

What Americans really think about

The Mobility Crisis

Voters say traffic congestion is getting worse and they want to see a balanced approach to the problem. They support more road construction and higher fuel-efficiency standards for all vehicles. But they also favor more spending on mass transit and have mixed feelings about charging drivers and airlines for the right to use busy roads and airports during peak hours.

► *by* **Mark J. Penn**

Every day, millions of Americans are caught in a hurry-up-and-wait routine in airports, train stations, and on roads and expressways around the country. Independent studies and census data have shown more and more people are sitting in traffic as they head to their place of work, run errands, or drive to their vacation destination. The same is also true for the business and leisure air travelers who run to the airport only to sit down and wait for the plane that was late leaving Chicago or that still has to make a stopover in Denver and will reach Los Angeles five hours after it was scheduled.

This DLC-BLUEPRINT poll by Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates examines how people feel about strategies to reduce congestion on our roads and expressways and in our train stations and airports. The national poll was conducted among 531 registered voters from July 31-Aug. 1, 2001. The poll has a margin of error of +/- 4.4 percent, larger for subgroups.

The highlights of the survey include:

- More than 70 percent of Americans believe traffic congestion in their area has gotten worse rather than better in the last 10 years.
- Americans want to tackle the difficult problem of

reducing traffic congestion with a balanced approach. People overwhelmingly use automobiles and value the importance of building new roads and expanding existing ones. But they also see the benefits of building more mass transit systems and encouraging more people to use them. However, certain groups, such as women with children and employed people, place the emphasis on building new roads.

- Despite congressional votes against significantly raising fuel-efficiency standards, a majority (58 percent) of Americans support increasing them for all cars and trucks. A near identical percentage (62 percent) think sport utility vehicles should meet the same standards as regular cars.
- A majority of Americans support turning underutilized high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes into toll lanes and see this as a good way to reduce congestion with existing infrastructure. But they are skeptical about the broader idea of “congestion pricing,” charging drivers or airplane companies to drive or land during high peak traffic hours.
- A majority of Americans believe those who live near airports and proposed airport sites should be compensated and relocated to make room for airport expansion and construction.

► The Poll

America has in the past and continues to be a country of drivers who enjoy the freedom of the automobile. More than nine in 10 Americans say automobiles are their main mode of transportation.

Q. What is your main mode of transportation? Car or some form of mass transit?

ALL	CITY	SUBURB	RURAL
92/6	86/12	98/2	95/2

Three-quarters of city and suburb dwellers think traffic has gotten worse while a very strong two-thirds of rural dwellers agree.

Q. Over the last 10 years do you think traffic congestion in your area has gotten worse/gotten better/stayed the same?

ALL	CITY	SUBURB	RURAL
71/6/21	72/7/19	75/8/15	66/3/27

Americans support a balanced approach between mass transit and more road building to combat traffic congestion. They first point to mass transit as the ideal way to this end. It draws the most intense response, with 51 percent saying encouraging more people to use mass transit is very important and 49 percent saying building the mass transit infrastructure is very important. However, with only 6 percent of Americans taking transit despite its significant expansion in the last decade, it's not clear that most Americans would use it.

Expanding existing roads and building new ones also garnered strong support, with 42 percent saying it was very important and 78 percent total saying it was an important action. Other solutions, such as encouraging people to work from home, are supported by two-thirds of the American public but they do not elicit the same strength of support as the “meat and potatoes” of mass transit and roads. It's worth noting that unemployed people are significantly more wedded to mass transit than others.

Q. I am going to read you a list of actions that could be taken to reduce traffic congestion on roads and highways. For each one tell me if you think it is a very important action, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important. (Subgroup numbers represent “very important” totals.)

	VERY IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT/ NOT IMPORTANT	CITY	SUBURB	RURAL	EMPLOYED	UNEMPLOYED
Encourage more people to use mass transit	51	81/17	54	53	46	47	59
Build more mass transit including bus, light rail, and subway systems	49	77/20	58	48	42	46	58
Expand existing roads and build new ones	42	78/20	42	43	43	43	42
Encourage more people to work from home or “telecommute”	30	66/30	33	31	28	31	30

When asked which strategy would be most effective and realistic in reducing congestion in their area, more roads with more fuel-efficient cars or more mass transit, a majority of city dwellers vote for more mass transit usage. Support for mass transit declines as you head out to the suburbs and rural areas. Suburbanites are split evenly between the two while a near majority (49 percent) of rural Americans support more roads with more fuel-efficient cars. Other demographic groups, such as women with children and employed people, also show a desire for more roads and cleaner cars.

Q. Which do you think is a more effective and realistic strategy for reducing traffic congestion in your area?

	ALL	CITY	SUBURB	RURAL	WOMEN W/KIDS	EMPLOYED	UNEMPLOYED
Building more roads while encouraging the development of cleaner, more fuel-efficient cars	44	38	48	49	57	50	34
Encouraging people to use mass transit to reduce demand on roads	49	58	48	42	37	45	58

A majority of Americans support using high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes as toll lanes to ease congestion. The strongest support comes from rural dwellers. However, support declines as one moves toward urban areas.

Q. Currently, some cities have high-occupancy vehicle lanes on their expressways that are restricted to cars carrying two or three or more people during rush hour periods. Because these high-occupancy-vehicle expressway lanes are often underused, some propose also opening these lanes to any driver willing to pay a toll, as a way to ease traffic congestion on regular highway lanes. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this proposal?

(Support = strongly + somewhat / Oppose = somewhat + strongly.)

ALL	CITY	SUBURB	RURAL
52/43	48/47	50/46	57/36

Regardless of whether they support or oppose the proposal, a majority of people think it would be successful in using under-utilized resources and reduce the amount of time people spend sitting in traffic.

Q. Which is closer to your view on this proposal?

	ALL	CITY	SUBURB	RURAL
I think it would unfairly benefit people who are willing to pay the toll to get to their destination faster.	31	34	31	28
I think it would allow more drivers to use all expressway lanes and thus relieve traffic on regular lanes, so fewer people overall would have to sit in traffic and for reduced periods of time.	54	51	56	56

On the other hand, the broader idea of “congestion pricing” or rush-hour tolls does not command strong support as an effective way to reduce traffic at peak-usage periods. The most negative response to the proposal came from suburban dwellers.

Q. Some experts say we need a new, market-based approach that enables local communities to charge drivers tolls during rush hours to encourage them to use streets and expressways during off-peak hours. Do you think this proposal would be very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, not at all effective? (Effective = very + somewhat / Not effective = not very + not at all.)

ALL	CITY	SUBURB	RURAL
38/57	40/54	34/64	40/53

Despite a recent congressional vote against raising fuel-efficiency standards, a majority of Americans support increasing them. The strongest support comes from independent, Democratic, and suburban voters. Republicans oppose raising standards by slightly more.

Q. Which is closer to your view on gas mileage standards set by the U.S. government for cars and trucks?

	ALL	CITY	SUBURB	RURAL	DEM	REP	IND
The standards need to be increased because they have not been raised in 15 years and we need to reduce the amount of gas we use as a country.	58	58	60	58	62	43	66
Congress should keep standards where they are working fine and if they did raise the standards cars would become more expensive.	33	33	35	33	29	44	31

Q. AMONG THOSE WHO OPPOSE RAISING STANDARDS: Experts say the extra money consumers spend to buy a more fuel-efficient car would be saved because less money would need to be spent on gas to run the car. Given this do you favor or oppose raising federal fuel-efficiency standards?

ALL	DEM	REP	IND
34/56	32/48	28/67	40/54

Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of all Americans believe sport utility vehicles should be required to meet the same fuel standards as regular cars. Again, the strongest support came from Democrats and independents while Republicans were split down the middle.

Q. By law, auto manufacturers have to meet a 27-mile-per-gallon standard for cars while light trucks and sport utility vehicles have to meet a 20-mile-per-gallon standard. Do you think sport utility vehicles should or should not be required to meet the same gas standards as regular cars?

ALL	DEM	REP	IND
62/36	70/28	50/49	65/34

A solid majority of Americans support a rail reform package that would eliminate long-distance lines while beefing up high-speed regional and commuter lines. But support for this tradeoff varies significantly by income level. More affluent Americans are much more receptive to the proposal than low-income Americans, who may believe ticket prices on high-speed trains would be prohibitively high.

Q. Would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose a significant investment from the federal government to create a regional and commuter high-speed rail line with trains that can reach speeds of up to 180 miles per hour to link major metropolitan areas while eliminating Amtrak and long-distance trains that are unprofitable? (Support = strongly + somewhat / Oppose = somewhat + strongly.)

ALL	<30K	30-75K	75K+
56/38	49/43	66/33	63/34

A majority of Americans support a public-private partnership to modernize airport facilities to deal with congestion and delays.

Q. Experts say one reason for increased air transportation delays and safety concerns is that air traffic control systems are outdated and need to be modernized to meet increasing demands on the system. They have proposed moving air traffic control duties away from the Federal Aviation Administration to a public-private corporation that would be charged with modernizing how air traffic is handled to reduce congestion and delays. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this proposal? (Support = strongly + somewhat / Oppose = somewhat + strongly.)

ALL	DEM	REP	IND
55/35	58/32	64/28	48/44

Air traffic congestion pricing plans are opposed by a majority of Americans, and that opposition increases as you go up the income ladder.

Q. Some experts say we need a new, market-based approach to reducing air traffic delays and congestion in U.S. airports by charging airline companies more money to land their planes during high traffic times during the day to better spread out air traffic. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this proposal? (Support = strongly + somewhat / Oppose = somewhat + strongly.)

ALL	<30K	50K+	100K+
39/53	41/53	37/57	28/72

The poll shows significant sympathy for NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) opponents of airport construction and expansion among urban, independent, Democratic, and rural voters, though the sentiment that they are overriding broader public interests rises among suburbanites.

Q. Which is closer to your view on new airport construction and current airport expansion?

	ALL	CITY	SUBURB	RURAL	DEM	REP	IND
I think residents living next to current airports and those living next to proposed new airport sites are blocking capacity expansion at the expense of having a safe and modern air travel system.	34	33	45	29	28	42	36
I think homeowners living next to airports or near proposed airport sites should have the right to live without the disturbances that would come with new or increased air traffic over their property.	47	53	39	48	55	44	44

On the other hand, over two-thirds of city and suburban dwellers, and a majority of rural voters, support compensating and relocating residents for the purpose of airport expansion and construction. This would appear to offer a “third way” solution to this problem.

Q. Some experts and local elected officials favor compensating and relocating residents near airports or proposed airport sites to make room for airport expansion and construction. Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this proposal? (Support = strongly + somewhat / Oppose = somewhat + strongly.)

ALL	CITY	SUBURB	RURAL
63/31	68/30	68/24	54/36