



What Do Americans Think About Federal Tax Options to Support Public Transit, Highways, and Local Streets and Roads? Results from Year 3 of a National Survey

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This research brief

summarizes the results of Year 3 of a national random-digit-

dial survey that explored public support for raising federal transportation revenues through gas, mileage, and sales taxes. This year's survey added a special focus on understanding support for public transit.

Linking transportation tax increases to safety, maintenance, and the environment can increase support.

Study Methods

A random-digit-dial telephone survey, conducted from March 6 to May 11, 2012, tested national support for federal sales, gas, and mileage taxes that would raise revenue for transportation purposes. Multiple variations on the mileage-tax and gas-tax concepts were presented, to test relative support levels among the different options.

A total of 1,519 adults (18 years or older) completed the survey in either English or Spanish. For the full sample, which included both land-line and cell-phone numbers, the margin of error was ± 2.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

This survey is Year 3 of a project assessing how public support for federal transportation taxes may change over time, so most of the questions asked were the same all three years.

Findings

Several key findings related to raising taxes are that:

- Most transportation tax increases don't have majority support, though certain tax options do cross that threshold of support.
- Linking tax increases to safety or maintenance purposes is particularly effective at increasing support among virtually all socio-demographic groups.
- Linking tax increases to environmental benefits is also effective at increasing support among almost all groups. For example, 2012 support was 19 percentage points higher for a mileage tax whose rate varied according to the vehicle's pollution level than for a mileage tax with the same rate for everyone.
- Support levels varied considerably by what kind of tax would be imposed. When taxes were described with no information other than the tax type, a sales tax was much more popular than either a gas tax increase or a new mileage tax.
- Certain demographic groups—young people, Asians, blacks, Democrats, and transit users—are relatively more receptive to most transportation tax increases.

Several key findings specific to public transit are that:

- A large majority of respondents believe transit is an important priority for their state, though it's rated a priority slightly less often than safety and maintenance of the transportation system.
- The majority do not support increasing either gas taxes or transit fares to expand and improve transit.
- The majority do not know of the federal government's role in funding public transit.

Policy Recommendations

Support for higher gas taxes or a new mileage tax can be increased by careful program design.

The survey results show that the very low support levels for a gas tax increase or a new mileage tax can be raised by modifying how the tax is structured and the way it is described. Dedicating the revenue to purposes popular with the public, spreading out the increase over several years, and providing information about how much the increase will cost drivers annually may all increase support.

To increase support for transportation taxes, including ones for transit, stress the environmental benefits, safety, and maintenance.

Devoting revenues to maintenance and safety can increase support levels substantially across the whole population. Also, linking a transportation tax to environmental benefits can strongly increase support among most population subgroups. Linking transit with environmental benefits may be a particularly successful way to increase support for transit revenues.

Comparison of Support* for the Tax Options Surveyed, 2010 – 2012

Tax option	2010 (%)	2011 (%)	2012 (%)
Gas tax			
10¢ increase	23	24	20
10¢ increase, respondents informed of the annual tax burden for the typical driver	32	36	31
10¢ increase, phased in over 5 years at 2¢ per year	39	39	39
10¢ increase, revenues spent to reduce local air pollution	30	48	41
10¢ increase, revenues spent to reduce global warming	42	45	41
10¢ increase, revenues spent to add more modern, technologically advanced systems	--**	50	46
10¢ increase, revenues spent to reduce accidents and improve safety	--**	56	54
10¢ increase, revenues spent to maintain streets, roads, and highways	--**	62	58
Mileage tax			
1¢ per mile	21	22	21
1¢ per mile average, but vehicles that pollute more pay more and vehicles that pollute less pay less	33	36	41
National 0.5% sales tax	43	45	49

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

**These options were not included in the 2010 survey.

About the Authors

Dr. Asha Weinstein Agrawal is Director of MTI's National Transportation Finance Center, Dr. Hilary Nixon is an Associate Professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at San José State University, and Vinay Murthy is an independent researcher.

To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1128.html