

ABC News Poll: Traffic in the United States

A Look Under the Hood of a Nation on Wheels

Analysis

By **GARY LANGER**

Feb. 14, 2005 - Freeways get clogged, minutes tick by and tempers sometimes flare, but there's another side to the daily commute for millions of Americans: Most of them actually like it.

So it goes (and stops-and-goes) in the nation's love-hate relationship with the daily task of getting around. In a country where 220 million adults average an hour and a half a day in their cars, views of traffic in America vary as much as highway conditions themselves, from the joy of the open blacktop to the misery of another rubberneck-inspired backup.

On balance, the road still offers more freedom than frustration. Three-quarters of Americans say driving often gives them a sense of independence, and nearly half say it's often relaxing. Four in 10 love their cars -- not just like them, but love them.

But there's a darker side: About a third can be classified as aggressive drivers. Six in 10 concede they sometimes go well over the speed limit. Sixty-two percent occasionally get frustrated behind the wheel, more than four in 10 get angry and two in 10 sometimes boil into road rage. And nothing fuels driver anger like getting stuck in a traffic jam.

From emotional responses to policy choices, this ABC News/Time magazine/Washington Post poll dissects public attitudes on traffic and experiences on the road, with some surprising results. The national survey supports ABC's weeklong, cross-platform coverage, "Gridlock Nation: America's Traffic Toll," starting Feb. 13.

On The Road

For better or worse, America is a nation on wheels. To get where they need to go, 90 percent of Americans say they usually drive, reporting an average of 87 minutes a day behind the wheel. For car commuters, it's an average of 100 minutes; for parents with children at home, an average of 104 minutes (compared with 77 minutes for people without kids at home). The average household owns two cars, trucks or sport utility vehicles -- and one in four owns three or more.



Sampling, data collection and tabulation for this poll were done by [TNS](#).

Emotions Behind the Wheel

Driving often makes you feel...

Independent	74%
Relaxed	48

Driving occasionally makes you feel...

Frustrated	62%
Nervous	56
Angry	43

Traffic overall is not decidedly dreadful -- 53 percent say it's pretty good in their area. But 47 percent say it's bad, and there's great local variance. Traffic is worst in big cities and suburbs -- but far better in the towns and rural areas where about half of Americans live. Regionally it's best in the Midwest and especially bad in the West, which on a population basis mainly means California.

Rating Traffic Conditions

	Good	Bad
All	53%	47
Midwest	64	36

Northeast	53	46
South	52	47
West	43	57
Rural/Town	65	35
City/Suburb	39	60

About half of Americans say traffic in their area is worse now than it was five years ago, and about half expect it to be worse still five years from now -- both about 10 points less negative than they were in a 2000 survey. Westerners, suburbanites and people with long or often-delayed commutes are most likely to say traffic has gotten worse, and to expect it to worsen further.

Almost a quarter of Americans get stuck in traffic jams on at least a weekly basis. That's the same as it was five years ago -- no worse -- but still it represents about 50 million adults stuck on the road with something better to do. Among commuters, more, nearly a third, get nailed by traffic jams at least weekly.

Life for commuters can be heaven or hell. They report an average one-way commute time of 26 minutes (over an average distance of 16 miles). But the variance is huge: On the best days, the average commute is 19 minutes; on the worst days, 46 minutes. That means traffic, at its worst, can double the average commute time, adding 27 minutes each way.

And on average -- not at its worst, but just on average -- workers estimate that traffic congestion adds a half-hour a day to their drive, 15 minutes each way. That's an impressive time suck.

Commuting to Work: the Agony, the Ecstasy _____

Commute Time: Average	26 minutes
On a good day	19 minutes
On a bad day	46 minutes

Commuting to Work: the Agony, the Ecstasy _____

Like commute	60%
Dislike it	36

As an example of how much conditions vary, average commute times range from 19 minutes for people who work in towns to 34 minutes for people who work in big cities. And where people say the traffic is OK, it's 24 minutes; where poor, it's 32.

Views of traffic conditions over time have been unstable. In four Roper Organization polls between 1976 and 1992, anywhere from a low of 42 percent to a high of 59 percent said traffic in their area was good. The average was 49 percent, not far from the 53 percent measured in this poll.

One difference: A fortunate 14 percent now say their traffic is "excellent," the first time it has cracked double digits. About as many, 15 percent, give their traffic the worst rating, "poor."

Strategies

Traffic engenders impressive avoidance strategies. Two-thirds of Americans sometimes take a less direct route to avoid snarls. Six in 10 sometimes leave earlier or later than planned to duck the worst traffic. Two in 10 have moved homes mainly to improve a commute.

A quarter have changed their work schedules, and 10 percent sometimes work at home to avoid a commute -- obviously not an option for many workers. This rises to a fifth of people in high-congestion areas, and a quarter of those who really don't like the drive. Fourteen percent of Americans say they've taken the ultimate commute-avoidance measure: Changed jobs, or simply left a job, primarily because of the commute.

Traffic Avoidance Strategies

Take a less direct route	68%
Leave earlier or later	60
Skip a planned stop	40
Changed work schedule	24
Moved closer to work	20
Changed/left a job	14

Policy choices are a contentious brew. Among some of the most-discussed options, the public is somewhat skeptical about high-occupancy vehicle lanes and downright hostile toward adjustable-rate or city-center tolls. Solutions such as quickly hooking and hauling breakdowns, retiming traffic lights and providing prompt traffic alerts are seen as the best choices, and automatic cameras to catch traffic offenders get 2-1 support. About half see building roads as very effective -- but most oppose gasoline taxes to fund it. For most people, public transportation and carpooling remain far outside the fast track. While six in 10 Americans have public transit available, just 10 percent use it regularly, and just 4 percent of workers use it for their daily commute. (Ninety-three percent call driving more convenient.) Eighty-four percent drive alone to work, 8 percent drive with someone else and 80 percent of solo drivers aren't interested in car pooling. Alongside the traffic, there's the other kind of congestion: Two-thirds of Americans are concerned about the effect of auto exhaust on their health, although fewer (four in 10) concede that their own driving is much to blame.

Like it/Love it

Yet, as noted, for all the watercooler gripes, 60 percent of people who work outside the home say they like their daily commute.

How so? One secret is a sane trip: Happy commuters tend not to work in cities, report below-average travel times and distances and say their local traffic isn't bad. Among people who work in towns or rural areas (four in 10 commuters), 71 percent like the commute; but among those who work in big cities (three in 10 commuters) it's 24 points lower.

The Commute: Liking it _____

All	60%
Work in rural/town	71
Work in suburb	56
Work in city	47

<15 min. commute	74
>30 min. commute	42
<5 min. traffic delay	74
>15 min. traffic delay	40
Good local traffic	71
Bad local traffic	46

Long commutes are no fun: Enjoyment is 32 points higher among people who spend 15 minutes or fewer each way on their daily commute, compared with those who take more than a half-hour. Similarly, people with a long-distance commute are 22 points less likely to say they like it.

Indeed, about a quarter of commuters say the main reason they like it is because they're blessed with a short or easy route. More, nearly four in 10, like the quiet time alone or the break between home and work. And others report simple pleasures such as the scenery or listening to music or the radio.

Detroit may enjoy one finding: By a 10-point margin, people who "love" their cars are more apt to like their commute. Environmentalists may dislike another: It's SUVs that win the most affection. Among the one in six Americans who drive an SUV, half love it. Among sedan drivers, by contrast, just 35 percent love their cars.

Behaving Badly

One common experience on the road is bad behavior. Majorities of motorists say they often see other drivers speeding (reported by 82 percent), driving inattentively (71 percent) or driving aggressively (64 percent).

Four in 10 often see others run a red light or stop sign; 34 percent often witness "impolite gestures," and 27 percent often see other drivers exhibiting road rage -- "uncontrollable anger toward another driver on the road."

Traffic plays a big role. Among people who give the worst rating to their local traffic conditions, many more -- 41 percent -- see road rage, and 54 percent often see other

drivers making angry or impolite gestures -- double the number who see it in good traffic.

Bad Behavior on the Roads

	Local traffic: Ex/Good	Local traffic: Poor
Often see: Impolite gestures	27%	54
Often see: Road rage	22	41

Given these, it's no wonder that 30 percent of drivers say they feel nervous about their safety on the road very or somewhat often. Include those who feel this way at least occasionally, and the number jumps to 56 percent -- a majority.

Feelings on the Road

	Very often	Very/Somewhat	Occasionally or more
Independent	54%	74	98
Relaxed	20	48	73
Nervous about safety	12	30	56
Frustrated	10	30	62
Angry	5	19	43

As far as their own behavior, nearly a quarter of drivers fess up to speeding very or somewhat often, and more -- 58 percent -- say they do it at least occasionally. More than four in 10 concede that they drive inattentively at least occasionally, and three in 10 sometimes drive aggressively. Two in 10, or close to it, at least occasionally make impolite gestures, feel road rage, or run a light or stop sign.

Driving Behavior

	Have seen: Very/Somewhat often	Have done: Occasionally or more
Speeding	82%	58
Inattentive driving	71	43
Aggressive driving	64	30
Run a light/stop sign	40	17
Impolite gestures	34	21

Fessing Up: Personal Behavior (at Least Occasionally)

Speed	58%
Drive inattentively	43
Drive too aggressively	30
Make impolite gestures	21
Feel road rage	19
Run a stop sign or light	17

Aggressive

Thirty-six percent of Americans concede that they engage in at least one of these behaviors very or somewhat often. These aggressive drivers are most likely to include young drivers, people who often get stuck in traffic jams and city drivers.

There's another kind of behavior this poll measures: What people do when they're stuck in stop-and-go traffic. Almost everyone listens to the radio or music; four in 10 talk on the phone or have a bite to eat. Among women, one in 10 say they sometimes put on makeup. The fewest -- 3 percent -- try to drive and read at the same time.

Problems and Solutions

People chiefly blame the sheer volume of traffic as the main cause of jams in their area; 44 percent say so, while 26 percent blame construction and 14 percent say it's accidents. In cities, suburbs and the worst-traffic areas, moreover, volume soars as the prime culprit.

However, building new roads or expanding public transit -- both presumably volume-reducing measures -- are not seen as the most effective solutions. Instead a low-tech

and comparatively low-cost approach takes the top slot: Sixty-six percent think it's very effective to remove disabled vehicles from the roadway immediately, an approach some municipalities are stressing.

'Very Effective' Traffic Remedies

Clear breakdowns	66
Traffic alerts	56
Improving lights	55
New roads	51
Public transit	42
Car pooling	39
HOV lanes	27
Adjustable tolls	7
City-center tolls	7

The next best solutions from the public's perspective are equally commonsense: Using an information system such as electronic signs or other alerts to warn people about jams and suggest other routes, and improving the timing of traffic lights.

Fifty-one percent do think road-building is very effective (highest in the South, lowest in the Northeast); that slips to 42 percent for building or expanding mass transit. About as many think car pooling can work well.

Some of the approaches that get some of the most buzz, however, are much less likely to be seen as very effective solutions. Just 27 percent think HOV lanes will do the trick, and even among the nearly three in 10 Americans who have HOV lanes in their area, 34 percent rate them as very effective in reducing congestion.

Far fewer still, a mere 7 percent, think it's very effective to charge adjustable tolls on highways (that is, higher tolls when the volume is heaviest), or tolls on non-residents to enter the central areas of major cities during business hours. Even among people who live in big cities, just 15 percent support tolls on non-residents driving in, and just 10 percent see it as very effective in reducing congestion.

Taxes, Tolls and HOVs

People may see tolls as ineffective because they don't want to pay them. Eighty-eight percent say they'd oppose a \$5 toll to drive into city centers (a type of approach that's said to have been successful in London); opposition is equally high whether people drive into big cities or don't.

A substantial if less overwhelming majority, 68 percent, opposes adjustable tolls to try to spread the flow of traffic more evenly across the day; even in bad-traffic areas, it's equally unpopular.

Support for Policies

Automatic cameras	66
Single-driver hybrids in HOV lanes	54
HOV lanes (if none now)	51
Single-driver tolls in HOV lanes	36
Higher gasoline tax	32
Adjustable tolls	29
City-center tolls	11

The cost sensitivity expressed in anti-toll sentiment may reflect the price of gasoline, now averaging \$1.91 for a gallon of regular unleaded. In any case, it extends to gasoline taxes: Americans by a 2-1 margin, 65 percent-32 percent, oppose higher gasoline taxes even if the money is earmarked for transportation projects.

HOV lanes -- though not broadly seen as very effective -- garner fewer objections.

Among the seven in 10 Americans who don't have them in their areas now, 51 percent would support HOV lanes, while 43 percent oppose them. Support is higher in worse traffic areas, including cities and suburbs.

Sixty percent oppose opening HOV lanes to single drivers who are willing to pay an extra toll for the privilege another anti-toll result. But 54 percent are in favor of another proposal, opening HOV lanes to single drivers of low-pollution hybrid vehicles in order to encourage the use of such cars.

Transit

Public transit is more available in the Northeast and West (seven in 10 say it's an option) than in the South and Midwest (five in 10). But it's not an especially attractive alternative: Among those who have public transit available, 52 percent rate it positively - no better than the number who positively rate their local traffic.

Lack of convenience seems to be the main rap -- as noted, 93 percent of Americans say it's more convenient to travel by car. Fewer but still a majority, 56 percent, don't see a cost advantage either, instead saying it's less expensive for them to drive.

Public Transportation

Is Available	59%
If available, use it often	10
Use it to get to work	4

Incentives are few and far between: Just 8 percent of people with jobs outside the home say their employers offer money or other incentives to encourage people to take public transportation to work.

There is a plus for public transit: People who know it best like it. Among those who use it, 69 percent rate it positively; 23 points higher than among those who don't. (Use of public transit peaks among city dwellers, minorities and lower-income Americans.)

Carpool/Car Share

While just 8 percent of commuters currently car pool, 20 percent of solo drivers say they'd be interested in it -- far from a majority, but enough to take plenty of cars off the road if they were to follow through. For most, though, that looks unlikely: Just 6 percent are "very" interested in a car pool arrangement.

As with mass transit, convenience is the biggest objection: Asked the main reason they're not in carpools now, 51 percent say it'd be inconvenient, and an additional 22 percent give reasons related to convenience or privacy. Eighteen percent, though, say it's because they don't know anyone to carpool with.

There are roughly similar levels of interest in short-term car rentals -- membership services that rent cars by the hour. A quarter of Americans say they'd be interested in replacing their main car with this kind of service; 32 percent say they might use it to replace a second car. The numbers who are very interested, however, are again much lower -- 8 percent and 10 percent, respectively.

Means/Medians

A word about numbers: While this analysis refers to averages (meaning the means) for results such as driving and commute times, they also can be computed as medians -- the midpoint of responses. Medians, while less inclusive of the full range of responses, mitigate the effect of the extremes.

It can make a difference. Americans say they spend an average of 87 minutes a day in their cars, but a median of 60 minutes. Commuters say their average commute takes 26 minutes; the median is 20 minutes. Their worst commute can take an average of 46 minutes, but a median of 30. The amount of time they estimate traffic adds to their commute averages 15 minutes, while the median is 10.

Holiday

It is, finally, close to another national holiday -- President's Day, Feb. 21. Get ready for traffic: Fourteen percent of Americans say they'll be traveling by car on a special trip during the upcoming holiday weekend -- translating to nearly 30 million cars on the road.

Methodology

This ABC News/Time magazine/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone Jan. 26-31, 2005, among a random national sample of 1,204 adults, including 750 commuters. The results have a three-point error margin for the full sample, 3.5 points for commuters. Sampling, data collection and tabulation was done by TNS of Horsham, Pa.