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The Surprising Political Difficulty of Promoting Infrastructure Safety.

For politicians, there are lots of incentives in favor of new construction projects but not much for maintenance. That can lead to deadly results, as the bridge collapse in Baltimore demonstrated.

Following the March 26 collapse of Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge, many pressing questions remain about the tragedy that shocked a nation and took the lives of six people. This includes the most obvious: Could this accident have been avoided?

In the coming months, the National Transportation Safety Board will conduct an exhaustive technical investigation to determine the exact sequence of events that led to the ship's power failure and the catastrophic ensuing collision with one of the main pillars that held up the Key Bridge. But the board's final report will only tell part of the story. The full explanation involves a complex mixture of maritime and civil engineering — and politics.

When the Key Bridge was completed in 1977, it represented a momentous engineering achievement. Its main 1.6-mile span was the second longest continuous truss bridge in the United States. Prior to its collapse, an average of 30,000 vehicles crossed each day. Given the enormous volume of maritime cargo that passed beneath the Key Bridge every year, its span is notable for what it lacks — reinforced protective barriers around the main support columns, often called fenders.

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