

Poll: Americans diverge on how to pay for highways

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- FILE - This Feb. 11, 2014 file photo shows a car driving by a pothole in Detroit, as a fuel station is seen in the background. Congress has kept federal highway and transit programs limping along for the past six years, unable to decide how best to pay for them. Lawmakers' indecision mirrors what The Associated Press and GfK found in a recent opinion survey. (AP Photo/Carlos Osorio, File)

Graphic shows results of AP-GfK poll on transportation funding; 2c x 4 inches; 96.3 mm x 101 mm;

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WASHINGTON (AP) — A majority of Americans think the economic benefits of good transportation outweigh the cost to taxpayers, but they can't agree on how to pay for new highways or repairs of old ones, according to a new Associated Press-GfK poll.

Six in 10 people surveyed said the cost of good highways, railroads and airports is justified by their benefits. Among those who drive places multiple times per week, 62 percent say the benefits outweigh the costs. Among those who drive less than once a week or not at all, 55 percent say the costs are worthwhile.

Yet a majority of Americans bristle at the most commonly proposed ideas from public officials and industry. For example, 58 percent oppose raising federal gasoline taxes to fund transportation projects such as the repair, replacement or expansion of roads and bridges. Only 14 percent support an increase. And by a better than 2-to-1 margin, Americans oppose having private companies pay for the construction of new roads and bridges in exchange for the right to charge tolls. Moving to a usage tax based on how many miles a vehicle drives also draws more opposition than support — 40 percent oppose it, while 20 percent support it.

Support for shifting more responsibility for paying for such projects to state and local government is a tepid 30 percent.

Small wonder then that Congress has kept federal highway and transit programs teetering on the edge of insolvency for years, unable to find a politically acceptable long-term source of funds. The public can't make up its mind on how to pay for them either.

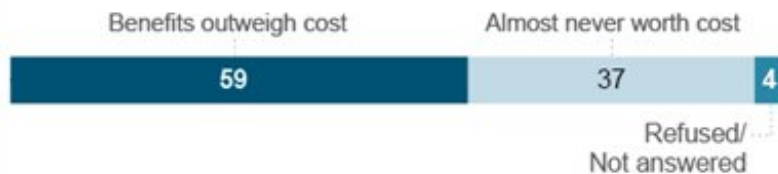
"Congress is actually reflecting what people want," said Joshua Schank, president and CEO of the Eno Center for Transportation, a transportation think tank. "People want to have a federal (transportation) program and they don't want to pay for it."

Last week, Congress cobbled together \$10.8 billion to keep transportation aid flowing to states by changing how employers fund worker pension programs, extending customs user fees and transferring

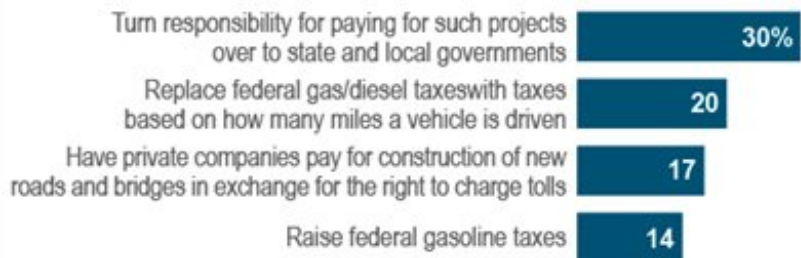
Americans love roads, hate taxes

An Associated Press-GfK poll finds people in the U.S. see value in high-quality public infrastructure but are undecided on how to pay for it.

Q: Do you think the economic benefits from good quality highways, railroads and airports outweigh the cost to taxpayers or are these benefits almost never worth the cost?



Percentage of poll respondents who said they support paying for transportation projects the following ways:



NOTE: Poll results based on interviews with 1,044 U.S. adults July 24-28. Margin of error is ± 3.4 percentage points.

SOURCE: GfK Public Affairs & Corporate Communications

AP

money from a fund to repair leaking underground fuel storage tanks. The money was needed to make up a shortfall between aid promised to states and revenue raised by the federal 18.4 cents-per-gallon gas tax and the 24.4 cents-per-gallon diesel tax, which haven't been increased in more than 20 years.

It's the fifth time in the last six years that Congress has patched a hole in the federal Highway Trust Fund that pays for highway and transit aid. Each time it gets more difficult for lawmakers to find the money without increasing the federal budget deficit. Critics described the pension funding changes used this time as budget gimmicks that would cost the government more in the long run and undermine employee pension programs.

The latest patch cleared Congress about three hours before midnight last Thursday, the day before the Transportation Department said it would begin cutting back aid payments to states. The current fix is only expected to cover the revenue gap through next May, when Congress will be back where it started unless lawmakers act sooner.

The most direct solution would be to raise fuel taxes. That's what three blue-ribbon federal commissions have recommended. But opposition to a gas tax increase cuts across party lines, although Republicans are more apt to oppose an increase, 70 percent, than Democrats, 52 percent.

"Every time we turn around there's another tax, and our gas taxes are so high now," said James Lane, 52, of Henry County in rural south-central Virginia, who described himself as leaning toward the GOP.

Lane favors allowing companies to pay for the construction of new or expanded roads and bridges in exchange for the right impose tolls on motorists, often for many decades. There have been projects like that in Virginia, but since those roads are in more populated areas of the state where he doesn't drive it makes sense to have the people who use them pay for them, he said.

But Michael Murphy, 63, a data services contractor who lives near San Antonio, Texas, where a high-speed public-private toll road is scheduled to open this fall, said he'd rather see gas taxes increased than tolls imposed on drivers. Roads benefit everyone, even if indirectly, so it's only fair that everyone who drives pays something toward their cost, he said.

A majority of those surveyed, 56 percent, say traffic in the area where they live has gotten worse in the last five years. Only 6 percent say traffic has improved in their area, and 33 percent that it's stayed about the same.

Thirty-five percent say the quality of the roads and bridges where they live is getting worse, while 25 percent think their roads and bridges are improving. About 4 in 10 say their local roads and bridges are neither improving nor getting worse.

The AP-GfK Poll was conducted July 24-28 using KnowledgePanel, GfK's probability-based online panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. It involved online interviews with 1,044 adults. It has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.4 percentage points for all respondents, larger for subgroups.

Respondents were first selected randomly using phone or mail survey methods, and were later interviewed online. People selected for KnowledgePanel who didn't otherwise have access to the Internet were provided with the ability to access the Internet at no cost to them.

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Online:

AP-GfK Poll: <http://www.ap-gfkipoll.com>

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