

Gridlock: Stopped in Traffic, Delayed on Transit

As lawmakers, business groups gear up to act on transportation, many commuters appear near a breaking point.

Getting around Massachusetts has gotten much harder in recent years, and advocates, business executives, and political leaders are taking notice. The governor and legislative leaders are signaling new policy may coming down the tracks, and two different groups of business executives have convened to start mapping the road ahead.

A growing pileup of recent news stories have documented the increasing strain on commuters of using Massachusetts' roads and public transportation. The daily impacts of the system's shortcomings show up in real time on social media as commuters speak out.

This report shows results of a new poll of Massachusetts registered voters, putting many of these struggles into perspective. The poll was designed and conducted by The MassINC Polling Group with input from a steering committee of policy experts, transportation planners, and business leaders. It was sponsored by The Barr Foundation. The results suggest voters, and especially commuters, are feeling the effects of the transportation system's problems in very personal ways. For a large portion of those with the longest commutes, the frustration of being stuck on the roads or transit has led them to consider changing jobs, or leaving the region altogether.

They paint a picture of a public that has not seen much progress on transportation over the past 5 years, and who are feeling a real emotional strain from their increasingly difficult commutes. Voters see the need for urgent action on transportation (Figure 1), up to and including

KEY FINDINGS

- Voters, and particularly full-time employees report feeling angry and stressed and being late for work or appointments. Many have recently considered changing jobs or leaving the area altogether.
- Few voters think getting around has gotten easier over the past 5 years; about as many think it will get any easier over the next 5 years. Majorities think the state's roads and public transportation systems are in only fair or poor condition.
- A majority (66%) think "urgent action" is needed to address transportation issues in Massachusetts, while 21% think the system is functioning well as is. Voters support overall calls for new funding, as well as regional ballot initiative legislation and TCI.
- Voters are more optimistic that the MBTA can be fixed than can traffic around Boston. They also understand that public transportation helps alleviate traffic by taking cars off the roads. The poll suggests that some least non-riders would be open to trying transit if frequency and reliability were improved.

Figure 1: Voters express urgency toward action on transportation

Q: Which statement is closer to your own view?

Action is urgently needed to improve the state's transportation system	66%
The state's transportation system is working pretty well as is	21%
Unsure	13%

support for new funding to invest in the transportation system.

Rankings and studies tell a part of the story. Massachusetts fell out of top spot in US News and World Report's state rankings, dragged down by low scores on infrastructure and fiscal stability. Comparisons with other regions show the crushing amount of time Boston region residents spend in traffic each year. Studies suggest ridesharing apps like Uber and Lyft are contributing to both problems, siphoning ridership from the T and generating more trips on the roads.

The MBTA has dug out from the epic winter of 2015 but continues to be plagued by breakdowns, despite new management and two fare hikes in the intervening years. Report after report highlights to the MBTA's challenges including long term fiscal stability, reaching a state of good repair, and modernizing the system to match the demands of a changing region.

The MassINC Polling Group has been conducting polls and focus groups around transportation

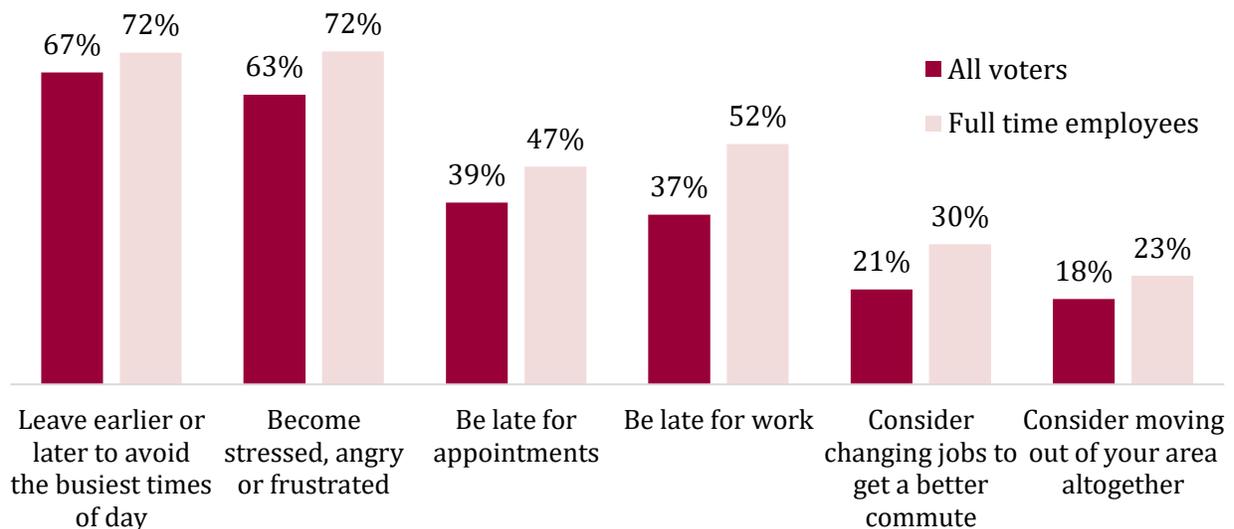
since 2012, in the run-up to the last time lawmakers tackled this issue. We are pleased to share the results of latest poll of registered voters in the state.

Voters, and especially commuters, are feeling strain of travel delays.

Everybody relies on the transportation system in some capacity. Most have personal stories of the system's impact on their daily lives. The most prevalent impacts in this poll are to people's commuting routines and their emotions. Two-thirds (67%) of voters report changing their schedules to avoid the worst travel times (Figure 2). Nearly as many (63%) say they've become angry, stressed, or frustrated due to delays on the roads and transit. Many also report being late for medical appointments or daycare pickups (39%) or for work (37%).

The numbers are even higher among full-time employees across the state. Among those who report full time employment, 52% say they have been late for work in the last few months, and 47% have been late for appointments. Among

Figure 2: Delays bring stress, tardiness, even thoughts of moving and changing jobs
Q: In the past few months, have delays on the roads or public transportation caused you to...



these full-time employees, 30% say they have considered changing jobs for a better commute in the last few months; 23% have thought about leaving the area entirely. Within Route 128, a third (32%) of full-time workers say they have considered leaving the area.

Compared to drivers, full-time workers who use transit are having a worse time of it; 63% of transit riding FTEs report being late to work. Perhaps some of these riders are getting some work done in transit, but they are also feeling frustrated and face an added risk of tardiness getting both to work and to appointments. Among transit riding FTEs, 72% report having adjusted their schedules to avoid the worst travel periods, and 37% have considered a job change in the last few months.

Workers with longer commutes describe levels of exasperation which should throw up red flags business community. Among those with commutes longer than 45 minutes, about half (51%) have thought about changing jobs; 30% have considered leaving their area altogether. These thoughts are likely related to other

impacts of their commutes—83% report stress and frustration, 71% say they have been late for work recently, and 62% have been late for appointments.

These impacts also echo much of what we have heard in focus groups about transportation going back to 2012. Participants have told of near-heroic measures they have taken to try to beat persistent delays: changing routes, leaving at extreme hours of the morning and evening, trying various navigation apps to gain a small advantage, and more. Some had forgone jobs with higher pay in Boston because of the commute. Many more had simply rationalized the stress and strain as a tradeoff of living in Massachusetts. These numbers suggest that, for a significant minority of workers, the strain of commuting may be reaching a breaking point.

These commuting woes are linked to another major issue facing the state: the high cost of housing. In this poll, 65% of voters considered housing costs to be a major priority for state government, just behind public education and jobs and the economy and slightly ahead of

Figure 3: Full-time workers feeling strain, especially those on transit and with long commutes.

Q: (Among full-time employees) In the past few months, have delays on the roads or public transportation caused you to... Major differences highlighted.

	Commute Mode			Morning Commute Length			
	All FTEs	Drive	Transit	15 or <	>15-30	>30-45	>45
Become stressed, angry or frustrated	72%	73%	78%	62%	70%	76%	80%
Leave earlier or later to avoid the busiest times	72%	71%	82%	50%	74%	78%	86%
Be late for work	52%	52%	63%	32%	48%	61%	71%
Be late for appointments	47%	47%	53%	34%	40%	53%	62%
Consider changing jobs to get a better commute	30%	30%	37%	19%	20%	34%	51%
Consider moving out of your area altogether	23%	24%	29%	16%	19%	29%	30%

improving the transportation system. Within Route 128, housing is the top-ranked priority (75% major priority), followed by transportation (67%). The combination of housing and transportation seems to be having a particularly pernicious effect in Boston and its innermost suburbs.

Little progress seen or expected; voters hold dim views of the system condition.

Most see the system treading water or actually deteriorating, and about as many think things will stagnate or continue to get worse in the near future. Only 17% think it has gotten easier to get around their part of the state over the past 5 years, and only 19% expect it will get any easier over the coming 5 years. More than twice as many think it's gotten harder (38%) and will get harder (39%) to get around. That pessimism increases with proximity to Boston: pluralities in the outer (41%) and inner (47%) suburbs think travel will get harder over the next five years. In Boston itself, a majority (53%) think it will get harder to get around.

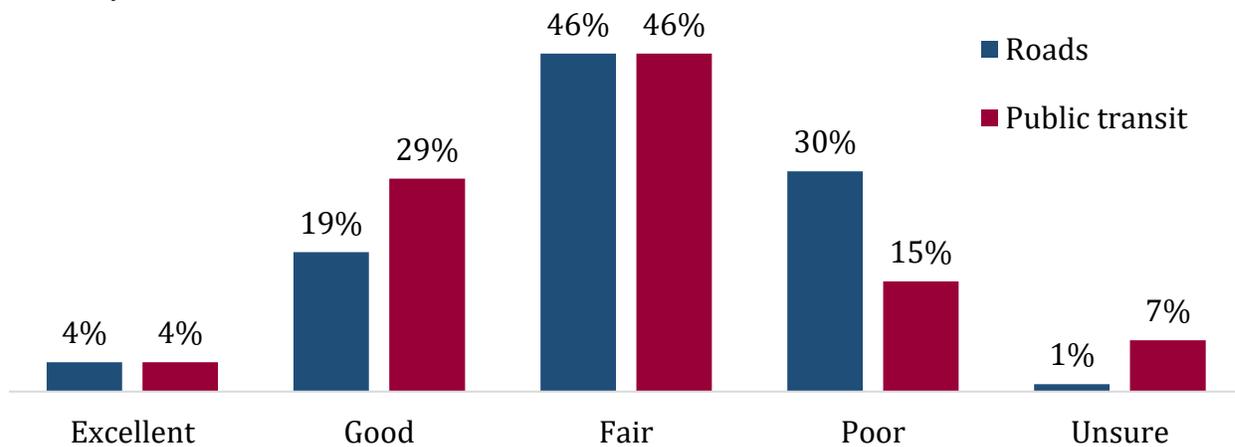
To be fair, a considerable share think that getting around has gotten neither easier nor harder, and they expect it to stay that way going forward. The problem is the voters do not think the status quo is particularly good. Majorities think that both the road system and public transportation in the state are only fair or poor condition (Figure 4), and only 21% think the system is working well as it. So staying the same is not a good place to be, according to voters.

Voters support “urgent action” on transportation, including new money and other policies.

By more than a 3-to-1 margin, voters agree that “urgent action is needed to improve the state’s transportation system”. Two-thirds (66%) agree with that statement, compared to 21% who think “the state’s transportation system is working pretty well as is”. Older voters, voters with higher levels of education and income, and those who ride public transit are most likely to think urgent action is needed. So are voters with longer commutes – 72% of those traveling more than a half hour every morning think urgent action is needed.

Figure 4: Few high marks for condition of the state’s transportation system

Q: How would you rate the condition of the road system here in Massachusetts, including the local roads, highways, bridges, and tunnels? How would you rate the condition of public transportation here in Massachusetts, including subways, trains, buses, and ferries?



So what sort of action would voters support? The poll tested support for various policies that have been proposed and discussed in the past year. These included several that would generate new funding for the transportation system. A majority of voters supported each policy tested.

Voters also support funding for that action; 80% of voters support a general call for new money to invest in the transportation system, almost identical to the support found in a December 2017 poll (81%). Of course, new money needs to come from somewhere, and how the state raises those funds makes a big difference in levels of support. While there is talk of some effort to raise revenue for transportation for transportation, details have not yet emerged. Absent those, specific user fees or taxes were not tested as a part of this poll.

Majorities of voters do support two policies that have been proposed and that would have the effect of raising new revenue for transportation while accomplishing other policy goals (Figure 5).

User fees v. general taxes

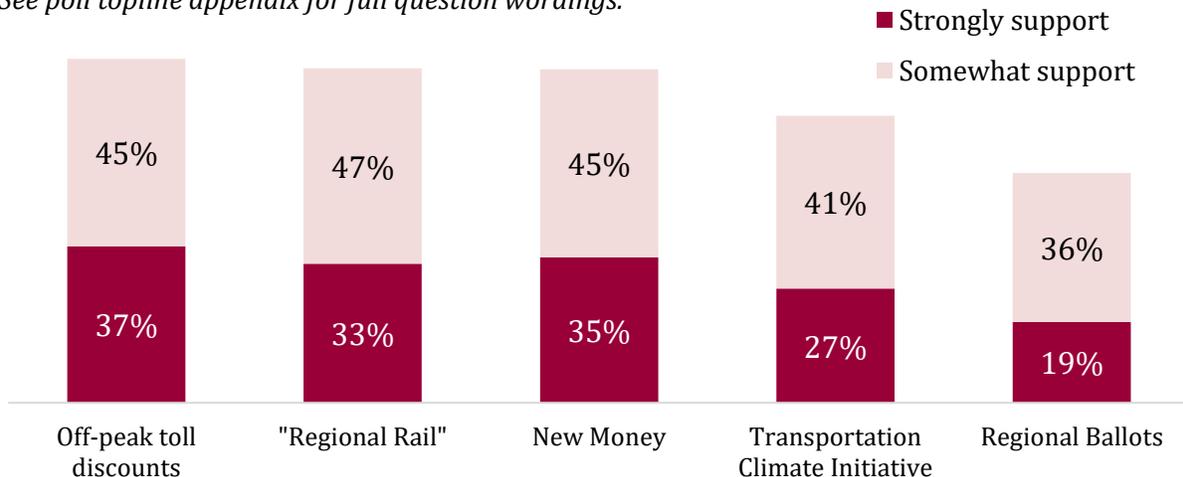
In past polling, voters have sent somewhat mixed signals about how they would like to see money raised for transportation. In 2012, a plurality favored user fees – having the drivers or transit riders pay – over general fees as a matter of principle. But in the same survey, when specific taxes were tested, the most popular options were non-transportation revenues – specifically, raising taxes on corporations.

In 2013 we found Governor Patrick’s proposal to raise the state’s income tax while cutting the sales tax was more popular than raising transportation-related revenues via a gas tax or transit fare hikes. In recent years, the so-called Fair Share constitutional amendment, which would have created a 4% surtax on income over \$1 million, was consistently popular in polling.

Voters may say they want transportation to pay for itself, but when faced with specifics taxes, general taxes are more popular, and general taxes that most voters don’t have to pay are most popular of all.

Figure 5: Majorities support policy proposals, including new revenue proposals

See poll topline appendix for full question wordings.



Transportation Climate Initiative (TCI)

In December, the Baker administration announced it was moving forward, with other Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transportation by imposing a fee on distributors importing gasoline into the region. The details of the plan are currently being negotiated by the participating states, but the general concept mirrors the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), which has reduced greenhouse gas from power plants in the Northeast.

Two-thirds (68%) of voters supported the policy after a fairly lengthy description of how it would work and how the funds raised might be used. Support is highest among younger voters, women aged 60 or over, and transit users. It is very popular among self-identified Democrats, although the idea has majority support with Republicans as well. The groups most supportive of TCI are also the ones most likely to consider climate change and reducing transportation emissions major priorities for state government.

We asked about this policy in December 2017, using two different wordings, each of half the sample, and found support at 58% and 61%, depending on a question wording. This is a complex policy proposal, and not yet fully formed; support will likely shift as the public learns more about the details. But for now, voters appear to be quite open to the idea.

Regional Ballot Initiatives

The other revenue-raising policy tested was a proposal to let cities or regions in the state put forward transportation projects, and taxes to pay for them, as ballot questions for voters to approve or reject. In many other states these

regional ballot initiatives are a major source of funding for transportation projects, but they are currently not allowed under Massachusetts law.

Voters support letting cities and regions pursue regional ballots for transportation by 55% to 35% margin. This is tighter than seen in previous waves of polling going back to 2012, where support has been 70% or higher. Those previous question wordings focused on giving regions the ability to vote on transportation projects for their areas; in this poll the question more explicitly highlighted the local taxes that would be raised to pay for those projects.

The 20-point margin in favor of allowing regional ballots does not mean that voters will necessarily vote for a regional ballot initiative in their area. That will depend on the mix of projects put forward and the taxes proposed to pay for them. But as with TCI, this poll suggests an openness to at least giving regions ballot questions as a tool for choosing and paying for transportation improvements, even when voters are told that taxes would be involved.

Large majorities support policies to improve transit and reduce congestion.

The polls also asked voters about two policies to improve transportation. Both had broad support. Eighty percent of voters supported what might be described as “regional rail” (although we did not use that term in the question wording): increasing the frequency of commuter rail trains in and out of Boston to every 15 to 30 minutes, and running trains throughout the day later at night and on weekends.

As might be expected, current commuter rail riders are the most enthusiastic about this policy; 59% strongly support the idea. But

overall support is high across all travel modes, and even in regions of the state not currently served by the commuter rail. We noted a similar dynamic in our last public poll on transportation, from December 2017, where majorities across the state supported expanding commuter rail to Western Massachusetts and to the South Coast. There appears to be an appetite for rail, even among those who would not directly benefit from or even necessarily use it.

An equal number (82%) supported giving drivers toll discounts for driving during off-peak travel times. This is an idea that has been proposed as a pilot project and was even included as an outside section in last year’s state budget until Governor Baker vetoed it. This support level represents a sizable increase in support over our last public poll, from December 2017, which found 60% support with a slightly different question wording. The policy got considerable discussion in the press since that first poll, so this higher support number could be a result of voters warming to the policy after hearing more about it.

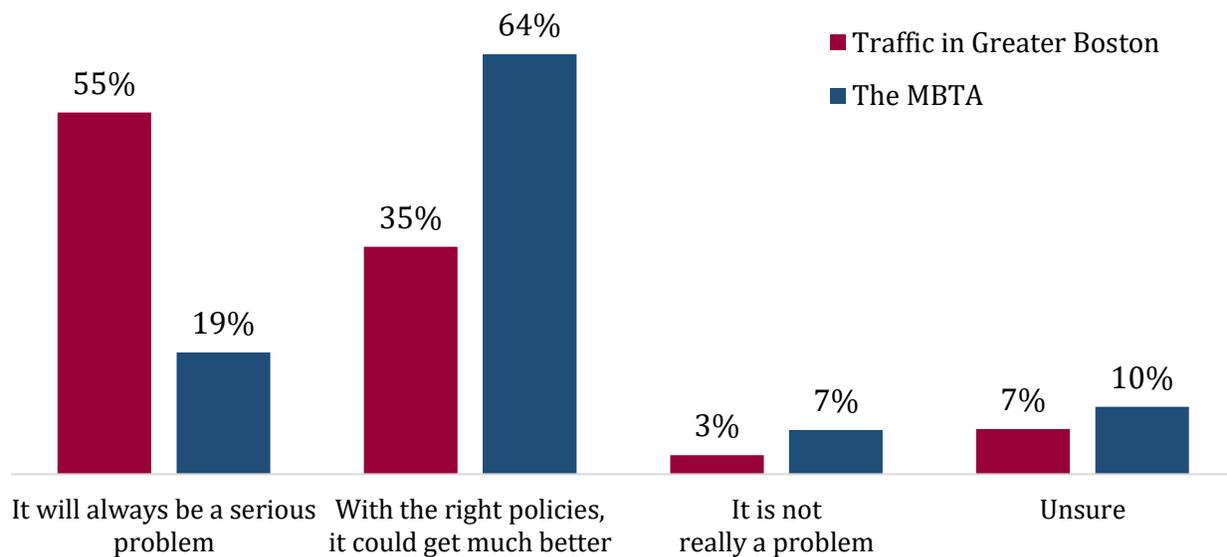
As with “regional rail”, there is support for toll discounts across modes; transit users and drivers alike support the idea. Strong support is particularly high in the inner suburbs (within Route 128) and with workers with commutes between 30 and 45 minutes long. Given that a majority of voters report they sometimes shift their commuting times to avoid peak travel times, there appears to be a group of commuters who might be primed to take advantage of off-peak discounts.

Voters think the MBTA could improve, but are more skeptical on traffic.

Despite the MBTA’s well-documented woes, voters are more optimistic that it could be improved compared than traffic around Boston. Most say the MBTA could be improved with the right policies (64%), while just 19% say it will always be a problem (Figure 6). Users of the system are even more optimistic, with 72% of subways riders and 77% of commuter rail riders saying the system could be improved.

Figure 6: Voters are more optimistic about fixing the T than traffic around Boston.

Q: Which is closest to your view of _____?



There is more skepticism on traffic in the Boston region, where just 35% say better policies could make the situation better; 55% say it will always be a problem. Unlike with the MBTA, familiarity with the situation does not breed optimism. Inside 128, 56% say traffic will always be a problem, close to the figure for drivers as a whole (53%).

Past polls have examined support for various ideas to reduce congestion. In 2016, a WBUR poll found the top two ideas for addressing traffic were improving the MBTA and making it more affordable. Similarly, in this poll, voters are keenly aware of the connection between transit and traffic. In all, 86% agree with the idea that public transportation helps gets cars off the road and traffic would be worse without it.

Despite skepticism that it can fixed, reducing traffic congestion is a major priority for 68% of voters; another 27% call it a minor priority (Figure 8). Only road improvements were cited by more voters as a major priority (75%). This focus on roads can also be traced to the fact that

nearly everybody uses the roads for some portion of their day-to-day life, whether as an individual driver, in a rideshare, or on a bus.

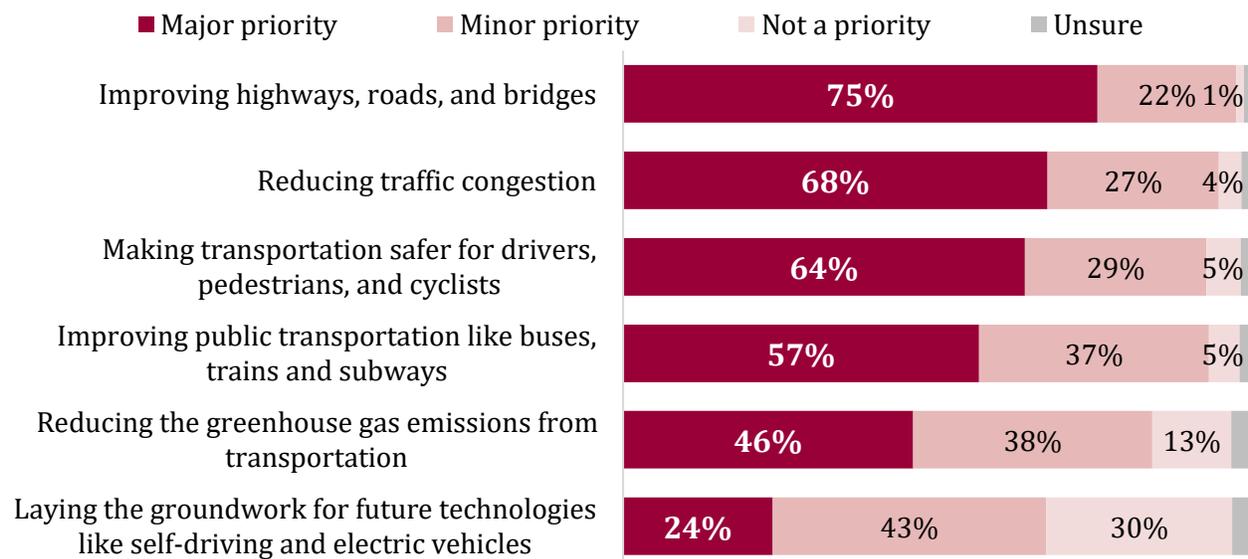
Despite most voters driving, there is some opportunity for mode shift.

Driving remains the mode used for the large majority of residents, with just 24% saying they use transit for all, most, or some of their trips. Meanwhile, 75% report using transit for none (60%) or just a few (15%) trips in a given week. This is significantly related to availability, with voters in and near Boston far more likely to report using transit than are voters elsewhere in the state, where transit options are more sparse.

The regional availability of transit means many drivers would have no option even if they wished to take another mode. But a considerable number say they could use transit for many more of their trips than they currently do. Among those who take transit rarely or never, a third say they could take transit for at least “some” of their trips. In Boston and the inner

Figure 8: Voter transportation priorities focus on current needs

Q: Thinking about transportation specifically, how much of a priority do you think each of the following issues should be for state government here in Massachusetts?



suburbs, a *majority* (58%) of non-transit users say they could take transit for at least some of their trips if they wanted to, including 41% say they could take transit for all or most of their trips.

Not everyone is primed for mode shift. The most common major obstacle to using transit is that commuters simply prefer to have their car for errands or other trips; 41% of non-transit users statewide and in Boston and the inner suburbs alike cite this as a major obstacle to using transit. But significant numbers of non-riders statewide also cited a lack of frequency (30%) and reliability (22%) as major obstacles. Addressing

these concerns, and others like unfamiliarity with transit routes, could make public transportation a more viable and attractive option for some portion of these non-riders.

That portion would likely be a small share of all commuters, but research suggests that taking a relatively small number of cars off the roads can have a disproportionately large effect on the traffic congestion that is having such a profound and negative effect on voters, and especially workers, in the Commonwealth.

APPENDIX – TOPLINE RESULTS
The Barr Foundation Transportation Issues Survey
 Statewide Survey of 1,200 Massachusetts Registered Voters
 Field Dates: March 15-25, 2019

Which modes of travel do you use regularly to get around? Please check all that apply.

Drive alone	82%
Drive or ride with others	50%
Walk	41%
Take the MBTA subway (Red, Orange, Blue, Green, Silver lines)	19%
Take a taxi, Uber or Lyft	19%
Take a MBTA or other public bus	15%
Take the commuter rail	9%
Ride a bicycle	7%
Other	2%
Take a ferry	1%
Take a corporate or private shuttle	1%

During the average week, how often do you use public transportation (public buses, subways, trains, or ferries)?

All of my trips	5%
Most of my trips	11%
Some of my trips	8%
Just a few trips	15%
None of my trips	60%
Unsure	2%

Asked of those who use public transportation for “just a few” or “none” of their trips.

If you wanted to take public transit, how many of your trips start and end in places accessible by transit (public bus, subway, trains, or ferries)?

All of my trips	8%
Most of my trips	12%
Some of my trips	13%
Just a few trips	20%
None of my trips	40%
Unsure	8%

Following asked of those who did not answer “none of my trips” – ie, those with some access to transit.

How much of an obstacle is each of the following to your using public transportation for more of your travel?

<i>Order randomized; sorted by “major obstacle” for display.</i>	A major obstacle	A minor obstacle	Not an obstacle	Unsure
I prefer to have my car for errands or other trips	41%	18%	36%	4%
Public transportation does not run frequently enough	30%	42%	22%	7%
Public transportation isn’t reliable enough	22%	45%	27%	6%
I don’t know what routes to take to get where I need to on public transportation	21%	33%	41%	5%
Public transportation is too expensive	15%	36%	43%	6%
I don’t feel safe on public transportation	11%	34%	52%	3%

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

<i>Order randomized; sorted by “major priority” for display.</i>	Major priority	Minor priority	Not a priority	Unsure
Growing jobs and the economy	68%	26%	4%	2%
Improving public education	67%	27%	5%	2%
Addressing the high cost of housing	65%	28%	6%	2%
Keeping taxes as low as possible	64%	28%	6%	2%
Improving the state’s transportation system	60%	32%	6%	2%
Addressing climate change	49%	31%	18%	3%

How would you rate the condition of the road system here in Massachusetts, including the local roads, highways, bridges, and tunnels?

Excellent	4%
Good	19%
Fair	46%
Poor	30%
Unsure	1%

How would you rate the condition of public transportation here in Massachusetts, including subways, trains, buses, and ferries?

Excellent	4%
Good	29%
Fair	46%
Poor	15%
Unsure	7%

Over the last five years, has it become easier or more difficult to get around your part of the state?

It's gotten much easier	4%
It's gotten a little easier	13%
It's stayed about the same	44%
It's gotten a little harder	25%
It's gotten much harder	13%
Unsure	2%

Over the next five years, do you think it will become easier or more difficult to get around your part of the state?

Will get much easier	5%
Will get a little easier	14%
Will stay about the same	38%
Will get a little harder	24%
Will get a lot harder	15%
Unsure	4%

How much would you support or oppose the Commonwealth raising new money to invest in the Massachusetts transportation system, including improving roads, bridges and public transportation?

Strongly support	35%
Somewhat support	45%
Somewhat oppose	11%
Strongly oppose	6%
Unsure	4%

Right now, cities and towns in Massachusetts cannot hold votes to raise local taxes to pay for transportation projects. Would you support or oppose a new state law which would allow cities, towns, or regions to hold votes to raise local or regional taxes to pay for transportation projects?

Strongly support	19%
Somewhat support	36%
Somewhat oppose	19%
Strongly oppose	16%
Unsure	10%

Massachusetts and other northeast states are developing a regional plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transportation. The program would be modeled on one that has successfully reduced emissions from power plants in the region. Under the plan, gasoline importers would be charged a fee based on the amount of pollution their fuels produce. States would then invest those fees as to make their transportation systems better and cleaner. Potential uses might include improving existing roads and public transportation; expanding public transportation to more people and places; encouraging walking and biking; giving consumer incentives to buy electric vehicles; and building charging stations for electric vehicles.

Would you support or oppose Massachusetts joining with other northeast state in a program like the one described above?

Strongly support	27%
Somewhat support	41%
Somewhat oppose	12%
Strongly oppose	11%
Don't Know / Refused	9%

Thinking about transportation specifically, how much of a priority do you think each of the following issues should be for state government here in Massachusetts?

<i>Order randomized; sorted by "major priority" for display.</i>	Major priority	Minor priority	Not a priority	Unsure
Improving highways, roads, and bridges	75%	22%	1%	1%
Reducing traffic congestion	68%	27%	4%	2%
Making transportation safer for drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists	64%	29%	5%	2%
Improving public transportation like buses, trains and subways	57%	37%	5%	2%
Reducing the greenhouse gas emissions from transportation	46%	38%	13%	3%
Laying the groundwork for future technologies like self-driving and electric vehicles	24%	43%	30%	3%

Which is closest to your view of traffic around the Greater Boston region?

It will always be a serious problem	55%
With the right policies, it could get much better	35%
It is not really a problem	3%
Unsure	7%

Which is closest to your view of the condition and operations of the MBTA?

It will always be a serious problem	19%
With the right policies, it could get much better	64%
It is not really a problem	7%
Unsure	10%

In the past few months, have delays on the roads or public transportation caused you to...

<i>Order randomized; sorted by "yes" for display.</i>	Yes	No	Unsure
Leave earlier or later to avoid the busiest times of day	67%	30%	3%
Become stressed, angry or frustrated	63%	34%	3%
Be late for appointments, like going to the doctor or picking up or dropping off from daycare	39%	57%	3%
Be late for work	37%	60%	3%
Consider changing jobs to get a better commute	21%	73%	6%
Consider moving out of your area altogether	18%	75%	6%

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Public transportation helps get cars off the roads. Without it, traffic around Greater Boston would be much worse.

Strongly agree	42%
Somewhat agree	44%
Somewhat disagree	6%
Strongly disagree	3%
Unsure	4%

Which statement is closer to your own view?

Action is urgently needed to improve the state's transportation system	66%
The state's transportation system is working pretty well as is	21%
Unsure	13%

Now we'd like to ask you about some ideas that have been proposed to improve transportation in Massachusetts.

How much would you support or oppose increasing the frequency of commuter rail trains running to and from Boston to every 15 to 30 minutes throughout the day, at night and on weekends?

Strongly support	33%
Somewhat support	47%
Somewhat oppose	9%
Strongly oppose	2%
Unsure	9%

How much would you support or oppose giving drivers a discount on tolls if they drive outside of rush hour, to reduce traffic congestion?

Strongly support	37%
Somewhat support	45%
Somewhat oppose	7%
Strongly oppose	3%
Unsure	8%

Which one of the following best describes your work situation?

Employed full time	51%
Employed part time	14%
Not currently employed	33%
Prefer not to say	2%

The following asked only of those who said they were not currently employed.

Are you...

A student	4%
A homemaker	14%
Retired	62%
Temporarily unemployed	15%
Prefer not to say	5%

The following asked only of those who were employed full- or part-time or were a student.

On an average day, how long is your one-way commute to work or school?

15 minutes or less	30%
More than 15 minutes to 30 minutes	26%
More than 30 minutes to 45 minutes	23%
More than 45 minutes to an hour	11%
More than an hour	7%
I do not commute to work or school	4%

Do you have any children under age 18 in your household?

Yes	22%
No	77%
Prefer not to say	1%

Do you currently own your home, or rent?

Own	64%
Rent	33%
Prefer not to say	3%

How many cars, if any, does your household own?

None	7%
One	37%
Two	41%
Three or more	15%

DEMOGRAPHICS

Party Identification

Democrat	34%
Republican	14%
Independent / Other	48%
Prefer not to say	4%

Race and Ethnicity

White	81%
Black	5%
Hispanic or Latino	6%
Asian	5%
Some other race	1%
More than one race	2%
Prefer not to say	<1%

Age

18-29	18%
30-44	23%
45-59	26%
60+	32%
Prefer not to say	<1%

Gender

Male	47%
Female	53%
Neither / some other gender	<1%
Prefer not to say	<1%

Education

High School or less	32%
Some college, no degree	24%
College graduate (BA/BS)	26%
Advanced degree	18%
Prefer not to say	<1%

About the Poll

These results are based on a survey of 1,200 Massachusetts registered voters. Responses were collected via online survey interviewing March 15-25, 2019. Final survey data was weighted to known and estimated population parameters for the state's registered voters by age, gender, race, education, geography, and party. This project was sponsored by The Barr Foundation.