

Public support grows for spending on mass transit and infrastructure

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Public support is growing for expenditures on mass transit and infrastructure and remains high for education and health care, according to a National Opinion Research Center survey at the University of Chicago that has been following spending trends for 35 years.

The General Social Survey asked people a consistent set of questions, including whether more or less money should be spent on a priority. If more people thought more money should be spent on a category than said less should be spent, the category received a positive score. The spending priorities received a negative score when the reverse was true.

"Mass transportation moved up three positions in the ranking of 22 spending priorities, and now is 10th place with a score of +40.8. This is an increase of 15.5 points from 2002," said Tom W. Smith, Director of the General Social Survey at NORC and author of the report, "Trends in National Spending Priorities, 1973-2008." "The especially sharp rise from 2006 to 2008 probably reflects the increased demand for mass transportation due to high gas prices in the first half of 2008."

In 13th place on the survey came support for highways and bridges, with a score of +35.5 in 2008. Both the rank and score for infrastructure spending set record lows in 2004, but support increased in 2006 and shot up in 2008 following the Minneapolis bridge collapse in August 2007, Smith said.

The survey was based on face-to-face interviews with 2,023 randomly

selected people throughout the country and was most recently conducted April through September 2008. With support from the National Science Foundation, the biennial survey is widely used by social scientists and is considered one of the most reliable reports on public opinion in the country.

"Despite a dislike of taxes (in 2008, 57 percent said their own federal income tax was too high), more people have always favored increases in spending than cuts," Smith said.

As in other recent surveys, spending on education topped the list in 2008. "In absolute terms, support for educational spending has been very high and changed little since 1989," Smith said. It had a score of +68.4 in 2008. After a first-place rank in 2004, health finished second in 2008 with a score of +68.1.

"In nine surveys since 1990, health topped the list twice, and education finished first seven times. Moreover, they both are consistently ahead of the next group of spending areas," Smith said.

Support for more spending for assistance to the poor has grown in recent years. Now in third place at +62.1, assistance to the poor has strongly rebounded from a 10th-place showing in 1996. It showed its top relative finish in 2002-08 and had its best score (+63.5) in 2004.

The survey also asked people if they were willing to spend more on welfare and found that support has hit a record high, moving it to 19th place in 2008 with a record-high score of -12.8. The priority has regained considerable ground from a near-record low of -49.3 in 1994. (Its low point was -49.6 in 1977).

"Welfare has always been favored much less than assistance to the poor. People like the idea of the government helping those with low-incomes,

but consider welfare a failed program," Smith said. "Part of the rise in support for welfare reflects a positive response to the welfare reforms of the mid-1990s."

Other top priorities include the environment, fourth at +58.7; social security, fifth at +55.7; halting crime, seventh at +55.0; assistance for child care, seventh at +47.6; and dealing with drug addiction, eighth at +47.2. "These spending areas are not only close in absolute terms, but have frequently switched relative positions in recent years," Smith said.

The bottom priorities (18th through 21st) include assistance to big cities, welfare, defense and space exploration. In last place at 22nd was foreign aid, with a score of -52.3. Spending on foreign aid has always been the least-popular spending priority for Americans, the survey has found.

Source: University of Chicago

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