



Policy entrepreneurs and opportunities: Establishing a model of policy change through bicycle infrastructure at the municipal level



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ABSTRACT

Although bicycling has been the subject of increasing academic attention, particularly in the areas of mode choice, benefit analyses, and discussions of policies/treatments, much less attention has been devoted to actually studying how communities have made decisions about whether and what they will implement in regards to bicycle infrastructure. “Policy entrepreneurs” are theorized as actors centrally responsible for either creating an opportunity or capitalizing on an opportunity to pair a public problem with a policy solution. A survey instrument solicited directly the participation of the 200 most populous municipalities within the United States. Using a variety of analytical tools (and merged data sources) a model of municipal transportation policy change is developed that contributes an important perspective to the existing paradigm of policy process theory. Neither individual policy entrepreneurs nor their role or qualities were not significant effectors of change, despite being regularly present. However, where networks of supportive actors (including strong champions/policy entrepreneurs) were present they played a critical role in making projects happen and at larger scales. This finding puts additional emphasis moving forward on the collaborative nature of municipal policy change. Advocates and planners may be more successful by being attuned to these networks and political contexts and taking advantage of open “windows” of engagement, or by ‘manually’ opening these windows. Lastly, city population was also associated with implementation, suggesting underlying factors to be explored in the future.

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1. Introduction

To say that a lot of attention is paid to mode and route choice is probably a bit of an understatement, if the volume of published work is any indication. There is good reason to believe that safety (Buehler and Pucher, 2011a, 2011b), perceived safety (Akar and Clifton, 2009; Heinen et al., 2011), distance (Broach et al., 2012; Cervero and Duncan, 2003), traffic volume (Broach et al., 2012; Providelo and Sanches, 2011), traffic speed (Providelo and Sanches, 2011), topography (Cervero and Duncan, 2003), and current weather (Flynn et al., 2012; Sears et al., 2012; Heinen et al., 2011) are all significant influences on cycling behavior. Because of these factors (particularly safety and traffic conditions), the provision of dedicated facilities is a major encourager of bicycling (Akar and Clifton, 2009; Buehler and Pucher, 2011a, 2011b; Broach et al., 2012; Heinen et al., 2010; Krizek et al., 2009; Monsere et al., 2012). Given that the goal of much current research is to support the efforts of communities to better encourage and foster bicycling, it is not surprising that so much work focuses on developing a better

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understanding of what factors influence the decision to bicycle. In fact, this work is fairly critical to the selection of optimal infrastructure, programs, and policies, and has to-date provided a wealth of data that, when considered together, provides some very useful information about bicycling behavior.

While studies of mode and route choice can reveal a lot about behavior, and the importance of the built environment, these studies do not provide us with a good understanding of how a city actually triggers a shift in policies toward supporting bicycling. While planners and engineers have touted widely the characteristics of bicycle-friendly environments (low traffic volumes and speeds, high perceived safety, etc.) as the reason to invest in cycletracks, buffered bike lanes, and other protected and/or separated infrastructure, it is not clear why some cities have taken these steps and others have not. A few studies have discussed the factors that might facilitate or limit the adoption of bicycle-friendly policies and projects (Cole et al., 2010; Cradock et al., 2009; De Zeeuw and Flusche, 2011), but there have been no focused efforts to explore any particular hypotheses regarding policy change (Khayesi and Amekudzi, 2011), nor has there been much discussion of how theories of the policy process might provide value to the goal of growing bicycling.

These questions gain additional significance when framed by the concepts of public involvement, citizen engagement, and network governance. While the transportation planning process has traditionally been characterized as a 'rational planning model' (Khisty and Arslan, 2005; Meyer and Miller, 2001), this conception of planning as technocratic predict-and-provide problem-solving has undergone a gradual evolution in the last two decades (Litman, 2013; Willson, 2001; Hysing, 2009; Talvitie, 1997). Social and cultural values have always been imbued into planning decisions (Wachs, 2004; Bickerstaff and Walker, 2005), but this is beginning to rise to greater prominence and visibility in the form of the public involvement movement in planning (Batheram et al., 2005), fueled by an increasing awareness of the relationship between transport and sustainability, economic activity, opportunity, and quality of life (Bertolini, 2007; Slotterback, 2010). The intent of this focus on citizen involvement has been to introduce specific channels and processes by which values can more clearly and directly mix with other forms of data (modeling, counts, etc.) to improve decision-making (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004).

The reality is that these processes often fall short of the deliberative vision (Bickerstaff et al., 2002; Vigar, 2006), reduced to campaigns to validate decisions (Newman et al., 2004) or inform the public of activities (Ward, 2001), rather than engaging in the much more difficult discursive practice that may be needed (Rowe, 2005). Debates continue as well as to whether any type of public engagement can achieve the lofty goals set for it (Owens, 2000; Newman et al., 2004). Still, the pressure to make more comprehensive and informed decisions has introduced greater opportunities for entrepreneurial citizens and advocacy organizations to familiarize themselves with transportation institutions and contribute to planning discourse and decisions. Transportation planning remains highly path dependent and resistant to change, particularly in its institutions, narratives, and epistemology (Hysing, 2009; Innes and Gruber, 2005; Low and Astle, 2009). As such, theoretical frameworks that give credence to the role and influence of public perspectives and values in the decision-making process are underdeveloped in civil engineering and transportation planning. To contribute to filling the gap in this area, a framework has been pulled from the policy change literature to be tested in its usefulness and applicability to the question of local infrastructure policy change.

If the general understanding of the relationship between policies and behavior is accurate, then the question of variation in city bicycle infrastructure turns from the causes of mode share to the causes of adoption of bicycle policies, programs, and projects. Since there is good reason to believe that variation in bicycle policy decision-making is likely not explained by strict reference to rational analysis of costs and benefits (Weber, 2014), there must be meaningful differences between the cities that have developed bicycle projects/policies, and those which have not (or at least differences associated with the scale or type of their respective projects/policies). Little research has explored these differences, but there are a few good starting points: Firstly, there is consensus that bicycling is a fundamentally local activity, making the primary scale of decision-making the municipal level (Handy and McCann, 2010). While other levels of government are influential, including Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) (York et al., 2011), and the federal government (Newhall, 2013), local governments are responsible for the large majority of planning and policy decisions (York et al., 2011). Arguments have been made that policies and projects are directly tied to the influence of advocacy organizations (Wray, 2008), strong local leadership (Handy and McCann, 2010; Cole et al., 2010), and the coordination and cooperation of multiple actors (Pucher et al., 2011; Pucher and Buehler, 2008; Pucher et al., 2010). A working understanding of what factors have been responsible for facilitating the selection and implementation of bicycle policies and projects is an important gap in our collective knowledge, and a question which could provide useful lessons not only to the governance, planning, and mode-specific research which inform this project, but also to the practical efforts of communities to develop conditions conducive to dramatic increases in bicycling. Though this new direction could offer a multitude of possible projects, this project begins by testing in particular one prominent policy change framework, the so-called "Multiple Streams Framework" (MSF) developed and expounded by Kingdon and Zahariadis, among others (Weber, 2014). This perspective appears to parallel the qualitative narratives of policy change in cities like Davis, Portland, and New York; this project explores whether the MSF can indeed accurately and consistently explain these policy changes.

2. Theory

Reviewing the issue context around a particular policy area often suggests a range of potential directions for any set of research questions. There are numerous competing explanations for policy change that could be considered or at least

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