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## **The Rockefeller Foundation Infrastructure Survey**

*Findings from a national survey of registered voters, conducted by  
Hart Research Associates and Public Opinion Strategies*

### **Overview**

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Even with a highly polarized electorate that remains steadfast in its belief that things in the nation are off on the wrong track there is wide agreement—across the partisan spectrum—that leaders in Washington should be seeking common ground. Nowhere is this more true than legislation related to the country’s transportation infrastructure. Indeed, two in three voters say that making improvements in infrastructure is very important, and most voters say that in its current state the nation’s transportation system is barely adequate. Voters seek better and safer roads and more public transportation options, widely agreeing that the United States would benefit from an expanded and improved public transportation system.

Moreover, few believe that current government spending in this area is efficient and wise, and voters welcome a range of reforms in how transportation projects are financed. At the same time, as is the case with many spending-related issues today, voters are unwilling to personally pay for additional funding of national transportation projects. While wide support exists for encouraging more private investment, imposing penalties on over-budget projects, and establishing a National Infrastructure Bank, there is very little support for increasing the federal gas tax or increasing tolls on interstate highways and bridges.

### **Key Findings**

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- **Voters—be they Democrats, Republicans, or independents—are looking for cooperation and consensus in Washington.**
  - As has been the case for well over a year, a majority of the public believe that things in the country are off on the wrong track—55% say this is the case, while 33% say things are headed in the right direction.
  - One of the key things the public is looking for right now is for elected leaders to work together. Two-thirds (66%) of voters say this is a time where they would like leaders in Washington to make compromises and seek common ground, compared with just 20% who say leaders should hold fast to their positions (another 10% say it depends on the issue).
  - Interestingly, this sentiment crosses party lines—74% of Democrats, 65% of independents, and 58% of Republicans say leaders should be seeking common ground. Even a plurality (46%) of voters who identify as Tea Party supporters want common ground, versus 34% who say leaders should hold fast to their positions.

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- **Voters want common ground on transportation legislation more than on any other issue.** Americans want leaders to seek common ground across a host of issues, but they want it on transportation legislation more than any other area.
  - 71% of voters say there should be common ground on this issue—higher than other major issues—while 19% say leaders should hold fast to their positions, which is *lower* than other major issues.
  - By comparison, the next-highest issue is legislation dealing with the budget deficit, where 69% would like to see common ground and 25% want to see leaders holding fast to their positions.
  - This pattern holds across other issues as well, from energy development to health care reform to tax cuts to Social Security.
  
- **Two in three voters say that improving the nation’s infrastructure is highly important, and many say our current infrastructure system is inadequate.**
  - 66% of voters say that improving the country’s transportation infrastructure is extremely (27%) or very (39%) important. Another 27% say it is somewhat important. Just 6% say it is not important.
  - Again, majorities of Democrats (74%), independents (62%), and Republicans (56%) say this is very or extremely important, as do 59% of Tea Party supporters.
  - The importance of improving infrastructure also is consistent regardless of the length of a voter’s commute—whether their commute is less than 15 minutes (60% important), between 15 and 44 minutes (69%), or 45 minutes or longer (63%).
  - Indeed, 44% say that roads are often or totally inadequate and that only some public transportation options exist for those who want them. Only 4% of voters say that roads are totally adequate with lots of public transportation options, while 50% say roads are mostly adequate and there are just enough public transportation options.
  
- **The public understands the economic benefits of infrastructure improvement.**
  - Four in five (80%) voters agree that federal funding to improve and modernize transportation “will boost local economies and create millions of jobs from construction to manufacturing to engineering.” Just 19% disagree with this.
  - And 79% agree that “in order for the United States to remain the world’s top economic superpower we need to modernize our transportation infrastructure and keep it up to date.” Again, 19% disagree.

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- **In fact, voters are in strong agreement with President Obama's ideas on investment in transportation.** Survey respondents were read excerpts from the president's State of the Union address related to transportation and asked their reaction.

"The American Dream has required each generation to sacrifice and meet the demands of a new age. We know what it takes to compete for the jobs and industries of our time. We need the fastest, most reliable ways to move people, goods, and information—from high-speed rail to high-speed Internet. So over the last two years, we've begun rebuilding for the 21st century, a project that has meant thousands of good jobs for the hard-hit construction industry. We should redouble those efforts. We'll put more Americans to work repairing crumbling roads and bridges. We'll make sure this is fully paid for, attract private investment, and pick projects based on what's best for the economy, not what's best for politicians."

- Fully 80% of voters agree with this statement, including 46% who *strongly* agree, while 19% say they disagree.
  - Agreement is nearly unanimous among Democrats (95%) and is exceptionally high among independents (75%) and Republicans (66%).
  - Indeed, 91% agree with the specific idea that "our generation has a responsibility to the future to invest in America's infrastructure--just as our parents and grandparents did"; only 8% disagree with this.
- **Voters' top priorities for additional infrastructure investments are safer streets and having more transportation options.**
    - Voters' top goal by far is "safer streets for our communities and children"—57% say this should be one of the top-two priorities if more money is invested in infrastructure. This is the top choice for most major subgroups of the electorate.
    - The second-highest priority for voters overall at 32% is "more transportation options." But there is a socioeconomic difference here—for voters in lower-income households the second-highest priority (at 37%) is "less money spent out-of-pocket on transportation."
    - In addition, 85% agree that "spending less time in traffic would improve quality of life, make communities safer, and reduce stress in people's daily lives."
    - Moreover, the vast majority also believe the country (80%) and their own community (66%) would benefit from an expanded and improved public transportation system.
  - **A large majority of voters see room for improvement in how the government spends money on infrastructure and they endorse a host of reforms in this area.**
    - 64% of voters say that how the government currently spends money on building and maintaining our transportation infrastructure is inefficient and unwise, including one in four (26%) who says it is *very* inefficient. Just 32% say the government currently spends efficiently and wisely.
    - Republicans (72% unwise) and independents (67% unwise) are particularly adamant that this is the case, though 56% of Democrats say that current spending is unwise as well.
    - Given this attitude, it is unsurprising that the public supports a number of measures that would change the way in which transportation dollars are spent.

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Indeed, two-thirds or more of respondents favor nine of the 10 reforms tested in the survey, with the highest levels of support for holding government accountable for collecting data and certifying that all projects are delivered on time and fit into an overall national plan (90% favor), and allowing local regions to have a greater say in how transportation dollars are used in their area (90% favor), and having a “fix it first” policy that focuses on maintaining existing transportation systems before building new ones (86% favor).

- The only reform that does not engender majority support is developing a pilot program in which several areas replace the gas tax with a user fee based on the number of miles driven—40% favor this, while 50% oppose it.
- **Voters are open to several suggested funding streams for national transportation projects, though there is considerable hesitancy among voters to backing higher taxes to pay for them.**
  - Proposals that the majority of voters find acceptable are encouraging more private investment (78% acceptable) and imposing penalties on projects that go over budget or exceed their deadline (72% acceptable).
  - There also is significant support for establishing a National Infrastructure Bank (60%), issuing new transportation bonds (59%), and eliminating subsidies for American oil companies that drill in other countries (58%).
  - Voters are far less accepting of proposals that would affect their own wallets. Seventy-one percent (71%) say it would be unacceptable to increase the federal gas tax; majorities also are opposed to placing a new tax on foreign oil (51% unacceptable), replacing the federal gas tax with a mileage fee (58%), and adding new tolls to interstate highways and bridges (64%).
- **The Bottom Line:** Voters of all political stripes are tired of partisan gridlock in Washington—they want leaders to work together and seek compromise to get things done for the country. They overwhelmingly say elected leaders should cooperate when it comes to transportation infrastructure, seeing improvement in this area as a way to improve the economy, make communities safer, and improve Americans’ quality of life. And while voters oppose some funding streams they widely endorse others, and they clearly see a need for reform when it comes to financing transportation projects.

*Survey Methodology: From January 29 to February 6, 2011, Hart Research (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R) conducted a national survey of voters on behalf of the **Rockefeller Foundation**. The firms interviewed 1,001 registered voters, including 200 voters who have only a cell phone. The data’s margin of error is  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points for the full sample, and is higher for subgroups of the sample.*