



How Exit Polls Can Help Newly Elected Leaders Gauge the Policy Preferences of Voters

Mary Angelica Painter, The Natural Hazards Center, University of Colorado, Boulder

Exit poll surveys often ask the question, “what is the most important issue facing your city/state/country today?” followed by a list of options. These options usually include crime, the economy, development, education, race, and other pressing issues of the day, alongside some less salient issues such as infrastructure and transportation that are infrequently chosen. Despite this standard menu, wording and choice of options play a key role in the issues selected as important by voters. I argue that stand-alone issue questions on topics like transportation can reveal more about what voters think than questions that require respondents to choose general topics from a list. Using such questions, political scientists can help newly elected city leaders better understand issues like transportation, even if voters do not list them as most important.

In my research, I compare an exit poll that colleagues and I conducted in the March 2017 Mayoral primaries in St. Louis to actual results in the April 2017 general election. In the exit poll, voters were asked to choose from a list of important topics; later in the poll, we asked stand-alone questions about support for the expansion of public transportation.

Lyda Krewson won the primary and went on to win the general election, becoming the first female Mayor of St. Louis. Newly elected to a powerful position, Mayor Krewson must ask herself: What policy priorities *should* I focus on? In what ways can I support my constituents as they supported me? Our research showed that there is robust support among voters for Mayor Krewson to prioritize mass transit: in the April 2017 general election, voters passed a transit expansion measure called Proposition 1 or the Metrolink tax, which raised a sales tax for light-rail expansion. And support for expansion is confirmed by other findings from our exit poll survey.

A Proposition on the Ballot and Focused Exit Polling

After federal funds of approximately \$375,000 were given to Saint Louis to plan a North-South light rail expansion, new attention was paid to shortcomings in public transit. Politicians backed expansion during 2017 Democratic primary campaigns. The former mayor, Francis Slay, made expansion a key priority for redevelopment of the city – and he endorsed Krewson, the current Mayor.

Proposition 1 proposed a half-cent increase in sales tax for “economic development” purposes including public transportation expansion, neighborhood revitalization, workforce development, public safety, and infrastructure. Although it was not explicit in the ballot proposition, sixty-percent of the revenues raised would go towards a North-South extension of the city’s current light rail system. City voters approved the ordinance with 60% of the vote.

Our exit-poll survey included questions concerning the Metrolink tax and public transportation ridership. Over 900 voters participated in the exit poll survey, which showed 65% support for the Metrolink tax – five percentage points higher than the actual election results.

Compared to a previous exit poll, the proportion of respondents who said they had used public light rail or buses in the last month rose from 26% in 2013 to 32% in the 2017 poll. Yet respondents who said transportation was a “most important issue” remained well under 10% the whole time. This is hardly surprising, given that transportation had to compete with issues such as crime, neighborhood redevelopment, and race relations. Yet voters still had concerns about transportation, and focused, stand-alone questions about specific policies were a better way to gauge their support for public transportation.

Prioritizing Policy Through Newly Found Links

For Mayor Krewson, two findings on public transportation support should stand out:

- **Voters who express favorable opinions of former Mayor Slay (who endorsed Mayor Krewson for the office) are far more likely to support the Metrolink tax compared to those who think unfavorably or have no opinion of Slay.** We used two versions to ask slightly different kinds of the Metrolink tax support question: one referenced the increase in sales tax for the Metrolink as “Mayor Slay’s proposal” and the other did not. We found that 75% of those who think favorably of Mayor Slay support the Metrolink tax, compared to 64% of those who think do not think favorably of him.
- **Respondents who think electing women to political office is *very important* are far more likely to support the Metrolink tax than those who think that it is *not important at all*.** 71% of respondent who think it is very important for women to be elected to political offices support the *Metrolink tax*, compared to 47% of those who think it is not important at all.

A majority of Krewson supporters who turned out in the general election supported the Metrolink tax – and their specific expressions of support for public transportation expansion correlated with voter support for Mayor Slay and female politicians. This study provides new findings about transportation issues -- and offers an example of how political science research can contribute to governance.

Although transportation was not called the “most important issue” by St. Louis voters, many of them – especially Krewson supporters -- want to fix deficiencies in the current transit system. Robust transportation increases mobility and can enhance economic opportunity and neighborhood development. When questions are asked about transportation policies in their own right, public concerns and preferences become visible. And we see that people understand that mobility plays an important role in addressing other urban issues.

Political scientists do not often use research to make policy recommendations. Usually, they look retrospectively at what happened in order to explore why it happened – instead of aiming to suggest what should be done. But my work on election-time questions has allowed me both to better understand the 2017 results and to help newly elected officials set policy agendas that meet the expectations and preferences of their voters. Political scientists can contribute to politics, even as they study processes objectively.