



Explaining voting behavior in the Gothenburg congestion tax referendum[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The Gothenburg congestion tax was introduced in 2013 and later subjected to a consultative referendum where the citizens, despite getting first-hand experience with the scheme, rejected it. This article explains voting behavior in the referendum using both self-expressed motives and five nested models to test various explanations suggested in previous research. Drawing on an extensive longitudinal study, we conclude first that although a majority voted against the tax in the referendum, attitudinal preferences have become more positive since its introduction – supporting previous findings and hypothesis of familiarity effects. Second, we present a model for voting behavior that explains significant portions of the variance, concluding that it is not the outcomes of the charges that are important, but rather if the charges are in line with basic values, if the uses of the revenues (in this case, infrastructure investments) are supported, and if the institutions and processes introducing the charges are perceived as legitimate, trustworthy, and responsive. The article ends with general policy recommendations on the basis of these findings.

1. Introduction

Congestion charges are widely considered an effective instrument to reduce urban congestion and deal with associated environmental and health problems. The main barrier for introducing congestion charges has been identified as lack of public acceptance. As a measure that imposes a charge on previously free (or cheaper) road space, congestion charges are always controversial and citizens often have difficulties to foresee the real societal and individual costs and benefits with this type of schemes (Börjesson et al., 2012). Hence, enabling people the opportunity to gain first-hand experience with congestion charges before saying yes or no has been a key policy recommendation (Hensher and Li, 2013). This has also found support in studies on referendum voting in road pricing reforms. While lack of information and disbelief in the measure has been identified as key explanations behind the referendum results in Manchester and Edinburgh, where majorities voted against congestion charging, the referendums in Milan and Stockholm, where majorities voted in favor of congestion charging, both were conducted after the citizens had a chance to get familiar with the schemes during a trial period (in the case of Stockholm) and a predecessor system (in the case of Milan) (Börjesson et al., 2012; Gaunt et al., 2007; Hensher and Li, 2013).

In the Swedish city of Gothenburg, a congestion tax was introduced

in January 2013 and later that spring the City Council decided to hold a consultative local referendum on the continuation of the tax. The referendum was carried out in September 2014 – twenty months after the introduction of the tax – and 57% voted against continuing the Gothenburg congestion tax. In this paper we set out to explain voting behavior in the referendum on the continuation of the Gothenburg congestion tax. Drawing on an extensive longitudinal study we first examine if the experiences of the Gothenburg congestion tax have made the public more positive to the scheme. Second, we explore self-expressed motives behind voting behavior in the 2014 referendum. Third and finally, five nested regression models are tested covering a wide range of explanations of voting behavior suggested in previous research.

Drawing on previous research on public acceptance of congestion charging and road pricing we identify a number of potential explanatory factors behind voting behavior in congestion charging reforms. A first basic idea, which has already been introduced, is that support of congestion charges increase with *familiarity*. Several potential explanations for this phenomenon have been suggested, including that the benefits of the scheme are larger than anticipated and/or that expected negative effects are less severe. Another reason suggested is that people tend to accept what they perceive as unavoidable, hence, once a scheme is in place and opposition is perceived as futile, acceptance grows

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(Börjesson et al., 2012; Schade and Baum, 2007). Although this is an important factor in explaining public acceptance, in a referendum situation, the congestion charges are not perceived as unavoidable. Hence, we need to look into a wider set of potential explanatory factors to explain referendum voting.

The outcomes of congestion charges are by nature differentiated across the population, i.e. they do not affect all the citizens the same. One argument against congestion charges is that they focus too heavily on average welfare gains (Banister, 2003) and do not adequately deal with the fact that they create winners and losers (Richardson et al., 2010), especially socially disadvantaged people who depend on car mobility for access to key services and opportunities (Lucas, 2012). Thus (subjective) income is likely to affect voting behavior. In addition, congestion charges only target a specific sub-set of the population – the motorists. Car use has been shown to be a principal determinant of voting behavior, where car owners/users strongly oppose congestion charges while public transport users and others (e.g. cyclists and walkers) support it (Gaunt et al., 2007; Eliasson and Jonsson, 2011). However, it is not only current travel behavior that influences acceptance of congestion charges, but also the attractiveness of alternative modes of transport. Thus, research points to the importance of policy packages (i.e. combinations of policy measures that are aimed to address the same problem) where distributive measures such as improvements in public transport in combination with the congestion charges can increase acceptance (Sørensen et al., 2014). In Stockholm, efforts were made to make public transport more attractive, for instance through extra capacity before, during, and after the trial, which helped increase public acceptance (Kottenhoff and Brundell Freij, 2009). However, once made permanent the revenues became earmarked for a new motorway tunnel (Richardson et al., 2010; cf. Manville and King, 2013).

Before experiencing congestion charges, people tend to exaggerate potential negative personal effects of changes such as increased costs and reduced flexibility (Börjesson et al., 2012; Schuitema et al., 2010). In Stockholm, the trial period has been deemed of key importance precisely because it enabled the residents themselves to experience significant benefits in terms of reduced travel time, improved travel reliability, and better air quality (Eliasson, 2008; Eliasson and Jonsson, 2011). Previous research has also shown that it is not only personal consequences of the congestion charges that affect acceptance but also collective consequences e.g. successfully contributing to reduced local congestion and pollution, improved public transport and transport infrastructure, as well as more diffuse policy outcomes such as environmental improvements and benefits for future generations (Börjesson et al., 2012). More generally speaking, and in line with the theoretical framework of reasoned action (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010), we can assume that various *beliefs about outcomes* of congestion charges influence an overall attitude towards a specific congestion charging scheme and ultimately a behavioral intention of supporting or opposing it.

The extent to which congestion charges are believed to generate beneficial personal and collective outcomes also depends on awareness of the urban transport problems. In both Stockholm and Edinburgh, the congestion problems were widely acknowledged (Gaunt et al., 2007; Richardson et al. 2010). However, even in cases where the public acknowledges congestion problems, this does not mean that they prefer the particular instrument of congestion charges to handle it (Gaunt et al., 2007). There is evidence that many people simply do not like prices as an allocation mechanism (Börjesson et al., 2012). Such beliefs are also related to more basic values related to individual freedom, restrictions of mobility, and public intervention. Not surprisingly, self-transcendent and biospheric values are generally positively related to pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, such as the acceptability of environmental policy measures, while self-enhancement and egoistic values tend to be negatively related to them (Nilsson et al., 2004). Drawing from the Stockholm experiences, Eliasson and Jonsson (2011)

conclude a strong connection between general environmental values and positive attitudes towards congestion charges. Previous research has also stressed the importance of equity for making congestion charging publicly acceptable (Eliasson and Mattsson, 2006).

Voting behavior is, however, not only explained by how people value the scheme, but also to what extent they are knowledgeable about the scheme. Voter rejection of the congestion charges in Edinburgh and Manchester has partially been attributed to the complexity of the schemes, which made the scheme more difficult for the voters to understand and, thus, increased uncertainty and aversion towards it (Gaunt et al., 2007; Hensher and Li, 2013; Vonk Noordegraaf et al., 2014).

People's perceptions of the procedures and institutions responsible for introducing and implementing congestion charges also influence acceptance. In Edinburgh, the citizens acknowledged the problems of congestion but did not believe in the effectiveness of charges; neither to reduce congestion nor to improve public transport. A realistic explanation to this, according to Gaunt and colleagues (2007), was the lack of trust in the local government. Only 17% agreed that the City Council could be trusted to improve the welfare of the City's residents. Experiences from London show the importance of actively engaging in information and marketing efforts, public consultations, and stakeholder involvement to build and maintain public acceptance (Banister, 2003; Livingstone, 2004). By including the congestion charges in his election manifesto Ken Livingstone got a clear mandate from the citizens to introduce the scheme. However, even then, the importance of including the citizens and organized interests in the process was deemed vital to ensure public support (Livingstone, 2004). People tend to object to policies if they feel their voices are not heard in the process, or if they do not perceive the process to be democratic, fair, and open (Hysing, 2015). In Stockholm, arranging a public referendum was in itself an important strategy to divert criticism as well as increase legitimacy (Isaksson and Richardson, 2009).

2. Background: the Gothenburg congestion tax

The Gothenburg congestion tax was introduced on 1 January 2013 as part of a large infrastructure investment package, the so-called West Sweden Package, including the construction of new roads and railway infrastructure and improvements in public transport. The largest investment was the West Link – an eight kilometre double railway track, with six kilometre through a tunnel under central Gothenburg – estimated to cost SEK 20 billion (EURO 2 billion). The congestion tax zone consists of 36 control points, mainly located along a single cordon surrounding the core of the city. Some control points were built outside the cordon to prevent people from circumventing the tax zone and to avoid congestion elsewhere (Fig. 1). At the time of introduction, all Swedish-registered vehicles entering the area between 6:00 a.m. and 6:29 p.m. Monday to Friday (except in July) were required to pay a fee of between SEK 8 and SEK 18 depending on the time of day. The maximum fee per day and vehicle was SEK 60. The charge was levied in both directions. Vehicles that passed multiple control points within 60 min were only charged once (Swedish Code of Statutes, 2004:629).

The Gothenburg City Council resolved in principle to introduce a congestion tax in January 2010 (Gothenburg City Council, 2010). However, the formal authority to introduce congestion taxes in Swedish cities resides with the national parliament and it is the state that manages and receives the tax revenues. An agreement was thus reached between the national government, regional governments, and the City of Gothenburg on using the revenues – estimated to about SEK 14 billion over a period of 25 years – to co-finance regional infrastructure investments estimated to a total cost of SEK 34 billion (Swedish Road Administration, Swedish Rail Administration, Region Västra Götaland, Region Halland, City of Gothenburg, and Gothenburg Region Association of Local Authorities, 2009). The formal objectives was to design a system that could generate enough revenues to co-

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