



What Do Americans Think about Public Transit? A Review of U.S. Public Opinion Polling Survey Questions

Asha Weinstein Agrawal, Ph.D

MTI Project WP 12-03

July 2015

SJSU Research Foundation
210 N. Fourth St., 4th Fl.
San José, CA 95112

Tel // 408.924.7560
Fax // 408.924.7565

transweb.sjsu.edu

Board of Trustees

Founder

Secretary Norman Mineta

Honorary Co-Chairs

Congressman Bill Shuster
Congressman Peter DeFazio

Chair

Nuria Fernandez

Vice Chair

Grace Crunican

Executive Director

Karen Philbrick, Ph.D.

Joseph Boardman

Anne Canby

Donna DeMartino

William Dorey

Malcolm Dougherty

Mortimer Downey

Rose Guilbault

Ed Hamberger

Steve Heminger

Diane Woodend Jones

Will Kempton

Art Leahy

Jean-Pierre Loubinoux

Michael Melaniphy

Abbas Mohaddes

Jeff Morales

David Steele, Ph.D.

Beverley Swaim-Staley

Michael Townes

Bud Wright

Edward Wytkind

Emeritus

Executive Director

Rod Diridon, Sr.

In order to achieve two objectives, this “seed grant” research project collected U.S. public opinion polls that asked respondents their opinions about public transit. The primary goal was to assemble a large set of transit-related survey questions that can

be used to inspire the design of future surveys. A secondary objective was to identify general patterns in public opinion about transit that emerge across the many surveys analyzed.

Strong majorities believe that transit benefits communities by providing congestion relief and accessibility for vulnerable residents, but fewer people support increasing spending on transit.

Study Methods

This study identified and analyzed 56 surveys of US residents that included questions about attitudes toward public transportation. Public transportation was defined as local or regional services. Questions selected for analysis had to be opinion-based (as opposed to questions about travel behaviors) and had to ask about public transit on its own (without combining public transit with another topic such as roads/highways or bicycle infrastructure).

The survey questions were reviewed to identify themes covered in many polls, and all questions on each theme were compiled and analyzed.

Findings

The study analysis revealed that the surveys most commonly explored the following themes: the reasons people support public transit; opinions about transit service quality; the extent to which people support improving transit as a general concept; and support levels for raising additional revenues to support transit.

The analysis of the poll questions found that strong majorities of people believe that transit brings a number of specific benefits to their community, especially congestion relief and accessibility for vulnerable residents. Strong majorities also support improvements to transit as a general concept. However, fewer people support the general concept of increasing spending on transit, and considerably fewer than half support increasing any specific tax to generate transit funding, except for sales taxes, which usually enjoy majority support.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings from the current review also suggest some types of questions that have not been commonly asked but might fill important gaps in knowledge, such as to more directly ask respondents:

- Why they support public transit. The existing polls typically break this information into two questions, one asking about benefits perceived and another asking whether or not people support more or better transit.
- The reasons they would not support additional funding for transit (for those who don't).

Fruitful avenues for expanding this review of poll findings would be to:

- Expand the range of surveys reviewed to include household travel surveys that include opinion questions;
- Compile a set of transit passenger surveys that include opinion questions, to compare the views of transit riders with the views of the general public; and
- For the subset of polls for which data files or crosstabs are available, examine how opinions vary by key socio-demographic and travel behavior factors such as age, gender, and transit use.



<http://d.fastcompany.net>

About the Author

Dr. Asha Weinstein Agrawal is Director of MTI's National Transportation Finance Center and a Professor of Urban & Regional Planning at San José State University.

To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1132.html

MTI is a University Transportation Center sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Research and Innovative Technology Administration and by Caltrans. The Institute is located within San José State University's Lucas Graduate School of Business. [WEBSITE transweb.sjsu.edu](http://transweb.sjsu.edu)