

To: Transport & Health Policy Makers, & Practitioners
From: Professor Adrian Davis
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Subject: Essential Evidence 4 Scotland No.86 Change in support before and after implementation of controversial measures

Top Line: Support for controversial policies in the area of transport often increases after real-world implementation.

It seems plausible that support for controversial policy options in particular might change over time. Think of pricing policies, parking policies, and built environment policies that downplay the role of the car, benefiting public transport, walking and cycling, and making the environment more pleasant for non-car users (e.g., greenery and playgrounds). Researcher explored the issue of changes in support before and after the implementation of controversial transport policies.¹ Many candidate policies that led to changes in the status quo lead to a lot of debate, even in the case of smaller projects, such as installing a crosswalk with a stop sign, or converting a few parking places into a small park. The researchers gave four cases of controversial transport and the built environment policies that many people will recognize: 1) road pricing, 2) parking policies, 3) reducing the speed limit on highways, and 4) taxing flying.

First, road pricing is a policy that can be considered controversial. Over a century ago Pigou (1920) and Knight (1924) explained why, in the case of road congestion, pricing of scarce road capacity can result in efficient allocation and, therefore, welfare gains. Nevertheless, the number of real-world implementations is small (e.g. Stockholm, London – where support went up after implementation). Second, parking policies aiming to reduce parking capacity, or which introduce paid parking are often difficult to implement. Local municipalities hesitate to implement restrictive parking policies because of resident opposition. Third, policies aiming to reduce speed limits are difficult to implement. They are especially controversial because it adversely influences people's feeling of freedom on how to drive as they 'like' (loss aversion). Some cities have introduced 20 mph speed limits on many roads, an example being Edinburgh. Researchers concluded that support for this policy increased in the city after its real-world implementation. They speculated that in the before situation resistance to the speed policy was relatively large as it affected people's 'freedom to drive', whilst after implementation people's resistance altered 'when they experience the extent of the changes they need to make, and perceptions like longer journey times or reduced fuel efficiency are proven unfounded'.² Fourth, flying is not environment-friendly. Nevertheless, fuel for international flights is not taxed, nor are international airline tickets subject to value-added taxes. Although this inconsistency has been addressed many times, this fiscal advantage still applies. The researchers hypothesised that a lack of (expected) public support is a factor contributing to the status quo.

Regarding lessons learnt, the researchers say that the first very important and obvious lesson is that public support for controversial policies can increase after real-world implementation. Social acceptance is a key factor in political acceptance. This means that politicians might benefit from being aware of such changes in support. They could, for example, propose policies even if the majority of the public does not (yet) support these policies, or implement them in phases. Other aspects include, depending on the stage of a policy, it is important to pick the right moment for a certain mode of communication (e.g., marketing) in order to inform affected and involved parties. Next, as is generally recognised in the area public policy and managerial sciences, the role of dominant actors in policy development and implementation is crucial. Hence, to advance future controversial policies a possible strategy might be to find a charismatic person who fulfils the role of champion, visionary, or ambassador. Lastly, fairly implemented policy is essential.

¹ van Wee, B., Annema, J., van Barneveld, S. 2023 Controversial policies: growing support after implementation. A discussion paper, *Transport Policy*, 139: 79-86.

² Williams, D. et al, 2022 Public Attitudes to, and Perceived Impacts of 20mph (32 Km/h) Speed Limits in Edinburgh: an Exploratory Study Using the Speed Limits Perceptions Survey (SLiPS). *Transportation Research Part F*, 99–113.