
Public policy lesson drawing: the case of 80 km/h in France

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Abstract

In July 2018, the French government implemented a new speed limit for some sections of the interurban road network. The 80km/h speed limit was promoted to improve the road safety record. This new speed limit constitutes a main evolution for regulating speed in France these last years. The evaluation of the measure shows 300 lives at least were saved, while the cost-benefit analysis estimated large socioeconomic gains. Such outcomes are aligned with previous experiences of other countries with similar intervention. Although the effectiveness of the measure was proved, the 80 km/h was contested mainly by some local political decision makers. Some lessons are drawn from this experience.

Keywords

Speed limit; Public policy, Lesson drawing

Introduction

In July 2018, the French government implemented a new speed limit for some selected sections of the interurban road network. The 80km/h speed limit was promoted to improve the road safety record. This new speed limit is a national measure and is enforced over the whole territory. It constitutes a main evolution for regulating speed in France that could be compared with the setting up of the speed camera programme in 2003. This contribution presents the historic perspective of the measure, its different impacts and the lessons which can be drawn from this intervention (Rose, 1993).

1 Historic perspective

1.1 Origins of the measure

Since 2013, France has faced a plateau effect for the road safety record, which is also noted for other European Countries. Indeed, the number of fatalities increased by 6 % over the 2013-2017 period, while the number of road injuries showed a 4 % increase (ONISR, 2022). The comparison of number of fatalities and injuries between 2013 and 2017 shows a respective increase of 180 and 1,800. This unfavourable evolution calls for new initiatives from the government, while the authorities have to face political commitment to halve the level of fatalities by 2020.

While the plateau effect represents a barrier to improve the safety record, it was noted roughly 2,200 fatalities occur on the interurban network, which represent more than 60 % of the total of fatalities in France. Consequently, a true potential exists for improving the current record.

In 2013, an expert committee proposed some recommendations which should help in improving the current safety record (Comité des experts, 2013). The report estimated that 250-400 lives could be saved with the lowering of the speed limit at 80 km/h on the interurban road network.

1.2 The 80 km/h speed limit (2018-2020)

In January 2018, Prime Minister Philippe announced the lowering of the speed limit for interurban road sections without any separation. This important measure is included in an 18 safety interventions package announced after an interministerial committee meeting (Dossier de presse, 2018). It has to be noted that the last speed limit modification was the introduction of the 50 km/h speed limit in urban areas in 1990, while the setting-up of the automated speed enforcement program was launched in November 2003. This new speed limit can be considered as a main change for the road safety public policy.

However, the introduction of the new speed limit collided with another public policy with aims at increasing the level of taxes for fuel consumption. Both of the measure feeds a political protest, which drove the Prime minister to announce in April 2018 a two-year evaluation of the 80 km/h speed limit covering the July 2018 - June 2020 period. The aim of this evaluation is to prove the speed limit is an evidence-based intervention and a well-grounded decision from the road safety standpoint.

However, after a strong social protest movement with the demonstration of the yellow jackets and political pressure, the government decided to give the opportunity for the counties to change again the speed limit and to revert the previous limit under restrictive conditions (safety design and investments, administrative agreement) (Comité des experts, 2019).

1.3 A hybrid situation since 2020

In July 2020, the evaluation report concluded the 80 km/h speed limit was associated with a positive impact for the road safety record confirming the expected impacts by the experts. The results support the public decision and constitute objective evidence for keeping in force the measure because of its effectiveness.

However, in January 2020, some counties decided to revert to the 90 km/h speed limit, while not considering and waiting for the definitive results of the evaluation. At present, a half of the counties decided to return to the 90 km/h. The main justifications are economic reasons and land planning perspectives.

The present situation appears quite complex. Indeed, a half of counties decided to keep the 80 km/h speed regulation, while among the other counties only few of them reverted to the 90 km/h for their whole network (10 %). The most part of counties which changed their speed limit are concerned with a reversal for less of 30 % of their road network, meaning it is partial change.

2 The impacts of the 80 km/h speed limit

2.1 The results of the evaluation

In April 2018, the road safety interministerial delegate mandated Cerema to proceed to the official evaluation of the new speed limit. Cerema provided interim and final reports about the estimated effects associated with the measure. The report investigated different dimensions: evolution of speed, speeding behaviour, casualties, social acceptance of the measure and proceeded to a cost-benefit analysis (Cerema, 2020).

The implementation of the new speed limit was associated with an immediate reduction of the mean driving speed by 4.3 km/h, which is a 5 % reduction. After an 18-month period, the reduction of the mean speed amounts to 3.5 km/h. The magnitude of the reduction is aligned with other countries experiences. It has also to be noted the percentage of speed violators remain quite high with a 58 % violation rate in December 2019, suggesting there is a potential for benefiting from the full effect of the new speed limit.

The impact on fatalities were estimated by using time series corrected from seasonal events, and then, compared with the evolution of a so-called control network. The estimated gains amount to 331-389 saved lives for the 18-month period and 349-468 saved lives for a 20-month period (until February 2020).

Carnis and Garcia (forthcoming) using econometric techniques such Arimax with an intervention function estimated that 300-350 fatalities were probably avoided between July 2018 and February 2020. This work in progress shows different impacts according the type of counties.

2.2. Some other impacts

Lowering speed limit impacts also the time for a journey. The report shows 19 % of journeys were positively affected (reduction of their length), while an increase is noted for 81 % of them. More accurately, the new speed limit increases by one or two second in average per travelled kilometre the duration of a journey, that remains acceptable. At the society level, the monetary estimates of time losses amount to 720 – 917 million euros and was considered for determining the whole efficiency of the measure.

The social acceptance of the new speed limit evolves with the experience of the driver with the measure. Before its implementation, in April 2018, 30 % of respondents were in favour of the measure, while 40 % were strongly opposed. In October 2019, the respective rates were 42 % and 23 % showing a rapid change in favour of the measure while the country faced strong social demonstrations and a low political support. This positive evolution is confirmed with a last poll in June 2020, showing a 48 % positive support while the rate for strong opponents fall to 20 %. Probably, the positive impact of the measure had an influence upon public opinion.

An interesting result of the evaluation report concerns the outcome of the cost-benefit analysis. The 80 km/h speed limit is associated with a net gain estimated at 667-780 million euros after one year of implementation, while the monetary gains related to the reduction of casualties amounts to 1.2 billion euros.

2.3. Lessons from the evaluation and the evaluation process

The evaluation process was not planned and was not considered initially as part of the implementation of the measure, that implies the mobilized experts had to work in a special context with limited resources and data. The completion of the report in due time has to be considered as a main achievement, especially when it is considered how the evaluation team was able to gather the requested data for injuries and driving speed. Indeed, to proceed in this way implies that some organization hold particular skills for collecting disaggregate data for the road network concerned by the new speed regulation and for answering the different statements included in the mission letter.

The evaluation was also impacted by some unexpected events. First, over the period, a strong social protest was characterized by the neutralization of speed cameras and important regular demonstrations by the yellow jacket movement inside the main cities in France between November 2018 and March 2019. In 2020, France was also concerned as the other European countries by some lockdowns for health reasons due to the Covid restriction period. It is the main reason justifying the evaluation report estimated the impact of the new speed limit until February 2020. The context of evaluation constituted an important barrier for investigating the measure and measuring its impacts.

Another element of context concerns the political dimension of the evaluation. First, the decision of the French government to determine its definitive position about the 80 km/h with the impacts of the measure implies the outcomes of the report were scrutinized and to make available interim reports. This particular context places the evaluation team in a difficult position, because it associates the outcome of the evaluation with the decision to maintain or forgive the measure. It raises also some

methodological issues about what could be concluded from interim results in a case of a dynamic policy. What would have been the political context if the intermediate outcomes were not favourable?

A last concern is related with the contest of the measure by the counties and its official representatives. One main argument is related to the local impact and specificities of the counties. It raises the issue about the perimeter and the scope of the evaluation: to assess the measure as a whole disregarding differentiated local effects or to evaluate local implementation of a national measure by considering local socioeconomic contexts.

3. Some lessons from a policy analysis perspective

3.1. Evaluation as a policy instrument

In 2014-2015, there were some discussions about the implementation of an 80 km/h speed limit. However, the government did not wish to take political risks with a measure which could hurt the general opinion, when the government faced a weakened political situation. It was decided to launch an experiment with 3 national road sections over the 2015-2017 period. The political choice of deciding a very small-scale experiment drove to the impossibility to conclude about the efficiency of the measure, and then to justify a status quo which was very welcome before the holding of general election.

The evaluation process was politically instrumentalized again with the case of the two-year experiment decided in 2018. Making the adoption of the measure conditional on significant effects does not say anything about the criteria for its adoption. The evaluation of the measure has to prove it is justified in terms of reduction of injuries. But what is the criteria for accepting or rejecting the measure? In fact, the two-year evaluation provided time to government for conducting its policy and for managing the protest and to make the measure less sensitive politically. In a sense, evaluation could be considered more as a management tool for mitigating political opposition than to prove it is an efficient measure. It could be considered as a communication tool. The decision to provide the possibility for the counties to depart from the new speed regulation before the end of the evaluation process proves the high importance given to the political dimension.

3.2. The political dimension

The 80 km/h speed limit episode highlights the importance of the political dimension related to the measure and the political commitment. The measure benefited from the strong support of Prime minister Philippe. The measure was regularly defended and promoted. However, he was not backed by some important ministers (such as the minister of Interior) and mildly supported by the President. This latter proposed a discussion about the measure during "*le grand débat national*" which consisted in public exchange about different issues with selected people during many meetings. Probably, the lack of commitment from top political public decision makers weakens the legitimacy of the measure.

Another important political dimension refers to the position taken by the local public decision makers. More especially, the presidents of county councils showed a strong opposition to the measure. They considered the measure as inappropriate in terms of road safety (speed is not the problem!), counterproductive for local economic development and the mobility of people, but also as an infringement to their prerogatives (the most part of roads concerned by the measure are under their jurisdiction). This opposition from the local decision makers highlights the importance of negotiating with all the local stakeholders before the implementation of the measure. A top-down approach could face many difficulties for implementing an intervention. The government faced similar opposition from the counties with the implementation of speed cameras on the county road network. Having a participative collaboration of stakeholders could be considered as a golden rule and a lesson to learn.

Another political dimension is related with the social protest. The yellow jacket movement contested the 80 km/h speed limit which was considered as useless and a new way for collecting money from the citizen and a new infringement of liberties. During this episode, an important number of speed cameras were neutralized or destroyed. It illustrates the sensitive dimension it exists with the regulation of speeding. Communication about the aims followed by the measures, promotion of the measure are important ingredients for making the measure acceptable. It has to be noted that was not done properly.

3.3. Lesson for road safety public policy

The results associated with the implementation of the 80 km/h speed limit in France is aligned with the other experiments related with the change of speed limit (ITF, 2018). Lowering speed limit can bring socioeconomic benefits from the society standpoint and represents an efficient measure to improve the road safety record.

However, the reconsideration of the measure by local public decision makers shows to hold an efficient measure is not enough to be accepted and implemented and to stand on its own. Scientific proofs represent one element for decision and local political dimensions have also to be considered. In fact, the debate with the 80 km/h speed limit illustrates the tension between different forms of governance, between political localism and the national government or centralization of the decision. Consequently, the road safety expertise is not enough to justify the implementation of a measure, while it could be counterproductive by being considered as politically oriented.

The rejection of the 80 km/h and the speed cameras programs and more generally the different ways of regulating speeding, is not new. Similarly, the positive impact of such measure is regularly overlooked by a part of the public. However, an important evolution concerns the importance given to fake news, disinformation and attention to layman opinion and beliefs which influence the political decision makers. In one sense, there is trend towards an ochlocracy. The debate between rational reasoning and opinion becomes difficult or impossible. The decision becomes the outcome of political trade-offs, in which emotion of the mob could plays a more important role than scientific knowledge.

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