



California Voting and Suburbanization Patterns: Implications for Transit Policy

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MTI Project 1105

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In California and other states, significant funding for transit infrastructure depends on the ballot initiative process.

However, little systematic evidence exists that explains

which groups support transit initiatives. This research provides the first comprehensive study of all state-level, transit-related ballot propositions from California between 1990 and 2010. This information can be used by policy makers and others to better understand the role of the following sets of factors in explaining support for transit:

- Income, unemployment and other socio-economic variables,
- Age, educational attainment, race/ethnicity, and other demographic variables, and
- Political ideology, as measured by Republican and Democratic party membership.

In this report, special attention was devoted to the following questions:

- How does a household's location affect support for transit measures?
- Has continued suburbanization caused support for transit to decline?

Study Methods

This research project matched data from over 40,000 precincts in California with data from the U.S. Census and estimated statistical models of support for transit-related propositions. It also analyzed data from public opinion polls, which are often used by policy makers to gauge support for various issues, and compared the results from these polls to actual electoral outcomes.

This enabled conducting hypotheses tests concerning the role of demographic, socio-economic, ideological and urban form variables.

Findings

Suburban residents, both Republican and Democrats, tend to oppose transit-related propositions.

Not all suburban residents oppose transit-related propositions, but this study finds that living further from downtown areas and at lower population density is associated with less support for transit, on average. Although Republican voters tend to live in the suburbs and Democratic voters near downtown, statistical techniques employed in this study indicate that suburban residents are more likely to oppose transit-related propositions, and this holds for voters across political parties.

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Both self-interest and ideology affect voter decisions.

Political ideology was consistently found to be the strongest predictor of support for the ballot propositions considered in this study. However, results indicate that self-interest is also a powerful determinant of voting on transit-related propositions. For example, downtown residents will tend to support transit-infrastructure to which they will have easy access.

Sample results from voting models: Likelihood of voter with specified characteristic to support Prop 23*

A white, middle-aged, middle-income, Alameda county homeowner with the following additional characteristics...	...is predicted to support Prop 23 with the following probability:
High school educated, Republican in a typical suburban neighborhood	70.3%
College educated, Republican in a typical urban neighborhood	56.2%
High school educated, Democrat in a typical suburban neighborhood	15.4%
College educated, Democrat in a typical urban neighborhood	1.3%

* Given Prop 23 from the 2010 election proposed to place a moratorium on policies that hold the potential to yield large sources of funding for low-carbon transit infrastructure, the authors considered Prop 23 to be an anti-transit proposition.

Policy Recommendations

The authors recommend that policy makers consult this report when drafting propositions and building political coalitions. Specific policy recommendations include:

- Nurture downtown neighborhoods for positive feedback benefits; Downtown residents are more likely to use transit, and as this study documents, are also more likely to vote for improved transit infrastructure—which will further strengthen urban neighborhoods.
- Transit-related propositions—even gasoline taxes—can succeed, but only if they are carefully designed to distribute benefits and costs across politically important groups.

About the Authors

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To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1105.html