



Executive Summary
Sonoma County Voter Research Regarding
Fire Protection Revenue Measure
October 2019

Research Process

Quantitative Survey of Likely March 2020 Voters

Goals: Evaluate feasibility of a fire protection revenue measure at the ¼ cent or ½ cent level

*Hybrid web/telephone survey
627 interviews
MoE ±3.9 percentage points
July 9 - 14, 2019*

Qualitative Focus Groups among Likely Voters

Goals: Hear opinions regarding fire protection

*2 groups
August 21, 2019*

Quantitative Survey of Likely March 2020 Voters

Goals: Test support for a revised ½ cent fire protection revenue measure

*Hybrid web/telephone survey
644 interviews
MoE ±3.9 percentage points
September 25 – 29, 2019*

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

Key Findings

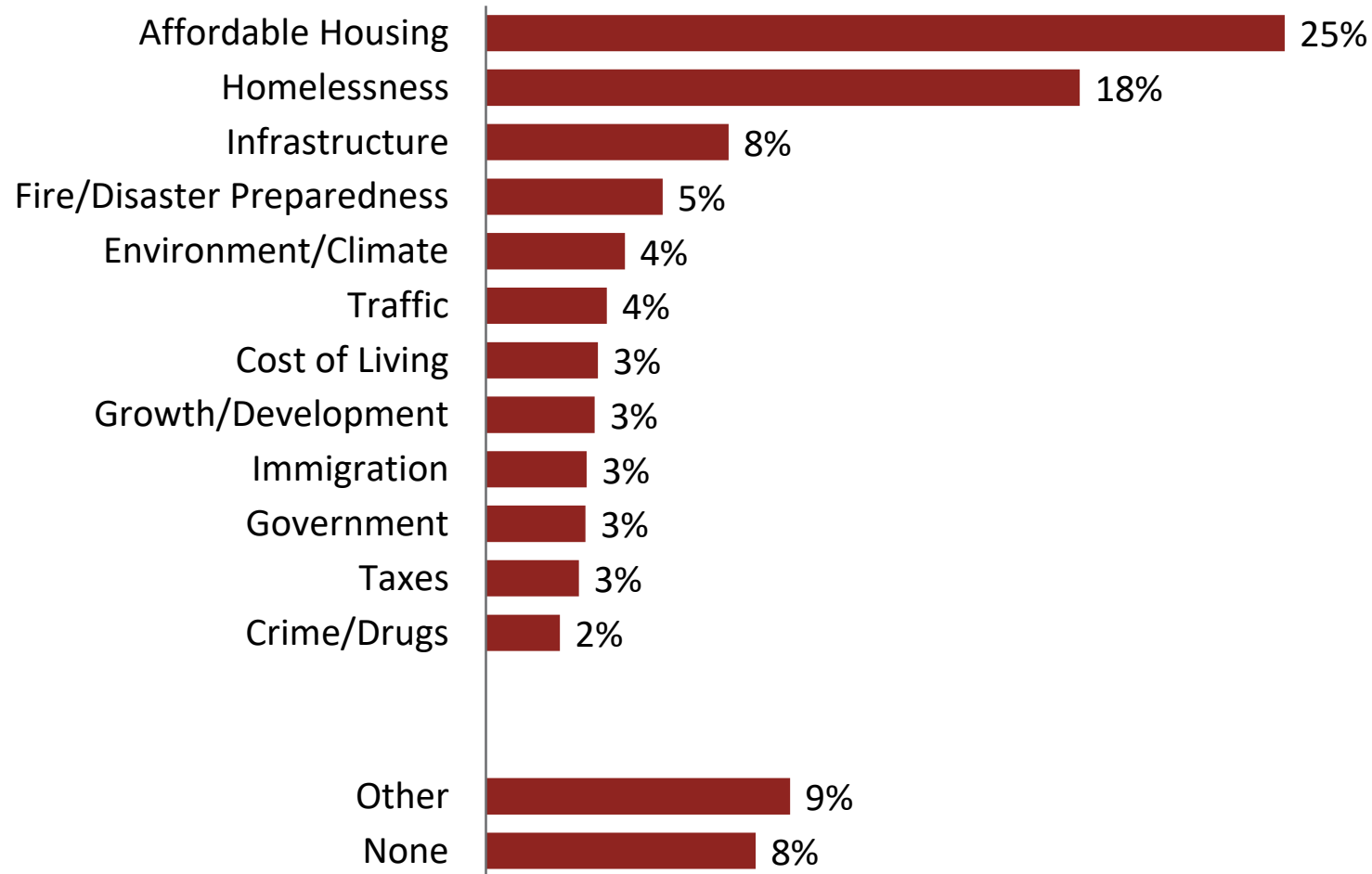
- ▶ Although top of mind voter concern today is primarily focused on housing and homelessness, fire protection is seen as a very high priority for most voters.
- ▶ The 2017 wildfires are still a very recent memory and voters are concerned that it could easily happen again.
- ▶ Sonoma County voters think local firefighters are doing a good job and are supportive of making sure they have the resources they need.
- ▶ There is significant interest in improved emergency systems. Support for a sales tax measure hovers right at the two-thirds threshold and may be viable in the right environment.



Issue Environment

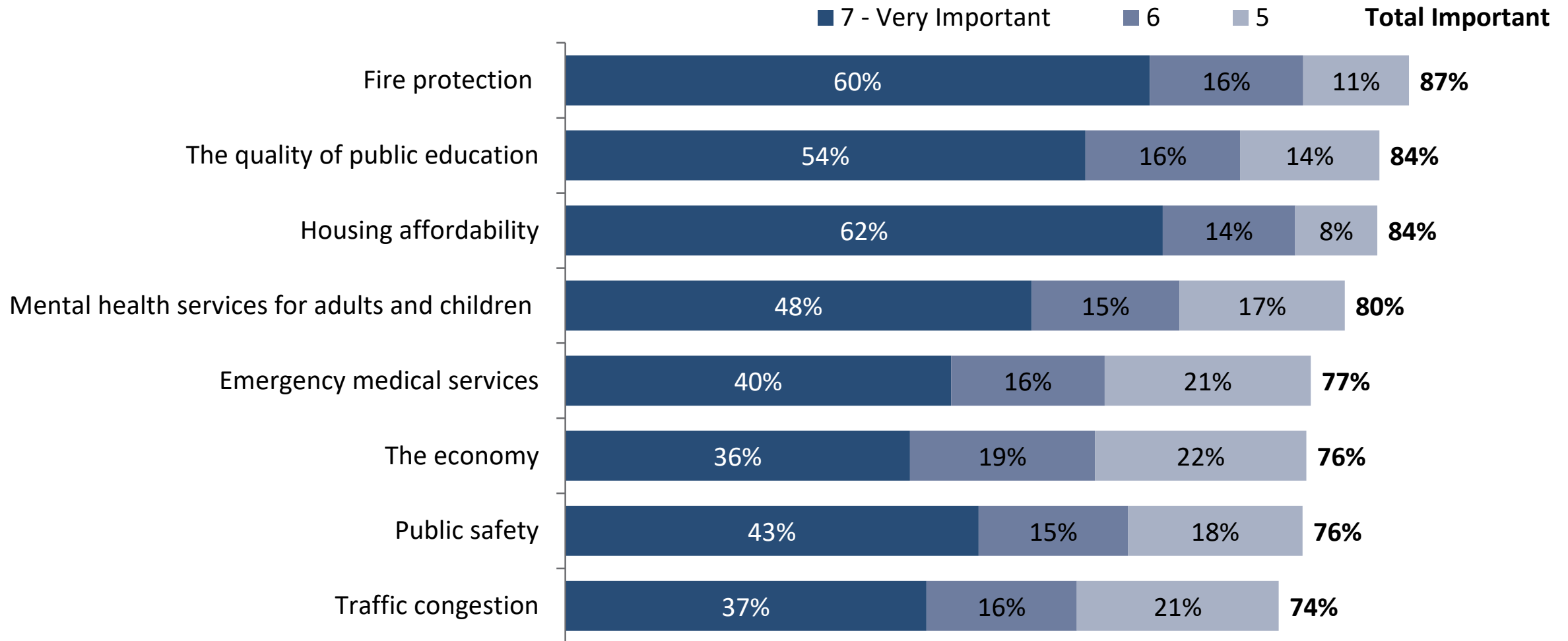
Most Important Problem – Open End

Affordable housing and homelessness are the most frequently mentioned top of concerns.



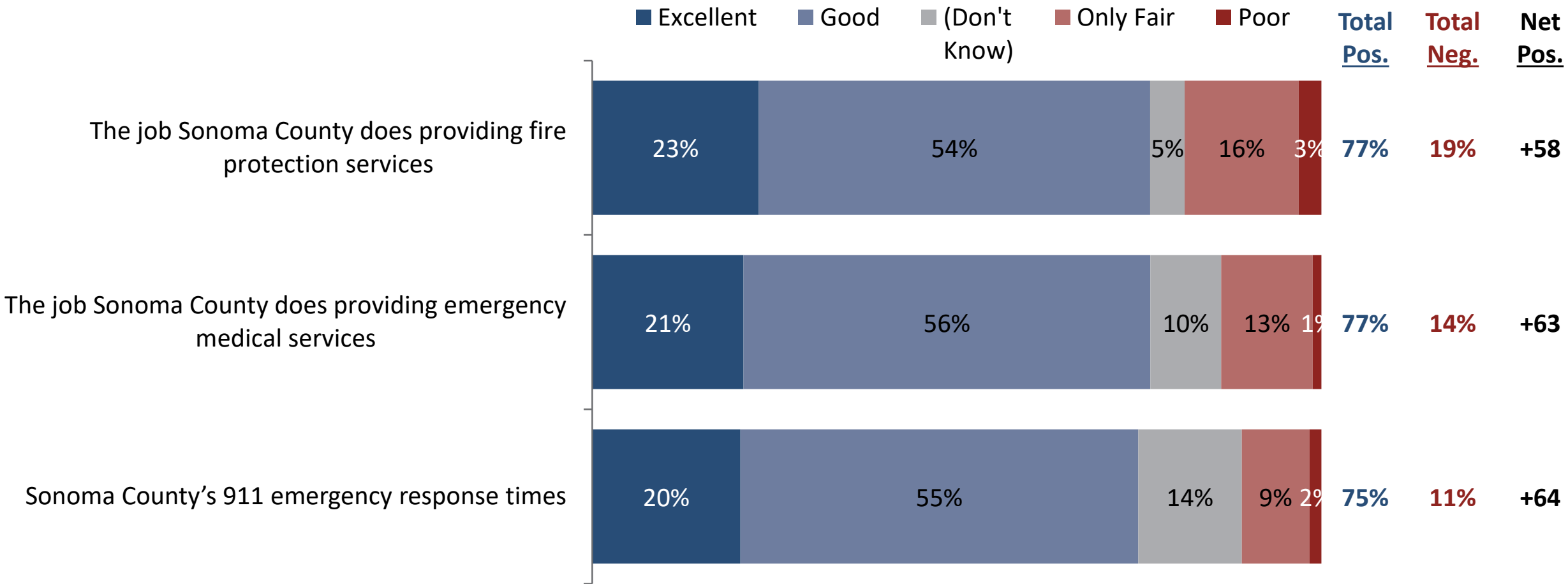
Issue Importance – Close Ended

Fire protection, education, housing, and mental health all rise to the top.



Emergency Service Job Ratings

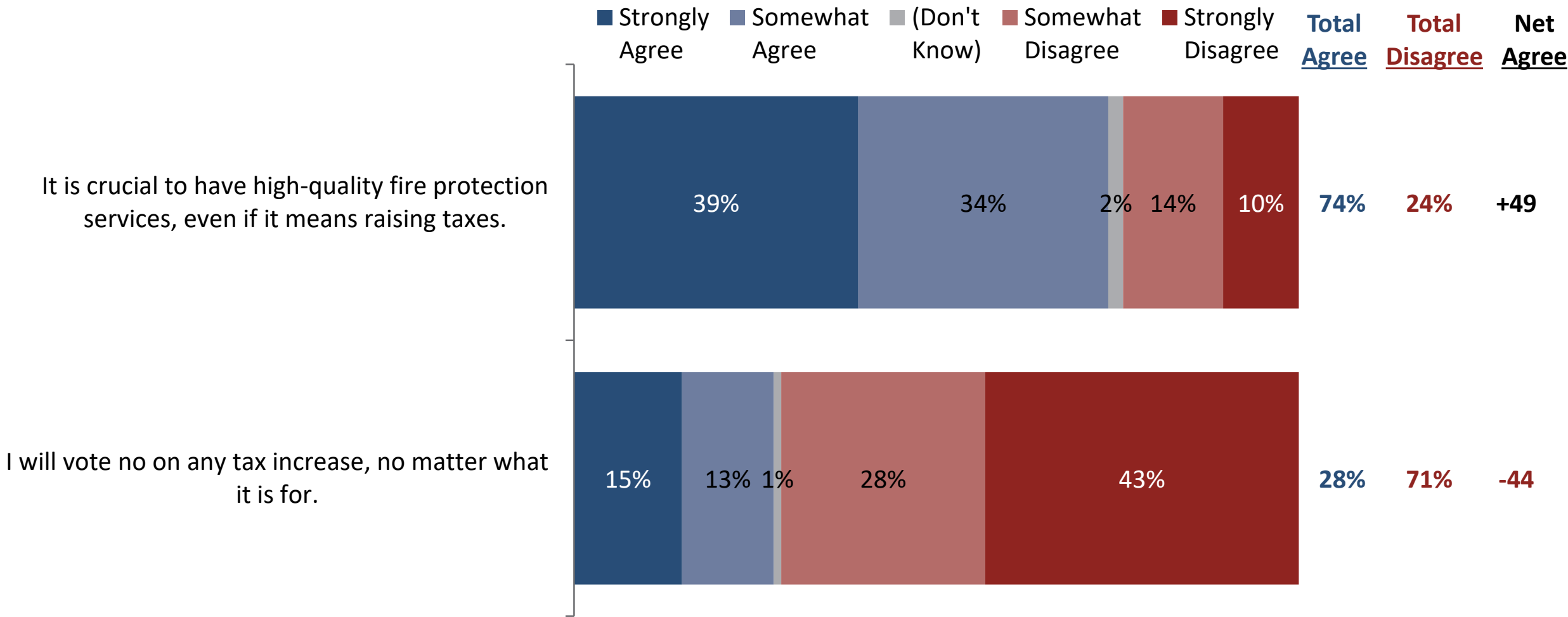
Voters give overall positive ratings to local fire protection, EMS, and 911 services.



July 2019 Survey: Using a scale of excellent, good, only fair, or poor, please rate each of the following for Sonoma County.

Tax Attitudes

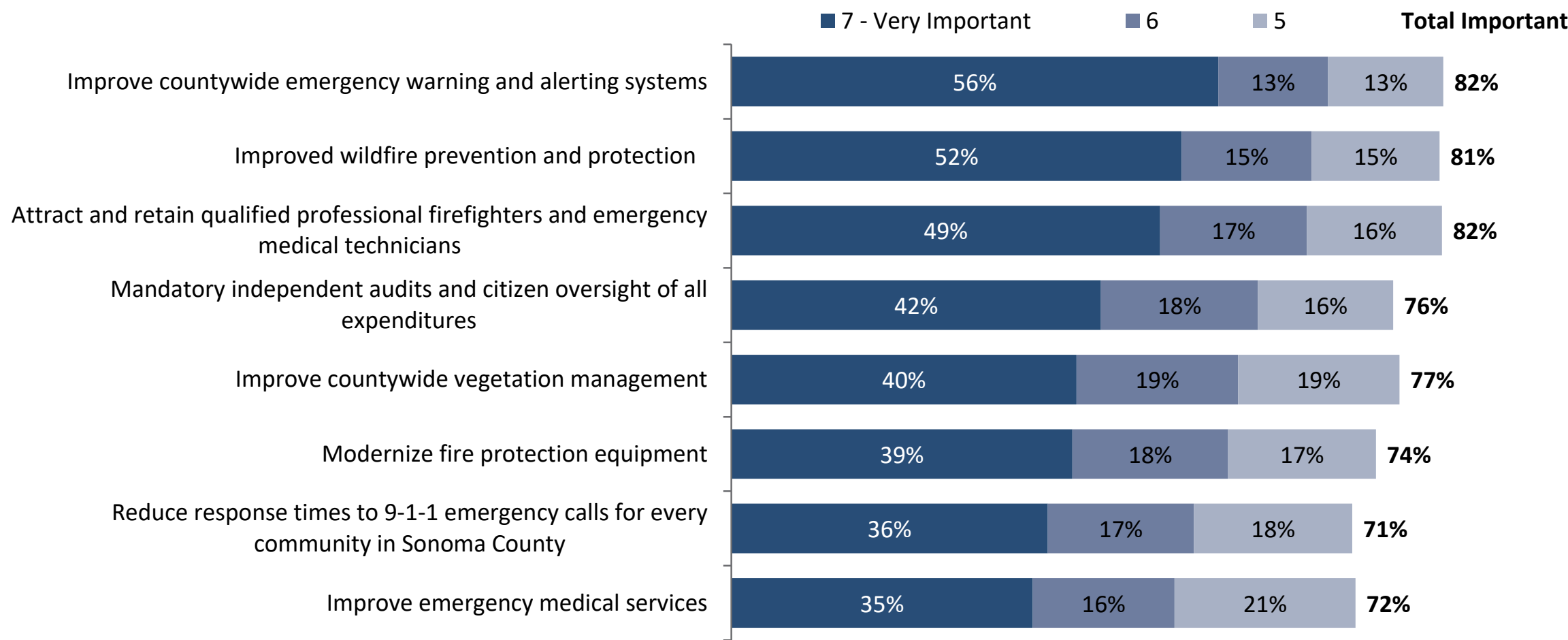
Few voters consider themselves to be strongly anti-tax, and the vast majority are conceptually supportive of new taxes for fire protection.



July 2019 Survey: Please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements.

Potential Elements

There is a strong intensity of support for alert systems and wildfire prevention. Other elements are important to voters, but with less intensity.



July 2019 Survey: I’m going to read you a list of components that could be included in the proposed measure. On a scale from one to seven, where one is not at all important and seven is extremely important, please tell me how important each of the following components are to you.

Focus Group Findings

- ▶ The 2017 fires were at the forefront of voters' minds and any discussion of fire protection circles back to the fires.
- ▶ Participants generally had a positive assessment of the job fire protection services did during the 2017 fires.
- ▶ Participants were generally satisfied with the day-to-day service of their local fire departments.
- ▶ Many felt there was an ongoing risk for another severe fire and were interested in ways to mitigate that risk.
- ▶ There was significant concern about the inadequate warning systems in 2017 and want something in place for the future.

"Everybody's on their toes after what happened two years ago." – Group 1 Man

"We're at this point right now where the pain is so still raw and on a lot of people's nerves, and a lot of people really want this because they're really terrified." – Group 2 Man

"Some things I know, like from the big fires, the response was there, but it was too much for them to be able to do anything about." – Group 2 Woman

"They're doing a good job." – Group 2 Man

"I live right by Coffey Park and I had no idea that the fire was behind me and to the left of me." – Group 1 Woman

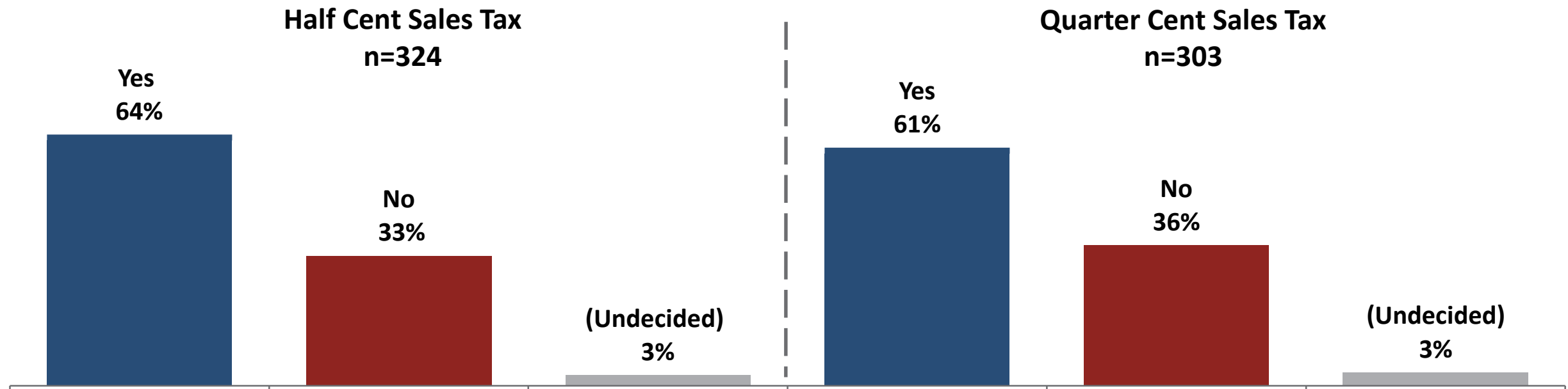


Potential Fire Protection Revenue Measure

First Poll – Uninformed Vote

The first poll saw no statistical difference between the tax amounts, but both were below the two-thirds threshold.

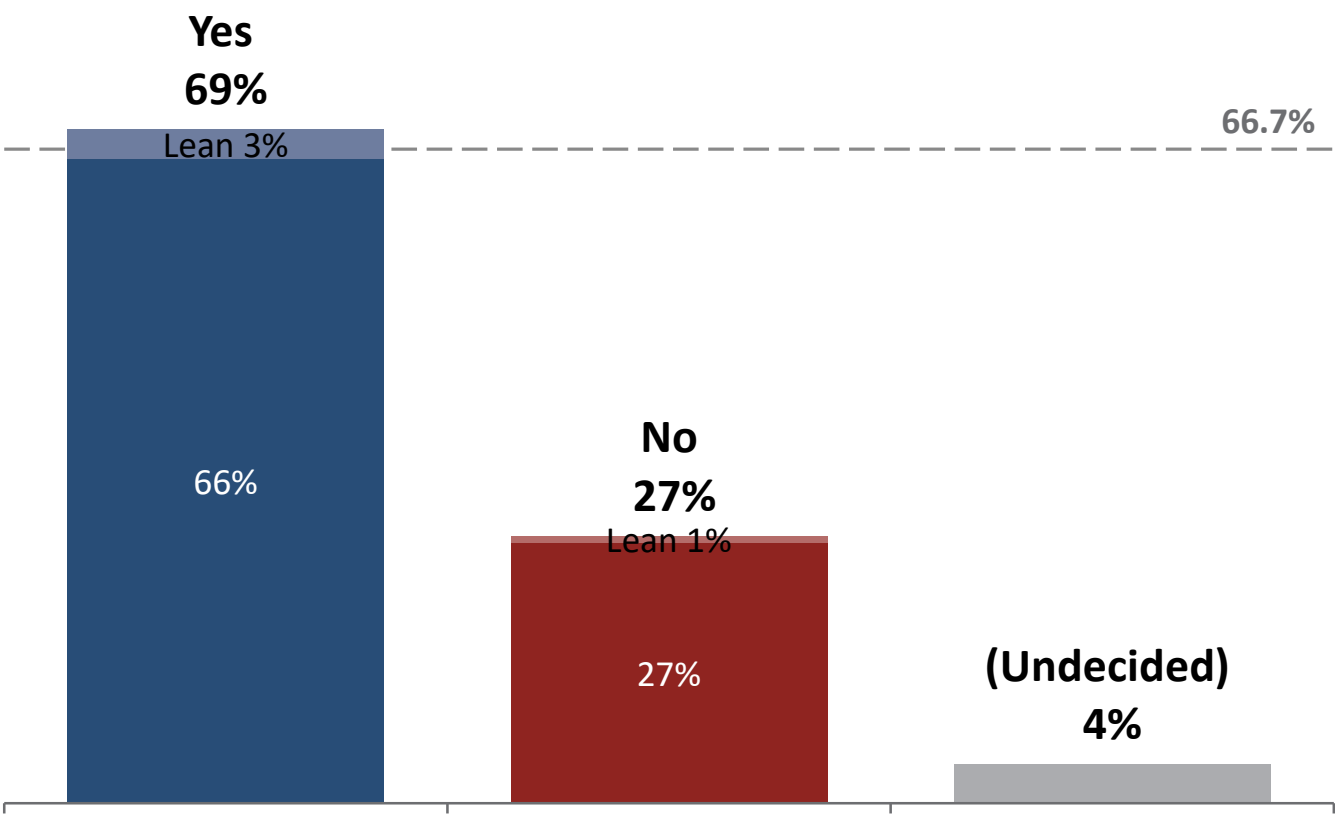
*To improve emergency medical services, provide improved wildfire prevention and protection, reduce response times for 911 emergency calls, and modernize fire protection equipment, shall the County of Sonoma establish a **[Sample A: half/Sample B: quarter]** cent sales tax countywide for a 25 year period, providing approximately **[Sample A: \$45/Sample B: \$23]** million annually, with citizens' oversight and annual audits?*



Second Poll – Uninformed Voted

The second poll tested a revised measure. Support exceeds two-thirds when including those that are initially undecided, but lean toward yes.

To improve local fire prevention and protection by: installing emergency warning sirens and alerting systems; improving vegetation management to prevent the spread of wildfire; attracting and retaining qualified, local firefighters and emergency personnel; and, modernizing fire department equipment, facilities and stations, shall the County of Sonoma establish a half cent sales tax until ended by voters, providing approximately \$45 million annually, with annual audits and citizen oversight?



Fire Protection Measure Language Comparison

Providing additional information about outcomes into the ballot question does result in a slight increase in support.

Original Language Tested **64% Total Yes; +31 Net Yes**

To:

- *improve emergency medical services*
- *provide improved wildfire prevention and protection*
- *reduce response times for 911 emergency calls,*
- *and modernize fire protection equipment*

shall the County of Sonoma establish a half cent sales tax countywide for a 25 year period, providing approximately \$45 million annually, with citizens' oversight and annual audits?

Revised Language Tested **69% Total Yes; +42 Net Yes**

To improve local fire prevention and protection by:

- *installing emergency warning sirens and alerting systems;*
- *improving vegetation management to prevent the spread of wildfire;*
- *attracting and retaining qualified, local firefighters and emergency personnel;*
- *and, modernizing fire department equipment, facilities and stations*

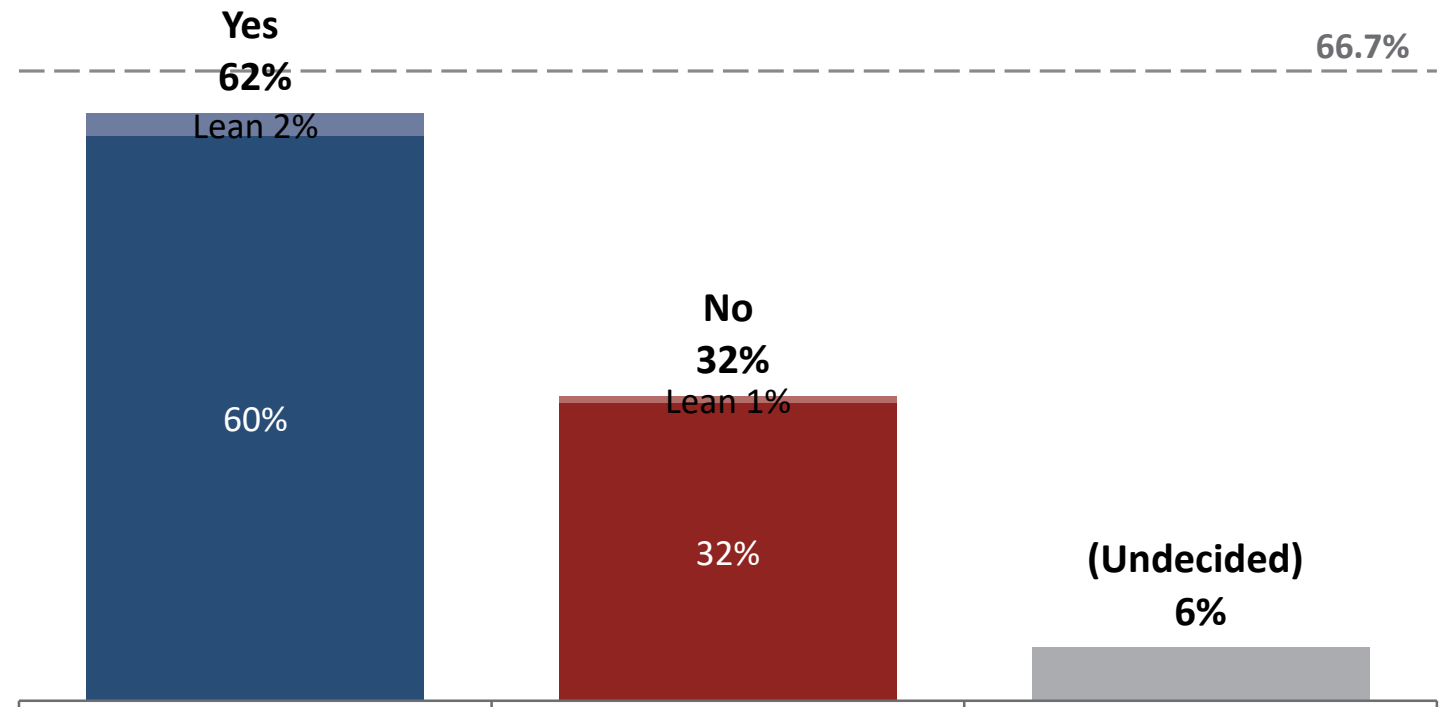
shall the County of Sonoma establish a half cent sales tax until ended by voters, providing approximately \$45 million annually, with annual audits and citizen oversight?

- ▶ Funding wildfire prevention efforts making the community safer and reducing the likelihood of future wildfires
- ▶ Installing emergency warning sirens and alerting systems
- ▶ Improving vegetation management and fuel reduction efforts
- ▶ Fiscal accountability provisions, including citizen's oversight and independent audits, ensuring money is spent properly

Impact of Potential Opposition

An opposition statement resonates with voters and drives total support below the two-thirds threshold.

Some people say we just don't need this. This measure is a significant increase to our taxes and, it has no end date and would continue forever. Fire Departments in the County already get local funding from parcel taxes or sales taxes, we don't need this new additional tax.



- ▶ Fire protection is an important issue for voters with the 2017 wildfires still being a very recent memory.
- ▶ Wildfire prevention and improving warning systems are especially important to local voters given recent experiences.
- ▶ Support for a measure hovers right around the two-thirds threshold. Strong local support with a privately funded campaign effort, and no organized opposition will be required for measure approval.



Ruth Bernstein

ruth@emcresearch.com

510.550.8922

James McClain

james@emcresearch.com

614.827.9672