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Politics & Policy

What Factors Determine Support for a Parcel Tax: Evidence from Survey Data

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Introduction

Survey data is oftentimes used to gauge voter interest in supporting a ballot measure. In 2012 The city of Mountain View, California conducted an Affordable Housing Parcel Tax Feasibility Survey to see whether its residents would support a ballot measure. They conducted a phone survey of 400 likely November 2012 voters. As part of the survey questionnaire, the city was interested in whether voters could be persuaded to support a parcel tax through a set of pro and con arguments. Would it be worth it for the city to spend additional resources informing voters about the positive aspects of the parcel tax before they voted on the ballot measure? We obtained the raw survey data collected by the city of Mountain View.² The survey asked residents how likely they would support a specific parcel tax rate and whether they would change their support based on a set of pro/con arguments. The first response concerning the ballot measure is referred to as the uninformed response, while the second response is referred to as the informed ballot response.

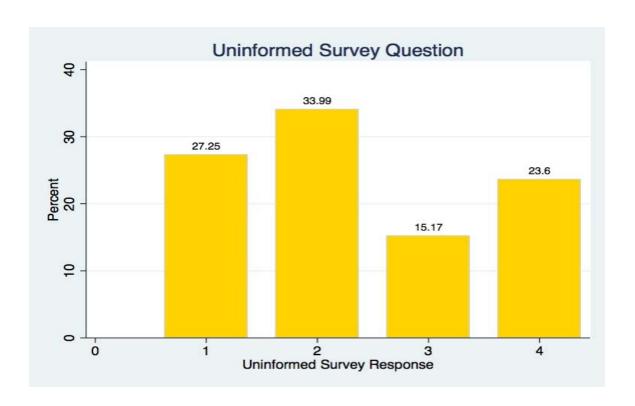
The uninformed and informed ballot test questions are structured as follows:

1. Definitely Yes 2. Probably Yes 3. Probably No 4. Definitely No

The initial distribution for the uninformed ballot test is reported below:

¹ We thank the editor and an anonymous referee for helpful comments. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2015 annual meetings of the Association of Private Enterprise Education. All errors are our own. The views expressed in this paper are our own and do not necessarily represent the views of the city of Mountain View.

² The entire data and survey questions are available upon request. Detailed numbering and questions are provided in the appendix.



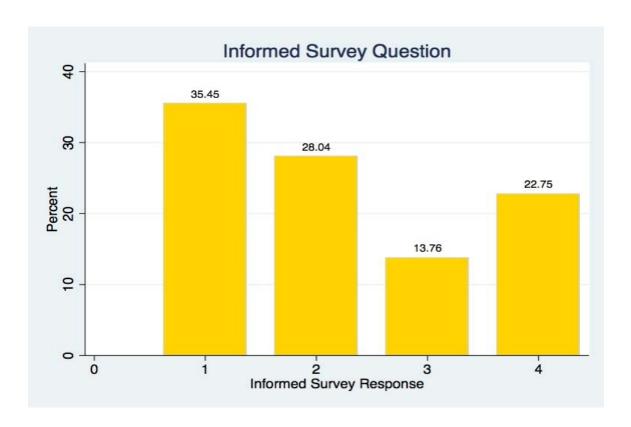
Frequency distribution for uninformed response, obs 1-404

	Freq.	rel.	cum.
1	97	27.25%	27.25%
2	121	33.99%	61.24%
3	54	15.17%	76.40%
4	84	23.60%	100.00%

Missing observations = 48 (11.88%)

Passage of the parcel tax based on Proposition 13 at the time required a two-thirds majority vote. According to the results above, the tax measure is predicted to receive 61.24% of definitely and probably yes votes and narrowly miss being approved.

After providing various pro and con arguments regarding the ballot measure, the resident is asked again to state their likelihood of supporting a parcel tax. The distribution of the informed ballot measure question is as follows:



Frequency distribution for the informed response, obs 1-404

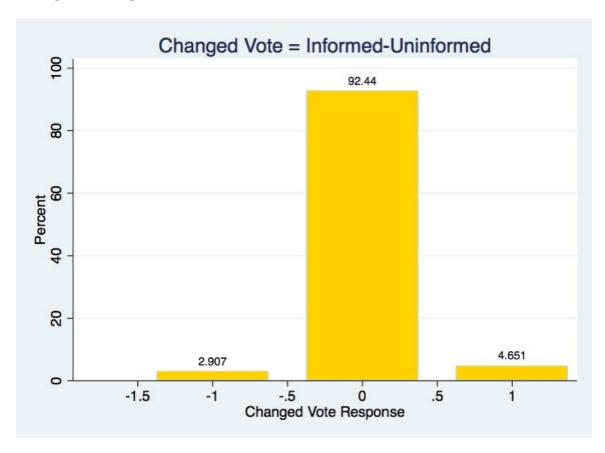
	Freq.	rel.	cum.
1	134	35.45%	35.45%
2	106	28.04%	63.49%
3	52	13.76%	77.25%
4	86	22.75%	100.00%

Missing observations = 26 (6.44%)

The percentage of voters now supporting a parcel tax increases slightly and most of the increase comes from a reduction in those listed as missing or declining to state an opinion for the uninformed ballot response. Another important point is that the proportion of definitely yes votes increases from 27% to 35% while the distribution of no votes remains essentially the same. The slight increase in yes votes from 61% to 63% still predicts a narrow defeat of the parcel tax even after informing the voters of pro and con information about the parcel tax.

The difference between the answers from the uninformed to informed ballot test can also be analyzed. A histogram comparing the difference between answers is reported below:

Change in Voting Based on Information



Frequency distribution for VoteChange, obs 1-404

	Freq.	rel.	cum.
-1 (Yes to No)	10	2.91%	2.91%
0 (No Change)	318	92.44%	95.35%
1 (No to Yes)	16	4.65%	100.00%

Missing observations = 60 (14.85%)

The above histogram reveals that there was not a lot of change in the voting patterns between the uninformed and informed ballot tests. Specifically, the total percent of changed answers was around 7.5%. Twenty-six of the respondents changed their vote from the uninformed to the informed ballot. Ten of those respondents changed from yes to no, whereas sixteen changed from no to yes, meaning that the net change in number of yes from the uninformed to the informed ballot test was plus six. We conclude that the statements intended to change the respondents' views did not have a significant effect on the views of the respondents.

Summary Statistics

Before estimating statistical models we collapsed the answers to the uninformed and informed ballot tests into simple "Yes/No" answers. The binary variable was equal to one for definitely or probably yes and zero for the no response. Questions 1a-f asked voters to identify issues of importance to residents, while Question 2 asked if a resident was satisfied with city services and Question 3 asked about the performance of the city in obtaining funding for affordable housing. Questions 8 (pro questions) and 9 (con questions) asked the respondent to respond to arguments in favor or against the parcel tax and whether that argument was persuasive. The specific details of each question are provided in the appendix.

The independent variables are defined as follows:

```
Gender (1 - Male, 0 - Female)
Children (1 - Yes, 0 - No)
Homeowner (1 - Yes, 0 - No)
Political Affiliation (1 - Democrat, 0 - Other)
Likely Voter (1 - Yes, 0 - No)
Permanent Absentee Voter (1 - Yes, 0 - No)
Likely Absentee Voter (1 - Yes, 0 - No)
Age (Actual Value in Years)
Income (Actual Value in $)
Question 1a-1f Reversed (0 - No Importance, 4 - Extremely Important)
Question 2 Reversed (0 - Very Dissatisfied, 4 - Very Satisfied)
Question 3 Reversed (0 - Very Dissatisfied, 4 - Very Satisfied)
Question 8 (0 - No Effect, 1 - Somewhat More Likely, 2 - Much More Likely)
Question 9 (0 - No Effect, 1 - Somewhat More Likely, 2 - Much More Likely)
```

The summary statistics for each of the variables used are reported under Table 1.

Determining What Factors Suggest Support for a Parcel Tax

While simple histograms provide the overall proportion of yes votes and the chances of the ballot measure succeeding, they fail to tell us which factors are statistically significant in determining support for a parcel tax. Two-way tables or crosstabs between two variables provide only a simple correlation between variables. A multivariate approach is needed in order to control the influence of each variable and identify its individual contribution to the probability of a yes response. When dealing with a host of similar questions like the set of pro or con questions, the issue of multicollinearity arises. In this type of situation controlling and identifying the individual structural impacts of each variable becomes nearly impossible, since the set of pro arguments are likely to be similar arguments, which are highly correlated with each other. One way to measure the impact is to jointly test a subset of variables, like the pro arguments and see if one or more of them have a significant impact. It may be impossible to identify individual impacts of the pro arguments but perhaps one can say something about their joint impact.³

³ Obviously the same argument applies to the con arguments.

Table 1. Summary Statistics

A. Dependent and Control Variables

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
uninformed	356	.612	.488	0	1
informed	378	.635	.482	0	1
votechange	344	.017	.275	-1	1
votechangeadj	344	1.017	.275	0	2
gender	404	.483	.500	0	1
children	403	.300	.459	0	1
homeowner	404	.621	.486	0	1
indivparty	312	.696	.461	0	1
likelyvoter	404	.705	.456	0	1
permabs	404	.678	.468	0	1
likelyabs	404	.530	.500	0	1
age	385	52.0	17.8	19	97
income	347	69027	13575	37300	97000

B. Prior Important Issues

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
rq1a	402	3.39	.74	1	4
rq1b	399	2.69	.99	1	4
rq1c	404	3.34	.72	1	4
rq1d	395	2.58	1.03	1	4
rq1e	401	2.97	.82	1	4
rq1f	401	3.22	.78	1	4
rq2	391	3.41	.68	1	4
rq3	230	2.81	.95	1	4

C. Positive Arguments

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
adjq8a	401	1.18	.88	0	2
adjq8b	397	1.10	.88	0	2
adjq8c	400	1.16	.88	0	2
adjq8d	399	1.08	.89	0	2
adjq8e	397	1.07	.89	0	2
adjq8f	398	1.01	.87	0	2
adjq8g	397	.92	.88	0	2

adjq8h	388	.82	.85	0	2
adjq8i	394	.94	.89	0	2
adjq8j	399	1.05	.87	0	2
adjq8k	397	1.14	.87	0	2

D. Negative Arguments

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
adjq9a	384	.58	.80	0	2
adjq9b	395	.69	.87	0	2
adjq9c	376	.69	.86	0	2
adjq9d	396	.79	.86	0	2
adjq9e	387	.94	.87	0	2
adjq9f	384	.69	.82	0	2
adjq9g	391	.71	.86	0	2
adjq9h	395	.63	.84	0	2

Our approach is to answer two questions. First, which variables impact and predict the overall support for the ballot measure? We will use the uninformed and informed responses as de-pendent variables. Second, which pro or con arguments can explain changes in voter responses. We will use the changed vote variable as the dependent variable in this model.

The last issue to deal with is the type of empirical model to specify. The preferred approach is to specify and estimate either a probit or logit model when the dependent variable is a binary variable. The obvious advantage, for those familiar with econometric techniques, is that either model will predict probabilities between zero and one. For our purpose we provide estimates using the logit model.⁴

Results—Uninformed and Informed Ballot Response

Table 2 present three results using logit regression with the uninformed response as the dependent variable. Column one includes all of the control variables listed in Table 1. Due to missing observations, three variables (Likely Voter, Income, and Question 3) were dropped. Column two presents the model without the three variables and column three estimates the model by including only the most statistically significant variables. Questions rq1b and rq1d remain statistically significant in all three specifications suggesting residents that think its important for the city to provide affordable housing (rq1b) are more likely to support a parcel tax whereas residents that feel it is important to oppose tax increases (rq1d) are more likely to oppose a parcel tax measure. Dropping some variables does not appear to change the predictive power of the models

⁴ Probit and Linear Probability Model (LPM) estimates are available upon request. Our experience using these three models is that while they provide different marginal impacts on the dependent variables, they yield the same information regarding the statistical significance of structural and joint impacts.

Table 2. Logit Uninformed Voter Results

	(1) Uninformed	(2) Uninformed	(3) Uninformed
gender	-0.838* (0.470)	-0.413 (0.278)	
children	-0.916 (0.581)	-0.148 (0.313)	
Homeowner	-0.731 (0.519)	-0.225 (0.286)	
indivparty	-0.119 (0.539)		
likelyvoter	-0.636 (0.864)	0.102 (0.470)	
Permabs	-0.941 (0.833)	-0.064 (0.461)	
likelyabs	0.856 (1.063)	-0.025 (0.565)	
age	-0.016 (0.017)	-0.003 (0.010)	
income	0.000 (0.000)		
rq1a	0.174 (0.394)	-0.394* (0.221)	
rq1b	1.318*** (0.326)	1.134*** (0.166)	1.100*** (0.135)
rq1c	0.201 (0.329)	-0.036 (0.187)	
rq1d	-0.707*** (0.238)	-0.547*** (0.140)	-0.520*** (0.128)
rqle	0.001 (0.297)	0.288* (0.165)	

rq1f	-0.275	0.198	
•	(0.383)	(0.192)	
rq2	0.553	0.186	
	(0.424)	(0.192)	
rq3	0.272		
	(0.263)		
_cons	-1.200	-1.167	-1.069**
	(2.760)	(1.282)	(0.457)
N	125	315	346
r2_p	0.279	0.208	0.178
chi2	46.419	74.639	75.532
p	0.000	0.000	0.000
Percent	77.60	71.11	71.68
Predicted Correctly			

Standard errors in parentheses

as both report over 70% correctly predicted.⁵ Not surprisingly due to collinearity, this simplified model (column three) leads to higher t-values for the included variables. Regardless, the model still maintains a very high predictive power. The three models from Table 2 suggest that the strongest predictive determinants to supporting a parcel tax are the two variables describing prior beliefs about ones attitude towards affordable housing and tax increases. A resident's predisposition to these two factors can predict with high accuracy whether the respondent will say yes or no to the parcel tax. What may appear surprising is that controlling for gender, number of children, whether you are a homeowner, party affiliation, a likely voter or age had no significant effect on the dependent variable.

Table 3 reports the same model specifications as Table 2 but uses the informed response as the dependent variable. The results are similar to the uninformed response. Attitudes towards affordable housing and taxes are statistically significant in explaining the decision to support or not support a parcel tax. All three models in Table 3 predict over 70% of the responses correctly. Both sets of results from Table 2 and 3 suggest that only two factors provide statistical significance in explaining the probability of a yes vote in support of a parcel tax.

^{*} p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

⁵ A common measure of goodness of fit for binary models is to report the proportion of correct (both yes and no) predictions rather than the usual R-square.

Table 3. Logit Informed Voter Results

	(1) Informed	(2) Informed	(3) Informed
informed			
gender	-0.607 (0.437)	-0.305 (0.264)	
children	-0.926*	-0.133	
cimaren	(0.531)	(0.302)	
homeowner	-0.683	-0.213	
	(0.491)	(0.277)	
indivparty	0.167		
	(0.504)		
Likelyvoter	-0.292	-0.211	
	(0.754)	(0.461)	
Permabs	0.011	0.257	
	(0.815)	(0.452)	
Likelyabs	-0.086	-0.232	
	(0.981)	(0.559)	
age	-0.015	-0.006	
	(0.017)	(0.009)	
income	0.000		
	(0.000)		
rq1a	-0.091	-0.302	
	(0.348)	(0.194)	
rq1b	0.766***	0.894***	0.919***
	(0.255)	(0.158)	(0.129)
rq1c	-0.149	0.003	
	(0.297)	(0.175)	
rq1d	-0.598***	-0.522***	-0.514***
	(0.226)	(0.136)	(0.123)

rqle	0.058 (0.260)	0.240 (0.149)	
rq1f	0.021 (0.314)	0.134 (0.173)	
rq2	0.329 (0.390)	0.298 (0.182)	
rq3	0.053 (0.268)		
_cons	1.593 (2.653)	-0.782 (1.167)	-0.491 (0.429)
N	132	337	368
r2_p	0.174	0.166	0.143
chi2	29.964	62.000	59.480
p	0.027	0.000	0.000
Percent Predicted Correctly	71.97	72.40	71.74

Standard errors in parentheses

Results—Changing Voter Opinion

The next set of results seeks to explain changes in voter opinion when exposed to various pro and con arguments regarding the parcel tax. We ran an ordered logit since there are now three responses to the imposition of new information: -1 - when the resident went from supporting to not supporting the parcel tax, 0 - when there was no change in voter opinion, and +1 - when the voter was persuaded to support the parcel tax. See Talbe 4. The first model includes all control variables (minus Likely Voter, Income, and Question 3) plus all pro arguments (adj8a-k) and all con arguments (adj9a-h). The second set of results dropped the insignificant control variables like the previous results and included only the two prior variables rq1b and rq1d and all of the pro/con variables. The last set of results dropped the insignificant pro and con arguments. We conducted joint tests on the pro and con arguments to see if they were jointly significant. For the pro arguments the joint tests were significant but provided mixed results: χ^2 stats equal to 32.83 (p-value = .0006), 27.33 (0.004), and 20.66 (0.000) respectively. Most pro arguments except for two arguments were statistically insignificant. One of the significant pro arguments was the opposite sign of what we expected. Question 8d asked if you would be more likely to support a parcel tax if "An individual audit will ensure that funds are spent properly." The negative estimated coefficient suggests that a resident would be less likely to support a parcel tax if there was

^{*} p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

Table 4. Ordered Logit for Voter Change

	(1) votechange~j	(2) votechange~j	(3) votechange~j
gender	-0.736 (0.608)		
children	0.187 (0.780)		
homeowner	0.151 (0.705)		
likelyvoter	-0.476 (1.269)		
permabs	1.447 (1.010)		
likelyabs	-2.475* (1.316)		
age	0.040* (0.021)		
rq1a	0.751* (0.398)		
rq1b	-1.320*** (0.419)	-1.039*** (0.316)	-0.722*** (0.230)
rqlc	0.062 (0.402)		
rq1d	-0.147 (0.349)	-0.072 (0.306)	0.169 (0.228)
rq1e	-0.211 (0.300)		
rq1f	-0.269 (0.357)		

rq2	0.598 (0.471)		
adjq8a	0.132 (0.748)	0.088 (0.618)	
adjq8b	0.094 (0.799)	-0.083 (0.692)	
adjq8c	0.628 (0.485)	0.935** (0.430)	
adjq8d	-2.084*** (0.567)	-1.244** (0.511)	-0.765**
(0.323)			
adjq8e	0.264 (0.451)	0.208 (0.486)	
adjq8f	0.192 (0.765)	-0.472 (0.528)	
adjq8g	0.945** (0.463)	0.787* (0.475)	
adjq8h	-0.976 (0.780)	-0.736 (0.655)	
adjq8i 1.315***	1.636***	1.238**	
	(0.511)	(0.511)	(0.294)
adjq8j	-1.052* (0.580)	-0.549 (0.626)	
adjq8k	0.690 (0.728)	0.375 (0.571)	
adjq9a	0.087 (0.459)	-0.181 (0.559)	
adjq9b	-1.216** (0.533)	-1.192* (0.669)	-0.918*** (0.326)

adjq9c	0.960* (0.553)	0.768 (0.512)	
adjq9d	0.086 (0.352)	0.178 (0.390)	
adjq9e	-0.314 (0.350)	-0.109 (0.446)	
adjq9f	0.078 (0.571)	0.082 (0.490)	
adjq9g	-0.099 (0.401)	0.236 (0.463)	
adjq9h	-0.195 (0.607)	-0.203 (0.581)	
cut1			
_cons	-4.719*** (1.798)	-7.300*** (0.948)	-5.822*** (0.862)
cut2			
_cons	5.626** (2.382)	1.609* (0.958)	1.943** (0.766)
N	254	275	322
r2_p	0.358	0.257	0.144
chi2	13.941	12.771	7.946
p	0.083	0.120	0.005

Standard errors in parentheses

an audit to ensure the funds were spent properly. Question 8i asked residents if they were more likely to support a parcel tax if "The measure would raise two million dollars per year for affordable housing." The estimated coefficient was positive and strongly significant. For the con arguments question 9b was negative and statistically significant (joint tests - χ^2 stats equal to 13.94 (p - value = .0083), 12.77 (0.120), 7.95 (0.005) respectively). For this question residents were asked if they would be less likely to support a tax if they felt they were "already paying a utility tax and this measure is just more wasted money to the city."

^{*} p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

Concluding Remarks

Our results may not be generalized for other types of ballot tax measures but they do suggest taking prior beliefs into account will more than likely determine whether residents will support a parcel tax. Our results, which have high predictive power, suggest that simpler polling with fewer questions may provide just as significant results. Most of our control variables provided little in terms of explanatory power individually and as a group. Providing pro/con campaign arguments may have some impact on swaying voters but our results were somewhat mixed. Two pro arguments were statistically significant but one was the opposite sign. Only one con argument was significant and when tested jointly with all con arguments, they were not significant as a group.

Appendix: Detailed Survey Questions

Godbe Research City of Mountain View 2012 Affordable Housing Parcel Tax Feasibility Survey

IS	SUES OF IMPORTANCE					
1.	I'd like to ask you about some issues in the to tell me how important this issue is to you.	City of Mount	ain View	. For eacl	n one, I'd	l like you
	Here's the [first one/next one]: Issomewhat important, or not important to you		/ importa	nt, very ir	nportant,	
[RA	NDOMIZE]					
		Extramely	Von	Surt	Not	[DON'T
	Maintaining the quality of public education	Imp.	lmp.	Imp.	Imp.	READ] DK/NA
A.	Maintaining the quality of public education	1	2	3	4	99
B.	Providing access to affordable housing Maintaining public safety	1	2	3	4 4	99
D	Preventing local tay increases	1	2	3	4	99
F.	Preserving parks and onen space	11	2	3	4	99
F.	Improving the local economy	1	2	3	4	99
		7			-	
2.	Generally speaking, are you satisfied or disa doing to provide city services? (GET ANSWI (satisfied/dissatisfied) or somewhat (satisfied	ER, THEN AS d/dissatisfied)	SK): Is th)?	ne City of at very	Mountair	n View is
	Very satisfied		1			
	Somewhat satisfied		2			Dr.
	Somewhat dissatisfied Very dissatisfied		3			
	(DON'T READ) Don't know/No ar	newer	5			
	Very favorableSomewhat favorable	oinion	2 3 4			
U	NINFORMED BALLOT TEST					
4.	Next year, voters in your area may be aske me read you the summary of one of these			ocal ballo	t measur	es. Let
	To provide funding the State cannot take a Mountain View fixed-income senior citizens income families earning less than 80 perce affordable housing, shall the City of Mountay years, exempting senior citizen homeowne anything other than the Mountain View afform independent audits? [76 words—City of Mountain View and City of Mount	s, low-wage v nt of area me ain View levy rs, prohibiting rdable housi	vorkers, edian inc \$59 per g the fun- ng progra	disabled pome with housing under the housing under the housing to the housing the housing sind sind sind sind s	people, a access t unit annu eing use subject to	nd low- o ally for 8 d for
	If the election were held today, would you wanted THEN ASK]: Is that definitely (yes/no) or p	robably (yes/	no)?	measure'	? [GET /	ANSWER
	Definitely Yes		2 3 4			

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE STATEMENTS

•	ANTITAL MANAGEMENT OF A LANGUAGE A
[R	OTATE QUESTIONS 7 AND 8]
8.	Voters may hear information in favor of the potential measure we have been discussing. As I read each of the statements in support of the measure, please tell me if you would be much more likely or somewhat more likely to vote "YES" on the measure, given the information.
	Here's the (first/next): Does hearing this make you much more likely or somewhat more likely to vote YES on the measure – or does it have no effect on your opinion?
[R	ANDOMIZE]
-	Much Swt. [DON'T
	More More No READ] Likely Likely Effect DK/NA
A.	The money raised by the measure is required by law to be used
В.	only in Mountain View99 This measure provides local funding for access to affordable housing that the State cannot take away99
C.	The measure prohibits the funds from being used for anything other than the Mountain View affordable housing program111199
D.	An independent audit will ensure the funds are spent properly99
E.	Senior citizens who own their homes, many of whom live on fixed incomes, will be exempt from the measure
F.	The measure would provide a steady source of funds for affordable housing in Mountain View399
G.	The measure will help to ensure the City of Mountain View remains a diverse community
H.	A recent court decision has limited the City's affordable housing program to fund affordable housing and compelled the City to consider this measure
l.	consider this measure————————————————————————————————————
J.	The measure will allow low-wage service workers to live near their
K.	workplace reducing traffic and air pollution99 The measure will help low-income workers, including daycare
	workers, entry-level teachers, retail, and restaurant workers who support our local economy99
-	
9.	Voters may hear information <u>against</u> the potential measure we have been discussing. As I read each of the statements against the measure, please tell me if you would be much more likely or somewhat more likely to vote "NO" on the measure, given the information.
	Here's the (first/next): Does hearing this make you much more likely or
	somewhat more likely to vote "NO" on the measure – or does it have no effect on your opinion?
[RA	ANDOMIZE]
	Much Swt. [DON'T
	More More No READ] <u>Likely Likely Effect DK/NA</u>
A.	The City of Mountain View cannot be trusted to use the money as
B.	proposed in the ballot measure
C.	The City has too many highly paid administrators99
D.	With the current economic crisis, stagnant home prices, and continued
E.	high unemployment, now is not the right time to raise taxes1299 Developers who want to build large housing projects in Mountain
	View should pay the fee, not average homeowners12399
	The tax is regressive and unfair to owners of small condos and homes
G. H.	The money could be better spent on other City priorities12399 This measure is a subsidy that is really just another big government

give-away ----

---1-----2-----99

INFORMED BALLOT TEST

10. Now that you know more about the measure, let me read you a summary of the proposal again:

To provide funding the State cannot take away, and preserve diversity by providing eligible Mountain View fixed-income senior citizens, low-wage workers, disabled people, and low-income families earning less than 80 percent of area median income with access to affordable housing, shall the City of Mountain View levy \$59 per housing unit annually for 8 years, exempting senior citizen homeowners, prohibiting the funds from being used for anything other than the Mountain View affordable housing program, and subject to independent audits? [76 words -City of Mountain View and Mountain View count as one word each]

If the election were held today, would you vote yes or no on this measure? [GET ANSWER, THEN ASK]: Is that definitely (yes/no) or probably (yes/no)?

Definitely Yes	1
Probably Yes	2
Probably No	3
Definitely No	4
[DON'T READ] DK/NA9	9