



Public support of transport policy instruments, perceived transport quality and satisfaction with democracy. What is the relationship?

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ABSTRACT

Lack of public support is regarded as a major barrier for implementing restrictive transport policy instruments. Recent studies have therefore analyzed factors explaining variations in public support and examined strategies to increase support of restrictive policy measures. However, few have analyzed whether there is an actual relationship between transportation policies and political legitimacy. This article thus makes two main contributions to the literature. First, it explores whether there is a relationship between support of restrictive instruments and political legitimacy to study the political implications of introducing such instruments. The results show that citizens opposing restrictive measures, such as local road tolls, are more dissatisfied with the performance of local democracy. The effect also appears to be mediated through citizens evaluation of politicians' and how they evaluate governmental performance at the local level. Second, the article analyzes the importance of transportation policies in particular for local political legitimacy. The results show that citizens dissatisfied with the quality of services within the transport sector are also more dissatisfied with the performance of local democracy.

1. Introduction

This article contributes to the literature on acceptance and support for restrictive policy instruments by analyzing the relationship between political legitimacy and the use of such instruments. While most studies have focused on measuring opposition or explaining variations in support (Eliasson, 2014; Eliasson and Jonsson, 2011; Hårsman and Quigley, 2010; Albalate and Bel, 2009; Börjesson et al., 2016; Schade and Baum, 2007), few have analyzed whether there is an actual relationship between opposition towards restrictive instruments and satisfaction with democracy.

According to Salamon (2002:24), "*tool choice can affect the overall sense of legitimacy that government enjoys in the eyes of the citizens*". While these claims may be theoretically well-founded, there are few articles that empirically analyze whether the implementation of unpopular instruments have any impact on political legitimacy. This is an important field of study since scholars have argued that when citizens have positive attitudes towards the political system they are less likely to push for radical changes (Bernauer and Vatter, 2012:435). It is therefore important to understand the mechanisms explaining citizens' satisfaction with how democracy works and, in doing so, to analyze the importance of transportation policies for political legitimacy. Thus, the purpose of this article is to analyze if, and how, the use of specific policy instruments in the transportation sector can influence satisfaction with democracy (Bemelmans-Videc et al., 2011).

This is an especially relevant topic considering the challenges governments face in seeking to achieve targets for reducing GHG-emissions. Congestion and emissions from transport are frequently mentioned as examples of wicked problems. Use of restrictive

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policy instruments is commonly seen as necessary in order to address many of the negative consequences associated with such problems (Börjesson et al., 2012). But congestion pricing and tolls have proven to be highly controversial instruments which meet fierce public and political opposition in many cities (Rye et al., 2008; Eliasson and Jonsson, 2011; Börjesson and Kristoffersson, 2015). The lack of public, and hence political, support has therefore been suggested as a main reason for why such instruments are not adopted and introduced (Santos, 2008).

This article also contributes to the literature on political legitimacy. First, although there are several studies analyzing political legitimacy at the local and regional level (e.g. Rose and Pettersen, 2009b, 2000, 1999; Weitz-Shapiro, 2008; Vetter, 2007), few have analyzed the specific role and importance of transportation policies. This is especially important since, according to Wagner et al. (2009), we still lack knowledge on ‘what drives subjective perceptions of satisfaction with democracy’. In the Nordic countries, municipalities exercise substantial influence over policies relevant to peoples’ satisfaction with local democracy (Denters and Rose, 2005). The performance of subnational levels of government in these countries is thus likely to play a key role for citizens’ evaluations of democracy, especially considering the fact that lower levels of government have a crucial impact on policies regarding transport quality and transport instruments. When citizens in Norway were asked about the most important issue for their vote in the most recent local election, for example, land-use, toll roads and transportation were ranked as the most important issues together with schools, environment and amalgamation issues.¹

The article therefore aims at shedding light on why citizens are satisfied with governmental performance by including citizens’ viewpoints on the use of restrictive instruments, as well as citizens’ evaluation of transport quality. In doing so, the article responds to the call from Marsden and Reardon (2017) who criticize the ‘technical-rational model within the transportation literature’ while important questions, such as for instance political legitimacy, have largely been ignored.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a literature review of factors influencing satisfaction with democracy. Explanatory factors identified in the literature are then used to develop a set of hypotheses. Literature regarding policy instruments is also included. In Section 3 the dataset used to address the hypotheses is then presented. Ordinary least squares regression and mediation analysis following Imai et al. (2011) are used to analyze mechanisms explaining variation in satisfaction with democracy. Finally, the last section discusses the findings and implications from the analysis.

2. Literature

Political legitimacy has deep roots within political philosophy (e.g. Hobbes, 1994; Mill, 1998; Rawls, 1971; Kant, 1999; Weber, 1978) yet it is a concept difficult and problematic to define (Rothstein, 2009:312).² In general, political legitimacy is multi-dimensional in nature (Beetham, 1991). This was famously exemplified in Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address when he coined the well-known ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’. He thereby illustrated three dimensions of political legitimacy.

Within the literature on political legitimacy, David Easton’s work (1965) is a common theoretical and analytic starting point for many. In this work Easton distinguishes three forms of political support: support for the political community, regime and authority respectively. This classification highlights the multi-dimensional aspect of political legitimacy based on what is often referred to as specific and diffuse support. Specific support refers to support for a particular government, party, politician, decision or actions, while diffuse support refers to support for the political system more generally as, for instance, the norms and rules found in that particular country or municipality. Dalton (1999) has later extended this operationalization of political evaluation into five categories; political community, regime principles, regime performance, regime institutions and political actors. Table 1, which in large part is based on the work of Norris (1999), illustrates how the different categories are defined and operationalized.

These levels can be understood as a scale of citizens evaluation of political support along an axis varying from specific to diffuse support (Norris, 1999). ‘Political community’ and ‘regime principles’ are factors representing more abstract or diffuse support of democratic ideals and democratic principles. One typical way to operationalize ‘regime principles’ is e.g. pose the following statement and ask for respondent’s agreement: “Democracy has its weaknesses but is better than any other form of government”. Support for ‘political actors’, on the other hand, involves an evaluation of e.g. specific politicians or a government. The implications of experiencing a loss in public support are thus expected to vary greatly between these different dimensions (Peffley and Rohrschneider, 2014). Experiencing a loss in citizens’ evaluation of democratic ideals can be grave since citizens might require constitutional reforms or accept of new forms of government. Experiencing a loss of public support for a particular government, on the other hand, can be less severe inasmuch as elections for example may offer an opportunity for changes in the government.

Support for democratic values and principles have traditionally been strong in the Nordic countries (Dahlberg et al., 2015). Thus, it is less likely that the nature of local transportation policies will have a significant impact on support for the principles of

¹ The question was the following: “Could you mention the most important issue for personally when you voted in the municipal election this year?”. The top eight issues were the following: Schools (9%), environment (6%) transportation (5%), municipal amalgamation (5%), care for the elderly (4%), health and social welfare (4%), economy, taxes and toll roads (4%), land-use/city development (4%). N = 1190. The data are gathered from “Lokalvalgundersøkelsen 2015”. Institute for Social Research and Statistics Norway made the data available but are not responsible for any of the analyses or interpretations.

² This is not the place for a more comprehensive account of developments regarding political legitimacy. For interested readers, see e.g. Beetham (1991), Beetham and Lord (1998), Habermas (1979), Dahl (1989), Norris (1999). With reference to (political) legitimacy Beetham (1991:15–16), for instance, state that “power can be legitimate to the extent that (i) it conforms to established rules, (ii) the rules can be justified by reference to beliefs shared by both dominant and subordinate, and (iii) there is evidence of consent by subordinate to the particular power relation.

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