



Why Can't the United States Build a High-Speed Rail System?

The problem isn't geography, demographics, or money—it's federal will.

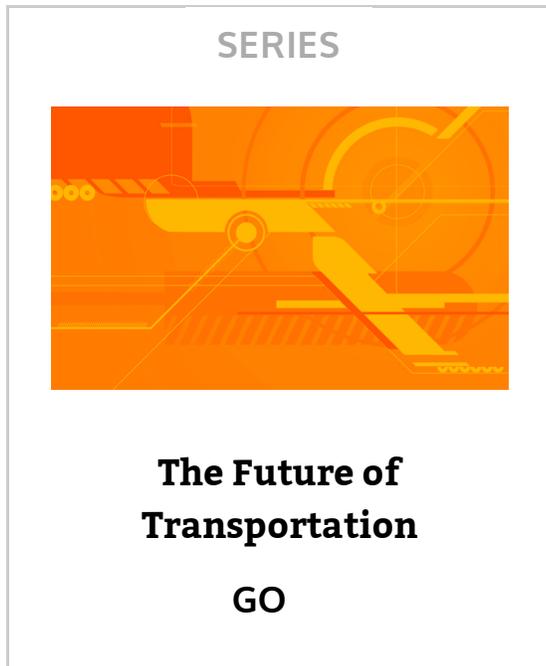
YONAH FREEMARK | @yfreemark | Aug 13, 2014 | 343 Comments



[Darkroom Daze / Flickr](#)

Virtually every wealthy nation in the world has invested in a high-speed rail network—with the striking exception of the United States. From [Japan](#) to [France](#), even from [Turkey](#) to [Russia](#), trains travel through the country at speeds of 150 miles per hour or above, linking city centers and providing a desirable alternative to both air and automobile travel. Meanwhile, outside Amtrak's 28 miles of 150-m.p.h. track in rural Massachusetts and Rhode Island, the American rail network is largely limited to speeds of 110 m.p.h. or less. There are few reasons to think the situation will change much in the coming decades.

So why has the United States failed to fund and construct high-speed rail?



The problem is not political process. Most of the countries that have built high-speed rail are democratic, and have submitted the projects to citizen review; others, like Germany and Russia, have federated governments similar to ours that divide general decision-making between levels of authority. Nor is it geography. The British and French completed a [31-mile tunnel](#) under the British Channel 20 years ago, while many American cities are located in flat regions with few physical construction obstacles. Nor is it the characteristics of our urban areas. While U.S. cities are less

dense than those of many other countries, the Northeast is denser, more transit reliant, and more populated [than most areas](#) served by high-speed rail abroad. Nor still is it money. Though the United States invests [less in infrastructure](#) than other developed countries do, America nevertheless remains an immensely wealthy nation perfectly capable of spending on new rail links if desired.

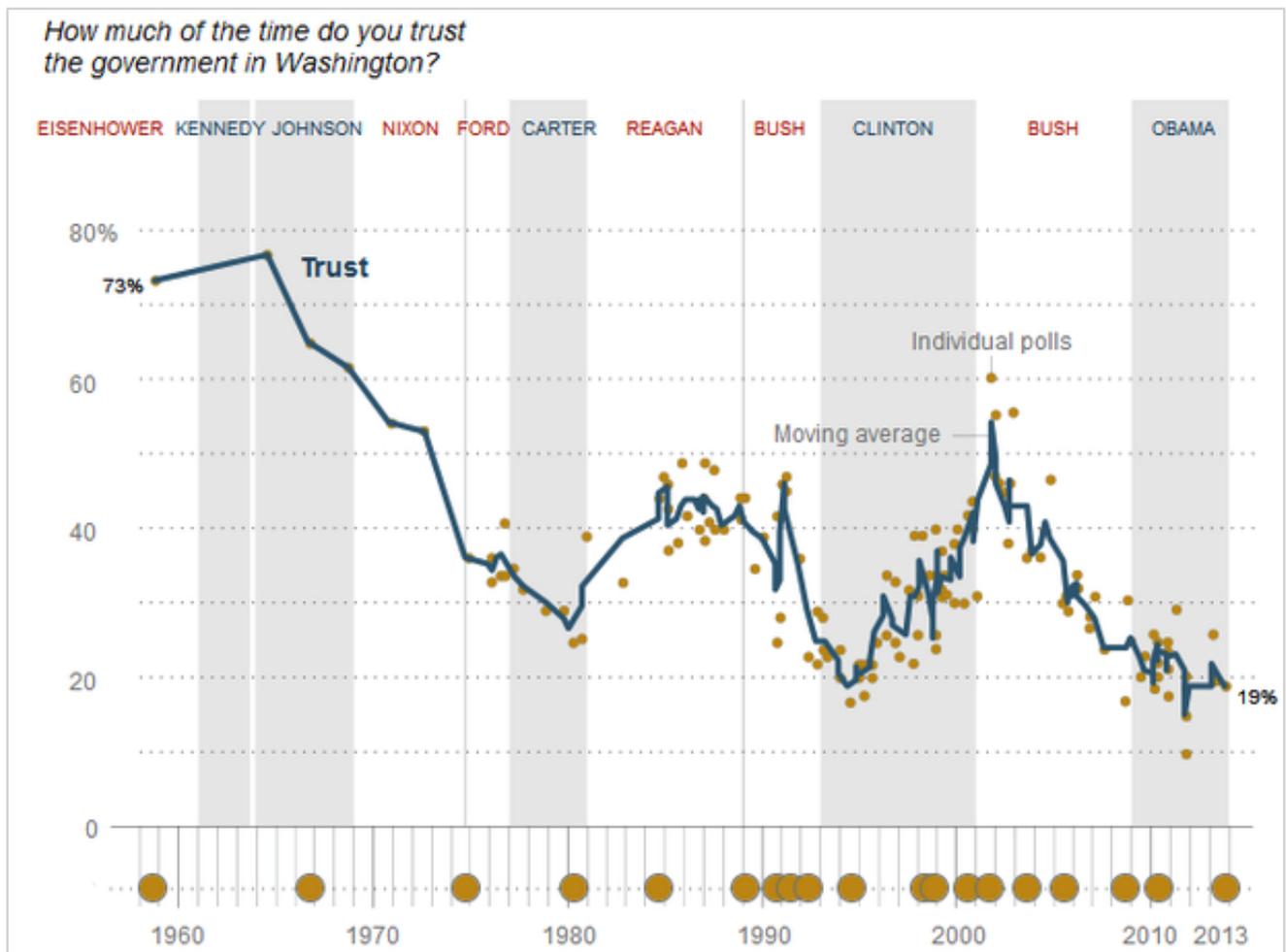
What's missing is a [federal commitment](#) to a well-funded national rail plan. Instead, we have a political system in which the federal government, having devolved virtually all decision-making power to states, cannot prioritize one project over another in the national interest. We have a funding system that encourages [study](#) after [study](#) of unfundable or unbuildable projects in places that refuse to commit their own resources. And we have a bureaucracy that, having never operated or constructed modern intercity rail, doesn't understand what it takes. This helter-skelter approach to transportation improvements is fundamentally incapable of supporting large-expenditure, [long-range projects](#) like high-speed rail.

This wasn't always the case. In 1956, [Congress approved](#) a significant increase in the federal gas tax, and with it a national plan for interstate highways. That plan, which included a steady stream of funding and a [clear map of national priorities](#), was [mostly completed](#) over the next three decades. Though

implemented by states, highway alignments were chosen at the national level, with the intention of connecting the largest cities, regardless of political boundaries. Funding came almost entirely ([90 percent](#)) from the national government and was guaranteed as long as a route was on the national map. Physical requirements for roadways were [mandated at the national level](#) and universally applied. And construction was completed by state departments of transportation that were technically knowledgeable, accustomed to building such public works, and able to make decisions about how to move forward.

The result was a system of roadways that most Americans rely on, often daily. The interstate system is unquestionably the nation's transportation lifeblood.

Yet Americans do not have the same perspective on the role of the federal government that they had when this highway system was initially funded. Trust in Washington [has declined](#) from more than 70 percent during the 1950s to less than 20 percent today. So while President Dwight Eisenhower [declared in 1955](#) that the federal government should "assume principal responsibility" for the highway system, its approach to a high-speed rail network has reflected this change in public thinking about Washington's place in transportation planning. The response has been to reduce the federal government's ability to commit to a long-term plan and associated funding.

Via [Pew Research](#)

Recent [efforts to revive](#) this federal role have been seriously flawed. Take the Obama administration's [attempt at a national plan](#) of proposed intercity rail investments in 2009.

For starters, the map's proposed routes were vague, a number of important connections [were not identified](#), and some routes appeared to have been chosen at random—simply the consequence of previous state studies with no national outlook. Funding had been dedicated through an [initial \\$8 billion](#) included in the stimulus bill, but there was certainly no guarantee that railways on that map would be built in the long term. The definition of "high-speed rail" was not applied universally; the administration [proposed some links at 90 m.p.h.](#) and others at more than 250 m.p.h., with no explanation for why some would be fast and others not. Finally, many of the states that were supposed to be implementing these projects were woefully unprepared for the task, having made few such investments in the past. None had the experience of building 200 m.p.h. electric railways to the international standard.

Such an approach to national transportation doesn't work. It leaves too many planning questions open to state decision making, and it fails to offer a financing source that actually produces the funds needed for intercity rail. Far from fulfilling Eisenhower's mandate of assuming principal responsibility, the latest high-speed rail plan assumed too little.

It would be ridiculous to plan an intercity transportation system at the state level.

But the need is still there. With falling automobile [vehicle miles traveled](#), [rising transit use](#), and booming city centers, we need new ways to connect our cities. More highways are not the answer, not only because they pollute the environment and destroy the neighborhoods they pass through, but also because they're relatively slow and become congested almost as soon as they're built. With a growing population, the country needs an expanded transportation system. The United States must invest in [clean, neighborhood-building](#), and [congestion-relieving](#) trains, but we cannot expect states to pick up the slack of an uncertain federal government.

The planning and funding of the interstate highway system was premised on the fact that the travel needs of Americans occur irrespective of state lines. Indeed, the 50 largest metropolitan areas, representing more than half of the country's population, are located in 31 separate states and 15 of them actually straddle state borders. Given this reality, it would be ridiculous to plan an intercity transportation system at the state level. California's high-speed rail progress—its proposed [San Francisco-to-Los Angeles line](#) remains the only truly fast train project in the country—is the exception that proves the rule; that state's size makes it no example for the rest of the nation.

It's time for the United States to commit to national planning, funding, coordination, and prioritization of rail investment. Intercity transportation systems require active federal engagement to guarantee the development of

routes that reflect national needs and national priorities. Yet without political consensus on the need to develop national goals and focus investments, high-speed rail will remain a pipe-dream for decades to come.

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About the Author

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