

## How do elected officials think about transportation equity?

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The goal of this brief is to help planners, whether staff members or external experts, and advocates work effectively with politicians when trying to advance transportation equity. To do so, it draws on recent research that surveyed and interviewed local politicians in Canada about their values, experiences, and perspectives on transportation equity.

Local politicians play a key role in determining policies and allocating resources that could help improve transportation equity. While transportation equity has been examined at some length at an academic level, there has been little direct research about how local politicians understand it.

This brief starts to answer some of these key questions:

- How do elected officials get their information about transportation issues?
- What do they think of when talking about transportation equity?
- What are their values and priorities?
- Appendix: what are some of the differences between politicians in smaller and larger municipalities?

# Background

## THE RESEARCH

The research consisted of a survey filled out by elected officials (both councillors and mayors) in both municipal and regional governments. Only elected officials (mayors and councillors) who served in communities with some form of public transit (e.g., light rail, bus, paratransit) were contacted to ensure comparability between respondents. Everyone who filled out the survey was asked if they were open to a follow-up more in-depth interview.

- 2,148 surveys sent out.
- 165 surveys filled out (8.2% response rate) (completed Fall 2022).
- Responses from seven provinces and one territory.
- 38 follow-up interviews (20-60 minutes) (completed Winter 2023).

### DEFINITION

While definitions vary, a simple definition of transportation equity is:

Ensure adequate transportation for all, recognizing that specific measures for equity-deserving groups are needed to ensure fairness.

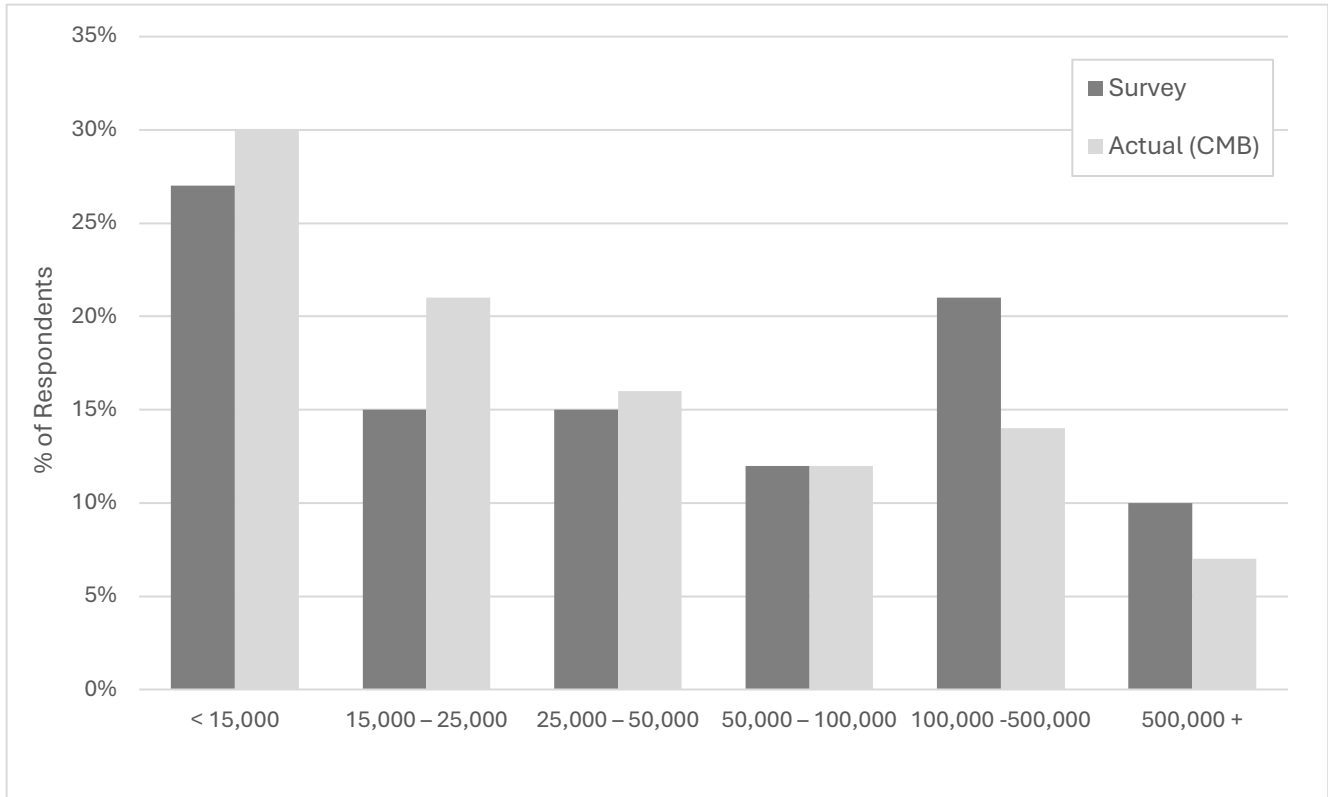
## PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

- The majority of respondents were councillors (85%), rather than mayors (15%).
- The majority represented local (89%), rather than regional (11%) governments.
- The majority of participants (56%) had been in office for 5 or more years.
- 40% of respondents were seniors.
- 38% of respondents were women.
- Respondents who identified as members of equity-deserving groups made up less than 10% of respondents.

## COMMUNITY SIZE

While the majority of respondents were from smaller municipalities (less than 50,000 people), larger cities (more than 100,000 people) were over-represented compared to their overall number of elected officials (see Table 1).

*Table 1: Respondents, by community size*  
(compared with the *Canadian Municipal Barometer* survey of elected officials)<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> See Lucas, J. (2022). *Canadian Municipal Barometer 2022: Tracking Questions and Data Summary*. Available at <https://doi.org/10.5683/SP3/LREVZR>.

# How do elected officials get their information?

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Participants overall had little direct personal experience with transportation modes other than driving. Almost all (90%) owned a car, and travelled to work by driving (71.1%). Other modes for work travel were used by fewer than 10% each. For non-work trips, more participants travelled by walking (28%) or cycling (20%) at least once a week. Transit use was low (less than 10%) for all types of trips, and there was no use of paratransit.

The respondents had little personal experience with most transportation challenges. Between a third and a half had personal experience with long commute times, or with public transit problems such as it not going to the destination they need, but few had other experiences.

Qualitative information from some interviews confirmed that personal experience played a role in understanding transportation barriers. In the words of one regional councillor:

*“When you have politicians that don't ride the bus, they don't necessarily see the benefit in it.”*

However, many elected officials had someone important to them who experienced transportation inequities.

- Over half indicated they had someone important to them who couldn't afford transportation costs.
- Over 40% indicated that someone important to them had difficulty walking or cycling, or had a disability that limits mobility.
- Respondents had the least experience with someone they knew suffering harassment or an inability to afford public transportation, but both were still cited by over 20%.

One consideration is that almost half of the participants had served on a transportation-related board or committee, which may have helped them develop specific expertise in transportation issues compared with other elected officials.

## Possible Take-Aways:

- Encourage politicians to experiment with other modes of transportation in order to gain direct experience.
- Encourage politicians to consider and ask about the experiences of constituents who they may not regularly hear from.
- Advocacy groups may consider strategies to convey their experiences and barriers directly to elected officials.

## EXTERNAL ADVICE AND INFORMATION

### Municipal Staff

The good news for municipal staff is that politicians are most likely to look to staff for information, with 81% saying they regularly relied on municipal staff for information about transportation barriers. Staff may not realize the degree of influence they can have in shaping politicians' understanding of their community and of equity issues:

*"I think that staff probably have a role in teaching us, in bringing us along and mentoring us, so to speak, and showing us what our community looks like."*

However, many of the politicians interviewed expressed a desire for clearer, less technical communication from staff, not only for their own sake, but also so that they can communicate better with their constituents.

Politicians acknowledged that elected officials may resist staff advice if it does not fit with their own principles or values. They also noted the importance of staff understanding the political context in which elected officials operate, as one councillor discussed:

*"I wish [staff] understood the need for elected officials to have political cover for decision making... they have to think about the optics of decision making for elected officials unfortunately, and I wish that wasn't the case, but I do think that that's true... they have to anticipate the pushback that we're going to receive and how we sometimes need a better argument on their part to be able to make the decision that we do want to make, but just might seem illogical to the community."*

While perspectives on this varied, most elected officials discussed a middle ground where staff are attuned to political constraints, present a variety of options for decision-makers, and are cognizant of potential public reactions.

## Other Sources

The next most common regular source of information was individual constituents (66%) and constituents in public meetings (60%). Politicians likely hear from a fairly narrow band of constituents, and are aware of that fact. As one councillor noted:

*“When we talk about things like affordable bus passes, we know that the folks that are struggling to meet their day-to-day needs are not going to be interested in coming to a public meeting or having a conversation about public transportation when they have other bigger fish to fry.”*

However, politicians can be strongly affected when they do hear personal stories about constituents’ transportation difficulties. A councillor provided this example:

*“I had a woman who got in touch with me, and she was 96, and her son was living with her, and they were living in a mobile home. They were out of food, and they didn't have transportation. And that's a fairly common thing for me to see.”*

Associations, whether of constituents (47%) or advocates (40%), were less commonly cited as regular sources, but were seen as important for some elected officials. Media of all kinds (traditional and social media) was a less important source of information.

### Possible take-aways:

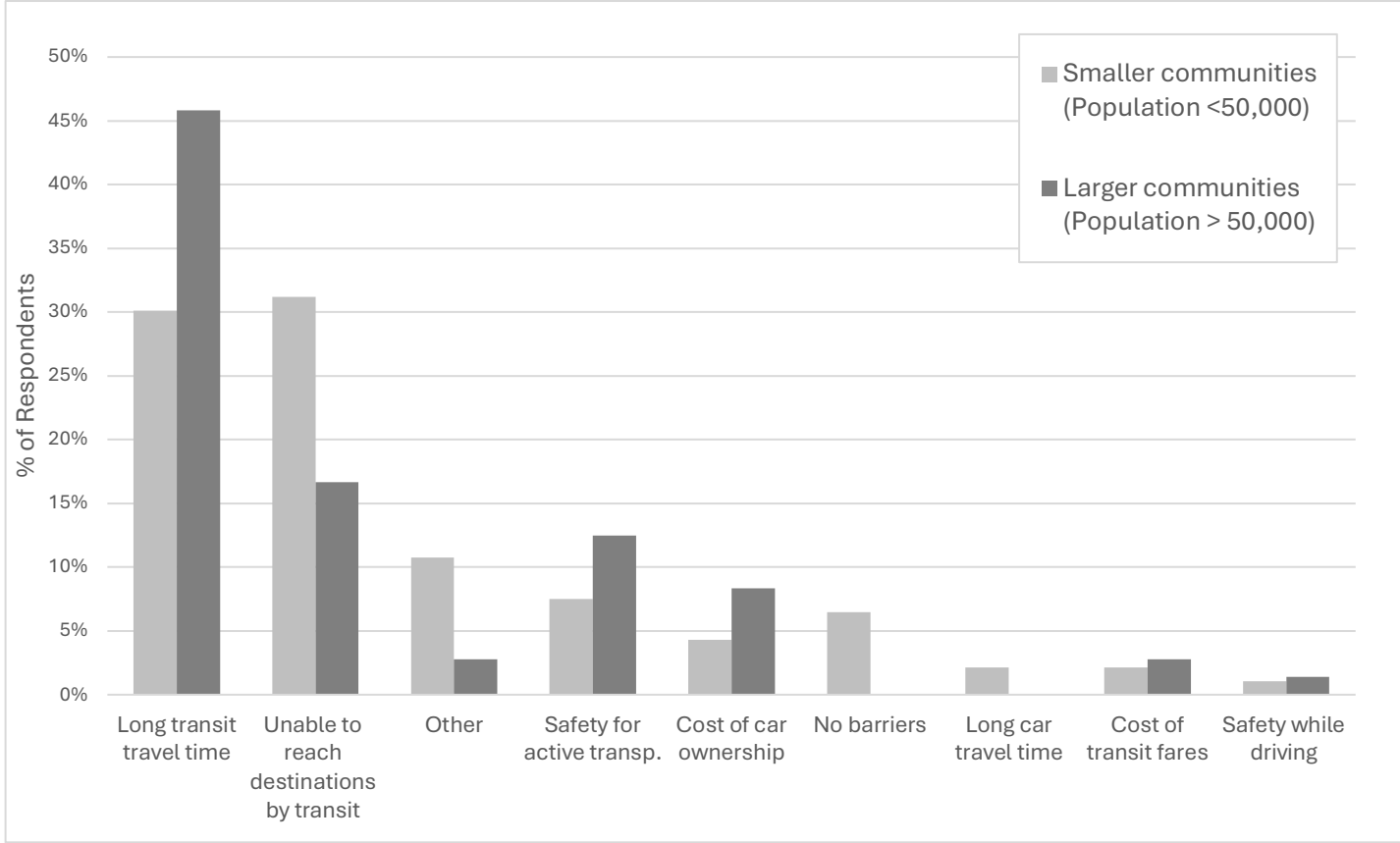
- Staff may want to consider conveying detailed information about transportation inequities experienced by constituents, because that information may not reach elected officials in other ways. Such information could, for example, include both data and illustrative individual stories learned through public outreach.
- In order to have an impact, staff need to translate complex and technical material into clear and accessible language that builds a compelling and easily understood picture.
- Staff also need to pay attention to the political context under which politicians operate and demonstrate they are reflecting constituent priorities that elected officials may not be hearing about directly.
- Advocacy groups should consider encouraging direct communication between supporters and their elected officials.

# What do politicians think about when discussing transportation equity?

When asked about what they thought were the key barriers to transportation equity, 80% of the politicians identified public transit barriers: long travel times, and an inability to get to desired destinations. These were also most often identified as the *most important* barrier. By contrast, less than a quarter (22%) identified the cost of public transportation as the top barrier.

A majority also identified the high cost of car ownership (59%) and active transportation (walking/cycling/rolling) safety issues (58%) as barriers. Few identified discrimination (13%) or safety on public transit (14%) as an issue.

Table 2: Perception of most important transportation barriers



In the follow-up interviews, participants were asked what groups of people they think of when considering transportation barriers. Respondents highlighted three groups:

- people with disabilities (66%),
- people with low incomes (58%), and
- seniors (45%).

Communities that are frequently addressed in the academic literature, such as immigrants, women, and racialized people were not commonly noted by elected officials.

In terms of barriers to their own actions for increasing transportation equity, in the interviews the majority cited lack of funds (from higher levels of government, or within the constraints of municipal budgets). However, this issue was usually applied to general transportation investments, rather than with a specific equity focus. Other factors were mentioned by less than a third of interviewees, but apply more specifically to focusing on equity, such as lack of political will and lack of knowledge of and experience of barriers. While political will was seen as barrier to improving equity, one councillor noted how this could be shifted:

*“I think political will sometimes is created, and it's created by actors that really are knowledgeable and know this front and back”*

### **Possible take-aways:**

- Politicians most easily identify concrete constraints (travel times, physical limitations, physical safety from collisions) but have a harder time connecting to experiential issues (harassment, discrimination).
- Accessibility for people with disabilities is widely understood to be an important issue (possibly because of existing legislative requirements) and may be a valuable avenue for initiating changes.
- As few elected officials identified groups commonly addressed in equity analyses (such as racialized people, women, and immigrants) as facing barriers, there may need to be more education on existing disparities and the need to address them.
- Staff and advocates have a role in linking constituent experiences to the need for equity improvements, and demonstrating support from constituents.



# What are politician's values about transportation equity?

To get a sense of values, we asked respondents to choose between two options, one of which was more equity focused. The options were not perfect opposites, but rather pushed the politician to choose priorities. In general, the more equity-focused option received the most support, although the level of support varied. While there was widespread agreement with some values, such as ensuring fairness in public consultation, there was limited support for prioritizing equity-deserving communities in transportation investments.

Respondents expressed strong support for propositions that:

- Some changes to costs and infrastructure are necessary to ensure fairness (84%).
- It is more important for car users rather than transit users to pay the full cost of their transportation (77%).
- Fairness in public consultation requires inclusion of people from different identities and communities (73%).
- People using any mode of transport should be able to reach the destinations they need, with similar time, costs, and comfort (66%).

The exception were questions focused on how resources should be allocated:

- The majority (63%) opted for prioritizing the greatest number of people rather than prioritizing equity-deserving communities.
- Respondents were divided on prioritizing under-invested geographic areas (56%) rather than investing in all areas to a similar extent (44%).

## Possible take-aways:

- Planners can build on the general acceptance that change is necessary.
- The idea that resources should be directed towards equity-deserving groups is the foundation for much equity analyses but is not a value shared by many elected officials.
- Based on the understanding that it is important to find ways to include voices of communities that are not always heard, practitioners can make concerted efforts to ensure that experiences of equity-deserving communities are prioritized in data collection, public consultation, analyses, and reports.
- Doing so may assist planners in making the case for prioritizing investments towards equity-deserving communities, which may be a more difficult case to make.

# Conclusions

The survey may not be entirely representative, as elected officials with a particular interest in transportation may have been more likely to participate (as reflected in the nearly half who have experience on a transportation committee or board). Nonetheless, it provides a first window into the points of view of local politicians who have a significant role in addressing transportation equity.

The research reveals that elected officials in general do not have direct experience with transportation barriers. However, they may be open to learning from indirect experience through people they know, through the experiences of constituents, and through information from staff.

Survey responses pointed towards a focus on system-wide issues that applied in general to users (transit times and destinations, safety of vulnerable road users) and on people with disabilities. Politicians were less attuned to issues and inequities faced by specific communities (e.g. racialized communities) or that were outside their experience (e.g. safety on public transit) and were less supportive of the need to focus investment on such communities in order to address transportation equity.

The research points both to potential avenues for staff and advocates to connect with positions and experiences elected officials already hold, and directions where additional efforts may be needed to further the understanding of transportation equity.

## **For more information:**

Full report on findings available here: <https://mobilizingjustice.ca/articles/>

## **Suggested citation:**

Linovski, O., Dean, J., Leger, S., McLaren, A., & Cascante, I. (2024) *How Do Elected Officials Think About Transportation Equity?*. Mobilizing Justice. <https://mobilizingjustice.ca/reports/>

# Appendix: Differences between smaller and larger communities

In some areas, there was no significant difference between elected officials from different types of municipalities, but in others there were noticeable differences between the responses of politicians from smaller municipalities and those from larger ones. Noting these differences may be helpful to planners working in these different environments.

- Only respondents from smaller communities selected long travel times by car as the most important barrier, or that there were no significant barriers for in their jurisdictions.
- As seen in Table 2, representatives from larger communities were more likely to see long travel times by transit as the most serious transportation barrier, whereas representatives from smaller communities were more likely to select being unable to reach one's destination by transit.
- Elected officials in the larger municipalities (50,000 people and greater) discussed people with low incomes more frequently (75%) than those in smaller communities (33%).
- Immigrants were also more frequently mentioned by those in larger cities (30%, compared with 13% in smaller municipalities), though some in small communities discussed migrant workers specifically.
- Conversely, officials in smaller communities discussed seniors more frequently (60%), compared with those in large municipalities (35%). In interviews, one respondent noted that, in smaller communities, because council positions are part-time or volunteer, they are more likely to be filled by retired people.
- For the choice question related to procedural fairness, 40% of respondents in the smallest communities (<15,000 residents) felt that processes were still fair if people chose not to participate, compared to only 13% of respondents from the largest municipalities (>500,000).
- For the choice question related to prioritizing equity-deserving communities, 50% of large city (>500,000) respondents felt that these groups should be prioritized, compared to 21% in mid-sized cities (100,000 – 500,000).
- Smaller municipalities noted that their limited staff resources made it challenging for them to apply to funding programs from upper levels of government.