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Introduction

A protected bike lane that goes to your favorite park, a speed bump that protects your family, a high-speed rail network that connects you with friends, or a bench at your bus stop that lets you rest while you wait: Countless changes like these are possible, and this book will teach you how to win them.

Nearly every day, I work at the boundary between the status quo and the imaginary, bringing transportation possibilities into reality. When it's easy, it's just "bringing." Other times, it's building, coaxing, easing, cultivating, or dragging. I am not particularly special, but I am experienced. I've helped win new bike racks in the fare-gated area of my local Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station, a halt on a proposed 20 percent bus fare increase, \$3 million for new street safety infrastructure in my city, and \$1 billion for California transit systems. This book will teach you lessons I've learned as an activist who has waged hundreds of campaigns at the local, state, and federal levels and advised over seven hundred transportation advocates in rural communities, small towns, suburbs, big cities, red states, and blue states. It also contains wisdom

from interviews with dozens of transit, bike, and street safety advocates. With this knowledge, you can make your dreams real.

This book will not tell you what to want; I assume you already have some dreams. You might want cargo bike storage at your local grocery store, or a pedestrian plaza in your downtown that would be the envy of any European city. Maybe you want a protected bike lane network throughout your community to rival the Netherlands, a bus rapid transit system that's better than Bogotá's, or a high-speed rail line that makes the international community say, "Why can't we be like those Americans?" You may have a vision for transportation change that comes from personally experiencing a problem that needs fixing. Or you might not yet have a firm goal in mind and instead want things to be different in general. Maybe you draw inspiration from videos, books, social media posts, or articles that show you how much better the world could be.

Whatever it is you want, I want you to have it. Winning your transportation dream normalizes it, which makes it easier for all of us to win the transportation dreams we are fighting for. And frankly, when it comes to improving our public transportation systems, if you win it, then we all get to use it. If you dedicate your life to getting a high-speed rail network built connecting cities across America and you win, then everyone else can hop on that train too. As the saying goes, our liberation is bound up together.

Our individual efforts also set the stage for huge collective wins. Winning something truly transformational, like hundreds of billions in annual federal funding for transit, takes advocates like you and me organizing in every corner of the country pushing our representatives in that direction. Advocates do not have to intentionally collaborate, though that helps, but as long as we are pushing in the same direction, we can win big together.

Achieving Your Transportation Dream Means Getting Political

Winning these changes means getting political. Politics is “the total complex of relations between people living in society,” and almost nothing is as political as how people get around.¹ Society affects where we go and how we go, and in turn, how we transport ourselves affects society. When a person is on roads, sidewalks, waterways, rails, or in the sky, they are taking up space and using infrastructure that has been planned, designed, financed, and built by others. When you try to change anything about those spaces, like adding a sidewalk or a protected bike lane, you are doing work that is political.

If someone tries to stop you and keep things the way they are, that’s also political. In the American transportation system, business as usual—also called the status quo—means prioritizing cars over people. However, our system is not inherently or inevitably pro-car and anti-people. This status quo was made and is maintained by political decisions. Our transportation systems would literally crumble without consistent maintenance, as Alan Weisman describes in his book *The World Without Us*. For a mundane example of this, check out your local pothole.

Each time a government sets its budget is an opportunity to direct its spending in a way that either affirms or reimagines the car-centric status quo. It is an active choice for local, state, and federal governments to spend roughly \$200 billion on highways and roads each year.² Beyond these financial costs, our systems designed around cars also cost us our health and our planet. Maintaining the status quo is a political choice.

By consistently choosing to prioritize cars over people, our elected officials have left millions of Americans with no viable option besides cars. Among US adults, 47 percent want to ride bikes more often than they do but are afraid of getting hit by cars.³ Half of Americans do not have access to public transportation.⁴ In transit discussions, people talk

about two types of riders: “choice riders,” who take transit because they choose to, and “captive riders,” who take transit because driving isn’t an option for them—like the third of Americans who are unable to drive.⁵ While many car drivers are “choice” drivers, millions are “captive” drivers because they don’t have other choices. Everyone deserves better mobility options.

Transportation politics are so inherent to our everyday lives that there is no neutral ground: Transportation choices either challenge our status quo or they support it. It’s easy to identify something as “political” when it challenges the status quo, but upholding the transportation status quo is also political because it impacts others. For example, a choice as innocent as driving to run an errand is still political regardless of intention, because it affects others by adding to congestion and pollution. A person can challenge the status quo by choosing to bike instead, and they can challenge it even more by choosing to tell politicians to build a protected bike lane network.

Transportation activists can help give people more choices in how they get around and create opportunities for them to get involved in reshaping their community. When you seek to get others to join you in “being political,” that’s called “politically mobilizing” and “politically organizing.” Most of this book focuses on how to intentionally engage politically to win what you want by collectively fighting for it and collaborating with others who share your dream. Chapter 1 builds on the foundational point that transportation is always political. Every transportation change is a political matter and is almost always a political fight. You cannot get billions of dollars in high-speed rail funding, block an airport expansion, get a new bus route, protect a bike lane, or win a speed bump by only asking nicely.

Like most political issues, transportation generates intense debate because people tend to have opinions about how the world works and how it should work. They have really strong opinions about perceived

threats to the things they consider theirs. “That bike lane will destroy my parking” is a standard objection to almost every bike project. To be fair, they are partially right—that parking spot is theirs and that street is theirs too. But one person is not the sole owner of a public street parking spot. “Their” parking spot and “their” street also belong to you, me, and everyone else. Street safety and transit are public goods that benefit us all, but there is always opposition from people who believe that those changes mean they lose “their” thing, whether that is “their” parking space, “their” road space, or a perception of ownership of “their” community.

Transportation changes can ignite a political firestorm. American communities consistently fight over relatively minor proposed changes to the transportation status quo. Even in a climate-conscious California city like Berkeley, a bike lane proposal turned neighbors on each other as part of a “culture war.”⁶ It’s not just bikes: All forms of transportation are a tinderbox of controversy. Florida and Indiana legislatures have even gone so far as to consider policies to ban bus-only lanes. Even something as small and reasonable as a speed bump is political and can incite rabid opposition from neighbors who don’t like change.

It might seem a bit melodramatic, but that’s America today. Unless transportation advocates internalize that truth, we will consistently end up bringing a knife to a gunfight. To be extremely clear: Transportation advocates should not shy away from these fights. You can win in spite of that pushback by out-organizing your opposition and pushing harder. This book will teach you how. But you cannot win change if you refuse to engage in the political fight for it.

Some readers might struggle with accepting the idea that these are political fights; chapter 1 is especially for them. Parts of the transportation advocacy community have a strong tendency to think that if only they could propose the perfect policy or the perfect message, then there would be no opposition. But you can present a great idea to a decision-maker

and have all the facts on your side and still be met with, “So what?” Advocate Anna Zivarts, author of *When Driving Is Not an Option: Steering Away from Car Dependency*, said in our interview, “So many people want to know, ‘What is the thing that I need to do to fix this? What is the right policy solution?’” But, she says, “I don’t actually think that’s the problem. . . . That’s not really what’s stopping us from moving forward. It is a political question.”⁷ For example, the policy question of how we get more people on transit has many straightforward solutions like opening all the fare gates and getting rid of all fare boxes on buses to make transit free. However, the political matter of actually getting a transit agency to do that is a lot harder than coming up with the policy solution.

It can be tempting to view transportation issues as logic problems rather than political struggles. Figuring out the most efficient way for lots of people to get around a community is in fact a geometry problem, and it has a logical solution: Prioritize walking, rolling, biking, scooters, and transit. But politics is a power struggle. While transportation advocates may be right, we often lose because we are not politically strong enough to get the decision-makers to back our solutions. Time and again, transportation advocates’ experiences have affirmed that being right is one thing and winning is another. Laura Chu Wiens, the executive director of Pittsburghers for Public Transit, explained that when it comes to winning, “It doesn’t matter if you’re right. It never matters if you’re right. . . . You just have to have the power to win the thing. . . . Beyond helping motivate our side, being right has never helped us win anything.”⁸

Winning by Building Political Power

Once we accept the truth that transportation is always political and winning the fight for change takes power, then we can be more strategic in our advocacy. Accepting this truth can help us move beyond asking why our communities don’t have the transportation features other places

have. Now we have the answer: Nobody who has wanted it, including you, has used enough political power to make it happen. No one fought for it effectively enough before now. That is a painful truth, but it frees us up to consider a more productive question: How can I build political power with others and use that to win what we want?

I wrote this book to help answer that question for you. Winning takes a lot of work, but it is doable. Sometimes it's a wonderful way to build joyous community and befriend people you otherwise wouldn't have. Sometimes it's frustrating and heartbreaking. Sometimes you do the best you can and still lose, and sometimes you stumble into surprisingly easy wins. This book will help you through those highs and lows.

When you know how to do it well, building political power can be easy. It is not that hard to get a person waiting for a bus to sign a petition demanding politicians provide more funding for transit. That is a straightforward conversation to have, but you need to have it over and over again with a lot of different people. The legendary farmworker organizer César Chávez once said that politically organizing is simple: "First you talk to one person, then you talk to another person, then you talk to another person."⁹

This work of building connections and community can feel empowering, and it can be exhilarating to see your victory become more possible. In fact, it can become so enticing that your activism will often snowball into more activism. Win a protected bike lane once and you might be very tempted to try and win another one. I am a bit addicted to politically organizing, or in other words, bringing more people into transportation activism. I try to limit myself to pursuing "only" about half a dozen campaigns during any given week.

While working on this book I also codeveloped a board game about political organizing and trained hundreds of transportation advocates across North America. Some of the local advocacy wins I've been a part of while writing this book include fortifying a painted bike lane, getting

safety measures installed to fix a deadly bus-only lane, and stopping a bus fare price increase. I also supported a regional funding measure for transit, got a local policy passed to create a permit process for community members who want to install benches at bus stops, pushed the members of Congress who represent my region to cosponsor transit operations funding legislation, put on about a dozen events as part of Bay Area Transit Month, and helped launch Southern California's inaugural Transit Week. I also led a project that got hundreds of political candidates on the record about transportation issues for 2024's primary and general elections. During that time, I also supported campaigns to keep Amtrak service in an East Bay community and to get a bus lane built in the South Bay. The reason I can do a lot is because everything I do, I do with others. There is a lot of transportation advocacy work to do, and when you team up with other people, you can get so much more done together than you could by yourself.

No one person can fight every transportation fight that we need to win. There are thousands of Main Streets in America, and I bet each one would be better with a protected bike lane and more bus service.¹⁰ Every Main Street change involves its own campaign, and each campaign needs lots of people involved to win. With over ninety thousand local governmental jurisdictions in the United States, we need hundreds of thousands of transportation organizers focused on making our communities better.¹¹ Our movement needs you.

While this book is about encouraging you to take action, I promise I won't try to scare you into it. This book isn't about being miserable; it's about fixing the things that make us miserable. There is already an ocean of content dedicated to the problems humanity faces, which can fill people with anxiety. I won't try to motivate you by repeating the horrors covered in so many documentaries, newspapers, exposés, or Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports. I won't delve into the time

I was hit by a car while biking as a teen, nor the vigils I have held with grieving neighbors who lost loved ones to traffic violence.

But if you do need some motivation to get started, you can search online for “traffic fatalities in my town.” Or take a long walk; if you are currently able-bodied and child-free, bring a suitcase, folding shopping cart, or stroller with you to get a sense of how others may experience your streets. Or take the bus to run a series of time-sensitive errands. If you have a small child, go for a short bike ride with them. Take a long bike ride by yourself. Your lived experience will fire you up far more than any story or statistic will, and motivation is waiting for you just outside your front door. Every unpleasant car-dominated space you’ve been in, car crash you’ve heard about, or traffic jam you’ve been part of is a problem of the status quo. Every time you have written off a frustrating, scary, challenging, depressing, or enraging transportation-related moment of your life as “that’s just the way things are” is a time you have tried to make peace with the failings of the status quo.

Instead of using fear or anger to tempt you to take action, I offer a special sort of hope. As Rebecca Solnit says in her book *Hope in the Dark*, “Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency. Hope should shove you out the door.”¹² I believe that the hope-axe comes from two things: knowing that what you want is possible and knowing how to make it reality. This book is here to give you that hope, show you how to use it, and help you have an easier time waging your transportation-related campaigns for a better future.

Transportation Advocacy Is Constant and Everywhere

In transportation advocacy, the political battleground is everywhere at every moment and involves everyone. That big window of opportunity puts organizers in an astonishingly powerful position. For transportation

advocates, when we pick a goal or a problem to fix, it can be really easy to find the people who care about it and connect with them when they care about it the most, which later chapters cover in detail.

For example, one night in 2023, I got dozens of people who were out clubbing to stop and sign a street safety petition. I did it by standing at a dangerous intersection between party spots and talking with people right after they were almost hit by car drivers. Before they started crossing the street, they were likely just thinking about the fun night ahead of them. But after that experience, they were very open to learning about how our city could make our streets safer. It helped that I wore a high-visibility construction vest and a friendly demeanor. After they were nearly hit and safely got to my side of the sidewalk, I would put a flyer near their hand and say something affirming and empowering like, “Oh jeez, that was scary. I’m glad you’re okay. The city really needs to fix dangerous streets like this. Here’s a petition about that; you just need to scan the QR code and bam, you’ve added your name and are ready to go clubbing. Great outfit by the way!” I recognized their immediate lived experience and gave them a near-frictionless way to take action to fix their problem.

As transportation advocates, we can connect most moments into the political point we want to make. For example, the conventional wisdom is that people are too busy to care about politics on a Friday night and that most people aren’t that interested in street safety. But as transportation advocates, we can buck the conventional wisdom and have great success if we are strategic. Being audacious and friendly helps too.

Opportunities to shift our transportation politics are everywhere, and so are stories about how change is made. When people are shown advocacy in the news or in movies, they often only see hyper-visible actions like protests, sit-ins, petition deliveries, and street theater. Those are absolutely vital elements of success, and chapter 7 details how you

can deploy them, but there is so much more that goes into making campaigns successful. This book will help strengthen your advocacy by explaining what goes into all of that behind-the-scenes work and how it connects to what goes on in public.

For example, in 2023, when a pro-transit coalition of diverse organizations got California Governor Gavin Newsom to reverse \$2 billion in proposed transit funding cuts and provide over \$1 billion in additional funding, it took pretty much every tool in the toolbox. Building power for that effort took lots of coalition building, education work, flyering, fundraising, lobbying, researching, strategizing, message crafting, and much more. At the same time, we put on disruptive and hyper-visible actions, which supercharged the campaign and put an international spotlight on the issue when it was most needed. One of those actions was a “transit funeral,” where we carried mock coffins with huge cardboard trains in the streets of downtown Oakland, then on BART and into San Francisco. That action even got the British magazine *The Economist* to cheekily admit, “Sometimes, it turns out, protests work.”¹³

Nearly everything you need to know in order to do the same for your community, city, or state is in this book. This book can help you win an amazing variety of changes and help you weather the defeats along the way. You might lose, but you won’t fail: The only way to fail in organizing is by giving up. As long as you are learning from your experiences, growing, and continuing to fight, you are succeeding.

In fact, this book exists largely because of a fight I lost. A few years ago, I led a three-year quest to win a bus-only lane on the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge and its three highway approaches. Our campaign came tantalizingly close to victory: We got a bill introduced and it passed the state senate. But a global pandemic and the promotion of two of our champion policymakers out of the legislature hobbled the effort, and eventually it was killed in a committee. While that defeat still chafes me,

that campaign was one of the core initial organizing efforts that helped form Transbay Coalition, which has since been my organizing home in the region. Through that effort, I built relationships and learned lessons that have been central to all of my transit-related organizing since then.

No advocate who is doing bold things is undefeated. I won't sugar-coat it: You will lose sometimes. I won't lie to you and say, "Jump in, the water is fine." The water is not fine. I want you to jump in anyway.

What's Ahead

This book will help you be as successful as possible while minimizing unnecessary difficulty. You can read it cover to cover or skip around, reading the chapters in the order that sticks out to you. Either way, this book is here to be a resource for you.

This book is for beginners and mid-level activists who want to win transportation changes that make it easier to get around without a car. Veteran organizers who learned their craft from experience may also appreciate this book's attempt to make the often-chaotic world of activism more coherent. If I had this book when I was starting out, I would have jumped years ahead in my political change-making experience. I hope it saves you a lot of time, headaches, and heartaches. As the Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota's executive director Michael Wojcik says: "Better than learning from your mistakes is learning from other people's mistakes."¹⁴

This book guides you through embracing the fight, planning it out, and taking action. Each chapter ends with a handful of Action Points with exercises to help you apply the chapter's lessons. Chapter 1 answers our community's frequent questions about why we haven't made the transportation progress we see in other places around the world. It drills deeper into the ideas from this introduction to help readers get comfortable with embracing politics and see our reality more clearly. Chapter 1

details how wanting to cross the street safely is in fact a radical desire in America today, how being apolitical is not possible, and how to use that truth to better aim your energies.

The middle of the book will help you plan out your fight. Chapter 2 helps you turn your general dream into a specific campaign to make things better. Our hopes and advocacy also do not exist in a vacuum, so chapter 3 helps readers assess their unique situation and tailor their advocacy to it. It will also guide you through the fact that your transportation advocacy exists within a greater context of US politics, which often includes painful realities and historical traumas. The past is still very present and it impacts your advocacy, so chapter 3 will help you better navigate that.

The last and largest part of the book dives more specifically into the “how.” It walks readers through how to build and deploy political power in different ways. A campaign can seem like a lot to jump into and take on alone, but you are not alone. Chapter 4 focuses on growing your allied forces of fellow transportation advocates and how to collaborate so you can win. Chapter 5 expands into building larger coalitions with all sorts of groups that are already working on these and related issues, including disability justice groups, immigrant rights groups, racial justice groups, unions, business associations, environmental groups, climate groups, civic associations, and other organizations. Chapter 6 explains how outside advocates and political insiders can work together to win their shared goals. Chapter 7 walks through which actions you can use as stepping stones to get to those goals and how to take those steps, such as petitioning, working with reporters, and creating electoral consequences for the decision-makers you seek to sway.

The book concludes with recommendations for handling what happens after a campaign, preparing for the next one, and shaping your advocacy to last a lifetime. While a particular transportation campaign may come to an end, transportation advocacy never does.

Jumping into the Unknown

It is possible to win a better world, but that takes work. The work is not always easy, fun, or glamorous, and it is rarely financially rewarding, but it is always important. I hope this book makes it easier for you to do whatever part of that work you set out to do. I hope you win. And for the times you do not win, I hope this book—along with the joy, community, and meaning that suffuse transportation organizing—helps you be brave and resilient enough to innovate and try again.

This book is me betting on you. I am counting on you too. Your community and our planet need you to win. No one has to be ready or perfect to get started, you just need to start. And guess what—you have already started. So, roll up your sleeves: Let's get political, let's fight, and let's win.

CHAPTER 1

Politics Isn't a Dirty Word

For advocacy, you don't need any degree. You don't need any papers. You don't need any of that. You get together with people who also share the same concerns as you and you figure out how to bring more people into this, and together you win the change you want.—Bakari Height, MARTA Army cofounder and former transportation planner¹

You can do politics. Many people may be intimidated by politics or dislike it because they think that “politics” means Republicans versus Democrats or because our political situation today is a bit heated (to put it mildly). However, the struggle between political parties is just a subset of politics: partisan politics. Politics is so much bigger than that—it’s the process of people shaping each other’s lives, whether in workplaces, families, governments, or beyond. Our transportation system is part of this process. People create our transportation system, which in turn thoroughly affects everyone’s lives, so transportation issues are inherently political.

Of course, transportation advocates sometimes have to deal with partisan politics. For example, in 2015, the Bicycle Coalition of Maine had to adapt its approach to work in a hyper-partisan environment. Maine’s

Republican governor staunchly refused to pass any legislation introduced by Democrats, so the group focused its campaign on something that would appeal to a Republican lawmaker: a bill that emphasized the responsibilities and rights of bicyclists and pedestrians.² The coalition worked with a Republican lawmaker to introduce the bill, which the governor ended up signing into law.³ They won by successfully navigating their political context rather than pretending their transportation goals were somehow separate from politics. Winning transportation change is a lot easier when transportation advocates recognize the political nature of their work, so this chapter focuses on laying that foundation.

Politics Is About People

People built our transportation system, and people are trying to either change it or keep things the way they are. Elected officials, government staffers, business owners, workers, community leaders—they are all people, just like you. Their transportation-related decisions affect the world around them, and we can influence those decisions.

Regular people make political transportation decisions all the time without realizing it. For example, when a person in a car-dependent place decides to go anywhere, they may not feel like they are making a transportation choice, and they may not be aware of how their choice affects others. From their perspective, they are not choosing to drive to a destination; they are just choosing to go there, and they may feel like a car is their only option.

In the United States, car dependency is currently the status quo. Conversely, in transit-friendly places like the Netherlands or South Korea, the status quo supports the development of more transit. That doesn't mean it's apolitical to expand transit in those areas; it means that the pro-transit side has so thoroughly won the political fight that abundant, high-quality transit is considered normal.

Advocates for better transit, biking, and street safety in the US often

have to put in a lot of work because challenging the status quo is hard. It's easier to accept the systems you are operating within rather than push to change them. When people are used to something, they may not even realize that they can or should change it. For example, every single day on local news radio stations across the country, announcers talk about traffic. As part of those radio traffic updates, announcers often comment about highway backups due to car crashes. If you're listening to the report while you are driving, you just heard that a person in your area may have died a few moments ago while doing the same thing you are doing right now. You might even drive past the wreckage. That was a person's life. A life just as important as yours, and it could just as easily have been you. That is a hard reality to sit with. It is much easier to chalk that up to "that's how things are" and accept or ignore the costs of our car-centric status quo than it is to reject or work to change the status quo.

Every aspect of our transportation system is inherently political—even when it doesn't look like it's doing anything at all. Politics and how it shapes the world is often invisible. For example, you can't physically see the apparatus of political power that creates and maintains parking spots, nor can you see parking's full impacts on society. As Donald Shoup points out in *The High Cost of Free Parking*, building a parking spot costs tens of thousands of dollars. Shoup writes: "If drivers don't pay for parking, who does? Everyone does, even if they don't drive. Initially the developer pays for the required parking, but soon the tenants do, and then their customers, and so on, until the cost of parking has diffused everywhere in the economy."⁴

Additionally, parking spots have major environmental costs to society beyond their financial costs. If someone is unaware of parking's cost to society, they may incorrectly view parking as apolitical, rather than seeing how it is a product of human decisions and how it affects society. Cars and parking are so enmeshed in our current transportation system that efforts to shift things away from them usually involve a power

struggle. In fact, attempts to change our transportation system are often viewed as radical.

Transportation Politics Is Radical

Being radical means wanting reality to change significantly. Safe streets, protected bike lane networks, and frequent transit are radical departures from our status quo. Cars are so dominant in the United States that 87 percent of daily trips take place in a private vehicle.⁵ It is statistically weird for an adult in the US to leave their home and go to work without using a car. According to a 2021 Census report, “The Northeast had the highest share of workers who commuted by transit, at 14.3%, followed by the West (4.4%), the Midwest (3.0%), and the South (2.0%).”⁶ A 2023 nationwide transportation study said that with 1.3 percent of all commute trips happening by bike, Oregon was the state with the highest share of bike commuting.⁷ Given these percentages, “it’s a powerful statement to ride your bike anywhere,” said Kalli Krumpas of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association.⁸ She told me that “it can be an act of resistance to be on your bike.”⁹ To want a lot more people to bike or ride transit is to want society to be radically different.

It can be difficult for transportation advocates to internalize this truth. We tend to want pretty straightforward and reasonable things, so it can be hard to see our desires as radical. But it does take radical change to make it so that you can be safe biking around town, or you can take a train wherever you want to go, or your kid can walk to school without the threat of traffic violence. You aren’t wrong to want these things; it’s society that’s wrong. Because of our current transportation system, tens of thousands of our neighbors die violent deaths on our roads each year, millions of people aren’t able to get where they need to go, and hundreds of millions of people around the globe suffer the ravages of climate change. We transportation advocates are right to want radical changes to our deadly and broken transportation system. Given that our reality is catastrophic, it’s good to want to divert from it!

Our status quo is so out of sync with the needs of our planet and the people who live on it that, as Naomi Klein says in her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, “there are no non-radical options left.”¹⁰ When we recognize that the shifts we want are radical, we can better understand that we will need to build a lot more political power to win, and we can plan accordingly. As mentioned in the introduction, advocates cannot get hundreds of billions of dollars to fund transit by asking nicely. We can only win if we are clear-eyed about what we are up against and if we have the power to back up our demands. When you have a realistic understanding that change is political and politics is about power, you can seriously examine the power you have, the power you can build, and the power you will need in order to win what you want. The rest of this book will help teach you how to build and wield that sort of power. Before we get to that, we need to face another hard truth.

Process Is Political

In transportation, there is no escaping politics. If you were to examine transportation questions on some “objective” or “technical” merit, you would almost always reach the conclusion that cars are not the best answer. However, the decisions that shape our world are not objective. There is no politics-free way to make a decision that impacts people. Even a “purely technical” decision-making process about transportation issues is political because it affects people’s lives and because people are the ones who make the process and decide what to prioritize within it.

What Is a Process?

In transportation, we often deal with processes to make and enact decisions. A process may be determined by some outside authority or be self-imposed by a community. For example, the process for getting a speed bump in your community might require filling out an official application with a certain number of residents’ signatures and submitting

it to some committee. External rules may have shaped that process—like a state law requiring towns to get community input before they change roads—but the specifics are likely designed by the town itself.

Many communities' processes can impede transportation changes such as sidewalk expansions, protected bike lane additions, or transit line extensions. For example, the process to convert an intersection into a pedestrian plaza in your town is likely not an easy one. While there are rarely simple, predefined processes for implementing the changes we want to see, there are often established processes for doing things we don't want, such as tearing down homes to widen freeways. Winning the changes we want as transportation advocates can involve reforming old processes or creating new ones. Win a plaza conversion once and now there is a process for doing it a second time. Reform the housing removal process and you can stop a highway expansion.

Process as a Political Tool

Process adds layers of abstraction to political decisions. It distances the decision-maker from their decisions, which can be helpful for a decision-maker who wants to hide their attempt to kill a popular proposal. For example, since 2001, transit advocates in Atlanta have advanced a light-rail and walking trail project called the Beltline, which loops the city to connect many neighborhoods.¹¹ The walking trail has already been built, but the proposed light-rail—which has been key to the project since its inception—is stalled. Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens, who holds enormous sway over the Beltline light-rail's future, has been using process as a tool to stop the project while creating an illusion of impartiality.

For years, numerous studies have consistently affirmed the importance and technical feasibility of light-rail on the Beltline.¹² However, when asked in a 2024 interview about the project, Mayor Dickens brought up “the need” for another study before the light-rail can proceed.¹³ He

said, “We are still looking at how to make sure that we can fully vet this process. . . . Do we want it to be on rails, do we want it to be on rubber tires, do we want small pods, or do we want to leave this as a walking trail?”¹⁴ Pushing for yet another study is a way to prevent the project from moving forward. Even more alarming, the mayor’s statement introduces the prospect of building no transit at all. I don’t know for sure why the mayor would do such a thing, but the people in affluent areas who have been lobbying against the light-rail seem to be happy with the mayor’s actions. Considering that a light-rail line has always been central to the Atlanta Beltline project, the mayor would cause an uproar if he said outright that he wants to kill the project. Politicians who want to do something unpopular often use process to pretend the matter is out of their hands.

When politicians try to escape accountability by pointing to engineering or technical planning processes, it puts transportation professionals in an awkward position. Transportation professionals are supposed to be apolitical actors who carry out the will of elected officials and the community. But appearing to be apolitical does not eliminate biases; it just hides them. When I interviewed Josh, the urban planner behind the YouTube channel Radical Planning, he said, “It’s kind of taboo to be a planner and admit that your own actions are political. . . . We can kind of exculpate ourselves from advancing that plan through the political realm.”¹⁵ However, he said, “planning is political at every stage.”

Josh gave an example: “Sometimes [politicians] just give [government staffers] a list of organizations that they think should be key stakeholders: the groups that they are interested in, the ones they want you to make sure are moved to the front above the general public. That ends up giving particular groups an outsized voice in the process.”¹⁶

Josh also shared an example of a county staffer who was asked to make a survey about widening a road in a scenic corridor. The county politicians were very clear that they wanted to widen the road regardless

of public opinion, “so the planner made a survey where every answer would be positive,” Josh said. “The questions were things like, ‘Which do you like more?’ And it wouldn’t be a choice between widening a road and not widening a road, it would be something like widening the road to four lanes or four lanes and a median.”¹⁷

When the decision-making process blocks out options from even being considered, as was the case with the survey Josh mentioned, it channels the conversation in a certain direction. This can be used to justify almost anything, like bulldozing homes to build a freeway. On the other hand, we can make processes that justify bulldozing freeways to build homes. Process is a tool, like a screwdriver or a knife. It isn’t inherently good or bad, but it is political.

To readers who are professionals in the transportation space and are nervous about being “political” or “an activist,” you are already political. You are already actively shaping the world to be a certain way, so you are already an activist, and you have power you can wield. Josh says, “You can, as the planner, also highlight what you think is important. If you knew anecdotally that an intersection was dangerous and you have the data to show that, then there isn’t anything wrong with just adding that data point to a report on the area even if no one else asked you to.”¹⁸ You can find more detail on strategies transportation professionals and advocates can use to move things in the direction they want in chapter 6.

Fear, Anger, and Getting Political

Transportation issues are some of the most visible ways that governments touch our lives. However, it can be hard for the average person to stay up to date and engaged in these decision-making processes. When someone thinks that an important decision about their life is being made without them, they may get upset, especially if they think that decision will hurt them. Transportation changes can feel like they are being done *to* a community rather than *for* or *with* a community. Clear communication

and community engagement can preempt a lot of these concerns, but you will always be able to find people who object to change.

Eric Rogers of the Kansas City group BikeWalkKC says, “For the people who are scared of change, that fear is often a barrier to their thinking about how they could benefit directly or indirectly from that change.”¹⁹ That fear comes from somewhere. Some people may lose their job if a change to their transportation situation makes them late to work one more time. Some people physically cannot stand to wait for a bus, and some people drive to avoid harassment on the street or on transit. Often people in these situations do not have the means or the time to consider trying something different. Whether or not they would benefit from a change, their situation is so precarious that they are not interested in rolling the dice to see if the change you want could help them. Chapter 3 covers understanding and navigating your community’s context in more depth so you can better connect with people even if they have hesitations.

At the same time, transportation advocates need to understand that our vocal opposition often argues in bad faith. Opponents to your campaign can form up because they fear change, and they may stoke fears (valid or not) to stop you. For example, the “No on San Francisco’s Proposition K” campaign tried to stop the conversion of a beachfront highway into a park. The No on K campaign was so enraged at the idea of a little-used road being turned into a new park, they held an aggressive protest at a playground where the Yes on K campaign was planning a public Q&A session for families. Due to this intimidation, the Yes on K campaign had to cancel their event, stating: “Prop K opponents showed up with a bullhorn and were harassing attendees. This isn’t something we want to put families through. Stay tuned for a future events [sic] to learn more about Prop K.”²⁰

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. People defending the car-centric status quo sometimes use aggressive tactics to try to



Figure 1.1. “No on Prop K” supporters protesting at a playground where the “Yes on Prop K” campaign was planning to host a family-friendly educational event. *Credit:* Yes on Prop K campaign

intimidate community members. Often, this kind of opposition cannot be appeased, but we can build power, organize, and win anyway. In the “Prop K” example, the people promoting the park won, the bullies lost, and the highway is now a car-free place for all to enjoy. You may encounter opposition, but you can win in spite of it.

The Journey from Where You Are to Where You Need to Be

When we accept that transportation-related desires are political and often radical, we can view our desires as what they are: political struggles. That understanding makes it easier to translate our dreams into the plans and actions needed to win. The next chapter covers the different pathways you can take in order to bring your desired change into reality.

Action Points

- 1) Check your local news for a story about a proposed transportation change in your area. See if you can find out:
 - a) Who are some of the people supporting the change?
 - b) Who actively opposes it or doesn't like it?
 - c) Which of those people do you think has more political power and why?
- 2) For that proposed transportation change in your area, look around to see what stage of the decision-making process it is in. That information may be in the article or in other news about the proposal, or you may need to check if the responsible governing agency has that information online. **Bonus** What is the next step if the proposal makes it through this step?
- 3) Think of a transportation change you want. Who would benefit from it? Who might see themselves as “losing” if it happened?

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CHAPTER 2

Picking Your Battles and Outlining Your Campaign

This [new city policy] was the only way to slowly start to build out a connected sidewalk network, which is not enough, but it was a start. And now we are at risk of losing that, so we're gearing up for a fight [to defend it].—Ines Sigel, LINK Houston¹

One good thing about the American transportation system is that there are a lot of ways to make it better. Like much of America, Houston, Texas, is a place where it's hard to get around without a car. Local transportation activists, including the group LINK Houston, have been waging a number of campaigns to fix that. In 2024, LINK Houston successfully defended a city policy that required developers to either build sidewalks as part of their projects or pay into a citywide sidewalk construction fund. The group, whose mission is to advance “a robust and equitable transportation network so that all people can reach opportunity,” chose to mount a campaign to protect sidewalks from the new city administration's attacks because, as deputy executive director Ines Sigel said, “sidewalks are part of a well-connected public transit system.”²

Like LINK Houston, you may have a wide set of values you bring to your transportation advocacy. You need to translate them into concrete

campaigns in order to win specific changes. This chapter will help you convert your values into actionable campaigns with different pathways to your destination. As explained in the introduction, this book won't tell you which dreams to dream—that's up to you. Whatever your dream is, this chapter will help you translate it into a clear objective you can build a campaign around. This chapter will illustrate the steps between envisioning something, figuring out who can officially make it happen, and then getting it implemented in the real world.

Articulating What You Want

Whether you are a first-time advocate, a veteran transportation activist, an elected official, or a government agency staffer, translating your transportation dream into a winnable campaign requires getting specific about what you want. Since there are so many transportation changes to want, table 2.1 presents a few questions you can ask yourself to focus your attention.

When you have a clearer understanding of what you want, it's easier to think about which transportation campaigns would be needed to make that happen. You may find that you want some epic shifts to our transportation system as well as tiny changes that would make your life a bit more convenient. Although the fundamentals of effective campaigns are similar regardless of scale, there are some key differences between big and small fights.

Picking a Big Fight

It's not inherently harder to win a bigger demand than a smaller demand. In fact, one of the best ways to win something is to demand a lot and then settle for as much as you can get. If you ask for something and are met with indifference, it can be tempting to shrink your demands in response. Don't. In politics, you almost always get less than what you

Table 2.1. Generating Rough Ideas for Transportation Campaigns

<i>Clarifying question</i>	<i>Example</i>
What's a pain point you want to solve?	"It's frustrating having to use a car to get to the park; I want to be able to get to the park without a car."
If you could have one transportation wish magically granted, what would it be?	"I wish I never had to check when the next bus was coming because they were running so frequently."
What is something that is under attack that you care about?	"They want to get rid of my bus line and I want to keep it."
What's something that feels like it should be a commonsense, easy change to enact?	"I can't believe there isn't bike parking at my local grocery store; that should be easy to make happen, right?"
What's a small change that would make you really happy?	"I would love it if my street became a cul-de-sac with cut-throughs so cars couldn't get through it but people could."

ask for, so if you ask for less, you will get a lot less. Instead, be bold and campaign for more.

When you demand more, you shift the "Overton window," which is the range of what the mainstream community considers politically reasonable. When politicians consider which laws to introduce, they tend to think about what their allies and the general public would support. If a politician thinks they could get your idea passed into law, then they will be more open to it. As transportation activists, our campaigns can shift what people consider reasonable. When we shift the Overton window by demanding a lot of change and fighting for it, we move things in our direction. The new "reasonable compromise" position is one where we end up with more than where we first started.

For example, asking for a bench at your bus stop is within the current Overton window: Bus stops generally have benches, so it's reasonable to

ask for one. Yet many bus stops still don't have benches even after advocates request them. When your request for a bench is turned down, you could shrink back and try to win something smaller, or you could get bolder and campaign for a bench at *every* bus stop. Your new demand—and the campaign to back it up—changes what would be considered a reasonable compromise. The people in charge could respond by increasing the city's budget for installing benches at bus stops or committing to put benches at the most-used bus stops within a certain number of years. If you push for a big goal, you likely won't win it outright, but you can put yourself in a position to "settle" for winning something that moves you toward your new goal, and maybe you'll even win the smaller thing you wanted in the first place. Take the win, make sure it gets implemented, celebrate it when it does, and then campaign for more.

You can shift the Overton window in a variety of ways, such as by demanding a faster rate of change or shifting what you demand. However, keep your demands within the realm of reality by considering what your potential allies might think of as the far end of reasonable. Having massage chairs at every bus stop is technically possible, but it would likely be considered unreasonable by even your staunchest allies.

A benefit of campaigning to shift the Overton window is that even if you technically lose, you can still come out ahead. Even if you don't win anything yet from the relevant decision-maker, you may have successfully injected the concept into the collective conversation, built a base of supporters, and created new relationships with decision-makers that make the next fight easier. The progress we make opens up larger possibilities, which is vital considering the long timelines transportation activists often operate in. Michael Wojcik, executive director of the Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota and a former city councilmember, puts it succinctly: "Sometimes you introduce a bill to get it passed. Sometimes you introduce a bill to get it passed in ten years."³ The next time around, you might have better luck since you will have gotten people more used

(continued...)