

Delays ahead

Voters don't see much progress improving the condition of the transportation system and see both roads and transit as key.

BY STEVE KOCZELA AND RICH PARR

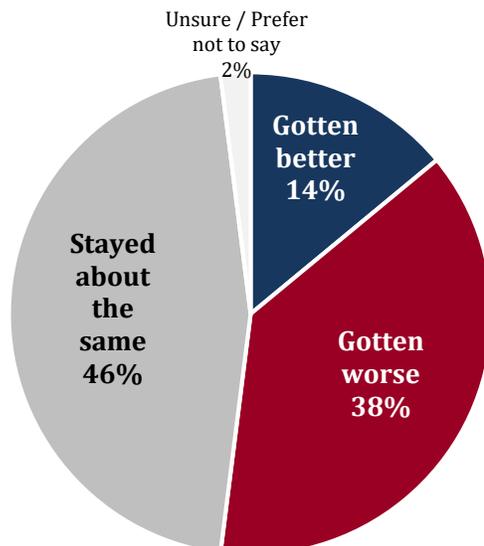
Introduction

Fixing the state's transportation system is now consistently rated as a high priority for the state government, on par with perennial top issues like education and the economy.

There are a number of forces that account for this shift. The economy is booming, particularly in Greater Boston. Boston itself is growing in population, and in jobs. As the region grows, the transportation system is straining to meet the demand. "Rush hour" seems a quaint misnomer when the roads into and around Boston are clogged all day and often on weekends. The public transportation system, which failed catastrophically in during the winter storms of 2015, is overcrowded and unreliable, with breakdowns and delays on subways and commuter trains seemingly every morning and night. On top of it all, the threat of climate change looms, as seen in the recent winter storm that inundated the Boston waterfront and the Seaport District.

Voters seeing little progress on transportation issues.

Q: In the past 5 years, would you say that getting around your part of the state has:



KEY FINDINGS

- Voters see little progress on transportation (Figure 1). A third think the system is bad enough that it is holding back the state economy.
- Transportation is now consistently a top-tier policy issue in Massachusetts. Voters think improving roads and transit reliability would be equally effective in addressing the problem.
- There is support for rail extension to Western Massachusetts and the South Coast, along with strong support for better transit frequency and reliability, suggests that regional rail could be a viable part of a vision for a better transportation system.
- Voters support new funding for transportation generally, as well as several specific ideas, including tolls earmarked for regional congestion, letting regions put transportation funding on the ballot, and charging gasoline importers a pollution fee.
- Voters think autonomous vehicle will make traffic and road safety worse, not better, and they overwhelmingly think the state needs to invest in the current transportation system rather than wait for new technology.
- Voters are even more concerned about distracted driving and support cellphone bans for drivers and pedestrians.

Transportation revenue policy has been haphazard in recent years. In 2013, Governor Deval Patrick proposed raising the income tax, lowering the sales tax, and eliminating various deductions to raise money for transportation and education. Instead, the legislature raised far less with a hastily assembled series of revenue measures. One, the so called "tech tax", was repealed almost immediately. Voters struck down another, the indexing of the gas tax to inflation, in 2014.

The problem is worst at the MBTA. Against the advice of its own special panel, the Baker administration has not pursued new outside funding for the agency. Instead the focus has been on increasing fares, and boosting other own-source revenue. Meanwhile, a new report argues that the sales tax, a portion of which is dedicated to the MBTA, has also not performed up to expectations.

Voters are preparing to take the matter into their own hands. A proposed ballot question would add a 4 percent surcharge to incomes over \$1 million per year, a change which would bring in an estimated \$2 billion. The ballot language says the funding would be focused on education and transportation. At the same time, another ballot question, to cut the sales tax to 5 percent would move revenues in the opposite direction. If both pass, the result would be a small net gain, but far less than what experts estimate the system needs. If just the surcharge passes, the impact on transportation is unclear, as the division of revenue between policy areas is uncertain.

Meanwhile, new transportation technologies promise to disrupt the status quo. Autonomous vehicles are already cruising the back roads of the Seaport, bringing the prospect of a major reordering to not just transportation, but everyday life. The Baker administration recently convened a new commission to study the effect of future technology on transportation – and transportation investment –

surcharge and the sales tax rollback, assuming both remain on the ballot.

With so many day-to-day problems, and uncertainty changes on the horizon, voters are understandably anxious about the future. This new poll sheds light on how voters around Massachusetts view the transportation system, what they want to see done about it, how much to pay for it, and their hopes and fears for the future. Below is our analysis of those findings, which also draw on context from the extensive research we have conducted on transportation issues over the past 5-plus years.

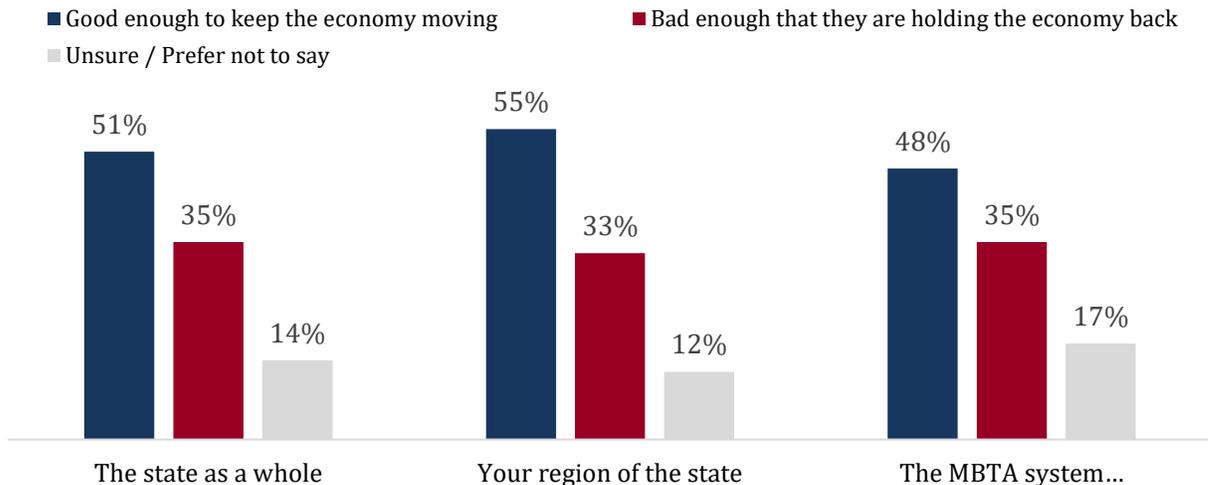
Views of the current system

Voters hold lukewarm views about the overall state of the transportation system. About half think the system is “good enough to keep the economy moving”, while roughly a third think it is “bad enough to hold the economy back (Figure 2). There is significant variation on these questions by region and mode of travel. More Boston voters think that the transportation system statewide and the MBTA are holding the economy back. Half of voters who used the MBTA subway system think the T is holding the economy back, while just 42 percent think it is good enough.

Voters also see little progress on transportation, with only 14 percent saying the system had gotten better in the past 5 years (Figure 1). The rest are

Figure 2: A third think transportation is bad enough that it is hindering the economy.

Q: Thinking about _____, do you think the roads and public transportation in ____ are:



-- in the Commonwealth. The commission’s report is due after the election that will decide the income tax

split between thinking things have gotten worse (38

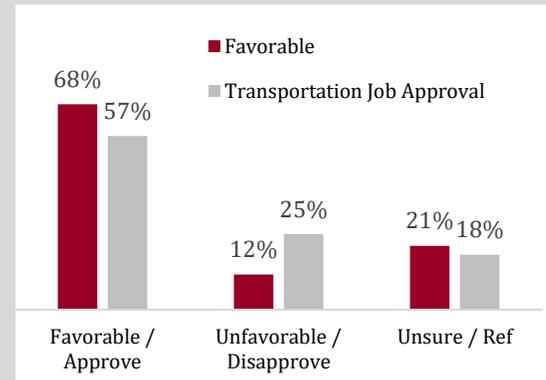
percent) and that they've stayed about the same (46 percent). This finding may explain why transportation is near the top of voters' priorities for state government in this poll, as it has been increasingly in other survey over the past 5 years. Nearly three-quarters of voters thinking that fixing highways, roads and bridges should be a major priority for the Commonwealth (Figure 3). Almost as many (64 percent) say the same of improving public transportation, coming in just behind public education, a perennial top concern.

These findings are consistent with other public polling we have conducted. A January 2017 WBUR poll found just 37 percent report satisfaction with the transportation system, while a majority (57 percent) are dissatisfied. An October 2017 WBUR poll of the Boston mayor's race found similar levels of discontent: 73 percent of voters were dissatisfied with traffic on Boston's main roads; 64 percent were dissatisfied with side-street traffic; and 46 percent were dissatisfied with the MBTA. Among voters who used the T, 54 percent were dissatisfied.

Transportation is a deeply local issue, and voters differ on their priority of roads versus transit by region. In Western Massachusetts, 83 percent of voters consider roads a major priority, while 50 percent say the same about transit. In Boston, where the MBTA is critical to riders and drivers alike: 74 percent think transit should be a made priority, and only 59 percent feel that way about roads. In the suburbs closest to Boston, who use both the T and the highways, seven in ten voters think both roads (70 percent) and transit (74 percent) should be a major priority.

Gov. Baker and transportation: lower, but still strong.

The most popular governor in America, Charlie Baker enjoys very strong favorables in this poll. His job approval for transportation is somewhat lower, with a quarter disapproving. But more than twice as many still approve of the job he is doing on the issue. There is little indication that voters are taking out their frustrations with a lack of progress on transportation on the Governor.

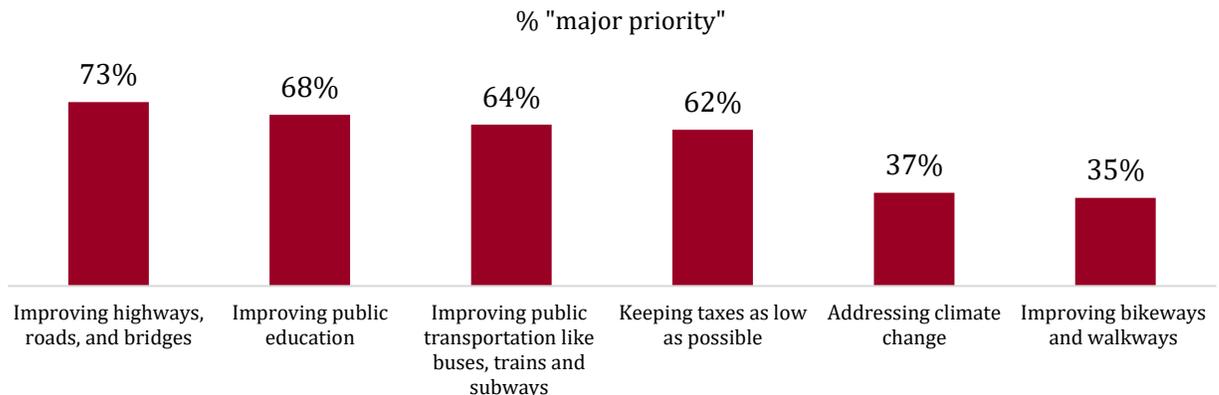


Even so, transit is still given major priority by half or more in ever regions of the state. This dynamic has been more or less consistent over the years of polling we have done on this issue. While voters in different regions have more or less need for transit themselves, they still see it as an important policy priority which the state should continue to improve.

The push and pull of funding vs frugality continues. In this poll, "keeping taxes as low as possible" was

Figure 3: Transportation first and third highest priority for voters.

Q: How much of a priority do you think each of the following issues should be for state government here in Massachusetts?



prioritized nearly as highly as public transportation. Republicans (73 percent) are far more enthusiastic than Democrats (56 percent) about this emphasis. But the fact that a majority of Democrats think taxes are important points to an important dynamic we have observed since 2012: voters do not trust that transportation funds are well-spent in the Commonwealth. Overwhelmingly and consistently, voters think shortfalls in transportation spending are more due to waste and mismanagement rather than a lack of real dollars. This is in large part a legacy of the Big Dig, and it has continued in the ongoing “reform before revenue” debate over the MBTA. Fortunately, support for funding is strong in this poll despite this dynamic, and there are strategies to assure the public that transportation funds will go where they are intended. One of those is providing local or regional input, as we will see in findings discussed later.

Climate change, on the other hand, is seen as a major priority by only 37 percent of voters, although majority of Democrats and voters in Western Massachusetts consider it a major priority. That is not to say that voters are not worried about climate change – our 2017 polling for WBUR showed a spike in concern about climate – but it is not seen as on par with other priorities for state government as other issues tested here.

This finding is consistent with our 2011 and 2014 polling for the Barr Foundation, which found that, despite widespread belief in climate change and concerns about climate impacts voters did not consider climate change a top-tier priority for the state. Voters tend to support possible policy interventions to address climate change but have not shown consistent passion in terms of

demanding change. This suggests that selling climate-friendly policies should be done on other merits, for instance promoting transit not because of its environmental benefits but because of its effect on congestion and the economy. Other findings in this poll suggest that is a very feasible strategy.

Improving transportation in the Commonwealth

Transit and roads both seen as key

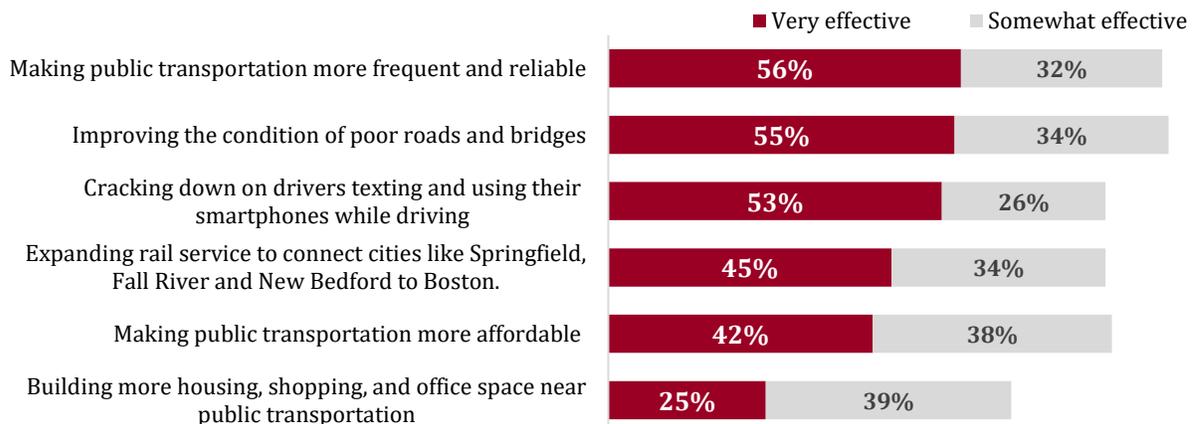
Just as voters prioritize both roads and transit, they see both as equally effective ways to improve transportation around the Commonwealth (Figure 4). Majorities think making public transportation more frequent and reliable (56 percent) and improving the condition of roads and bridges (55 percent) would be very effective at improving getting around the state.

As on the priority question, there are regional splits on this question. In Boston and the inner suburbs, 65 percent think fixing transit would be very effective, compared to only 48 percent who think the same about road improvements. This is flipped into the outer suburbs (51 percent for transit, 61 percent for roads) and in Western and Central Massachusetts.

These findings suggest a “both/and” approach to advocating for transportation investment, which is consistent with previous polling. Our first extensive polling on this issue, from 2012 and 2013, found that support for new investment in transportation was highest when it was earmarked for *both* roads and public transportation, rather than one or the other. In our 2016 WBUR poll about traffic in Greater

Figure 4: Fixing public transit and roads seen as equally effective

Q: How effective do you think each of the following would be in improving getting around the state?



Boston, fixing the MBTA was the top solution favored for relieving congestion, rather than improving roads directly. At least close in near Boston, voters understand relationship between transit and traffic.

Transit expansion

Improving the current public transportation network is seen as most effective at improving transportation, but there is also decent support for expanding transit beyond its current footprint. Some 45 percent say expanding rail to Springfield and Fall River and New Bedford would be very effective at improving transportation in the state. As would be suspected, this idea does best in the regions that would benefit most directly, Western Massachusetts (63 percent) and the Southeast (61 percent).

Asked another way, 77 percent would support expanding commuter rail service to these cities; 39 percent strongly support that idea, again concentrated in the West and Southeast. There is little opposition to the idea from regions that wouldn't directly benefit. Democrats, transit riders, and those with longer commutes most likely to strongly support the idea.

Geographic expansion is one part of the "regional rail" concept that some groups, have begun to advocate, particularly in connection to the North South Rail Link. The other part of it is to improve frequencies on existing commuter rail lines, especially outbound from Boston to surrounding

Gateway Cities, so as to facilitate reverse commutes and travel outside of rush hours. The strong support for improving transit frequency and reliability, combined with support for rail expansion, suggest that regional rail could play a role as a transformative vision for transportation in Commonwealth, provided that more proximate needs are addressed at the same time. As with roads versus transit, these findings suggest a "both/and" approach to transit maintenance and expansion.

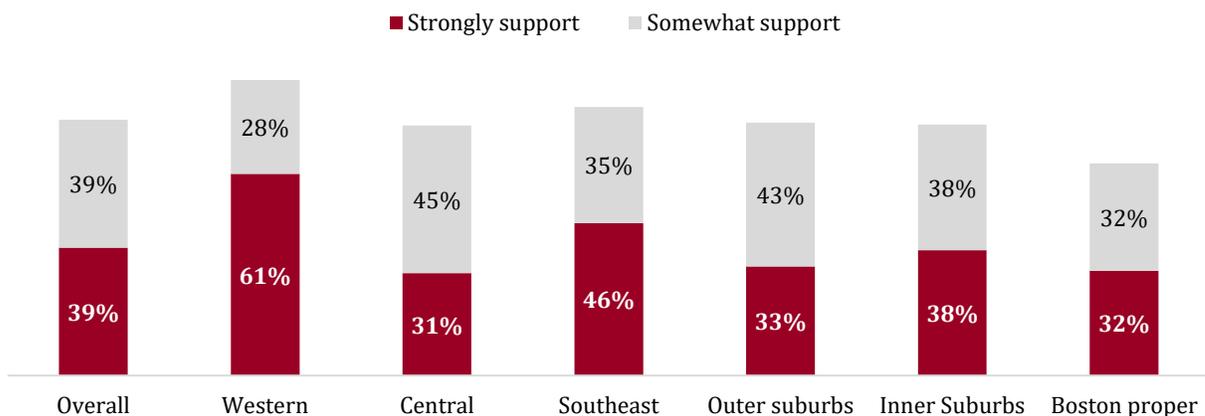
Transit affordability

Just as popular East-West and South Coast rail expansion was "making public transportation more affordable" (80 percent effective; 42 percent very effective). Democrats, lower-income voters, and T subway and bus riders were more disposed towards this idea, as are voters with longer commutes to work. There's little regional variation, which is somewhat surprising given the concentration of transit service in and around Greater Boston.

The fact that affordability is seen as less effective than improving transit service is consistent with previous polling that shows that transit riders are willing to pay more for improved service. In a 2015 post-storm poll of Greater Boston, two-thirds of T riders said they would be more likely to support raising the cap on fare hikes -- allowing larger hikes more often -- if it meant that service on the T would be significantly improved. But despite fair hikes in recent years, satisfaction with the MBTA remains low.

Figure 5: Majority support for East-West, South Coast rail; strong support highest in West, Southeast.

Q: Would you support or oppose expanding the commuter rail system to connect cities like Springfield, Fall River and New Bedford to Boston?



In this poll, seven in ten subway and bus riders think improving reliability and frequency would be very effective at improving transportation, compared to just over half who say the same about affordability. That should not be taken as a green light to raise fares, but rather than riders care about the quality of the service for which they are currently paying.

Voters support funding for transportation generally, and with some particulars.

Of course improving roads, transit and expanding commuter rail all cost money for riders, drivers and taxpayers alike. A large majority of voters support additional investment in transportation. Majorities also support some, but not all, of the transportation related revenues tested here, including tolling earmarked for regional congestion relief (61 percent), regional ballot authorization (70 percent), and a “RGGI for transportation” type gasoline importing fee (59 percent). Most also support congestion pricing on the roads around Boston (61 percent), although only if it involves toll discounts, not increases. If a congestion price increase were applied, support drops to 38 percent.

Overall, 81 percent of voters support raising new money to invest in transportation in both roads and transit in the Commonwealth; 40 percent strongly support the idea. Strong support is highest among Democrats (52 percent) and some Democratic-leaning demographics (younger voters, more educated voters), but not all. Democratic men are the group most enthusiastic than women, and white and non-white voters are equally supportive.

Tolling

Smaller majorities support specific revenues for transportation. Three-quarters (74 percent) support the move to electronic tolls on the Interstate 90 (Figure 6). Even more support electronic tolls in Western Mass and the outer Boston suburbs, two regions where drivers are often using the Pike. But only 48 percent would support using that technology on other roads in the state. However, if the proceeds from those tolls were earmarked to relieve congestion in the region where the tolls were collected, 61 percent would support new electronic tolling.

The caveats here highlight a dynamic we have observed throughout our polling on transportation. Because voters are skeptical transportation dollars

will be well spent, revenue ideas that include some assurances about how funds would be used tend to garner more support. In this case, locking the funds in for a specific use in a specific area increases support by 13 points.

Congestion Pricing

Electronic tolling enables “congestion pricing”: raising tolls during peak travel times or lowering them outside rush hour, to help manage traffic congestion. Far more (61 percent) support the idea of lower off peak tolls than would support higher peak tolls (38 percent). Support for off-peak discounts is slightly higher in the outer Boston suburbs (66 percent), but lower in the inner suburbs and the city itself (54 percent). Commuter rail riders (70 percent) are particularly enthusiastic, a sign perhaps they would choose to drive if tolls were lower and traffic less congested.

These findings show that the public is open to some form of congestion pricing, but not one that will bring significant new revenue into the state’s transportation coffers, at least if only applied to current toll roads.

Regional ballots

Local or regional control is another key dynamic that often seems to increase support for revenue, particularly in regions farther from Boston that feel they have gotten less than their share of state funding in the past. Once again, this poll shows

Figure 6: Voters like electronic tolls, would support more of them if earmarked for regional congestion relief.

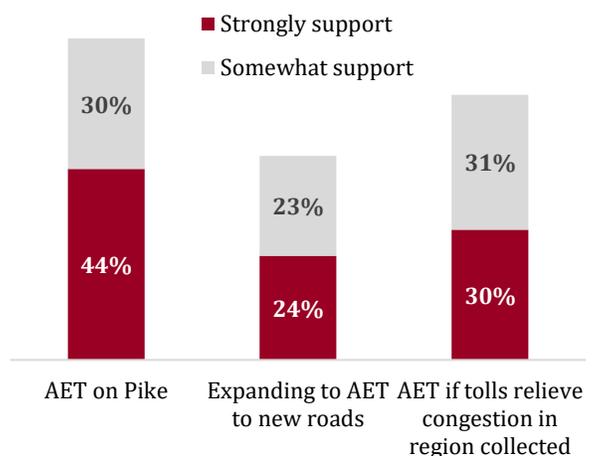
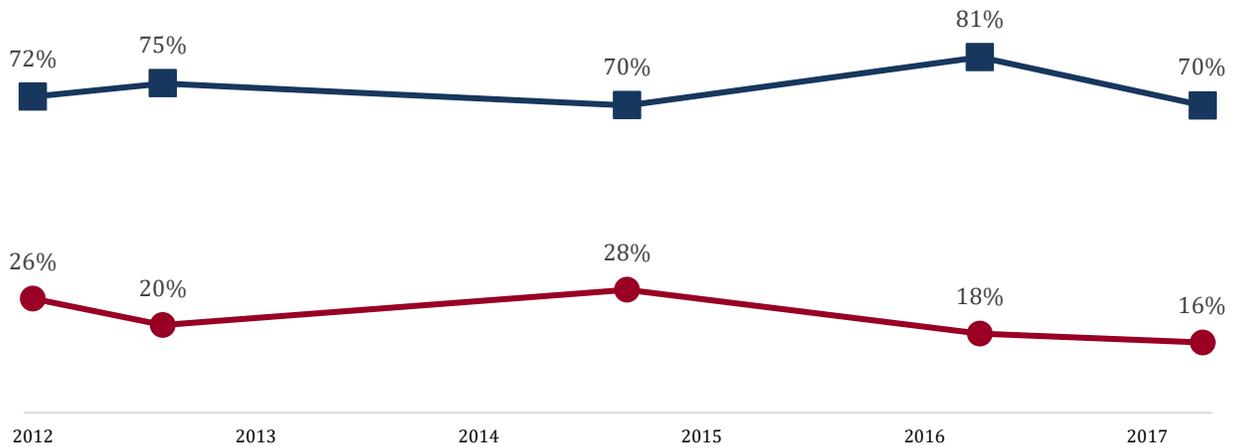


Figure 7: High support for regional ballots basically flat since 2012.

2017 Q: Currently, cities, towns, and regional agencies in Massachusetts cannot ask voters to vote on a transportation project for their specific area. Would you support or oppose letting cities, towns place funding measures for local or regional transportation projects on the ballot for voters in their area to approve or reject?



strong support and little opposition to giving cities and regions that authority to raise their own taxes to pay for transportation projects (Figure 7). Seven-in-ten voters support the idea, about half of those strongly, compared to only 16 percent opposed. Boston voters and transit riders are the groups most likely to strongly support regional ballots. That is somewhat ironic, since the MBTA currently receives a significant state subsidy, and some advocates have feared that state support could be threatened by a move to a more local or regional model for funding. Still, this could be a sign that transit riders see current levels of funding as inadequate and are looking anywhere they can for more to improve service.

Meanwhile, overall support is highest in Western Massachusetts and the Southeast; 77 percent in each of these region support allowing regional ballots. Western Massachusetts, in particular, is a region that has felt neglected by funding decision made in Boston, while the Southeast has been waiting for South Coast rail expansion for some time. These findings suggest both regions would be willing to shoulder some of the cost of transportation projects themselves.

"RGGI for transportation"

The transportation sector is now the single-largest contributor of greenhouse gas emissions in the Commonwealth, in large part because of the success of Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) among northeast states at curbing emissions from the

energy sector. Policymakers in those states are now contemplating a similar compact to bring down emissions from the transportation sector.

A majority would support imposing a fee on gasoline importers and using the proceeds to invest in cleaner forms of transportation. Overall 59 percent support the idea, including 27 who strongly support it. The idea is particularly popular with Democrats (71 percent total support) non-white voters (66 percent) and voters in Western Mass (75 percent) and Boston proper (70 percent). Non-drivers – those who take the subway or bus, use ridesharing service, walk or bike – are also more likely to support the idea. This is an example of voters supporting a significant policy intervention despite not placing high overall priority on the issue of climate change relative to other things.

There are also clear trends by age and education level; 76 percent of voters aged 18-29 and 64 percent 30-44 year-olds support a gasoline import fee, compared to just 53 percent of older voters. Among those with a high school education or less, 52 percent support the idea, compared to 68 percent of those with an advanced degree. These age and education splits mirror those regarding belief in man-made climate change from a 2017 WBUR poll.

Half of voters in the poll were shown two additional sentences preceding this question, connecting the idea to RGGI. There was no significant difference in overall support between voters who read that preamble and those who didn't (Figure 8). This suggests that unpacking RGGI for voters is not a prerequisite for gaining their support, although it seems not to hurt, either.

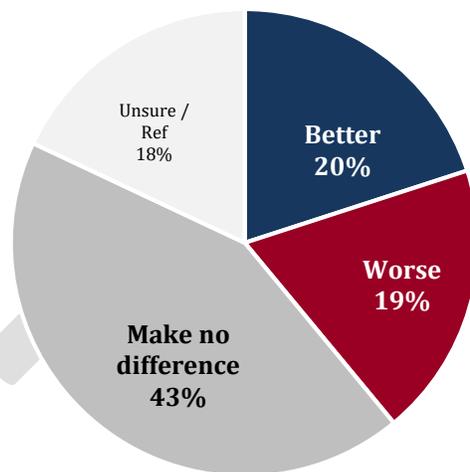
If such a gasoline fee were to go into effect, what should the proceeds be spent on? Our 2014 climate change poll for Barr gives some clues. A large majority (84 percent) support improving the state's public transportation network to reduce car travel; 55 percent strongly support that idea. And 69 percent support tax incentives to encourage the purchase of electric cars (38 percent strongly support). Incidentally, that poll asked about a similar policy idea: replacing some current state taxes with a tax on fossil fuels. That idea had majority support (56 percent; 26 percent strongly support) – very similar to the 59 percent support for a gasoline fee in this poll.

Looking ahead: new technologies and transportation

The Baker administration recently named members to a long-promised commission to study the future of transportation in the Commonwealth. Among the issues to be studied are the effects of new technologies on how we use – and pay for -- transportation. As the commission begins its work, this poll finds voters are not particularly optimistic about perhaps the most prominent and transformative new technology: autonomous vehicles (AVs).

Pluralities think the self-driving cars will make traffic worse (37 percent) and less safe for other drivers (46 percent) and pedestrians and bicyclists (45 percent). More than a quarter of voters are unsure on each of these questions, suggesting that opinion is not fully formed on this new technology

Figure 8: Voters don't think ride-hailing is having much impact on traffic
Q: Do you think that ride-hailing services like Uber



yet. The possible outcomes of a shift to autonomous vehicles also greatly depends on how the technology and policy frameworks evolve. With this in mind, voter opinion is likely to remain fluid.

For now, however, voters clearly have their concerns. Younger voters are less worried than older ones. A plurality of 18-29 year olds think AVs will make traffic better, while 47 percent of voters aged 60 or older think they will make traffic worse. The same dynamic plays out on the questions about road safety.

Perhaps because of this ambivalence, voters are not waiting on autonomous vehicles to solve problems with public transportation. Just 9 percent think AVs will largely replace public transportation, an idea that has been floated recently, while 79 percent say we should not wait on them to invest in public transportation. Transportation planning is complex and should not be entirely beholden to public opinion; researchers are seeing an effect from ridesharing on traffic and transit ridership, even if voters do not yet. Still, this finding, combined with other in this survey about the current state of transportation, improving public transit, and investing in both, suggests a sense of urgency about addressing the state's transportation shortfalls.

Little traffic impact seen from Uber and Lyft

Voters may be nervous about AVs, but so far they are taking another transportation innovation in stride: 43 percent think ride-hailing companies like Uber and Lyft are not making much difference on traffic (Figure 8). This is contrary to the findings of studies that have come out linking ride-hailing to increased vehicle trips and decreased transit ridership in urban areas. Concern about ride-hailing and traffic is higher in the parts of the state with the worst traffic and the most use of these apps; 25 percent in Boston and the inner suburbs think that ride-hailing is making traffic worse. But that's still 20 point less than the share that see no difference. As with AVs, there is an age effect, but in the opposite direction. Voters under 45 are more likely to think ride-hailing is making traffic worse than their elders. But as with urban voters, the plurality across all ages see little difference. Planners and transit agencies may be proven right about the negative impacts of these new apps, but so far voters are not seeing the downside.

Voters want action on distracted driving

As concerned as voters are about AVs as the future of transportation, they are far more worried about a current problem: distracted driving. While AVs may have a bigger long term impact, for now voters are much more concerned about distracted driving (76 percent) than self-driving cars (19 percent). About half (53 percent) think that cracking down on drivers using their cell phones while driving would be "very effective" at improving transportation in the state, making it the third most popular idea behind improving roads and transit. Banning drivers from using cell phones or other devices unless they are in hands-free mode draws 79 percent support, and 75 percent support a ban on pedestrians using their phones when crossing a street.

Once again age is a determining factor. Fully 81 percent of voters aged 60 or over *strongly* support a driver cellphone ban, compared to 27 percent of 18-29 year olds. There is a 30-point gap between these age groups on the pedestrian cell phone ban, as well (65 percent versus 35 percent). Older voters see the possibility of tangible results from these changes, with 75 percent of voters over 60 saying cracking down on drivers used cell phones would be very effective at improving transportation. Familiarity with technology may be a factor in these question, but even among the youngest cohorts there is

majority support for cell phone bans, for drivers and pedestrians alike.

Figure 9: Voter support cell-phone bans for drivers and pedestrians.

Q: Would you support or oppose a ban on drivers using their cellphones, GPS or other electronics unless they are in "hands-

