

The Public Supports Pricing if . . .

A Synthesis of Public Opinion Studies on Tolling and Road Pricing

By Johanna Zmud, Ph.D., NuStats, Austin, Texas

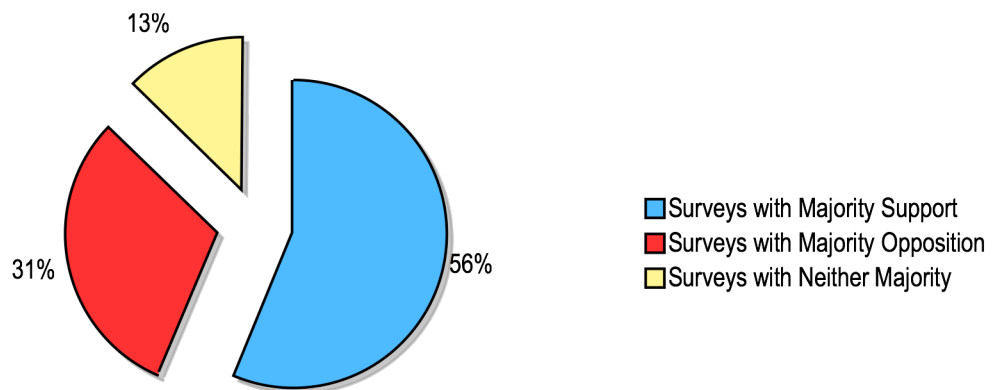
Introduction

Traffic congestion is one of the most pressing problems in high density or high growth areas today. Solving the problem requires expansion of infrastructure and capacity. In recent years, there has been a significant and widespread interest in the use of flat tolls, variable tolls, and other forms of road pricing as a source of funding infrastructure, a means to manage congestion, and a way to expand traveler options. Thus, tolling and road pricing have been thrust to the top of the policy and electoral agenda in many U.S. states, regions, cities, and in other countries. Diverse attempts to introduce tolling and road pricing have been successfully implemented, while others have failed politically. Viability of these efforts depends not only on public support but also on elected officials' perceptions of public support. In many parts of the U.S., a wide gap exists between elected officials' perceptions of what the public thinks about tolling and road pricing and what public opinion actually is. So even within the context of legislative support, political acceptability remains a challenge.

Results from "Survey of Surveys"

NuStats recently conducted a systematic review of how the public feels about tolling and road pricing. Our "survey of public opinion surveys" indicated that in the aggregate there is clear majority support for tolling and road pricing. Among all surveys, 56 percent showed support for tolling or road pricing concepts (See Figure 1). Opposition was encountered in 31 percent of the surveys. Mixed results (i.e., no majority support or opposition) occurred in 13 percent of them.

Figure 1: Support for Road Pricing in Public Opinion Surveys (N=103)



Factors Influencing Public Opinion

A number of factors influence public opinion, including type of project, location of survey, survey sponsor, sampled respondents, scientific rigor of the survey, whether public opinion was elicited about a specific pricing program or generally on the issue, whether clarifying information

was presented to respondents in survey questions, among other factors. Details on two of these factors follow.

Type of Project. Levels of support or opposition varied according to the type of project on which public opinion was solicited (see Table 1). The notable standouts are cordon/ area pricing and private-ownership, both of which showed higher opposition than support. Public opinion was supportive in the vast majority of surveys or polls asking about HOT lanes, traditional tolling, or express toll lanes.

Table 1: Public Opinion based on Type of Pricing

Survey Results	Type of Pricing Project				
	HOT Lanes	Traditional Tolling	Express Toll Lanes	Cordon / Area Pricing	Private Ownership
Majority Support	73%	71%	62%	32%	0%
Majority Opposition	15%	26%	23%	53%	60%
Neither Majority	12%	3%	15%	16%	40%
Total Percent	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total Cases	26	35	13	19	10

Geography. The polls and surveys in the West have resulted in support for pricing to a much greater degree than opposition. The West also has the longest history with pricing initiatives. Public support for pricing in the Midwest is also strong. Public support is less evident in the South, where there is less history with road pricing and where there was the introduction of many new pricing initiatives recently. In the Northeast, public support is also mixed. This is most likely the result of the types of new initiatives that are being introduced.

Table 2: Public Opinion based on U.S. Geography

Survey Results	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Majority Support	36%	64%	44%	84%
Majority Opposition	36%	27%	32%	13%
No Majority	27%	9%	24%	3%
Total Percent	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total Cases	11	11	25	38

Themes in Public Opinion Results

1. The public wants to be shown the value.

When a concrete benefit is linked to the idea of tolling or charging for road usage as opposed to tolling in the abstract, the public support of tolling is higher. It is important to articulate benefits as they pertain to individuals, to communities, and society as a whole. In Atlanta, focus group participants liked a HOT lane proposal because “it offers more choices. It gives me benefits – I can get to places faster.” In London, support for the Central London Congestion Charge increased as the scheme was proven to improve air quality and reduce particulates contributing to poor health. In a survey of New Yorkers, reasons for supporting congestion pricing were – reduced congestion and pollution, increased use of transit and city revenues.

2. The public prefers tangible and specific rationales.

When public opinion on tolling is measured in the context of a specific project as opposed to the general principle or policy, the level of support is higher. In the former context, road pricing is

perceived of as a “choice” not as a kind of a punishment. This is likely the reason that low-income individuals generally support pricing – they appreciate having the “choice” of paying to use uncongested lanes or roadways. Traffic problems must be evident, and it must be demonstrated that pricing is the best solution to the problems. In many European examples, support was higher when road pricing was put forth as part of a comprehensive policy package of road and public transit investments.

3. The public cares about how revenues are used.

The use of tolling revenues is a key determinant to acceptance or rejection of congestion pricing. When the perceived beneficiaries of tolling revenues are special interest groups (private companies or investors), support for tolling is lower. In New Jersey, respondents were against the sale of the New Jersey Turnpike and Garden State Parkway to pay down the state’s debt. However, they were more supportive when the money was used to fund transportation infrastructure in the state. Support tends to be higher when revenues are used for highway infrastructure or public transit improvements and/or to complete necessary transportation construction faster.

4. The public learns from experience.

Support from a majority of citizens often cannot be expected from the outset. When the opportunity to use tolled facilities already exists, public support of tolling is higher than when/where tolling is simply a possibility for the future. In Oslo, Sweden, and London, support for cordon tolling increased after the pricing program was implemented. Building support is a long-term, continuous process that should not stop after implementation. In the SR 91, I-15, and I-394 HOT lane evaluations, support remained high and even increased as respondents experienced more of the benefits.

5. The public uses knowledge and information to take a supportive position.

When opinion is informed by objective explanation of the conditions and mechanics of tolling and its pros and cons, support is higher than when there is no context for how tolling works. In surveys in both Denver and Alameda County, support for HOT lane projects increased after information and clarification on how the HOT lanes worked. In San Diego, equity concerns dissolved and support for a pricing project strengthened when participants received clarifying information on the features of the project. This factor may explain why members of the public may express negative attitudes about tolling and road pricing as theoretical constructs, but will use the priced facility when it opens.

6. The public believes in equity but wants fairness.

Public opposition of tolling is higher where there is perceived unfairness. In Atlanta, respondents supported proposals that would toll vehicles with as many as three persons (HOV-4) more than proposals that would toll vehicles with two persons (HOT-3). HOT-3 was perceived as penalizing carpoolers, whereas almost everyone would be tolled in HOT-4. In Port Authority of NY/NJ focus groups, peak period pricing was mentioned as “unfair to commuters.” Also encapsulated in this perception is that people do not want to “pay for [roads] that they have gotten for free in the past. That’s unfair.” This also relates to why having an “alternative cost-free route” is so important for public support, and why support for tolling new roads and bridges is higher than for tolling existing facilities. In terms of equity, there is general agreement that

decisions to use or not use a priced facility revolve around people's needs and preferences. Everyone, regardless of who they are or where they live, benefits from having a choice.

7. The public wants simplicity.

When the mechanics of tolling or other user fee programs are simple and clear and therefore easy to understand, public support of tolling is higher than with highly complex programs. In two failed cordon toll projects in Hong Kong, the alternatives had complex pricing structures and numerous charging locations. In a statewide survey in Oregon, opposition was lower for the simplest idea (i.e., toll roads, 68%) than for more complex ideas (i.e., per-household highway access fee, 91% and mileage fee, 81%). In focus groups around Washington State, some participants preferred the gas tax as a revenue instrument rather than the mileage-based system using GPS and cell phone technology that was tested in the study. "I would rather pay a higher gas tax than [have] another system to keep track of." Complex systems engender apprehension about opportunities for government abuse or fraud.

8. The public favors tolls if the alternative is taxes.

While there are some instances of the surveyed public preferring tax increases over tolling, these are isolated instances. In Maine, survey respondents were given a list of alternatives for funding a new highway or bridge. Fifty-six percent (56%) supported establishing tolls; 16 percent increasing the gas tax; and 10 percent would cancel the project. One individual in Minneapolis focus groups was quoted as saying, "I like tolls because I wouldn't use them and I wouldn't pay for it. We've got enough taxes." In New Jersey, nearly two-thirds of voters opposed raising tolls on the states turnpikes to pay off state debt. However, when asked to choose between raising tolls, cutting services, or raising taxes, more persons opted for raising tolls (44%, 28%, and 9%, respectively). In a statewide survey in California, respondents favored HOT lanes, tolls roads, and express toll lanes over gas and sales tax increases. Likewise in a national American Automobile Association survey, the public supported adding tolls on new and existing roads and highway lanes over increasing motor- and non-fuel taxes or imposing a vehicle mile tax.

Conclusion

In the aggregate, the public supports tolling and road pricing; however, a number of factors can influence public support or opposition. Popular discourse would have one believe that the public is opposed to tolling and road pricing. This perception often stems from the political nature of given communities and their various interest groups, which can obscure the majority opinion on complex subject matter such as tolling and road pricing. Rather than stimulate discussion, the transformation of pricing into a political issue has in some places resulted in policies that possess superficial majority appeal but fail to address real issues of how to deal with infrastructure financing or congestion management. Public acceptance is key. However, the public still lacks credible available information on these issues. Public education is necessary to communicate the value of tolling and road pricing as solutions to critical problems in transportation.

While not exhaustive, our synthesis provided a broad perspective on public opinions across the U.S. and internationally. It was based on a thorough review of the published literature, a scan of national and international media stories on the topic, and contact with organizations with interest in or experience with tolling programs and road pricing. We cannot be certain that all relevant studies were found. Our focus was on breadth of information to provide an empirical review of the state of public opinion on this topic, without regard to positions on the issue. For more information: jjmud@nustats.com.