



THE ROLE OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN TRANSFORMING URBAN TRANSPORT:

STRATEGIES FOR CONSTRUCTIVE CHANGE

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THIS BRIEF TARGETS

- Transportation professionals, urban policy makers, and those concerned with sustainable urban transportation planning.
- Academics, practitioners, community members, and students who are interested in the politics of transportation policy and planning.

KEY MESSAGES

- To reduce traffic congestion, curb auto dependence, and improve transit alternatives, cities must challenge the status quo by introducing innovations in hardware, software, and financing.
- Such priorities tend to be highly controversial, requiring strong political leaders serving as champions for change.
- Successful political leadership involves framing and pacing reform efforts, broadening coalitions of support, and creatively managing opposition.

It is one thing to know of technologies and policies that advance sustainable transport goals, and quite another to understand the political negotiations and governance strategies required to implement them. This research brief discusses lessons from case studies in Mexico City, Seoul, and Stockholm.

Harvard University's Graduate School of Design is exploring the role of Political Leadership in Transforming Urban Transport (TUT) by identifying the strategies adopted by political actors and institutions as they seek to implement significant transportation innovations. Building on case study research from around the world, the TUT research team is identifying effective tools, strategies, and tactics for advancing innovative and sustainable urban transportation.

Leaders in these cities deployed combinations of *hardware* (bus-exclusive corridors, articulated buses, streetscape interventions for traffic calming), *software* (regulatory reforms and institutional redesign that increase accountability and align incentives to provide better transportation services), and *financing* innovations (congestion charging, integrated transit fares) to significantly improve the experience of those who favor non-auto modes of transportation and to provide better and more-sustainable transportation services.

▶ Leadership strategies

Multiple actors and institutions were involved in promoting these innovations: leadership was distributed across a wide range of public- and private-sector stakeholders. To ensure implementation, political leaders relied on coalition-building and targeted negotiation. Despite differing priorities (BRT in Mexico; congestion pricing in Stockholm; highway removal combined with citywide bus reform in Seoul), in all three cases the ability of project champions to deploy one or more of the following strategies led to success.

- Assessing political timing for disrupting the status quo and introducing change. Crisis often provided opportunities to do things differently.
- Framing and reframing the issues so as to build momentum and bring relevant actors “to the table.” It was often constructive to start with small problems and build consensus for a more expansive policy reach over time.
- Identifying a critical stakeholder map and assessing who needs to participate in the discussions, and when. All stakeholders were not brought into the conversation at the same time, allowing more room to manage support and opposition.
- Recruiting and empowering a technical team to package transport knowledge in a politically-savvy manner.
- Anticipating (and pre-empting) resistance from public- or private-sector stakeholders in ways that reinforce the deployment of the strategies noted above.

Other key tactics

In addition to these general strategies, political leaders and their allies also relied on a set of key tactical maneuvers. They included the following:

REFERENCING: Illuminating successful experience elsewhere with similar policies – even if details are significantly different – energizes supporters and reduces opposition.

APPEASING OPPONENTS: Offering opponents fiscal benefits minimizes risk of failure or delay. Although costly, such strategies can be sustained if transport innovations enhance revenue collection.

GIVING VOICE TO SUPPORTERS AND OPPONENTS: Demonstrations of support can strengthen the case for policy change. Behind-the-scenes negotiation with negatively-affected parties allows for frank discussion and problem solving, making opponents less inclined to grandstand.

REDUCING UNCERTAINTY VIA PROTOTYPES AND TRIALS:

Before formalizing new policies, it is useful to minimize uncertainty, whether real or perceived. Demonstration projects allow citizens to see for themselves the potential gains associated with transport policy change.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

The aforementioned strategies and tactics can create momentum for policy change aimed to eliminate outdated and unsustainable transport arrangements, practices, and infrastructure. Even so, the path to positive outcomes is often indirect, and many truly transformative transport-policy innovations may not be readily attainable through conventional routes. The following insights reflect “big picture” considerations that can enable policy successes.

THINK BEYOND TRANSPORTATION: Calling for “sustainable transport” is often not enough to bolster strong support. Economic-competitiveness and environmental-protection goals hold much more traction and tend to widen support coalitions.

CONSIDER BOTH DISRUPTIVE AND INCREMENTAL POLICIES: Both small, incremental steps and larger, disruptive interventions can produce long-term change. Because the former are most likely to set the stage for the latter, when prioritized they can lay foundations for transformational change.

LONG-TERM COMMITMENT MATTERS: Political leaders must invest in the long-haul without losing sight of contextual shifts that establish pathways for change.

BOTH OPEN AND CLOSED NEGOTIATIONS PRODUCE RESULTS: Democracies place a premium on open and transparent political leadership. But behind-the-scenes negotiations can be effective and appropriate, even in a democracy. Democratic process must be part of the discussion of how and why transforming urban transport improves people’s everyday lives.

AUTHORS

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Project website: <http://research.gsd.harvard.edu/tut/>.