



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

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This research brief summarizes the results of the eighth year of an annual survey project exploring national support for raising federal transportation revenues through gas, mileage, and sales taxes. The surveys in the last six years also added a focus on understanding support for public transit.

## Study Methods

A national random-digit-dial telephone survey conducted from February to April 2017 tested public support for ten ways to raise transportation revenues. Multiple variations on the mileage tax and gas tax concepts were presented to test relative support levels among these options, and respondents were also asked about a single sales tax option.

A total of 1,201 adults completed the survey in English or Spanish. For the full sample, which included both landline and mobile numbers, the margin of error was  $\pm 2.83$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

Because this survey project assesses trends in public support for federal transportation taxes, most survey questions were identical for all eight years.

## Findings

Key 2017 findings related to increasing taxes include:

- Seven of the ten transportation tax options tested had majority support.
- Linking tax increases to safety, maintenance, or environmental benefits increased support by at least ten percentage points among almost every sociodemographic group.
- 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 2017 findings specific to public transit include:

- A large majority (83%) said that expanding and improving transit services in their states should be a high or medium government priority.
- Only 58% of respondents knew that fares don't cover the cost of transit, and only 41% knew of the federal government's role in funding public transit.
- More than two-thirds (68%) supported spending current gas tax revenues on transit, and 48% supported increasing gas taxes specifically to improve transit.

**Twice as many Americans would support a gas tax increase dedicated for road and highway maintenance as would support that same tax increase if the money were dedicated for unspecified transportation purposes.**

Looking across the eight years of survey data, support for all the taxes except the flat-rate mileage tax has risen noticeably, from 9 to 27 percentage points depending on the tax.

## Policy Recommendations

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

The survey results show that the low support levels for a gas tax increase or a new mileage tax can be raised by modifying how the tax is structured and 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.

### Emphasizing the environmental, safety, and maintenance benefits can increase support for transportation taxes, including those 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 – 2017**

| Tax options  | 2010 (%) | 2011 (%) | 2012 (%) | 2013 (%) | 2014 (%) | 2015 (%) | 2016 (%) | 2017 (%) |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Gas tax options, presented as a 10¢ increase with  |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| ... No additional detail   | 23       | 24       | 20       | 23       | 25       | 31       | 31       | 36       |
| ... Respondents informed of the annual tax burden for the typical driver                             | 32       | 36       | 31       | 40       | 42       | 48       | 46       | 52       |
| ... The increase phased in over 5 years at 2¢ per year   | 39       | 39       | 39       | 42       | 41       | 48       | 53       | 58       |
| ... Revenues spent to reduce global warming  | 42       | 45       | 41       | 50       | 51       | 51       | 55       | 54       |
| ... Revenues spent to reduce local air pollution   | 30       | 48       | 41       | 53       | 54       | 52       | 56       | 57       |
| ... Revenues spent to reduce accidents and improve safety  | --**     | 56       | 54       | 62       | 63       | 64       | 64       | 65       |
| ... Revenues spent to maintain streets, roads, & highways  | --**     | 62       | 58       | 67       | 69       | 71       | 75       | 78       |
| Mileage tax options  |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| 1¢ per mile  | 21       | 22       | 21       | 19       | 19       | 24       | 23       | 23       |
| 1¢ per mile average, but vehicles that pollute more pay more and vehicles that pollute less pay less | 33       | 36       | 41       | 39       | 43       | 44       | 48       | 45       |
| National 0.5% sales tax  | 43       | 45       | 49       | 51       | 49       | 55       | 56       | 53       |

\* 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/1728.html](http://transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1728.html)

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