threatening cuts is not convincing

25



Protecting core academics and quality education is more convincing, but there is still low intensity among The Target

26



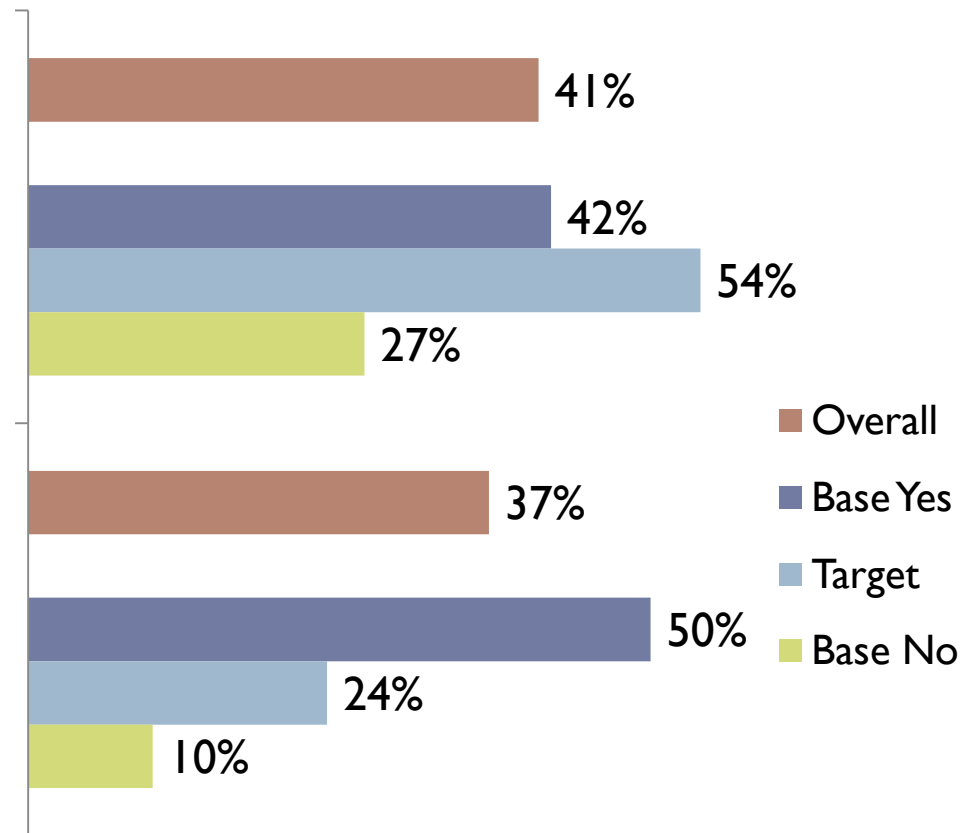
A shorter term tax may help many in the Target to feel comfortable

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Which of the following is closer to your opinion? (Q20)

I would support a short term school parcel tax that would last around 4 years so we can help schools get through the state budget mess.

I would support a long term school parcel tax so schools can make investments in programs and quality education that will last.



Target – The Difference Makers

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- ▶ 18% currently have children in public K-12 schools, 28% had children that went through the public system previously and 46% do not have children.
- ▶ 21% are Asian (7% Vietnamese), 11% Latino and 59% White
- ▶ 23% are Female Democrats, 22% Female Republicans and 17% Male Democrats



TO: Santa Clara County Education Coalition and California Teachers Association
FROM: Ruth Bernstein, EMC Research
Jared Boigon, Barry Barnes, Sarah Stern, TBWB Strategies
DATE: November 7, 2009
RE: Key Lessons From Voter Survey Regarding School Parcel Taxes

The following findings and recommendations are based on a telephone survey conducted in October 2009 of 900 randomly selected likely 2010 voters to explore attitudes regarding funding for local schools, and particularly opinions about parcel taxes. The survey targeted voters in Santa Clara County school districts where there is no parcel tax, or an existing parcel tax of \$150 or less.

The lessons we learned should be particularly helpful for any Santa Clara County district that is seeking a local funding measure in 2010, and generally helpful to any district that is communicating with its community during the current environment of state budget cuts.

The poll results and strategic conclusions may vary in each particular district. For more information, please contact Ruth Bernstein at EMC Research or Jared Boigon, Sarah Stern or Barry Barnes at TBWB Strategies.

Please note: this is a general summary of conclusions, based on a countywide snapshot. It should *NOT* replace or supplant any local district polling or strategic public outreach that is tailored to that particular district.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Our research shows that improving local schools is a top concern in the minds of voters. Even in the current economic crisis, voters feel improving schools is just as important as job creation. The majority of voters feel local schools need more money, even if it means tax increases, and a solid majority of voters support a parcel tax for their own district. However, in many areas of the County it appears that it will be difficult to reach the two-thirds supermajority of support required to pass a parcel tax.

In most cases, a small group of “tax-skeptical” voters will make the difference between winning and losing your parcel tax election. These skeptics include public school parents and Democrats, not just older conservatives. For these key voters, blaming the state is NOT persuasive. They want to know that the money they’ve invested with you in the past is helping, and that investing more money will result in positive outcomes for students.

DETAILED FINDINGS

Voters are concerned about improving schools, despite the economy.

We asked voters to rate the importance of several items on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 is “not at all important” and 7 is “extremely important.” Six in ten voters (60%) rated *improving the quality of education at local public schools* as “extremely important,” the same proportion that rated *creating local jobs* as “extremely important.” The majority of voters rated the following items either a 6 or a 7: *retaining jobs for experienced teachers* (63%), *increasing state funding for local public schools* (59%), and *increasing local funding for local public schools* (56%).

The vast majority of voters in the area support increased local funding for schools, and would likely support a tax – but reaching two-thirds is not universally easy.

When asked how they will vote on a potential parcel tax for their local school district, without hearing specific ballot language, 65 percent of voters say they will vote yes. One third (32%) say they will “definitely” vote yes, 33 percent say they will “probably” vote yes, 12 percent will “probably” vote no, 19 percent will “definitely” vote no, and only 4 percent are undecided. Even after hearing additional information about educational improvements and programs that might be funded, support barely inches over the supermajority mark with 68% indicating they would vote Yes at the end of the survey.

Voters are aware that public education is in need of money, but they also want improved money management: they do not believe that money alone is the problem.

While 71% of voters feel that public schools in their district need more money, only 36% say that there is a great need and only 40% feel that increasing local funding for public schools is extremely important. Meanwhile, voters are likely to be unaware of specifics about cuts and funding today: only one-quarter of voters think the quality of education today is worse than it was a few years ago, and half of all voters don’t know if there’s an existing parcel tax in their District. Even if voters do support more funding, they want to be sure it’s being used well. The vast majority of voters rate “improving your local school district’s management of education funding” as important (44% extremely important plus 33% somewhat important). When forced to choose between two ideas, 55% of voters agree that “better use of existing funds in schools would lead to better educated students”, while only 34% agree that “additional funding for schools would lead to better educated students.”

There is significant anti-tax sentiment, but low tax amounts are well-received.

The survey results show that a significant minority of voters are firmly opposed to tax increases. When asked to rate the importance of *avoiding any tax increases*, 36 percent say it is “extremely important.” Later in the survey, 40 percent agreed with the statement *taxes are high enough; I’ll vote against any increase in taxes*. (Of course, elsewhere in the survey, some of these voters do indicate that they would vote for a generic parcel tax for their local schools.) Support for a potential parcel tax varies widely by the dollar amount of the tax. While 65 percent of voters say they will vote yes on a proposed tax with no dollar amount specified, only 53 percent support a \$200 tax, 67 percent support a \$100 tax, and 75% support a \$50 tax.

Core academics and keeping experienced teachers are top priorities for funds.

The survey asked voters to rate the importance of various potential uses of parcel tax funds. Target voters, as well as voters in general, see core academics like English, math and science as by far the most important potential purposes for a funding measure (88% rate as very important). “Keeping experienced and qualified teachers” was rated next most important (70%), and also far outranks other priorities tested. Computers and technology (62%), school libraries/librarians (57%), classroom materials (55%) and small class sizes (54%) remain important to voters (as past polling for various local districts has indicated).

Messages about protecting programs and improving education are recommended over threatening cuts.

Using a “split sample” methodology, the survey tested two sets of very similar arguments in favor of parcel tax measures. One set of messages focused on potential cuts (for example, messages about teacher layoffs, cuts to arts and music programs, increasing K-3 class sizes) while a parallel set talked about protecting and improving education (e.g. retaining qualified teachers, preserving arts and music, protecting small classes in grades K-3). Among both target voters and voters overall, positive messages that focus on using parcel tax funds to protect and improve education were more effective than threatened cuts. Support for a potential parcel tax also increased by a larger margin among voters who heard the positive messages than among voters who heard about threatened cuts.

Blaming the State is not persuasive: voters don’t believe it’s the root problem.

Voters are tired of hearing state fiscal management and state cuts blamed for problems in local schools. They know the state is in miserable shape and that the state budget is very poorly managed, but they also believe that the state budget “is not the real problem.” Only 38% agree that “the recent state budget problems have significantly impacted the quality of education our local schools” vs. half (49%) that agree that there have been problems for years, and “the current state budget cuts are not the real problem.”

A small group of voters will determine the outcome of parcel tax elections.

Reaching two-thirds approval for a parcel tax measure will require districts to focus on those voters who do not automatically support or oppose any school tax. This group of “difference makers,” less than 20 percent of the electorate, is interested in supporting local schools but also conservative, tax-averse, and mistrustful of the management of taxpayer money. A surprising number of these target voters are Democrats and even parents in local public schools. Parents of public school students are actually *more* concerned than non-parents about the quality of financial management in their local schools (50% extremely concerned, compared with 39% of non-parents). More parents believe “State budget cuts aren’t the real problem (49%) than believe “State budget cuts have impacted local schools.” (38%) In many cases, parents aren’t automatic “Yes” votes for a generic local school funding measure. The same holds true for Democrats – an important “base” constituency for school measures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Work towards rebuilding trust in the public school system and voter confidence in the quality of education provided by local schools.
- Do not use “The State” as a scapegoat for problems.
- Do not try to build support for schools by lamenting the bad budget situation.
- Do not try to build support for schools by threatening cuts.
- Communicate with District residents, voters, businesses and parents about the benefit of good quality local public schools by highlighting successes, especially in core academic areas like English, math and science. Brag about rising test scores.
- It’s OK to say that funding is needed, but purely saying that the purpose is to “fill a gap” or “avoid cuts” should be avoided. It’s more effective to explain that funding is needed to support good teachers and quality education.
- Communicate about fiscal responsibility and money management successes. Instead of bemoaning the shortfall, take credit for what you’ve been able to do with less.
- Remember that in a down economy your community members are belt-tightening. They probably think you should too.
- Remember that donors (and taxpayers) want to feel that their money is being put to good use. Their goal is not more revenue or a balanced budget. Their goal is quality education for the children in the community.
- Remember that quality teachers are important to the community. They should be an important part of the communications process.
- Remember that many of your students’ families are *also* experiencing hard times – and don’t take their support for granted. They need to hear the same basic messages as your conservative, non-parent voters.
- Remember that messaging for all funding support is similar – whether it’s a parcel tax, parent fundraising or business donations – the lessons are the same.
- Do not be afraid to consider a parcel tax, even in this down economy. With the right messaging, the right coalition, and the right tax amount, many districts can be successful.

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