What Do Americans Think about Federal Tax Options to Support Transportation? Topline Results from Year Twelve of a National Survey

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1. Introduction

This Perspective presents the top-line results from the twelfth year of an annual survey investigating public opinion about a variety of federal transportation tax options. The survey data was collected in February 2021, nearly a year into the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondents answered questions that included their opinions related to mileage fees, support for different variations on raising the federal gas tax rate, priorities for improving the transportation system, and knowledge of when the U.S. Congress last raised the federal gas tax rate.

A second MTI report, to be released soon, will present a more detailed analysis of the survey results that includes an analysis of how different population subgroups responded (e.g., people who drive vs. those who do not) and a comparison with results from early surveys in the series.

2. Survey Administration Method

The online survey was administered by Qualtrics from February 5 to February 23, 2021. Quota sampling was used in order to ensure a sample that closely represents the U.S. adult population. A total of 2,516 adults responded with usable data. The median time to complete each survey was 12 minutes, and the mean time was 17 minutes. We did not calculate response or frequency rates because the Qualtrics sampling method does not track how many people received the survey invitation.

3. About the Respondents

Table 1 compares the socio-demographic characteristics of the final set of respondents to the U.S. adult population. Values for the sample were within five percentage points of the U.S. population for the great majority of characteristics. The sample varied by more than 10 percentage points for only two characteristics: percent white (an 11-point variation) and percent with a graduate degree (a 12-point variation). To account for the variations, we weighted the results to match the Census Bureau's 2014 – 2018 *American Community Survey* five-year estimates with respect to gender, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education level, annual household income, and age.[1]

[1] Steven Ruggles, et al, "IPUMS USA: Version 10.0 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2014-2018" (Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020), https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V10.0.

Table 1. Survey Respondents Compared to the U.S. Adult Population

		Sample (%)	U.S. adults[a] (%)
Gender	Male	50.0	48.7
	Female	50.0	51.3
Of Hispanic/Latino/a, or Spanish origin		17.1	15.7
Race	White only	63.3	74.4
	Black or African-American only	15.1	12.3
	Asian or Asian-American only	12.1	5.8
	Other or multi-race	9.5	7.5
Education	< high school grad	2.8	12.4
	High school grad	21.0	27.7
	Some college	27.3	31.0
	College grad	25.9	18.2
	Grad degree	23.0	10.6
Income (annual household)	0 – $24,999	20.0	18.1
	$25,000 – $49,999	18.3	20.2
	$50,000 – $74,999	17.5	16.6
	$75,000 – $99,999	11.8	12.3
	$100,000 – $149,999	15.0	15.0
	$150,000 – $199,999	10.5	6.7
	$200,000 +	7.0	11.0
Age	18 – 24	10.2	12.4
	25 – 34	19.5	17.9
	35 – 44	22.9	16.4
	45 – 54	11.4	17.1
	55 – 64	18.4	16.6
	64 – 74	14.8	11.4
	75 – 84	2.7	5.8
	85+	0.2	2.5

[a] US data are for adults 18 years and older, except that household income is for all U.S. households. Source: Steven Ruggles, et al, "IPUMS USA: Version 10.0 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2014-2018" (Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020), https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V10.0.

4. Topline Survey Results

Notes:

- Missing and refused responses were removed from the dataset before calculating the response rates.
- Columns of numbers in some tables do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

* * *

We are interested in your opinions about the transportation system. The "transportation system" means local streets and roads, highways, and public transit services like buses, light rail, and trains.

Q1. In your community, how is the quality of:

	Very good (%)	Somewhat good (%)	Somewhat bad (%)	Very bad (%)	Not sure / doesn't apply (%)
Interstates, highways, and freeways	32	46	15	3	4
Local streets and roads	22	46	22	7	2
Bicycle and pedestrian facilities	22	42	18	6	11
Public transit (bus, rail, etc.)	21	37	18	8	16

Q2. How concerned are you about traffic congestion in your community?

	(%)
Very concerned	34
Somewhat concerned	42
Not at all concerned	23

The next questions ask for your opinion about what government can do to improve transportation in the United States.

Q3. How important are the following transportation-related goals for the United States?

	Very important (%)	Somewhat important (%)	Not important (%)
Reduce crashes and improve safety	71	27	2
Ensure that everyone, regardless of income, can conveniently get to jobs, school, health care, etc.	69	28	3
Reduce health impacts caused by air pollution from cars and trucks	61	34	5
Reduce traffic congestion	60	36	4
Reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transportation sources that contribute to climate change	58	33	9
Make it more convenient to go places without driving (bus, walking, bike, etc.)	52	39	9

Q4. Now, imagine that Congress is deciding how to spend transportation money in the next 5 years. What percent of the money should go to each of the following goals? The total must add up to 100%.

	Mean (%)	0% (%)	1-10% (%)	11-20% (%)	21-30% (%)	<30% (%)
Ensure that everyone, regardless of income, can conveniently get to jobs, school, health care, etc.	20	10	25	37	14	13
Reduce crashes and improve safety	18	10	30	36	13	11
Reduce traffic congestion	17	11	37	33	10	8
Reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transportation sources that contribute to climate change	16	17	32	31	12	8
Reduce health impacts caused by air pollution from cars and trucks	15	15	32	38	11	4
Make it more convenient to go places without driving (bus, walking, bike, etc.)	14	15	40	32	8	5

Q5. As you may be aware, the federal government charges a gas tax and spends the money collected for transportation. Listed below are different ways the government could spend that money to improve the transportation system. How much of a priority should each one be?

	High (%)	Medium (%)	Low (%)	Not at all (%)
Maintain interstates, highways, and freeways	59	32	6	2
Keep public transit safe to use during the pandemic	53	36	9	3
Maintain local streets and roads	54	36	8	2
Maintain public transit (rail, buses, etc.)	45	41	11	3
Provide discounted public transit fares for low-income people	44	39	13	4
Improve safety for pedestrians and bicyclists	43	41	13	3
Expand public transit service into new areas not already served	40	42	14	4
Build/improve sidewalks	39	43	15	3
Build/widen interstates, highways, and freeways	39	42	15	3
Build/widen local roads and streets	35	45	17	3
Add more frequent public transit service on existing routes	34	45	17	4
Build/improve bike lanes and bike paths	32	41	22	5
Provide financial incentives for people to purchase electric vehicles	30	38	20	11
Install more charging stations for electric vehicles	29	40	23	7

Q6. Here is the same list of transportation purposes that the federal government could spend the gas tax money on. Select the three you think are most important.

	Selected as top 3 (%)
Maintain local streets and roads	36
Maintain interstates, highways, and freeways	34
Provide discounted public transit fares for low-income people	26
Build/improve sidewalks	22
Improve safety for pedestrians and bicyclists	20
Expand public transit service into new areas not already served	19
Build/widen interstates, highways, and freeways	18
Keep public transit safe to use during the pandemic	18
Provide financial incentives for people to purchase electric vehicles	17
Add more frequent public transit service on existing routes	15
Build/widen local roads and streets	14
Maintain public transit (rail, buses, etc.)	14
Install more charging stations for electric vehicles	13
Build/improve bike lanes and bike paths	12

The next set of questions ask about the types of transportation your household uses and how much money your household spends on certain transportation-related expenses. As a reminder, "household" means all the people currently living with you in your home. (Do not include renters or tenants.) If you live in a dormitory, in a boarding house, or with roommates, just answer the following questions for yourself.

Q7. In the last 30 days, which types of transportation have you or any other members of your household used? Check all that apply.

AND

Q8. In a typical month prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which types of transportation did you and any other members of your household use? Check all that apply.

	In the last 30 days (Q7) (%)	In a typical month prior to the pandemic (Q8) (%)
Drive yourself (car, truck, motorcycle, etc.)	78	76
Walk	39	38
Ride as a passenger in a personal vehicle (exclude trips in taxis, rideshare like Uber/Lyft, etc.)	34	36
Public transit (bus, light-rail, ferry, etc.)	17	20
Ridesharing service like Uber or Lyft	11	14
Bicycle	10	13
Taxi	7	8
Airplane	3	8
Electric kick-scooter, skateboard, or other small device	3	4
Other	2	1

Q9. In a typical month prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, how much did your household spend on the following expenses?

	$0 (%)	$1-50 (%)	$51-100 (%)	$101-150 (%)	$151+ (%)
Fuel for personal vehicles	13	40	29	6	13
Tolls on bridges and highways, including express lane fees	66	30	2	<1	1
Public transit (buses, trains, subways, ferries, etc.)	69	26	3	1	1
Taxis or ride-hailing services (e.g., Lyft or Uber)	69	25	4	1	1
Parking	70	25	3	<1	1

Q10. How often does your household not have enough money to pay for gasoline, transit fares, or other transportation costs?

	Frequently (%)	Occasionally (%)	Never (%)
Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic	26	26	48
During the COVID-19 pandemic	24	31	45

There are many ways the U.S. Congress could raise money to pay for maintaining and improving the transportation system. The next few questions ask your opinion about some of these options. In each case, assume that the money collected would be spent only for transportation purposes.

Q11. Right now the federal government collects a tax of 18¢ per gallon when people buy gasoline. One idea to raise money for transportation is to increase the federal gas tax by 10¢ a gallon, from 18¢ to 28¢. Would you support or oppose this gas tax increase?

	%
Strongly support	19
Somewhat support	29
Somewhat oppose	23
Strongly oppose	28

Q12. Now, imagine that the U.S. Congress decided that the best option to raise money for transportation is to increase the federal gas tax by ten cents per gallon. Would you support or oppose the gas tax increase if the new money were spent only on the following types of projects?

	Strongly support (%)	Somewhat support (%)	Somewhat oppose (%)	Strongly oppose (%)
Maintain streets, roads, and highways	37	34	14	14
Reduce accidents and improve safety	37	33	16	14
Reduce traffic congestion	33	35	16	16
Reduce the transportation system's contribution to global warming	29	30	18	23
Reduce local air pollution caused by the transportation system	28	31	20	22

Q13. Some people say that money from gas taxes should only be spent on roads and highways, since drivers pay the tax. Other people say gas tax money should be used to pay for public transit in addition to roads and highways, because transit helps reduce traffic congestion and wear-and-tear on the roads. Would you support or oppose spending some gas tax money on public transit?

	%
Support	72
Oppose	28

Note on Q13: Half of respondents received the question as worded here, and the other half received the question with the two statements in reverse order: Some people say gas tax money should be used to pay for public transit in addition to roads and highways, because transit helps reduce traffic congestion and wear-and-tear on the roads. Other people say that money from gas taxes should only be spent on roads and highways, since drivers pay the tax. Would you support or oppose spending some gas tax money on public transit?

Now, imagine that the U.S. Congress decides to replace the gas tax with a mileage fee of 3¢ per mile driven. That means someone driving 10,000 miles a year would pay $300. Vehicles would have an electronic meter to keep track of the miles driven.

Q14. Would you support or oppose replacing the gas tax with such a mileage fee?

	%
Strongly support	19
Somewhat support	29
Somewhat oppose	21
Strongly oppose	31

Q15. If Congress adopts a mileage fee, would you support or oppose charging a lower rate to low-income drivers?

	%
Strongly support	30
Somewhat support	32
Somewhat oppose	17
Strongly oppose	20

Q16. A variation on the mileage fee concept is to have the fee rate vary depending upon how much the vehicle pollutes. On average, vehicles would be charged 3¢ per mile, but vehicles that pollute less would be charged less, and vehicles that pollute more would be charged more. Would you support or oppose this new mileage fee?

	%
Strongly support	21
Somewhat support	32
Somewhat oppose	23
Strongly oppose	23

Q17. Another variation on the mileage fee concept is to replace the gas tax with a mileage fee of 3¢ per mile for all gas and diesel vehicles, but with a different rate for all-electric vehicles. What rate per mile do you think electric vehicles should pay?

	%
The same rate as gas/diesel vehicles	48
Half the rate set for gas/diesel vehicles	36
Nothing (electric vehicles pay no fee)	17

Q18. Now imagine that the U.S. Congress decides to keep the gas tax, but to add a new per-mile "Business Road-Use Fee" for miles that commercial vehicles drive on the job. (These vehicles would continue to pay the current gas tax, as well.) Would you support or oppose this new Business Road-Use Fee for the following types of commercial vehicles?

	Strongly support (%)	Somewhat support (%)	Somewhat oppose (%)	Strongly oppose (%)
Delivery and freight trucks	23	30	23	25
Ridehailing vehicles	19	31	25	25
Taxis	19	30	26	25

Q19. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? I'm already tracked everywhere I go through my phone, so having my mileage tracked for a mileage fee wouldn't really bother me.

	%
Strongly agree	22
Somewhat agree	26
Somewhat disagree	20
Strongly disagree	31

Q20. Which statement is closer to your opinion?

	%
A mileage fee is MORE fair than the gas tax because everyone pays the same for use of the roads, regardless of vehicle fuel efficiency or vehicle type (electric vs. gas vehicles)	51
A mileage fee is LESS fair than the gas tax because the mileage fee doesn't give a break to people who buy cleaner vehicles.	49

Q21. If Congress does create a federal mileage fee, how would you prefer to pay? Remember that the total amount you pay annually would be the same in each option.

	%
Pay each time I purchase gas/diesel or charge an electric vehicle	44
Pay a bill that comes once a month	33
Pay a bill that comes once a year	24

Q22. As best you remember, when did the U.S. Congress last raise the federal gas tax?

	%
Less than a year ago	9
1 to 3 years ago	19
4 to 10 years ago	11
11 to 15 years ago	5
16 to 20 years ago	1
More than 20 years ago [correct answer]	2
Don’t know	53

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