

What Do Americans Think About Federal Transportation Tax Options? Preliminary Results From Year 2 of a National Survey



MTI Preliminary Report



MINETA TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE

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MTI PRELIMINARY REPORT

**WHAT DO AMERICANS THINK ABOUT FEDERAL TRANSPORTATION
TAX OPTIONS? PRELIMINARY RESULTS FROM YEAR 2
OF A NATIONAL SURVEY**

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, the transportation revenues available from state and federal gas taxes have fallen significantly, especially in terms of inflation-adjusted dollars per mile traveled. At the same time, the US transportation system requires critical—and expensive—system upgrades. Policy makers are thus seeking options for raising new revenues.

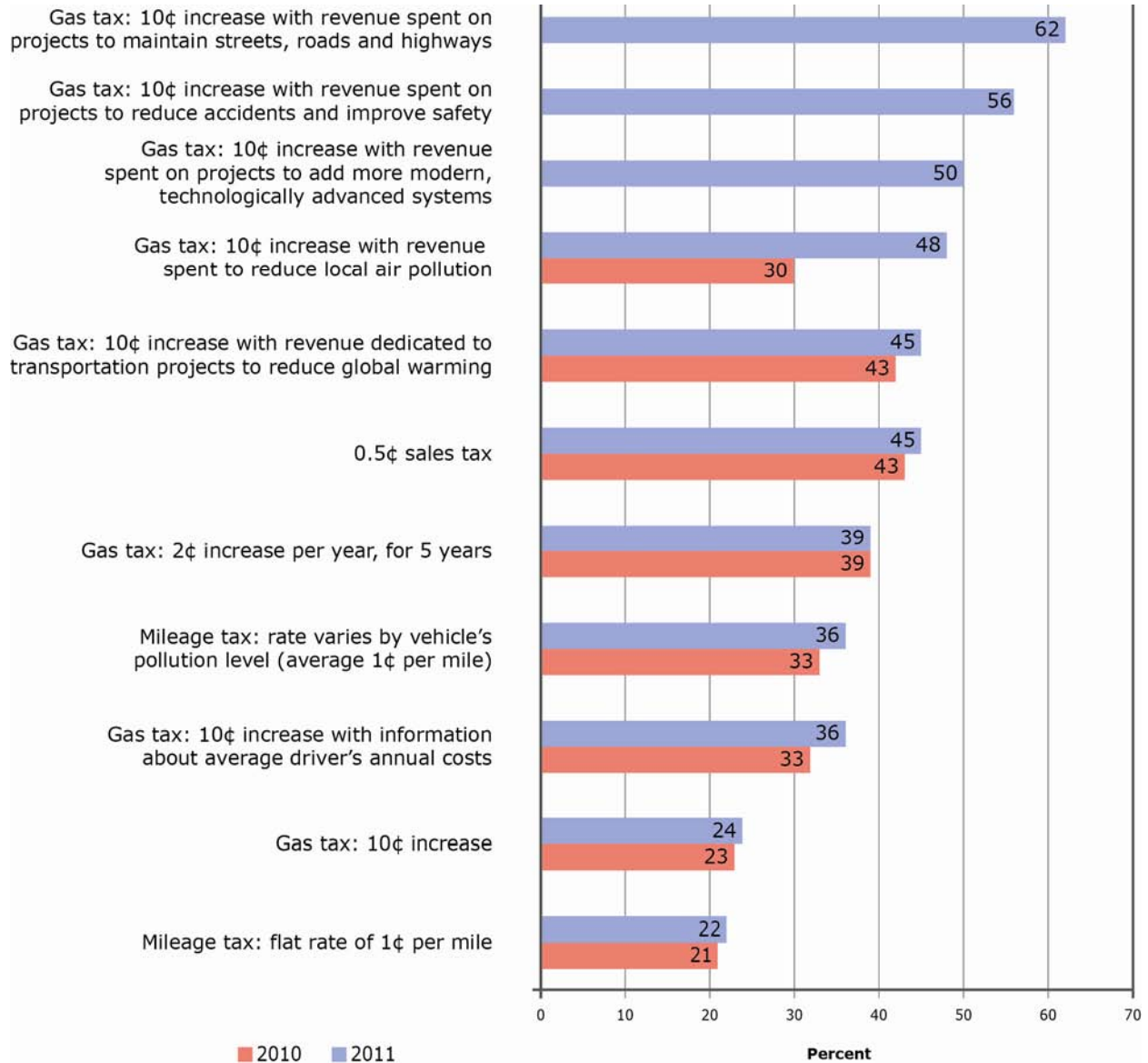
This report presents the preliminary results of the second year of a random-digit-dial public opinion telephone survey investigating support among members of the public for a variety of transportation tax options at the federal level. The survey results show that a majority of Americans would support higher taxes for transportation—under certain conditions. For example, a gas tax increase of 10 cents per gallon to improve road maintenance was supported by 62% of respondents, whereas support levels dropped to just under half if the revenues were to be devoted to reducing local air pollution or global warming. For tax options where the revenues were to be spent for undefined transportation purposes, then support levels varied considerably by what kind of tax would be imposed, with a sales tax much more popular than either a gas tax increase or a new mileage tax. The figure below shows support levels for all the tax options tested.

The poll also asked respondents about their priorities for government spending on transportation in their state. Over two-thirds of respondents felt that governments should make it a high priority to maintain streets, roads, and highways, and almost two-thirds said the same about reducing accidents and improving safety. By contrast, not quite half of respondents placed a high priority on reducing traffic congestion or expanding public transit service.

The survey questions replicate those from a similar survey that MTI conducted in 2010, to establish how public views may have shifted over the past year. The survey findings suggest that Americans are just as willing to support tax increases for transportation this year as last, or perhaps even slightly more so. For example, this year 36% of respondents supported a new mileage tax if the rates varied by the vehicle's pollution level, compared to a similar 33% supporting such a tax last year. The only substantial change in support levels over the two years was a jump in support for a gas tax with revenue spent to reduce local air pollution. This year the tax had 48% support, compared to 30% last year.

This preliminary report of the survey findings will be followed in summer 2011 by a final report providing further detail, including analysis of how factors like age, political party, and transit usage may correlate with respondents' support for the different tax options and spending priorities.

Support levels for the tax options surveyed in 2010 and 2011



Notes: "Support" is the sum of those who said they strongly or somewhat supported the tax option. For more information about the 2010 survey results, see MTI publication 09-18, *What Do Americans Think About Federal Transportation Tax Options? Results From a National Survey* (available at <http://transweb.sisu.edu/project/2928.html>).

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The Survey and Policy Research Institute at San José State University conducted this national telephone survey from March 1 to April 6, 2011, on behalf of the Mineta Transportation Institute's National Transportation Finance Center. A total of 1,516 adults were interviewed in either English or Spanish, with 2.3% of the interviews conducted in Spanish.

Telephone numbers included in this sample were randomly generated, and survey respondents were reached by both cell phone (N=413) and landline phone (N=1,103). The margin of error for the total sample of 1,516 is plus or minus 2.52 percentage points, at the 95% confidence level. Smaller subgroups have larger margins of error.

Results are weighted by gender, race, Hispanic ethnicity, age, education, and income to match the U.S. population estimates from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (2004-2009, 5 year average).

SURVEY RESULTS

The following pages present the results of the 2011 survey described above, comparing them to the results from a similar survey conducted by MTI in 2010. For the complete 2010 results, see MTI publication 09-18, *What Do Americans Think About Federal Transportation Tax Options? Results From a National Survey* (available at <http://transweb.sjsu.edu/project/2928.html>).

Note that in the tables below, some categories do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

* * *

Q1. In the community where you live, would you say that roads and highways are in very good condition, somewhat good condition, or bad condition?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Very good condition	25	19	20
Somewhat good condition	54	62	61
Bad condition	20	19	19
Don't know (volunteered)	<1	<1	<1

Q2. Does your community offer very good public transit service, somewhat good public transit service, poor public transit service, or no public transit service at all?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Very good	17	16	14
Somewhat good	38	38	38
Poor	15	19	21
No service	23	21	20
Don't know (volunteered)	7	7	7

Now, please think about what the government could do to improve the transportation system for EVERYONE in the state where you live. I'm going to read you several

options. For each one, tell me whether you think government should make that a high priority, medium priority, or low priority.

[Q3-Q7 RANDOMIZED]

Q3. How about reducing traffic congestion? Should government make that a high, medium, or low priority?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
High priority	47	49	45
Medium priority	35	36	36
Low priority	15	14	17
Don't know (volunteered)	4	2	2

Q4. How about maintaining streets, roads, and highways in good condition, including filling potholes? Should government make that a high, medium, or low priority?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
High priority	68	73	72
Medium priority	26	23	23
Low priority	5	4	4
Don't know (volunteered)	1	<1	<1

Q5. How about expanding and improving local public transit service, like buses or light rail? Should government make that a high, medium, or low priority?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
High priority	47	47	46
Medium priority	36	33	33
Low priority	14	17	20
Don't know (volunteered)	4	3	2

Q6. How about reducing accidents and improving safety? Should government make that a high, medium, or low priority?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
High priority	--*	65	63
Medium priority	--	26	26
Low priority	--	7	9
Don't know (volunteered)	--	1	2

* Question was not asked in the 2010 survey.

Q7. How about adding more modern, technologically advanced systems like real-time travel alerts, longer lasting pavements, and better timed traffic lights? Should government make that a high, medium, or low priority?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
High priority	--*	47	43
Medium priority	--	36	38
Low priority	--	15	17
Don't know (volunteered)	--	1	2

* Question was not asked in the 2010 survey.

There are many ways the U.S. Congress could raise money to pay for maintaining and improving the transportation system. I'm going to ask your opinion about some of these different options. In each case, assume that the money collected would be spent ONLY for transportation purposes.

[Q8-Q10 RANDOMIZED]

Q8. One idea (a DIFFERENT idea) is to adopt a new national, half-cent sales tax to pay for transportation. Would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this new sales tax?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Strongly support	12	14	14
Somewhat support	30	31	29
Somewhat oppose	16	20	19
Strongly oppose	38	30	35
Don't know (volunteered)	4	5	3

Q9A. Right now the federal government collects a tax of 18 cents per gallon when people buy gasoline. One idea (a DIFFERENT idea) to raise money for transportation is to increase the federal gas tax by 10 cents a gallon, from 18 cents to 28 cents. Would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this gas tax increase?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Strongly support	9	7	9
Somewhat support	14	17	18
Somewhat oppose	20	22	19
Strongly oppose	54	52	53
Don't know (volunteered)	2	2	2

Q9B. A VARIATION on the idea of raising the gas tax by 10 cents AT ONE TIME would be to spread the increase over 5 years. The tax would go up by 2 cents a year for each of five years. Would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose THIS gas tax increase?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Strongly support	14	13	14
Somewhat support	25	25	27
Somewhat oppose	21	20	17
Strongly oppose	36	39	40
Don't know (volunteered)	3	2	2

Q10A. One idea (a DIFFERENT idea) is to adopt a new tax based on the number of miles a person drives. Each driver would pay a tax of one cent for every mile driven. For example, someone driving one hundred miles would pay a tax of one dollar. Vehicles would have an electronic meter to keep track of the miles driven, and the tax would be paid each time drivers buy gas. Would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this new mileage tax?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Strongly support	9	6	5
Somewhat support	12	16	14
Somewhat oppose	15	17	16
Strongly oppose	61	58	64
Don't know (volunteered)	3	2	2

Q10B. A VARIATION on the mileage tax just described is to have the tax rate VARY depending upon how much the vehicle pollutes. On average, vehicles would be charged one cent per mile, but vehicles that pollute less would be charged less, and vehicles that pollute more would be charged more. Would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose THIS new mileage tax?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Strongly support	14	14	13
Somewhat support	19	22	22
Somewhat oppose	18	18	17
Strongly oppose	46	42	46
Don't know (volunteered)	3	4	3

[QUESTIONS 11-15 RANDOMIZED]

Now, imagine that the US Congress decided that the best option to raise money for transportation is to increase the federal gas tax by ten cents per gallon. I'm going to read you several different options for how the money is spent. For each, please tell me if you would strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose the gas tax increase.

Q11. Would you support the gas tax increase if the new money were spent ONLY on projects to reduce LOCAL AIR POLLUTION caused by the transportation system?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Strongly support	9	14	10
Somewhat support	21	33	30
Somewhat oppose	23	16	19
Strongly oppose	42	33	38
Don't know (volunteered)	6	3	3

Q12. Would you support the gas tax increase if the money were spent ONLY on projects to reduce the transportation system's contribution to GLOBAL WARMING?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Strongly support	12	14	12
Somewhat support	30	32	27
Somewhat oppose	19	15	17
Strongly oppose	36	34	39
Don't know (volunteered)	3	6	5

Q13. Would you support the gas tax increase if the money were spent ONLY on projects to MAINTAIN streets, roads, and highways?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Strongly support	--*	26	23
Somewhat support	--	36	36
Somewhat oppose	--	12	13
Strongly oppose	--	22	25
Don't know (volunteered)	--	4	3

* Question was not asked in the 2010 survey.

Q14. Would you support the gas tax increase if the money were spent ONLY on projects to reduce accidents and improve safety?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Strongly support	--*	23	17
Somewhat support	--	34	34
Somewhat oppose	--	15	17
Strongly oppose	--	24	28
Don't know (volunteered)	--	5	4

* Question was not asked in the 2010 survey.

Q15. Would you support the gas tax increase if the money were spent ONLY on projects to add more modern, technologically advanced systems like real-time travel alerts, longer lasting pavements, and better timed traffic lights?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Strongly support	--*	16	15
Somewhat support	--	34	32
Somewhat oppose	--	18	18
Strongly oppose	--	28	31
Don't know (volunteered)	--	4	4

* Question was not asked in the 2010 survey.

Q16. Let me give you some information about how much the CURRENT federal gas tax costs an AVERAGE driver. Someone who drives 10,000 miles a year, in a vehicle that gets 20 miles to the gallon, will pay about 100 dollars a year. If Congress raised the gas tax by 10 cents a gallon, that same driver would now pay about 150 dollars a year. Now that you have this information, would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose a 10 cent gas tax increase?

	2010	2011	
	Weighted %	Weighted %	Unweighted %
Strongly support	13	11	14
Somewhat support	19	25	24
Somewhat oppose	19	18	17
Strongly oppose	46	42	42
Don't know (volunteered)	3	4	3

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