We finally see Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood (R-IL) emerge from his undisclosed location, and the result isn't pretty:

> Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood says he wants to consider taxing motorists based on how many miles they drive rather than how much gasoline they burn _ an idea that has angered drivers in some states where it has been proposed.

This idea is bad on several levels:

1) To the extent that we are concerned about climate change and energy consumption, it simply makes no sense to tax a Prius for going 4 miles more than taxing a Hummer for going 3 miles.

2) I see no evidence for the idea, floated by some, that somehow a vehicle miles traveled tax is more politically acceptable than a gasoline tax. If anything, it's just the opposite: buying a more fuel-efficient vehicle is expensive, but it's cheaper than changing your travel patterns, which might involve moving or getting a different job. (The exception here is deciding how often to make local trips, which would be just as affected by gasoline taxes than vehicle-miles-traveled taxes.). Republicans will oppose all taxes except those that fall on working class people, in which case they are called "user fees."

3) One could argue that if you tax gasoline instead of vehicle miles traveled, then you would be letting plug-in hybrids off the hook, because they could drive all they want, and get their electricity from dirty coal plants. You know what? If our biggest problem in transportation and energy policy is that too many people are buying plug-in hybrids and scrapping their SUVs, I'll take that problem when it arrives.

4) If anything, a vehicle miles traveled tax if politically more dangerous, because it requires the government to determine how many miles you have traveled. That will be a gift to those warning of "liberal fascism." If we are serious about charging for vehicle miles traveled, the better way to do that is through private automobile insurance, and let the insurers take the lumps. Phone companies charge you for phone calls; auto insurers charge you for how much you drive. That's a better analogy.

5) Moreover, a gasoline tax connects much more directly to energy independence,

which is overstated as a policy goal (complete autarky is rarely a good policy strategy), but nevertheless resonates for good reason with the public.

If we think of transportation policy as being just about congestion, then I could see it. But it’s not just about congestion — that’s Transportation 101.

I can’t help but think this has something to do with the ethanol lobby — an Illinois Transportation Secretary, serving under an Illinois President, and working with an Iowan Agriculture Secretary, has figured out a way to get Americans to use more ethanol and pretend that they are helping the environment. But maybe it’s just a lousy idea. I hope so.

*Cross-posted at the Reality-Based Community: [www.samefacts.com](www.samefacts.com)*