

Voting is the easy part

Why LA's Measure M hasn't led to greater transit use



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1 Whitehall Street, 17th Floor,
New York, NY 10004
www.TransitCenter.org

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About the Research

To understand the motivations of transit riders and people who voted on Measure M, UCLA professor Michael Manville and a team of students carried out two surveys of Los Angeles voters and transit riders. The first was a combination online and telephone survey of voters, which was conducted the week after the November 2016 election and garnered 1,450 responses. The second was a February 2017 intercept survey of transit riders (surveyors spoke to riders at the ten busiest transit stations in Los Angeles) which garnered 550 responses.

Voting for Transit is the Easy Part was written by TransitCenter's Joelle Ballam-Schwan, with contributions from Steven Higashide, David Bragdon, Tabitha Decker, and Jon Orcutt. The research report, Measure M and The Potential Transformation of Los Angeles, was written by Professor Manville, is available at transitcenter.org and [UCLA ITS' website](http://UCLA.ITS.org).

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Voting is the easy part: Why LA's Measure M hasn't led to greater transit use



Transit in Los Angeles is still used primarily by low-income, often foreign-born residents who cannot afford cars

In 2016 Los Angelenos approved Measure M, a ½-cent sales tax increase that will raise \$120 billion over forty years for transit expansion and maintenance, and traffic and street improvements. The measure captured 71.5% of the vote, exceeding the two-thirds threshold required for new taxes in California. Despite this, and despite previous wins at the ballot, transit ridership in Los Angeles has been falling for over a decade. A transit plan that will get 67% of the vote on election day is not necessarily a plan for a transit system that will attract riders.

LA's transit leaders talk about their system as on the way to being world-class. At a 2018 conference, LA Metro CEO Phil Washington predicted that ridership would surpass New York City. But current ridership trends are going in the wrong direction. Transit in Los

Los Angeles votes for transit but builds streets and neighborhoods for cars

Angeles is still used primarily by low-income, often foreign-born residents, who cannot afford cars. Instead of investing in these riders, many transit investments continue to be based on political geography and their poll-tested appeal to voting blocs rather than attractiveness to potential riders. This difference between political imperatives and sound transit planning imperatives has resulted in the construction of rail lines to suburbs and wealthy communities, where there is little potential for ridership (at least without significant new development) rather than improving service for existing transit riders.

Los Angeles now has billions of dollars reserved for transit projects over the next 40 years, and many expansion projects underway. But as a region, Los Angeles has yet to sort out the political fights that make a transit system effective, which are not fights over money, but fights over space. Los Angeles' built environment is dedicated to cars, and public transit continues to lose fights for space to cars. Walking to transit can be difficult and unpleasant. Buses mostly lack their own right-of-way, and even light-rail lines are not prioritized over car traffic. As a result, driving continues to be much more convenient and efficient than riding transit.

New research by UCLA's Michael Manville, summarized in this brief, shows that voter enthusiasm for transit doesn't directly translate to use of that transit, or support for the kinds of development that transit can serve. "Transit voters" are motivated by goals like improving the environment or reducing congestion, by a belief that transit can address those goals, and (increasingly) by partisan cues. But most of those who voted for transit are not riding it.

Much of the problem with mass transit in Los Angeles is that the region votes for transit, but builds streets and neighborhoods for cars. This results in transit that looks impressive on a campaign brochure, map or in a budget, but not at street-level. The disconnect between the rhetoric and reality is stark, and taxpayers may eventually tire of it. For civic, elected, and transit leaders, the task ahead requires education, advocacy, and policy change focused on building effective public transportation. Episodic ballot measures that are pro-transit once every few years are no match for pervasive, on-going anti-transit policies that persist every single day of the year.

Los Angelenos have continually voted for transit, so why aren't more of them riding it?

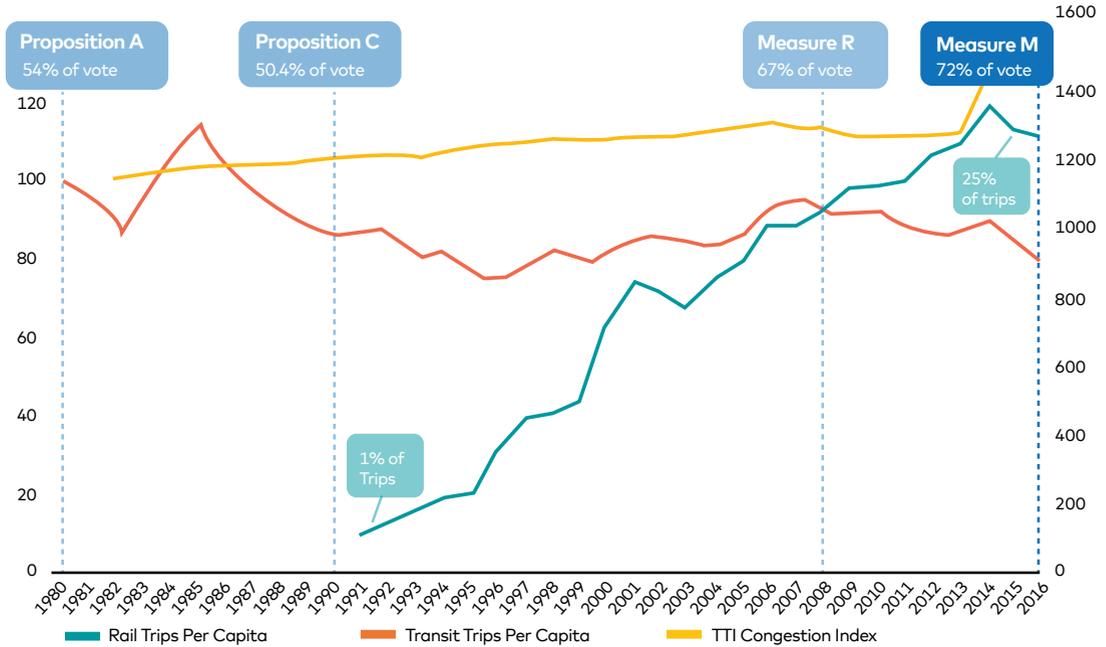


Driving continues to be much more convenient and efficient than riding transit

Los Angeles is attempting to transition LA from a social service model of transit to a model that closely resembles the transit systems like Boston or New York. Los Angeles needs to maintain its current ridership while attracting new riders, and attracting new riders means getting people out of their cars and onto public transportation. But cities like Boston and New York did not have to divorce their cars. They were married to transit from the beginning.

Getting drivers to adopt public transit takes time and requires policy change to make transit more attractive and to reduce the priority afforded to cars on city streets. Los Angeles has had the time to make such adjustments, but hasn't.

Measure M was not the first time Los Angeles approved funding for transit. Between 1980-2008, voters approved three transportation sales tax measures for transit and rail. Each ballot measure was accompanied by messaging about reducing congestion and pollution, and shifting Los Angeles away from its car-centric mode of getting around, but the actual content of the proposals did not include all the steps that would have been needed to fulfill that ambition. Following each transit expansion in Los Angeles, there has been a decline in transit use, rather than a decline in congestion.



Who are LA's transit riders?



Socioeconomics of Transit in the 7 U.S. Regions With the Most Transit Ridership

	Median Earnings, Transit Commuters	Median Earnings, All Workers	Share of Transit Commuters in Poverty	Share of All Workers in Poverty	Share of Poor Workers Commuting by Transit	Transit Trips Per Capita (Unlinked)
New York	\$39,691	\$32,820	8.1%	5.9%	40%	233
Los Angeles	\$17,421	\$41,274	19.5%	8.5%	6%	56
Chicago	\$41,511	\$39,505	8.9%	8.9%	13%	75
Washington, DC	\$50,273	\$54,108	5.8%	3.7%	37%	104
San Francisco	\$52,434	\$49,809	5.1%	6.4%	17%	135
Boston	\$44,788	\$45,475	4.3%	7.5%	14%	96
Philadelphia	\$31,792	\$40,675	10.5%	5.0%	12%	68

Sources: National Transit Database 2014-15, APTA Fact Book 2016, US Census ACS 2016. Census data are for MSAs.

Although Los Angeles has the second-largest transit ridership of any region in the U.S., riders of LA Metro look more like transit riders in Topeka or Waco than riders in Chicago or Philadelphia. Los Angeles' transit is used primarily by low-income, often foreign-born, people who lack access to private cars.

Riders of LA Metro look more like transit riders in Topeka or Waco than riders in Chicago or Philadelphia

Transit riders in LA have lower earnings and higher poverty rates than commuters in other big metropolitan areas, and the earnings gap between LA's transit commuters and its workforce overall is much larger. And yet transit is not working for most low-income people in LA. Of the transit riders who took the intercept survey in the course of this research, only 53% said they would use transit if they had access to a vehicle. Only 6% of low-income workers in the LA region commute on transit, compared to 13% in Chicago and 17% in the Bay Area.

LA's transit system isn't meeting the needs of the Angelenos who'd benefit most from an affordable mobility option. Leaders should prioritize improving the system for existing riders, making transit an attractive option for more of their trips, and then seek to attract new riders.

What motivated pro-transit voters?



LA has low central densities, high sprawl, wide roads and massive amounts of parking. These all make driving easier and hinder transit's effectiveness

Voters seem to want transit for reasons beyond wanting to personally ride it. Measure M supporters, like most residents of Los Angeles County, tend to be drivers with car-oriented lifestyles. They have cars and free parking at home and work, and many have high incomes.

LA “yes” voters were not primarily motivated by helping low-income people (the majority of LA’s transit riders), or because they planned to use transit. Instead, they were motivated primarily by the views of the political party they identify with, a belief that transit would reduce congestion for them, and concern for the environment.

Congestion

38 percent of Measure M supporters see the top benefit of transit as reducing congestion. Perhaps this is not surprising, because the Measure M campaign emphasized alleviating LA’s notorious traffic congestion. (Experts agree that the mere addition of some transit without accompanying changes to land use and the price of owning and operating an automobile is unlikely to reduce congestion, which raises the question of whether this campaign promise is credible.)

Positive ideas about transit

However, concerns about congestion did not directly correlate with support for Measure M. People concerned about congestion who also felt positively about transit were very likely to support Measure M. Supporters were both concerned about congestion and had positive ideas about transit.

Environment

31 percent of Measure M supporters see transit’s top benefit as improving the environment.

Partisanship

Support for Measure M was strongly tied to ideological, and especially partisan lines; in the sample, 79% of Democrats supported the measure, compared to 56% of Republicans. Moreover, identifying

Each transit expansion in Los Angeles did not lead to a decline in congestion, but to a decline in transit use

as a Democrat was a stronger predictor of supporting Measure M than location, income, race, experience riding transit, or experience being in congestion. It appears that transit (like many other issues) has become increasingly partisan.

Only twenty percent of Measure M supporters view transit's top benefit as improving mobility for low-income people, even though this is an important function of transit. 11 percent view transit's top priority as creating jobs.

What lessons can be drawn from this? To the extent that supporting transit is becoming increasingly associated with liberal politics and Democratic identity, advocates will want to time transit ballots around other elections that promise strong Democratic turnout. (For example, presidential-year elections as opposed to special elections.)

Advocates can also appeal to voters' self-interest. In Los Angeles, campaign advertising claimed that transit would reduce traffic congestion and make it easier to drive. There is virtually no evidence that transit reduces congestion in the long run; transit can take some cars off the road, but traffic continues to grow unless roads are priced. Transit does allow people to *avoid* congestion if it operates in its own right-of-way.

But if people are motivated to vote for transit by their political leanings and concern about abstract issues, there is little evidence to believe this will translate into a change in their travel behavior from driving to riding if the transit created by the plan is not useful. Securing funding for transit does not alone secure a successful transportation system. It is just one step. To succeed, the transit that the funding makes possible needs to be useful to the most likely riders.



LA's leaders aren't making the choices that would make transit work.

Taxpayers may eventually tire of the disconnect between LA's transit rhetoric and reality

Many “transit voters” are not in favor of the policies necessary to make transit work effectively. Los Angeles’ elected officials have the power to shift the public conversation by being honest about the need to prioritize both transit and transit-complimentary policies.

The public’s strong support for Measure M is counterbalanced by deep ambivalence about complementary policies—building more housing, reforming parking, or tolling highways—that make transit work. Only 40% of Measure M supporters in the survey also support lowering parking requirements near transit; 51% support building more housing near transit; only 38% support tolling freeways.

Most American cities with extensive public transportation systems also have complementary land use policies that make riding transit a competitive choice. These cities have high central city housing and population densities, narrow streets with frequent intersections, and scarce and expensive parking. None of these characteristics describe Los Angeles.

Instead, LA has low central densities, high sprawl, wide roads, and massive amounts of unpriced parking. These features all make driving easier and hinder transit’s effectiveness. More space for the quality sidewalk connections, transit-only lanes, and development that makes transit work means taking some space away for car traffic and parking. If all the transit being planned under Measure M and prior measures is to succeed, local governments need to get serious about changing all these other underlying conditions that currently inhibit that success.

Because LA has largely not implemented complementary policies...



Many “transit voters” are not in favor of the policies necessary to make transit work effectively

Transit is slow

Rail and buses both have to compete with cars on the street. [The Expo and Blue Lines slow to a crawl as they approach downtown.](#) Buses mostly do not have dedicated lanes and get stuck in traffic.

Transit is not safely accessible by walking

People are risking their lives just to cross a street. If riders are going to use transit, they need to be able to get to it. In LA, that often means crossing arterials that are both deadly and unpleasant. Missing and broken sidewalks in the city increase the danger.

Transit is inhospitable

Unlike leading cities where transit is woven into the urban fabric, and stations are designed from a customer’s perspective, many stops and stations on the LA Metro network are isolated and unpleasant. Not only is it dangerous to get to stations, but once there, riders don’t want to stay. Several of Los Angeles’s light rail and BRT lines, including the Gold and [Green Lines](#), have stations in the middle of highways that expose riders to noise and pollution from vehicles. Most bus stops lack shelter, in part because placing a shelter goes through a complicated and lengthy approval process that involves eight different agencies.

Many of the most likely transit users can’t afford to live near transit

In many cases, affordable housing is not being built near transit for existing residents or people who depend on public transit to get to work. Efforts to build more affordable housing near transit often get tied up in lawsuits. As a result, the most loyal transit riders are getting pushed further away from high-capacity transit.



Do these lessons apply beyond Los Angeles?

Like any city, Los Angeles has a unique political culture, and advocates should be cautious about generalizing from this report to other cities. However, LA’s challenges are the challenges of most American cities. In regions that rely on plebiscites, the particular challenge is how to develop a transit plan that simultaneously attracts a majority of voters on election day and will attract riders into the future. In most US cities, transit is primarily a social service and advocates have to convince people who don’t ride transit to support it.

The findings in this report offer a broad explanation for why transit ballots sometimes win but then fail to spur transit ridership: the disconnect stems from the conflict between the desire to design a transit plan that will appeal to 66.6% of likely voters on one day in November in one year, and the need to design a transit plan that will attract riders over decades. Those are proving to be two different types of plans, but they don’t have to diverge as much as they seem to in Los Angeles. Instead, it is not too late for Los Angeles to learn from peer cities that have not only won at the ballot, but grown ridership.

In recent years, non-legacy transit and historically car-centric cities in the United States have passed ballot measures for transit and seen huge boosts in ridership. Seattle regional voters approved ballot measures in 1996 and 2008, the \$900 million Move Seattle transportation levy within the city limits in 2015 and (in 2016, the same year as Measure M) Sound Transit 3, a \$50 billion transit ballot initiative.

Not only has Seattle become the city with the

fastest growing transit ridership in the US, but it’s also seen a decline in car use. In 2017, 70% of trips to downtown Seattle were made by people outside of private vehicles and they also added 4.7 million transit trips for a total ridership of 19.17 million, higher than the region had ever seen. Seattle has rapidly added housing in walkable neighborhoods, allowing people to live and work near transit. Seattle also invested in more frequent bus service, added several bus lanes, and put streets on “road diets” to give more space to people walking and biking. Unlike Los Angeles, Seattle has given transit space on the street, and that has paid dividends.

Seattle isn’t the only historically car-married city that’s been able to make the shift by a combination of funding and essential policy changes to zoning and street design. In 2015, Phoenix approved \$31.5 billion for transit improvements over 35 years. Importantly, more than half of the funding is going to improve frequency on local buses. While Phoenix largely lacks pedestrian-friendly streets, it offers an important lesson: Success comes from improving existing bus service, not just expanding high-capacity transit.

It is also worth noting that, although helping low-income people was viewed as a benefit of transit by only 20% of survey respondents in this research, some transit campaigns have successfully mobilized voters with that message. In 2016, Indianapolis residents voted to raise the city’s income tax to expand bus service. Advocates argued that better transit would connect poorer residents to jobs, groceries, and healthcare. Local opinion polling can identify which issues resonate in a given city.

Los Angeles has the money.

Now what?

LA has secured robust and long-term funding for transit. This is an undeniable political accomplishment, but only the first and arguably the easiest step in creating a transit-oriented region. But unless other changes are made to policies like zoning and street design, the investment in transit will continue to underperform. The task at hand for advocates is educating the public about the other accompanying factors that are required for transit to work, like supportive land uses and street designs, what geographic markets transit is most and least effective to serve, and service characteristics like frequency and connectivity.

A transit system cannot clear the roads for drivers; a look at any of the world's great transit cities quickly confirms that great transit correlates nearly 100% with high levels of street congestion. Transit can transform cities in ways that make them more livable, that enable and foster more inclusive and varied built environments, and that let people move around in more and healthier ways, reducing their everyday experience with road traffic congestion. But these require changes in how the city uses space. New rail and rapid-bus routes are unlikely to do enough to grow ridership if existing transit lines remain mired in traffic, or if the pedestrian experience of transit remains so unpleasant. Advocates need to demand safer sidewalks; more bus lanes; more fast, frequent, and reliable service, and transportation that reflects where people need to go.

Strong agreement about building transit, moreover, conceals deeper divisions about making a region where transit would be effective: people who nominally support transit are far more ambivalent about building housing near transit, congestion charging, or parking reform.

Advocates must convince policymakers that a less car-dependent, more transit-focused Los Angeles will lead to better outcomes when it comes to values that matter to citizens, like economic growth, equity, public health, and safety. If they can do so, Los Angeles will finally have an excellent transit system that works for riders.

