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Can quitting cars be popular?

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"There is a war against cars in America," a popular YouTube channel declared in 2017. The views raised in the video were not new, or limited to the US. Accusations of a "war" had been circulating in the UK 15 years previously, as London prepared to introduce what was then the world's largest congestion charge scheme, requiring drivers to pay for city-centre journeys. More recently, the city's expansion of its Ultra-Low Emission Zone which also charges cars that don't meet certain emissions standards, has seen protesters tear down enforcement cameras. In the Belgian city Ghent, the deputy mayor received death threats in the wake of a 2017 plan to discourage short journeys by car.

Despite the ongoing pushback, cities around the world are continuing efforts to reduce traffic and improve air quality by encouraging drivers to switch from polluting cars to greener transport. Paris has a target to ban gas-powered cars by 2030, citing the need to tackle climate change. And, later in 2024, New York is set to conduct a first-in-nation car-reduction experiment : the launch of a long-delayed congestion charge on journeys below Manhattan's 60th Street.

The need for change in US urban centres is quite literally in the air. Tail-pipe emissions are akin to wildfires that are happening on our own streets. Working hours lost sitting in traffic equate to around \$20bn a year. A complete waste.

Moreover, reforms in several cities elsewhere suggest that, despite initial resistance, car reduction plans steadily gain public acceptance in the long run.

Why the early opposition? People struggle to weigh potential losses against gains. So suggests a concept in behavioural psychology known as prospect theory, with a disproportionate aversion to loss encouraging a bias towards the status quo.

Showing people the benefits of car reduction, rather than just telling them, can consequently have a powerful effect. The moment before you do something is the most precarious political moment of all, but people's fears of change also don't usually happen and the benefits do. Public support for road pricing schemes tend to begin well, with recognition of the need for intervention. That support then falls away as more specific details are released ahead of enforcement, only to rise again after implementation.

The key to successful schemes seems to lie in a better understanding of human behaviour and decision making, where the initiative is perceived to be sufficiently fair, and supportive or responsive to drivers' concerns.

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