



Voter Support for the MO Empowerment Scholarship Accounts Program

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KEY POINTS

The Missouri Empowerment Scholarship Accounts program offers tax-credit scholarships which may be applied to private school tuition and other educational expenses. Scholarship recipients must live in an eligible county or city and meet other requirements, and priority will be given to students with disabilities and low-income students. We polled a representative sample of Missouri voters about support for the program and found:

- Fifty-three percent of all respondents supported the program, while 19% opposed the program and 27% were not sure.
- Support was highest among nonwhite voters, conservatives, those who currently or previously enrolled their children in private school, and those who identify as religious.
- A majority of voters (55%) opposed a current regulation which limits program eligibility to those who live in the state’s most populous areas.
- Forty-one percent of voters indicated that no group of students, such as students with disabilities or low-income students, should have priority access to scholarships.
- Seven out of 10 voters expressed support for a hypothetical regulation requiring participating private schools to administer the state’s standardized tests.

Introduction

The Missouri Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESA) program (HB 349) was signed into law in July 2021.¹ Through the program, K-12 students can apply scholarships of up to \$6,375 toward private school tuition or other educational expenses, while individuals and corporations that donate to scholarship-granting organizations will receive state tax credits.² While much remains to be determined about the program’s rules and regulations, one of the main legislative compromises for the bill’s passage was a geographic eligibility provision. Students must live in one of the state’s four charter counties or in a city with a population of 30,000 or more to be eligible to receive a scholarship. Scholarship recipients must have also attended public school for one semester in the previous year or be starting kindergarten or first grade. After meeting these eligibility standards, preference will be given to students with disabilities and students from low-income families before scholarships will be offered to students from moderate-income families.

In July 2021 we administered a poll to a representative sample of 950 Missouri registered voters.³ We asked respondents about their support for the ESA

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Better evidence, better policies, better schools

program and hypothetical regulatory mechanisms the state could impose. In this policy brief we present evidence outlining differences in voter opinion by demographic factors such as voter race and political affiliation. We found that Republicans and conservatives were more likely to support the program than were Democrats and liberals, though over half (53%) of all respondents indicated support. We also examined differences in support related to perceptions of local public school quality, access to private schools, and whether respondents lived in program-eligible areas. We found broad opposition to the provision which limits participation to the most populous portions of the state. We also found high levels of support for a hypothetical regulation requiring participating private schools to administer the state's standardized tests.

Voter Support by Demographic Characteristics

Overall, slightly more than half (53%) of all respondents statewide indicated that they strongly support or support the ESA program (Figure 1).⁴ Nonwhite voters showed stronger support for the program than did white voters, and voters with a bachelor's degree or above indicated more opposition to the program than did voters with lower levels of education.

While over one half of respondents supported the program, only one fifth (19%) indicated opposition, and the remaining 27% were not sure. Underlying this top-line backing, however, we see clear differences in support between different demographic groups. Seven out of 10 nonwhite voters supported the program, compared with 5 out of 10 white voters. Only six percent of nonwhite voters but 22% of white voters indicated opposition. When considering voter opinions by education level, the percent of each group indicating support was

similar for those with a high school diploma or GED, some college experience, or a bachelor's degree or above. However, voters with a bachelor's degree or above were much more likely (28%) to indicate opposition to the program (particularly strong opposition) than were those with less education (13% of those with a high school diploma or GED and 15% of those with some college experience indicated opposition).

Support for the program was similar by income level, but higher-income voters showed stronger opposition to the program (Figure 1).

Family income is one of the main eligibility requirements for receiving a scholarship. We found that those with a reported income of less than \$50,000 were three percentage points more likely to support the program than were those with higher incomes (56% v. 53%) and nine percentage points less likely to oppose it (15% v. 24%). The \$50,000 income level is important because it represents the approximate threshold for a family of four to be granted priority in receiving a scholarship through the program (100% eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunch).

Homeowners were six percentage points more likely to support the program than were those who did not own their home (53% v. 47%) (Figure 1). Twenty-three percent of homeowners indicated opposition. Homeowners in eligible areas of the state who also rated their local schools highly were slightly less likely to support the program (49%) and slightly more likely to oppose it (27%) than were homeowners overall.

Prior research suggests homeowners in "high-quality" public school districts (typically measured through perception of quality or through metrics such as test scores) are less likely to support private school choice programs.⁵ Home values are often tied to school district quality, and so homeowners in high-quality districts may oppose a private school choice program

Figure 1: Voter Support for the MO ESA Program, by Demographics (Part 1)

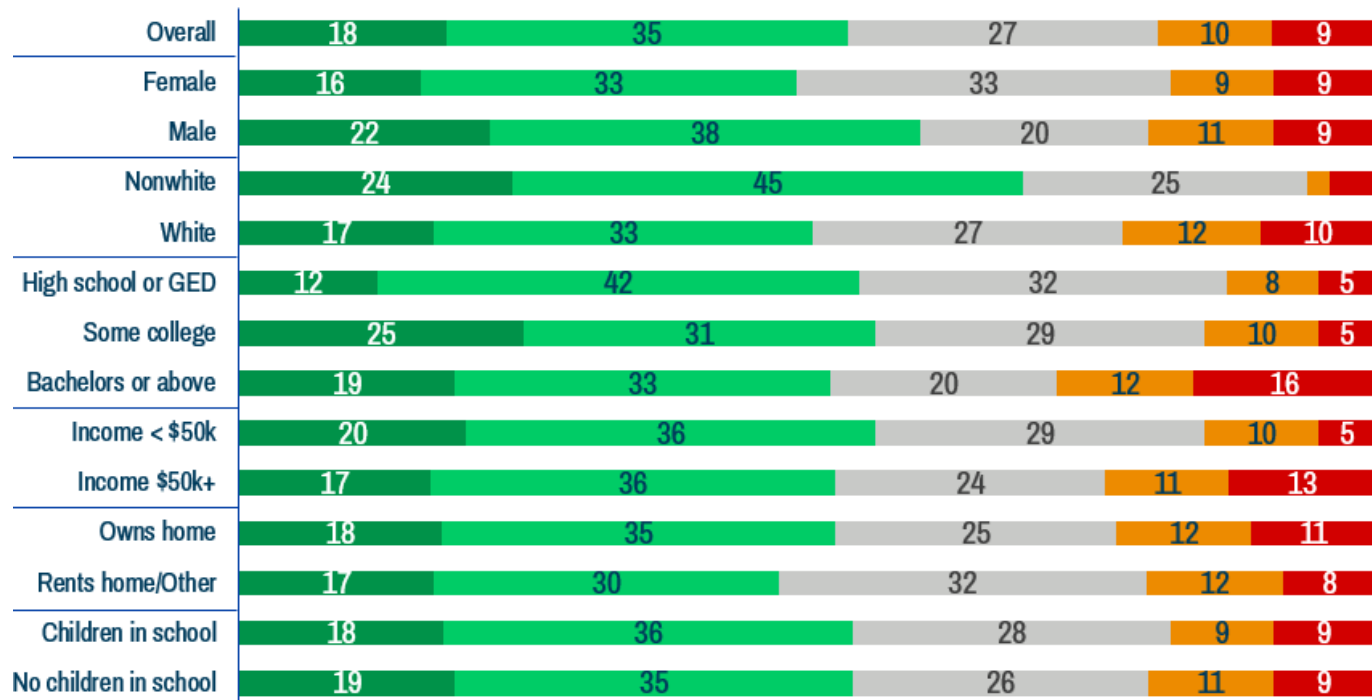
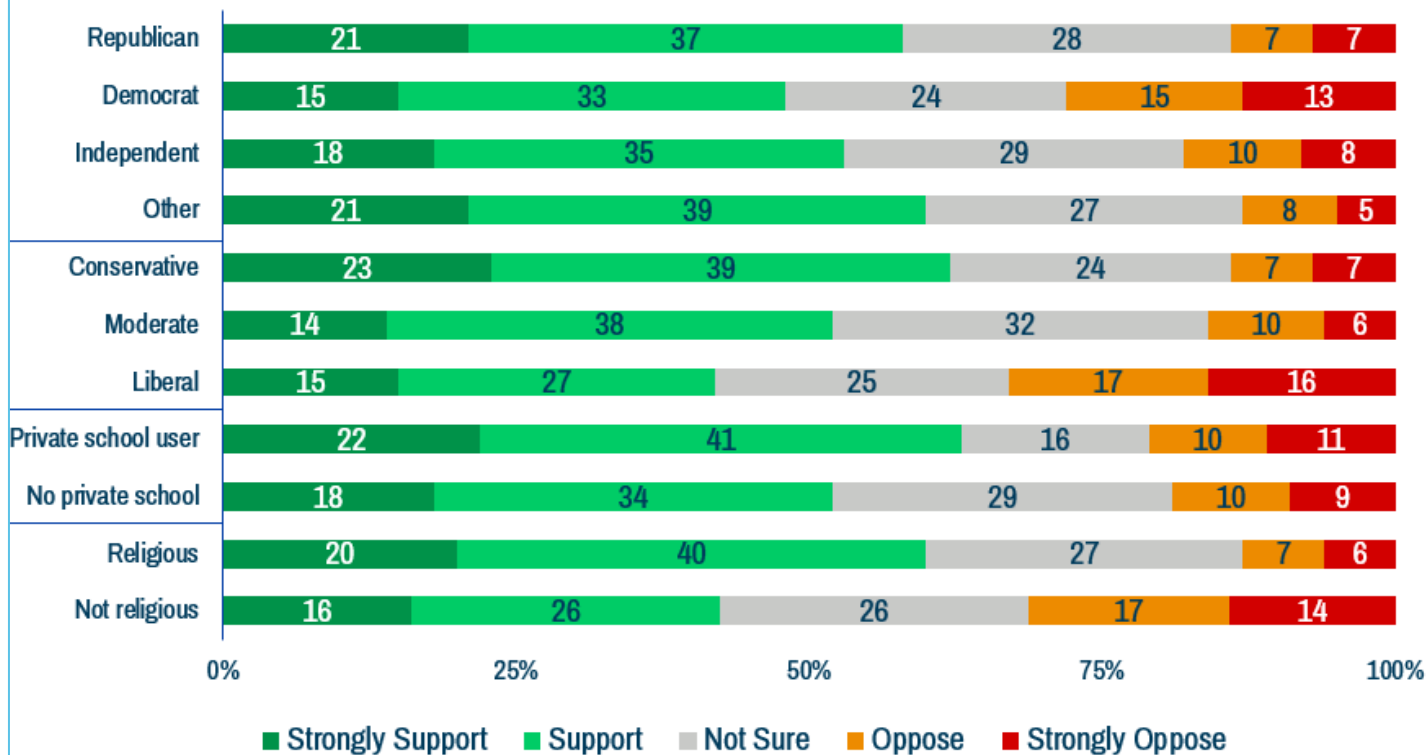


Figure 2: Voter Support for the MO ESA Program, by Demographics (Part 2)



if they think it would lessen demand for the local public school district and depress area home values. We find modest evidence in support of this theory.

We asked respondents whether they had school-aged children and found no meaningful difference in support for the program between voters with school-aged children and those without (Figure 1). However, only 18% of our respondents had children, and while our overall sample was representative of all voters statewide, the demographics of respondents with children may not be representative of the demographics of all adults with school-aged children in the state. We recognize that this limits our ability to draw strong conclusions about parent opinions; as a result, we will conduct a parent-specific poll in the near future to better assess their opinions.

Support among voters diverged along political lines. Fifty-eight percent of Republican voters indicated support, compared to 48% of Democrats (Figure 2).

HB 349 was passed by a Republican-majority legislature, with no Democratic legislators supporting the bill in its final votes in the House and Senate.⁶ Opposition to the bill among voters was twice as high among Democrats as Republicans (28% v. 14%). The differences were starker when considering political ideology. Those who identified as conservative were 20 percentage points more likely to support the program than were those who identified as liberal (62% v. 42%). Thirty-three percent of liberals opposed the program, compared with 14% of conservatives.

Unsurprisingly, those who send (or sent) their own children to private school were more likely to support the program than were those who have not used private school (63% v. 52%) (Figure 2).

Finally, 6 out of 10 voters who said religion is very or somewhat important to them supported the program, compared with 4 out of 10 voters who were not religious. This may be related to the fact that many

private schools are religiously affiliated.

Voter Support by School Context and Eligibility

Support by Public and Private School Context

We examined the relationship between voter opinions and their local public and private school context along dimensions of perceived quality and availability (Figure 3).

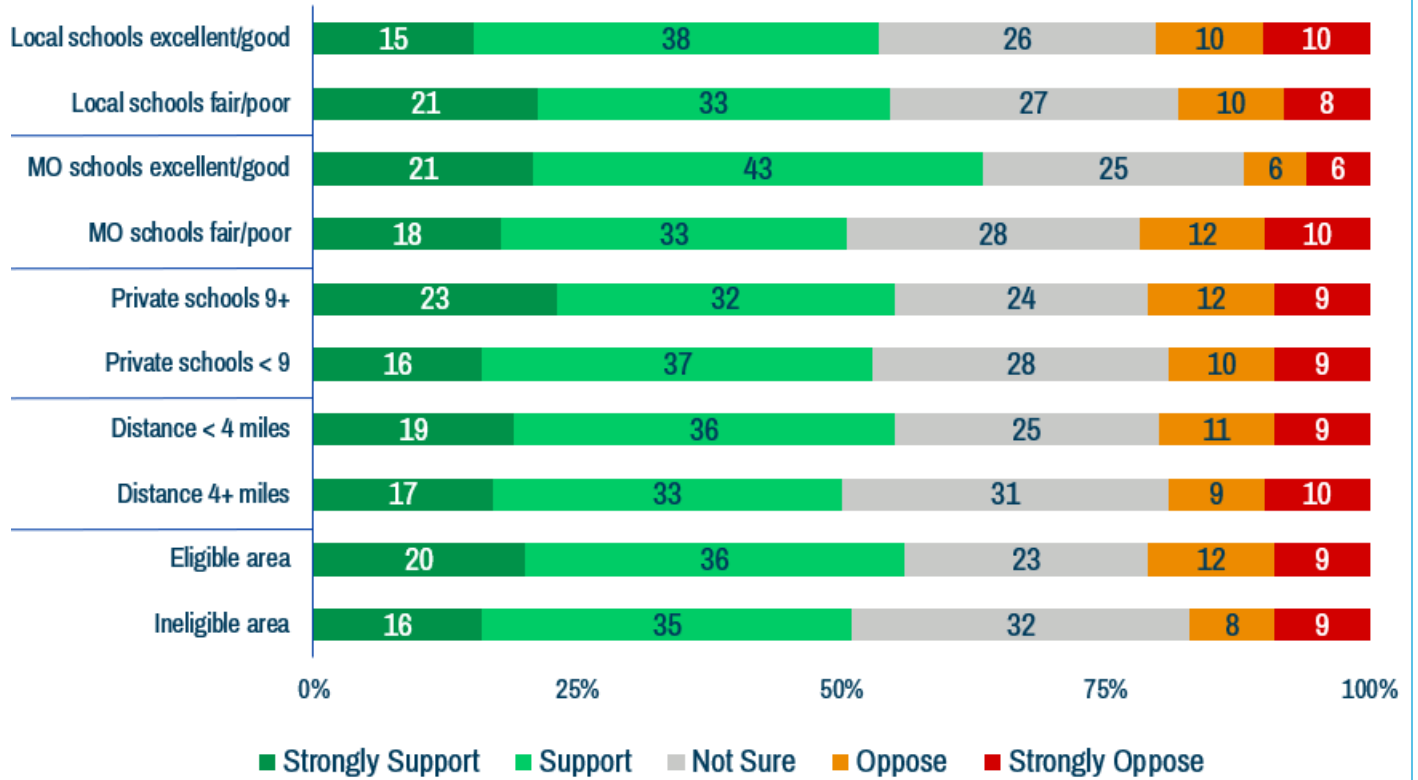
There was little difference in support between voters who said their local public schools were excellent or good and those who said their local public schools were fair or poor in quality (53% v. 54%).

We might expect to see meaningfully higher levels of support among voters who rate their local public schools to be low-quality, as those voters may support providing students in their community or their own children with access to an alternative educational option through a scholarship. This was not the case in our poll results. Interestingly, voters who considered Missouri public schools statewide to be excellent or good showed strong support for the program (64%) and little opposition (12%).

We also examined the “private school choice set” of each poll respondent in our data. Private schools are geographically unevenly distributed throughout the state, often concentrated in and around areas with larger populations (Figure 4). This lack of nearby existing private school options for a sizable portion of the Missouri voter population could be a potential explanation for support of or opposition to the ESA program.

To explore the relationship between the private school market and voter opinions, we examined the count of private schools within a 5-mile radius of the center of each respondent’s self-reported zip code. This was the best approximation for a respondent’s residence and allowed us to estimate the density of each

Figure 3: Voter Support for the MO ESA Program, by School Context and Program Eligibility



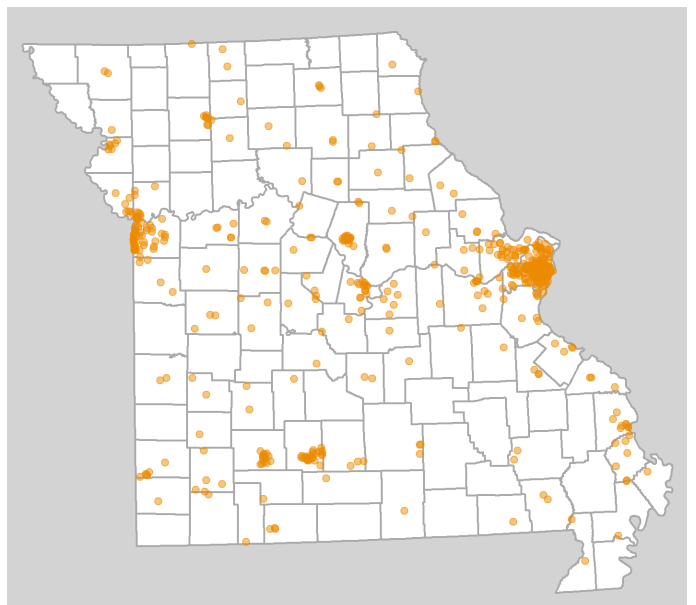
respondent’s private school market. The average number of private schools in a five-mile radius was nine, though the number ranged from zero to 59 for surveyed voters. We looked at differences in support for the program between those who had below average access to private schools (fewer than nine nearby) and those who had nine or more nearby private schools.

Voters in areas with greater private school density were more likely to indicate strong support for the program (23% v. 16%), though only slightly more likely to indicate overall support (55% v. 53%) as measured by combining those stating they “strongly support” or “support” the program (Figure 3).

In addition, we calculated the distance from the center of each respondent’s zip code to the nearest private school. The average distance was approximately four miles, with a range from 1/10 of a mile to 31 miles.

Those who lived less than four miles from a private school were five percentage points more likely to support the program than were those who would have to travel an above-average distance to the nearest private school (55% v. 50%).

Figure 4: Missouri Private School Locations



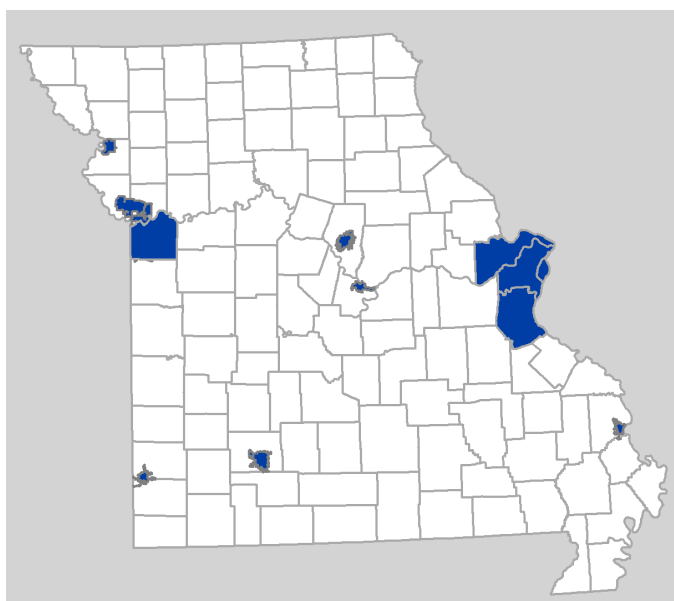
Though these private school availability findings give some indication of greater support for the program among voters who live in a more robust private school market, support was strong even among voters with little access to private schools. In fact, 50% of the 230 respondents who have zero private schools within a five-mile radius indicated support for the ESA program, and only 18% of these voters indicated opposition. It may be that these voters are aware the program can be used for other educational expenses besides private school tuition (e.g., private tutoring).

Support by Program Eligibility

We also examined support and opposition by whether voters lived in program-eligible areas of the state. The ESA program is limited to residents of Missouri's four charter counties—Jackson, Jefferson, St. Charles, and St. Louis—and cities with populations of 30,000 or more (Figure 5). There appear to be 10 population-eligible cities that are fully or partially outside of the four charter counties: Cape Girardeau, Columbia, Jefferson City, Joplin, Kansas City, Lee's Summit, Liberty, Springfield, St. Joseph, and St. Louis.⁷

Voters in eligible counties and cities were more likely

Figure 5: Missouri ESA Program Eligible Cities and Charter Counties



to hold an opinion on the program, as they were nine percentage points less likely to select “not sure”. Voters in eligible areas were five percentage points more likely to support the program (56% v. 51%) but also four percentage points more likely to oppose it (21% v. 17%) (Figure 3).

Voter Support for Existing and Hypothetical ESA Regulations

Eligible Counties and Cities

The key existing program regulation limits eligibility to residents of charter counties and cities with populations of 30,000 or more. This aspect of the program's design was essential in gaining legislative support to pass the bill.

A majority of voters (55%) opposed the geographic eligibility provision, while only 16% indicated support for this regulation (Figure 6).

Opposition was 13 percentage points higher among Republicans than among Democrats (59% v. 46%). Half of voters in eligible areas indicated opposition to the regulation, along with 64% of voters in ineligible areas. Voters in ineligible areas may have been expressing frustration that their communities were not given access to the program, while voters in eligible areas may have been expressing an altruistic desire to expand access to all areas of the state.

Priority Access

Among students from eligible areas of the state, scholarship priority will be given to two groups of students: students with disabilities (SWD) and students from households with an income at or below the maximum to be eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch (approximately \$50,000 for a family of four). Remaining scholarships will then be available to students from households with incomes up to 200% of the free and reduced-price lunch eligibility threshold. We asked Missouri voters if any students should be

Figure 6: Voter Support for Limiting ESA Program Eligibility to Charter Counties and Cities with Populations of 30,000 or More

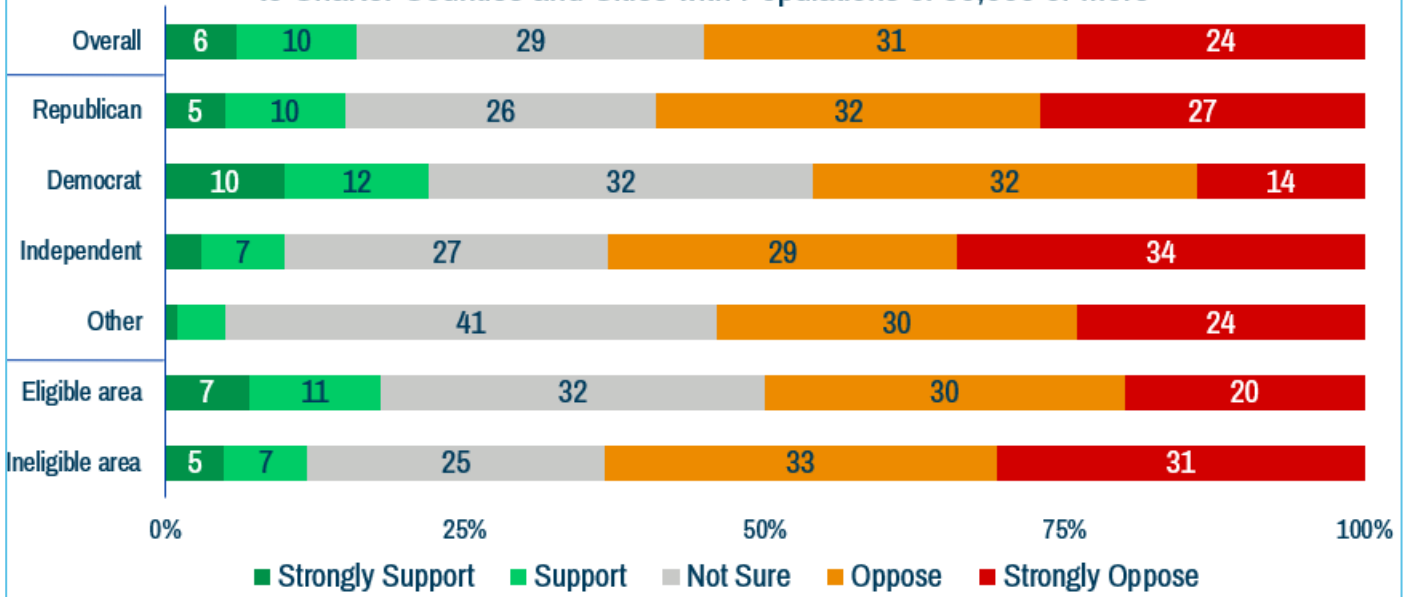


Figure 7: Voter Support for Giving Priority Access to Scholarships

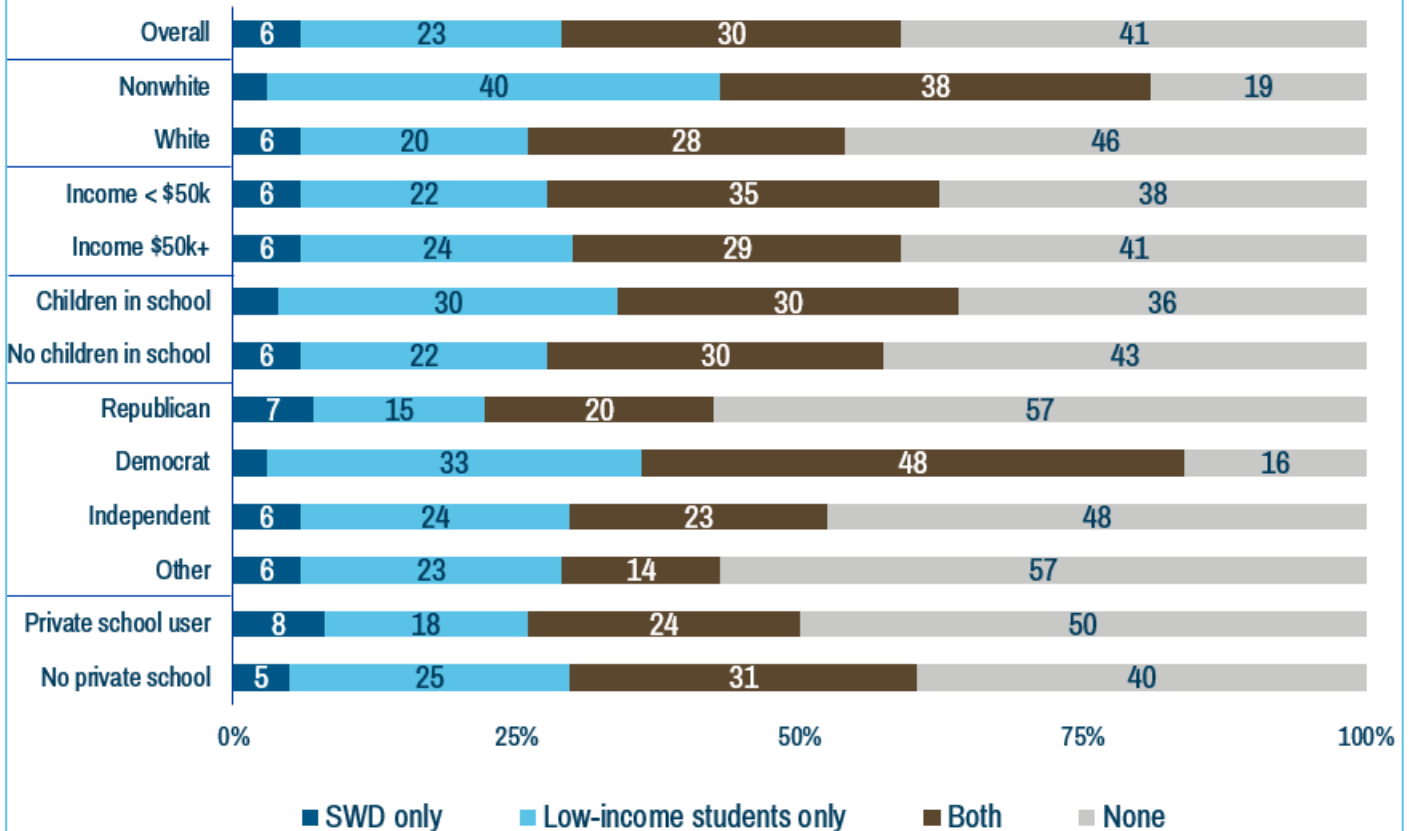
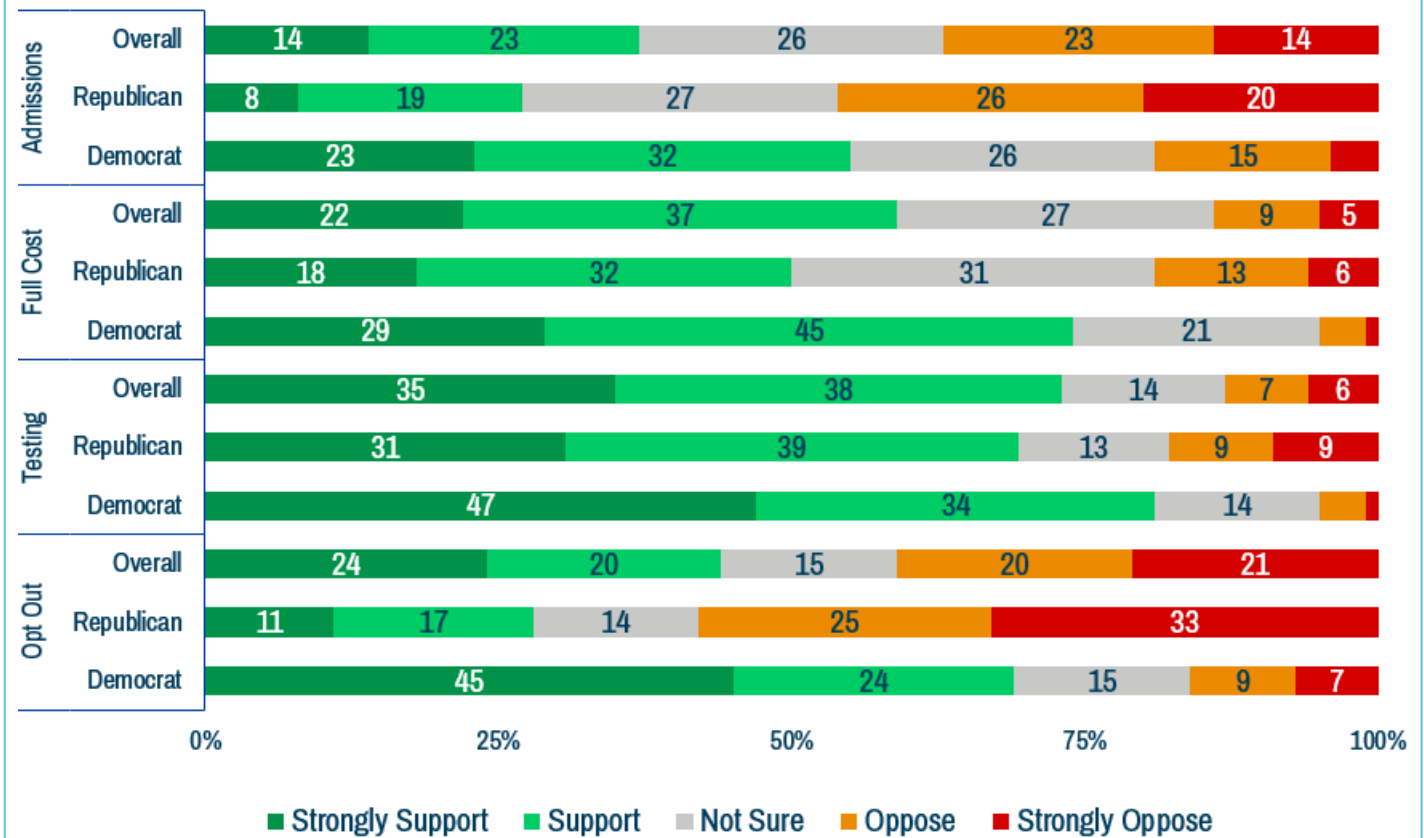


Figure 8: Voter Support for Hypothetical Regulations, by Political Party



given priority access to scholarships under the ESA program (Figure 7).

Overall, 41% of voters indicated that no students should be given priority. Republicans were highly likely to express this sentiment (57%), while only 16% of Democrats indicated that scholarships should be available to all students.

There was a similarly large gap between nonwhite (19%) and white (46%) voters who supported making scholarships equally accessible to all. Among all groups there was little support for giving priority only to students with disabilities.

Hypothetical Regulations

Currently, little is known about what additional regulations may be imposed on private schools interested in admitting scholarship students. Regulations on similar programs across the country

vary substantially and pertain to elements such as admissions requirements, what scholarships can be used for, and standardized testing participation and reporting. Because of this, we asked a series of questions about support for four hypothetical regulations that would require participating private schools to: 1) waive admissions requirements for scholarship students; 2) accept scholarships to fully cover all costs of attendance; 3) participate in state standardized testing and public reporting programs; and 4) allow scholarship students to opt out of religious activities at religiously affiliated schools. These regulations are based on those implemented in programs in other settings and were posed as hypothetical regulations to be placed on the state's new program.

Support was high (73%) among all respondents for the hypothetical regulation requiring participating private

schools to administer state standardized tests and publicly report the results (Figure 8).

HB 349 requires participating private schools to measure learning gains in math and reading but does not specify a test. Seven out of 10 Republicans and 8 out of 10 Democrats indicated support for requiring participating private schools to be part of the state's standardized testing program used for public schools.

Thirty-seven percent of all respondents supported requiring participating private schools to waive admissions requirements for scholarship students. Six out of 10 respondents supported requiring participating private schools to accept scholarships to fully cover all costs of attendance, while only 14% of respondents opposed this idea (Figure 8).

While Republicans indicated more support for the ESA program itself than did Democrats, Democrats showed more support for regulations that would likely make private school access more equitable: waiving admissions requirements for scholarship students and requiring participating private schools to accept ESA scholarships to fully cover all costs. Support for waiving admissions requirements was 28 percentage points higher among Democrats (55%) than among Republicans (27%). Democrats were 24 percentage points more likely than were Republicans (74% v. 50%) to support requiring participating schools to accept ESA scholarships to fully cover all costs.

Finally, 44% of respondents supported requiring participating private schools to allow scholarship students to opt out of religious activities, while another 41% opposed this regulation (Figure 8).

Support for allowing students to opt out was high among Democrats (69%), and opposition to this hypothetical regulation was strong among Republicans (58%).

Conclusion

In recent months, there has been a national groundswell of support for the expansion and implementation of private school choice programs. Missouri joined the ranks of states by passing its own program, but it has yet to go into effect. With that in mind, we conducted a poll to understand Missourians' opinions of the program and to gather information on what voters desire regarding the program's design. As policymakers finetune Missouri's new ESA program, these findings help shed light on overall voter opinion regarding the program and its current and hypothetical regulation.

Our representative poll of registered voters across the state found that support for Missouri's new program is much higher than is opposition to the program, while a substantial portion of voters appear ambivalent. Support is higher among Republicans and conservatives than among Democrats and liberals. However, there is substantial bipartisan opposition to the program's current geographic eligibility restriction, which limits program access to residents of Missouri's four charter counties and largest cities. There seems to be some sense among voters that if Missouri is to invest in private school scholarships for students with disabilities and low-income students, access should not be limited to the most populous parts of the state. Finally, we found high levels of support among both Republicans and Democrats for a hypothetical regulation around test-based accountability, and there was substantial support for requiring private schools to accept ESA scholarships to fully cover all costs of attendance. These insights should be considered as policymakers prepare to debate the design of the program in the coming legislative session in the hopes of implementing Missouri's new ESA program in the coming school years.

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Notes

¹ Mo. 101st Gen. Assemb. H.B. 349. 1st Reg. Sess. (2020). Establishes the “Missouri Empowerment Scholarship Accounts Program.” <https://house.mo.gov/Bill.aspx?bill=HB349&year=2021&code=R>

² <https://house.mo.gov/billtracking/bills211/sumpdf/HB0349T.pdf>; Weinberg, T. (June 2, 2021). Missouri lawmakers passed a tax credit program to fund school choice. How will it work? <https://missouriindependent.com/2021/06/02/missouri-lawmakers-passed-a-tax-credit-program-to-fund-school-choice-how-will-it-work/>

³ SLUPoll is a partnership between Saint Louis University and the professional polling firm YouGov. YouGov uses its own survey panel, to which respondents must opt in. Using self-reported demographic characteristics such as age, race, gender, and education level, the sample is weighted to reflect the characteristics of the state’s registered voters as reported in the 2018 Current Population Survey.

⁴ Weighted sample sizes: overall (n=950); female (n=564); male (n=386); nonwhite (n=87); white (n=863); high school or GED (n=231); some college (n=320); bachelors or above (n=399); income < \$50k (n=368); income \$50k+ (n=494); owns home (n=535); rents home/other (n=144); children in school (n=172); no children in school (n=778); Republican (n=319); Democrat (n=336); Independent (n=242); other (n=53); conservative (n=375); moderate (n=285); liberal (n=290); private school user (n=177); no private school (n=773); religious (n=601); not religious (n=349); local schools excellent/good (n=384); local schools fair/poor (n=566); MO schools excellent/good (n=221); MO schools fair/poor (n=729); private schools 9+ (n=336); private schools < 9 (n=614); distance < 4 miles (n=675); distance 4+ miles (n=275); eligible area (n=600); ineligible area (n=350)

⁵ See for example: Brunner, E., & Sonstelie, J. (2003). Homeowners, property values, and the political economy of the school voucher. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 54(2), 239–257; Brunner, E. J., & Imazeki, J. (2008). Tiebout choice and universal school vouchers. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 63(1), 253–279; and Turnbull, G. K., & Zheng, M. (2019). A meta-analysis of school quality capitalization in U.S. house prices. *Real Estate Economics*, 1-52.

⁶ <https://house.mo.gov/BillTracking/PDFViewer/web/viewer.html?file=/billtracking/bills211/jrnpdf/jrn030.pdf#page=15>; <https://www.senate.mo.gov/21info/Journals/RDay6205061339-1440.pdf#page=98>.

⁷ Current population estimates were drawn from the Missouri Census Data Center: <https://mcdc.missouri.edu/population-estimates/> The legislature has not made clear which estimates will be used to determine eligibility.