



Power Struggle: The Transformation of Transportation

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The long and winding road to work has become more costly than ever before, but it's also forcing drivers to explore other ways of getting around. From bikes to buses, Americans are starting to spend more time using other modes of transportation instead of in their gas-guzzling cars. These alternative industries, which may have been largely ignored in the past, are getting a greater deal of attention from consumers at home, as well as from lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

"Younger generations of Americans are not as wedded to the auto as their predecessors were because they've been inculcated with a sense of environmental stewardship and they want to show that they're reducing the carbon footprint," said Eron Shosteck, senior vice president of the American Bus Association (ABA), which represents motorcoach and tour operators.

Soaring energy prices haven't been entirely bad, Shosteck said. "The half-full perspective is one in which we've finally got a confluence of events that are getting people to consider alternative transportation besides the family car." The number of people spending money to take buses is on the rise, but on the flip side, overhead costs for bus companies are rising, too, because of fuel prices.

The [ABA's PAC](#) has given at least \$53,700 to federal candidates during this election cycle so far, with 62 percent going to Democrats. It's on track to spend about \$40,000 this year to [lobby](#) policymakers on issues that would allow the industry to maintain, and potentially increase, its role as part of the solution to the energy situation. This has included supporting the continuation of the partial fuel tax exemption for the motorcoach industry, which would allow smaller operators to serve rural communities that are too remote to be served by larger bus companies.

All in all, bus travel is the most cost effective and carbon-efficient way for groups of people to travel, Shosteck said. The ABA's stance on protecting the environment while still moving people from one place to another is captured in one of their slogans: "Save A Penguin, Take A Motorcoach." The ABA is also supporting the "Stop Excessive Speculation Act," introduced by Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.), which will be debated this week in the Senate. The act would seek to close any loopholes that allow speculators to manipulate oil prices to get greater profits (instead of just selling the oil to consumers), and would impose limits and greater transparency, meaning that the government would be able to better regulate the market.

The [airline industry](#), which has given \$2.2 million to federal candidates, committees and parties in the current cycle, is in favor of curbing oil speculation, as well. The larger [air transport industry](#), which includes

passenger airlines as well as shippers such as FedEx and UPS, has spent a total of about \$10 million. According to Elizabeth Merida, a spokeswoman for the Air Transport Association of America (ATAA), curbing oil speculation would help to alleviate the high cost of jet fuel, which has to go through a more expensive refining process than regular fuel. By curbing speculation, airlines wouldn't have to purchase already expensive jet fuel at unnecessarily high prices. These rising costs are responsible for the surcharges and flight cuts by many major airlines, which have left plenty of customers frustrated and angry. The [ATAA](#) has spent \$1.1 million this year to lobby on issues such as this one, and is looking for action from Congress before the August recess.

"[The bill] is extended to all sorts of travel and tourism groups, anyone who uses oil in any form," Merida said. "If you use oil to cook in your kitchen, if you plan on using it this winter to heat your house, then you're being affected. The magnitude that the airlines consume in the form of jet fuel, we're being hit very hard."

The trucking industry is also bearing the burden of high fuel prices, spurring the American Trucking Association (ATA) to urge the government to take action by drilling for oil in areas that are currently off-limits, according to Tiffany Wlazlowski, the ATA's director of public affairs. The [ATA](#) has spent at least \$230,000 on lobbying efforts so far this year, in part pushing for the release of oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which is an emergency oil stockpile along the Gulf Coast of Texas and Louisiana maintained by the Department of Energy, and the development of fuel-saving strategies by the Environmental Protection Agency.

"Because trucks haul 70 percent of all freight tonnage, and 80 percent of communities receive their goods exclusively by truck, rising fuel costs have the potential to increase the cost of everything that Americans consume that comes by truck," Wlazlowski said, emphasizing that sky-high gas prices are affecting consumers even when they're not at the pump.

While [railroad companies](#) must also deal with oil costs, and are certainly affected by oil speculation, they aren't suffering as much as their flying or trucking counterparts are. The number of people hopping on the train has been steadily increasing, which Amtrak will likely bolster using its new congressional funding (pending a compromise version of the bill between the House and Senate). The funding proposal would also repair Amtrak's Northeast corridor, which runs from Virginia up to Massachusetts. Most corridors of the Association of American Railroads (AAR) are approaching capacity, according to Tom White, AAR's spokesperson. [AAR's PAC](#) has given \$132,600 in the 2008 cycle, leaning Democratic by almost 60 percent. The \$2.2 million spent by the association on [lobbying efforts](#) has partly gone to expanding capacity for freight goods in addition to opposing re-regulation of the industry (it was first de-regulated in 1976 when it faced bankruptcy). The organization also supports clean-coal technology, which reduces polluting emissions from burning coal, one of the country's most abundant fossil fuels.

But it's not just about planes, trains, buses and automobiles. Bike enthusiasts are also peddling their influence on the Hill. The [PAC of the Bikes Belong Coalition](#) has contributed \$28,000 to members of Congress this election cycle, ensuring that it is supporting bike-friendly lawmakers from all over the country, said executive director Tim Blumenthal, who also heads up the coalition's PAC. Lately Bikes Belong has been helping out Republican senators instead of only Democrats, such as Sens. [Norm Coleman](#) (R-Minn.), who has received \$3,500 this cycle, and [Susan Collins](#) (R-Maine), who has collected \$3,000. But the group tries to remain bipartisan. "We make a point of giving the same amount to the same number of Republicans as we do Democrats," Blumenthal said.

In fact, Blumenthal said the group's never been divided by red and blue. "When it was a Republican-controlled house in Congress, we were still heard pretty well," he said. Blumenthal did say that the ranking member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, [Jim Oberstar](#) (R-Minn.), an avid bicyclist, has been especially supportive of the group's efforts. The congressman, who owns several bikes (one of which cost \$6,800) and reportedly rides more than 2,000 miles a year, has received \$17,500 total from the group since 2001, more than any other member of Congress.

By giving contributions to lawmakers such as Oberstar, and spending money on [lobbying efforts](#), the biking industry helped to put itself on lawmakers' radars, according to Blumenthal. Perhaps this helped with the coalition's proposal for the Bicycle Commuter Benefits Act, first introduced in 2006 and then again in 2007, which is a measure that would allow employers to extend a tax-free benefit to biking employees. Ideally, the industry will see greater recognition from the government in years to come, Blumenthal said.

"Without any doubt, bicycling has come up a notch or two-or three-in the minds of elected officials, and that's particularly true among big city mayors, somewhat true among members of Congress," Blumenthal said.

"Part of it will depend on who gets elected president, what the administration's mindset on bicycling is."

In order for bicycling to truly take off as a way of transportation, Blumenthal said that the industry would need greater funding to make facilities more convenient. He pointed to bike lanes that end at wide intersections, limiting the distances that bikers can safely travel. Without seamless and continuous facilities, Blumenthal acknowledged that bike travel is unrealistic for most trips, leaving bikers to revert back to being drivers.

The dominant hold of the [automobile industry](#) is also evident in campaign contributions and lobbying expenditures. During the current cycle, the industry, including [dealers](#) and [manufacturers](#), has spent a combined \$33.4 million on lobbying and given \$18.6 million to federal candidates, committees and parties-making Bikes Belong's \$28,000 little more than a few pennies. The auto industry is fighting for policy that would encourage consumers to buy more fuel-efficient and environmentally friendly cars, in turn stimulating automakers to manufacture more of these vehicles. Bike paths are not on the industry's list of concerns.

The Bikes Belong Coalition recently managed to meet with Barack Obama, however, and is hoping to arrange a meeting with John McCain as well. Both the Democratic and Republican national conventions, where Obama and McCain will officially become their party's nominee, will receive 1,000 bikes from Bikes Belong. Neither candidate, however, has collected any money from the group.

Like trains and buses, bikes are making their way back onto American roads. "It's not just nostalgic America of the 1950s," Blumenthal said. "It's a contemporary solution."