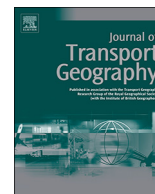




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Exploration of millennials' perception of spending on cities, mass transit, and highways

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ABSTRACT

In light of declining spending and increasing backlogs for cities and transportation agencies, this study compares the perception of millennials with the perception of older generations regarding public spending on cities, mass transit, and highways in the US national context. The study focuses on millennials because past studies have often depicted them as distinct, optimistic, more favorable to cities and mass transit, and less enthusiastic about cars and driving. By using data from the General Social Survey for the period 1984 to 2016, the study compares the millennials' perception of spending with the perception of all others as well as with the perception of the same age cohort from the two previous generations. The first set of comparison examines how different the millennials' perceptions are relative to the rest of society, whereas the second set examines if the millennials brought forth a generational shift in perception of public spending on cities, transit, and highways. Tukey's range tests as well as generalized mixed ordinal logit models, linear models, and binary logit models were used. The analyses consistently showed that the millennial's perception of spending is no different from society as a whole regarding spending on cities and mass transit, but they are less supportive of spending for highways. Because no difference was found between their perceptions and the perceptions of people in the same age cohort from the two previous generations, the study concludes that the millennials did not bring forth a generational shift in perception of spending.

1. Introduction

The millennials' perspectives on public spending may hold the key for the betterment of cities and transportation systems in the United States, where revenues have remained stagnant, spending has decreased, and backlogs have increased dramatically since the beginning of this century. Between 2002 and 2011, surface transportation spending in this country decreased by 12% (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2014), whereas overall transportation spending, including aviation and maritime transportation, decreased by 9% between 2003 and 2014 (CBO, 2015). Because the country's 83 million millennials constitute the largest of all generations (Myers, 2016), they will play an important role in determining how the needs and challenges faced by cities and transportation agencies are addressed in the coming decades.

The share of world population in urban areas is expected to increase from 54% to 66% by 2050, whereas the urban population of the United States is also expected to increase by 33% and rural population to decrease by 16% during the timeframe (UNDESA, 2014). Although the current rate of urbanization in the United States is considerably lower than the developing countries, almost 70% of its nonmetropolitan

counties lost population between 2010 and 2016, indicating that geographic redistribution of population through urbanization is still an ongoing process in this country (USDA, 2017). Beginning in the middle of the 20th century, large-scale geographic redistribution of population has also taken place in this country through the migration of households from urban to suburban areas, whereas some households have returned to cities in recent years (Greenwood, 1997; Gallagher, 2013). Because of population growth and redistribution of population through urbanization and suburbanization, planning for sustainable cities has been and will continue to be highly important in this country.

A number of studies show that urbanization without proper planning for places and transportation systems is environmentally unsustainable (Madlener and Sunak, 2011; Sadorsky, 2013; Elliott and Clement, 2014; Ahmad et al., 2016). These studies also indicate that planning for compact and continuous developments with emphasis on sustainable transportation can counter the environmental inefficiencies associated with urbanization. However, for such planning to be effective, there is need for substantial amounts of public spending. Unfortunately, the United States has experienced a dramatic decrease in spending for both cities and transportation in recent years.

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In view of the growing challenges faced by cities and transportation agencies because of the geographical redistribution of population, increasing need for infrastructure maintenance and upgrade, and the shortage of public funds, this study examines how Americans' support for public spending on cities, mass transit, and highways has changed over time. It compares the perception of American millennials—those born during the last two decades of the 20th century—with the perception of people belonging to previous generations to examine if the millennials perceive public spending differently. It focuses on the millennial generation for two reasons. First, because they are the newest and largest adult generation consisting of almost 85 million individuals, their perception of spending will have a significant impact on public spending for cities and transportation for years to come. Second, recent years have seen an intense debate about the millennials' affinity for cities and transit and their disdain for cars and driving (Delbosc and Ralph, 2017). Although some studies (e.g., Gallagher, 2013; TransitCenter, 2014; Dutzik et al., 2014; Talen, 2017) have suggested that American millennials have a special affinity for cities and mass transit, other studies (e.g., Kotkin and Cox, 2013; Myers, 2016; Blumenberg et al., 2016; Klein and Smart, 2017) have generated a certain degree of skepticism about that perspective.

The millennials' attachment to newest communication technologies, lower rate of automobile ownership, lower propensity to drive, and delayed driver's license acquisition have prompted some planners and researchers to predict that they will live in high-density areas near transit stations, use non-motorized travel modes or mass transit, and thus fulfill urban planners' longstanding aspiration for compact cities initially championed by the likes of Jacobs (1961) and later promoted by others, including Duany et al. (2000) and Gallagher (2013). Disagreeing with this vision, others have suggested that the millennials are no different from the previous generations in terms of preferences; if their living and travel behavior seem more sustainable, that is because of the economic hardship they encountered during and after the Great Recession.

This study compares the perception of public spending on large cities, mass transit, and highways for different generations by using pooled data for the period 1984 to 2016 from the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey of Americans (Smith et al., 2017). The survey inquires whether respondents believe too much, too little, or the right amount of money is being spent on a number of public goods, including “solving the problems of big cities,” “mass transportation,” and “roads and bridges.” Based on past literature described in Section 2, where millennials have often been described as more sustainable than previous generations in their living and travel preferences, the study hypothesizes that millennials would be more likely to believe that spending is too little or inadequate for cities and mass transit, but adequate or more than adequate for highways (i.e., roads and bridges). Finding these results from empirical analysis would indicate that millennials have more support for funding cities and mass transit and less support for funding highways.

To compare the millennials' perception with the perception of other generations, the study uses Tukey's range tests, mixed linear regression models, generalized mixed binary logit models, and generalized mixed ordered logit models. Detailed results are provided from the Tukey tests and the generalized mixed ordered logit models, whereas results from the other models are only discussed in narrative form.

Through the tests and models, the spending perceptions of millennials are compared separately with the perceptions of all others as well as with the perceptions of the two previous generations when they were of the same age as today's millennials (i.e., the same age cohort). The first comparison examines the differences between the millennials and the rest of the society, whereas the second comparison examines if a generational shift in perception was brought forth by the millennials. The multivariate models control for people's demographic and socio-economic characteristics, religious and fiscal ideologies, geographic region within the country, and type of places they were exposed to

when they were young (e.g., large city, suburb, small town, and rural area).

2. Background

Because of declining revenue, the transportation investment backlog in this country has been increasing significantly since the beginning of this century. Data presented by the Pew Charitable Trusts (2014) shows that aggregate surface transportation spending by federal, state, and local governments decreased between 2002 and 2011 by as much as 12%. More recent data from the CBO (2015) on overall transportation spending also shows a similar trend. As a result of the decline in transportation spending, the highway investment backlog for the country in 2012 amounted to as much as \$836 billion, whereas the transit backlog amounted to \$89.8 billion (FHA/FTA, 2016). The reduction in transportation spending affects all types of areas, but because of their complex and diverse transportation networks, the effects are felt more in metropolitan areas.

Urban local governments have been cash-strapped in recent times not only for transportation, but for other purposes also (GAO, 2015). A reason for the scarcity of funds for urban areas has been a reduction in federal aid to local governments since the 1980s (Randall et al., 2016). A report by the US Census Bureau (Barnett et al., 2014) indicates how difficult it has been for state and local governments to maintain a balanced budget. According to this report, the aggregate revenues of state and local governments nationally decreased by 1.1%, whereas their expenditures increased by 18.2% and indebtedness increased by 22.2% between 2007 and 2012.

Because of dilapidating infrastructure, population growth, and increasing investment backlogs, it has become imperative that public spending for cities and transportation increases dramatically without further delay. However, spending depends of society's perspectives, and for social perspective to change, younger generations would have to think differently from the older generations. This makes the perspective of the millennials on public spending highly important.

Characterizing them as distinct, optimistic, courageous, and determined, authors like Howe and Strauss (2000) suggested that the millennial generation would be the generation to bring forth seismic changes to the American way of life and public policy. Many other studies provide impetus to believe that the millennials would favor public spending on cities and mass transit more than the older generations. As evident from Myers (2016), more millennials live in urban areas than did people of similar age from previous generations. From their familiarity with the urban environment, one can expect that millennials would have greater propensity to support public spending for cities. One could potentially expect the same from studies claiming that millennials have an inherent affinity for the urban lifestyle (e.g., Gallagher, 2013; Talen, 2017) and other studies showing the millennials' willingness to own homes in urban areas (e.g., Dickerson, 2016). Similarly, from studies showing greater attraction of millennials for mass transit and predictions that millennials would prefer to live near transit stations (e.g., Center for Transit-Oriented Development, 2004; TransitCenter, 2014; Dutzik et al., 2014), one can expect that they would have greater support for mass transit spending. From studies showing or claiming that millennials are driving less and acquiring driver's licenses later in life (Sivak and Schoettle, 2012; Kuhnimhof et al., 2013; Metz, 2013; Polzin and Chu, 2014), one can expect that millennials would have less support for highway spending than older generations.

There exist a number of studies also from which one could expect the millennials to have no special affinity for cities and mass transit and aversion for highways. Regarding their presumed attraction for cities, Myers (2016) argued that the millennials' seeming concentration in cities is primarily because of the large size of the age cohort and economic circumstances. Kotkin and Cox (2013) argued that millennials have grown not only in cities, but in all types of places. Dickerson

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