Revisiting Factors Associated with the Success of Ballot Initiatives with a Substantial Rail Transit Component

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Study Methods

This report presents the replication of an MTI study conducted in 2001, which comprised an analysis of transportation tax elections in 11 urban areas across the nation.

> *The general patterns observed in these more recent case studies were highly consistent with the findings from the 2001 study.*

The study culminated in the identification of 17 community-level factors with potential impact on the success of ballot measures for sales tax increases to fund transportation packages with substantial rail components. This report closely follows the approach of the 2001 study, and employs in-depth analysis of transportation tax elections in eight communities, representing a variety of urban settings across the United States. The central research question addressed by the report is: are the same factors that seemed most important to the outcome of transportation tax elections in 2001 still as important ten years later?

Among the elections analyzed in this report are the following:

Summary of Case Study Elections

Locality	State	Year	Outcome	Margin
Maricopa County	Arizona	2004	Passed	57% to 43%
Seattle	Washington	2007	Failed	45% to 55%
Charlotte	North Carolina	2007	Passed	70% to 30%
Honolulu	Hawaii	2008	Passed	53% to 47%
Los Angeles	California	2008	Passed	68% to 32%
Santa Clara County	California	2008	Passed	67% to 33%
St. Louis County	Missouri	2008	Failed	49% to 51%
Kansas City	Missouri	2008	Failed	45% to 55%

As in 2001, the study also identified several instances in which tax increase ballots were successful in communities that had recently experienced defeats. The study contains an in-depth analysis of such "rebound" elections.

Findings

Findings with respect to most factors largely replicate those reported in the 2001 study. Among the factors that were again found to be present in successful campaigns (or absent in unsuccessful ones) were:

- A consensus among the business, elected and environmental communities, and the accompanying depth of financial support
- Use of multimedia campaign techniques
- Use of experienced campaign consultants
- A transit agency with a positive public image

Among the factors that seemed less important than in 2001 were:

- Presenting a multimodal package
- The perception of benefits of a package being distributed throughout the voting district
- The experience gained in recent transit elections

Summed across all elections and factors, the results indicate that of a total of among those elections where the presence or absence of factors was not inconclusive or ambiguous, 68.9 percent of the factors were consistent with the expected outcome of the elections. By contrast, the 2001 study identified only 80 percent of the factor/outcome instances matching their expected outcomes. Nearly all of the decrease in the accuracy of these factors in predicting election outcomes is associated with the case of Seattle, where a 2007 ballot initiative failed despite a promising set of circumstances.

As in 2001, the study also identified several instances in which tax increase ballots were successful in communities that had recently experienced defeats. The study contains an in-depth analysis of such "rebound" elections. Among the findings that seemed salient in this special context were:

- Assured financing may enhance voter confidence in the deliverability of proposals
- Specified routes may increase perceptions of individual benefits
- The bleak reality of tangible service cuts may trump other factors

Policy Recommendations

This study does not contain explicit policy recommendations, but the findings can be readily employed by practitioners as a checklist for planning and implementing a transit tax-related campaign. Not every finding may translate effectively into every campaign, so those using the results will want to make careful comparisons between their communities and the cases explored in this study.

About the Authors

Peter J. Haas is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at San José State University and also serves as Education Director for the Mineta Transportation Institute. The author or numerous scholarly and professional articles, he earned a PhD in Political Science (concentration in Public Policy and Public Administration) from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1985. Dr. Haas has authored and co-authored numerous reports and other publications covering transportation and is co-author of the text Applied Policy Research: Concepts and Cases. In 2003, he received a Senior Specialist grant from the Fulbright Foundation to teach and study in Latvia.

Katherine Estrada recently earned her Master of Public Administration degree from San José State University. She previously served as a research assistant while earning her undergraduate degree in Political Science from the University of California, Los Angeles. Currently employed by the City of San José, her research interests include transportation and land use planning.

To Learn More

The report is expected to be published at the end of September 2011. For more details about the study, download the full report at *transweb.sjsu.edu/project/2911.html*