

Americans' Attitudes Toward Smart Growth

September 2000

Introduction

During this time of economic prosperity, more Americans are able to buy homes, and more areas are feeling the conflicting pressures of the desire to develop and the wish to preserve the livability of their communities. As policy-makers and the public debate the different aspects of growth and development, Smart Growth America asked Belden Russonello & Stewart to measure the public's appetite for specific policies to deal with these issues of how we live. In September 2000, Belden Russonello & Stewart conducted a national random sample survey. The interviewing was conducted September 7 through 10, 2000. The survey used a random digit dial (RDD) sample of households across the U.S. A total of 1007 interviews were conducted. The margin of sampling error for the entire survey is plus or minus 3 percentage points at the 95% level of tolerance.

The survey reveals three main points on Americans' attitudes toward smart growth and the future of land use in their communities:

- 1) Americans believe we need better planning for growth, and large majorities support specific "smart growth" initiatives.
- 2) As commute times lengthen for many Americans and traffic becomes ever more a part of daily life, Americans are looking for alternatives. A national majority now looks to improved public transportation as the better answer to the traffic dilemma instead of more highways.
- 3) Americans trust local civic groups more than government or developers to make decisions about land use in their communities.

Findings

1. Americans support policies behind “smart growth” and planning for the future of their communities

Large majorities of Americans endorse both the concept of smart growth and a number of policy initiatives to make smart growth a reality in their communities.

Nearly eight in ten Americans (78%) favor and 16% oppose “smart growth” when it is described as “giving priority to improving services, such as schools, roads, affordable housing, and public transportation in existing communities, rather than encouraging new housing and commercial development in the countryside.” The strongest proponents of smart growth are women, younger Americans (18-24) and residents of the northeast. (Chart 1 and Table 1)

Not only is there broad support for the concept of smart growth, but Americans favor a wide array of policies to make it a reality. The survey tested seven specific policy options to promote smart growth. Each of the initiatives receives support from majorities of Americans. Specifically, we find:

- 81% favor their state government giving funding priority to maintain services, such as school and roads, in existing communities rather than to encourage new development in the countryside.
- Eight in ten Americans support programs to make it possible for individuals to help revitalize existing communities. The public favors government tax credits and low-interest loans for people to revitalize cities, suburbs and rural communities that are not doing so well (81%). Similarly, the public endorses tax credits and low-interest loans for people to rehabilitate historic houses and revitalize neighborhoods in cities and older suburbs (79%).
- Large majorities of the public want to protect and preserve America’s natural areas. Eighty-three percent support establishing zones for green space, farming, and forests outside of existing cities and suburbs that would be off-limits to developers. Nearly eight in ten (77%) approve of the government using tax dollars to buy land for more parks and open space to protect wildlife.
- 77% of Americans would be willing to spend less money on building new highways if the money went to creating communities that had more sidewalks and stop signs, to make it easier and safer for children to walk to school.
- Two-thirds (66%) of Americans support requiring all new housing developments built in their state include at least 15% of housing for moderate and low-income families. (Chart 2)

Better and more planning for new growth is also strongly endorsed by large majorities of Americans:

- 85% would like to see an increase in coordinated efforts among towns to plan for growth. (Chart 3)
- 78% say there is a need for better land-use planning to guide the place and size of development in their county or area, while less than two in ten (17%) believe people and industry should be allowed to build wherever they want. (Chart 4)
- Three-quarters (76%) believe their state needs to do more to manage and plan for new growth and development. Only 13% would like to see less effort to manage and plan for growth in their state. (Chart 5)

2. *Public transportation, the answer to traffic problems*

There is growing concern about traffic among the American public and the answer many point to is improving public transportation. Over half of the public (54%) report that traffic where they live has gotten worse; nearly four in ten (37%) believe it has stayed about the same; and four percent say it has gotten better over the past three years. Residents of the western part of the U.S. are the most likely to report that traffic has worsened, and Hispanic and Whites are more likely than Blacks to believe traffic has gotten worse over the last few years. (Chart 6 and Table 2)

The traffic solution Americans are most likely to endorse is improving public transportation. When given three options to solve long-term traffic problems, a plurality (47%) chooses “to improve public transportation” and nearly three in ten (28%) choose “develop communities where people do not have to drive long distances to work or shop.” Only two in ten (21%) select “to build new roads” as the best long-term solution to reducing traffic. Residents of the northeast are the strongest proponents of improvements in public transportation. Hispanics are the most likely to choose developing walkable communities, and men are more likely than women to believe new roads are the answer to traffic problems. (Chart 7 and Table 3)

When forced to choose between new highways and improved public transportation, six in ten Americans (60%) are willing to forgo money for new highways in their state in order to improve public transportation, such as trains, buses, and light rail. (Chart 8)

3. *Local groups trusted to make best decisions*

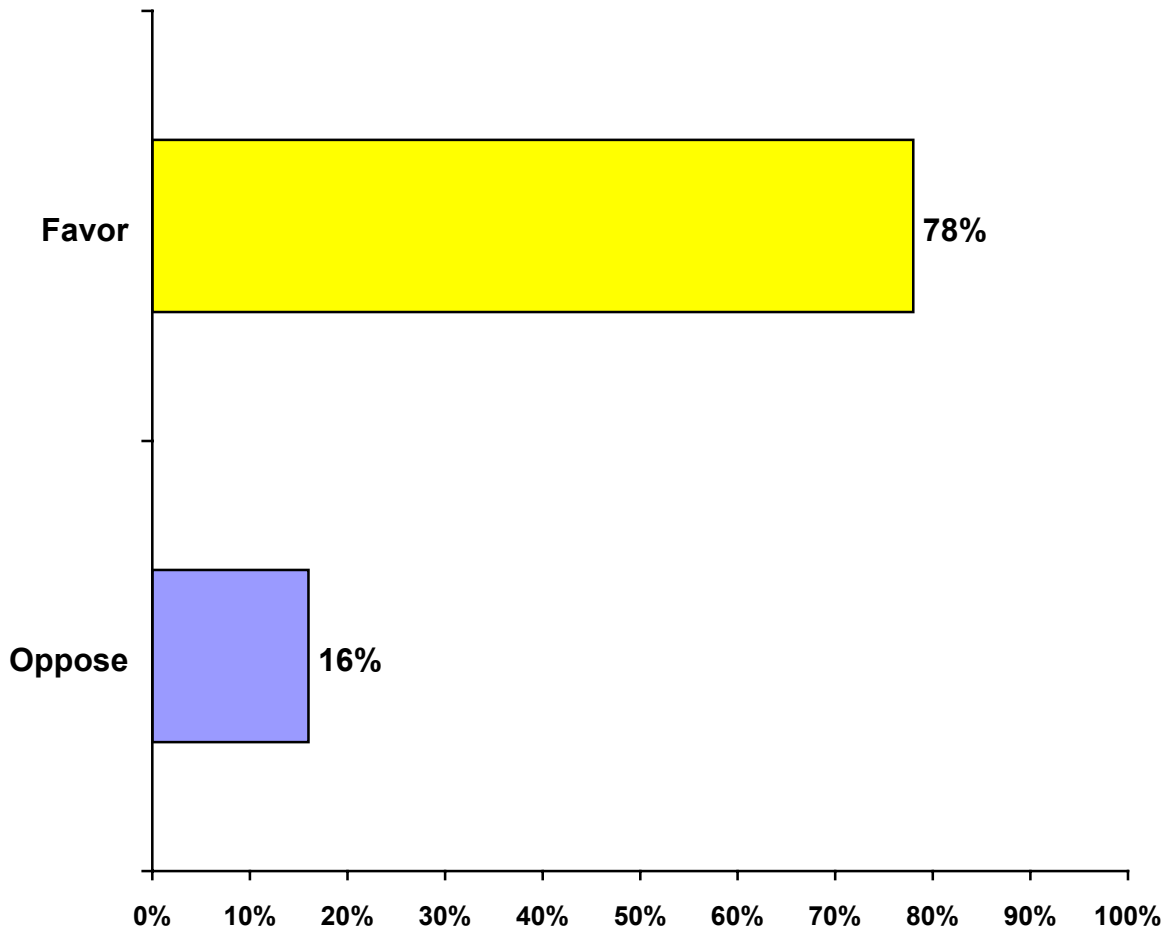
Americans trust local civic groups, as well as state and local governments to make decisions about land use affecting their communities. The public has little confidence in the federal government and private developers to make the best land-use decisions.

Two-thirds of Americans say they have some (47%) or a great deal (20%) of confidence in neighborhood associations or civic groups (67%). Over six in ten report having confidence in their state government (62%), their city or town government (61%), or their county government (61%) to make land-use decisions.

The public expresses much less confidence in the federal government (46%) and private developers (35%) to make decisions about land use issues affecting their communities. (Chart 9)

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Support for "Smart Growth"



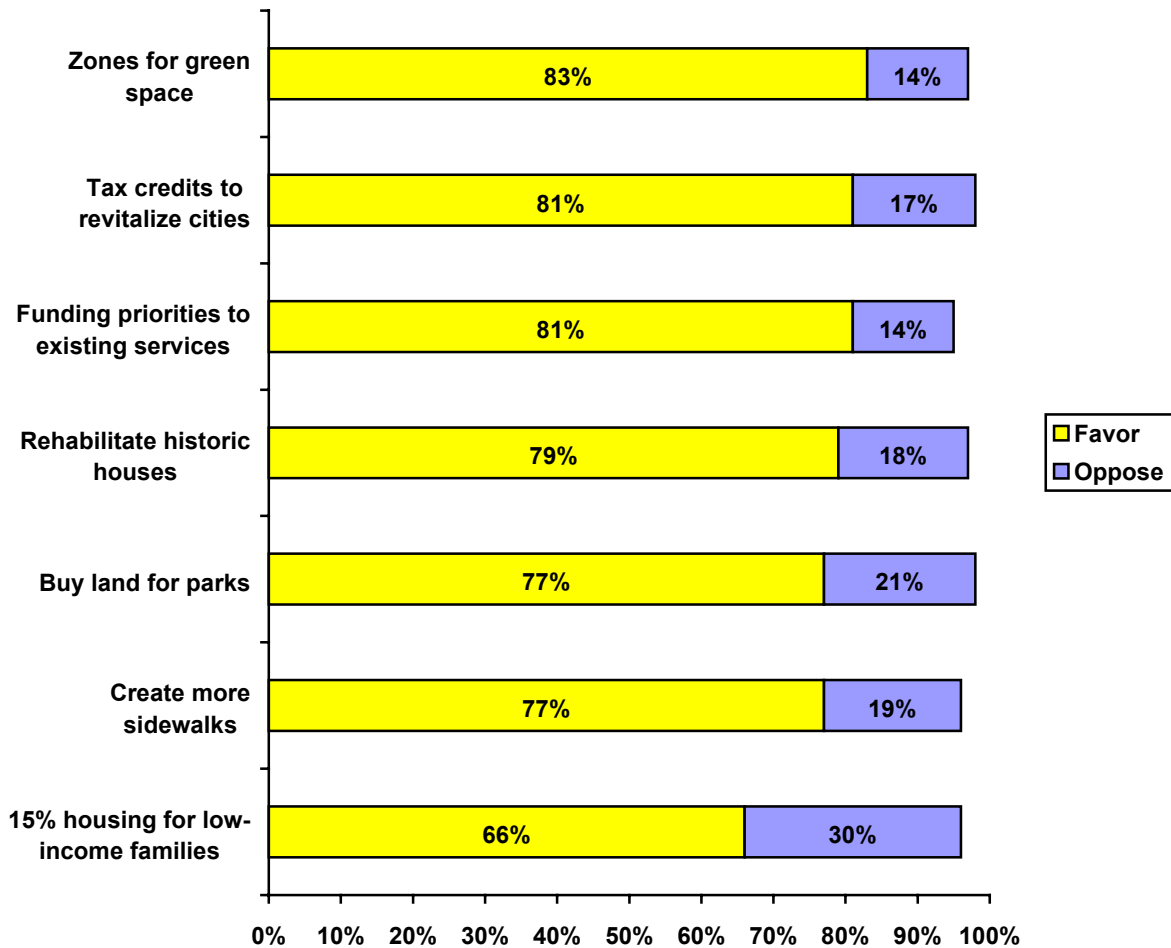
Q. The term Smart Growth refers to giving priority to improving services, such as schools, roads, affordable housing, and public transportation in existing communities, rather than encouraging new housing and commercial development, and new highways, in the countryside. With this in mind, would you favor or oppose smart growth policies in your state?

Support for "Smart Growth"

Q. The term Smart Growth refers to giving priority to improving services, such as schools, roads, affordable housing, and public transportation in existing communities, rather than encouraging new housing and commercial development, and new highways, in the countryside. With this in mind, would you favor or oppose smart growth policies in your state?

	Favor	Oppose
Total	78%	16
Men	74%	21
Women	82%	12
18-24	87%	10
25-34	76%	18
35-44	80%	15
45-54	80%	17
55-64	75%	19
65+	72%	20
Northeast	84%	11
Northcentral	77%	19
South	77%	16
West	76%	19

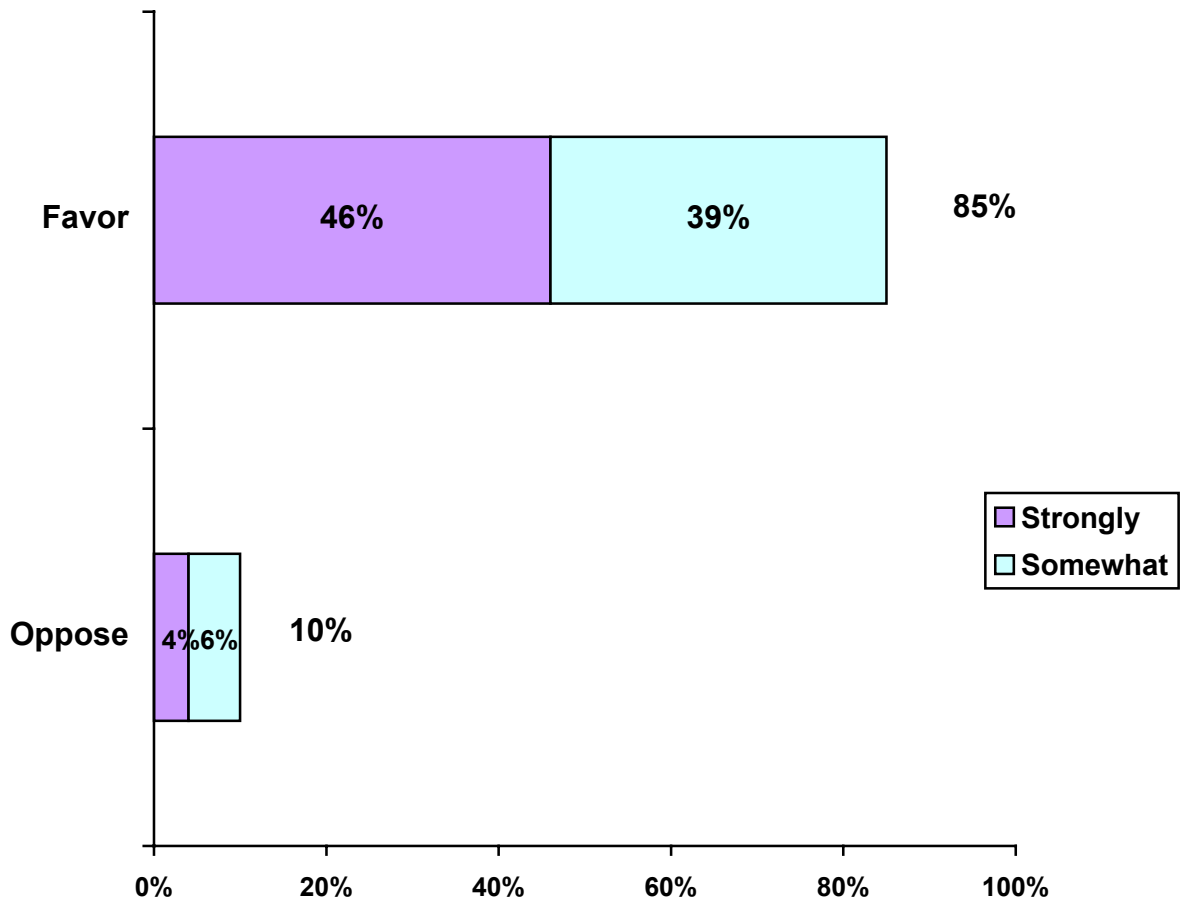
Support for Smart Growth Policies



Q. Here are some proposals on development and land use policy in your state. For each one, please tell me if you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the proposal:

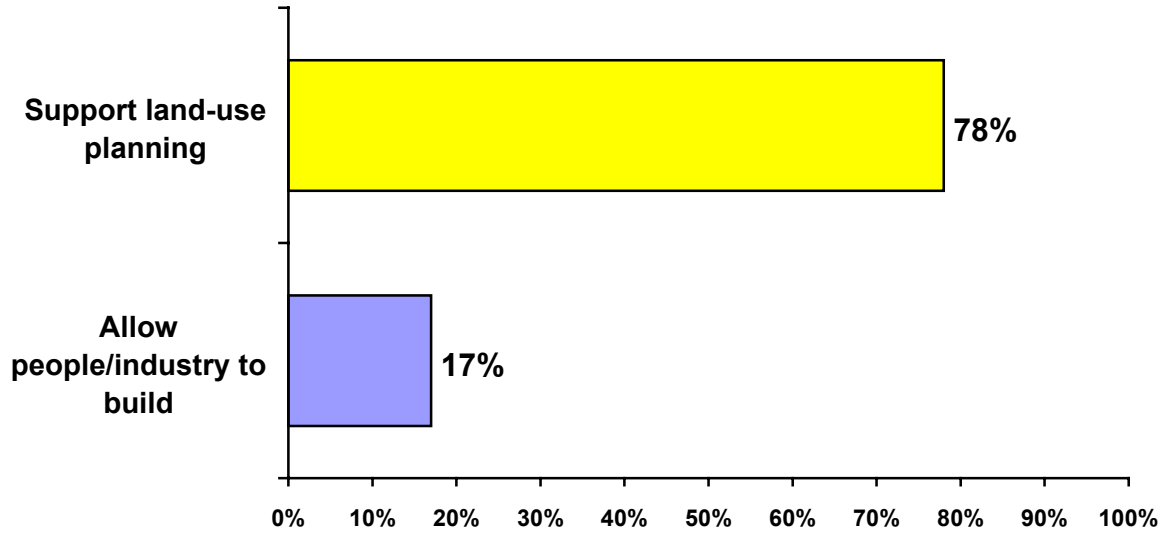
- Establish zones for green space, farming, and forests outside of existing cities and suburbs that would be off-limits to developers.
- Have government provide tax credits and low-interest loans for people to revitalize cities, suburbs and rural communities that are not doing so well economically
- Have state government give funding priority to maintain services, such as schools and roads, in existing communities rather than to encourage new development in the countryside.
- Provide tax credits and low-interest loans for people to rehabilitate historic houses and revitalize neighborhoods in cities and older suburbs.
- Have government use tax dollars to buy land for more parks and open space and to protect wildlife.
- Use part of the state transportation budget to create more sidewalks and stop signs in communities, to make it safer and easier for children to walk to school, even if this means less money to build new highways.
- Require that all new housing developments built in your state include at least 15% of housing for moderate and low-income families.

Support for Coordination Among Towns to Plan for Growth



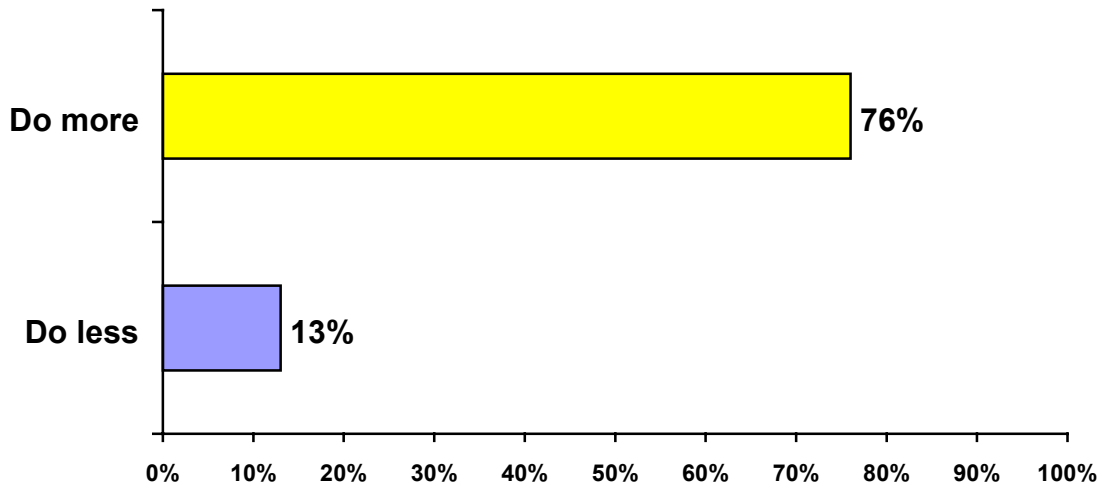
Q. Here are some proposals on development and land use policy in your state. For each one, please tell me if you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the proposal. Increase coordinated efforts among towns to plan for growth.

Support for Land-use Planning



Q. Do you agree more with those who say it is better to have land-use planning to guide the place and size of development in your county or area, or more with those who say that people and industry should be allowed to build wherever they want?

Manage and Plan for New Growth and Development in State



Q. Now, thinking about your state, is there a need to do more or to do less to manage and plan for new growth and development in your state?

Traffic Worsening

Q. Thinking about the area where you live, has traffic over the last three years gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same?

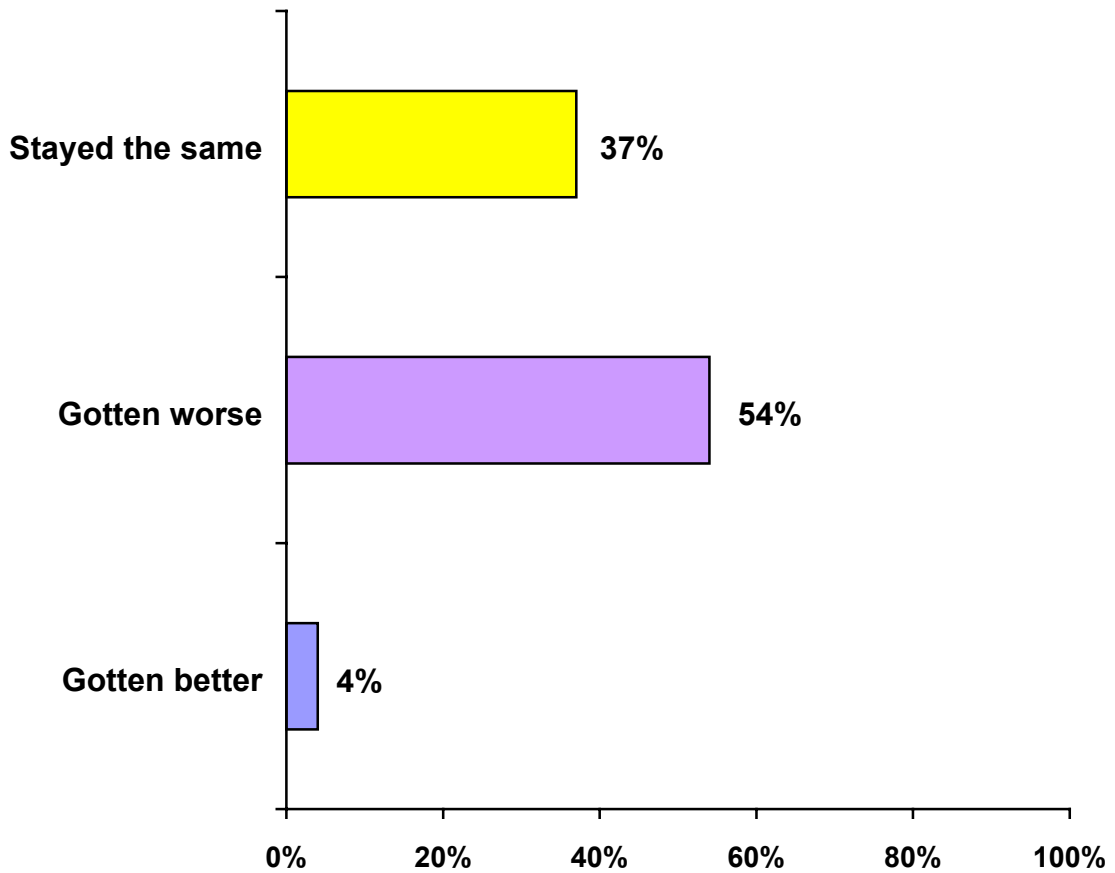
	Gotten better	Gotten worse	Stayed the same
Total	4%	54	37
Northeast	6%	49	41
Northcentral	5%	49	43
South	4%	54	35
West	2%	62	32
White	4%	57	35
Black	9%	40	52
Hispanic	2%	61	29

Best Long-term Solution to Reduce Traffic

Q. Which one of the following proposals is the best long term solution to reducing traffic in your state: Build new roads, improve public transportation, such as trains, buses, and light rail, or develop communities where people do not have to drive long distances to work or shop.

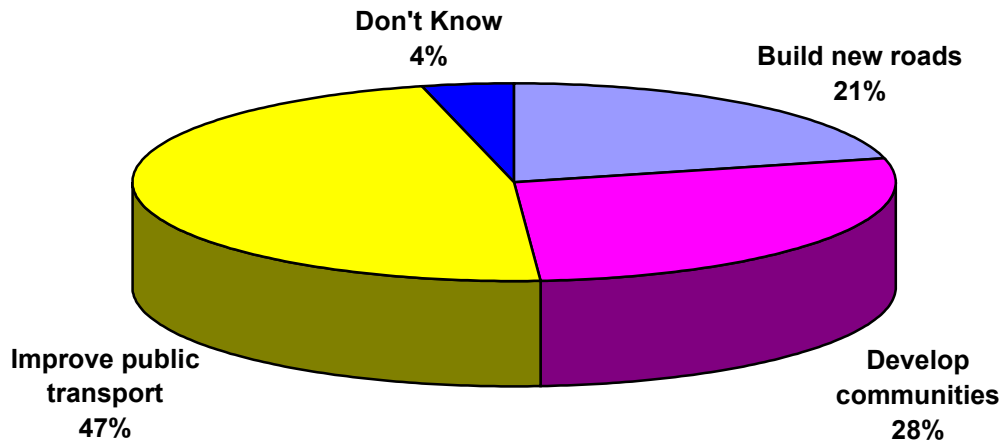
	New roads	Improve public transport	Develop communities
Total	21%	47	28
Men	24%	49	23
Women	17%	45	32
White	20%	47	27
Black	19%	49	30
Hispanic	21%	33	41
Northeast	15%	60	23
Northcentral	21%	44	27
South	23%	43	29
West	22%	44	30

Traffic Worse Than Three Years Ago



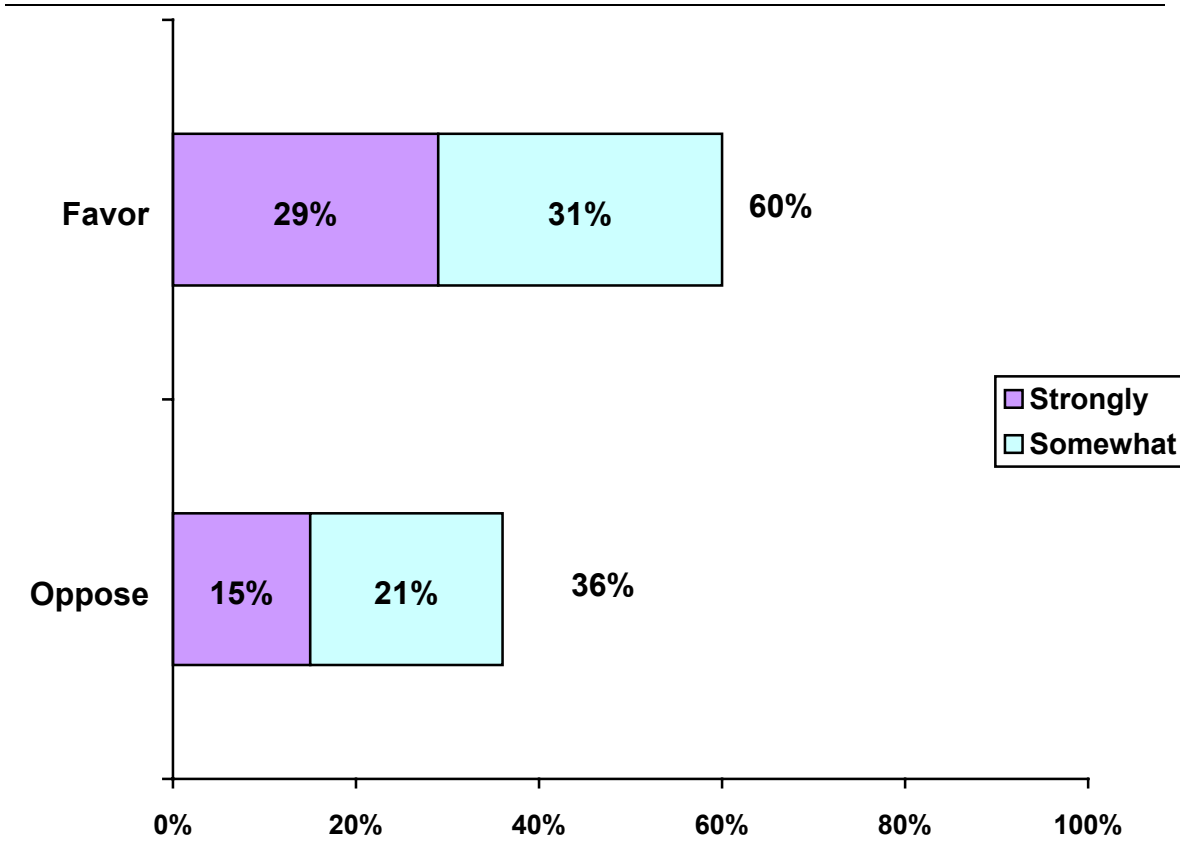
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Long-term Solution to Reducing Traffic in State



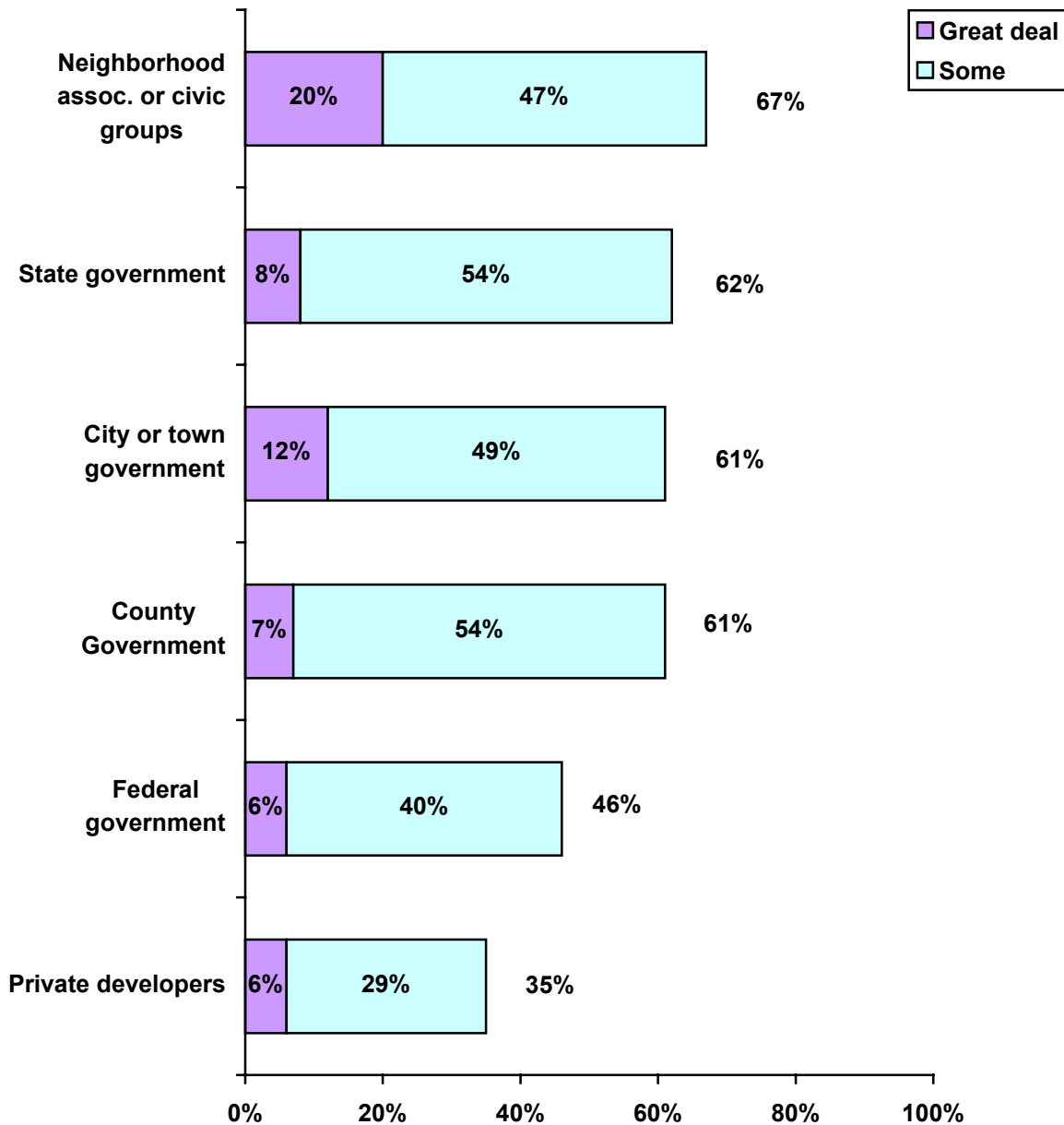
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Use Transportation Budget for Improvements in Public Transportation



Q. Here are some proposals on development and land use policy in your state. For each one, please tell me if you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the proposal. Have your state government use more of its transportation budget for improvements in public transportation, such as trains, buses and light rail, even if this means less money to build new highways.

Confidence in Officials and Institutions on Land Use Issues



Q. How much confidence do you have in each of the following to make the best decisions on land use issues affecting your area? Do you have a great deal, some, not very much, or very little confidence in