

Decisive factors of congestion pricing acceptability

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Lack of public acceptability is often cited as the main obstacle for implementation of congestion pricing. Over the last decades a vast literature has sought to understand the causes of the low acceptance, and a number of explanatory factors have been identified. Most previous papers have focused on a small number of factors, and mostly on one city. This paper presents the results from a large survey carried out in three cities, selected to have varying experience of and attitude to congestion pricing. Stockholm introduced a congestion charging system in 2006 despite fierce public resistance, but the charges now enjoy overwhelming public support (around 70%). Helsinki planned to introduce a congestion charging system, but the plans were eventually abandoned in the spring of 2011 (around the time the survey was carried out). In Lyon, congestion pricing is not on the agenda. Through econometric analyses of the survey data, we identify a variety of factors affecting acceptability. While most of these factors have been identified or hypothesized by previous studies, we are also able to compare their relative impact, and compare results across cities. Four types of factors are shown to affect acceptability:

1. Factors related to self interest, such as expected payment, expected time savings, value of travel time, and use of revenues.
2. Factors related to perceived fairness, such as effects on vertical equity and attitude to payment principles (user pays, polluter pays) or allocation principles (allocating through price, queueing or administrative decisions).

3. Factors related to other ideological or political attitudes, such as environmental attitudes and trust in the government.
4. Factors related to own experience from congestion pricing and belief in its effects.

The explanatory factors turn out to be similar across cities in many respects, but not all. In all three cities, self-interest factors and whether one views pricing as a “fair” allocation mechanisms are the most important explanatory variable. After that come environmental attitude and “trust in government”. In Stockholm and Helsinki, vertical equity concerns are significant but the least important explanatory variable, while it is the second most important variable in Lyon.

While many of the factors have been shown (or argued) to affect congestion pricing acceptability in previous studies, we are able to compare their relative importance. Some of the factors have only been shown to be important through focus groups; we confirm some of these qualitative results with statistical results from the three cities. Some factors are new: for example, this study is (to our knowledge) the first that empirically establishes a strong link between value of time and support for congestion pricing (interestingly, this link is not due to differences in income). We also establish novel links between acceptability and certain indicators of “trust in government” and support for pricing as an allocation principle.