

Sustainable Transportation at the Ballot Box



Background

As federal funding for transportation spending diminishes and infrastructure crumbles, citizens and interest groups across the country are turning to ballot initiatives to fund transportation. According to the Center for Transportation Excellence, transportation initiatives have been on the ballot in 41 states since 2000 and 71 percent have succeeded (Moore 2016). These initiatives fund a variety of projects ranging from capital projects like new transit systems to basic maintenance activities like filling potholes.

As part of the Framing Livability Research theme, SCI examined transportation ballot measures from 2005-2015 in cities (and their counties and regional agencies) with populations greater than 100,000 in California, Oregon, and Washington. California, Oregon, and Washington utilize the ballot initiative process more than other states, and several extensive, successful ballot measures have emerged from these state. This study focused on transportation funding ballot measures in general and active transportation and transit projects relating to livability goals in particular. Researchers gathered, read, and coded 111 ballot initiatives. This policy paper summarizes key descriptive findings from this work.

Previous Work

Previous work has focused on national studies of transportation ballot initiatives, but existing national sources like Ballotopedia lack comprehensive coverage and comprehensive datasets of transportation ballot initiatives are generally unavailable. Recently, the Eno Center for Transportation published a database of 2016 transportation ballot measures, finding \$250 billion at stake for transportation in the 2016 election alone (Eno Center for Transportation 2016). Some previous studies have focused exclusively on transit. (Haas and Estrada 2011; Werbel and Haas 2002) provide guidance for cities attempting to pass a ballot measure or offer case studies of success. This study examines transportation ballot measures in three west coast states, focusing on sustainable transportation including bicycle, pedestrian, and transit. Previous research on ballot initiatives has been conducted in California, but there is limited work on either Oregon or Washington.

Reports

Transportation Finance at the Ballot Box

This 2006 report by the Center for Transportation Excellence found that ballot measures were increasingly being used to successfully fund transportation projects.

Success at the Ballot Box

In 2013, Advocacy Advance found that transportation ballot measures were continuing to prove a successful means for funding transportation-related projects.

Revisiting Factors Associated with the Success of Ballot Initiatives with a Substantial Rail Transit Component

This 2011 report by the Mineta Transportation Institute replicated an earlier 2001 study examining the conditions in a community that contribute to either the success or failure of a transportation ballot measure. The study found many similarities to the earlier work including:

- The importance of consensus amongst the business, elected and environmental communities, and accompanying depth of financial support.
- The difficulty of passing an initiative without well-funded, effective use of multimedia.
- The importance of utilizing experienced campaign consultants.
- Why Campaigns for Local Transportation Initiatives Succeed or Fail: An Analysis of Four Communities and National Data
- Haas et al. (2000) asked “What determines the success of campaigns in support of such ballot measures? Using a “statistical analysis of community-level characteristics”, the results indicated:
- “Efforts to fund transportation with taxes where the proportion of elderly is greater than 9 percent are more likely to succeed.”



- “Efforts to increase the sales taxes for transportation programs will be less successful in communities with higher sales taxes.”

[Journal articles](#)

Factors Influencing Support for Local Transportation Sales Tax Measures

Hannay and Wachs (2006) found that “the closer voters lived to the transportation projects to be funded, the greater their support. Higher incomes were also positively related to support, controlling for other variables. Political leanings were found to affect support, with the direction of the effect dependent upon the project list in each measure’s expenditure plan.” They also found that multi-modal expenditures were helpful for at least one of the ballots in their study.

Voting Outcomes of Local Tax Ballot Measures with a Substantial Rail Transit Component

In their study of tax ballot measures, Werbel and Haas (2002) found that “(a) failed campaigns may successfully be repeated with appropriate adjustments; (b) multimodal packages tend to be more readily approved by voters; (c) providing perceived geographic equity is both important and challenging, with one feasible approach involving decentralized planning; (d) involving influential representatives from the business community, environmental groups, and the political community in the planning process is important in building an effective supporting coalition, although developing a package acceptable to all these groups can be difficult, and (e) voters appear to be more sensitive to the tax expiration date than to the sales tax rate.”



Process

Ballot collection

Researchers collected all transportation-related ballot measures in California, Oregon, and Washington between 2005 and 2015, inclusive, that appeared on ballots that serviced cities with populations greater than 100,000 or counties and/or special districts with at least one city that met the population threshold.¹ State,

¹ Lane County ballots were from 2010-2015, inclusive, due to lack of access to earlier ballot measures.

county, special district (e.g., transit agency), and city ballots were included.^{2 3}

Ballot measure information, including the name of the measure, full ballot measure text wherever possible, and information on the voting results, was collected from official government sources wherever possible. For California, the Secretary of State maintains an exhaustive database of ballot measures spanning the state, city, and county. The Secretary of State for both Oregon and Washington provide state-level measures. To acquire the city and county measures, the cities (and servicing counties) had to be investigated individually. In most cases, the archive of ballot measures was available online from the election records databases of the respective county⁴ though several cities in Oregon required manual searching through election archives to complete the dataset. While all cities and counties in Oregon must permanently track and make available to the public the results of all elections⁵ the actual voting pamphlets and ballot measures that contain the material information only have a mandatory retention period of two to four years.⁶

Coding

For the purposes of analysis and coding of the ballot measures, priority was given to coding based on the short description and proposal from the voter pamphlets where available. Where full voting pamphlets were not available, the measure description or proposal was used, whichever was available. A number of attributes were created for each ballot including location, type, funding, time, and success or failure. Words related to transportation like bicycle, pedestrian, transit, capital, operations, etc. were each coded as attributes.⁷



² There is a practical consideration in choosing municipalities with large populations; the smaller a settlement is, the less likely it is to have relevant measures on the local ballot. Transportation issues and related infrastructure matters are often handled by larger settlements in service of the smaller ones. Thus, our resources are best spent on investigating the ballot measures of larger settlements where they are most likely to appear.

³ In the case where a city spans more than one county (such as Salem, Oregon), counties were included if the county has a population of 100,000 or more. This was done to eliminate confusing and redundant measures that might appear on the ballots for multiple counties but only serve one city. Also, in the cases where a city's borders span more than one county, the majority of the population resides in a single county (Marion County for Salem, Oregon, for example), with only a small portion of the population residing in the much smaller neighboring county (Polk County in this example). ⁴ In both Washington and Oregon, the county services both the county and city ballot measures for the region.

⁵ ORS 192 & 357, Division 150, County and Special District Retention, Elections (2)

⁶ ORS 192 & 357, Division 150, County and Special District Retention Schedule, 166-150-0035, Elections (14-16)

⁷ San Francisco County ballots were coded as city ballots.

Analysis

Researchers examined key characteristics of the ballot measures including:

- State
- Type of government
- Mode
- Multimodal
- Sustainable transportation
- Type of funding
- Continuation or new funding

Findings

Most ballots are at the city level, followed by county (primarily in California) and special districts (exclusively in Oregon and Washington).

Despite having a two thirds majority requirement for most types of funding measures, California has the highest ballot pass rate. Cities and states are also most likely to have the highest pass rates. Bicycle and pedestrian related measures perform slightly better than those that mention automobiles (although there is substantial overlap between ballots that mention walking or biking and those that mention roads and vehicles). Transit measures have the lowest pass rate.

In unpacking the performance of measures that focus on one mode versus several modes, we found that bicycle and pedestrian ballot measures are more successful than any other mode whether single, multimodal, or packaged with other sustainable modes. What's more, the pass rate for transit measures is higher when other sustainable transportation modes (bicycle and pedestrian) are mentioned.

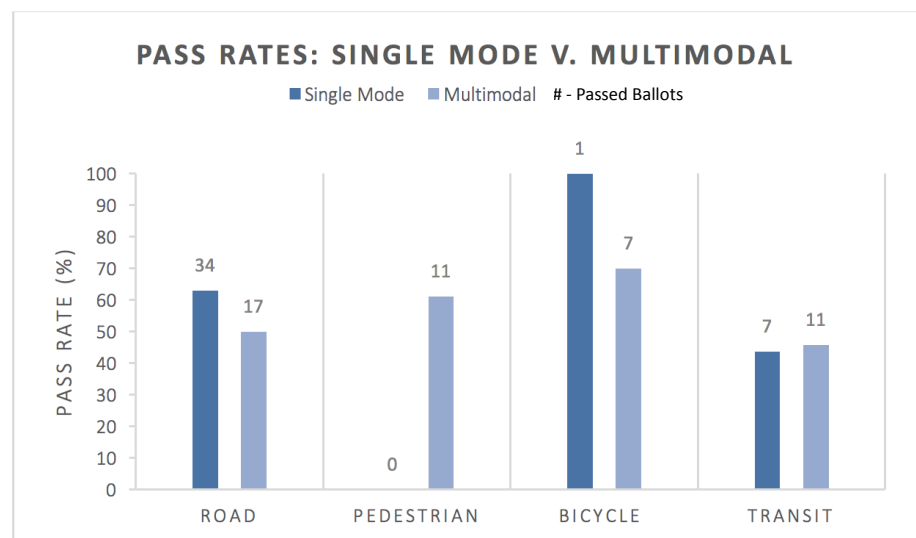


Figure 1

Measures that focus on only roads are more successful than multimodal measures in general. Transit modes face the greatest obstacles at the ballot.

Ballots with a bond measure as the funding mechanism are the most likely to pass. Taxes are less likely to pass. When bonds and taxes to fund bonds are both mentioned, the bond measures are less likely to pass than those that only mentioned bonds. Ballots are more likely to pass if the measure mentioned that the funding is related to an existing funding source (either an extension or an increase) than those that seem to indicate a new type of funding (this is especially true if one controls for bonds and their high pass rate even though they are typically a new source of funding).

Implications

Governments and organizations should examine the type of funding, funding purpose, level of governance, and language used in their ballot measures to increase the likelihood of the measure passing. Further analysis is needed to determine what relationships, if any, exist between ballot language and results. Preliminary results show optimism for some types of sustainable transportation (like bicycle transportation), particularly when coupled with other modes.



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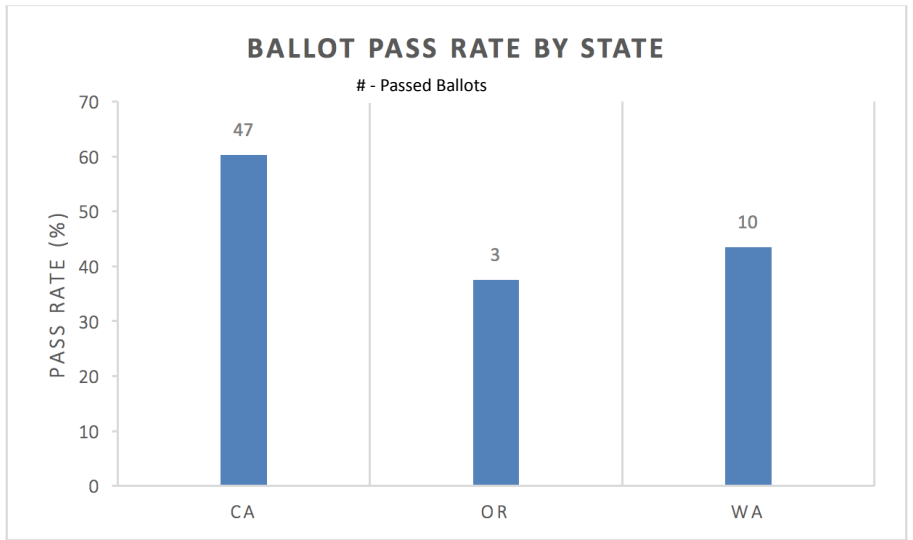


Figure 2

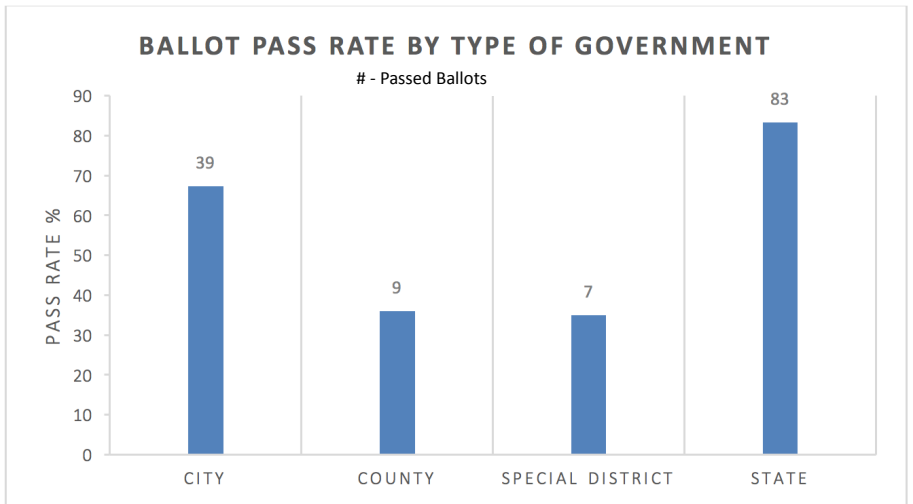


Figure 3

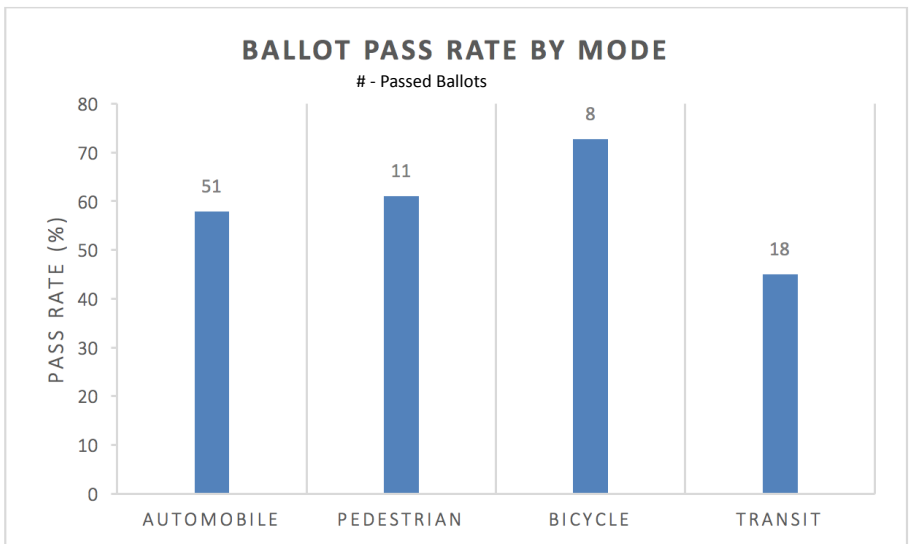


Figure 4

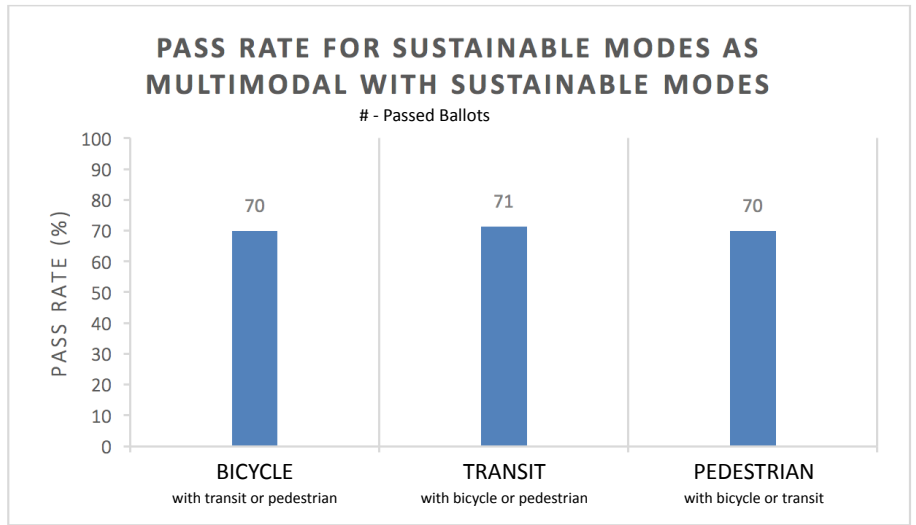


Figure 5

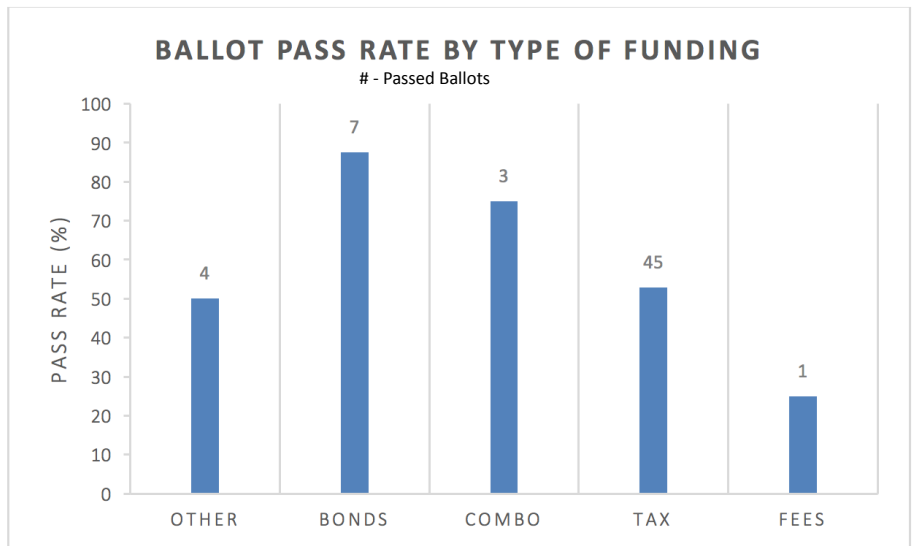


Figure 6

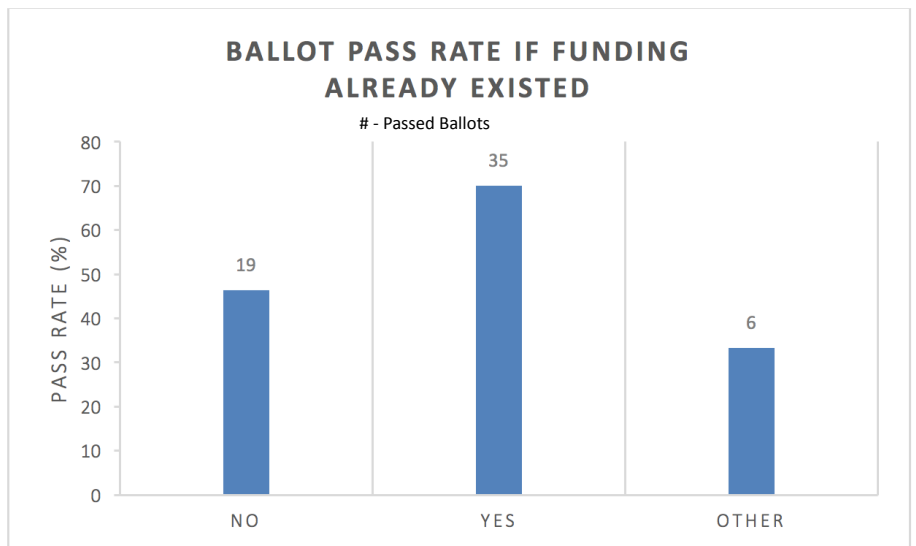


Figure 7