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Building acceptance for congestion charges – the Swedish experiences compared

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ABSTRACT

Lack of public and political acceptance is the main barrier to introducing congestion charges. Here we compared the experiences of congestion charge introduction in the Swedish cities of Stockholm and Gothenburg, with the aim of explaining differences in political and public acceptance. The results showed the importance of procedural factors, such as the consistency of objectives in policy packages, communication and marketing efforts, and the use of public referendums, and of contextual factors, including urban form, level of congestion, and functioning of public transport. Important lessons were drawn between the two cities, but primarily on how to design, rather than secure public acceptance for, a congestion tax scheme. To build acceptance for congestion charges, close attention must be paid to the local political and geographical context when designing and implementing such a scheme.

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1. Introduction

Congestion charges are frequently advocated as an effective strategy to reduce urban car traffic and congestion and deal with local environmental and health problems. However, it has proven extremely difficult to win political and public acceptance for the measure. So rare is successful implementation that each case of success and failure has been extensively studied for clues to the winning formula, so that the policy can be rolled out more generally. Previous research has generated important in-depth, case-based empirical knowledge (Gullberg and Isaksson 2009) as well as lists of more general explanatory factors (Vonk Noordegraaf et al. 2014). Frustratingly, however, each case seems to be highly subject to local political, economic, and social conditions. The very different political and geographical contexts of the congestion charges in Singapore, London, and Valletta clearly illustrate this point (Attard and Ison 2010; Livingstone 2004; Sørensen et al. 2014; Vonk Noordegraaf et al. 2014). Research on policy transfer and policy mobilities (Benson and Jordan 2011; Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; McCann and Ward 2013), which analyzes the transfer and translation of policies from one context to another (Cochrane and Ward 2012), has shown that local implementation is complex, political, dynamic, and highly contextual (Attard and Enoch 2011). In the same spirit, the former London Mayor Ken Livingstone (2004) advised against following the London scheme slavishly and instead urged policymakers to design their own scheme to meet their own needs.

Sweden has experienced the introduction and implementation of two congestion charging schemes: Stockholm, which introduced a permanent congestion tax in 2007 (preceded by a full-scale trial), and Gothenburg, which introduced a congestion tax as recently as 2013. While the implementation process in Stockholm was characterized by a high degree of political conflict, it ultimately found support in a local referendum. In Gothenburg, introduction of a congestion tax was the subject of political consensus, but the measure ended up not being supported in an advisory local referendum. What is the explanation for these different outcomes in political and public acceptance? Here we used a comparative approach (most-similar comparative design) to examine the introduction of the two congestion tax schemes. The aim of the analysis was to explore similarities and differences in the policy process behind their introduction and the political and geographical context, in order to identify key factors explaining differences in public and political acceptance and the process of policy transfer between the two cities.

The next section of this paper presents a broad theoretical discussion on key factors behind public and political acceptance of congestion

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charges and other road pricing measures.[1] After a short presentation of our research design in Section 3, in Section 4 we give a brief account of how the congestion tax schemes were decided upon and implemented in the two cities. In Section 5 we systematically compare the two schemes in terms of procedural and contextual factors. Finally, we discuss policy transfer between the two cities and important similarities and differences and their effects on the legitimacy and public acceptance of the schemes.

2. How to build acceptance for congestion charges

Experiences of implementing congestion charges from around the world have shown that the key obstacles are political rather than technical (Albalate and Bel 2009; Attard and Ison 2010). As a redistributive measure that imposes a charge on previously free (or cheaper) road space, congestion charges are always controversial (Gullberg and Isaksson 2009). Even in cases where such policies are widely acknowledged to be necessary to secure long-term sustainability, citizens have a tendency to place short-term material wellbeing first. This is related to difficulties in foreseeing the real societal and individual costs and benefits of this type of scheme (Börjesson et al. 2012). Furthermore, a lack of trust in the effectiveness or equity of these measures or in the ability of public institutions to implement them successfully are other frequently cited reasons for public opposition (Sørensen et al. 2014).

How can public and political acceptance be secured? While elected representatives depend on public support, they do not act solely on the direct wishes of citizens but can also *champion* ideas that challenge the public in various ways. One example is the introduction of congestion charges in London, where Ken Livingstone launched the proposal alongside improved public transport as part of his campaign in the mayoral election (Banister 2003). When he won the election, he thus had a clear mandate to implement congestion charges.

Other cities have sought support through *public referendums*. However, experience from Edinburgh and Manchester shows the difficulties with this approach. In these two cases, the majority voted against congestion charges, which has been explained by lack of information and lack of belief in the effectiveness of the measure (Hensher and Li 2013). Experiences from Stockholm and Milan, where local referendums led to a yes verdict, show the importance of giving people the opportunity to get first-hand experience of how congestion charging actually works before they vote on the measure (Hensher and Li 2013).

Even in cases with strong political support, the importance of meaningful *consultations* to build and maintain public and stakeholder acceptance has been highlighted (Banister 2003; Livingstone 2004). This includes *information and marketing campaigns* to inform the public of the functioning and effects of the scheme. Effective communication also depends on how easy it is for the citizens to understand the objectives and design of the scheme (Vonk Noordegraaf et al. 2014).

Combining congestion charges with improved public transport in a wider *policy package* has been deemed important to secure acceptance (Sørensen et al. 2014). Altogether, the success of different strategies depends on the ideological, political, and institutional context (Attard and Enoch 2011; cf. McCann and Ward 2013). In a discussion about the implementation of road pricing measures in general, Langmyhr (1999) demonstrated the importance of leading politicians building *strategic alliances* to secure successful implementation, and stressed that such coalitions need to be built and rebuilt over time. Alliances might be built around, for instance, the desired effects, the design, or the use of revenues. However, Manville and King (2013) caution against relying on "revenue recycling" to secure acceptance, as the revenues are easily diverted.

Although procedural factors are important for securing public and political acceptance, success is also highly dependent on the *characteristics of the transport system*; primarily the severity of the congestion (Albalate and Bel 2009; Attard and Ison 2010) and the functioning of the public transport system and car dependency (Gaunt et al. 2007; Kottenhoff and Brundell Freij 2009). The final point is particularly important, as it addresses the ratio between relative winners and losers of a congestion charging scheme (Vonk Noordegraaf et al. 2014).

Finally, learning from other schemes has been deemed important to design and justify politically controversial measures such as congestion charges. While the experiences of others can be used to show that congestion charges are able to successfully handle common urban transport problems, contextual circumstances need to be carefully considered in such *policy transfer* (Attard and Enoch 2011).

3. Research design

Based on a broad theoretical discussion of key factors for successful introduction of congestion charges, in this study we compared the introduction of the Stockholm and Gothenburg congestion tax schemes. These cases exist in the same cultural and national political context, and are both subject to the same legal and institutional framework for congestion charging. These are factors reported to be highly important for learning across cases (Attard and Enoch 2011; Vonk Noordegraaf et al. 2014). In addition, both sought public support in local referendums, which further strengthens their comparability. The most similar comparative design helped identify differences in the local contexts and in the policy processes behind the introduction of the schemes that were important in understanding the different outcomes in terms of political and public acceptance. As in most real-world cases, these are interdependent – rather than independent – as governments seek to learn from the experiences of others (McCann and Ward 2013; Rose 1991). Although not the primary focus of the study, this inter-local policy transfer and learning is discussed later in this paper using the framework of Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) for the analysis of policy transfer (see also Benson and Jordan 2011; McCann and Ward 2013). This framework is structured around seven questions: Why was policy transfer undertaken? Who was involved in the process? What was transferred? From where were lessons drawn? How complete was the transfer? What were the barriers to transfer? Was transfer a success or failure? This framework has been successfully applied by Attard and Enoch (2011) in an analysis of the introduction of congestion charges in Valletta, Malta.

The analysis was based on two separate case studies, of the Stockholm and Gothenburg congestion tax schemes, conducted in 2007 and 2013 respectively. In both studies, we used a case-based approach aimed at generating in-depth and contextual empirical knowledge on the policy processes and their outcome in terms of acceptability and legitimacy. Both case studies were shaped by a combination of semi-structured interviews, i.e., interviews based on, but not restricted to, an interview guide (Kvale 1996), and existing documentation from the process, such as policy documents and official reports. Initial interviewees were identified using central policy documents, after which relevant actors were identified with snowball sampling, i.e., asking interviewees to suggest other important actors for further interviews. Interview data were used to get more in-depth factual accounts of the process (informants), to complement and clarify data from policy documents and previous research, and to collect personal experiences, perspectives, and valuations of the process from the people involved (respondents).

The Stockholm study was initiated as a research assignment by the City of Stockholm who wanted to make sure that the process was well documented from several perspectives, including not only the local policy process but also the complex interplay between the state, the region,

[1] Here we use the term road pricing to refer to any policy instrument that sets a price on road space, while the term congestion charge is used for such instruments that explicitly aim to reduce congestion (compared with e.g., only financing new infrastructure). In Sweden, congestion charging is legally designed as a national tax, so we use the term congestion tax when referring to the Swedish congestion charging schemes (Government Bill 2003/04:145 2004).

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