

Attitude of Europeans Toward Urban Mobility

PIERRE LACONTE AND
WM. CAMPBELL GRAEUB

Automobile traffic and its unchecked growth are the most crucial local problems facing cities of the European Community (EC). This finding and others come from the first European-wide survey of the attitude of citizens and elected officials toward urban mobility (1). The survey, made in 1991, was jointly sponsored by the Commission of the European Community and the members of the International Union of Public Transport (UITP) and was conducted by INRA (Europe), headquartered in Brussels, Belgium, and Socialdata, which is located in Munich, Germany.

The problems of urban traffic congestion caused by the rapidly growing number of automobiles have been receiving increased attention recently from both citizens and decision makers. In most industrialized societies, there is a growing sensitivity to environmental problems, and concerns have been expressed about the negative consequences of excessive automobile traffic on the health and quality of life of the urban population. These concerns led the sponsoring organizations to study the degree to which citizens and elected officials are aware of the problems and to compare their preferences for solutions. Insight gained from this study is targeted at better understanding of public support for transportation decisions.

In this study 13,149 Europeans in 13 countries were questioned in personal interviews using the Eurobarometer, the instrument by which the EC Commission

conducts periodic polls. Tight control over the question formulation in seven languages guaranteed the objectivity of the study. Similarly, 157 elected transportation officials from throughout Europe were questioned.

Although much can be learned from summary data, there are wide differences among responses from the 13 European countries surveyed (2): Belgium, Denmark, East Germany, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom, and West Germany. Underlying reasons include dissimilar national transportation infrastructure, different degrees of urbanization and motorization, varying transportation policies and economics, and divergent socio-cultural patterns. For example, almost 70 percent of the citizens in The Netherlands use bicycles every day or at least several times a week, whereas the EC average is about 30 percent. To ignore such exceptional conditions or the many other national differences that exist in Europe can lead to erroneous conclusions.

Perception of Current Situation

Almost 6 out of 10 Europeans (59 percent) consider the results of automobile traffic in their urban area to be unbearable (25 percent) or hardly bearable (34 percent). Although this question was phrased slightly differently when asked of political decision makers, the same proportion (25 percent) viewed traffic as being no longer bearable. On this issue there appears to be widespread consensus (Figure 1).

Nearly all of the political decision makers (92 percent) believe that automobiles are

the major cause of urban air pollution. Although this view is expressed less often by the public, it is still one shared by more than three-fourths of the population. In every European country surveyed, a majority of the public attributes most of the blame for air pollution to the automobile.

Views on Transportation Planning

A series of questions was asked about the fundamental orientation of planning and future support for different modes of transportation. If a planning choice were necessary between highways and public transit, 84 percent of all Europeans would give preference to transit. The range by country varied from a low of 67 percent in Ireland

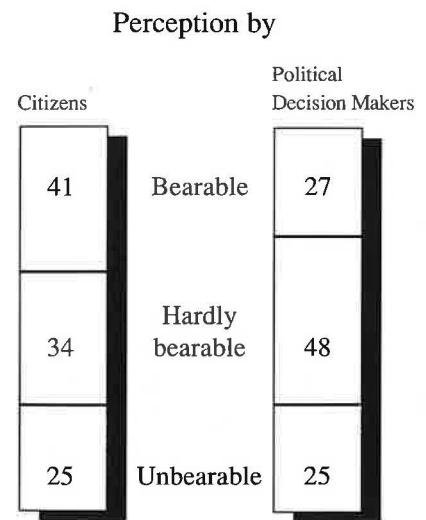


FIGURE 1 Perception by citizens and political decision makers of results of automobile traffic in urban areas [adapted, with permission, from *Assessments of Mobility in Europe* (2)].

Pierre Laconte is Secretary General, International Union of Public Transport. Wm. Campbell Graeub is Senior Program Officer, Transit Cooperative Research Program, TRB.

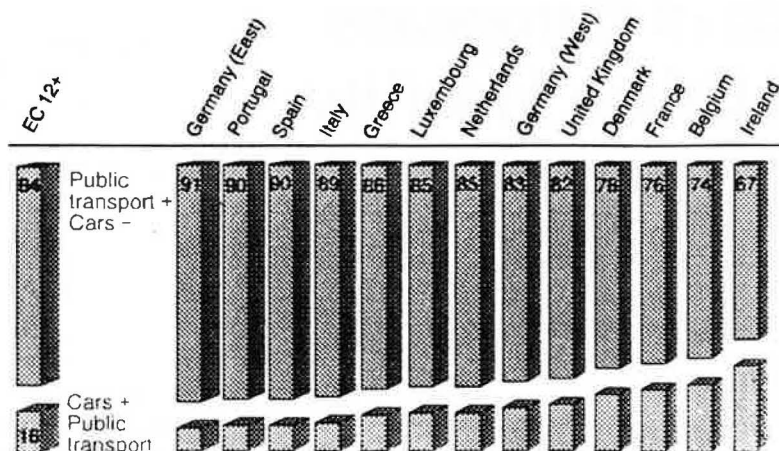


FIGURE 2 Preference for automobiles versus public transit by country surveyed [adapted, with permission, from *Assessments of Mobility in Europe* (2)].

to a high of 91 percent in East Germany (see Figure 2).

When decision makers were asked their views on the conflict in transportation planning and policy between the automobile and transit, more than 8 out of 10 (85 percent) replied that they would like to see priority given to public transit, even if it were to inconvenience movement of the automobile. Here again, the citizens and their elected officials hold similar views.

However, when citizens were asked about the views of their elected officials, a majority stated that political leaders did not reflect the views of citizens on transportation planning; only 19 percent believed that politicians made the correct judgment about the views of citizens. For example, when decision makers were asked to what extent citizens would prefer to give priority to public transit, only 49 percent believed that citizens shared their opinion, when in fact the study shows a support of 84 percent.

Although both citizens and decision makers rate the importance of public transit equally high when planning choices must be made, both groups considerably underestimate each other's support for transit.

Solving Transportation Problems

In the study both citizens and decision makers were questioned about solutions to urban transportation problems. About 4

out of 10 (41 percent) believe that current traffic problems can be solved by innovative technological advances. Roughly the same proportion (43 percent) hold the opposite view. It is of interest to note that citizens of Europe's technically more advanced countries pinned less hope (a low of 32 percent) on technological solutions than did those of the still-developing countries (a high of 64 percent).

Almost three-fourths (71 percent) of Europeans view restrictions on automobile traffic in their city centers as an effective means of improving the traffic situation. There is still higher support (75 percent) for further development of pedestrian areas. Support for the introduction of restrictive controls on parking is somewhat lower than the other two measures listed. Overall, 53 percent of the citizens believe such controls to be effective.

Political decision makers of the EC countries give greater support to the foregoing control measures. Their responses were to restrict traffic in the city centers (80 percent), develop more pedestrian areas (93 percent), and control parking (59 percent). Although the views of the decision makers and citizens are similar, the former show a tendency to underestimate popular opinion. They assume that citizens are more reticent about traffic control measures and believe that support among citizens for the control measures just discussed is only 48 percent, 51 percent, and 36 percent, respectively.

Because elected officials perceive a lack of citizen support for automobile-restrictive measures, a majority of officials believe that solutions to urban traffic congestion should involve improving the public transit system itself by so-called "hard policies," such as making major capital investments. As a result, lower-cost measures known as "soft policies," such as motivation, information, and adaptations that will lead to changes in behavior, are not as readily used. Elected officials clearly underestimate public opinion, suspecting that the population supports transportation planning that favors the automobile (3).

With the rapid evolution of the EC, transportation decisions that in the past have been the concern of each country have now become multinational concerns. This study on attitudes toward urban mobility provides decision makers with a better understanding of the views of citizens on the problem of urban traffic congestion and how these views vary from one country to another. Although European views may differ significantly from those held in North America, much can be learned from foreign perspectives of similar transportation problems faced by cities in the United States. The polling methodology from this survey could be used in selected U.S. urbanized areas. Complete survey procedures and results may be found in the INRA and UITP reports (1,2).

The findings of this survey, which indicate that political leaders underestimate citizen support for public transit, are a useful source of arguments in favor of transit.

References

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