



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

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

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This research brief summarizes the results of Year Four of a national survey project exploring public support for raising federal transportation revenues through gas, mileage, and sales taxes. The surveys in the third and fourth years also added a focus on understanding support for public transit.

Study Methods

A random-digit-dial telephone survey, conducted from March 4 to April 4, 2013, tested national support for federal gas, mileage, and sales tax options to raise revenue for transportation purposes. Multiple variations on the mileage-tax and gas-tax concepts were presented, to test relative support levels among the options.

A total of 1,501 adults 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 percent confidence level.

Since this survey project is assessing trends in public support for federal transportation taxes, most survey questions were the same for all four years.

Findings

Key 2013 findings related to raising taxes include:

- Of the 11 transportation tax options tested, 6 had majority support.
- Linking tax increases to safety, maintenance, or environmental benefits increased support substantially among virtually all sociodemographic groups.
- 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.

Key 2013 findings specific to public transit include:

- A large majority (80 percent) said better transit is an important priority for their state.
- The majority did not support increasing gas taxes or transit fares to improve transit, but two-thirds (64 percent) supported spending current gas tax revenues on transit.
- Less than half of respondents (46 percent) knew of the federal government's role in funding public transit.

Looking at trends from 2010 to 2013, public opinion about the federal transportation tax options tested has changed little; all four surveys found approximately the same support levels. However, most of the tax options received the highest support levels in 2013.

Policy Recommendations

Careful program design can increase support for higher gas taxes or a new mileage tax.

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. For example, support rises when revenues are dedicated to specific purposes popular with the public, the tax increase is spread out over several years, or information is provided about how much the increase will cost drivers annually.

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

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.

Trends in Support* for the Tax Options, 2010-2013

Tax Options	2010 (%)	2011 (%)	2012 (%)	2013 (%)
Gas tax options				
10¢ increase	23	24	20	23
10¢ increase, phased in over 5 years at 2¢ per year	39	39	39	42
10¢ increase, revenues spent to reduce local air pollution	30	48	41	53
10¢ increase, revenues spent to reduce global warming	42	45	41	50
10¢ increase, revenues spent to maintain streets, roads, & highways	-**	62	58	67
10¢ increase, revenues spent to reduce accidents & improve safety	-**	56	54	62
10¢ increase, revenues spent to add more modern, technologically advanced systems	-**	50	46	58
10¢ increase, respondents informed of the annual tax burden for the typical driver	32	36	31	40
Mileage tax options				
1¢ per mile	21	22	21	19
1¢ per mile average, but vehicles that pollute more pay more and vehicles that pollute less pay less	33	36	41	39
National 0.5% sales tax	43	45	49	51

*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/project/1228.html