

When Surveys Talk Back



AI Conversational Survey & the 2025 NYC Mayoral Race

A Collaboration Between CloudResearch & Beacon Research

Terry Classen | Beacon Research | AAPOR 2026

Powered by Engage by CloudResearch



A Supplement to Traditional Research

Qualitative depth at scales that are impractical for human moderation.

1	Scale	Large N studies to give qualitative findings at scale
2	Candor	Voters disclose more to AI than to moderators or live-interviewer settings.
3	Language	Organic framing, contemporaneous offshoots.
4	Early signal	Emerging themes before they move quantitative trendlines.

METHODOLOGY

NYC Mayoral Race: Study Overview

Fieldwork: Oct. 1-8, 2025

Platform: Engage by CloudResearch

Recruitment: Text-to-web via Tele-TownHall

Universe: 661 NYC likely voters, from a voter file

Actual results: Mamdani 51% · Cuomo 41% · Sliwa 7%



44%

Mamdani

n=291



31%

Cuomo

n=204



14%

Sliwa

n=93



9%

Undecided

n=60

Mapping the Survey

Closed-ended questions established baseline measures; conversational AI follow-ups provided depth and nuance.



Enthusiasm relative to past elections

"What is driving that feeling?"



Candidate favorability

"What is behind your rating?"



Candidate vote intention

"Why are you supporting your candidate?"



Voting motivation (for vs. against)

"Tell me more about that."



Sliwa: H2H Cuomo vs. Mamdani preference

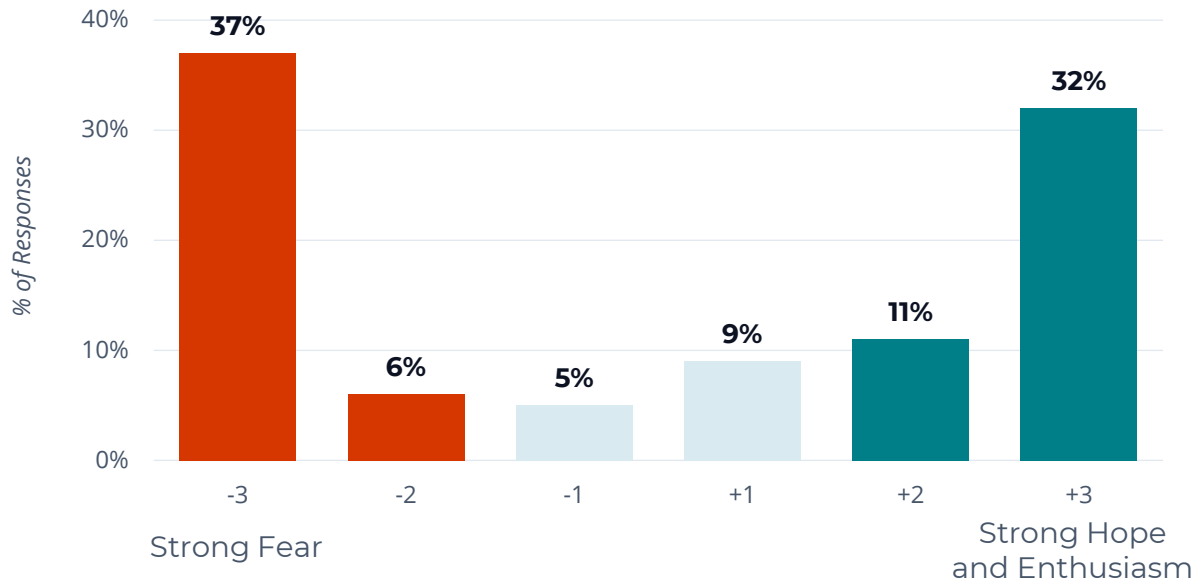
"Would you vote for another candidate if you knew Sliwa couldn't win?"

VOTER SENTIMENT

An Electorate of Extremes

Distribution of sentiment intensity (-3 = Strong Fear | +3 = Strong Hope and Enthusiasm)

Sentiment Score



37%

STRONG FEAR

Largest single bloc — voters at the deepest negative extreme.

14%

MODERATE MIDDLE

Combined share across the four center positions (-2 to +2).

32%

STRONG HOPE & ENTHUSIASM

A near-mirror bloc anchoring the positive extreme.

We were able to identify distinct emotional polarity within the electorate that cut through partisan and ideological identifications.



HOPE VOTING FOR

52% reported feeling MORE enthusiastic about voting than in past elections — driven mostly by Mamdani supporters.

New type of Democrat · Working-class champion · Anti-corruption · Generational energy

“We need to phase the old guard of Democrats out. We need a fresh new face.”

— Non-binary, 28 | Democrat

“I have been a lifelong Democratic voter, but it wasn’t until this election that I fully believed we have a fighter for the working class.”

— Female, 29 | WFP

“He’s the first candidate in a long time that genuinely wants to help New Yorkers thrive.”

— Female, 45 | Unaffiliated



FEAR VOTING AGAINST

Many Cuomo voters were not enthusiastic — they were holding their nose.

Anti-Mamdani imperative · Lesser of two evils · Deep reluctance

“Cuomo is garbage but Zohran is radioactive garbage.”

— Female, 51 | Independent

“I feel that a lot is on the line in this election. Not like the end of the world but definitely something close to it.”

— Male, 36 | Democrat

“I am very concerned about the effects of a Mamdani victory on my family’s future and quality of life. If he wins we will probably end up leaving NYC.”

— Male, 41 | Democrat

MAMDANI COALITION.

A positive emotion-driven coalition built on hope, generational change, and economic justice.

We captured many of the trends showing up in polls (e.g. Mamdani's advantages with young voters) but with the emotional force behind it.

Affordability & Economic Justice

Highest-cited driver: cost of living, housing, and rent freezes resonated with cost-burdened New Yorkers.

Generational Energy

Many described this as the first election where they felt genuine excitement rather than resignation.

Anti-Corruption / Anti-Establishment

Voters seeking a clean break from machine politics and Democratic establishment fatigue.

In their words

"He's not bought and paid for." · "Honest, accountable to the people." · "He will be a change agent."

CUOMO COALITION.

A fear-driven coalition built on stability, experience, and concern over public safety. Support was framed as strategic voting, to prevent Mamdani from winning; they were reluctantly backing Cuomo.

Experience and Trump management

COVID leadership, Albany relationships, managing DC — the wrong moment to experiment.

Character & scandal as a persistent liability

Even supporters acknowledged his harassment history and nursing home scandal in the same breath as their endorsement.

“Lesser of two evils” ran throughout

Many Cuomo supporters were primarily motivated by opposition to Mamdani, not affirmative support.

Public safety, identity and antisemitism

Voters citing crime and losing the character of NYC. Jewish and Catholic voters expressed concerns about antisemitism and having a Muslim mayor.

THE SLIWA HOLDOUTS.

A preview of the final election results.

Half of Sliwa supporters said they would consider backing Cuomo if Sliwa dropped out but many expressed deep reluctance.

~1/3 were true Sliwa loyalists. To these voters, a losing vote for Sliwa was not wasted, it was a way of staying true to their beliefs.

"I can never ever vote for Cuomo or Mamdani. I never compromise my values."
— Sliwa voter, holding firm

"If it came down to Cuomo being the only one with a chance, I'll vote for him. I will not vote for Mamdani under any circumstance."
— Sliwa voter, open to switching

Public safety

Most-cited driver of Sliwa support

Outer boroughs

Staten Island, parts of Queens/Brooklyn

Anti-Democrat

Deep frustration with the long-term direction of the city under Democrats



OTHER APPLICATIONS.

Other ways we use AI conversational surveys



Issue Salience

Surface which issues actually drive sentiment.



Message Development

Test the language voters use organically.



Sub-population Probing

Drill into niche groups without scripted bias.



Exploratory Research

Map the landscape before quantitative validation.

THREE TAKEAWAYS.

01 · Qualitative depth at scale

Conversational AI delivers qualitative insight at a scale human moderation cannot match.

02 · Reduces social desirability bias

Voters disclose more to AI than to moderators — surfacing emerging trends earlier.

03 · A supplement to your quant

Pair with closed-ended polling to add the depth and understanding.

