Mind the Funding Gap: Transit Financing in Los Angeles County and Metro Vancouver

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By
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IMFG is funded by the Province of Ontario, the City of Toronto, Avana Capital Corporation, and Maytree.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Richard Bird, Tomas Hachard, Sara Hughes, Heather Millar, Monica Prasad, Enid Slack, and Selena Zhang for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. Special thank you to Philippa Campsie for her diligent copyediting. The author would also like to acknowledge the financial support of IMFG, Fulbright Canada, and the Department of Sociology at Northwestern University. Any errors, omissions, or misinterpretations are the sole responsibility of the author.
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Abstract
Across North American cities, the demand for better public transit is pervasive, yet many local governments lack sufficient revenue to finance the construction of new infrastructure. To resolve this dilemma, some localities have turned to citizens directly, proposing temporary, earmarked, sales tax increases as a way to finance capital-intensive projects. Why have some communities been more receptive to this funding model than others? This study addresses this question by comparing the recent experiences of Los Angeles County (2008), where a ballot measure to raise money for transportation was successful and Metro Vancouver (2015), where a similar public vote was unsuccessful. The analysis demonstrates the importance of political trust, issue framing, policy design, and coalition-building when engaging public support. The findings offer important lessons for other municipalities looking to invest in their public transportation systems.

Keywords: transit, taxes, ballot measures, municipal finance

JEL codes: H54, H71, R42
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and Metro Vancouver

I. Introduction
Across North America, investment in public transit has failed to keep pace with the pressures associated with economic growth and demographic change. A shortage of policy ideas or transit visions has rarely been the culprit. Local election campaigns commonly feature debates over transit plans and transportation policy priorities (Church 2014; McGregor, Moore, and Stephenson 2016). Yet, if there is consensus about the need to invest more in public transit, there is less agreement about how to pay for such plans.

In many North American cities, local leaders have developed ambitious long-term transportation plans, yet local officials often concede that existing revenues streams are inadequate to finance such plans. Large municipalities may lack either the legal authority or the political will to create new revenue streams.

To cope with increased public demand for better infrastructure, some cities have turned to tax financing models. Under this system, cities dedicate the proceeds of a sales tax – or property tax – increase to specific transportation and public transit projects. Economists have long stressed the benefits of these financing models. Sales taxes have considerable revenue potential and can enable local jurisdictions to spread the costs of investment across residents, businesses, and visitors (Kitchen and Lindsey 2013: 9).

Despite these advantages, elected officials are reluctant to increase sales tax rates or introduce new revenue streams, fearing defeat at the ballot box come election time. Instead, they make incremental adjustments, drawing on funds from existing revenue sources, including transit fares, property taxes, and intergovernmental transfers.

In some cities, officials have sought a way out of this predicament using transit ballot measures or referenda (Crabbe et al. 2005; Dixit et al. 2010; Haas and Estrada 2011; Middleton 1998). By leaving major transit governance decisions to the electoral process, local officials shift accountability, leaving decisions in the hands of local voters. The record on transit referenda has been mixed, raising an important question for students of transit policy: Why have some jurisdictions been more successful than others in building public support for sales tax–financed transit infrastructure investments?

1 For the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) see http://www.metrolinx.com/en/regionalplanning/rtp/review.aspx. For Metro Vancouver, see Mayors’ Council on Regional Transportation (2014).
2 In jurisdictions such as California, local and state governments are required to get public approval of tax increases.
3 Whether cities should use referenda is a separate question beyond the scope of this paper.
To address this question, this paper explores two recent case studies of transit financing: Los Angeles County (2008) and Metro Vancouver (2015). Regional authorities in both instances asked voters to approve a half-percentage-point sales tax increase to finance a series of public transit and transportation projects.

In November 2008, voters in Los Angeles County approved Measure R, increasing the local sales tax and providing financial support for a 30-year, $40-billion transportation plan. It included new rail projects, expansion of the bus network, new carpool and high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes, and road and highway improvements across the region.

The success of Measure R is remarkable for three reasons. First, the threshold for public approval in California is higher than that in other jurisdictions, including Metro Vancouver. Following a 1995 State Supreme Court ruling, revenue-raising ballot initiatives in California require supermajority support – greater than 66.66 percent – to be enacted (Crabbe et al. 2005).

Second, Measure R was presented to voters in a largely unfavourable economic environment. By 2008, the U.S. economy had slipped into recession and the effects of the downturn were especially evident in Southern California (Lutz, Molloy, and Shan 2011).

Third, to appear on the November ballot, several decision-making bodies – including the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority Board of Directors (Metro board), the California bicameral state legislature and executive, and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors – had to approve the measure within a very narrow timeframe.

In sum, the political, structural, and institutional conditions appeared highly unfavourable for proponents of Measure R. On the other hand, local officials and voters could draw on previous experience with transit referenda, offering insight into how to build a successful campaign.

The success of Measure R attracted considerable attention from policy analysts, who stressed the role of timing, coalition-building, and campaign strategies in this remarkable outcome (see, for example, Kassoff and Giordano 2011; Luberoff 2016; Mares and Rothman-Shore 2012). This study does not challenge these explanations but synthesizes them while drawing out an underexplored theme: the role of political trust.

In contrast, voters in Metro Vancouver (the Lower Mainland) were presented with a similar transit proposal in spring 2015, one that would have increased the provincial sales tax (PST) rate within Metro Vancouver. Developed by the Mayors’ Regional Council on Transportation, the plan outlined a 10-year transportation vision that would add new light-rail lines to the city’s rapid transit network, improve existing infrastructure and service levels, and build new road and cycling infrastructure. Despite early indications that the public would back the mayors’ plan, the transit measure was ultimately opposed by 61 percent of voters during a mail-in plebiscite.
To explore these cases, the paper draws on primary documents, media reports, public opinion data, and secondary literature. Section 2 outlines the main tools available to local governments to finance transportation and transit infrastructure. Section 3 explores the political challenges associated with sales tax increases as well as the challenges local communities confront in building pro-transit electoral coalitions. Section 4 describes the forces that contributed to the success of Measure R in Los Angeles County. Section 5 turns to Metro Vancouver and the factors that led voters to oppose the local mayors’ transportation plan. Section 6 discusses the findings of the study, identifying lessons for future governments considering similar funding mechanisms. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the implications for further scholarly research.

2. Financing Transportation and Public Transit Infrastructure

Many North American municipalities allocate between 20 and 30 percent of property tax revenues to roads and transportation (Kitchen 2019). It is less common for cities to draw exclusively on the property tax base for public transit. Instead they use a combination of sources to finance operations and new capital spending. According to Slack and Bird (2019), funding options for transit largely fall into three categories: (1) user fees, including highway tolls, parking fees, and vehicle kilometres travelled systems; (2) taxes, such as sales, fuel, payroll, corporate income, property, land value capture, and vehicle registration fees; and (3) intergovernmental transfers.

Although transit could be financed primarily through user fees, many economists argue that subsidies are required to make transit more attractive to residents. Keeping transit fares low discourages automobile use, thus reducing traffic congestion, greenhouse gas emissions, and traffic accidents (Parry and Small 2009). Moreover, while transit users are clearly the main beneficiaries of improved transit, businesses, property owners, and visitors often benefit indirectly from transit.

Congestion can undermine economic competitiveness and productivity, not to mention environmental quality and public health (Simeonova et al. 2018). According to Cookson (2018), in 2017, the total cost of congestion to the Los Angeles County economy was $19.2 billion. Canadian cities have not fared much better (see Table 1). In 2015, HDR Corp. estimated annual congestion costs for Metro Vancouver at $827 million (Lindsey 2019). Expectations of positive spillovers explain the willingness of national and regional governments to help cities finance expensive infrastructure projects (Kitchen and Lindsey 2013).

Local governments in Canada are limited in the types of revenues they can raise. In other countries, including the United States, cities may have access to local sales taxes or income taxes. In many American cities, for instance, local governments have the power to levy fuel taxes. The revenues from these are commonly earmarked for local roads and transit services (Slack 2011: 10). Canadian municipalities are permitted to raise funds only as specified by provincial legislation (see Slack and Bird 2019).
The dedication of sales tax or property revenues to transit initiatives is an increasingly common funding model in American cities. Although the sales tax might be viewed by local officials as highly efficient for revenue generation, increasing taxes on local constituents and businesses is politically risky, since it imposes visible and traceable costs (Arnold 1990; Pierson 1996). Often, the electorate would prefer to push the costs of transit investment into the future or have the costs absorbed by some other level of government.

Many American cities have sought to resolve this dilemma by turning to voters directly. Between 2000 and 2011, no fewer than 367 sales or property tax-financed transportation ballot measures were introduced in the United States (Haas and Estrada 2011). In Canada, Metro Vancouver is the only city in which voters have been consulted on public transit financing.

### 3. Taxation, Ballot Measures, and the Politics of Transit Decisions

#### 3.1 The challenge of increasing taxes

Martin, Mehrotra, and Prasad (2009: 3) define taxes as “obligations to contribute money or goods to the state in exchange for nothing in particular.” Taxes are distinct from user fees and other payments to the state since they are not “paid in direct exchange for a service” (Martin, Mehrotra, and Prasad 2009: 3). Opposition to new or increased taxes is well documented in academic research (McCaffery and Baron 2004) and popular writing (Lepore 2012; Porter 2012).

Public aversion to taxation is broadly consistent with findings from cognitive psychology and behavioural economics on the subject of loss (Wilson 2011). Individuals exhibit a negativity bias, failing to respond symmetrically to logically equivalent gains and losses (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Soroka 2006). These findings have important implications for transit planning decisions, particularly

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**Table 1: Congestion in Selected North American Cities, 2017**

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>3,971,883</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>8,550,405</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>2,720,546</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montreal</td>
<td>1,753,034</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>2,296,224</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>2,826,498</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td>2,463,431</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>1,239,220</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
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Source: Cookson (2018)
when policies seek to introduce new and highly visible costs on the public such as sales tax increases.

A core challenge facing democratic societies is declining trust in traditional political institutions (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Crepaz 2008; Gallup Inc. 2010; Keele 2007). Voters are often suspicious of efforts by governments to raise taxes (Akaishi and Steinmo 2006; Steinmo 2018). Elected officials must convince voters that expensive, complex policy proposals are in the public interest, and not simply an effort to shore up government coffers. Populist rhetoric (Inglehart and Norris 2016) and the rise of anti-tax movements across western democracies (Sears and Citrin 1982; Smith 2013) have contributed to the erosion of public faith in democratic institutions.

The average voter is typically portrayed as tax-averse (Porter 2012), but research suggests that voters’ tax policy attitudes are more complex than previously theorized (Campbell 2009). In a recent survey of Americans, 84 percent of respondents reported that they would be more willing to pay higher taxes and/or transit tolls if the change were accompanied by improvements to transportation infrastructure. The survey results reveal the factors underlying public support. Respondents prefer that revenues be earmarked for transportation infrastructure (HNTB Corporation 2017). These findings reveal broad public support for investment, but also suggest a need to design transit policies in a way that engages this support.

3.2 Factors shaping success at the ballot box

Research has identified factors that shape public receptivity to sales tax–financed transit investments. First, effective coalition-building is essential in garnering public support (Haas and Estrada 2011), because a disparate range of actors and groups must support such policy changes. Moreover, according to Middleton (1998: G2), to succeed, “planners must go beyond perfunctory public hearings to make sure that they’ve really engaged the public in a discussion about a project, and that the public’s views and concerns have really been heard and taken into account.”

Business, environmental, labour, and other civil society groups must be willing to work together to promote the value of transit investment to their membership as well as to the broader public. While these groups have different interests at stake, the coordination of efforts can enable proponents to present a cohesive message to voters about the benefits of investment, including the costs of underinvestment. Ballot initiatives that have received the support and involvement of different sectors, such as business groups, tend to be associated with success at the ballot box (Haas and Estrada 2011).

Second, governments must design policies in ways that mitigate concerns about trust in government. Voters may have concerns about whether local agencies can be trusted to plan and competently manage large-scale, capital-intensive projects. Studies have found that connecting taxes to specific projects is associated
with successful public transit ballot initiatives (Haas and Estrada 2011). “Detailed earmarking of funds in the expenditure plan” can also improve the political viability of a transit measures (Beale, Bishop, and Marley 1996: 74).

A transit agency’s public standing also shapes willingness to support a transit plan. As Haas and Estrada (2011: 15) argue, in some cases “transit agencies develop a reputation for poor management (deserved or not)” or are “beset by controversy about service levels.” In their view, retaining an image of competence and efficiency can instill voter trust, while negative coverage can “promote lack of trust and provides an easy target for opponents.”

Concerns about trust can be mitigated through careful policy design, including the use of a “lock-box” to prevent current or future governments from raiding or misappropriating funds. These types of transparency measures improve residents’ confidence in the management of public funds.

Finally, local decision makers need to be sensitive to spatial and demographic implications of their policy designs. As Middleton (1998) argues, certain groups in any jurisdiction do not depend upon public transit as their primary mode of transportation. Thus it is crucially important to offer something to “non-users.” Since most non-transit users depend on roads and freeways, transit planners need to broaden the scope of policy benefits.

Haas and Estrada (2011: 14) discuss the importance of broadening the base of support to avoid provoking “geographically based pockets of opposition.” Decision makers must look beyond strictly rational cost-benefit analyses of transit plans. Building mass support often hinges on perceptions of spatial or demographic equity. Thus, to be politically viable, it is important for transportation policy proposals to reflect a broad range of interests.

4. Los Angeles County and Measure R

4.1 Background of jurisdiction
Los Angeles County is the most populous county in the United States, made up of 88 different cities and unincorporated areas, and home to about 9.82 million residents. The most populated part of the county is the City of Los Angeles. The region is known for its smog, congested freeways, and urban sprawl.

According to the 2015 American Community Survey, fewer than 11 percent of Los Angeles County residents use public transit to commute to work. In contrast, that share of the population is closer to 56 percent in New York City and 27 percent in Chicago (United States Census Bureau 2015).

Patterns of land use and economic development have reinforced this trend. Almost two-thirds of jobs in Los Angeles County are located more than 10 miles outside the Central Business District (CBD). Moreover, users of the public transit system disproportionately come from lower-income households (Huerta 2012). This “polycentric” pattern of urban growth (Luberoff 2016: 4) has worked against the development of a regional mass transit system.
Established by state legislation in 1993, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Agency (Metro) is responsible for planning and financing transportation projects across the county. Metro oversees the day-to-day operations of the region’s rail, bus, and commuter lines. The agency is governed by a 13-member board of directors, including the mayor of Los Angeles, five Los Angeles County supervisors, and several rotating appointments that reflect the region’s diverse geographic and socio-economic constituencies.

Metro has an annual operating budget of $4 billion. Proceeds collected from the local sales tax constitute its most important revenue source. Between 2003 and 2007, sales taxes made up 62 percent of the agency’s revenues (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2007). By 2011, with the Measure R tax increase in place, sales tax revenues made up almost three-quarters of the agency’s total revenues (Huerta 2012).

Metro’s finances rely far less on user fees than those of other large transit systems in North America (see Figure 1). Fares and advertising revenues represented just 11 percent of total revenue in 2006 (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2007). In New York City, fares make up almost 40 percent of revenues (Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2017), while they are closer to 95 percent in the City of Toronto (Toronto Transit Commission 2015).  

4.2 The history of public transit in Los Angeles County

Compared with cities in the Northeast and Midwest regions of the United States, the development of rapid transit in the Los Angeles region has been slow.

Figure 1: Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro) Revenue Sources, 2003–2007

4 The other major funding sources are intergovernmental grants (about 20 per cent) that Los Angeles County receives from the federal and state governments.
The expansion of the freeway system across Southern California in the 1950s and 1960s promoted the continued dominance of the automobile (Luberoff 2016). Some analysts attribute the delay in building transit to conflicting policy preferences between city residents and those living in more suburban areas of the county (Hymon 2007a). Historically, suburban voters have been more resistant to public transit investment.

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, several cities in California began constructing mass transit systems. Counties in the San Francisco Bay area, for instance, coordinated their efforts, creating the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system. In California, local counties can direct a portion of their local sales taxes to finance transportation investments. Local officials attempted to adopt this model in Los Angeles County, but public support for rapid transit infrastructure was weaker there.

By the late 1970s, however, it became increasingly clear that the region needed a public transportation system. Planners in Los Angeles County turned to the experience of Atlanta, a city that had successfully funded its public transit system through a ballot measure in 1971. The Atlanta case showed that to build an electoral coalition, proposals needed to go beyond funding public transit initiatives to include a broader set of transportation improvements (Luberoff 2016).

In 1980, Los Angeles County voters were presented with Proposition A. The measure proposed increasing the sales tax by half a cent to finance new heavy- and light-rail lines, including a subway between downtown Los Angeles and Long Beach. In an effort to win public approval, the ballot measure included two provisions. First, subsidies were introduced to help reduce the cost of existing bus fares. Second, a “local return” provision returned 25 percent of the revenue to the local municipalities, which could be used to finance transportation priorities of their choice (Luberoff 2016).

Proposition A passed with the support of 54 percent of residents of the county. Support was highest in areas of the county that would be served by the new rail lines (Huerta 2012). Drawing on lessons from the Atlanta experience, Los Angeles County found a way to reconcile the competing policy priorities of its economically and socially diverse political community.

Over the next few years, sales tax revenues as well as transportation grants from the federal and state governments allowed the county to begin rail construction. In 1990, transit proponents made a second pitch to voters, requesting an additional half-cent increase to the local sales tax to finance further development. Voters narrowly approved Proposition C in 1990, with 50.4 percent voting in support of the measure. Again, project funding was divided between the construction (and operation) of new rail or bus lines and other transit improvements (such as HOV lines and local roads). The funds generated from the two sales tax increases
led to the construction of about 73 miles of rail across the county, including the development of Metrolink, a regional commuter rail system.\textsuperscript{5} Before 2008, Metro built five separate heavy-rail (subway) and light-rail lines, the first of which opened in 1990.\textsuperscript{6}

During the same period, however, efforts to create an integrated transit system faced several setbacks, including NIMBY-related opposition, a common problem in transportation planning (Weitz 2008). For example, a major transit priority for mayor Tom Bradley was a subway line connecting downtown Los Angeles to the Westside. Just as the project was getting under way, some prominent local politicians and residents mobilized and successfully defeated the proposed line. Westside residents raised concerns about the types of individuals that a new subway line might attract to the neighbourhood (Luberoff 2016).

Moreover, following a 1985 gas line explosion near the site of the proposed route, safety concerns were raised about the tunnelling portion of the project (Bloomekatz and Hymon 2007). The campaign against the Westside subway was led by Congressman Henry Waxman, a powerful Democrat from Beverly Hills. Waxman helped enact legislation that banned federal funding for any transportation project that used underground tunnelling in Los Angeles (Luberoff 2016). Political opposition to the Westside subway halted the momentum of the system’s development at a key juncture.

In the early 1990s, concerns emerged about Metro’s governance. Construction problems along Hollywood Boulevard and cost overruns led to project delays. Evidence of political corruption within the agency intensified public criticism (Hymon 2007b). In 1994, Metro sought to address its budgetary shortfall by introducing a fare increase, a move that prompted immediate pushback.

The Bus Riders Union (BRU), a local advocacy group and think tank, filed a lawsuit claiming that the fare hikes, as well as other Metro decisions, were part of a pattern of systematic racial and ethnic discrimination. Racial and ethnic minorities made up a disproportionate number of bus users and thus benefited far less from the rapid transit infrastructure that had been developed. After two years, Metro’s board agreed to a consent decree. As part of its settlement, Metro reduced transit fares and allocated new funding to the bus fleet (Luberoff 2016). This response

\textsuperscript{5} In addition to these subway and light rail lines, Metro also operates two rapid bus transit lines: the Orange line (opened in 2005) and the Silver line (opened in 2009).

\textsuperscript{6} The Blue Line, a light rail line, connects downtown to Long Beach. In 1993, the Red Line opened, primarily an east-west line connecting the downtown core to North Hollywood and other communities northwest of the downtown. The Purple Line, a second subway line completed in 1996, runs parallel to the Red Line to the south and connects Mid-Wilshire to downtown. The Green Line, an additional light rail line that Metro opened in 1995, is the only part of the Metro line that does not operate downtown, running instead along the Century Freeway Corridor, linking suburban parts of southern Los Angeles (from Norwalk in the east to Redondo Beach in the west). In 2003, the Gold Line opened (extended in 2009), a 31-mile light rail line from Azusa in the San Gabriel Valley into downtown and southeast to East Los Angeles.
may have mitigated the city’s broader political conflict with minority communities, but it placed even greater strain on the agency’s public finances.

In 1998, Metro was carrying $7 billion in debt, making debt repayment the agency’s largest expenditure (Rabin 1998). On the recommendation of a corporate restructuring expert, the Metro board halted all design work on subway and light rail lines (Luberoff 2016).

Metro’s financial and project management woes undermined public confidence in the agency. Public frustration came to a head in 1998, when voters curtailed Metro’s authority. By a 2-to-1 margin, voters barred Metro from using sales tax revenue to finance any new subways. As one reporter concluded, voters had essentially “declared an end to the subway era in Los Angeles” (Rabin 1998). The 1998 ballot measure also introduced two changes to financial oversight. First, Metro’s spending would now be subject to an annual independent audit. Second, a five-member citizen committee would be responsible for overseeing any expenditure funded by Proposition A and C revenues.

This public rebuke of Metro reduced the agency’s discretion over project management. Following the 1998 changes, no additional underground transit lines were planned or constructed, ultimately stalling the development of a rapid transit system in Los Angeles. After some success in building rapid transit, the development of Los Angeles’s transit system ground to a halt in the late 1990s.

Public dissatisfaction with Metro prompted a number of internal changes within the organization. In the early 2000s, the agency hired a new CEO, Roger Snoble, former head of Dallas’s transit agency. He took steps to improve Metro’s finances as well as its fractured relationship with the public. Snoble implemented changes to Metro’s day-to-day operations, focusing on customer service. Under his leadership, Metro also engaged in a major rebranding, vastly expanding the agency’s communications and marketing efforts. Snoble believed that the agency needed to earn back the public’s trust if it hoped to expand the system (Luberoff 2016).

Changes implemented during Snoble’s tenure improved governance at Metro as well as the agency’s reputation. Between 2002 and 2008, Metro’s approval ratings increased by more than 50 percentage points, which analysts attributed to increased ridership as well as to the completion of various projects (Mares and Rothman-Shore 2012). At his retirement in December 2008, elected officials credited Snoble for turning around a “troubled and moribund agency” (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2008c).

In 2006, the American Public Transportation Association awarded Metro its Outstanding Public Transportation System Award for large transit properties. Polls reflected the change in sentiment toward the agency (see Figure 2). In 2000, 42 percent of residents believed that Metro was using its “tax dollars wisely.” This proportion increased to 52 percent in 2002 and 58 percent in 2004 (Luberoff 2016: 12). The completion of various rapid bus and light-rail projects within their budgets also improved Metro’s public standing (Kassoff and Giordano 2011: 2–22).
4.3 The congestion problem

The Texas Transportation Institute, a leading authority on the subject, regularly identifies Los Angeles as the most congested city in the United States. In its 2007 *Urban Mobility Report*, Los Angeles ranked worst in terms of traffic delays, excess fuel consumed, and overall cost to the economy. Based on the Institute’s estimates, congestion costs the average driver in the city about $1,480 a year (Kasoff and Giordano 2011). As the report put it:

During the prosperous economic times of the mid-2000s, there was a relatively sudden and palpable increase in congestion. Journeys that had previously been tolerable, despite significant levels of congestion, had become nearly impossible. And conditions were only expected to worsen (Kasoff and Giordano 2011: 2-7).

Growing attention to climate change also helped put investment in public transit back on the city’s and county’s agenda (Hymon 2007b). Signs of a transit renaissance were evident during the 2005 Los Angeles mayoral race. The front-runner, Antonio Villaraigosa, made public transit a central focus of his campaign. His platform centred on a commitment to revive the long-dormant Westside subway, now called the “Subway to the Sea.” In the lead-up to the election, *The Los Angeles Times* conducted polling that underscored public demand for

![Figure 2: Public Perceptions of Metro’s Performance](image-url)

Source: Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (2006)
action on congestion: 37 percent of voters identified transportation-related issues (congestion, public transit, and road improvements) as most important (Luberoff 2016). In May 2005, Villaraigosa won the run-off contest, taking 59 percent of the vote.

At first, Villaraigosa and his team proceeded cautiously on the transit file. Public appetite for transit investment appeared strong, but the subway plan faced fiscal, legal, and political hurdles. First, it was estimated that the project would cost between $4 billion and $5 billion; Metro lacked sufficient revenues to finance a project of this magnitude (Bloomekatz and Hymon 2007). Following an announcement by the Metro board in summer 2007 that it would have only about $6 billion to spend on all new capital projects, the need for additional revenue became apparent (Hymon 2007a).

Second, even with the mayor’s support, the construction of a new rail line would require approval from a majority of the Metro board. Funding the Westside subway would make it impossible to invest in any other transportation priorities across the county (Hymon 2007a). Given the competing transportation priorities of the MTA’s board, the “Subway to the Sea” would be a difficult political sell.

Finally, if the new administration wanted federal funding, the city would need to convince Congress to remove the tunnelling restriction enacted in 1986.

Developments in Los Angeles County and Washington helped advance Villaraigosa’s transit plans. Unlike his predecessor, the mayor became a much more active member of the Metro board and used his position to advocate for his transit priorities, especially the Westside subway (Luberoff 2016). The mayor and his allies focused on other challenges as well. There had been a long history of federal assistance for local transit projects, primarily through the Federal Transit Administration (Luberoff 2016). By 2005, the completion of a national safety study as well as various technological improvements convinced several local officials, including Congressman Waxman, to abandon their previous opposition to tunnelling (Bloomekatz and Hymon 2007). In December 2007, as part of a broader $516-billion appropriations bill, Congress removed the ban, opening up a potential revenue-matching tool for transit projects in the Los Angeles area.

4.4 A transit coalition emerges
As congestion worsened, a group of activists led by the former mayor of Santa Monica, Denny Zane, mobilized in support of the mayor’s transit plan in early 2007 as the “Subway to the Sea” non-profit group (Bloomekatz and Hymon 2007). This group brought together labour, environmental, and business leaders (Mares and Rothman-Shore 2012). Labour groups became more sympathetic to this cause, particularly as signs of economic downturn became apparent (Hymon 2008a). The Zane-led group concluded that success would hinge on expanding the scope of the transit package and that a Westside subway was only one pillar of a larger transit plan (Luberoff 2016).
In 2008, the group held a conference, “Time to Move LA,” to generate discussion on the future of public transit in the region. The organizers leveraged their network of contacts, attracting more than 350 attendees from a range of sectors. Metro officials and local politicians were also invited. For the organizers, a central objective was to demonstrate to local politicians that a broad coalition of actors from across the region supported a transit funding campaign (Luberoff 2016). By the end of the conference, the “Subway to the Sea” morphed into “Move LA,” an even larger coalition of civil-society actors dedicated to a “multi-modal” vision of transit investment (Mares and Rothman-Shore 2012).

Public opinion research found considerable public support for a transit ballot measure (see Figure 3). In November 2007, Metro had commissioned a study of 1,200 Los Angeles County residents, assessing how receptive the public would be to a sales tax increase. The poll found that 60 percent of respondents were supportive, including self-identified Republican voters. A further study commissioned by Move LA in February 2008 found that, depending on the phrasing, between 67 and 69 percent of residents would support a sales tax increase. Although the polling results captured the attention of the mayor, the encouraging polling numbers were treated with scepticism. It was not until the mayor’s office commissioned its own internal poll that local officials gained greater confidence in the degree of public support for a tax hike (Hymon 2008a).

4.5 Changing the way voters see transit: Establishing the foundation for Measure R
In early 2008, Metro released a draft of its Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), outlining priorities for the region. The draft included two stark warnings from Metro officials. First, unless something was done about traffic congestion in the region, Los Angeles would face major economic problems, including an inability to attract new investment. Second, Metro made it clear that it lacked sufficient resources to finance the projects it had listed as priorities (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2009). Nevertheless, the LRTP provided a template of the types of rapid transit projects that a tax increase could finance.

Following the release of the LRTP draft, Metro embarked upon an innovative communications strategy known as the “Imagine Campaign” to engage the public in transportation policy planning (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2008b). The $4-million initiative used outdoor and print media, a website, survey research, and face-to-face outreach. The campaign asked residents to “imagine a better future” (Mares and Rothman-Shore 2012) and gave them an opportunity to comment on the LRTP’s proposed list of projects.

7 This included the Orange Line Extension, the Goldline Foothill Extension, a corridor between Crenshaw and Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), a Regional Connector Transit Corridor, Van Nuys Boulevard Rapidway, Westside Subway Extension, West Santa Ana Transit Corridor, Eastside Transit Corridor Phase 2, Green Line LAX Extension, South Bay Metro Green Line Extension, and the Sepulveda Pass Transit Corridor (Huerta 2012).
The campaign attracted media attention and civic engagement across the region. The agency received 60 million hits on its website and 14,000 downloads of the LRTP draft (Kassoff and Giordano 2011). Importantly, the Imagine campaign was not designed to develop support public support for Measure R. By this point, the Metro board had not formally considered putting a tax increase on the November ballot.

4.6 Clearing the institutional hurdles
The ballot measure needed approval from the state government, the Metro board, and the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors. First, the Metro board’s power to increase the tax would expire in six years, and extending that authority to 30 years required the governor’s signature (McGreevy and Vogel 2008). Between April and June 2008, the enabling legislation, AB 231, made its way through the state legislature. The bill specified that the proposed tax increase had to be used to fund the “Subway to the Sea”, three other rail lines, and certain road improvements (Hymon 2008b). By September, the state legislature and Governor signed the enabling legislation (McGreevy and Vogel 2008).

Encouraged by public opinion data as well as confidence that the state would enact the enabling legislation, Villaraigosa, for the first time, publicly announced his support for the sales tax increase. In an op-ed in The Los Angeles Times in July 2008, he strongly endorsed the transit proposal, asking residents to reimagine Los Angeles as a “dynamic world capital defined by its flexibility and mobility, not by traffic and smog” (Villaraigosa 2008).
Approval by the Metro board posed the most important challenge to Measure R. After the conference in January, segments of the business community had voiced their political support of Move LA. In particular, the Chairman of the LA County Business Federation, a member of the Metro board, told reporters that he planned to vote in favour of the measure. The Federation had conducted polling among its membership and found that congestion was its most important issue (Hymon 2008c).

The Board authorized staff to develop and present a sales tax measure (the resolution, expenditure plan, and ordinance). California law requires any proposed tax increase be accompanied by an expenditure plan (Kassoff and Giordano 2011). But this requirement threatened to disrupt the fragile coalition of supporters the mayor had assembled on the board. As it became apparent to board members that the measure had a reasonable chance of being approved by the state, divisions arose over how the money should be spent. The MTA’s board reflects the geographic interests that make up the county and the distribution of the expected revenue had to be carefully negotiated.

Identifying the specific projects that would be funded would also identify the beneficiaries of the measure. As the negotiations got under way, some members and local elected officials began voicing concerns about equity in Metro’s LRTP. Officials from the San Gabriel Valley in particular voiced concerns that their area would not benefit as much from the measure (Kassoff and Giordano 2011). By making some compromises, the mayor and his allies were able to convince enough members on the Board to support the measure.

Proponents also knew that incorporating a mix of transit and highway/road improvements would be essential. In the end, the expenditure plan was “carefully calibrated” to ensure that no part of the county could claim they were “not receiving any benefit” (Mares and Rothman-Shore 2012: 5). In August 2008, the Metro board voted 9-2 to put the sales tax ordinance on the ballot in November.

Finally, approval from the LA County Board of Supervisors was needed to consolidate the ballot question in the county election process. At first, the Board of Supervisors failed to approve the plan (Hymon and Therolf 2008a). Eventually, one of the supervisors changed his opinion, paving the way for the November vote (Hymon and Therolf 2008b).

The expenditure plan in Los Angeles called for $14 billion for a dozen new rail and rapid bus transit lines (including $4 billion for the Wilshire subway), an additional $8 billion for highway projects (including HOV lanes), $8 billion for the bus system, and about $6 billion to improve local streets and intersections (see Figure 4).

The policy instrument was carefully designed to build public support. First, if voters enacted Measure R, the sales tax increase would be accompanied by a freeze in regular Metro fares until 2010. In addition, the freeze would be extended to 2013 for vulnerable groups such as seniors, the disabled, students, and those
on Medicare (Hymon and Weikel 2008). Second, Measure R included a lock-box provision. Any new revenue generated had to be directed to projects outlined in the expenditure plan. Changes to the list of projects being financed would require a two-thirds majority of the Metro board (Mares and Rothman-Shore 2012). Third, Measure R created a citizen oversight committee, which would be responsible for auditing program spending. The ordinance specified that appointees had to be drawn from specific groups, including transit experts, environmental experts, business community representatives, union workers, and transit users (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2008a).8 The inclusion of these provisions was drawn from the findings of public opinion research, which suggested that voters would be more supportive with this type of oversight mechanism in place (Luberoff 2016).

4.7 The Measure R campaign
With either Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton expected to be on the November ballot, local organizers anticipated voter turnout to be strong among groups most sympathetic to or likely to benefit from Measure R. Self-identified Democratic voters tend to be more supportive of infrastructure spending.

8 According to the provision, the advisory panel needed to include one or two representatives from the following groups: (1) construction trade labour unions; (2) environmental engineers or environmental scientists; (3) road or rail construction firm project managers; (4) public and private finance experts; (5) regional associations of businesses; (6) transit system users (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2008a: 13).
The campaign relied upon leaders from business, labour, and environmental groups to generate local media coverage and articulate the importance of the measure to Los Angeles County (Mares and Rothman-Shore 2012). Politicians played a more muted public role. Villaraigosa and his allies fundraised about $4 million, largely from labour unions. The funds were used to produce and air four local television ads. Revealingly, however, the word “subway” was never mentioned in the ads (Hymon 2008d), highlighting the divisive nature of regional equity in LA transit debates.

Villaraigosa and his advisors decided that he would not be the public face of the campaign. Since Villaraigosa led the city and not the wider county, having the mayor at the centre of the campaign might alienate soft supporters. There was a sense among those in the peripheral areas of the county that the city would disproportionately benefit from Measure R and that they would be “short-changed” (Kassoff and Giordano 2011: 17). The use of “transit champions” other than politicians was important in cultivating public support (Mares and Rothman-Shore 2012).

Meanwhile, opponents of Measure R failed to mobilize in any meaningful way. They raised money but decided against spending it on television commercials or direct mail. Some have suggested that the opponents mistakenly assumed that the supermajority requirement would be too tall a political order to achieve and that such expenditure was therefore unnecessary (Kassoff and Giordano 2011).

On November 4, 2008, Los Angeles County residents voted in favour of Measure R. Voter turnout for the county was 82 percent, exceeding the expectations of the Democratic Party (Zahniser 2008; Zahniser, Hymon, and Groves 2008). The Measure passed with 67.9 percent of the vote. It did particularly well in areas with sizable Latino populations, as well as in low-income neighbourhoods in South Los Angeles and in the liberal enclaves of the Westside (Luberoff 2016).

The effect of Measure R on public transit has been extraordinary. Since the 2008 ballot measure, two rail extensions have been completed and a new Expo line – a 15-mile light-rail route to Santa Monica – has opened. Over 480,000 residents now have access to rapid transit options in their neighbourhoods (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2015). This is a remarkable achievement for a region that had historically resisted investments in its public transit system.

4.8 Analysis
What explains the success of transit proponents in Los Angeles County? As existing work suggests, effective coalition-building plays an essential role. Yet mobilizing groups in Los Angeles County can be challenging, because Los Angeles is more decentralized than any other large North American city-region (Hughes 2017). Through a former local mayor’s efforts, however, pro-transit forces recognized the collective threat posed by congestion and mobilized disparate groups from across the region. For different reasons, business and environmental groups recognized that tackling congestion was in their interests.
Creating a broad coalition helped clarify the policy priorities that were important to different constituencies. The expenditure plan adopted by local decision makers required months of engagement with local officials representing different geographic interests. The coalition was particularly helpful in convincing Villaraigosa to broaden his narrow vision beyond building the “Subway to the Sea.” As a result, the mayor and his allies framed Measure R as a solution for the entire county and not just one that benefited wealthy residents and tourists in the City of Los Angeles. Without these efforts, it seems unlikely that Measure R would have been placed on the ballot.

Public support for the tax increase was also related to the magnitude of the policy crisis the county was confronting. Congestion had become so bad that voters, even conservative ones, began seeing taxation as preferable to the status quo. By 2006, the traffic problem had reached a tipping point, where the idea of “gridlock moved from theoretical to real” (Huerta 2012: 9).

Metro’s communications efforts in the Imagine campaign also helped lay the groundwork for Measure R’s success. As the agency’s creative director put it, the Imagine campaign helped position the agency “as the solution to congestion woes” in the region (Lejeune 2013). The politically deft campaign spoke broadly about transit investment and deliberately avoided describing specific projects such as the Westside subway that might have alienated supporters in the more peripheral parts of the county.

At its core, however, the case illustrates the importance of cultivating public trust through institutional reform and policy design. Governance issues, including project delays and public finances, had plagued Metro in the 1990s, and turned the public against the transit agency. In the subsequent decade, however, under new leadership, institutional reforms set the agency on a new fiscal and organizational path. There was a deliberate focus on getting “the small things right,” by making improvements to existing services and infrastructure while deferring new capital projects. These changes helped rebuild residents’ confidence in the agency.

The timing of the shift in the public sentiment toward the agency is also important. Metro’s relationship with the community had been rebuilt just as politicians were looking for a solution to the city’s congestion. These efforts improved confidence and customer satisfaction and help account for the unusual degree of public support for Measure R. Providing highly visible and stable benefits can shift the attitudes of the public towards a government agency. Political scientists refer to such phenomena as policy feedback effects (Mettler and SoRelle 2014; Pierson 1993).

The Los Angeles case also demonstrates the connection between policy design and trust. Beyond the expenditure plan, Metro made decisions that made the tax increase more politically palatable. First, the sales tax increase was accompanied by a two-year freeze in regular Metro fares to mitigate concerns from progressive groups. Metro officials had reflected on opposition from the Bus Riders’ Union.
in the 1990s. Although the Union opposed Measure R, Metro’s decision on fares robbed them of a significant argument. The case reveals evidence of what Peter May (1992) terms “policy learning,” that is, efforts by officials to reflect on previous policy failures and successes.

Second, the decision to embed a lock-box provision as part of Measure R eliminated residents’ concerns over how revenues would be used. By ensuring that funds could not be raided by fiscally strapped governments in the future, local officials assured voters that investments would be strictly reserved for specified transit measures.

Third, a check was placed on local officials’ authority through a citizens’ oversight committee. This committee allayed concerns about potential corruption and waste and allowed for public representation in subsequent decision making over Measure R projects.

Finally, the Measure R campaign was sensitive to voters’ scepticism towards elites. The decision to use unpaid experts who could credibly discuss the benefits of the transit plan in campaign advertisements helped separate the policy from the politics.

5. Metro Vancouver

In 2015, Metro Vancouver residents were asked to decide the future of public transit in the Lower Mainland. The vote marked the first time in the province’s history that voters were consulted directly about transportation infrastructure. The Mayors’ Council on Regional Transportation proposed a half-percentage-point increase to the provincial sales tax (PST) to fund a multimodal transportation plan for capital projects across the region, including new rapid transit lines, a new bridge, cycling infrastructure, and upgrades to roadways and bus services. The tax increase was expected to generate about $200 million in additional annual revenue, which would be enough to fund about one-third of the $7.5-billion transportation plan.

The Mayors’ Council plan was tailored to appeal to a wide range of geographic interests across the Lower Mainland. The plan also enjoyed the support of influential groups across the region, including business and environmental organizations. At first, polls suggested that the transit plan had a reasonable chance of succeeding. Over the winter of 2015, however, public support for the tax increase faltered. Opponents to the tax reduced the pro-transit coalition’s early advantage in the polls. In July 2015, Elections B.C. announced the results of the mail-in vote. By a 24-percentage-point margin, voters in the Lower Mainland rejected the proposed Metro Vancouver Congestion Improvement Tax.

5.1 Background of jurisdiction

Metro Vancouver – or the Lower Mainland – is the third-largest metropolitan area in Canada. The region has experienced intense population growth over recent decades. In the mid-1970s, the population was just over 1.3 million, but grew to
an estimated 2.4 million in 2015. The region is made up of large cities such as Vancouver and Surrey, medium-sized municipalities such as North Vancouver and Pitt Meadows, and small villages such as Anmore and Belcarra.

Metro Vancouver has a federated municipal structure, comprising 21 different lower-tier municipalities as well as Electoral Area A and the Tsawwassen First Nation. The region’s upper tier, the Metro Vancouver Regional District (MVRD), is responsible for protecting air quality, providing drinking water, developing the growth strategy for the region, and overseeing wastewater treatment and solid waste management. The region’s lower-tier municipalities look after all other functions (Metro Vancouver 2018).

5.2 Transportation governance in the region
Regional transportation in Metro Vancouver is overseen by TransLink, a transportation agency established by the province in 1999. Transit policy in the region had previously been overseen by BC Transit, a crown agency that continues to manage public transit in other cities and towns across the province. The creation of TransLink delegated the planning, financing, and management of Metro Vancouver transportation network to a single regional body that is also responsible for bridges, regional roads, and cycling infrastructure (Wales 2008). TransLink’s governance is shared between the Mayor’s Council on Regional Transportation – made up of 21 local mayors who select a chair – and a board of directors appointed by the mayors.

Public transit in the Lower Mainland is operated by TransLink subsidiaries. The Coast Mountain Bus Company (CMBC) provides bus service and oversees the SeaBus system, a passenger ferry system connecting North Vancouver to downtown Vancouver (Wales 2008: 2). Residents in the southwestern part of the region, including South Surrey, Delta, North Delta, Langley, and Tsawwassen and those in the North Shore, such as West Vancouver, rely almost exclusively on the agency’s bus system.

The British Columbia Rapid Transit Company, a separate division of TransLink, is responsible for the SkyTrain system, a series of light-rail lines that operate across heavily populated areas: Vancouver, Burnaby, New Westminster, Richmond, and Surrey (see Figure 5). The SkyTrain network has three major lines: the Expo Line, the Millennium Line, and the Canada Line (see Table 2 and Figure 5). The SkyTrain system is 79 kilometres long and has 53 stations throughout the Lower Mainland. The region’s broader public transportation system also includes the West Coast Express, a regional rail and bus system connecting the suburban communities of Pitt Meadows, Port Coquitlam, Coquitlam, Port Moody, Maple Ridge, and Mission to Vancouver.

5.3 The evolution of governance at TransLink
TransLink’s governance structure has changed over time. When it was first established, the agency’s board of directors consisted of local elected officials,
including several mayors and councillors. Board members were selected by the upper-tier government, Metro Vancouver. In 2007, the province removed the elected representatives from the board of directors. A review panel appointed by the province concluded that decision making on the board was “difficult, slow and marked by the division of local political interests rather than regional consensus building” (TransLink Governance Review Panel 2007: 1). Instead, the board would be drawn from professionals within the region’s business community (Willmott 2017). To ensure democratic oversight of this board of directors, the reform also created the Mayors’ Council.

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<th>Opened</th>
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<td>Expo Line</td>
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<td>36 km 24 stations</td>
<td>Vancouver, Burnaby, New Westminster and the northern Surrey.</td>
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<td>Millennium Line</td>
<td>2002</td>
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<td>Evergreen extension</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>10.9 km 6 stations</td>
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<td>Canada Line</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>19 km 16 stations</td>
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Under the new system, a non-political, 11-person board of directors is responsible for planning, construction, and operation of the regional transportation systems. The board oversees TransLink’s operations, including the approval of budgets as well as submitting planning documents and strategic plans to the Mayors’ Council. Provincial legislation requires the board to develop long-term planning strategies, setting out the goals and directions for the agency. These planning strategies must be updated every five years and approved by the Mayor’s Council. Under this arrangement, TransLink can raise revenues through means that include taxes (property, fuel, and parking sales tax), toll charges, user fees, levies, and motor vehicle charges (TransLink 2018).

The Mayors’ Council is made up of the mayors from the 21 municipalities across Metro Vancouver’s as well as the Chief of the Tsawwassen First Nation, and the elected representative of Electoral Area A. The thinking was that “voters [would] know when they vote for their Mayor, they are also voting for their representative on the Council of Mayors” (TransLink Governance Review Panel 2007: 16). The Council must approve the board’s strategic plans, including oversight over any new revenue measures. Voting power on the Mayor’s Council is directly tied to population size, giving large cities such as Vancouver and Surrey considerable say in decisions (Gardiner 2017: 10).

In March 2014, the province introduced legislation making further changes to the powers of TransLink and the Mayors’ Council, empowering the latter to create 10-year visions for regional transportation planning, determine levels of executive pay, and set fare increases. At the same time, the legislation fell short of giving the mayors control over TransLink’s $1-billion operations budget, as they had wanted (Bula 2014b).

As certain analysts have noted, the complexity of TransLink’s governance structure has created decision-making challenges over the years. Disagreements among local mayors are common, given their conflicting transportation policy preferences. Disagreements between the Council and the province are also common. The board and Council regularly complain about inadequate funding for transportation from the province. As a result, the mayors have called on the province to give it greater authority, requesting the final say over the transit authority’s operating budget (Golden 2014: 33).

Figure 6 illustrates TransLink’s main revenue sources. Most of the agency’s funds derive from transit fares and portions of the provincial fuel tax and local property taxes. The agency’s revenue sources have been the subject of public controversy. In 2006, TransLink introduced a parking tax on non-residential surface parking lots, parkades, and underground parking that was bitterly resisted by small businesses and eliminated by the province in 2007. In January 2010, Vancouver introduced a commercial parking sales tax, increasing the PST rate

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9 For a discussion of TransLink’s governance structure, see Gardiner (2017).
on parking from 7 to 21 percent (Kitchen and Lindsey 2013: 35). Finally, even though provincial legislation allows TransLink to levy a vehicle tax, the province has been reluctant to allow the agency to use this power. In 2010 and in 2013, TransLink proposed an annual vehicle levy (about $122 per vehicle), but this proposal was rejected by the province each time (Sinoski 2013).

5.4 Background to the referendum
Since 2010, TransLink has faced pressure to increase investment in its rapid transit infrastructure. The population of the Lower Mainland, currently 2.6 million, is expected to increase by an additional million by 2040. Although the mail-in campaign did not get under way until the end of 2014, discussion about TransLink funding had long dominated relations between the province and the mayors. In fact, as early as 2007, TransLink concluded that “commuter frustration” was reaching “new levels” (TransLink Governance Review Panel 2007: 1).

In September 2010, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Mayors’ Council and the province. The Livable Cities Agreement outlined a joint commitment to environmentally sustainable growth, including strategic investments in public transit. While it did not outline any specific transit policy plans, it noted that the combined “resources of senior governments” and local municipalities were needed to “sustain and support the development of a transportation system that efficiently integrates the movement of people and goods across the entire region” (Office of the Premier 2010). In fall 2009, the TransLink Steering Committee established a Joint Technical Committee (JTC) to study funding for developing the transit system. The Committee examined
different revenue tools, weighing different funding sources, including property tax hikes and sales tax increases (Joint Technical Committee 2012). Ultimately, however, the province did not take up any of these ideas. Throughout this multi-year process, the mayors and province failed to reach consensus on a new funding source.

Concerns about congestion, the capacity of existing infrastructure, and environmental quality continued to weigh on the mayors. During the development of TransLink’s long-term plan Moving Forward, the mayors concluded that established revenue sources were insufficient for “raising the necessary revenues” (TransLink 2012: 2). Between 2012 and 2013, the Mayors’ Council and the TransLink board began looking at different options. The consensus was that the region’s ability to cope with expected growth over the ensuing 20 to 30 years would require between $5 billion and $15 billion in additional funding (Vancouver Sun 2014). In February 2013, the Mayors’ Council released a long list of potential new taxes, including proceeds from the carbon tax, a regional sales tax, higher gas taxes, higher transit fares, and vehicle registration fees (Bula 2013, 2014a; McInnes 2013). Introducing new taxes or increasing the PST, however, required legislative approval by the province.

The 2013 provincial election shifted the transit debate in Metro Vancouver. Provincial contests rarely feature debates over public transit, but ongoing discussions about new revenue tools as well as overcrowded transit made public transportation a particularly compelling issue (Sinoski 2013). The B.C. Liberals, led by Premier Christy Clark, were seeking a fourth consecutive mandate. Facing a 10-point deficit in the polls, most expected the New Democrats to replace the Clark-led Liberals (Bateman and Marshall 2016: 28). When incumbents released their platform, it included a plank about TransLink funding tools. The government promised that if re-elected, any new revenue source would be subject to voter approval through a public referendum. As Clark later told reporters, “To have legitimacy and taxpayer agreement, [these solutions] need to be tested by the electorate who, ultimately, will be paying for them” (quoted in Palmer 2014).

Critics of the government, however, portrayed the move as “another stick being tossed by the province into the spokes of regional transit” (McInnes 2013). Some mayors accused the province of passing the buck (Sinoski 2013). Other mayors were more sympathetic to the premier’s argument (Bula 2014a). The come-from-behind victory by the Clark Liberals on election night virtually assured that there would be a public vote on transit funding.

After the election, Premier Clark announced that the transit vote would take place during the November 2014 local elections. Even those sympathetic to the referendum urged the premier to reconsider the timing. The mayors claimed that this scheduling provided insufficient time to educate voters about why new funding tools were required (Bula 2014a). At first, Clark refused to budge (Palmer
2014), but she eventually relented, agreeing to let the mayors decide the timing of the referendum separately from that of the November election (Bailey and Bula 2014).

In February 2014, B.C. Transportation Minister Todd Stone asked the mayors to develop a 10-year vision that included a complete list of proposed projects, the total cost of the proposed investment, and a timeline for the completion of each project. The province introduced new legislation in March 2014 that increased the powers of the Mayors’ Council to allow for this work. According to this legislation, a public vote on transit funding would need to be held by June 30, 2015 (Bula 2014b).

Early on, the mayors signalled a preference for financing methods based on transportation demand management, including the use of vehicle levies and road pricing (Quinn 2014). Over a 12-week period in spring 2014, a subcommittee of the Mayors’ Council worked with TransLink and municipal officials to establish priorities as well as identify potential funding mechanisms (Mayors’ Council on Regional Transportation 2014: 34).

Despite the challenges of getting public approval, there were some encouraging signs. When TransLink asked residents to identify the most important local issue facing the region, transportation-related topics dominated: 21 percent declared this as most important, followed by social welfare, education, and health (TransLink 2014). At this point, the mayors decided that the referendum would take place in spring 2015.

5.5 The transit plan
The Mayors’ Council released its 10-year vision in June 2014. All but one of the 21 mayors supported the $7.5-billion plan. The Council’s report Regional Transportation Investments: A Vision for Metro Vancouver framed the congestion problem as a matter of regional competitiveness, stating, “People need to get to their jobs; employers need to connect with workers; and producers need to get raw materials or deliver their goods to market, affordably and reliably” (Mayors’ Council on Regional Transportation, 2014: 2).

The mayors estimated that under their plan, compared with the do-nothing scenario, the Lower Mainland would see a 20 percent reduction in congestion over 30 years (Mayors’ Council on Regional Transportation, 2014: 1).

The mayors’ plan proposed a comprehensive expansion of the city’s rapid transit network. The plan included a subway along Broadway Avenue, connecting the University of British Columbia to the existing rapid transportation system, and the creation of three new light rail transit (LRT) lines along three corridors in Surrey: 104 Avenue, King George Boulevard, and Fraser Highway. In addition, it called for an upgrade to the region’s existing bus fleet and service routes, and a new bridge to replace an outdated one that linked Surrey to New Westminster (Mayors’ Council on Regional Transportation, 2014: 12). This meant spending $2
billion each on rapid rail transit for Vancouver and Surrey, $1 billion on the new Pattullo Bridge, and the remaining $2.5 billion for 11 additional rapid bus lines across the region, and improvements to existing roads and other infrastructure (Bula 2014c).

The plan could not fund everything the mayors and the municipalities wanted to include. Although every part of the region got something, “everyone also had to give something up” (Bula 2014c). Vancouver agreed to delay the extension of the subway to the University of British Columbia. Instead, the subway would be built to Arbutus, west of the university in the neighbourhood of Kitsilano. In Surrey, local officials agreed to tolls on the new Pattullo Bridge and accepted that one of the light-rail lines would not be built until the end of the decade.

The initial public response to the plan was promising. TransLink released the results of a public opinion survey that found that 57 percent of residents would support this transit plan, while 35 percent would vote “no” (The Globe and Mail 2014).

In total, the plan called for $7.5 billion in additional capital spending, a figure that would increase TransLink’s budget from $1.4 billion to $2.2 billion. The assumption was that they would receive about $3.95 billion from other public sources, including the provincial and federal government, as well as the federal gas tax (representing about $122 million a year). With increased revenue from ridership, the Council also anticipated about $500 million in additional revenue.

The mayors knew that financing this ambitious plan would require a new funding source to cover a third of the $7.5 billion total. At first, the mayors wanted to ask the province if the region could divert revenues collected from the B.C. carbon tax to finance the plan. The province opposed this move, claiming that these funds were already allocated to personal income tax cuts (see Harrison 2012).

5.6 The campaign begins
In November 2014, local elections took place across the Lower Mainland with transit as a major issue. In the City of Vancouver, the incumbent Gregor Robertson endorsed the vision in the Mayors’ Council report. Robertson was returned to office, serving his third consecutive term.

Following the local elections, discussions got under way among the mayors about what type of revenue tool would be proposed. In December 2014, the mayors settled on a half-percentage point increase to the provincial sales tax, to be collected only within the boundaries of Metro Vancouver. The tax increase

10 Specifically, the mayors committed to financing a four-lane $980-billion Pattullo Bridge; 11 new B-line buses (rapid bus transit); improvements to the West Coast Express; an increase in SeaBus service of 50 percent; 400 new buses; upgrades to the Expo, Canada, and Millennium Lines; improvements to 2,300 km of roads across the region; and investments in cycling and pedestrian infrastructure (Sinoski 2014a).
was expected to raise about $250 million per year in additional revenue (Bula and Hunter 2014).

The mayors decided on a mail-in vote to take place over a 10-week period between March 16 and May 29. Since voters had recently gone to the polls in the fall, a mail-in vote was deemed a less expensive option. Moreover, Elections B.C. had experience with holding a separate mail-in vote, overseeing the mail-in referendum on the Harmonized Sales Tax in summer 2011. On December 4, 2014, the mayors finalized the question; only three local mayors – West Vancouver, Maple Ridge, and Burnaby – voted against the plan (Bula and Hunter 2014).

The initial response to the mayors’ plan and campaign was largely positive. One journalist stated that the initiative “ticked most of the boxes,” offering a clear vision of benefits, while spreading benefits and costs fairly (Mason 2014). Initial polling by Insights West found that 52 percent of residents would support a regional sales tax, and that only 39 percent of respondents were planning to vote “no.” Of the latter group, 71 percent said they had no confidence in TransLink’s ability to “ensure that these transportation projects are implemented properly.” The most common reason for respondents’ support was that the plan addressed traffic congestion (Hager 2014).

Following local elections in November, pro-transit interests from across the region began to mobilize ahead of the vote. Two pro-transit coalitions – the Metro Vancouver Alliance and Moving in a Livable Region – were created. Membership in the latter was drawn from business associations in Vancouver and Surrey (Sinoski 2014b). In late November 2014, delegates from the B.C. Federation of Labour formally announced their full support for the transit package at their annual meeting. At about the same time, the Vancouver Board of Trade began identifying ways that it could build public support for the “Yes” side. Even before the referendum campaign was formally under way, several groups were “ready to plunge into action,” including the Vancouver Board of Trade, unions, students, the David Suzuki Foundation, the B.C. Chambers of Commerce, and mayors (Bula and Hunter 2014).

In early December, pro-transit forces mobilized under a single organization, the Better Transit and Transportation Coalition, to formally support the “Yes” side. This group consisted of 30 business, environment, and other civil-society groups, including the Vancouver Board of Trade, Tourism Vancouver, the Downtown Surrey Business Improvement Association, the Greater Vancouver Gateway Council, the B.C. Chamber of Commerce, and Unifor.

The main strategy of the “Yes” side was to leverage this broad coalition, educating voters about the costs of the status quo and the benefits of the proposed policy. The mayors and their allies had only three months to persuade the public about the merits of their plan. The “Yes” side developed infographics showing the benefits to residents in heavily populated areas such as Vancouver and Surrey. At the outset, the “Yes” side held a clear organizational and financial advantage over opponents.
Proponents believed that public resistance to new taxes and concerns about mismanagement at TransLink posed a key challenge. The leaders of the coalition believed that educating the public about the transit packages benefits would be critical to its success (Bula 2014d). In January, the “Yes” side invited a Democratic Party operative from the United States operative to advise the Mayors’ Council. Findings from polling and focus groups, however, revealed “an intensely negative perception of TransLink” among prospective voters (Mason 2015b).

5.7 The role of opponents

Upon the mayors’ announcement, opposition forces began to emerge. The Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTF), the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, and the Car Dealers Association of B.C. raised initial concerns. In December, the head of the CTF’s B.C. Office, Jordan Bateman, announced his intention to form an opposition group with his colleague, Hamish Marshall, called No TransLink Tax. From the beginning, it was clear that the focus of the group would be on TransLink’s management (Lee 2014). Over the next month, No TransLink Tax launched a website, developed a social media presence, and made a series of media appearances, using Bateman as its chief spokesman (Bateman and Marshall 2016).

Polling research informed the group’s decision to focus on TransLink. In a June 2014 survey of Lower Mainland residents, almost two-thirds of residents (63 percent of respondents) stated that TransLink was “inefficient and wasteful” (Bateman and Marshall 2016: 32). This perception shaped the group’s media strategy in an important way. Rather than focusing on the specifics of the mayors’ transit plan, Bateman relentlessly focused on governance and accountability. The initial efforts seemed to pay off. By mid-January, support for the tax had declined to 46 percent, and 42 percent indicated that they planned to vote against the measure (Bailey 2015).

Public opinion about TransLink was likely shaped by the negative press coverage it had received. In 2013, it was reported that 2.7 million fares had gone unpaid on TransLink buses (Woodward 2013). In July and October 2014, two high-profile SkyTrain service disruptions took place, resulting in criticism of the agency’s operations. Finally, the agency’s Compass Card program, a rapid payment system, was also the subject of media criticism when its implementation was delayed by three years and it went $25 million over budget (Yaffe 2015). The province also uncovered problems with procurement practices at TransLink, further undermining the agency’s credibility. According to an audit by the Ministry of Finance, since 2010, almost three-quarters of its contracts had failed to be awarded on a competitive basis (British Columbia Ministry of Finance 2012: 51).

Over the previous decade, the CTF, Bateman in particular, had criticized the agency and drawn the media’s attention to these governance problems. The advocacy group criticized the agency for its excessive spending on executive pay, car allowances, and policing (Bula 2015a). As one analyst notes, the CTF had spent the preceding years engaging in a relentless campaign of “debasing, confronting
and exposing the apparent misdeeds of TransLink and its executives” (Willmott 2017: 263).

The Bateman-led group prepared a 73-page document, outlining what it took to be the agency’s record of waste and fiscal mismanagement. Many of these details were converted “into easy-to-digest and easy-to-share online pamphlets” in an attempt to show a record of “overspending, wastefulness and administrative incompetence” at TransLink (Willmott 2017: 264). The group posted more than 80 examples of mismanagement on its website. One of the group’s favourite targets was Ian Jarvis, the agency’s CEO. The group criticized the agency for paying him over $422,000 in salary, bonuses, and taxable benefits. In combination with $45,000 in pension contributions, they estimated his salary to be $468,000 (Bateman and Marshall 2016). Despite its budget of only $40,000, there was widespread recognition of No TransLink’s success in shifting the ballot question (Mason 2015a). The group’s relentless focus on TransLink’s record of mismanagement “resonated with the public” (Bula 2015d).

5.8 The trajectory of the campaign shifts

By February 2015, it became increasingly apparent that the “No” side had momentum on its side. Criticism of the “Yes” campaign began to mount in the media (Klassen 2015). In the middle of February, TransLink announced it would be firing its CEO. Criticism from the “No” side resulted in the mayors’ and “Yes” strategists’ demanding “some announcement about change at TransLink” (Bula 2015b), with the Vancouver and Surrey mayors calling for Jarvis’s removal (Sinoski 2015).

The board’s decision, however, lent credibility to the “No” side’s arguments (Mason 2015). As Bateman and Marshall (2016: 90) put it: “the firing of Jarvis solidified our message that TransLink was incompetent.” After the Jarvis firing, support for the “No” side increased. In a late February poll, Insight West found that 53 percent would vote “no,” while those planning to vote “yes” had declined to 38 percent. Over a two-month period, the “No” side had erased the “Yes” side’s earlier advantage. While much of the early campaign focused on the merits of the transit plan, the “No” side succeeded in reframing the vote as a referendum on TransLink’s record of managing transit.

Facing the prospect of defeat, the mayors and their allies tried to alleviate concerns about TransLink’s management. The mayors used telephone town halls, talking to more than 36,000 residents from the across the region. The end of the campaign also included a surge in advertising. Promotional materials appeared on buses warning about the necessity of transit investment (Bula 2015c).

In an attempt to address concerns about accountability, the mayors announced that a popular businessman, Jim Pattison, would head the proposed oversight committee (Bula 2015d). This move, however, seemed to reinforce the “No” side’s position. As residents began to participate in the mail-in vote, it became increasingly clear that the measure would be defeated. In the final poll released
prior to voting, 63 percent (see Figure 7) of respondents said they planned to vote against the transit measure.

Figure 7: Vancouver Transit Plebiscite – Public Opinion Polling, 2014–2015

Source: Adapted from Insights West (2015)

5.9 Results of the transit vote
On July 3, 2015, Elections B.C. announced the results of the plebiscite. The results confirmed the predictions of the final public opinion poll, with 61.7 percent voting “no” and 38.4 percent voting “yes.” Of the 23 jurisdictions in Metro Vancouver, only three communities – Bowen Island, Electoral District A, and the Village of Belcarra – voted to support the transit measure (see Figure 8).

Opposition to the proposed tax increase was highest in areas of the Lower Mainland – Maple Ridge, Langley Township, and the City of Langley – that stood to benefit the least from the transit plan. Yet, even in areas that were promised vast infrastructure investment such as the City of Vancouver, the “Yes” side struggled to garner a simple majority of support. In Surrey, the measure was rejected by 65.5 percent of voters, despite the promise of three new light-rail lines there (Johnson and Baluja 2015).

The rejection of the transit plan across so many different parts of Metro Vancouver suggests that the mayors’ expenditure plan was not the decisive factor in shaping voters’ decision. Exit polling data reveals that transit tax opponents were remarkably effective in transforming the transit debate into one about whether TransLink could be trusted. The pollster Angus Reid (2015), for example, found that limited trust in TransLink was the most significant issue for 60 percent of those that opposed the tax (see Figure 9). When Insights West (2015)
Figure 8: Support for Vancouver Plebiscite by Electoral Area


Figure 9: Exit Polling, Vancouver Transit Plebiscite, June-July 2015

Reasons for Voting “No”

Source: Adapted from Angus Reid (2015)
asked voters: “Thinking about transit, what are the most pressing concerns that should be dealt with in Metro Vancouver?” 61 percent of respondents stated that reforming governance at TransLink was the most important priority.

5.10 Analysis
The defeat of the Metro Vancouver Congestion Improvement Tax can largely be explained by the success of its opponents in turning the vote into a referendum on TransLink.

Media coverage and the CTF’s public campaigns had drawn attention to public waste and mismanagement, elevating concerns about trust and accountability. Despite evidence that this issue could present a major problem, transit proponents failed to develop an effective counterbalance to the opposition’s critiques. Efforts were made to address accountability concerns by replacing the leadership of the agency and promising new oversight mechanisms for the additional tax increases, but these decisions seem to have been perceived as too little too late.

Framing the transit vote as a question of trust successfully overshadowed the technical discussion about the benefits of transit investment, such as alleviating congestion and promoting economic competitiveness. The “No” side made an important strategic decision early on not to engage with the “Yes” side on the specifics of the transit plan. The mayors and their allies had invested time and resources into developing the plan, allowing them to speak about the economic rationale behind the plan’s design. By failing to engage with the “Yes” side on these issues, opponents shifted the discussion to the question of whether TransLink could be trusted with more taxpayer dollars. Moreover, while civil-society groups, including business and environmental organizations, could speak credibly about the need to address congestion, or even about the specific advantages of the mayors’ plan, these coalition members were ill-equipped to respond to the trust and accountability questions.

Although the “No” side had limited resources, its small operation also gave it an advantage. The messaging of the “No” side was controlled by two individuals, enabling the group to design communication materials and media appearances that reinforced the positions it preferred. The “No” side’s attacks on the transit agency’s governance record repeatedly reminded voters that the embattled agency would be responsible for managing a multi-million-dollar transit plan. Since few other groups were lining up in opposition to the tax, Bateman and his colleagues became the voice of the “No” side. This seems to have elevated the stature of what was by all indicators an under-resourced operation.

Part of the public’s frustration with TransLink might be linked to its convoluted and constantly evolving governance structure. In large cities, transit agencies are often the subject of public criticism, yet voters can punish local authorities when they are unhappy with specific planning decisions or unsatisfied with operations. In the case of TransLink, its complex governance structure rendered processes of democratic accountability more challenging, contributing to further misunderstanding and mistrust of the agency.
6. Discussion

A comparison of the two cases (see Table 3) reflects the broader dynamics that shape the politics of transit financing. The findings are broadly consistent with the existing literature on transit referenda. Coalition-building, timing, and sensitivity to varying geographic and social interests are crucial in getting support for tax increases. Yet the comparison reveals other important insights that are not as often discussed, such as policy design and its connection to trust. Exploring and understanding the sources of success and failure provides important lessons for other cities considering similar policy measures.

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<td>Broad-based support across civil society groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salience of congestion issue</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
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<td>Framing tax increase as a policy solution to congestion</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>Role of political leadership</td>
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<td>Visibility of leadership</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
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<td>Favourable timing for turnout (Yes/No)</td>
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<td>Trust in transit agency</td>
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The outcome in Metro Vancouver was surprising, because several factors initially seemed to be working in favour of transit investment. First, the process of initiating a public vote required only the authorization of the Mayors’ Council and the provincial cabinet. Thus the institutional barriers or “veto” points (Tsebelis 2000) to getting on the agenda were fewer than those in Los Angeles County. Second, Vancouver and the Province of British Columbia are widely regarded as global leaders in environmental sustainability (Porter 2016; The Economist 2014). Investment in public transportation would have furthered the region’s efforts to
reduce its greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, polls throughout 2014 and 2015 suggested that the public was generally supportive of a sales tax increase.

Responding to growing concerns over traffic congestion and population growth, local officials began surveying different policy options. Two elements distinguish Vancouver and Los Angeles. First, local officials in British Columbia were fairly confident about the transit priorities required, but disagreed over the funding mechanism. The Mayors’ Council ultimately decided on a sales tax increase. Second, there was no existing local sales tax in the Lower Mainland, thus the mayors required the province’s authorization to piggyback the proposed sales tax increase onto the PST. Generally speaking, local governments in Canada lack the capacity to raise revenues from sources beyond property taxes and user fees. This might explain why the province insisted upon the referendum requirement.

6.1 Coalition building
Measure R succeeded largely because it had the backing of a broad-based coalition of civil society actors (Kassoff and Giordano 2011; Luberoff 2016). Various groups recognized the economic problems that congestion was creating for the region. By assembling labour, environmental, and business interests, local leaders were able to convince the political establishment in Los Angeles that the conditions were ripe for a transit vote. The support of business interests in particular was important in making the business case for transit investment to conservative voters. In Metro Vancouver, civil society groups also mobilized in favour of the mayors’ transit plan, yet the support of these groups was not as influential as it was in Los Angeles. These groups provided the “Yes” side with credibility about the appropriateness of the policy intervention, but this was of little assistance when the debate shifted to one about trust and governance.

Transit debates invariably involve tough policy decisions over which projects ought to be financed. These policy debates can exacerbate existing geographic and demographic cleavages and make electoral coalition-building difficult. Thus the process by which decisions are made, including which groups are consulted, can shape whether policy ideas are perceived as credible by voters. Allowing civil society to play a key role helps give voice to geographically and economically diverse constituencies. Support for a sales tax requires the representation of varying interests, including that of businesses and local community organizations. At the same time, emphasizing equity and consensus through early coalition-building may reduce cost-effectiveness and efficiency. If local communities need to construct electoral coalitions in support of sales tax-financed transportation plans, however, this is likely a worthwhile trade-off.

6.2 Political leadership
One of the key challenges of proposing tax increases is a pervasive mistrust of governing elites. In both cases, political leaders were rarely the public faces of the transit campaigns. Successful transit measure campaigns require an emphasis on specific policy benefits and a limited emphasis on actors, such as politicians, who trigger concerns about trust.
The two cases reveal the role of leadership in ways that differ from those in which leadership typically functions in policy making. Analyses of political leadership typically emphasize the persuasive capabilities of elected officials in building public support for a policy initiative. Yet this approach downplays a critical role of politicians. Leaders can draw on their deep knowledge of institutional processes to get transit initiatives on the ballot. This is particularly important in U.S. jurisdictions in which such authority is fragmented and decentralized.

In Los Angeles County, Mayor Villaraigosa built a coalition on the Metro board and coordinated efforts with state representatives in Sacramento. Even if these efforts were less visible to the public, they were instrumental in getting Measure R onto the November ballot. By contrast, the local mayors in the Lower Mainland who helped get the transit vote on the agenda were active during the transit vote. Ultimately, however, they proved less effective in convincing voters to back the regional sales tax. The visibility of mayors from the region’s urban core, particularly Vancouver’s Gregor Robertson, may have alienated voters from suburban parts of the Lower Mainland.

6.3 Issue framing
Effective issue framing helps decision-makers make persuasive links between policy problems and policy instruments. Although taxation is typically perceived as a blunt policy instrument, Measure R was successful in Los Angeles because of a widespread understanding that congestion had reached a point of crisis. Virtually nobody was claiming that traffic was not a problem; rather, opposition came down to disagreements over the design of the policy instrument. Elected officials and transit proponents drew explicit links between the design of the instrument and the specific policy problem at hand: congestion. In Metro Vancouver, however, the congestion crisis was not deemed as significant, limiting the appeal of the tax increase.

Shared perceptions of a problem, such as traffic congestion, can help build public support for taxation as a policy solution. Governments need to present ambitious transit plans when there is a prevailing sense of crisis. As policy researchers note, “focusing events” (Kingdon 1995) and other vivid indicators are important in opening up “windows of opportunity.”

6.4 The role of time and timing
History shapes the way that voters think about transit investment. The political context in Los Angeles County was structured by the effects of previous decisions and controversies. Many transit agencies have poor reputations for failing to complete new capital projects in a timely and cost-effective fashion and scepticism about the state’s capacity to competently manage large public works projects is pervasive. To address these concerns, local officials must give residents some control over the process.

Timing also explains why some transit ballot measures are ultimately successful. In Los Angeles County, civil-society leaders and elected officials
recognized the 2008 presidential election as a “window of opportunity” (Kingdon 1995). Political organizers expected turnout to be high among constituencies that support transit investment and needed to place Measure R on the ballot in a limited time frame.

In retrospect, this decision helped Measure R get the necessary level of public support. In contrast, the decision by the B.C. mayors to have a mail-in vote in spring 2015 was a political misstep. Although the Lower Mainland mayors were reluctant to compete with the transit referendum during local elections in November 2014, separating the election from the transit vote likely hurt the prospects of the transit measure. This observation also reflects the limits of Metro Vancouver model in providing leadership for the region. One of the benefits of holding elections and referenda simultaneously, as is common practice in the United States, is that proponents can wait for a wave election, maximizing the prospect of a ballot initiative’s success.

Timing is important in getting transit measures approved by voters. Proponents need to recognize the right time to ask voters (that is, when the crisis is most significant and vivid) and pair it with the right institutional opportunity (such as a wave election). Perceptions of the policy problem, such as congestion, need to be pronounced and voters need confidence in the agency responsible for managing transit investment.

6.5 Trust and policy design

Efforts to increase sales taxes are inevitably going to confront a sceptical electorate. Opponents were successful in Vancouver partly because their strategy was well-informed. Public polling conducted ahead of the plebiscite underscored that perceptions of waste and mismanagement at TransLink were pervasive. Despite their best efforts, the pro-transit side, led by the city’s mayors, was unable to counter these messages effectively, likely because the mayors were ill-prepared to address these arguments. Had the mayors been more attuned to these concerns, they could have emphasized specific accountability mechanisms and oversight processes to prevent mismanagement and waste.

Los Angeles County officials took the issue of political trust more seriously than their counterparts in Vancouver. One of the lessons from Los Angeles County is the need to be explicit about how public funds will be managed and overseen. This finding may reflect local officials’ experience with referenda in California, and the lessons they had drawn about cultivating public support.

Building trust, however, is not simply a matter of embedding accountability mechanisms. In Vancouver, some provisions were included, but they were insufficient to address the governance problems at TransLink. Making structural changes to institutional processes, as the Los Angeles County case shows, takes time.

Another crucial difference between the two cases is that Metro had built credibility with the public, while TransLink neglected its reputation with transit
riders. The opposition’s arguments took root in B.C. mainly because they resonated with the public’s mistrust of TransLink. This frame would not have had the same effect in Los Angeles County, since it would have been at odds with prevailing public sentiment. Whether a frame is effective will often hinge on the broader political context in which these ideas or claims are embedded.

Building public support requires policy design that is attentive to concerns about equity on the other hand, and trust on the other. Governments have long recognized the importance of regional equity, designing policies so that they appeal to a broader geographic coalition of supporters. Less commonly, however, have governments effectively dealt with the issue of trust. Voters need to have confidence that they are not just throwing away money.

7. Conclusion
Beyond offering lessons for local officials, this analysis has implications for the study of transit governance. First, it reveals an important connection between perceptions of a policy problem and public support for an intervention. The congestion crisis had reached a tipping point in one instance, but not in the other. This finding aligns with previous work on the subject. When traffic congestion is “perceived to be significantly harmful to the economy, the environment, and/or the quality of life of a community, voters may be more motivated to support tax increases” (Haas and Estrada 2011: 11). Yet we have a limited understanding of the forces that shape these perceptions. What indicators determine public perceptions of traffic congestion? To what extent do these perceptions align with empirical data? Future work should consider the role of focusing events and other feedback in mediating this relationship.

Second, understanding why voters in Vancouver had such strong opinions about TransLink’s governance requires more analysis. It is possible, for instance, that voters’ perceptions of TransLink derived from their own personal experiences as users of the system. It would be useful to determine the extent to which citizens’ perceptions of TransLink align with more objective measures of the agency’s service levels."

Third, the analysis illustrates the value of placing case studies within a historical context. There is a tendency in some public policy research to focus on the short-term factors that shape electoral outcomes, including existing examinations of the success of transit ballot initiatives (for example, see Haas and Estrada 2011; Hannay and Wachs 2007). In Los Angeles County and Metro Vancouver the groundwork for success and defeat had been laid in the years leading up to each campaign. A qualitative approach enables analysts to be more sensitive to the role of sequencing, timing, and history in shaping policy dynamics.

Finally, creating reliable and efficient mass transportation networks will continue to pose a challenge for local governments across the globe. Experts have

11 The author thanks Ben Dachis for this excellent suggestion.
long noted the economic costs associated with congestion and have proffered policy prescriptions, such as road pricing and infrastructure investment. The central barrier confronting these ideas, however, tends to be a lack of public acceptability, often rooted in a mistrust of politicians and governing institutions. Political scientists can contribute to this debate, offering a better understanding of how different policy designs and broader institutional reforms can mitigate voters’ concerns over trust and accountability.
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ISBN 978-0-7727-1011-6