

State of Estate Planning Report 2026

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Understanding the modern estate planning landscape: [A letter from Vanilla's CEO](#)

When clients come to their advisors about estate planning, they're rarely asking about trusts and tax brackets first. They're asking: Will my kids be okay? Will my spouse be taken care of? Will the business I built survive me? Will my family stay close when I'm gone?

This year's State of Estate Planning survey of over 1,000 U.S. consumers reflects just how personal these concerns are. Ninety-seven percent believe discussing estate plans with loved ones is important. More than half worry their heirs lack financial literacy. Forty percent say passing down family values is their top priority—ahead of any financial goal.

Estate planning lives at the intersection of money and meaning. It asks clients to confront mortality, navigate family dynamics, and articulate what legacy truly means to them. Few other services offer advisors such an intimate window into their clients' lives.

The advisors who embrace this see the difference. They're facilitating the conversations families have been avoiding, helping parents prepare their children, and giving clients peace of mind that extends far beyond their portfolios.

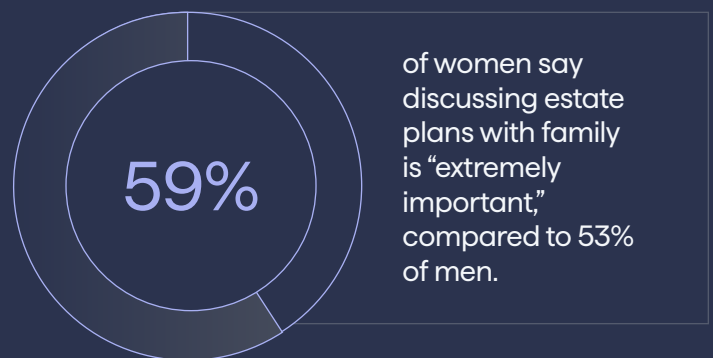
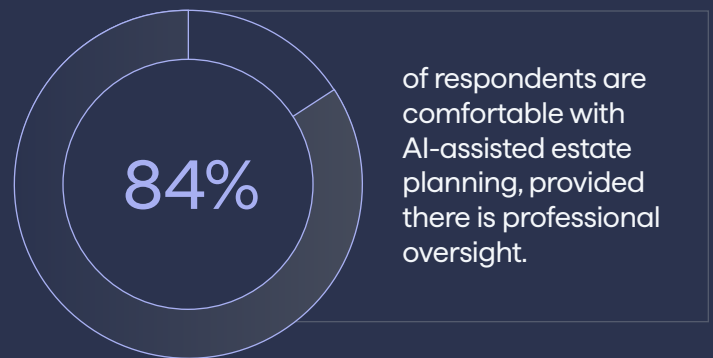
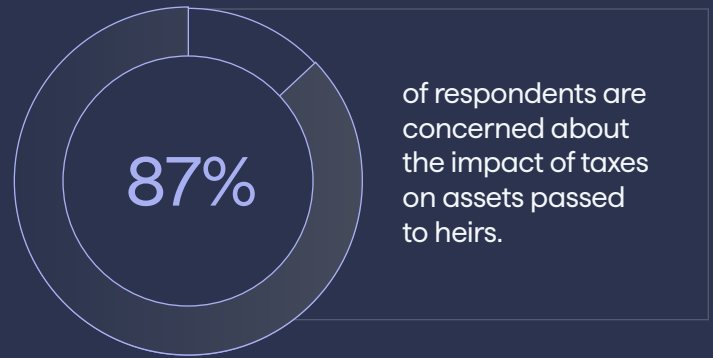
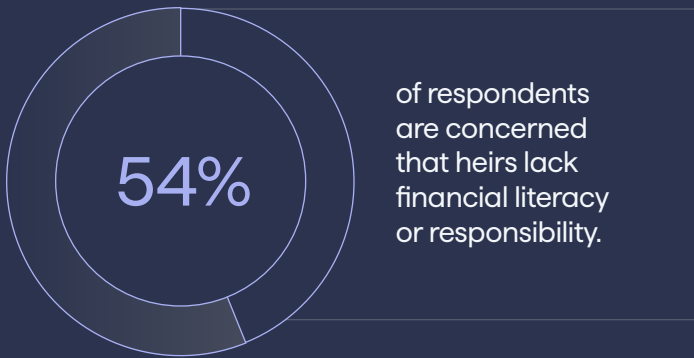
Technology helps advisors show up more fully in these moments. When clients say they're comfortable with AI handling routine tasks, they're really saying: spend your time with me on what matters.

Thank you for your continued trust in Vanilla as we work to make estate planning what it should be—deeply human, professionally guided, and focused on the people who matter most.

Gene Farrell
CEO, Vanilla



Key findings at-a-glance*



*Some numbers have been rounded to the nearest whole number value.

Estate planning is about safeguarding what matters most

According to respondents, protecting assets from probate is a top priority when making an estate plan. This protective instinct reflects a deeper truth: estate planning is fundamentally about shielding loved ones from uncertainty.

Clients are increasingly looking for estate planning solutions that offer predictability and control. By minimizing the risk of probate—a lengthy, expensive, and often emotionally draining legal process—they can ensure their family's financial future remains stable.

Advisors can act on this by educating clients about the risks of probate and recommending strategies to avoid it, such as trusts and beneficiary designations. This proactive, holistic approach ensures smoother wealth transfers, enhances financial security for heirs, and strengthens long-term client relationships.



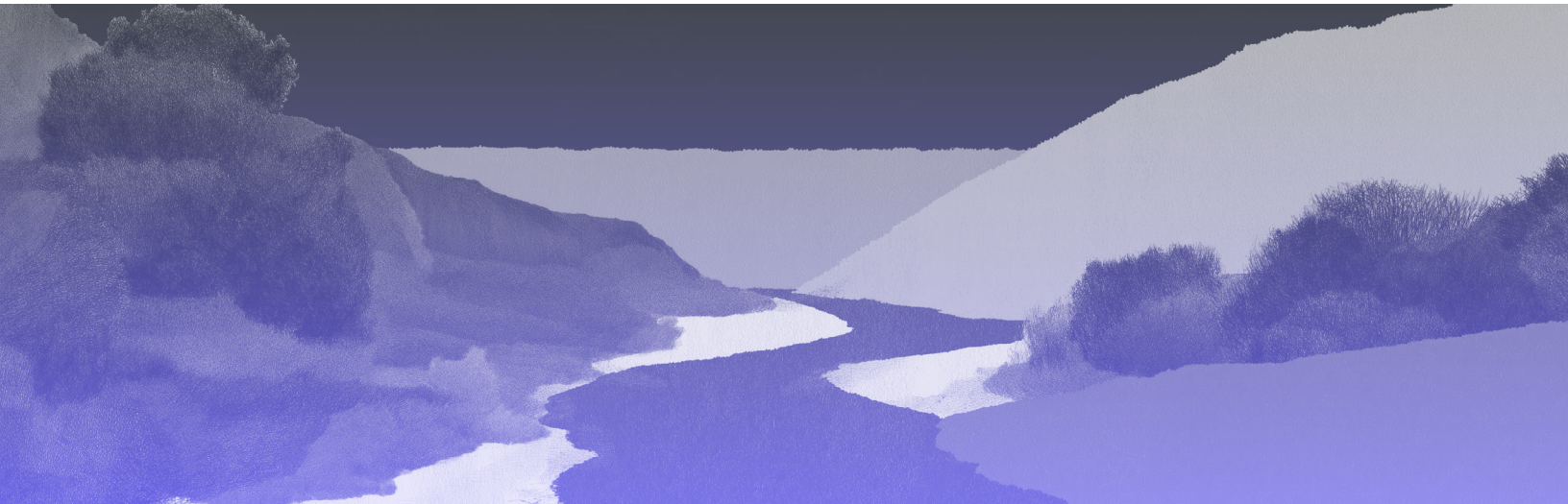
Trusts: An opportunity to educate

Many clients feel uncertain about how to use trusts effectively. Nearly 41% of respondents lack confidence in their understanding of trusts, with 7% admitting to being "not at all confident."

This presents a crucial opportunity for advisors to educate clients on how trusts can safeguard assets, manage wealth over time, and provide for heirs in a structured manner.

When selecting someone to administer a trust, trustworthiness is overwhelmingly seen as the most important factor. People clearly want their wealth to be managed in a way that reflects their family's legacy and values.

CONFIDENCE IN UNDERSTANDING TRUSTS		
Confident (Extremely/Very) ①	59%	
Somewhat confident ②	19%	
Not confident ③	22%	
①	②	③



Passing down values, not just wealth

When asked what they most want to pass on to the next generation beyond financial assets, 40% of respondents said family values and principles. Financial literacy ranked second at 22%, followed by real estate and tangible assets at 10%.

This finding reveals something profound about the human side of estate planning: for most people, the transfer of wealth is inseparable from the transfer of meaning. They want their children and grandchildren

to inherit not just money, but the principles that guided how that wealth was built.

Yet clients face a genuine anxiety: How do you structure an estate plan to encourage values you can't quantify? The tension between financial freedom and the desire to pass down values is real and complex.



Wealth transfer strategies

Respondents showed diverse preferences for how to transfer wealth. Nearly 30% prefer a lump sum inheritance after death, while 25% favor gradual distributions over time. About 11% prefer incentive-based inheritance tied to achievements or milestones.

Interestingly, 57% have either already implemented or are planning "practice inheritances"—smaller gifts during their lifetime to see how heirs manage money.

This reflects a desire to mentor the next generation while still alive.

When it comes to timing, 27% believe readiness depends on the individual rather than age, though the most popular age ranges were 31-40 (25%) and 41-50 (24%).



have implemented or are planning "practice inheritances" to mentor heirs while alive

The conversation gap

While 97% believe discussing estate plans is important, only 39% have had detailed conversations with heirs. Another 31% have had general but not detailed discussions, and 20% plan to have these conversations but haven't yet.

This gap between intention and action represents an opportunity for advisors to facilitate family conversations.

CONVERSATIONS WITH HEIRS ABOUT WEALTH TRANSFER				
Had detailed conversations ①				39%
Had general conversations ②				31%
Plan to but haven't yet ③				20%
Don't plan to discuss in detail ④				3%
Not applicable/No heirs ⑤				6%
①	②	③	④	⑤

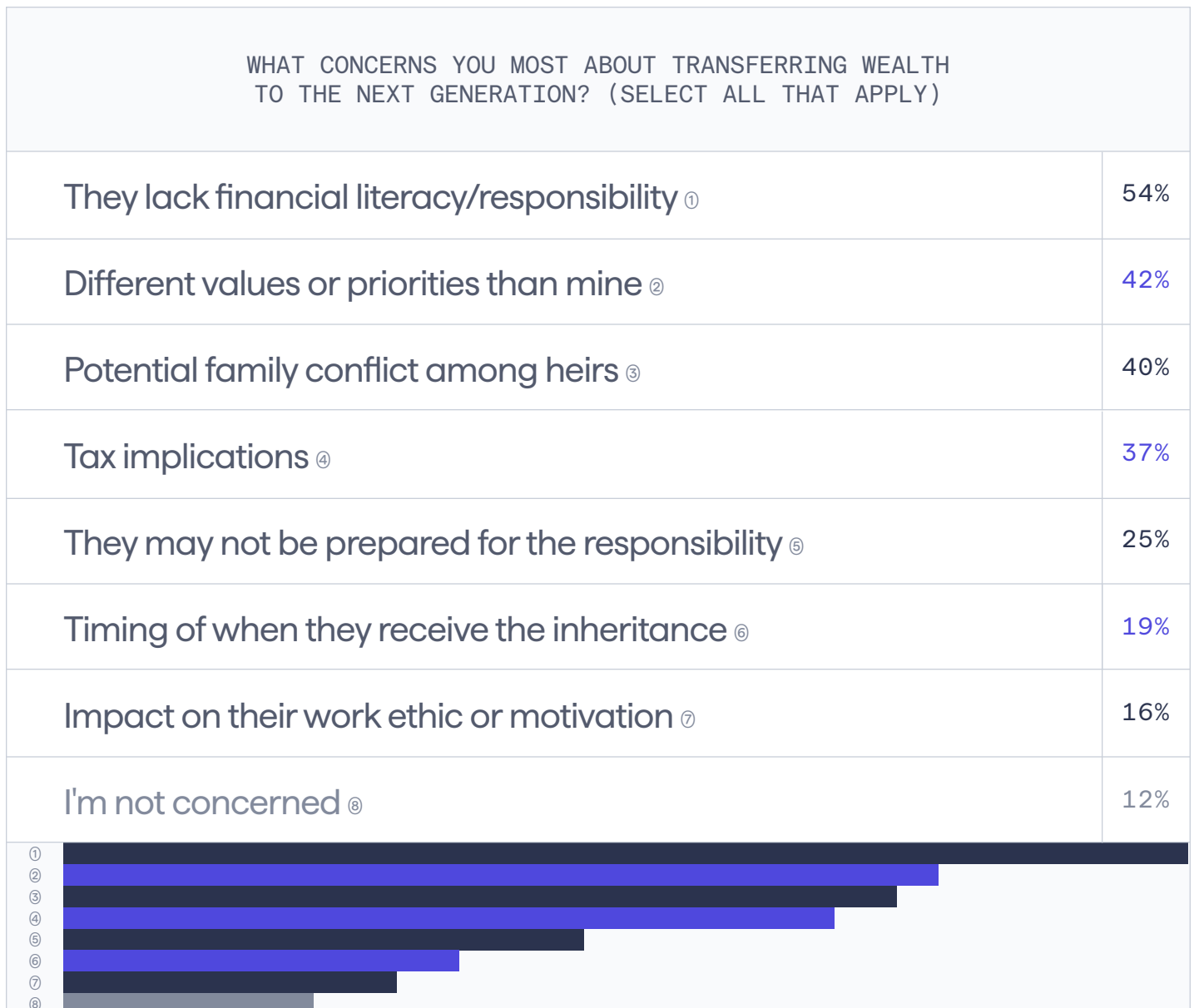
Preparing the next generation for inherited wealth

The survey reveals a significant concern among respondents: Is the next generation ready for what they'll inherit? This anxiety goes beyond money—it touches on fundamental questions about responsibility, values, and family legacy.

More than half (54%) of respondents worry that their heirs lack financial literacy or responsibility.

This concern outpaces even tax implications (37%) as a source of worry about wealth transfer.

These findings suggest that advisors have an opportunity to provide value beyond traditional estate planning. Educational components, family financial meetings, and structured approaches to wealth transfer can address these deep-seated concerns.



The importance of education

Nearly 68% of respondents say it's extremely or very important that their wealth transfer strategy includes educational components about managing inherited wealth. Only 12% said it was "not important."

Advisors who can address both questions—the technical and the educational—position themselves as true partners in their clients' multi-generational goals.

This demand for financial education as part of estate planning represents a significant shift in client expectations. They're not just asking "how do I transfer my wealth?" but "how do I prepare my heirs to receive it well?"



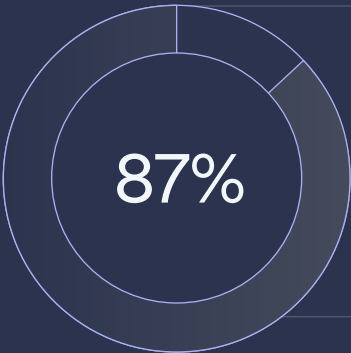
Navigating the tax landscape

Tax concerns remain a driving force behind estate planning decisions. An overwhelming 87% of respondents are concerned about the impact of taxes on assets passed to heirs, with 55% being "very concerned."

This concern translates into demand for expertise: 93% of respondents value tax expertise when

selecting an estate planner, with 66% considering it "very important."

The survey reveals that respondents worry about multiple tax types—not just estate taxes, but income taxes on retirement distributions and capital gains on appreciated assets.



are concerned about taxes on assets passed to heirs (55% "very concerned")

IMPORTANCE OF TAX EXPERTISE IN SELECTING AN ESTATE PLANNER	
Very important ①	66%
Somewhat important ②	28%
Not very important ③	4%
Not sure ④	1%
Not important at all ⑤	1%

①

②

③

④⑤

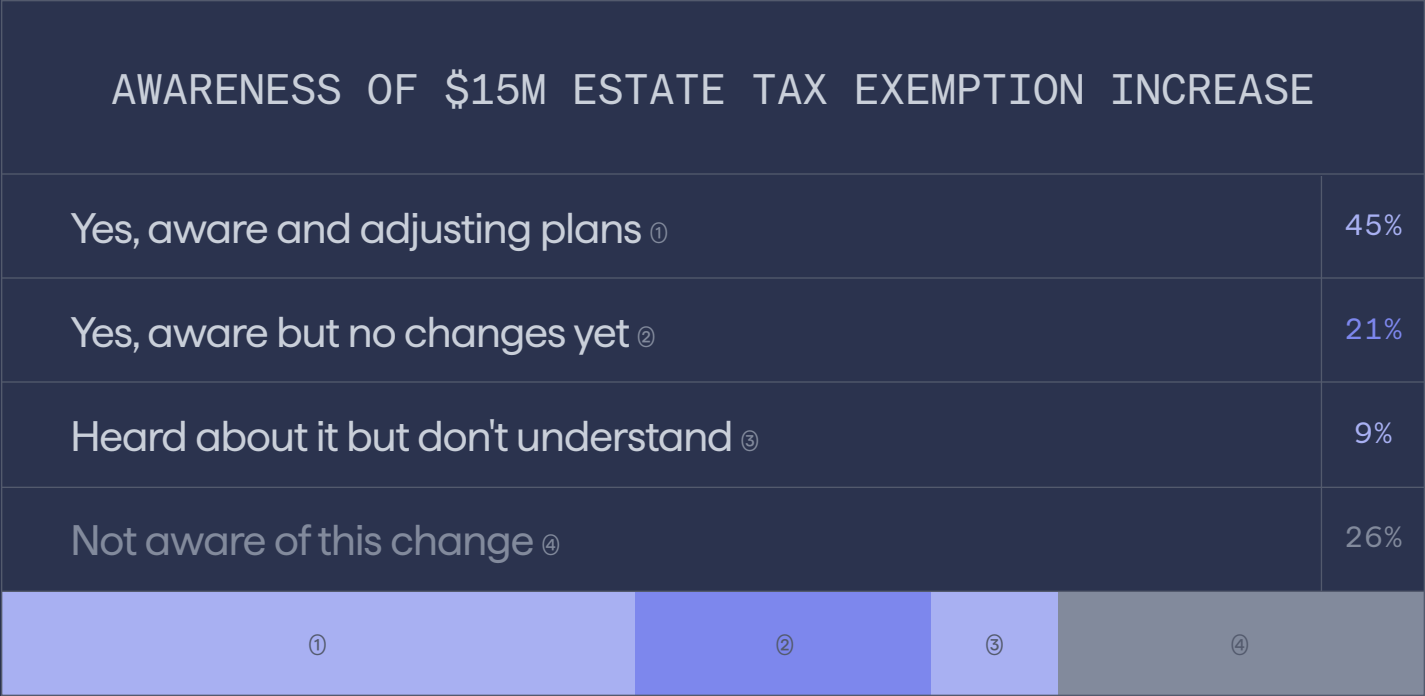
Regulatory awareness

The survey measured awareness of the federal estate tax exemption increase to \$15 million per person (\$30 million for couples) under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. Results show a divided landscape:

- 45% are aware and adjusting their plans accordingly
- 21% are aware but haven't changed their approach

- 9% have heard about changes but don't understand the details
- 26% weren't aware of this change at all

Importantly, 65% say their estate is well below the new exemption threshold—meaning federal estate taxes aren't their primary concern. This shifts the conversation toward income taxes, capital gains, and state-level taxes.



Regulatory awareness

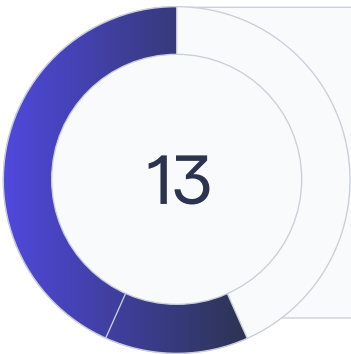
ESTATE SIZE RELATIVE TO \$15M EXEMPTION				
Well below exemption - not a concern ①	65%			
Approaching exemption - should monitor ②	17%			
Exceeds exemption - need sophisticated planning ③	5%			
Not sure where estate stands ④	5%			
Not applicable ⑤	7%			
①	②	③	④	⑤



The Gender Gap in Estate Planning

Our survey reveals a persistent gender gap in estate planning that presents both a challenge and an opportunity for advisors. Despite women statistically living longer and often outliving their partners—

making comprehensive estate planning even more critical—they consistently report lower involvement in estate planning decisions.



percentage points separate men and women in who manages estate planning decisions

The decision-making gap

When asked who manages estate planning decisions in their household, a significant gap emerges:

- 56% of men say "I do" manage estate planning
- 43% of women say "I do" manage estate planning

Women are more likely to report sharing estate planning responsibilities equally (29% vs. 18% for men), which may indicate collaborative decision-making—or deferral to a partner's lead.

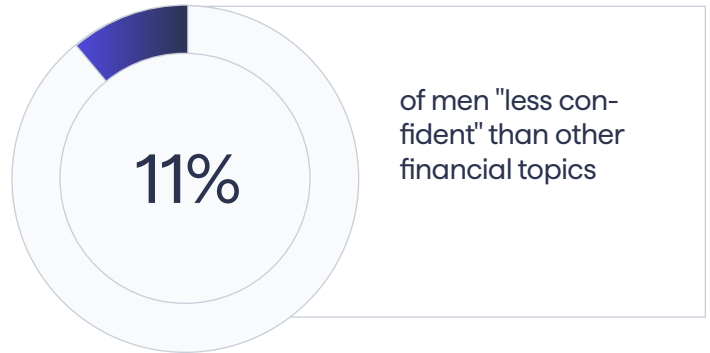
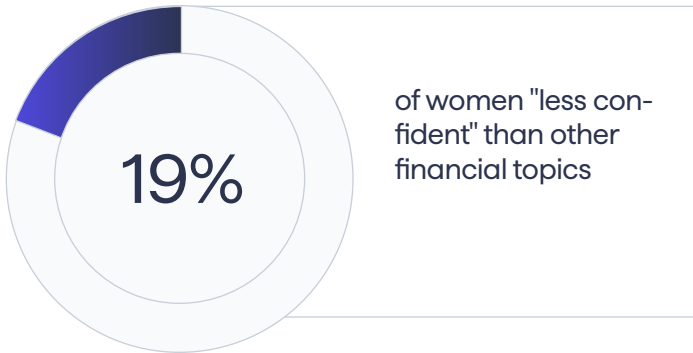
"I MANAGE ESTATE PLANNING DECISIONS" BY GENDER	
Men ①	56%
Women ②	43%
Gap ③	13%
①	
②	
③	

The confidence gap

Women are more likely to feel underprepared when it comes to estate planning discussions:

- 19% of women feel "less confident" about estate planning than other financial topics

- 11% of men feel the same—meaning women are significantly more likely to feel underprepared



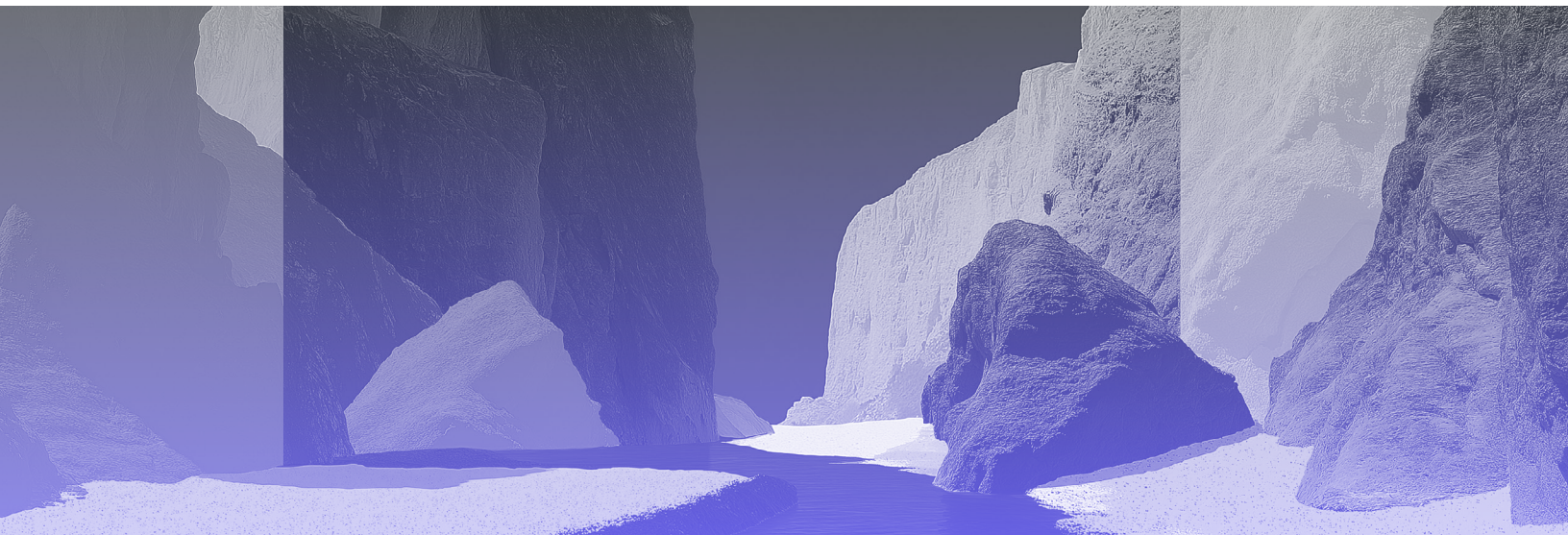
Plan status gap

Women are less likely to have comprehensive, recently updated estate plans:

- 47.7% of men have a comprehensive, recently updated plan

- 39.4% of women have a comprehensive, recently updated plan (8.3pp gap)

Women are also more likely to report not having started estate planning at all (10.0% vs. 6.0% for men).

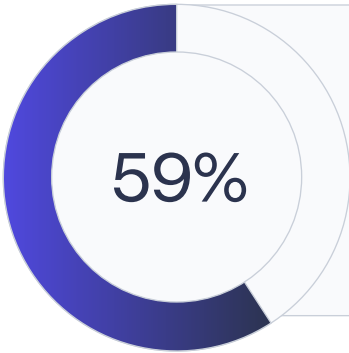


The paradox: High value, lower participation

The most striking finding in the gender data isn't a gap—it's a contradiction.

Women trail men across nearly every estate planning engagement metric. Yet on the question of whether

discussing estate plans with family is important, women don't just match men—they lead by a significant margin.



of women say it's "extremely important" to discuss estate plans with loved ones (vs. 53% of men)

CONSIDER WHAT THE DATA SHOWS SIDE BY SIDE:

METRIC	WOMEN	MEN	GAP
"Extremely important" to discuss with family	59%	53%	Women +6%
Manage estate planning decisions	43%	56%	Women -13%
Had detailed heir conversations	34%	44%	Women -10%
Have comprehensive plan	39%	48%	Women -9%

Women place higher value on family communication about estate plans, yet are less likely to be leading the process or having the detailed conversations they say matter most.

This pattern—high stated importance, lower actual engagement—suggests latent demand. Women

aren't indifferent to estate planning; they may simply not be in the driver's seat. Whether that reflects household dynamics, confidence barriers, or other factors, the opportunity for advisors is clear: women are an underserved audience who already value what estate planning delivers.

Implications for advisors

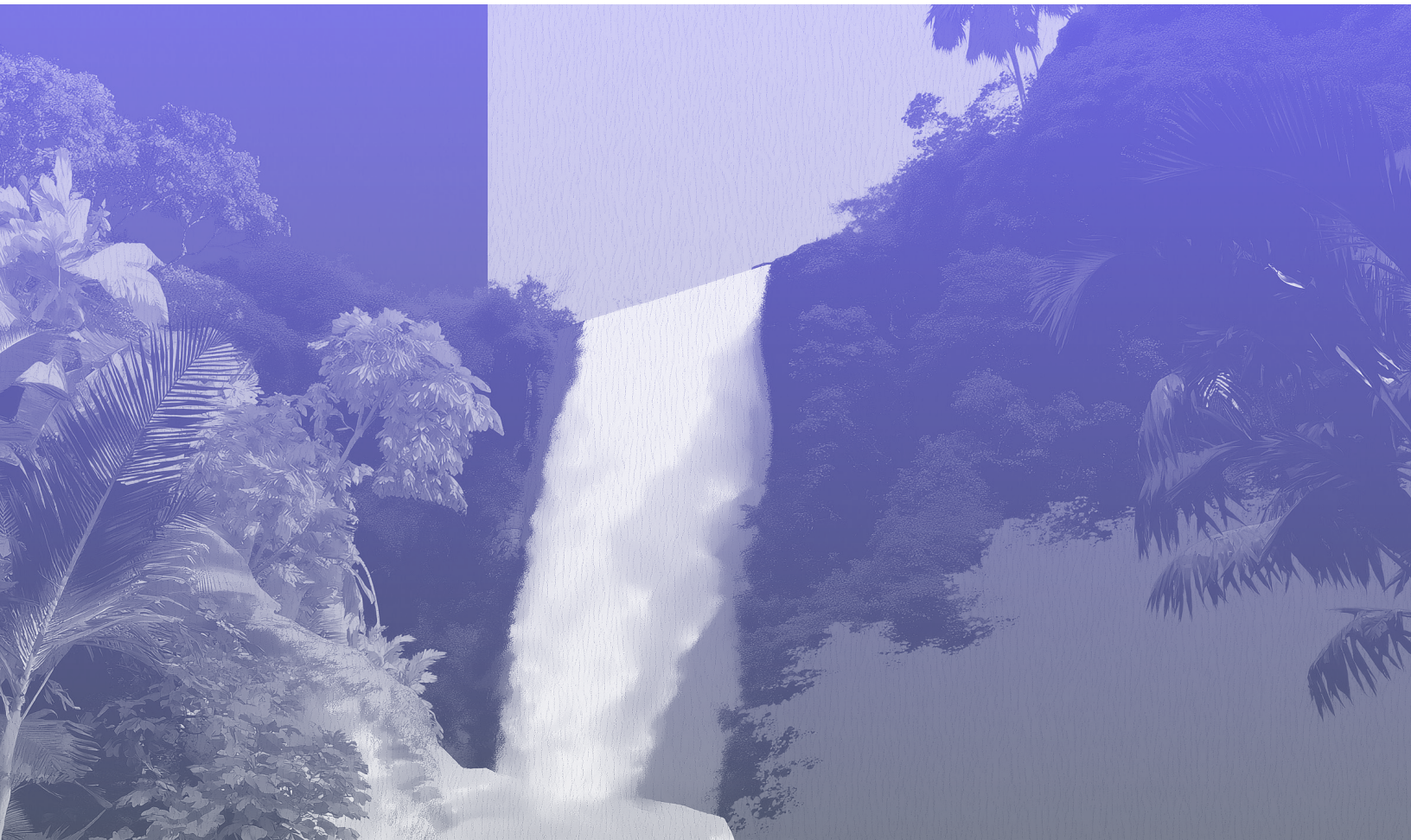
The gender gap in estate planning represents an opportunity for advisors who recognize the pattern in the data:

1. Engage both partners: The data shows one partner typically leads estate planning decisions. Advisors who make a point of including both partners—especially in households where women aren't currently leading—may find a receptive audience given women's high value on family communication.

2. Address the confidence gap directly: Women are more likely to feel underprepared discussing estate planning. Education-focused conversations about estate planning fundamentals can help close this gap.

3. Lead with family, not finance: Women's emphasis on family discussion suggests framing estate planning around relationships and communication may resonate more than leading with tax optimization or asset protection.

The data suggests women represent an underserved audience in estate planning—not because they don't care, but because the current patterns of engagement aren't reaching them effectively.



Household dynamics beyond gender

Estate planning decisions don't happen in isolation—they happen within households, often with one partner taking the lead. Understanding these dynamics helps advisors engage the right people in the right conversations.

Nearly half (49%) of respondents say they personally manage estate planning decisions in their household, while 17% say their spouse or partner takes the lead.

About 24% share the responsibility equally. Notably, only 5% have delegated this responsibility entirely to a professional advisor.

This suggests most households have a clear decision-maker when it comes to estate planning—and advisors need to identify and engage that person directly.

WHO PRIMARILY MANAGES ESTATE PLANNING DECISIONS IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD?	
I do ①	49%
My spouse/partner does ②	17%
We share this responsibility equally ③	24%
A professional advisor manages this for us ④	5%
No one has taken the lead yet ⑤	4%
Not applicable ⑥	1%



Confidence levels vary

When it comes to discussing estate planning compared to other financial matters like retirement or investing, confidence levels are mixed:

- 46% feel very confident with estate planning topics
- 12% feel more confident with estate planning than other financial matters
- 22% feel equally confident across all financial topics

- 15% feel less confident with estate planning than other areas
- 5% don't feel confident with any financial planning topics

This means roughly one in five respondents feels less confident discussing estate planning than other financial matters—representing an opportunity for advisors to provide education and build trust in this area.



Financial advisors are the starting point

When asked who they first spoke with when beginning their estate planning journey, financial advisors came out on top—by a significant margin.

41% of respondents first spoke with their financial advisor, compared to 26% who started with an estate planning attorney. Only 6% began with an accountant or CPA, while 13% turned to family members or friends first.

This positions financial advisors as the natural gateway to estate planning conversations. Clients already trust their advisors with their financial lives—estate planning is a logical extension of that relationship.

WHO DID YOU FIRST SPEAK WITH ABOUT ESTATE PLANNING?					
Financial advisor ①					41%
Estate planning attorney ②					26%
Family member or friend ③					13%
Haven't started estate planning yet ④					8%
Accountant/CPA ⑤					6%
Online research/DIY platform ⑥					4%
①		②		③	④ ⑤ ⑥

Who should initiate the conversation?

When asked who is best positioned to initiate estate planning conversations, respondents again favored financial advisors:

- 43% said financial advisors (because they understand the full financial picture)
- 23% said estate planning attorneys (for specialized legal expertise)

- 19% said both working together from the start

The takeaway: clients see their financial advisor as the quarterback of their financial life. They expect advisors to proactively raise estate planning—not wait for clients to ask.

Service delivery preferences

When asked how they'd prefer their advisor to deliver estate planning services, respondents showed a strong preference for advisor-led models:

- Advisor handles everything in-house: 36%
- Advisor collaborates with external attorney but manages the process: 34%
- Advisor refers me to an attorney and stays involved: 15%

- Advisor provides planning, but I work separately with attorney: 8%
- Prefer to work with attorney independently: 7%

Fully 70% want their advisor to either handle estate planning entirely or manage the process while collaborating with attorneys. Only 7% prefer to bypass their advisor entirely and work with an attorney independently.



PREFERRED SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL				
Advisor handles everything in-house ①	36%			
Advisor collaborates with attorney but manages process ②	34%			
Advisor refers to attorney and stays involved ③	15%			
Advisor provides planning, I work separately with attorney ④	8%			
Prefer to work with attorney independently ⑤	7%			
①	②	③	④	⑤

Estate planning is becoming non-negotiable

Eighty percent of respondents expect estate planning to be integrated into their advisor's offering, either directly or through collaboration. Estate planning is no longer a specialty service—it's becoming a baseline expectation.



expect estate planning integrated into their advisor's offering

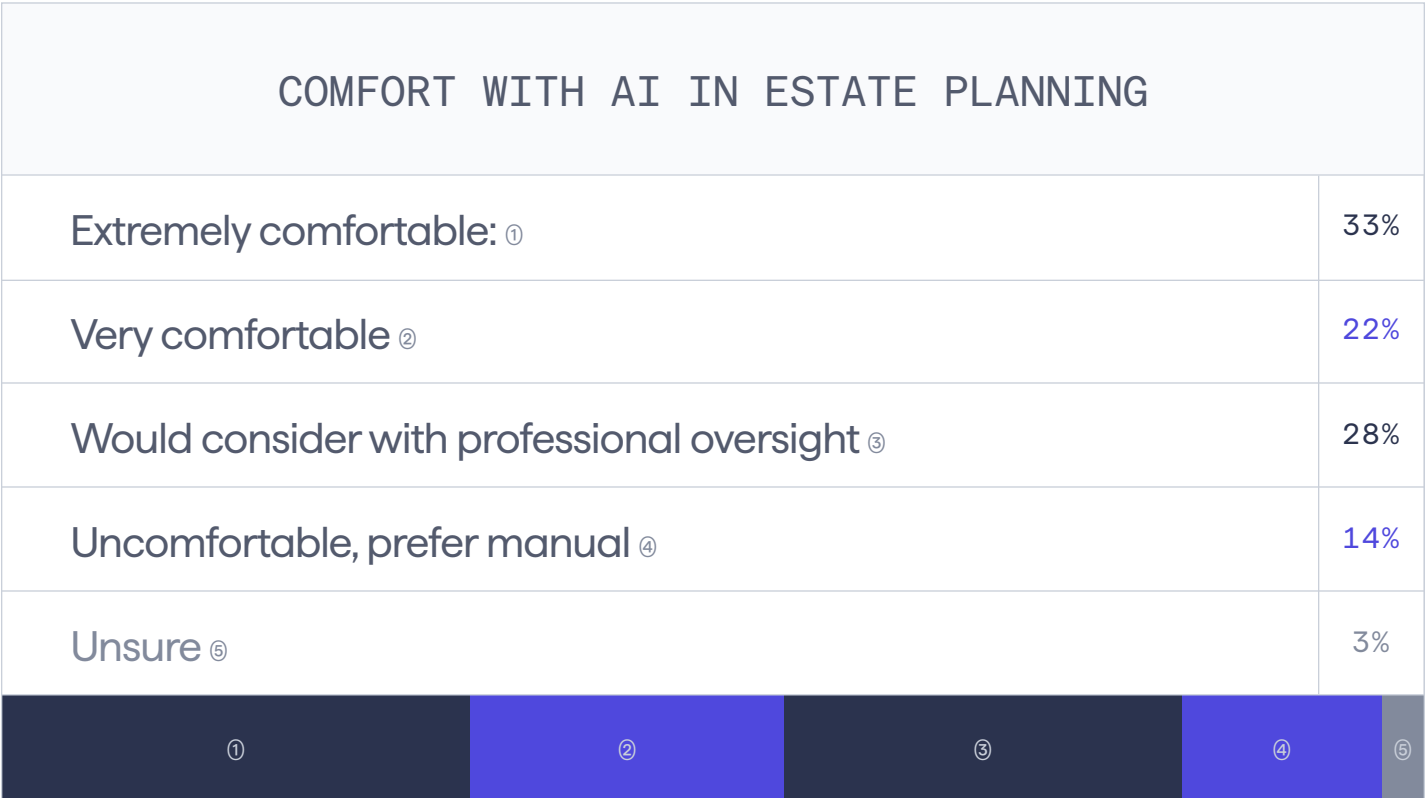
Technology enabling human connection

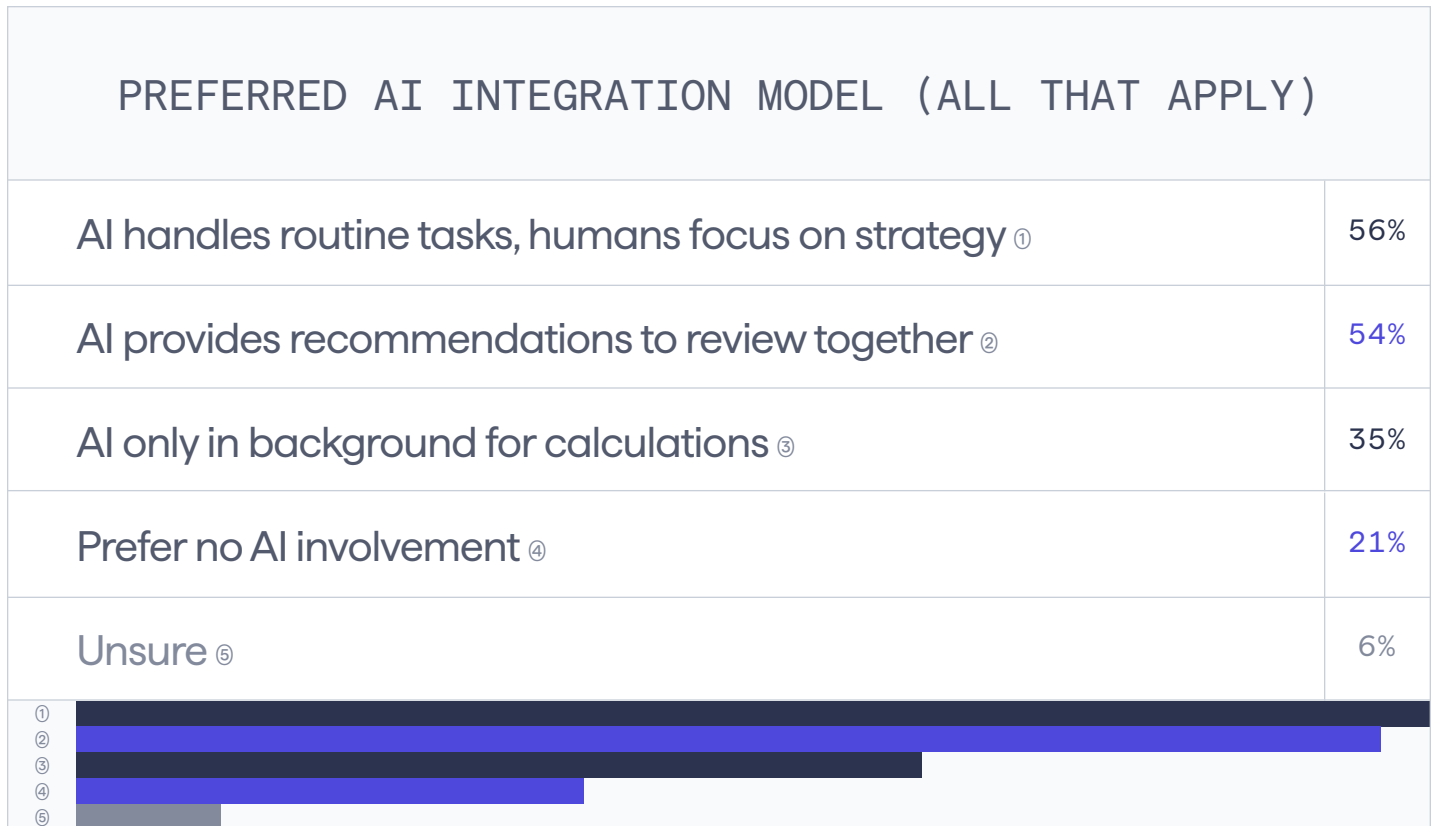
A striking 84% of respondents are comfortable with AI or automated software assisting with various aspects of the estate planning process. However, 28% specified this comfort is contingent on professional oversight.

This finding reveals something important: clients aren't asking for automation to replace human advisors. They're asking for technology that frees ad-

visors to focus on what matters most—the strategic conversations, the family dynamics, the emotional dimensions of estate planning.

The most preferred model? AI handling routine tasks while humans focus on strategy and complex decisions (56%), followed by AI providing recommendations that advisors and clients review together (54%).





What builds trust in AI

When asked what would make them more comfortable with AI in estate planning:

- Human advisor reviews all AI recommendations: 67%
- Ability to override or modify AI suggestions: 54%
- Clear explanations of how AI reached conclusions: 52%
- Demonstrated accuracy and compliance track record: 33%

- Lower costs than traditional methods: 23%
- Faster turnaround times: 15%
- Nothing would make me comfortable: 11%

The message is clear: technology succeeds when it amplifies human expertise rather than replacing it. Clients want AI that makes their advisors more effective—not AI that makes advisors unnecessary.

The intimate nature of estate planning

The 2026 State of Estate Planning survey tells a story about what people truly value when they think about their legacy. It's about family, values, and the people they love—not tax optimization or legal structures.

When 97% of respondents say discussing estate plans with loved ones is important, they're acknowledging that estate planning is fundamentally a human endeavor. When 54% worry about their heirs' financial literacy, they're expressing care that transcends money. When 40% say passing down values is their top priority, they're revealing what legacy truly means to them.

For advisors, this presents both a responsibility and an opportunity. Clients are asking for partners who can navigate not just the technical complexities of estate planning, but the emotional and relational dimensions as well.

Technology is enabling the human approach. When clients express comfort with AI-assisted planning, they're asking for their advisors to have more time for the conversations that matter.

Looking forward

The advisors who will thrive are those who embrace estate planning as an essential, integrated service—not an add-on. They will leverage technology to handle routine tasks while focusing their expertise on the strategic and emotional dimensions that only humans can navigate.

The 2026 State of Estate Planning Report reveals a clear path forward: estate planning that is deeply personal, technologically enabled, and professionally guided. It's about protecting what matters most—not just assets, but families, values, and legacies.

About Vanilla

Vanilla is the modern estate planning platform built for financial advisors. By transforming complex legal documents into clear, interactive visuals, Vanilla enables advisors to deliver more personal, impactful conversations around legacy, wealth transfer, and generational planning. With deep integrations, intuitive workflows, and expert support, Vanilla helps advisors bring estate planning into the heart of holistic financial advice.

For more information, visit www.justvanilla.com

