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

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MTI Project I528

June 2016

This research brief summarizes the results of the seventh 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 five years also added a focus on understanding support for public transit.

More than half of Americans support a federal gas tax increase if the revenue is dedicated to improving maintenance, safety, or the environment.

Study Methods

A random-digit-dial telephone survey conducted in February and March 2016 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 1,503 adults completed the survey in either English or Spanish. For the full sample, which included both landline and mobile numbers, the margin of error was ± 2.53 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

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

Findings

Key 2016 findings related to increasing taxes include:

- Of the ten transportation tax options tested, six had majority support.
- Linking tax increases to safety, maintenance, or environmental benefits increased support by at least ten percentage points among almost all the sociodemographic groups tested.
- 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 2016 findings specific to public transit include:

- A large majority (82%) said that expanding and improving transit services in their states should be a high or medium government priority.
- Only one-half of respondents knew that fares don't cover the cost of transit, and only 29% knew of the federal government's role in funding public transit.
- Two-thirds supported spending current gas tax revenues on transit, although only 41% supported increasing gas taxes to improve transit.

Looking across the seven years of survey data, support for all the taxes except the flat-rate mileage tax has risen modestly. In seven cases, support has increased by more than ten percentage points since the first year the question was asked.

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 – 2016

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

* 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/1528.html