

The Politics of Amtrak Funding (Or: Why Conservatives Hate Trains So Much)

Whether it's viewed as a waste of money or a socialist plot to destroy America, conservatives don't like federally funded Amtrak trains.

By [Dan McQuade](#)

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The House Appropriations committee made a curious move yesterday just hours after the [deadly Amtrak derailment](#): It voted to [cut \\$252 million in funding](#) from Amtrak.

Just because there was a horrible train crash does not mean rail funding should be increased (or even kept the same). But, obviously, a lot of people were angry at the vote — especially after reports that a safety measure called positive train control would have prevented the train from traveling so fast around the curve. (Amtrak has begun installing PTC on the Northeast Corridor, but federal officials said it is not yet operational.) Let's take one angry comment at random:



hrs ago, Republicans chose 2 cut Some of
The meager Funds,4 AMTRAK !!
They did this EVEN AFTER the Train Crash&
loss of Life,last nite !!



Okay, this isn't exactly random; it's a tweet from **Cher**. (I don't know what the emojis at the end mean. Perhaps that's her way of suggesting we should have bullet trains.) But it captures the sentiment of a lot of people angry at yesterday's vote. The vote went 30-21 along party lines, with Republicans voting for the spending cuts. **Ed Rendell** went on MSNBC and [lashed out at those voting for the cuts](#), saying "these SOBs didn't even have the decency to table the vote." (Rendell has [long been an advocate](#) of increased infrastructure funding.) Democratic senators

[blasted the Republican vote](#). Committee chair **Harold Rogers** said the committee was [hamstrung by rules](#) stemming from the 2011 sequestration and had to make the cuts.

But train funding is often split along party lines. **Simon van Zuylen-Wood**, a fellow *Philadelphia* magazine writer at large, recently [wrote a good piece for *National Journal*](#) headlined "Why Can't America Have Great Trains?" In it, he quotes Republican Rep. **John Mica** of Florida, who called the system "Soviet-style" and "third-world." The libertarian Cato Institute's [response to van Zuylen-Wood's article](#) contained more conservative train hate:

"Why can't America have great trains?" asks East Coast writer Simon van Zuylen-Wood in the *National Journal*. The simple answer is, "Because we don't want them." The slightly longer answer is, "because the fastest trains are slower than flying; the most frequent trains are less convenient than driving; and trains are almost always more expensive than either flying or driving."

It's funny — even funnier than the "East Coast writer" tag, which is supposed to label van Zuylen-Wood as an effete liberal who doesn't get what Real Americans want — conservatives hate trains so much because libertarian hero **Ayn Rand** [was a huge fan of trains](#). *Atlas Shrugged* is essentially a love letter to the rails! Not every conservative hates trains (van Zuylen-Wood points out that former GOP Senate Majority Leader **Trent Lott** is a railfan) but train hate tends to be the conservative view.

But it's not really trains *per se* Republicans hate. Conservatives, especially current GOP politicians, hate spending government money on trains. Increasingly, the GOP hates spending government money on pretty much everything but defense. Train travel gets a particular hate: **George W. Bush** tried to [completely zero-out](#) Amtrak funding in 2006.

Trains, people argue, are a waste of money. Amtrak is [unprofitable](#); New York-to-D.C. made \$286 million last year, while every other route combined lost \$600 million. "Let's end all subsidies to all forms of transportation and let passenger trains operate where they can compete on a level playing field," Cato's **Randal O'Toole** writes in his response to van Zuylen-Wood's article. Conservatives also point to [numbers that argue](#) highway funding essentially pays for itself and that Amtrak is unfairly subsidized. (Train boosters can, of course, do the reverse and point to differently calculated numbers that say [road subsidies are actually higher](#) or drivers [cover only 51 percent](#) of U.S. road spending.)

A few years ago, **Dave Weigel** attempted to unpack [why conservatives hate trains](#). He pointed to a **George Will** column [that said](#) trains are literally a socialist plot to destroy America. "The real reason for progressives' passion for trains," Will wrote, "is their goal of diminishing Americans' individualism in order to make them more amenable to collectivism. To progressives, the best thing about railroads is that people riding them are not in automobiles, which are subversive of the deference on which progressivism depends."

Not every conservative goes as far as Will and believes trains are a sinister plot to introduce socialism to the United States. But given the GOP's trend for slashing budgets to the bone, trains are an easy target — even for those who enjoy them, as Cato's O'Toole writes he does. Members

of Republican districts [tend to use trains less](#). The members of Congress who voted to slash Amtrak's budget yesterday could even argue an infrastructure upgrade isn't necessary — the driver should just have been going slower. House Majority Leader **John Boehner** [made this argument today](#). "Obviously, it's not about funding," he said. "The train was going twice the speed limit."

Even after Tuesday night's crash, take O'Toole at his word: They don't want trains. Unless that thinking changes — or the GOP is voted out of its Congressional majorities — Amtrak will never get the increased funding some say it deserves.