



# Great Britain adults' opinions on cycling: Implications for policy



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## ABSTRACT

In its neglect of cycling, the transport policy history of Great Britain is typical of many car-dependent societies. Policy inertia with respect to sustainable travel may be driven by the assumptions that, firstly, most households have access to the use of a car and are keen to preserve the mobility advantages the current system offers them, and secondly that environmental and health considerations should be subjugated to economic priorities. Thus, in spite of warm words about cycling, pro-car policies tend to dominate.

Set against this policy backdrop, and taking the stance that public opinion can influence policy change, this paper reports the results of two large scale surveys of opinions regarding the practice of cycling and its role within society, carried out amongst samples of adults representative of Great Britain, in 2010 and 2013. Results indicated broadly positive opinions relating to cycling as part of society, albeit with these measures dropping slightly between 2010 and 2013. Opinions of cycling were found to be significantly linked to voting intention with, broadly speaking, a gradient of decreasing positivity when moving from the political left to right. These results imply a possible link of 'surface' opinions of cycling being influenced by underlying 'deep-seated' beliefs and values. These results are discussed in terms of policy options for pro-cycling groups wishing to influence the debate. Options include decoupling cycling from underlying belief systems and presenting simply as a form of everyday transport; promoting cycling as a solution to multi-social issues across health, the environment and economic considerations such as lower congestion; the pros and cons of de-marketing car usage; and finally, changing underlying belief systems. It is concluded that pro-cycling advocates may be pleased with the broad support of cycling's contribution to society, but they may need to seek alliances with other environmental or health groups in order to turn these good intentions into genuine policy change.

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## 1. Introduction

There is increasing evidence that cycling is beneficial for health and environmental sustainability (Cavill et al., 2008; Jarret et al., 2012; Woodcock et al., 2009; de Hartog et al., 2010; Rojas-Rueda et al., 2011). However, in its neglect of cycling, the transport policy history of Great Britain is typical of many car-dependent societies. Decades of more or less unquestioning (from successive British governments) promotion of car cultures have been subjected to criticism (Aldred, 2012 has an in depth discussion) from minority parties (in particular the UK Green Party), pressure groups (such as the Campaign for Better Transport, Cyclists' Touring Club and Sustrans), and prominent academics (such as Goodwin (e.g. 1990, 1994, 2013); also see Davis and Parkin, 2016), though as yet with little collective success in achieving policy change. This policy landscape – car dominance but with fringe pressures for change – is echoed, though in different ways, across similar car dependent societies,

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for example Australia, the U.S., Canada, Italy and France. Meanwhile developing countries such as Brazil, or China, who had hitherto embraced automobiles as central to their economic growth are also possibly beginning to question their current policies. The alarming rise in environmental and health costs, with motor transport a major driver of these costs, has more recently placed narratives in favour of active travel modes somewhat more in vogue, although these narratives have yet to be accompanied by significant funding. A more accurate picture of the reality of political priorities emerges from the recent round of spending announcements (see e.g. [Department for Transport, 2014](#)) which has little funding of cycling amongst a capital spend devoted to road building. Meanwhile, since the 1990s, cycling policies have been largely devolved to local authorities and, again, given little funding ([Gaffron, 2003](#); [Aldred, 2012](#)).

The problem does not lie with a lack of knowledge or understanding of what to do. There is increasing agreement about the policies needed to encourage cycling in car dominant countries ([Lazendorf and Busch-Geertsema, 2014](#); [Pooley et al., 2013](#); [Horton and Parkin, 2012](#); [NICE, 2012](#); [Jones, 2012](#); [Pucher and Buehler, 2008](#)). For instance [Pooley et al. \(2013\)](#) offer an agenda that responds to the calls for safer and more pleasant conditions to cycle: fully segregated cycle routes; restrictions on traffic speeds; changes in legal liability from collisions; changes to the built environment; cycling training provision; partnership marketing with employers, schools and so on, and finally changes made to the image of cycling, for example campaigns to promote cycling as normal for everyday travel rather than for a sporty minority. However, with the exception of the roll out of urban 20 mph limits and small scale localised promotional work, recent cycling policy in Britain has tended to consist largely of warm expressions of support but little of substance, with funding for growth being of so small in scale as to be only noticeable within a few small ‘trial towns’ (and one larger city, Bristol). The rhetoric of governmental support has tended to lean heavily on the language of ‘choice’, ostensibly branded as mode-neutral, but in reality heavily favouring the car dominant status quo ([Aldred, 2012](#); [Horton and Parkin, 2012](#); [Pooley et al., 2013](#)).

What are the underlying causes of this political inertia? [Sloman's \(2006, ch.8\)](#) work suggests that political inertia with respect to sustainable travel is driven by a series of assumptions made by policy makers – about economic priorities and about the public's view of alternatives to the car. Two such assumptions are relevant here. Assumption one is that most households have access to the use of a car and are keen to preserve the mobility advantages the current system offers them. Assumption two is that environmental and health considerations should be subjugated to economic priorities, and that therefore the key transport issue is not better public health, or pollution control but in fact congestion relief. These civil service and political assumptions, combined with an unsympathetic media and long established corporate road lobbying that has been entrenched for decades ([Hamer, 1986](#)), have led policy makers to draw their inevitable conclusions about the public's attitude to cycling. These may be unspoken but privately regarded as: the public are fairly indifferent to cycling or regard it as quirky, and that a minority may be actively hostile to it; that car ownership and travel are the norm and that there is more demand; that there is little mainstream public pressure to fund a growth in cycling; and that losing car related ‘freedoms’ is politically unacceptable.

These tensions between pro-car ‘business as usual’ policies being challenged at the fringes by advocates of ‘active travel’ form the backdrop to this paper. Our central purpose is to report upon recent large scale surveys of representative samples of the Great Britain (hereafter reported as GB) adult population in order to shed light on the actual rather than assumed opinions of the GB adult public on cycling, and thence to link this data to current policies. Whilst the literature on cycling is quite rich and diverse ranging from growth strategies, already mentioned, to policy discussions domestically ([Goodwin, 1999](#); [Aldred, 2012](#)) and internationally ([Pucher and Buehler, 2006](#)), health, climate change and active travel ([Thornton et al., 2011](#)) and addressing car cultures ([Kingham et al., 2001](#)), very few of these contributions to cycling policy literature have utilised population level survey data. [Davies et al. \(1997\)](#) and [Daley and Rissel \(2011\)](#) undertook qualitative studies that explored general attitudes and images of cycling amongst both non-cyclists and cyclists in car dependent countries. Quantitative studies of attitudes to cycling (e.g. [Gatersleben and Appleton, 2007](#)) have tended either to focus on cyclists only or on a limited region (such as in the case of [Transport for London \(e.g. 2012\)](#) that collects annual data on Londoners). In contrast, the survey reported here enables a representative view of how cycling is generally regarded across the population. Thus, noting the lessons of [Castillo-Manzano and Sánchez-Braza \(2013\)](#) the importance of taking account of public opinion in creating cycling policies, this, then, is the intended contribution of this paper: within the Great Britain context at least – what do the public think?

The authors undertook two large-scale surveys of opinions and claimed behaviours with respect to cycling in Great Britain in 2010 and 2013. There have been many studies of personal disposition to cycling, respondents' barriers to taking up cycling, and so on, and while we do examine disposition here, the primary focus was to survey general opinions relating to cycling within British society – how is it regarded? A series of questions were asked about the public's opinions of cycling, the role of the car in their lives, motor travel in terms of its convenience and expediency, cycling and health, wider environmental issues, respondents' cultural readiness for possible increases in cycling, and so on. In answering these questions about Great Britain, it is hoped that the conclusions drawn from this paper may have international relevance in shedding light on the gaps that can form between, on the one hand, government, media, and sector professionals (the establishment), and on the other hand the public when dealing with pro-cycling policies in car-dominant contexts.

The analysis will be informed by two theoretical frameworks shown in [Diagram 1](#) (the effect of public opinion on policy) and [Diagram 2](#) (opinions relating to personal disposition to cycling). Opinions are verbalised judgements – expressions of attitudes, beliefs and values ([Simons, 2001](#) p28). In turn Simons (also p28) defined beliefs as judgements of what respondents believe to be true, attitudes as judgements about liking or disliking something, and values as judgements of what people regard as important. So, whilst opinions may reflect deeply held beliefs or values, they may also reflect snap

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