

## Opinion: US Public Transportation Isn't Great—But It Doesn't Completely Suck and Can Be Saved.

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New Jersey Transit delays impact commuters at Penn Station, New York, on June 18, 2024.  
Yuki Iwamura / Bloomberg via Getty Images

The US Senate Transportation Committee is finally realizing what commuters have long known—US Public Transit is bad and something has to be done.

So what makes it bad? If we asked commuters, they'll cite issues with coverage, quality, prices, and safety. However, if you ask the government, they'll say ridership. Regardless of what everyone believes is wrong, the fact is that the US public transit system consistently ranks low in terms of quality, coverage, and ridership, compared to other developed countries. The leading causes are: insufficient federal funding, car-centric policies and infrastructure, and politics.

In 2019, the US federal government accounted for only \$13 billion of the total \$79 billion toward transit funding. A common reason given for such low federal investment in public transit is low ridership. With 75% of the US population commuting by car rather than public transportation, the federal government views increased investment in public transit as a risk. However, the

reasons that ridership is low are rooted in transit issues of coverage, quality, prices, and safety, which all require increased federal funding to be adequately addressed. It's a broken cycle that contributes to a failed transit system.

The 2021 bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) aimed to address this issue by allocating \$108 billion for US public transit across 2022-2026. While this seems like a large increase from 2019, in reality, it's only \$21.6 billion per year for five years. Further, we're only one year away from the end of the IIJA funding, and there has been little improvement in public transit service for commuters. The funding is simply insufficient to address the overall needs. It's important that when this issue is inevitably revisited in 2026, the government considers more long-term federal funding for US public transit.

Besides funding, another challenge for US public transit is having to compete with car-centric policies and infrastructure. In 2019, federal funding for roads and highways totaled \$46 billion—nearly four times the amount allocated for public transit. Additionally, in 2021, the IIJA provided \$350 billion more funding towards roads and highways in comparison to the transit's \$108 billion. With this level of support and attention to the quality, safety, and coverage of our roadways, it's understandable why the majority of the US population prefers to commute via car instead of public transit. A reduction in car-centric planning and policies is key to a more efficient transit system with increased ridership.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to creating a more robust and effective public transit system, and what underpins all the other challenges facing US public transit, is politics. Implementing systemic changes like Senator Maria Cantwell plans to do with US public transportation is never easy, as it involves a variety of stakeholders with different and sometimes conflicting politics and priorities. Political actors are key to securing the necessary support, approvals, and funding for building a more efficient public transportation system. However, politicians' support is rarely dependent on what's good for everyone but instead often focuses on what benefits their political agendas, a particular population of the public (their constituents and members of their affinity groups), or even their own personal interests. Furthermore, political polarization within a two-party system often results in little to no compromise and a standstill on important issues such as improving the transit system.

To better address public transit, the Senate Transportation Committee must invest in policies that increase public transit-oriented urban development, planning and infrastructure, policies that incentivize public transportation through commuter programs, and policies that support research of emerging technologies and implementation of pilot programs used by countries with highly efficient public transit systems.

So, how can the Senate Transportation Committee overcome the political barriers that threaten the implementation of these policies? They can employ an evidence-based approach to framing a robust public transit system as one that benefits everyone, both transit riders and drivers. An efficient transit system with adequate coverage can help to eliminate one of the biggest issues that drivers face: traffic congestion, leading to reduced travel times and even lower fuel costs.

Despite its issues, the public transportation system plays a huge role in our society. Not only does it help citizens get from one place to another, it does so more equitably and sustainably than other modes of transportation, it supports our education system, helping those without jobs commute to school, it strengthens our economy by providing jobs and facilitating employee commutes, and most importantly, it connects communities. We cannot give up on the US public transit system.