

Policy Action 5D | MPO Proportional Representation



Strategy 5: Transform Institutional Structures
and Culture

To read the full report, see [Letting People Move](#)

Level of Government

Congress State Legislature MPO

Details

Key considerations

- MPOs' decisions often undervalue input from constituents who would benefit from transit and active transportation investments.
- MPOs need to implement democratic voting structures that ensure equal representation for their residents during transportation planning decisions.

Background

Undemocratic voting structures govern many metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs).¹ In these cases, each city in the metropolitan region typically gets one vote on any issue that comes before the board, with small and large cities getting equal weight. This means that residents of larger cities have less representation per capita. Because denser, bigger cities often rely on public transit more, this inequity often leads to reduced investment in public transit and increased investment in highways, increasing emissions.²

“It's absolutely the case here that the [MPO] voting structure favors the counties that are less populous, higher percentage white, more exurban... It's 'one jurisdiction, one vote' and so the most populous jurisdiction is Baltimore County and the second most populous jurisdiction is Baltimore City... Those are the two most populous and most diverse and most urban and they have one vote each. Then some very small population jurisdictions that are farther from the urban core, and more white, also have one vote but proportionally they have much more voting power. I think that does have a lot to do with those imbalanced budgets we see where there's over \$900 million for new highway capacity and zero dollars for new transit capacity because of who has an economic or perceived self-interest in those kinds of spending priorities.”

Brian O'Malley

Central Maryland Transportation Alliance

INTERVIEW | Perspective from Maryland – Requiring MPOs to enact proportional representation

Examples

In 2017, the California Legislature passed AB 805, which gave San Diego MPO board members the ability to invoke a weighted vote. Under the new rules, if a measure fails to pass with the tally vote, representatives from any two jurisdictions can call for a weighted vote and trigger a process by which representatives representing 51 percent of the County population and at least 3 jurisdictions could override the tally vote.

¹ Gian-Claudia Sciara, “Metropolitan Transportation Planning: Lessons From the Past, Institutions for the Future,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 83, no. 3 (2017), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01944363.2017.1322526>.

² Kevin DeGood, “Reforming the Governance of Metropolitan Planning Organizations,” Center for American Progress, February 15, 2024, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/reforming-the-governance-of-metropolitan-planning-organizations>.

Additional details

Proportional representation can be achieved through weighted voting structures or greater board membership for larger municipalities. A US Department of Transportation survey published in 2017 found that only 13 percent of MPOs (36 of 276) reported having an option for a weighted voting structure, and some of those had never used it.³

A directly elected MPO board could also address problems of proportional representation, although federal law does not explicitly allow this; it states that representation shall be made of local elected officials, which is typically accomplished through appointment of officials elected to other offices. The MPO serving Portland, OR, used to have a unique structure with a directly elected board and a separate advisory committee that officially approved decisions to ensure compliance with federal law.

MPO representation can be changed in some cases through the bylaws and in other cases by amending the enabling statute through the state legislature. Congress could also revise the requirements nationwide.

Case Study for MPO Reform: San Diego, California

The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), the MPO for San Diego County, CA, faced the issue of undemocratic voting structure for many years. There have long been two ways to pass measures at the SANDAG board. The first is the conventional tally vote under which each city gets one vote. The second is the weighted vote, under which cities' votes are weighted based on their population and votes that represent a majority of the County's population can pass a measure. Under the old rules, any measure had to pass under both voting systems, which meant that nothing could pass without broad consensus. In 2017, the California Legislature passed a bill, AB 805, which gave preference to the weighted vote on its board and created an outside auditor for SANDAG. **Under the new rules, if a measure fails to pass with the tally vote, representatives from any two jurisdictions can invoke the weighted vote and trigger a process by which representatives representing 51 percent of the County population and at least 3 jurisdictions could potentially override the tally vote.**

The impetus for this change came after a scandal broke, under which SANDAG officials had overestimated sales tax revenues to promise more infrastructure construction than they were able to deliver. Progressive members of the state assembly, who had long been frustrated with the unequal voting structure of the SANDAG board, took the opportunity to pass AB 805.

When the County considered a possible appeal of the state's determination of the county's housing needs under the Regional Housing Needs Assessment, a

³ "MPO Staffing and Organizational Structures," US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, October 2017, https://www.planning.dot.gov/documents/MPOStaffing_and_Org_Structures.pdf.

simple majority of board members had voted to appeal the state's allocation, but under the weighted vote, the board decided not to appeal, essentially voting to build more housing throughout the county.

Using the new voting structure, SANDAG hired a new CEO, Hasan Ikhata, who strongly favored a mode shift from private cars to public transportation. However, Ikhata failed to effectively build consensus around his initiatives and assumed that he could afford to ignore the representatives from the smaller cities by relying on the weighted vote. This proved a flawed assumption, as his pro-transit allies eventually tired of making politically contentious votes. Because of his overreach, Ikhata was pushed away from SANDAG, and a major opportunity was missed.

One lesson from this case is that passing state legislation to reform the voting structure on MPO boards can be an effective strategy for changing MPO priorities. However, policymakers must take care to ensure that initiatives are politically sustainable. The weighted vote can be a key tool to shift political power and pass initiatives, but consensus building remains important to avoid political backlash.⁴

⁴ Andrew Keatts, Axios, personal communication, July 2025.