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Is it really a stupid idea? The counterfactual check

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Proposals for unconventional policies often receive a lot of negative reactions, from media, citizens, politicians, interest groups, etc. The counterfactual check may be a simple method to explore if such policies are really a bad idea.

In a recent paper on growing support for controversial policies, we briefly discussed the idea of asking people whether the counterfactual of a controversial policy proposal would be a good idea (Van Wee et al., 2023). We gave the example of the proposal to convert a two-way street into a one-way street. I live in Amersfoort, a medium-sized city (almost 161,000 inhabitants on January 2023) in the Netherlands, in a 1930s neighbourhood (i.e. the Leusderkwartier). Some years ago, the local municipality suggested to convert that road in that neighbourhood to a one-way street for motorised traffic (not for cyclists), for reasons of safety and liveability. The road is frequently used by cyclists, including 12–18-year-old high school students. In the street where I live, many people had a poster behind their window stating the following: "keep the Leusderkwartier accessible". I did not have such a poster. One of my neighbours asked why. I explained that I was not sure if I thought it was a bad idea. He responded telling me that I certainly must think it was a bad idea. I asked him why. He responded saying that the idea was ridiculous because we then would have to take a detour driving in "opposite direction". I said he was right, that of course that would mean a (small) detour, but also that it would become a safer, quieter and consequently more attractive street. I asked him: suppose the street would always have been a one-way street, as the local municipality now suggested. And suppose the proposal was to make it a two-way street. Would he then think this would be a brilliant idea? I hypothesised that he and many others would show a poster behind their window with the following text: "keep the Leusderkwartier safe and liveable". He responded that he would not know if he would support the counterfactual change, and that this conversation made him think.

Another example. In 2022, I was at an OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Round Table meeting in Paris. One of the participants told me about the, in his opinion, ridiculous idea of converting the Route Periferique, an urban motorway surrounding central Paris, into a park with a cycle lane. I asked him why he thought that was a ridiculous idea. He indicated that the traffic intensities show that we need the Route Periferique. I asked him: suppose the Route Periferique would have been a park with a cycle lane for decades or even a century, would he support the idea of now converting it into an urban motorway, comparable to the current situation? A long silence occurred, followed by "I do not know". I also asked him: what would he think would happen if Paris

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would build an urban motorway straight through the centre of Paris, from North to South or from East to West. He confirmed that such a motorway would be intensively used. I asked him if building such a motorway thus would be a good idea. He did not respond.

Third example. In the Netherlands, a debate is going on for almost two decades about converting the current annual taxes on cars, into a per kilometre charge. The net revenue for the government would remain the same. Those who would drive more, will in the future pay more, those who drive less would pay less. Many people, citizens, journalists, politicians and others with whom I have discussed this policy in the past decade or longer, have argued this is a ridiculous, or at least a bad or unfair policy. They gave examples of people who would be affected negatively in an undesirable way, such as a household with two workers, with separate workplaces, forcing one worker to commute. The policy would be unfair towards the "forced commuter", because s/he would have to pay more in the future, whereas s/he would not have an alternative for driving, because of their residential location, not being connected to a railway station. My follow-up question was: suppose we now would have a system of paying per kilometre and the government would suggest to replace it by an annual tax. Probably they would consider that proposal as very unfair, because an 85-year-old driving a certain car 1000 km per year would then have to pay as much as his/her neighbour having a similar car, but driving 50,000 km per year. The most common responses then would be: "you make me think", or "you are right: almost any change will not only have winners but also losers. If we do not accept there are losers, this will block about any change".

Fourth example (or better group of examples): during the past three decades, several cities and towns with a historical centre, in many countries, were converted from parking places to attractive car-free squares, often with a fountain, terrasses for cafes and restaurants, and sometimes art. Before the conversion, there often was opposition from citizens, shop keepers, and people running restaurants and cafes. I assume that if local policy makers would now suggest to return to the old situation (parking place) that many people would think: "where is the hidden camera, this cannot be a serious proposal".

Lessons learned from these and several other examples is that asking people about the counterfactual, or about a proposal in line with the counterfactual (as in the case of the new urban motorway straight though central Paris) often opens people's mind toward seemingly ridiculous (in their eyes) or at least unfair on undesired policies. The negative attitude towards controversial policies can be explained by several mechanisms – see our 2023 paper referred to above, including attitude changes (Van Wee et al., 2019), reference point bias as made explicit by the prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), and because expected and experienced utility can differ (De Vos et al., 2016).

This does not mean that any unconventional idea is therefore a good idea. The counterfactual check gives an idea of the question if a policy is really ridiculous or at least unfair of undesired. Making use of this check for more than a decade in many debates on unconventional policies gives me the impression that many seemingly undesired, unfair or even ridiculous ideas are not as weird as people think based on their initial thoughts. If a policy proposal passes the counterfactual check it of course needs to be evaluated thoroughly, assessing if the benefits exceed costs, if it is a fair policy, and if maybe another policy would work even better. In sum, making use of the counterfactual check can be useful for policy makers, planners and other practitioners, and researchers with controversial ideas, facing strong opposition.

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