

Los Angeles Times

Opinion

Infrastructure: It's Job 1 to Americans

A poll finds near unanimous support for rebuilding.

By Frank Luntz
January 23, 2009

I'm a pollster and political consultant associated with Republican causes: the Contract with America, the "death tax" and, of course, ending wasteful Washington spending. So why am I behind the new stimulus legislation -- the biggest spending bill ever to be considered by Congress? Maybe because when it comes to some things -- crumbling schools, overcrowded highways, an ineffective energy system, clean-water facilities that don't clean water and trains and planes that are always late -- we're all on the same side.

Last month, I conducted a national survey of 800 registered voters on their attitudes toward infrastructure investment. It was commissioned by Building America's Future, a bipartisan coalition of elected officials -- chaired by Pennsylvania Gov. Edward G. Rendell, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg -- formed to support infrastructure investment.

The survey's findings were unlike any other issue I have polled in more than a decade. Iraq, healthcare, taxes, education -- they all predictably divide and polarize Americans into political camps. Not infrastructure.

Consider this: A near unanimous 94% of Americans are concerned about our nation's infrastructure. And this concern cuts across all regions of the country and across urban, suburban and rural communities.

Fully 84% of the public wants more money spent by the federal government -- and 83% wants more spent by state governments -- to improve America's infrastructure. And here's the kicker: 81% of Americans are personally prepared to pay 1% more in taxes for the cause. It's not uncommon for people to say they'd pay more to get more, but when you ask them to respond to a specific amount, support evaporates. (That 74% of normally stingy Republicans are on board for the tax increase is, to me, the most significant finding in the survey.)

This isn't "soft" support for infrastructure either. It stretches from Maine to Montana, from California to Connecticut. Democrats (87%) and Republicans (74%) are prepared to, in Barack Obama's words, put skin in the game, which tells you just how wide and deep the support is.

And Americans understand that infrastructure is not just roads, bridges and rails. In fact, they rated fixing energy facilities as their highest priority. Roads and highways scored second, and clean-water treatment facilities third.

But there's more: Accountability. The poll found that Americans are far less interested in doing projects quickly than in doing them right. "Don't screw it up" would be a more popular rallying cry than "get it done." Washington should not mistake the message of the November election and the desire for change with an "at all cost" mentality. In the poll, 61% chose "accountability" as their first or second priority in any government investment -- not the creation of jobs (34%) and not that the investment be truly national in scope (25%).

The context of the poll is clear: Americans have a serious case of bailout fatigue. They've seen government pony up to Wall Street and Motor City. Yet the stock market continues to fall, jobs continue to disappear and the spending just plain continues. Top executives received their Christmas bonuses, and the rest of America was left asking, "Where's my bailout check?"

New jobs and potential economic recovery are an important part of the infrastructure rebuilding effort, but if Washington cares about what Americans really want, Congress and the administration must establish four core stimulus principles to protect American taxpayers:

Accountability comes first. Next is transparency (24% of those polled put it at the top of their lists). Americans see themselves as shareholders in their country, and they firmly believe that they have the right to know their money is spent wisely, and expect to see the evidence on an ongoing basis.

The data also show significant support for a third principle -- setting public priorities through citizen input (13% ranked it their highest priority, which means that the people, not just the politicians, should have their say). And finally, 16% rank measurable results as the highest priority when it comes to government investment. Will the billions of dollars spent make a quantifiable difference in the daily lives of Americans in all 50 states?

Right now, 78% of Americans polled say government is responsible for the failure of America's infrastructure. They don't think the problems can be solved in the first 100 days of a new administration in Washington. Rather, they want ongoing strategic investments to improve America's standard of living and our individual quality of life. When more than 98% of Americans believe they have "the right to demand" that America's infrastructure is "efficient, convenient and modern," Washington better not fail.

Does Congress get it? Think about that the next time you're sitting in traffic.

Frank Luntz is a pollster and communication specialist. His clients have included Rudolph W. Giuliani and Michael R. Bloomberg.

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