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Brookings: The Priority List

Relative to other developed countries, the construction of transportation infrastructure in the United States is extraordinarily time-consuming and expensive. A number of factors drive these costs, ranging from a lack of state capacity to excessive environmental, labor, and protectionist regulations to poor planning and a lack of accountability among state and local political leaders. Without effective reform, the cost of building roads, trains, and bridges in the United States will only continue to grow. But it has been impossible to enact reforms due to interest group opposition and skepticism about funding government expertise.

This paper proposes a framework—the “Priority List”—for how Congress can improve the efficiency of infrastructure construction in the United States. The Priority List would be a short list of nationally important and publicly popular infrastructure projects. The core of the idea is that Congress might be willing to pass needed reforms to get these very popular projects built, even if political roadblocks stand in the way of adopting reforms more broadly.

In constructing this list, the Secretary of Transportation would first identify a set of early-stage, high-profile infrastructure projects. Congress would then vote on the Secretary’s list as a “closed rule,” meaning that they vote up-or-down on the entire Priority List as opposed to voting on each project individually. The desire to get these high-profile projects built would be the sweetener needed to get Congress to swallow the political difficulty of passing reforms.

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