



Policy Brief.....May 27, 2003
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Did Conservatives Really Support a Gas Tax Increase in 1982?

Recent newspaper advertisements by the Transportation Construction Coalition have cited Ronald Reagan's support for a five-cent increase in the federal gasoline tax (the first since 1959) as a reason why conservatives should be comfortable supporting another gas tax increase. In fact, the Coalition's full-page advertisement in the Thursday, May 22, 2003 edition of the *Washington Times* states, in part: "If it was right for Reagan, it's right for us." and "It's OK to be a conservative and support an increase in the federal highway user fee."

A closer examination of the Congressional consideration of this tax increase indicates that Republicans and conservatives were not unified in their support of a gas tax increase. Indeed, then House Member and now Vice-President Dick Cheney had this to say during debate on the Rostenkowski Amendment (Ways and Means Revenue Provisions) to H.R. 6211, the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1982, which added to the bill the 5-cent increase in the gas tax, as well as several other revenue provisions relating to trucks, tires, and lubricants:

"Mr. Chairman, I rise in opposition to the proposed 5-cent-per-gallon increase in the gasoline tax, because I am convinced that such a tax increase could wipe out more jobs than it would create." (*Congressional Record*, Page 28979, December 6, 1982)

Of the 169 votes against the Rostenkowski Amendment, 87 were Republicans. Several of the Democrats who opposed the amendment later became Republicans. A number of those Members who opposed the gas tax increase are currently serving as Republicans in Congress, including numerous Committee Chairmen, such as David Dreier, Henry Hyde, Mike Oxley, Jim Sensenbrenner, Billy Tauzin, Bill Young, and Don Young.

House Members Now Serving as Republicans in Either the House or Senate Who Opposed the Rostenkowski Amendment:

Craig, Larry
Crane, Phil
Dreier, David
Hyde, Henry

Roberts, Pat
Rogers, Hal
Sensenbrenner, Jim
Shelby, Richard (then a Democrat)

Leach, Jim
Oxley, Mike
Paul, Ron

Snowe, Olympia
Tauzin, Billy (then a Democrat)
Young, Bill
Young, Don

Other Notable No Votes on the Rostenkowski Amendment:

Cheney, Dick
Daschle, Tom
Gore, Al

Gramm, Phil
Kemp, Jack

The debate over the Rostenkowski Amendment also gives some indication that President Reagan may have not always supported the 5-cent increase in the gas tax. Rep. Les AuCoin (D-OR) had this to say during debate on the amendment:

“Last May, after the President restated his strong opposition to any increase in the gas tax, most people considered the chances of passage of H.R. 6211 to be non-existent. It was put on a back burner. Up until the day of the election the President still opposed a gas tax increase. Now we are told that this is not a gas tax increase—it’s a ‘user fee’, and lo and behold with unemployment increasing by leaps and bounds—the President supports it.” (*Congressional Record*, Page 28973, December 6, 1982) Rep. AuCoin voted against the Rostenkowski Amendment.

The Department of Transportation’s own website notes that the gas tax increase was not without controversy:

A Look at the History of the Federal Highway Administration – December 23, 1982:

“Overcoming a 13-day filibuster intended to block a gas-tax increase, the Senate votes 81-5 to approve the Surface Transportation Assistance Act. (Signed [January 6](#), 1983, see entry.) Secretary of Transportation Drew Lewis says, "We think this is a tremendous move forward for transportation." To break the deadlock, several Senators arrived in Washington, DC, today on military aircraft and were taken to the Capitol for the vote in police cars with lights flashing and sirens wailing.”

<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/byday/fhbd1223.htm>
