

Get a Move On: Mass voters ready for action on transportation upgrades

Massachusetts voters see the system in fair or poor condition, and support action to upgrade the road and transit system. Support for revenue options varies, with majorities in favor of several options and opinion split on others.

Massachusetts polls over the last few years have shown broad consensus that the state's transportation system is in need of serious attention. Residents complain of impossible traffic in the Boston region, the condition of the MBTA, the lack of any transit connectivity in many parts of the state, and deteriorating roads and bridges all over the state. Now, state lawmakers are weighing legislative action to improve the system including the prospect of raising significant new revenues.

This new poll of 600 registered voters across the state looks at voter priorities in upgrading the system, assessment of system conditions, and support for a number of the revenue options potentially under consideration. The survey was sponsored by The Barr Foundation and conducted by The MassINC Polling Group.

Voters agree action is needed on transportation.

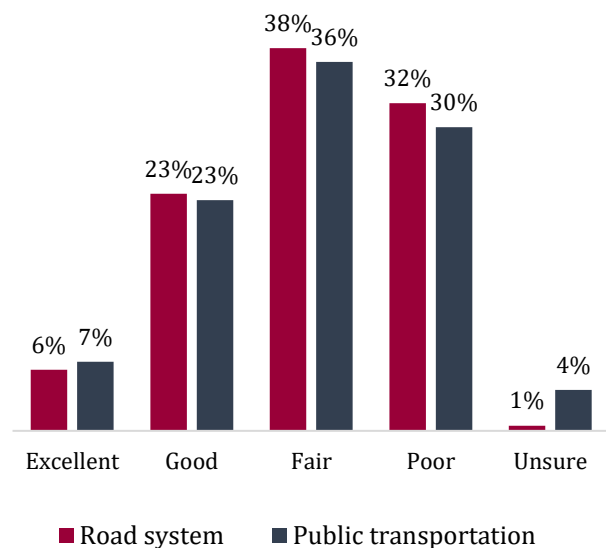
Overall, 71% of voters agree that "action is urgently needed to improve the state's transportation system", a sentiment reflected in many other polls we have conducted in recent years. Only 17% thought things are working pretty well as is, while the remaining 12% were undecided. This opinion is expressed across all demographic groups analyzed in this poll, but Democrats, older and more educated voters, public transit riders, and voters in Boston and its suburbs are most convinced of the need to do

something. This general patterns tracks with that of an MPG poll released earlier this year, which found a significant portion of the state's commuters reaching their breaking point with traffic and the MBTA¹.

Asked about the system's condition, voters offer few positive evaluations of either roads or transit (Figure 1). Just 29% say the road system is "good" or "excellent," nearly identical to the share of voters who say the same about transit. Views of public transit appear to have worsened since earlier this year: 30% of voters statewide say public transit in the state is "poor" condition in this poll, an increase from the 15% who said so in the poll released earlier this year. The share saying public transit is in "good" condition

FIGURE 1: Few Mass. voters offer positive reviews of system condition

% of Mass voters rating each element of the system as...



¹ "Gridlock: Stopped in Traffic, Delayed on Transit," The MassINC Polling Group, April 2019.

declined 6 points. The more familiar voters are with public transit, the lower they rate it; 38% of MBTA subway and commuter rail riders think transit is in poor condition.

Voters prioritize better road conditions, transit, and traffic.

When it comes to addressing the transportation system, specific priorities rose to the top. Asked about a number of potential priorities, two thirds or more called roads, transit, and traffic major priorities for state government. Each of the three came in above changes to management of transportation agencies. Reducing pollution and increasing adoption of electric vehicles were lower priorities.

This general order held when voters were asked to rank a list of priorities with different wording. There, the top two priorities were reducing traffic congestion and “spending more on transportation to improve the system now and in the future”. These two were ranked as number 1 or 2 by over half of voters, far more than prioritized any of the other items on the list.

FIGURE 2: Top transportation priorities for Massachusetts registered voters
% of Mass voters calling each item a “major priority”

Improving the condition of highways, roads, and bridges	75%
Reducing traffic jams and congestion on the roads	75%
Improving public transportation like buses, trains and subways	67%
Improving management at the government agencies responsible for transportation	59%
Speeding up planned improvements to the MBTA	59%
Reducing pollution from transportation	51%
Reducing the greenhouse gas emissions that come from transportation	40%
Increasing the number of electric vehicles on the road in Massachusetts	22%

To be clear, concerns about the management of the transportation system *are* real. We have seen this dynamic in many polls and focus groups, and through multiple rounds of reforms and changes to the agencies. It has been the case for many years of polling that voters are suspicious of how transportation dollars are

FIGURE 3: Massachusetts voters rank congestion, speeding investment most important
% of Mass voters ranking each item 1st through 5th in terms of priority for transportation

	% 1st or 2nd	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Reducing traffic congestion	56%	32%	24%	18%	15%	11%
Spending more on transportation to improve the system now and in the future	55%	27%	28%	21%	14%	9%
Making the transportation system more resilient to climate change, super storms, and other weather events	37%	17%	20%	26%	25%	13%
Improving management at the agencies that manage transportation	32%	13%	20%	22%	27%	19%
Reducing greenhouse gases from transportation	19%	11%	9%	13%	20%	48%

being used, a dynamic which no amount of reform seems likely to change. But when voters are asked to rank transportation priorities, making tangible improvements and investments in the system comes out on top.

Voters support several revenue options, divided on others

A large majority of voters are convinced of the need for action on transportation; and even larger majority (77%) say they support raising new revenue for transportation. That figure similar to the 80% found in the MPG poll released this spring, as well as other polls showing the public in favor of additional revenue by a wide margin.

Some of the revenues under consideration are “user fees” specific to transportation and paid by users of the system. Others are more broad taxes which may be dedicated to transportation uses, but which are not tied to how the system is used. Voters have no strong opinion on this in principle: 44% say transportation should be funded by users, while 35% favor general taxes.

That ratio is nearly identical to when MPG asked a similar question during the transportation funding debates of 2012-2013.

The most popular revenue option tested, with 73% support, was “collecting contributions from real estate development projects near highways or public transportation to help pay for that transportation infrastructure”. The Transportation and Climate Initiative, which aims to place a cost on carbon pollution upstream from drivers, was second with 62% support, in a similar range to other recent polls in the state. A few transportation user fees also garnered net support, including increasing fees on ride-hailing trips (51% support / 38% oppose), installing tolls at the state border (50% / 41%), a parking surcharge on spaces in commercial lots and garages (49% / 45%), and increasing the gas tax three times over 6 years in 5-cent increments (49% / 47%).

FIGURE 4: Massachusetts voters support for various revenue, policy options
% of Massachusetts registered voters who support / oppose each proposal.

Policy Description	Support	Oppose	Unsure
New revenue	77%	15%	8%
Value capture	73%	18%	9%
Discounting off-peak tolls	73%	18%	9%
Transportation and Climate Initiative	62%	30%	8%
Tolled lanes	56%	35%	10%
Ride-hailing fee increase	51%	38%	11%
State border tolls	50%	41%	9%
Regional ballots	50%	40%	11%
Parking surcharge	49%	45%	6%
Three 5-cent gas tax hikes	49%	47%	5%
Raising rush hour tolls	46%	47%	7%
15-cent gas tax	43%	52%	5%
Tolls on highways that do not have them now	43%	51%	6%
Registry fee hikes	42%	53%	6%
Logan Airport access tolls	38%	55%	6%

Focus on the gas tax.

The survey tested two versions of a 15-cent gas tax increase. About half the survey respondents rated a single 15-cent hike. The rest were asked about a three 5-cent increments every other year. The gradual approach proved more popular, with 49% support to 47% opposition. The all-at-once idea pulled 43% support and 52% opposition.

Both these are higher than some of the other polling numbers that have been quoted in the media, including one from an MPG poll that has been quoted out of context. In that earlier poll, the gas tax was earmarked specifically for paying for “regional rail”. Here the tax was dedicated to transportation more generally. The other poll cited by media is an internal poll for which the questionnaire, methods, and topline have not been released. This makes it difficult to evaluate the lower support levels found in that poll.

The support for the gas tax in this poll is consistent with others we have released. In 2013, in the lead-up to transportation finance legislation, MPG found 43% for a gas tax hike of an unspecified amount, similar to the level for a one-time 15-cent increase in this poll.

Focus on tolling

The poll explored several current proposals for raising and lowering existing and new tolls. Changes to tolling policy can have two purposes: raising new money for transportation from drivers, and helping manage traffic congestion. Some toll policies, like higher tolls during peak travel times, would aim to do both. Others, like off-peak toll discounts, aim to manage congestion at the expense of toll revenue.

Among tolling proposals most popular (73% support) is discounting off-peak tolls, to encourage travel at less busy times of day. Second most popular was the governor’s favored policy: converting lanes on stretches of highway to tolled lanes, so that drivers who wish to pay can have a less-congested ride (56% support).

Adding tolls at the state borders was more popular than not (50% / 41%), but all the other options generated more opposition than support. Those included adding tolls to highways that don’t have them currently (43% / 51%), increasing tolls during peak travel times (46% / 47%), and adding a toll to access Logan Airport (38% / 55%).

Conclusion

As lawmakers tackle transportation funding for the second time this decade, most voters are on board with the need for both action and more revenue. Despite different regions experiencing transportation stresses in different ways, there is widespread acceptance of the need to do something – and support for some ways, at least, of raising more money to do it.

Barr Foundation Transportation Issues Survey
 Topline Results
 Statewide Survey of 600 Massachusetts Registered Voters
 Field Dates: November 6-7, 2019

Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of Charlie Baker?

Very favorable	26%
Somewhat favorable	42%
Somewhat unfavorable	13%
Very unfavorable	5%
Unsure	14%

Order of next two questions rotated per respondent.

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

Excellent	6%
Good	23%
Fair	38%
Poor	32%
Unsure	1%

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

Excellent	7%
Good	23%
Fair	36%
Poor	30%
Unsure	4%

When it comes to the transportation system in Massachusetts, how much of a priority do you think each of the following issues should be for state government here in Massachusetts? *Order rotated; sorted by "major priority" for display.*

	Major priority	Minor priority	Not a priority	Unsure
Improving the condition of highways, roads, and bridges	75%	20%	3%	1%
Reducing traffic jams and congestion on the roads	75%	18%	4%	3%
Improving public transportation like buses, trains and subways	67%	24%	6%	4%
Improving management at the government agencies responsible for transportation	59%	31%	5%	5%
Speeding up planned improvements to the MBTA	59%	26%	8%	7%
SPLIT ½ Reducing pollution from transportation	51%	35%	10%	4%
SPLIT ½ Reducing the greenhouse gas emissions that come from transportation	40%	38%	17%	5%
Increasing the number of electric vehicles on the road in Massachusetts	22%	36%	35%	7%

Which statement is closer to your own view?

Action is urgently needed to improve the state's transportation system	71%
The state's transportation system is working pretty well as is	17%
Unsure	12%

Below are several ideas for improving transportation in Massachusetts. Please rank them, where 1 is the idea you think is most important to pursue, 2 is the second most important, and so on. *Order randomized; sorted by % top ranking for display.*

	Mean Rank	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Reducing traffic congestion	2.49	32%	24%	18%	15%	11%
Spending more on transportation to improve the system now and in the future	2.49	27%	28%	21%	14%	9%
Making the transportation system more resilient to climate change, super storms, and other weather events	2.96	17%	20%	26%	25%	13%
Improving management at the agencies that manage transportation	3.20	13%	20%	22%	27%	19%
Reducing greenhouse gases from transportation	3.85	11%	9%	13%	20%	48%

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	36%
Somewhat support	41%
Somewhat oppose	9%
Strongly oppose	6%
Unsure	8%

Assuming the Massachusetts state government decided to raise funds for maintaining and improving our transportation system, there are many possible ways these funds could be raised. The next few questions cover some of these options.

Order of revenue questions randomized per respondent.

One of next two questions asked of each respondent.

Would you support or oppose raising the state's tax on gasoline 15 cents per gallon if all the money raised were dedicated to improving roads, bridges and public transportation in the Commonwealth?

Strongly support	16%
Somewhat support	27%
Somewhat oppose	18%
Strongly oppose	34%
Unsure	5%

Would you support or oppose raising the state's tax on gasoline 15 cents per gallon, spread out in three 5-cent increases that occur every 2 years, if all the money raised were dedicated to improving roads, bridges and public transportation in the Commonwealth?

Strongly support	24%
Somewhat support	24%
Somewhat oppose	17%
Strongly oppose	30%
Unsure	5%

Massachusetts and other northeast states are currently considering a plan that would charge gasoline distributors a fee based on the amount of pollution their fuels produce. Massachusetts would dedicate a substantial portion of the money raised to reducing greenhouse gas pollution from transportation and improving public transportation. Would you support or oppose this idea?

Strongly support	28%
Somewhat support	34%
Somewhat opposed	16%
Strongly oppose	15%
Unsure	8%

Would you support or oppose raising fees at the Registry of Motor Vehicles, like for renewing a vehicle registration or getting a driver's license, if all the money raised were dedicated to improving roads, bridges and public transportation in the Commonwealth?

Strongly support	14%
Somewhat support	28%
Somewhat oppose	22%
Strongly oppose	30%
Unsure	6%

Right now, cities and towns in Massachusetts cannot hold votes to raise local taxes to pay for transportation projects. Would you support or oppose allowing cities, towns, or regions to hold votes to raise local or regional taxes to pay for transportation projects?

Strongly support	21%
Somewhat support	29%
Somewhat oppose	19%
Strongly oppose	21%
Unsure	11%

How much you support or oppose each of the following ideas that involve tolls on Massachusetts roadways, if all the money raised were dedicated to improving roads, bridges and public transportation in the Commonwealth? *Order randomized per respondent; sorted by "strongly support" for display.*

	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Unsure
Lowering tolls outside of rush hour to encourage travel at less busy times of day	32%	41%	12%	6%	9%
Converting lanes on busy highways to tolled lanes so drivers can choose to pay for a less congested drive	20%	35%	16%	19%	10%
Adding tolls at the border with other states.	20%	30%	20%	21%	9%
Adding electronic tolls to highways that currently do not have them, like I-95 and I-93.	18%	25%	19%	32%	6%
Raising tolls during rush hour to encourage travel at less busy times of day	16%	29%	21%	26%	7%
Adding a toll to drive into Boston Logan Airport	15%	23%	22%	34%	6%

Would you support or oppose a surcharge on parking spaces in commercial parking lots and garages, if all the money raised were dedicated to improving roads, bridges and public transportation in the Commonwealth?

Strongly support	17%
Somewhat support	32%
Somewhat opposed	23%
Strongly oppose	22%
Unsure	6%

Would you support or oppose collecting contributions from real estate development projects near highways or public transportation to help pay for that transportation infrastructure?

Strongly support	34%
Somewhat support	39%
Somewhat oppose	11%
Strongly oppose	7%
Unsure	9%

One proposal would add a surcharge to trips taken alone with ride-hailing apps like Uber and Lyft. Trips taken alone would have the highest surcharge, while shared rides and rides taken in an electric vehicle would have a lower surcharge. Would you support or oppose this idea if all the money raised were dedicated to improving roads, bridges and public transportation in the Commonwealth?

Strongly support	20%
Somewhat support	31%
Somewhat oppose	21%
Strongly oppose	18%
Unsure	11%

If you had to guess, how much is the current Massachusetts state tax on gasoline, in cents per gallon?

Median guess:	17 cents
Mean guess:	24 cents
Lower than 24 cents	60%
24 cents	1%
Higher than 24 cents	39%

Which of the following is closer to your point of view?

The state has all the money it needs to deliver the transportation system residents need. It just needs to spend it well.	49%
Even if it spends every dollar well, the state will need more money to deliver the transportation system residents need.	39%
Unsure	11%

Which of the following is closer to your point of view?

Transportation should be funded by those who use it, through the gas tax, toll, fares on public transportation, and fees at the Registry of Motor Vehicle or on ride-hailing trips.	44%
Transportation should be funded by broad general taxes, like sales taxes or income taxes.	35%
Unsure	20%

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	7%
Asian	5%
Some other race	1%
More than one race	1%
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%
Transgender	<1%
None of the above	0%
Prefer not to say	0%

Education

High School or less	33%
Some college, no degree	23%
College graduate (BA/BS)	26%
Advanced degree	18%
Prefer not to say	1%

About the Poll

These results are based on a survey of 600 Massachusetts registered voters. Responses were collected via online survey interviewing November 6-7, 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.