

What Do Americans Think About Federal Tax Options to Support Transportation? Results from Year Nine of a National Survey

Project 1828
June 2018

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This research brief summarizes results from the ninth year of an annual survey project exploring national support for raising federal transportation revenues through gas, mileage, and sales taxes.

Study Methods

A national random-digit-dial telephone survey conducted from February 8 to March 28, 2018, tested public support for ten ways to raise federal transportation revenues. Multiple variations on the mileage tax and gas tax concepts were presented to test relative support levels among these options, and respondents were also asked about a single sales tax option.

A total of 1,201 adults completed the survey in English or Spanish. For the full sample, which included both landline and mobile numbers, the margin of error was ± 2.83 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

Because this survey project assesses trends in public support for federal transportation taxes, most survey questions were identical for all nine years.

Findings

Key 2018 findings include:

- Six of the ten transportation tax options tested had majority support.
- Linking tax increases to safety, maintenance, or environmental benefits increased support by at least ten percentage points among almost every sociodemographic group.

- Support levels varied considerably by the type of tax. When taxes were described with no information other than the tax type, a new sales tax was much more popular than either a gas tax increase or a new mileage tax.

Looking across the nine years of survey data, support for all the taxes has risen. Comparing 2018 to 2010, the growth has been modest but steady (10 to 15 percentage points) for all but the flat-rate mileage fee.

Policy Recommendations

The basic concept of a gas tax increase is not popular, but there are ways to structure such an increase that would significantly boost its acceptability. While support for a one-time gas tax increase is very low, support could be substantially increased by modifying the way the tax is implemented or described. Dedicating the revenue to purposes that are popular with the public, spreading out the increase over several years, and providing information about how much the increase will cost drivers annually are all options for increasing support.

The basic concept of a mileage tax is not popular, but there are ways to structure such a tax that would increase its acceptability. A new mileage fee is not popular with the American public, but support could be increased by modifying the tax structure so the rate varies according to the vehicle's environmental performance (defined in this survey as the vehicle's pollution level).

Linking a transportation tax to environmental benefits can increase public support. In all years of this survey, support improved notably for both the gas tax increase and the mileage tax when they were linked to environmental benefits.

Demographic change in the U.S. population may increase support for transportation taxes. The surveys found that the youngest respondents were much more supportive of the tax options than the oldest respondents. If this variation reflects a true generational shift, rather than different views at different life-stages, then these opinions will persist as those currently young respondents age and might also hold with the age cohorts behind them.

Trends in Support* for the Tax Options, 2010-2018

Tax Options	2010 (%)	2011 (%)	2012 (%)	2013 (%)	2014 (%)	2015 (%)	2016 (%)	2017 (%)	2018 (%)
Gas tax options, presented as a 10¢ increase with...									
No additional detail	23	24	20	23	25	31	31	36	34
The increase phased in over 5 years at 2¢ per year	39	39	39	42	41	48	53	58	54
Revenues spent to reduce local air pollution	30	48	41	53	54	52	56	57	58
Revenues spent to reduce global warming	42	45	41	50	51	51	55	54	59
Revenues spent to maintain streets, roads, & highways	--**	62	58	67	69	71	75	78	72
Revenues spent to reduce accidents and improve safety	--**	56	54	62	63	64	64	65	66
Respondents informed of the annual tax burden for the typical driver	32	36	31	40	42	48	46	52	47
Mileage tax options									
1¢ per mile	21	22	21	19	19	24	23	23	27
1¢ per mile average, but vehicles that pollute more pay more and vehicles that pollute less pay less	33	36	41	39	43	44	48	45	46
National 0.5% sales tax	43	45	49	51	49	55	56	53	56

* Sum of those who said they “strongly” or “somewhat” supported the option.

** Options not included in the 2010 survey.

About the Authors

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To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/research/1828



MTI is a University Transportation Center sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology and by Caltrans. The Institute is located within San José State University's Lucas Graduate School of Business.