

The Driverless Debate: Equal Percentages of Americans See Self-Driving Cars as the “Wave of the Future” Yet Would Never Consider Purchasing One

Americans are split on whether self-driving vehicles are safe for those inside them, but majorities see them as a danger to pedestrians and fellow drivers

New York, N.Y. – March 24, 2015 – As we are now 15 years into the millennium, many of us are no doubt wondering why we aren’t yet commuting to work via flying car, à la “The Jetsons.” While our cars may not be taking flight in the near future, vehicle automation is becoming increasingly prevalent, with many vehicles now equipped with features such as park-assist and adaptive cruise control to aid in everyday driving chores. Some manufacturers have even begun making forays into vehicles that can drive themselves in some capacity, with more on the way. But how do Americans feel about sharing their roads with cars which can get themselves from point A to point B without a human taking the wheel? Recent findings indicate that Americans have yet to come to a consensus on the topic.

These are some of the results of **The Harris Poll**® of 2,276 U.S. adults surveyed online between November 12 and 17, 2014.

When provided with a brief description of self-driving vehicles and an aided list of potential feelings they may have towards the technology, Americans display a wide range of sentiments towards the subject. On one hand, there are many positive reactions to the vehicles. Over one-third (35%) say these vehicles are the future of driving and 24% think they are the designated drivers of the future. Meanwhile, almost one quarter of adults (24%) believe self-driving vehicles are something out of “The Jetsons” cartoon. Just over one-fifth of Americans (22%) say it’s a technology they’d love to have and 19% say they’re “insanely cool.”

But it’s not all sunshine and robots, with 34% saying the vehicles are an unnecessary luxury and nearly a third (32%) feeling they’re something only rich people could afford. Furthermore, 30% say they’re an even lazier way to drive. Then there are those who just don’t know what to make of them, with 12% saying they’re “confusing.”

The peaks and pitfalls

Digging into the specifics, Americans see a number of benefits and drawbacks to the use of self-driving vehicles, when presented with a list of options. Likely benefits include increased fuel economy (30%), more leisure/free time (21%), and increased productivity (18%). It should also be noted, however, that one-quarter (25%) of Americans do not see any benefits to self-driving vehicles.

Looking at the drawbacks, 80% of Americans feel computer “glitches” are a likely downfall of self-driving vehicles. Added costs are a concern as well. Nearly seven-in-ten (69%) feel the vehicles would cost more to service due to increased complexity and 45% say higher insurance costs or an additional “rider” are likely drawbacks. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of Americans also note personal data breaches as a likely drawback. Only 7% of adults don’t see any drawbacks to self-driving vehicles.

Safety: saving grace or cause for concern?

There are many safety factors to consider when looking at self-driving vehicles. Are they safe for those inside them? What about for others on the road? Can they make mistakes? Will they prevent accidents? Americans are largely split on implications for those inside them: 48% say self-driving vehicles would be “safe” for this group and 52% say “dangerous.” However, Americans edge towards a consensus when thinking of those outside the vehicles. Fifty-seven percent feel self-driving vehicles would be dangerous for other drivers in their proximity and 61% say the same for pedestrians. Matures are especially likely to worry that self-driving vehicles would be dangerous for pedestrians (73% vs. 63% Baby Boomers, 61% Gen X, & 56% Millennials) and other drivers (69% vs. 59%, 57%, & 51%).

And how do Americans rate self-driving vehicles against the average driver? Well, it depends on the activity. Americans have the most confidence when it comes to parallel parking, with 62% expecting that self-driving vehicles are less likely to make an error than human drivers; slightly fewer say the same for parking in a parking lot (56%) and driving on the highway (54%). This confidence dwindles when it comes to driving in a city; in this situation, 57% of Americans say self-driving vehicles will be more likely than the average driver to make an error.

Americans do, however, see some safety-related benefits in these vehicles in the form of fewer accidents and minimizing other driver-induced errors. Over half identify fewer accidents caused by drunk driving (53%) and distracted driving (also 53%) as likely benefits of self-driving vehicles. Half of adults (50%) feel they have a reduced likelihood of speeding tickets and 44% feel there is a reduced likelihood of rear-ending another car. Another potential benefit, seen as likely by 41%, is a reduced likelihood of running a red light.

To buy or not to buy

All things considered, what will it take before Americans will consider purchasing this new technology? Over one-fifth (22%) say they will consider buying/leasing when they believe the “bugs” have been worked out. Seventeen percent say they will consider doing so when self-driving vehicles drop to a price they think is reasonable. This is especially true of Millennials (23% vs. 15% Gen X, 13% Baby Boomers, & 13% Matures). Others say they’ll wait until they read or hear positive feedback from people using them (7%), and 17% simply aren’t sure what it will take for them to consider buying/leasing.

Most notably, however, a third (33%) say they will never consider buying or leasing a self-driving vehicle. Matures are more likely than all other generations to indicate this (50% vs. 36% Baby Boomers, 36% Gen X, & 22% Millennials).

“Distance drivers” may prove to be the industry’s best bet

Americans who drive more than 30 miles a day may be the best target for these new-fangled vehicles for a number of reasons. They are more likely than their counterparts (those driving less than 30 miles a day) to share some positive sentiments towards self-driving vehicles, including feeling they are a technology they would love to have (27% vs. 20%) and that they’re “insanely cool” (24% vs. 17%). Those who drive more are also more likely to cite increased productivity as a benefit (23% vs. 17%). Furthermore, they may be more open to buying or leasing one, as they’re *less* likely than lower-distance drivers to say they will never consider purchasing a self-driving vehicle (28% vs. 35%, respectively).

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TABLE 1
DAILY TRANSPORTATION METHOD

“Which of the following best describes your day-to-day method of transportation (i.e., how you typically go about getting to work/school, running errands, etc.)? Please select all that apply.”

Base: U.S. Adults

	Total
	%
Driving	81
Walking	19
Public transit system (e.g., subway, bus)	10
Carpooling (as a passenger)	5
Biking	5
Taxi	2
Other	4

TABLE 2
VEHICLE OWNERSHIP STATUS

“Do you currently own, lease, or regularly use a vehicle such as a car, truck, minivan, or SUV?”

Base: U.S. Adults

	Total
	%
Yes	87
No	13

TABLE 3
NUMBER OF VEHICLES OWNED

“And how many vehicles, in total, such as cars, trucks or minivans or SUV’s, are owned, leased or regularly used within your household?”

Base: Own, Lease Or Use a Vehicle

	Total
	%
1	39
2	45
3+	16
Mean	1.8 Vehicles

TABLE 4
MILES DRIVEN DAILY

“How many miles would you estimate that you travel in an average day? If you are unsure, please provide your best guess.”

Base: Own, Lease Or Use a Vehicle

	Total
	%
0	2
1-10	36
11-20	27
21-30	12
31+	22
Mean	25.6 miles

TABLE 5
KNOWLEDGE OF SELF-DRIVING VEHICLES

“As you may or may not know, a self-driving vehicle is a car, truck or SUV capable of navigating without or with limited human input. Prior to reading this description, had you heard, seen or read anything about self-driving vehicle?”

Base: U.S. Adults

	Total
	%
Yes	65
No	35

TABLE 6
FEELINGS TOWARDS SELF-DRIVING VEHICLES
By Generation, Gender, and Miles traveled per day

“Based on this description and any knowledge you might already have had about self-driving vehicles, which of the following describe how you feel about this technology? Please select all that apply. Self-driving vehicles are...”

Base: U.S. Adults

	Total	Generation				Gender		Miles traveled per day (avg)	
		Millennials (18-37)	Generation X (38-49)	Baby Boomers (50-68)	Matures (69+)	Male	Female	0-30 miles	31+ miles
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
The future of driving	35	35	33	37	31	40	30	35	36
An unnecessary luxury	34	31	32	36	42	29	39	36	33
Something only rich people could afford	32	34	27	33	29	25	38	32	28
An even lazier way to drive	30	31	31	30	22	27	32	31	30
The designated drivers of the future	24	24	20	28	23	27	21	24	24
Something out of “The Jetsons” cartoons	24	21	26	24	25	20	27	24	23
A technology I’d love to have	22	30	18	17	16	24	19	20	27
Insanely cool	19	29	19	12	7	21	17	17	24
Confusing	12	12	9	12	17	10	14	13	10
Something else	13	15	17	11	11	13	14	12	12

TABLE 7a
SAFETY OF SELF-DRIVING VEHICLES - SUMMARY

“How safe or dangerous do you feel a self-driving vehicle would be for each of the following?”

Base: U.S. Adults

		Very/ Somewhat safe (NET)	Very safe	Somewhat safe	Very/ Somewhat dangerous (NET)	Somewhat dangerous	Very dangerous
Those inside it.	%	48	17	31	52	32	21
Other drivers in its proximity.	%	43	16	27	57	34	23
Pedestrians in its proximity.	%	39	15	24	61	34	27

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 7b
SAFETY OF SELF-DRIVING VEHICLES – SUMMARY OF VERY/SOMEWHAT SAFE
By Generation, Gender, and Miles traveled per day

“How safe or dangerous do you feel a self-driving vehicle would be for each of the following?”

Base: U.S. Adults

	Total	Generation				Gender		Miles traveled per day (avg)	
		Millennials (18-37)	Generation X (38-49)	Baby Boomers (50-68)	Matures (69+)	Male	Female	0-30 miles	31+ miles
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Those inside it.	48	53	47	46	39	52	43	45	54
Other drivers in its proximity.	43	49	43	41	31	47	39	39	52
Pedestrians in its proximity.	39	44	39	37	27	44	33	36	44

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 7c
SAFETY OF SELF-DRIVING VEHICLES – SUMMARY OF VERY/SOMEWHAT DANGEROUS
By Generation, Gender, and Miles traveled per day

“How safe or dangerous do you feel a self-driving vehicle would be for each of the following?”

Base: U.S. Adults

	Total	Generation				Gender		Miles traveled per day (avg)	
		Millennials (18-37)	Generation X (38-49)	Baby Boomers (50-68)	Matures (69+)	Male	Female	0-30 miles	31+ miles
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Pedestrians in its proximity.	61	56	61	63	73	56	67	64	56
Other drivers in its proximity.	57	51	57	59	69	53	61	61	48
Those inside it.	52	47	53	54	61	48	57	55	46

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 8a
MORE/LESS LIKELY TO MAKE ERRORS – SUMMARY

“And would you expect a self-driving vehicle to be more or less likely than the average driver to make an error in the following situations?”

Base: U.S. Adults

		More Likely (NET)	Much More Likely	Somewhat More Likely	Less Likely (NET)	Somewhat Less Likely	Much Less Likely
Driving in a city	%	57	21	37	43	26	17
Driving on the highway	%	46	16	30	54	33	21
Parking in a parking lot	%	44	15	28	56	33	23
Parallel parking	%	38	14	23	62	34	29

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 8b
MORE LIKELY TO MAKE ERRORS

By Generation, Gender, and Miles traveled per day

“And would you expect a self-driving vehicle to be more or less likely than the average driver to make an error in the following situations?”

Base: U.S. Adults

	Total	Generation				Gender		Miles traveled per day (avg)	
		Millennials (18-37)	Generation X (38-49)	Baby Boomers (50-68)	Matures (69+)	Male	Female	0-30 miles	31+ miles
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Driving in a city	57	58	57	56	59	53	61	59	55
Driving on the highway	46	45	48	45	45	39	52	47	40
Parking in a parking lot	44	48	43	41	39	40	47	44	41
Parallel parking	38	41	37	36	33	35	40	38	35

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 8c
LESS LIKELY TO MAKE ERRORS

By Generation, Gender, and Miles traveled per day

“And would you expect a self-driving vehicle to be more or less likely than the average driver to make an error in the following situations?”

Base: U.S. Adults

	Total	Generation				Gender		Miles traveled per day (avg)	
		Millennials (18-37)	Generation X (38-49)	Baby Boomers (50-68)	Matures (69+)	Male	Female	0-30 miles	31+ miles
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Parallel parking	62	59	63	64	67	65	60	62	65
Parking in a parking lot	56	52	57	59	61	60	53	56	59
Driving on the highway	54	55	52	55	55	61	48	53	60
Driving in a city	43	42	43	44	41	47	39	41	45

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 9
LIKELY BENEFITS OF SELF-DRIVING VEHICLES
By Generation, Gender, and Miles traveled per day

“Which, if any, of the following do you believe to be likely benefits of self-driving vehicles? Please select all that apply.”

Base: U.S. Adults

	Total	Generation				Gender		Miles traveled per day (avg)	
		Millennials (18-37)	Generation X (38-49)	Baby Boomers (50-68)	Matures (69+)	Male	Female	0-30 miles	31+ miles
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Fewer accidents caused by drunk driving	53	54	49	55	54	54	53	53	54
Fewer accidents caused by distracted driving	53	50	49	57	56	54	51	54	52
Reduced likelihood of speeding tickets	50	50	44	52	54	53	47	50	50
Reduced likelihood of rear-ending another car	44	40	40	49	48	47	41	46	43
Reduced likelihood of running a red light	41	39	36	46	44	45	37	40	45
Increased fuel economy	30	31	31	28	27	34	25	31	30
More leisure/free time	21	26	25	16	9	26	16	20	22
Increased productivity	18	26	20	12	4	20	15	17	23
Something else	4	5	5	3	1	5	3	3	2
I see no benefits to self-driving cars	25	21	27	26	31	23	27	25	23

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 10
LIKELY DRAWBACKS OF SELF-DRIVING VEHICLES
By Generation, Gender, and Miles traveled per day

“And which, if any, of the following do you believe to be likely drawbacks of self-driving vehicles? Please select all that apply.”

Base: U.S. Adults

	Total	Generation				Gender		Miles traveled per day (avg)	
		Millennials (18-37)	Generation X (38-49)	Baby Boomers (50-68)	Matures (69+)	Male	Female	0-30 miles	31+ miles
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Computer “glitches” (e.g., navigation mistakes, misreading speed limits)	80	74	80	85	86	78	83	84	78
Would cost more to service due to increased complexity	69	61	68	73	81	66	71	70	73
Higher insurance costs or an additional “rider”	45	42	41	46	60	40	50	46	40
Personal data breaches	37	38	37	38	34	38	36	37	37
Something else	10	12	10	10	3	11	9	10	8
I see no drawbacks to self-driving cars	7	11	7	4	4	8	6	5	6

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

TABLE 11
TIMING OF PURCHASE CONSIDERATION
By Generation, Gender, and Miles traveled per day

“Which of the following best describes at what point, if ever, you will be likely to consider purchasing a self-driving vehicle? I will consider buying or leasing a self-driving vehicle...”

Base: U.S. Adults

	Total	Generation				Gender		Miles traveled per day (avg)	
		Millennials (18-37)	Generation X (38-49)	Baby Boomers (50-68)	Matures (69+)	Male	Female	0-30 miles	31+ miles
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
When I believe the “bugs” have been worked out.	22	23	24	21	16	25	19	22	26
When they drop to a price I think is reasonable.	17	23	15	13	13	17	17	16	18
When I read or hear positive feedback from people using them.	7	7	6	7	5	7	7	7	8
When my favorite auto manufacturer offers them	2	2	3	2	3	3	1	2	3
When they include features I can’t get anywhere else.	2	3	1	2	-	3	2	2	3
I will never consider buying or leasing a self-driving vehicle.	33	22	36	36	50	30	36	35	28
Not sure	17	19	15	18	13	16	18	16	15

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Methodology

This **Harris Poll** was conducted online, in English, within the United States between November 12 and 17, 2014 among 2,276 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, The Harris Poll avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Poll surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in our panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

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The Harris Poll® #18, March 24, 2015

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