

Memorandum

To: Sarah Bassett
From: Brett Barkley
Subject: Individual Analysis – Investing in Cities
Date: April 25, 2013

Introduction

This memo uses data from the National Opinion Research Center’s (NORC) 2010 General Social Survey (GSS) to analyze public perception regarding national spending on issues related to large cities. Views on government spending are considered based on responses to a variety of questions, including those that seem directly related to large cities (e.g. mass transit) and others that do not make explicit connections to urban issues but could be implicitly associated with such. For example, protecting the environment could have significant overlap with investing in big cities—insofar as residents of cities have arguably the largest collective impact on environmental and energy resources. The same could be said of improving the condition of African Americans insofar as the majority of African Americans reside in urban areas. By taking this broad interpretation of what it means to invest in cities, it is possible to gauge whether public perception views these issues through an urban lens and, moreover, the degree to which the general populace understands the multifaceted nature of urban problems.

In addition, by summarizing certain characteristic responses against categorical variables (e.g. race, age, income, etc.), we can also determine whether certain demographic groups favor investment in cities more than others. This could give insight as to the general attitudes of the population toward cities. This is relevant for current public policy discussions and demographic shifts that seem to be occurring. It is relatively well known that urban centers fell out of vogue with the greater population throughout most of the latter decades of the 20th century. However, many believe that attitudes toward cities are changing and many—especially the millennial generation—are beginning to return to the urban core.

Sample Population Characteristics

The sample size of the population varies from question to question. Of the characteristics examined, the largest sample size (2,044) is in response to labor force status, while the smallest (460) is in response to current welfare spending. The sample population is quite evenly distributed across working and non-working individuals (**Table 1**), as well as political affiliation (**Table A-1**). Race and education level of respondents, however, is relatively skewed—most respondents being white (**Table 2**) and possessing only a high school degree (**Table A-2**).

Table 1 (Source: NORC GSS, 2010)

Labor Force Status	Count	Percent
Working Full Time	917	44.9%
Working Part Time	234	11.4%
Not Working	890	43.5%
Total	2044	

Table 2 (Source: NORC GSS, 2010)

Race	Count	Percent
White	712	77.6%
Black	123	13.4%
Other	82	8.9%
Total	917	

Majority of respondents favor investment in big cities, but this belief does not translate to views on welfare, the condition of blacks, and the environment

Big Cities and Welfare Spending

It seems best to begin with the most explicit question on national spending related to big cities. GSS data shows that 41.3 percent of respondents believe that investment in big cities is “too little”, while 31.3 percent believe it is “about right”, 18.7 percent believe it is “too much”, and 8.7 percent “don’t know” (**Table 3**). This is a slightly different distribution than views on welfare spending, in which most respondents (46.5 percent) believe spending levels are “too much” (**Table 4**).

Table 3 (Source: NORC GSS, 2010)

Age	Investment in Big Cities Is...								Total
	Too Little		About Right		Too Much		Don't Know		
Under 20	1	50.0%	1	50.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2
20 - 40	77	40.3%	66	34.6%	31	16.2%	17	8.9%	191
40 - 60	96	41.9%	66	28.8%	46	20.1%	21	9.2%	229
Older than 60	16	42.1%	11	28.9%	9	23.7%	2	5.3%	38
Total		41.3%		31.3%		18.7%		8.7%	460

Table 4 (Source: NORC GSS, 2010)

Age	Current Welfare Spending Is...								Total
	Too Little		About Right		Too Much		Don't Know		
Under 20	0	0.0%	1	50.0%	1	50.0%	0	0.0%	2
20 - 40	38	19.9%	58	30.4%	90	47.1%	5	2.6%	191
40 - 60	36	15.7%	80	34.9%	106	46.3%	7	3.1%	229
Older than 60	7	18.4%	13	34.2%	17	44.7%	1	2.6%	38
Total		17.6%		33.0%		46.5%		2.8%	460

Obviously there is nothing indicative of cities in a question about welfare, but to the extent that people connect investing in big cities to solving issues of (urban) poverty, one might expect to find similar views on spending in these two areas. Apparently respondents do not associate the two issues. The responses might even evoke an urban bias. US poverty rates are higher in rural areas (17 percent) than in urban areas (15 percent), thus respondents could view investment in big cities and spending on welfare in opposition to each other.¹ If more rural residents were surveyed, one might see the amount of respondents who believe welfare spending is “too much” go down, assuming a higher percentage of those respondents are on welfare compared to their urban counterparts. One would, of course, also

¹ USDA Economic Research Service (Last updated 2013, March 26). *Geography of Poverty*. Retrieved April 2013, from: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being/geography-of-poverty.aspx#.UXmOebXvu84>

assume that individuals on welfare would not want to see welfare spending decrease. Such analysis involves quite a bit of speculation and one would need to account for more definitive data indicating the urban or rural character of respondents. We should more likely attribute such a negative response regarding welfare spending to the fact that most of the respondents have an income of \$25,000 or more (Table A-3).

Big Cities and the Condition of Blacks

Perhaps more surprising than views regarding welfare spending, are views on improving the condition of blacks—only 29.9 percent of respondents believe spending is “too little” (Table 5). There is arguably a stronger connection between urban issues and the condition of blacks since they are largely concentrated in urban areas.² So, it is reasonable to expect that investment in big cities would also improve the condition of blacks who live there. However, respondents do not seem to associate the two issues. A stronger determining factor is likely the racial composition of respondents mentioned above, which is severely skewed toward a white population. Only 21.6 percent of white respondents believe spending to improve the condition of blacks is “too little”, while a 69.8 percent of black respondents believe it “too little”.

Table 5 (Source: NORC GSS, 2010)

<i>Income</i>	<i>Spending to Improve the Condition of Blacks Is...</i>								
	Too Little		About Right		Too Much		Don't Know		Total
Less than \$15,000	46	32.4%	64	45.1%	16	11.3%	16	11.3%	142
\$15,000 - \$20,000	14	36.8%	10	26.3%	7	18.4%	7	18.4%	38
\$20,000 - \$25,000	13	26.5%	23	46.9%	9	18.4%	4	8.2%	49
More than \$25,000	99	28.6%	151	43.6%	58	16.8%	38	11.0%	346
Total		29.9%		43.1%		15.7%		11.3%	575
<i>Race</i>									
White	161	21.6%	359	48.1%	143	19.1%	84	11.2%	747
Black	113	69.8%	42	25.9%	3	1.9%	4	2.5%	162
Other	32	32.7%	38	38.8%	8	8.2%	20	20.4%	98
Total		30.4%		43.6%		15.3%		10.7%	1007

Big Cities, Mass Transit, and the Environment

Perhaps the issue most in step with views on investing in big cities is that of mass transit. Almost the same amount of respondents (42.6 percent) believes spending on mass transit is “too little” (Table 6). Mass transit, overall, actually receives a more favorable response than the former—with only 9.3

² CensusScope: A product of the Social Science Data Analysis Network at UM (2000). *African-American Population*. Retrieved April 2013, from: http://www.censuscope.org/us/map_nhblack.html

percent believe spending is “too much”. Still, the majority of respondents believe spending on mass transit is “about right”, which is unfortunately not consistent with the financial reality of most transit agencies on the ground.

The sustainable financing of mass transit is quite a complicated task. Most transit agencies face significant challenges due to forces beyond their control and varying political interests attempting to influence transit policies from all directions.³ Transit suffers, in part, from the perception of it as a public service that should be provided to the individual consumer at little cost. This means setting fares at rates far below levels needed to meet operating costs, much less run a profit. A fare increase has seemingly come to be viewed in some regard as a violation of the citizen’s right to convenient transportation services. Moreover, such increases are also opposed vehemently by environmental groups who also strongly oppose such increases in so far as they motivate individuals to use cars more and thus lead to more pollution. These views are well and good as long as transit agencies can secure revenue by other means to cover operating expenses (not just up-front capital improvements), such as tax revenues—the primary means by which other “public services” are funded. This is, however, countered by political contingencies that believe mass transit should be able to cover its own operating expenses and thus shouldn’t have access to significant tax revenues. Such contingencies, moreover, prefer to view mass transit as a product to be sold as opposed to a service to be provided and often support the privatization of transit, if not significant contracting out of services to private firms. The dilemma for mass transit is obvious: it is caught between rival contingencies that have diametrically opposed views of what mass transit is by nature and how it should be operated.

Table 6 (Source: NORC GSS, 2010)

Income	Spending on Mass Transit Is...								Total
	Too Little		About Right		Too Much		Don't Know		
Less than \$15,000	134	38.8%	173	50.1%	21	6.1%	17	4.9%	345
\$15,000 - \$20,000	34	38.6%	43	48.9%	10	11.4%	1	1.1%	88
\$20,000 - \$25,000	37	34.6%	47	43.9%	15	14.0%	8	7.5%	107
More than \$25,000	307	46.4%	269	40.6%	66	10.0%	20	3.0%	662
Total		42.6%		44.3%		9.3%		3.8%	1202
Race									
White	317	44.5%	287	40.3%	74	10.4%	34	4.8%	712
Black	52	42.3%	55	44.7%	13	10.6%	3	2.4%	123
Other	25	30.5%	48	58.5%	7	8.5%	2	2.4%	82
Total		43.0%		42.5%		10.3%		4.3%	917

³ Gomez-Ibanez, J. (1996). Big-city transit ridership, deficits, and politics. *Journal of the American Planning Association* .

Given environmentalists’ opposition to mass transit fare increases, there should be a large amount of consistency between views regarding spending on environmental protection and mass transit—and by extension, investment in big cities. While the disparity between the three areas of spending are not quite as large as that of big cities and the condition of blacks, it is still disconcerting. Nearly 60 percent of respondents believe spending on environmental protection is “too little” (**Table 7**), compared to 42.6 percent for mass transit and 41.3 percent for investment in big cities. Granted, there are many environmental issues that exist outside the urban context (e.g. deforestation, agricultural runoff, etc.), but the history of environmental degradation is part and parcel to the history of urbanization and industrialization. That such a disparity exists could indicate that many Americans only partially understand the nature of current urban and environmental challenges.

Table 7 (Source: NORC GSS, 2010)

Income	Spending on Protecting the Environment Is...								Total
	Too Little		About Right		Too Much		Don't Know		
Less than \$15,000	87	60.8%	45	31.5%	7	4.9%	4	2.8%	143
\$15,000 - \$20,000	23	60.5%	8	21.1%	4	10.5%	3	7.9%	38
\$20,000 - \$25,000	24	49.0%	15	30.6%	8	16.3%	2	4.1%	49
More than \$25,000	210	60.3%	94	27.0%	40	11.5%	4	1.1%	348
Total		59.5%		28.0%		10.2%		2.2%	578
Race									
White	409	54.5%	216	28.8%	98	13.0%	28	3.7%	751
Black	92	56.4%	54	33.1%	13	8.0%	4	2.5%	163
Other	56	57.1%	27	27.6%	11	11.2%	4	4.1%	98
Total		55.0%		29.3%		12.1%		3.6%	1012

Conclusion

Using NORC 2010 GSS data, the above analysis attempts to make connections between respondents’ views on investment in big cities with other potentially related issues, such as welfare spending, the condition of blacks, mass transit, and environmental protection. Views are most similar between investment in big cities and mass transit. This is to be expected since, in the US at least, big cities are the only locations with mass transit. However, views on national spending regarding welfare, improving the condition of blacks, and environmental protection diverge significantly from views on investment in big cities. This is unfortunate since solutions to these issues cannot be addressed without largely considering the urban context. Urban Planners should perhaps take this to heart and develop more robust methods of communication regarding the challenges facing urban areas in the 21st century.

Appendix

Table A-1 (Source: NORC GSS, 2010)

Region	Political Affiliation						Total
	Democrat	Percent	Independent	Percent	Republican	Percent	
New England	8	24.2%	17	51.5%	8	24.2%	33
Mid Atlantic	38	33.9%	41	36.6%	33	29.5%	112
E North Central	31	22.5%	63	45.7%	44	31.9%	138
W North Central	18	27.3%	27	40.9%	21	31.8%	66
South Atlantic	65	32.2%	88	43.6%	49	24.3%	202
E South Central	14	24.1%	26	44.8%	18	31.0%	58
W South Central	36	40.9%	35	39.8%	17	19.3%	88
Mountain	24	42.1%	22	38.6%	11	19.3%	57
Pacific	47	34.6%	53	39.0%	36	26.5%	136
Total	281		372		237		890

Table A-2 (Source: NORC GSS, 2010)

Income	Highest Degree Earned										Total
	Less than High School	Percent	High School	Percent	Junior College	Percent	Bachelor's Degree	Percent	Graduate Degree	Percent	
Less than \$15,000	65	18.8%	204	59.1%	24	7.0%	35	10.1%	17	4.9%	345
\$15,000 - \$20,000	14	15.9%	50	56.8%	9	10.2%	10	11.4%	5	5.7%	88
\$20,000 - \$25,000	13	12.1%	68	63.6%	11	10.3%	12	11.2%	3	2.8%	107
More than \$25,000	33	5.0%	259	39.1%	52	7.9%	187	28.2%	131	19.8%	662
Total	125		581		96		244		156		1202