



Light Rail Is Defeatable

Rail transit ballot measures usually lose unless proponents outspend opponents by more than one hundred to one.

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More than fifty rail transit tax measures have been put before voters in more than twenty urban areas since 1990. Some three out of four of these measures have lost. In all but one election for which records are available, rail proponents were won only by outspending opponents by more than one hundred to one.

For example, a 1989 light-rail measure in Phoenix lost even though proponents outspent opponents by almost exactly one hundred to one. In 1997, it was back on the ballot in Phoenix, but it lost after proponents outspent opponents by only fifty to one. In 2000, a Phoenix light-rail ballot measure received voter approval when proponents outspent opponents by 140 to one.

On the other hand, rail transit won in Portland in 1990 and 1994 because there was no organized opposition. After such opposition formed, it lost the next three elections: Vancouver in 1995, Oregon in 1996, and Portland in 1998.

In essence, rail transit taxes win only when there

is virtually no opposition. Rail won in the St. Louis area in 1993 and 1994, Charlotte in 1998, and Salt Lake City in 2000 because there was no organized opposition. A rail ballot measure in Houston won in 2003 only because no new tax was involved, but rail taxes in Tucson and Kansas City both lost.

As can be seen in the table below, the only known exception to the one-hundred-to-one rule was Seattle in 1996. That rail plan has had such huge cost overruns that voters would certainly reject it if it were on the ballot today.

Voter opposition to new tax measures plays a role in these elections. But even a small, organized opposition can play a big role in the election. Prior to the 2002 Cincinnati campaign, proponents polled voters and found that close to 40 percent were inclined to vote for rail. Despite spending \$700,000 to close the gap, the final election result was only 27 percent of the voters in favor of rail. The \$10,000 spent by opponents was very effective.

Expenditures on and Outcome of Rail Transit Tax Measures

City	Year	Yes	No	Proponents	Opponents
Phoenix	1989	39%	61%	\$1,100,000	\$10,000
Salt Lake	1992	42%	58%	500,000	8,000
Vancouver	1995	33%	67%	278,000	50
Seattle	1995	47%	53%	750,000	200,000
Seattle	1996	58%	42%	1,000,000	250,000
St. Louis	1996	41%	59%	90,000	300
Phoenix	1997	49%	51%	500,000	10,000
Denver	1997	42%	58%	600,000	40,000
St. Louis	1997	44%	56%	900,000	500
Portland	1998	48%	52%	1,100,000	130,000
Miami	1999	32%	68%	1,800,000	126,700
Columbus	1999	45%	55%	750,000	50
Phoenix	2000	65%	35%	1,400,000	10,000
Cincinnati	2002	27%	73%	700,000	10,000