FACT SHEET

# Transportation Researchers and the 2026 TRB Annual Meeting

## *Evidence of the impact of political interference on the dissemination of transportation research*

### HIGHLIGHTS

***Recent pressure by the federal government has led to substantial changes at the Transportation Research Board (TRB), an independent, non-governmental hub for transportation research housed within the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). UCS surveyed transportation researchers to understand whetehr this political interference may have ramifications for TRB's Annual Meeting, which promotes the dissemination of transportation research. While a small sample size limits drawing any conclusions, less than half of those surveyed indicated interest in attending the annual meeting, with those who did not overwhelmingly pointing to concerns around changes TRB has made claiming to respond to requests from federal funders of the organization.. Limited data on review of papers submitted to the conference suggests that a haphazard review process may have at least as substantial an effect on research presented at the conference as possible censorship, though both are the direct result of federal interference.***

The Transportation Research Board (TRB) of the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) has been a critical center for U.S. transportation research since its founding over a century ago, when it was established to coordinate a national transportation research program among state and federal government agencies and relevant stakeholders (FHWA 1977). However, last year saw TRB's independence threatened.

Within days of President Trump's inauguration, the U.S. Department of Transportation pressured TRB to cancel or substantially revise at least 28 projects funded by TRB totaling about $12.5 million, projects related to issues like climate change and equity (Levine and Karner 2025; Zipper 2025). In June, TRB abruptly restructured its committees, citing in part "additional direction from the federal government" for the restructuring, which led to the elimination of several committees related to equity, the environment, and sustainability (Sheehan and Brach 2025). And in its August request for submissions to its annual conference to support its central purpose of facilitating collaboration within the transportation research community, TRB warned researchers that topics may be limited to the research priorities of its sponsors, which include the federal government (TRB 2025).

There have been a number of concerns raised by researchers over the past year in response to this political interference. Over 100 transportation researchers and professionals signed an open letter to TRB calling on the organization to restore critical issue areas to the committee structure and ensure that research at its annual meeting be based on technical merit rather than political priorities (Greene et al. 2025). In the wake of these attacks on independent science, researchers in fields affected by the administration's actions have sought new spaces

independent of TRB to better ensure the freedom of inquiry necessary for the conduct of good research, such as Crossroads: A Transportation Equity and Justice Convening and the newly formed Association of Sustainable Transportation Researchers.

To better examine the impact of the administration's attacks on transportation research vis-a-vis TRB, UCS surveyed transportation researchers and practitioners about the upcoming 2026 TRB Annual Meeting. While the survey sample represents a small share of the TRB community (142 responses compared to annual attendance of about 13,000), there are still some results worth noting in light of the administration's interference.

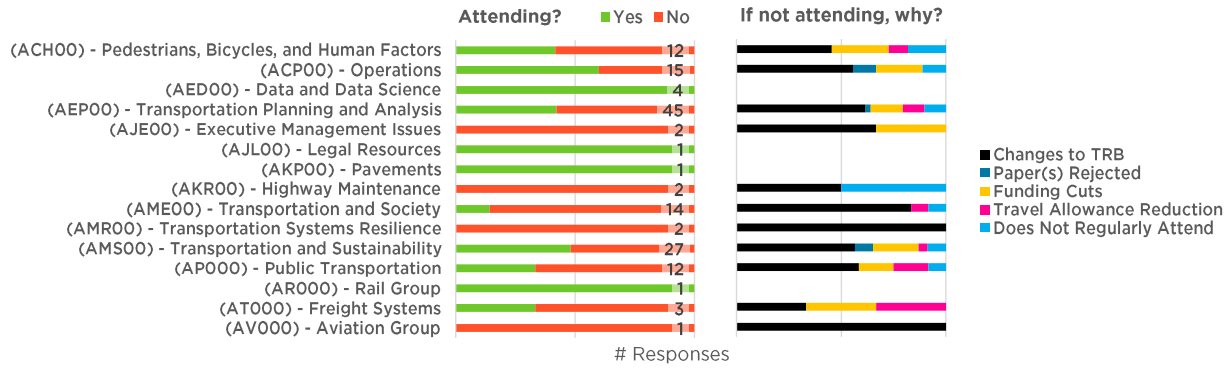
## TRB Annual Meeting Attendance

The annual TRB meeting is strongly tied to the organization's original purpose, as thousands of researchers convene to present and discuss the most current understandings on transportation topics as diverse as transit funding mechanisms, navigating state procurement laws, pavement characteristics, and equitable access to mobility choices.

This year, however, less than half of respondents to our survey plan on attending the meeting (60 "yes" compared to 82 "no"), with only a small number of non-attendees citing irregular attendance. Interestingly, this lack of interest in attending TRB appears to span a wide range of disciplines (Figure 1).

In addition to TRB's response to administrative pressure, many researchers cited funding cuts as a reason preventing them from attending, another direct result of administrative interference in research, since across the board research grants in a range of fields have been pulled as the result of agency interpretation of recent presidential executive orders.

**Figure 1.** Survey Response on Attendance, by Transportation Research Section




*While it may not be surprising for a large number of researchers in fields under attack by the administration to cite recent changes to TRB committee structure and practices as a reason for not attending the annual meeting, this represents the dominant reason for skipping the upcoming annual meeting across essentially every discipline surveyed.*

Some researchers pointed to additional challenges faced by international researchers and people of color, citing issues with visa applications and concerns about personal safety in Washington, DC, given the President's deployment of the military and increased federal law enforcement in the city of questionable legality and justification.

The breadth of rationale spoken to for researchers choosing not to attend a seminal meeting of fellow researchers and practioners underscores the many ways in which politicians can interfere with free inquiry and by which we as scientists and researchers need to maintain clear, supportive structures robust to such interference.

## Review of Research for Presentation at TRB's Annual Meeting

Given that TRB warned researchers that content presented at the conference may be censored, this survey focuses on two questions of interest: 1) did researchers alter content in order to avoid censorship by TRB (i.e. self-censorship), and 2) is there evidence of censorship by topic by TRB?

### Self-censorship

Based on responses from those surveyed, there is clear evidence that researchers edited the content of their submissions to avoid TRB's threat of censorship—of the 67 researchers who submitted papers to TRB (nearly half the sample), 21 of them (31 percent) acknowledged altering the content of in response to TRB's statement about the content of work presented at the Annual Meeting conforming to the priorities of its sponsors.

This self-censorship is predominantly found in areas of research targeted by the administration, with researchers noting "equity", "sustainability", and "climate change" as phrases particularly targeted for revision/elimination.

### TRB Censorship and Paper Acceptance

One of the concerns for some researchers who self-censored was to avoid what is known as a "desk rejection", where a paper was rejected without ever being sent out to reviewers. The concern was that such a rejection could operate similar to the keyword-based funding cancellations already conducted by TRB, where specific keywords would trigger an automatic rejection of the manuscript. However, this limited survey sample does not support this hypothesis. Only 4 percent of manuscripts submitted by those surveyed were rejected without review, 6 percent of submissions from self-censoring researchers and 3 percent from those that did not, a difference that is not statistically significant.

Additionally, there is no evidence of a difference in the rate of acceptance of submissions from self-censoring researchers and those who did not, with both agreeing with an overall acceptance rate of 81 percent (Table 1). Additionally, this acceptance rate is roughly constant across all fields of research, with one exception (ACH00)—however, one researcher who received half of the rejections for submissions to that section chalked this up to the review process and compared it to prior observations:

> "I didn't find the review process to be biased. The decisions seemed to be about the same level of fairness as in past years (which is to say, somewhat unpredictable)."

This suggests that observed shortcomings in the peer review process may not be related to direct censorship but other issues including a higher share of non-responsive reviewers, abbreviated review timeframe, and other issues raised by respondents that may stem from the abrupt committee reorganization.

**Table 1.** Paper Acceptance Rate, by Transportation Research Section

| Transportation Research Section | Self-censored | | Not Self-censored | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | # | Acceptance Rate | # | Acceptance Rate |
| (ACH00) - Pedestrians, Bicycles, and Human Factors | 19 | 58% | 1 | 100% |
| (ACP00) - Operations | 0 | | 39 | 79% |
| (AED00) - Data and Data Science | 4 | 100% | 10 | 90% |
| (AEP00) - Transportation Planning and Analysis | 36 | 89% | 65 | 80% |
| (AKP00) - Pavements | 2 | 50% | 0 | |
| (AME00) - Transportation and Society | 1 | 0% | 5 | 80% |
| (AMR00) - Transportation Systems Resilience | 0 | | 1 | 100% |
| (AMS00) - Transportation and Sustainability | 17 | 82% | 19 | 84% |
| (AP000) - Public Transportation | 1 | 100% | 14 | 86% |
| (AR000) - Rail Group | 1 | 100% | 0 | |
| (AT000) - Freight Systems | 1 | 100% | 0 | |
| **TOTAL** | **82** | **79%** | **154** | **82%** |

*Based on the surveyed sample, there appears to be little evidence for differences in rates of acceptance across different areas of study. Additionally, there is no clear evidence that choosing to self-censor played a role in acceptance, though the lack of a clear A/B comparison cannot rule it out.*

It should be noted that the lack of difference in acceptance rate between researchers who did or did not self-censor does not indicate that self-censorship was not warranted—the lack of an A/B comparison means selection bias could play a role in the two groups, where self-censorship leveled any differences in the possibility of censorship within the TRB process.

## Summary

While this survey did not find clear evidence of censorship on the part of TRB, that does not mean that TRB's actions in response to administration pressure will not have an impact on the conduct and dissemination of transportation research. Survey results show that researchers across all disciplines are concerned with the political intervention into transportation research, which will likely impact attendance at future TRB meetings and participation in TRB activities including paper review, which is critically dependent on committee members.

Many researchers have already experienced the impact of TRB's changes to committee structure and organization first-hand, whether that is the loss of convening space to converse about research or the inconsistent review process cited by many resulting from these abrupt changes (Table 2). Such changes could result in sustained harm if alternative spaces and research infrastructure do not materialize. Additionally, a siloed, fragmented approach to transportation research and convening could pose challenges to cross-disciplinary research if specific issue areas are further walled off from consideration.

These impacts to the infrastructural elements of TRB are additional to the harm already caused to research directly through funding cuts conducted by TRB in response to political pressure from federal funding agencies.

This example of political interference represents just one of the Trump administration's many attacks on U.S. scientific research infrastructure and the potential legacy of lasting adverse impact. One researcher's comment puts it succinctly:

> ***"The current scrutiny on academic activities will undoubtedly damage the scientific competitiveness of the United States in the world."***

**Table 2.** A Selection of Researcher Comments from the UCS Survey

| |
|---|
| "The paper was desk-rejected only three days after submission. Since it is already published … quality shouldn't be an issue. It is highly likely that the rejection was due to the title containing the keyword 'equity.'" |
| "The three submissions were rejected without receiving any meaningful feedback. It is clear that they were not carefully reviewed, as evidenced by the generic comments that showed little expertise in the subject area." |
| "Paper feedback was not as rigorous/relevant as previous years. … I know many students with excellent work whose papers were rejected and who also feel that the reviewer comments were not the same as those from previous years." |
| "TRB paper assignments were quite random, as this was done by TRB staff, rather than transportation researchers. Many paper review coordinators were new and did not do their job well." |
| "We want to see if there will still be value for [my students] at TRB in terms of who is going and what is presented, and also weigh the extent to which things there are censored based on those that were rejected without review. I am also sending them information about other conference options and encouraging them to consider those instead." |
| "I'm legitimately disappointed about the way committee membership was decided (which is unknown) and how workshops were identified. We know from our profession the danger of deciding things arbitrarily and without discussion and I'm worried about the long-term effects." |
| "Although both committees I was a member of were brought back with very similar names, I felt that the process overall did not acknowledge the very dedicated volunteers who made TRB successful. As such, I felt that I was better off putting my time in places where it was more appreciated." |
| "There has only been one committee meeting since the reorganization and it has been hard to know how the new committee will move forward, as it combines a great deal of environmental issues into one committee rather than giving them the space they had previously." |
| "Many research communities at TRB were created and nurtured for decades through the voluntary efforts of the best scholars/practitioners from around the world. Summarily disbanding the associated committees and restricting/precluding related communications risks shifting leadership and associated innovation attractors/incubators to elsewhere in the world. Ultimately, the U.S. loses its leadership role and the value provided in terms of real-world impacts that benefit our society." |
| "The changes that occurred at TRB were both alarming and disheartening, and, although over time adjustments might be made at TRB to reclaim its credibility, in the short term the credibility of TRB as a bonafide research entity independent of partisan politics was essentially destroyed." |

*Transportation researchers expressed concern not just about political interference with TRB but about how institutional response to political pressure may be impacting the quality of work.*

## Author

**Dr. Dave Cooke** is a Senior Scientist in the UCS Clean Transportation Program.

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