



The road to acceptance: Attitude change before and after the implementation of a congestion tax



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ABSTRACT

Attitudes and beliefs concerning a congestion tax in Gothenburg, Sweden, were investigated in a three-wave panel with 4738 respondents, twice before and once after the implementation. Attitudes were more positive after the implementation. Perceived environmental outcomes and value expressive beliefs were most strongly related to attitudes toward the tax. Respondents' perceived the system as easier to use and experienced less negative outcomes after the implementation compared to the expectations before. The most important variable in explaining the change in attitudes (before the implementation) was value expressive beliefs. The results indicate that the most strongly related beliefs both for explaining attitudes and the change in attitudes after the implementation are abstract in nature. The attitudes are grounded in emotional and value-related motives, rather than the more specific expected outcomes of the scheme.

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1. Introduction

When governments and politicians aim to implement policy measures, such as environmental policies, one major factor they have to take into account is public acceptance. If the public's reluctance to accept the measure is too widespread, politicians are likely to hesitate to implement or even suggest these measures. However, some previous studies suggest that people's attitudes may become more positive after the implementation of a policy measure (Eliasson & Jonsson, 2011; Hårsman & Quigley, 2010; Odeck & Bråthen, 2008; Schuitema, Steg, & Forward, 2010). Therefore it is important to achieve a better understanding of *if*, and in that case *why* the public's attitudes towards policy measures change after they are implemented. Understanding the underlying motives of attitude change is important when developing tools that can help make better predictions about policy acceptance after a policy is implemented. This will enhance political decisions about long-term public acceptance for the policy.

Environmental problems such as congestion, noise, odour, and parking problems due to large scale transport are major problems and causes societal as well as individual costs in many (if not all) urban areas around the world (Gärling & Steg, 2007). Economic policy measures such as taxes and fees payable by car users passing toll-rings or zones around city centres will be referred to as road pricing schemes in this overview. These schemes are becoming more and more common, even though their development is rather slow (Verhoef, Bliemer, Steg, & van Wee, 2008). The first road pricing scheme was introduced in Singapore in 1975, after which many other cities introduced road pricing schemes, such as Hong Kong (1983), Bergen (1986), Oslo (1990), Trondheim (1991), Rome (2001), London (2003), Stockholm (2006), Milan (2008), and Gothenburg (2013). However, in many other cases, the implementation of road pricing schemes failed, for example in Manchester (2005), Edinburgh (2007), New York City (2008), the Netherlands (2010), and Copenhagen (2012). This is largely due to the fact that these road-pricing schemes are often considered controversial and, subsequently, are hard to implement due to public resistance. In some cases however (for instance in New York City), it is not widespread public resistance but the actions of a vocal minority who through political and legal process cause a congestion charge to fail (Schaller, 2010). One could therefore

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characterise the barriers for implementation as a combination of lack of public support and political courage (Gärling & Schuitema, 2007). As a result, the acceptability of transport pricing and taxes has become a common research theme during the last fifteen years.

Not much attention has been given to the changes in acceptability of road pricing schemes over time, although with the implementation of schemes such as the congestion charges in London (2003), and Stockholm (2006), some insights on the effects on public acceptance over time were revealed, indicating that acceptance may increase. Hensher and Li (2013) conclude in a review of road pricing schemes that the reason why this is the case is that the perceived outcomes of the schemes were seen as positive and that made the main difference between public support or not. Still, a lot is unknown about how public support develops over time when a road pricing scheme or other similar measures is implemented. And even less is known about *why* the public opinion changes over time. Therefore, this current work contributes to the field by focussing on the change of attitudes and beliefs over time targeting the congestion tax in Gothenburg, which was implemented in 2013.

A longitudinal approach enables us to discern if the expected change is due to the official information or media attention before the implementation or due to the implementation of the tax. Further, by including psychological motives such as values and value expressive beliefs together with more specific perceptions of the functionality, effectiveness, and outcomes of the system, we are able to compare the influence of these constructs on attitude to the congestion tax at different points in time. Finally, we investigate if beliefs *before* the introduction of a congestion tax are associated with the changes in attitudes *after* its implementation. This novel approach contributes to the existing theoretical knowledge about attitude changes over time, whilst also providing useful insights for stakeholders and practitioners who work on the successful implementation of road pricing schemes.

Public opinion towards road pricing schemes is usually referred to as acceptability or acceptance. In line with others, we refer to acceptability as an attitude to the road-pricing scheme before the implementation and acceptance as an attitude after the implementation (Gärling, Jakobsson, Loukopoulos, & Fujii, 2008; Schuitema et al., 2010). We define an attitude as an evaluation (ranging from negative to positive) of an attitude object (in this case a congestion tax; cf., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). To enhance the readability of this paper, we will use attitudes as a common term to denote both acceptability and acceptance, and only indicate the differences (before and after implementation, respectively) when this is an important distinction.

The remainder of this introduction is organised as follows: A brief overview of the main findings of research on the acceptability of road pricing will be given in a section below. Next follows a section about the Gothenburg congestion tax, the case study in this paper, and finally a section with the aims and hypotheses of this study.

1.1. Case evidence: do attitudes of road pricing schemes change over time?

Most case studies that looked into attitude changes over time suggest that after the implementation of road pricing schemes attitudes became more positive. For example, when toll rings were introduced in the Norwegian cities Bergen (1986), Oslo (1990), and Trondheim (1991), there was strong public resistance against the introduction of these charges. However, a year after they were introduced, the resistance against the toll rings had decreased (Odeck & Bråthen, 1997; 2002; Tretvik, 2003), implying that attitudes had become more positive. Also, more positive attitudes were

observed after the implementation of road pricing schemes in London (introduced in 2002; Transport for London, 2004), Stockholm (introduced in 2006; Schuitema et al., 2010; Winslott-Hiselius, Brundell-Freij, Vagland, & Byström, 2009), and Milan (introduced in 2008; Martino, 2011). Hence, there seems to be a general tendency that attitudes toward road pricing schemes become more positive over time after their implementation. How can this be explained?

Empirical evidence shows that if people perceive positive effects of a road-pricing scheme, attitudes will be more positive than when no such positive effects were perceived (Eliasson & Jonsson, 2011; Hårsman & Quigley, 2010; Hensher & Li, 2013; Odeck & Bråthen, 2008; Schuitema et al., 2010). The perceived effects, referring to outcome beliefs, can apply to the individual (e.g., travel times, travel costs) and the collective (e.g., congestion levels, air quality; Börjesson, Eliasson, Hugosson, & Brundell-Freij, 2012; Schuitema et al., 2010); both have been shown to influence attitudes to road pricing schemes. In addition to the outcome beliefs (i.e., beliefs about which outcomes a road pricing scheme will have), it is highly relevant to understand how the outcomes are evaluated, that is, how positive or negative do people perceive the outcomes to be. For example, if people believe that road pricing schemes result in increased accessibility, more parking opportunities, and improved air quality *and* see these as positive outcomes, their attitudes will most likely become more positive (Eliasson & Jonsson, 2011; Odeck & Bråthen, 2008; Schuitema et al., 2010).

However, evidence in the literature suggests that factors other than outcome beliefs are important when studying attitudes to policies. These factors are not always based on rational cost-benefit analyses, but rather on motives related to moral and affective concerns. For example, Eriksson, Garvill, and Nordlund (2008) suggest that the perceived policy outcome is influenced by the extent to which people are aware of the problems that are targeted by road pricing schemes. That is, if people are aware of transport-related problems, they are more likely to think that road pricing schemes will change these problems, which in turn influences attitudes toward the road pricing schemes. It could be that the implementation of a road-pricing scheme changes people's problem awareness, which leads to changes in their outcome beliefs.

In addition, problem awareness depends on people's value orientation (Eriksson et al., 2008; Steg, Dreijerink, & Abrahamse, 2005; Stern, 2000). Values are defined as desirable trans-situational goals, varying in importance and serving as guiding principles in a person's life (Schwartz, 1992). People with strong self-enhancement values especially consider costs and benefits for them personally, whereas people with strong self-transcendent values particularly focus on costs and benefits for the collective (society, other people, and the environment). Later studies have modified the original value system to fit environmental issues and support for the categorization of values into biospheric, ego-centric, and altruistic dimensions has been found (De Groot & Steg, 2007; 2008). In contrast to Schwartz' (1992) theory, values that concern the environment (biospheric) are in this approach distinguished from other self-transcendent values, such as altruistic values. Not surprisingly, self-transcendent and biospheric values are generally positively related to pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, such as the acceptability of road pricing schemes if these are viewed as pro-environmental policies. Self-enhancement and egoistic values, on the other hand, tend to be negatively related them (e.g., Milfont & Gouveia, 2006; Nilsson, Von Borgstede, & Biel, 2004).

The positive relation between biospheric values and pro-environmental attitudes on the one hand, and the negative relation between egoistic values and pro-environmental attitudes on the other, is probably due to road pricing schemes being associated

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