

# What do people actually mean when they say that they support a policy measure in road safety?

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## Abstract

Forty experts and policy-makers in road safety from Austria, France, Greece, Sweden and the UK were asked why they supported or opposed particular road safety policy measures. A classification scheme was developed which groups the arguments into 'supportive' areas (Equity, Preserving human liberties, Relevance, Feasibility) and 'opposing' areas (Discrimination, Restricting human liberties, Limited added value, Practical obstacles). 'Relevance' (or lack of it) was the argument used most.

Additionally a survey was conducted in ten countries across the world. Respondents were asked whether they would support or oppose particular road safety policy measures, and why. The counterargument most used was 'Difficult to implement'. It also appeared that people who oppose a measure use different types of arguments than those who support it.

## Keywords

Road safety; Policy measures; Public support

## Introduction

An important factor influencing policy formulation in road safety is the expected level of public support. The more a decision is unpopular, the less policy makers are inclined to take that decision. Not much is known about what people really mean when they state that they support a particular policy measure (e.g., the generalisation of 30 km/h speed limits in urban areas) and why they support or oppose that measure.

## Methods

In the context of my PhD (Van den Berghe, 2022) I used two methods to address these questions. First, forty experts and policy-makers in road safety were interviewed from five European countries: Austria, France, Greece, Sweden and the UK. In each country there were eight interviewees; two-third of the interviews were conducted face-to-face. Interviewees were asked whether they would support or oppose eight possible measures in road safety, and to justify why they took that position. The measures discussed were chosen to reflect a variety of contexts and trade-offs and were not yet implemented in the countries considered.

Based on an in-depth qualitative analysis of these interviews, a classification scheme was developed which groups the arguments used into 'supportive' areas (Equity, Preserving human liberties, Relevance, Feasibility) and 'opposing' areas (Discrimination, Restricting human liberties, Limited added value, Practical obstacles). Each of these areas includes more specific arguments. For example, the area 'Relevance', which was used most when supporting a measure, includes the following of arguments: (1) 'Avoids or reduces harm'; (2) 'Is effective in meeting its purpose'; (3) 'Addresses an important problem'; (4) 'Is a good solution to the problem'; (5) 'Gives the right message'; and (6) 'Has positive side effects'.

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A second method used was an online survey conducted among a representative sample of the population in twelve regions or countries in the world: Austria, Greece, Sweden, Western regions of France, Flanders, Wallonia, Greater London, Texas, California, Argentina, China and Nigeria. Almost 5600 valid responses were collected. Respondents were presented with ten possible road safety measures and asked whether they would support or oppose these, what arguments their opinion was based on, and what the consequence of the measure would be on them individually. The generic counterarguments presented were: (1) not reduce road traffic injuries; (2) limit people's individual freedom or privacy; (3) reduce people's enjoyment in life; (4) restrict people's mobility; (5) lead to discrimination; (6) require a lot of public money; (7) imply high costs for the people concerned; (8) be easy to evade; (9) be difficult to implement correctly; and (10) be an unjustifiable intervention by the state. The respondents also needed to state what type of personal consequences they expected if the measure would be implemented; this list of consequences differed for each policy measure and included both positive as negative consequences. These lists had been established based on a literature review and focus group sessions with international experts from KfV (Austria), Université Gustave Eiffel (France) and Vias institute (Belgium).

## Results and discussion

Analysing the nature and distributions of arguments used by the interviewees and the survey respondents leads to a number of 'meta-results', which can probably be generalised to many other measures and contexts, even beyond road safety.

### *The meaning of 'supporting a policy measure'*

From the analyses undertaken it emerges that public support for the road safety policy measures considered is often high. This is consistent with findings from the literature (e.g., Antov et al., 2010; Buttler, 2016; Debinski et al., 2014; Fell, 2019; Goldenbeld, 1998; Rienstra et al., 1999; Van den Berghe et al., 2020). But this observation of high levels of public support requires some nuance.

The first reason is related to how survey respondents interpret a question on 'support for a measure', even if it is explicitly stated that it would become a legal obligation. Foad et al. (2021) warn that results from surveys may hide the ambivalence people feel around particular policies. I observed that for some participants 'support' implies that they would consider the regulation as legitimate and subsequently adhere to it. But for other respondents it meant that they found such a law to be relevant, particularly for others, but not necessarily that they would always comply with it. As one interviewee said in relation to public support for 30 km/h speed limits in urban zones: *"They are in favour, the Greeks, although they don't believe in measures because in the back of their mind, they think that they will skip"*. This phenomenon is linked to findings from ESRA showing that many people think that the 'others' engage in unsafe traffic behaviours more readily than they do themselves – so there is less need of regulation for themselves. Pires et al. (2020) refer to this as belief of road users of moral superiority over others.

This doubt on the willingness to adhere to rules, even if they are considered useful or even necessary, has been observed in the past. For example, Toy et al. (2014) found a mismatch between people's apparent support for 20 mph limits and their actual driving behaviour. Analyses based on ESRA data have also found a difference between what people found to be acceptable behaviour and what their actual behaviour was. For example, the percentage of people considering drunk driving acceptable is much lower than the percentage of those who that actually drink and drive (Achermann-Stürmer, Meesmann, & Berbatovci, 2019).

Thus, people who state that they support a measure have certain assumptions on how it will be implemented in their country, to what extent it will affect them and how easy it will be for them to not

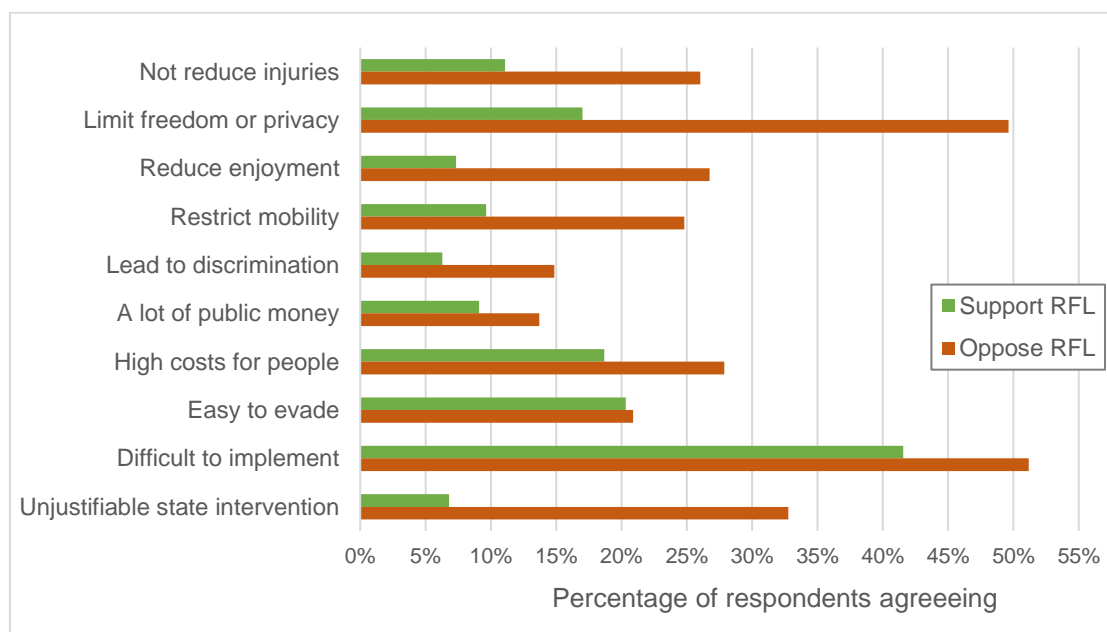
comply with it. Such a perception is likely linked to their experience with the implementation of other regulations, or even with their general attitude towards respecting a law – e.g. for some people a regulation is sacrosanct whilst for others it is more a guiding principle which one can deviate from. Also, because the arguments used are based on the knowledge and perception of the respondents, they are inherently subjective. They may also be used as a protective claim, i.e. people seeking counterarguments if they don't like or want a measure to be implemented.

### Fairness versus support for measures

In none of the cases where interviewees had stated that a particular policy measure was unfair, they supported it. When a measure was considered to be fair, the association with supporting the measure was somewhat weaker; in some cases a measure was perceived as fair by the interviewees but yet the measure was opposed. Thus, perceiving a measure to be fair is indicative for supporting it (but not sufficient), but it is very rare that people support a measure which they perceive as unfair. The online survey led to similar findings. Opponents to a measure used systematically more unfairness arguments than those who supported the measure. Interestingly, the interviewees used negative arguments in relation to ‘Restricting liberties’ more frequently than they used positive arguments under the ‘mirror area’ ‘Preserving liberties’. This illustrates that people are often more explicit in labelling situations as unfair but are less explicit when these are perceived as fair.

Another illustration of the close relationship between perceived fairness and public support for measures, are the different argument patterns of supporters and opponents of a measure. Let me illustrate this with two of the policy measures analysed. The first measure (‘RFL’) is whether pedestrians should wear reflective clothing or bags when walking on streets in the dark – a measure that was considered unfair by a large majority of the interviewees. Figure 1 shows how the fairness perspectives differ between the survey respondents opposing and supporting this measure. Half of the opponents thought that the measure would limit freedom or privacy and that it would be difficult to implement; about one third considered the measure to be an unjustifiable intervention of the state. The differences between the opponents and supporters are very high for the arguments that fall within the strict meaning of fairness.

Figure 1. Differences in use of unfairness arguments between those supporting and opposing RFL



Another measure discussed was zero tolerance for driving under the influence of alcohol. Only a minority of the interviewees perceived this measure as unfair. There appeared to be moderate to

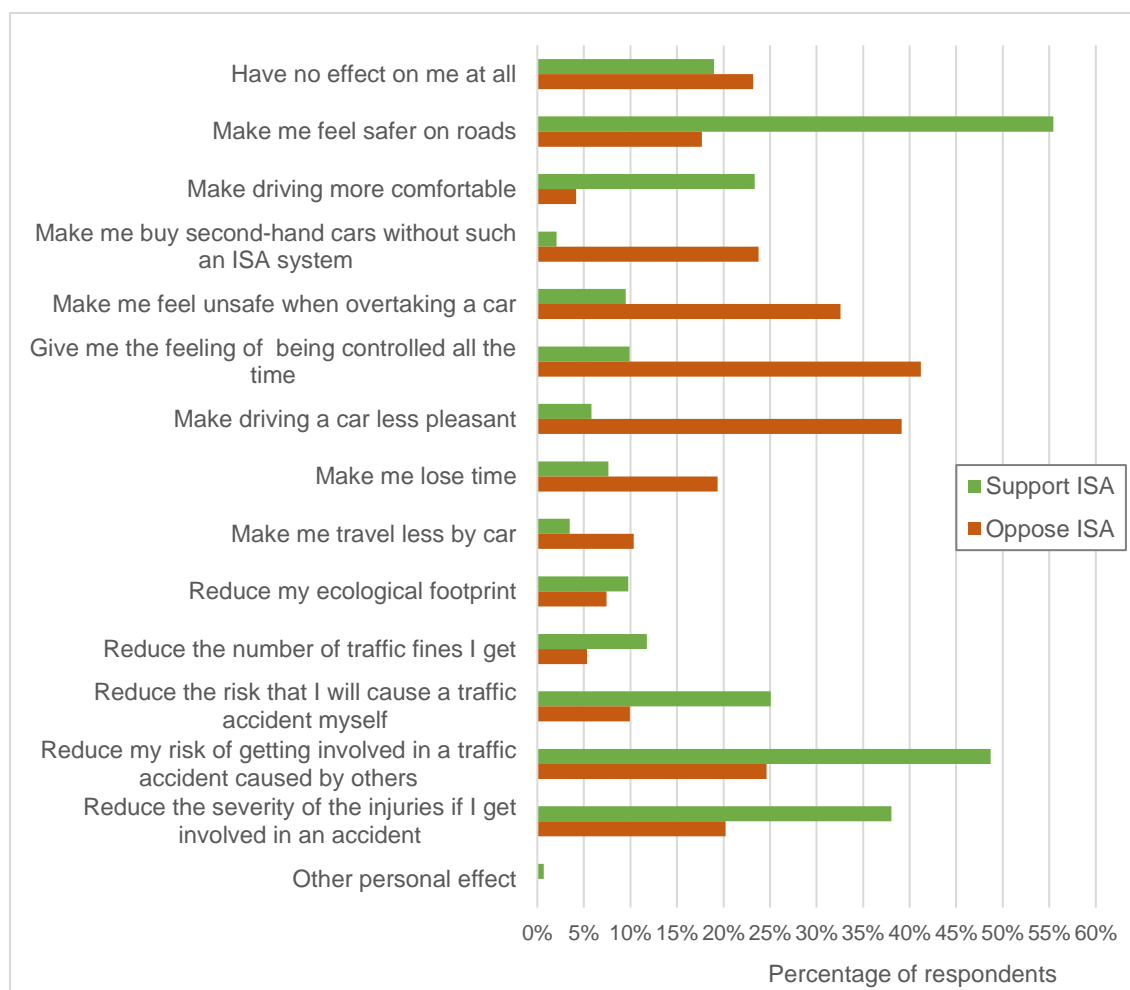
strong correlations (around 0.3) between the level of support for such a measure and ‘Limit freedom or privacy’, ‘Unjustifiable state intervention’, ‘Reduce enjoyment’ and ‘Restrict mobility’.

Analysis of the arguments and expected consequences also showed that for some measures, like the two ones just mentioned, one particular argument was used much more than the other ones. However, more often a range of arguments and/or consequences were put forward, in particular when one opposed the measure. So one person may consider a measure to be unfair for a particular reason (e.g., limitation of freedom), but another person may use another argument (e.g., discrimination).

### Asymmetry

I observed also an asymmetry in the nature of arguments used. When arguments are used to justify opposition to a measure, they often belong to different areas than the arguments used in favour. A common situation is where one interviewee used the argument ‘Relevance’ to support a measure and another interviewee ‘Practical obstacles’ to oppose it. In the survey, the expected consequences were often very different for the opponents and the supporters. For example, supporters of compulsory ISA (Intelligence Speed Assistance) strongly believe that the measure would be effective, i.e. make them feel safer on the roads, reduce the crash risk and would make driving more comfortable. The opponents, on the other hand, fear ISA as a means of controlling and restricting their behaviour. They also think it would make driving less pleasant and even unsafe when overtaking a car (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Consequences expected by supporters and opponents of ISA



Another interesting meta-result is that the number of negative arguments used by interviewees when opposing a measure, was much higher than the number of positive arguments when supporting it. Moreover, when opposing a measure interviewees rarely recognised positive arguments; those who

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supported a measure more frequently mentioned counterarguments. Similar patterns were found in the survey. For example, over 40% of the supporters for compulsory reflective clothing of pedestrians recognised that the measure would be difficult to implement. Respondents who were in favour of a measure obliging older people to be screened regularly for fitness to drive, recognised its unfair implications: one in five recognised the limitation of freedom or privacy, and one in four even the restriction of mobility that would be caused by the measure.

### *The influence of culture and ethical values*

The level of public support for road safety policy measures often differs considerably between countries (e.g., Antov et al., 2010; Goldenbeld, 1998; Van den Berghe et al., 2020). These differences are often associated with differences in levels of economic development and national culture (Van den Berghe, 2022; Van den Berghe & Christie, 2022). Publications by Hofstede et al. (2010) and Minkov (2011, 2018) state that people in individualist societies have a strong desire to determine themselves which rules to follow (e.g. whether to wear a helmet or not) but also let others decide for themselves – as long as it does not affect themselves negatively. They think of the whole society rather than only of their in-group, which is generally more typical of collectivistic societies. They also trust other people to exercise good judgment and feel less need than their collectivistic peers to regulate society for avoiding chaos. Collectivist societies, on the other hand, don't think that people should be left to decide for themselves as they are afraid that this would result in chaos. These general results support my findings that the more independent thinking in a society, the higher the opposition against measures that restrict freedom of action.

Road safety researchers have found a strong relationship between people's behaviour in traffic and how they perceive the social norm on such behaviour (see e.g. Sagberg et al., 2015). My analyses have shown that such a relationship also exists when it comes to support for policy measures: individuals' support for a particular measure appears to be strongly linked with the belief that their friends would support it. This social norm can be considered as an indicator of national road safety culture.

The social norm also influences the dominant ethical perspectives on behaviour in traffic in a country, i.e. on what is considered right or wrong. Several of the counterarguments for measures used in the survey can be considered as perceived violations of core ethical principles, in particular 'unjustifiable state intervention', 'limit freedom or privacy' and 'lead to discrimination'. Agreement with such statements is often moderately correlated with the opposition to that measure? For example, the correlation between 'Limit freedom or privacy' and support for ISA is -0.347 ( $p < 0.01$ ). In the discussions with the interviewees, 'Restricting human liberties' was the second largest group of counterarguments, used in almost 25% of cases.

I also found that the association between the perceived violation of ethical principles and the level of public support varies across countries. For example, the American survey respondents considered the policy measures to be an unjustifiable state intervention, much more than the others. Another example is that in China the respondents often considered the proposed measures less as a restriction of freedom and privacy or as leading to discrimination than in the other countries considered. Such national differences are linked to differences in national culture and organisation of society.

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