

ACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR?

Public opinion on behaviour change policy



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FOREWORD

There is a growing recognition among policymakers of the wide range of options that lie between doing nothing and outright bans or aggressive legislation. As this report makes clear, the public too are aware of this range of options and distinguish between them.

Big national differences immediately catch the eye: the much higher acceptability of state intervention on behaviour in countries such as India and China than in wealthy North European nations – from Sweden to the UK – and the USA's wariness in particular. The high overall level of public support for action – and especially for more transparent information and various 'nudges' - will also surprise many.

The subtler results are intriguing too, such as the distinction implicit in generally higher levels of support for interventions in behaviours that affect others (such as smoking in public places) than those which do not. Another striking result is that in some countries on particular issues, such as unhealthy food, the public appear more in favour of tough action than many policymakers have previously believed.

That said, the report documents the paradox that helps to explain why so many politicians tread around behavioural interventions with caution. While a large majority of the public support many specific interventions, around half also say that they don't think governments should get involved in people's choices. Indeed, around a third of people seem both to endorse tougher action and that the state shouldn't get involved in people's specific choices around what they eat, save, or live sustainably.

A common interpretation of this 'cognitive polyphasia' is that we want government intervention to stop the bad behaviour of other people, but not necessarily our own. The report suggests that Kahneman's distinctions between fast and slow thinking may be involved. But another interpretation is that people generally want to be able to make specific choices for themselves (as long as others are not harmed) but are broadly amenable to governments and trusted professionals making it more obvious and easier to choose the safest, healthiest or greenest option.

But one thing is for sure. When it comes to our lifestyle and habits, government action rests heavily on public acceptability and permission – it is the public's behaviour after all. Indeed, in a world of behavioural economics, public opinion surveys are themselves a 'nudge' – a signal to both policymakers and our fellow citizens about what's acceptable and what's not.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESEARCH

This international research considers the public acceptability of a range of measures intended to change behaviour across four key policy areas. We investigated support for different levels of political intervention in the lives of individuals with regard to:

- smoking;
- eating unhealthy foods;
- saving for retirement;
- and living in an environmentally sustainable way.

The findings are drawn from the Ipsos MORI Global @dvisor online survey of c.18,500 adults across 24 countries. Fieldwork took place between 4th and 22nd November 2010.

Our data provides insight into how attitudinal responses to different behaviour change policies vary with global cultural differences, and our analysis sheds light on the factors that influence these variations.

FINDINGS

- There is majority support for all types of intervention across all of the countries polled, including surprisingly high levels of support for prohibitive government legislation, such as outright bans on smoking and unhealthy foods.
- However, support for interventions tends to decrease as the “force” of intervention increases. While the provision of information or incentives is largely popular, legislative approaches receive less support, with acceptability decreasing as more freedoms are lost.
- The public are much more supportive of policies directed at businesses – for example, legislation obliging companies to promote healthy choices or act in environmentally sustainable ways – than they are of similarly forceful interventions directed at individuals.
- Even though support for interventions is high across the board, around half still have a gut instinct against the nanny state, agreeing that “government should not get involved” in people’s decisions about how to behave.
- Globally, there is a significant range of support for legislation. Support for partially-restrictive interventions, which make a behaviour more expensive or difficult, drops from an average across policy areas of 88% in China to 46% in the USA. Outright prohibitions divide global opinion even more, with 87% average support in Saudi Arabia and India but only 33% in the USA.
- The more that a country is in favour of partially-restrictive interventions, such as increased taxation, the more it will also tend to support outright prohibitions, and vice versa.
- The more prosperous a country is (as measured by GDP per capita adjusted for purchasing power), the less likely its public are to support behaviour change interventions. But within countries, wealthier individuals tend to be more supportive of each level of behavioural intervention than those with lower incomes.
- Support for outright bans of behaviours is particularly high in countries with a high Power Distance Index (PDI).¹ Such countries tend to have authoritarian cultures, with centralised, top-down governmental structures.
- Socio-demographic differences, where they occur, are generally not as pronounced as differences between countries.
- Just because many people practise an undesirable behaviour, this does not necessarily feed through into low support for interventions against this behaviour. The effect of prevalence on support of intervention appears to be both issue- and country-dependent.

INTRODUCTION

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Many of the biggest challenges we face as societies around the world could be largely solved if people changed their behaviours and habits.

For example, if we smoked less and ate more healthily – two of the areas we investigate in this report – we would do much to relieve the problems associated with “lifestyle” diseases such as obesity, heart disease and type 2 diabetes. In the USA, for example, treatment of type 2 diabetes – which is almost entirely preventable – is projected to cost \$500 billion per year by 2020.²

Similarly, citizens around the world are not saving nearly enough to pay for a much longer retirement. Governments cannot afford to fill this gap, so policies that encourage the “right” behaviour at an individual level are vital.

NUDGING AND SHOVING

In recent years the ideas of “behavioural economics”³ have been popularised by a range of books and studies by academics and policy-makers around the world. In particular, Thaler and Sunstein’s *Nudge*⁴ created a huge amount of interest when it was published in 2008, with the authors going on to advise a number of governments.

The idea behind *Nudge* is that it is possible to influence public behaviour simply by modifying the environment in which people conduct their actions and

make their decisions – what Thaler and Sunstein call the “choice architecture” of the behaviour.⁵ Such modifications might range from changing the wording of a letter (in order to elicit better responses) to painting road markings closer together before a bend (to get drivers to slow down). These subtle alterations, aimed at encouraging more desirable behaviour without coercing the individual, are known as “nudges.” Thaler and Sunstein define the target of nudging as “any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives”.⁶

Behavioural economics is not new: Daniel Kahneman received a Nobel prize for his pioneering work in the area, which he began in the 1970s. Kahneman summarises behaviour change very simply, as addressing one key question: “If we want people to change, how do we make it easy?”⁷ Given the public policy context of a sovereign debt crisis, escalating health costs, environmental threats due to our behaviour and insufficient saving to support ourselves in old age, it is no surprise that behaviour change has become a mainstream topic for governments around the world.

Of course, governments have always sought to influence the behaviour of their citizens – but traditionally policymakers have used legislation, regulation, or a financial imperative, such as taxation, in an attempt to change public behaviour.

This approach – sometimes known as “shoving”⁸ – can be characterised as a more obviously interventionist and paternalist approach than nudging.

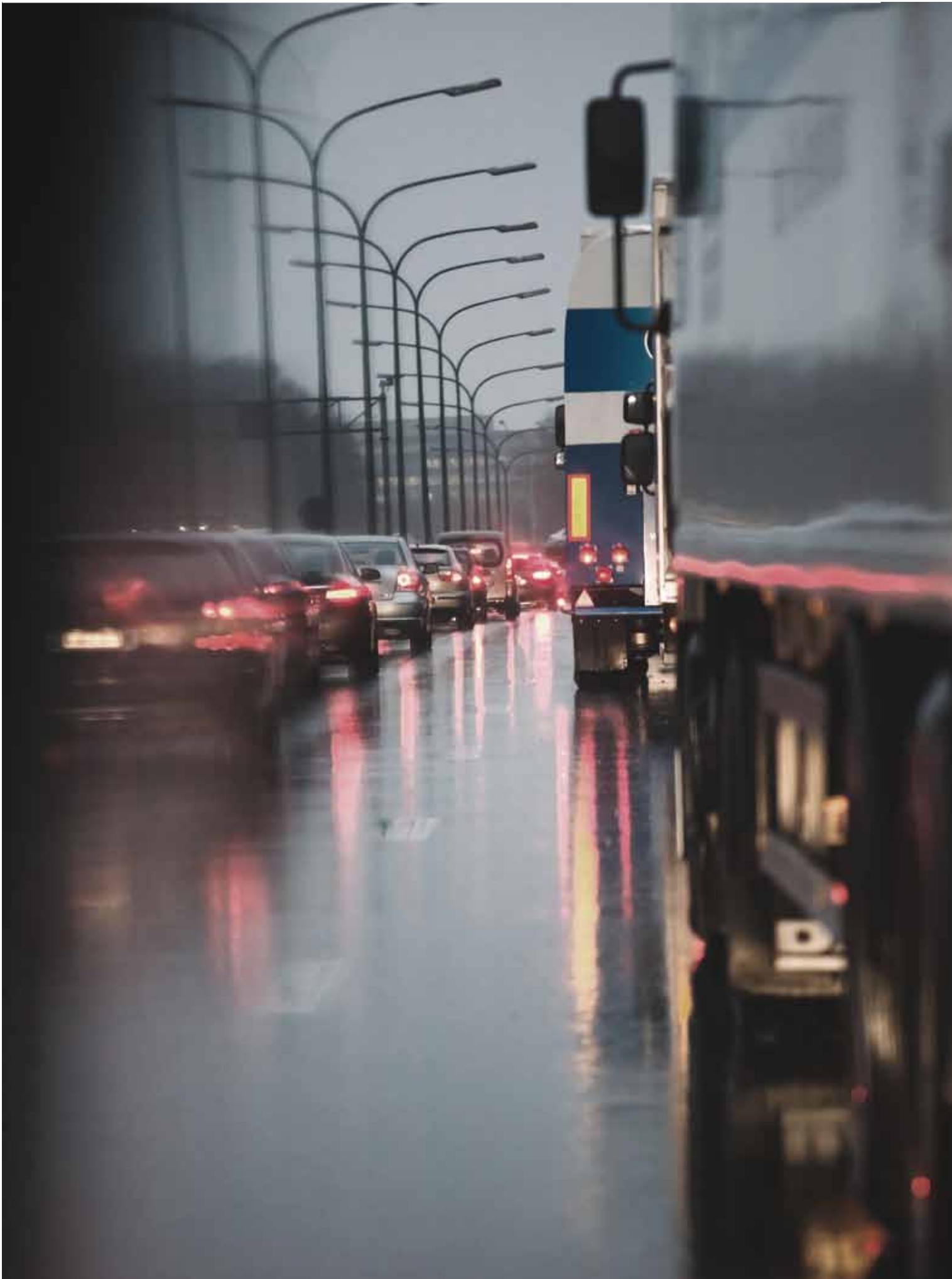
For those concerned with changing behaviour, the choice between shoving and nudging is often positioned as a no-brainer:

*...[nudging] proposes a set of seemingly simple, low cost solutions that do not require legislation and can be applied to a wide array of problems arising from our behaviour.*⁹

However, while nudging promises much, it is not yet clear that it will always offer “value for money” or sustained success in changing behaviour.¹⁰ As with most policy tools, case studies demonstrate a range of impacts.

THERE’S NUDGING MORE EFFECTIVELY...

- **Retirement:** The Save More Tomorrow (SMT) plan asks people to commit in advance to allocate a portion of their future salary increases towards retirement savings. In the US pilot average saving rates for SMT plan participants increased from 3.5 percent to 11.6 percent over the course of 28 months.¹¹
- **Recycling:** Since 2008, Marks and Spencer retail stores in the UK have managed to encourage pro-environmental behaviours through the introduction of a five pence charge for



plastic bags. Researchers at the London School of Economics found the charge not only increased reuse of bags but also encouraged reuse of bags at other stores where there was no charge. In this instance a well-placed nudge was able to “crowd-in” and sustain pro-environmental behaviour.¹²

AND NUDGING LESS EFFECTIVELY...

- **Obesity:** New York State responded to warnings of an “obesity epidemic” by passing legislation obliging restaurants to post the calorie content of regular meal items. However, despite an official estimate that the law would stop 150,000 New Yorkers from becoming obese it seems that there was no identifiable change in the number of calories purchased after the introduction of calorie labelling (despite almost 30% of people asked suggesting the information had influenced their eating choices).¹³
- **Energy:** In Sacramento, California, homeowners were provided with a mechanism allowing them to directly compare electricity bills with their neighbours. The initiative was intended to reduce energy consumption through the introduction of peer comparison. While energy consumption fell, the reduction of between 1.2% and 2.1%¹⁴ was “modest relative to the hopes being pinned on it”.¹⁵

George Loewenstein, another pioneer in behavioural economics, suggests that the insights derived from the field are useful but limited. He suggests, for example, that the most effective way to reduce obesity and promote healthy eating is not to introduce calorie labelling as in New York, but to “change the relative price of [healthy] and [unhealthy] food”.¹⁶ Loewenstein’s insight is summed up by Tyler Cowen who suggests that “Often there is no nudge-based free lunch and we need a straightforward relative price shift”.¹⁷

USING THE WHOLE TOOLKIT OF MEASURES

Nudges and shoves are clearly not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the recent UK House of Lords report suggests nudges and shoves may prove more effective when used together:

*In general, the evidence supports the conclusion that non-regulatory or regulatory measures used in isolation are often not likely to be effective and that usually the most effective means of changing behaviour at a population level is to use a range of policy tools, both regulatory and non-regulatory. Given that many factors may influence behaviour, this conclusion is perhaps unsurprising.*¹⁸

Drink driving provides a case study example of how the shoves of legislation and the nudges of communication

campaigns have “combined to change behaviour quite significantly” over a period of two decades.¹⁹ This example suggests that tailoring a combination of intervention types to a specific context over a significant period of time can provide a particularly effective and lasting solution to a behavioural problem.

It is also worth pointing out that there are a growing number of resources available to policy-makers and behaviour change professionals to assist their design of behaviour change interventions. Some notable examples would include BJ Fogg’s Behaviour Grid,²⁰ which provides a structured way of thinking about types of behaviour change, and his Behaviour Model,²¹ which helps explain why a given behaviour occurs (or not) by clearly describing the component parts of a behaviour. Fogg’s work is already proving influential, with the Behaviour Model being used by the World Economic Forum as their framework for health behaviour change.²² Another notable resource is ‘MINDSPACE’,²³ a report by the UK’s Institute for Government, which discusses the link between behaviours and interventions, and whose acronym functions as a helpful checklist of the most important influences on behaviour.

But before any other aspect of behaviour change intervention is considered we would do well to think about public

acceptability. The recent UK House of Lords report on behaviour change notes that “a measure which does not have public support is, in general, less likely to succeed,” citing the adverse effect of using pricing as the primary mechanism of alcohol control in Scandinavia.²⁴ When the public don’t accept a particular measure it may well not lead to the type of behaviour change desired. While public acceptability is clearly not the sole determining factor of the effectiveness of an intervention, it is an important component of the context in which behaviour change may be attempted.

Studies of public acceptability don’t just tell us about the popularity of an intervention (or lack of it), but can also provide valuable insight into the very possibility or likely success of attempts to change behaviour. In particular, it can indicate the types of intervention that would be more or less appropriate to the situation, the level of resistance there is to changing specific behaviours, and the length of time a particular strategy may need before coming to fruition.

Our research considers the issue of acceptability of interventions across four key areas for behaviour change, and in a variety of international contexts. We compare how opinion about acceptability varies for different areas of policy and types of behaviour, and we investigate

how support for behaviour change mechanisms varies with the type of intervention. Our focus here was not so much on the relative acceptability of various sophisticated and finely-tuned ways of altering the choice architecture - after all, it is the purpose of these tools to be as unobtrusive as possible. Rather, we were primarily interested in the effect on public opinion of the “force” of a behavioural intervention. Ultimately, we wished to understand how acceptability of a wide range of intervention levels varies between nations. As such, we asked about the broad spectrum of mechanisms available to policy-makers, including regulatory and non-regulatory tools – both shoves and nudges.

Naturally, we acknowledge that asking people what they think would be an acceptable action for government can only take us so far in understanding what people would actually do. Nevertheless, we think there is significant value in a study that compares and contrasts these attitudinal responses across a wide range of countries, policies and interventions. It is the first study of its type that we’re aware of, and the findings provide insight into the specific national reactions that individual governments might expect.

COUNTRY KEY FOR CHARTS

AR	Argentina
AU	Australia
BE	Belgium
BR	Brazil
CA	Canada
CN	China
FR	France
DE	Germany
GB	Great Britain
HU	Hungary
IN	India
ID	Indonesia
IT	Italy
JP	Japan
MX	Mexico
PL	Poland
RU	Russia
SA	Saudi Arabia
ZA	South Africa
ROK	South Korea
ES	Spain
SE	Sweden
TR	Turkey
US	United States

A GLOBAL SURVEY OF ATTITUDES TO BEHAVIOUR CHANGE INTERVENTIONS



	FOOD	RETIREMENT	ENVIRONMENT	SMOKING
INFORMATION	Government should provide information to people on how to eat more healthily	Government should provide information to people on how to save for retirement	Government should provide information to people on how to live in a more sustainable way	Government should provide information to people on how to stop smoking
INCENTIVES	Government should provide incentives, such as money off vouchers for healthy foods, to encourage people to eat more healthily	Government should incentivize people to save. For example, by giving people tax breaks on the money they put into pensions	Government should encourage people to live more sustainably. For example by making sustainable options (such as taking public transport or insulating homes) less expensive	Government should encourage people to stop smoking through incentive schemes
RESTRICT	Government should introduce laws to make it more expensive to eat unhealthy foods	Government should change the law so that people are automatically enrolled on the pension scheme, but give people the option to opt out	Government should make laws to make it more expensive to buy unsustainable products (such as leaded petrol or things that can't be recycled)	Government should ban smoking in public places
BAN OUTRIGHT	Government should introduce laws to ban unhealthy foods	Government should change the law so that everyone has to enroll in a pension scheme	Government should ban the most unsustainable products (such as leaded petrol or things that can't be recycled)	Government should ban smoking altogether
COMPANIES	Government should make food producers and shops promote healthy choices	Government should make employers offer, and contribute to, pension schemes for all employees	Government should make companies be more sustainable	Government should make tobacco companies invest in ways to discourage people from smoking
NOT GET INVOLVED	Government should not get involved in what people choose to eat	Government should not get involved in what people choose to save for retirement	Government should not get involved in whether or not people choose to live sustainably	Government should not get involved in how people make decisions about smoking

OUR RESEARCH

The Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute's Global @dvisor surveyed c.18,500 adults across 24 countries about their attitudes to different types of behaviour change mechanisms. We asked individuals about policies addressing the following four types of behaviour:

- smoking;
- eating unhealthy foods;
- saving for retirement;
- and living in an environmentally sustainable way.

In each policy area we wanted to learn about people's attitudes to different levels of government intervention, from the simple provision of information about how to change one's behaviour, such as information about how to stop smoking, to the use of mandatory legislation to prohibit the behaviour altogether, such as an outright smoking ban. By doing so, we were able to gather data about attitudes to a number of behaviour change interventions available to governments from the gentlest nudge to the firmest shove.

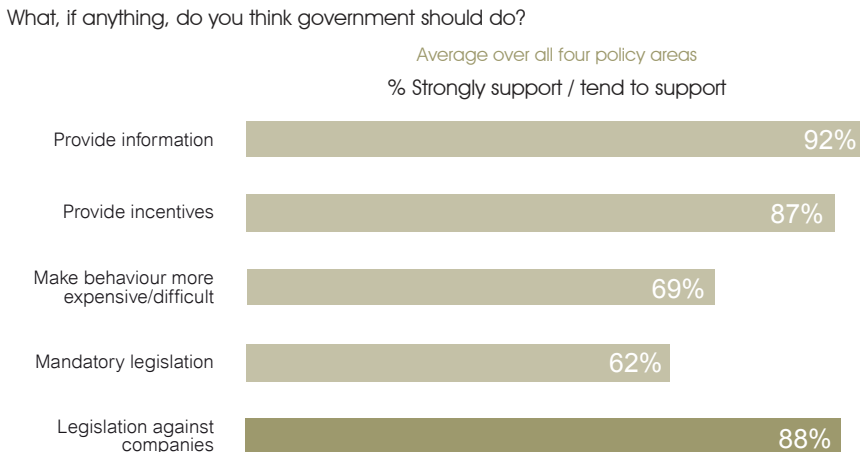
Global @dvisor is an online survey of c.500-1000 residents of working age in each of 24 countries, which represent

63% of the world's population and 75% of world GDP. We do need to remember that the study, by necessity, therefore only includes those who have internet access. In developed countries where internet access is high, this can be taken as a good approximation of the general working age population. However, in developing nations the results should be viewed differently, as representative of a more affluent and "connected" population.

BROAD SUPPORT FOR BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

One of the more striking findings is the high level of stated support for behaviour change policies across the 24 nations. Looking at

CHART 1: SUPPORT FOR INTERVENTION ACROSS THE BOARD, ALTHOUGH INDIVIDUALS ARE WARIER OF RESTRICTIVE LEGISLATION



Base: c.500 - 1,000 residents aged 16-64 (18-64 in the US and Canada) in each country, November 2010. Source: Ipsos Global @dvisor

the averages across all 24 countries, we find majority support for each intervention. As expected, there is exceptionally strong public support for being provided with information about how to change their behaviour, such as how to eat more healthily or how best to save for retirement: an average of 92% support these policies. But more surprisingly, perhaps, an average of six in ten individuals in the 24 countries polled (62%) also approved of legislation that prohibits the behaviour altogether, such as outright bans on smoking or unhealthy foods (see chart 1).

Nevertheless, while we find majority support for every type of policy, our results do highlight the fact that support for the intervention decreases as the “force” of the intervention increases – although this happens in fairly distinct steps. That is, there is little difference between providing information and

providing incentives, with both at around nine in ten saying they support each. This is perhaps not surprising, given that support for incentives without details on the associated costs or trade-offs involved will tend to be high.

Perhaps more surprising is that there is not more variation between support for restrictive legislation and outright banning of behaviours or products. We may have expected more resistance to the complete denial of choice that enforced saving for retirement, banning smoking, unhealthy food or environmentally damaging products implies – but overall there is little distinction between these measures and making behaviours more difficult or expensive.

We also asked about measures aimed at changing the behaviours of

businesses, as this is an important tool available to governments. These receive much higher support than restrictive measures aimed at the general public, with overall almost nine out of ten (88%) supporting measures such as laws making food producers and shops promote healthy choices, or forcing companies to act more sustainably. Of course this will partly reflect the fact that these are ostensibly “no cost” options for the respondents.

But overall our findings are encouraging for policy-makers, in that on these issues there seems broad support for a wide range of policy responses from government. However, people are not necessarily consistent in their views. In particular, 50% also agree that the government should not get involved in people’s decisions in each behavioural area. In other words, while a majority may agree that a particular intervention policy is a good idea, we still observe a strong gut reaction against government intervention and the “nanny state” among many people (see chart 2).

Certain findings in particular emphasise this contradiction. For example, 53% agreed that the “government should not get involved in what people choose to save for retirement”, while at the same time 69% agreed that the “government should change the law so that everyone has to enrol in a pension scheme”. When we look at an individual respondent level, **36% agreed with both statements**. In other words, over a third of respondents supported mandatory legislation

concerning pension scheme enrolment, whilst at the same time stating that governments should not interfere in what people choose to save!

In such cases our results will to a degree reflect the “cognitive polyphasia”²⁵ we often encounter when asking people about the role of government: that is, the same people can at the same time want governments to sort out an issue, but also be deeply suspicious of their involvement. Of course, the overlap in views will also be partly explained by the necessarily general question used (i.e. people will have different views of what “involved” means), but the point remains that governments should not assume a straightforward acceptance of restrictive measures.

It is also worth highlighting the difference between the spread of support and the depth of feeling involved. Opposition to

restrictive measures may be a minority in each case, but these views may be very strongly held – and therefore lead to significant negative reactions and political cost if an outright ban is actually attempted. This could well be the case with smoking, for example, given that we found a quarter of all people **strongly** opposed an outright smoking ban.

THERE ARE IMPORTANT EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE

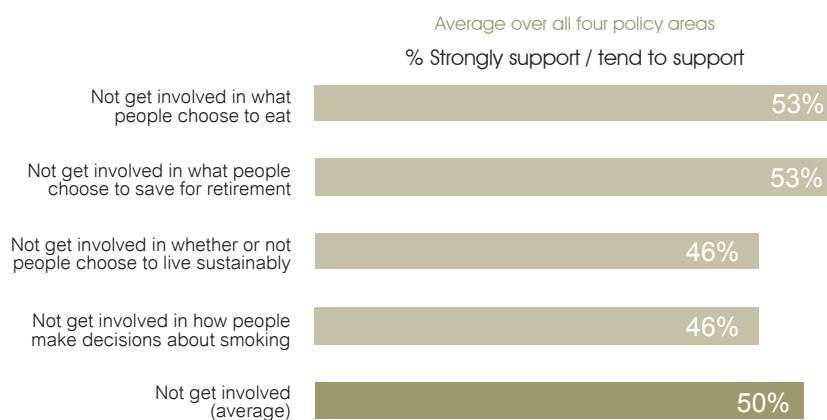
The assumption that there is a hierarchy of public support that follows the strength of the intervention is generally supported by the research – but there are important exceptions to this. For example, whereas we generally record higher support for partially-restrictive legislation than for outright bans, in two cases we find the opposite trend: fewer people support a “fat tax” that makes unhealthy foods more expensive (53%)

than approve of the outright banning of unhealthy foods (60%). Likewise, fewer support making it more expensive to use environmentally unsustainable products (63%) than approve of the banning of such products (68%). This contrasts with the questions on smoking and retirement savings where we find the expected trend of partially-restrictive legislation (a smoking ban in public places and automatic opt-in to pension schemes) receiving higher support than outright bans or enforcement.

The motivations behind these exceptions require further work to unpick: it could be because people don’t trust themselves to resist temptation or alternatively they have a sense of fairness that these measures will hit the least well-off most. In any case, it is clear that there are different patterns and motives depending on the exact measure being proposed, and it is important for governments to understand these.

CHART 2: HALF STILL HAVE A NEGATIVE GUT REACTION TO THE “NANNY STATE”

What, if anything, do you think government should do?



Base: c.500 - 1,000 residents aged 16-64 (18-64 in the US and Canada) in each country, November 2010, Source: Ipsos Global @dvisor

Given our finding that a “fat ban” would be relatively unpopular in European countries (with an average of 48% support among those polled), it will be interesting to observe the reaction to Denmark’s recent introduction of a tax on saturated fat in foods, thought to be the first of its kind in the world.²⁶ If sales of targeted foods decrease without much public disgruntlement, then high levels of intervention in previously protected areas may grow in appeal for governments in other countries. But given that Danish citizens have already adapted to a ban on trans fats, not to mention a “sin



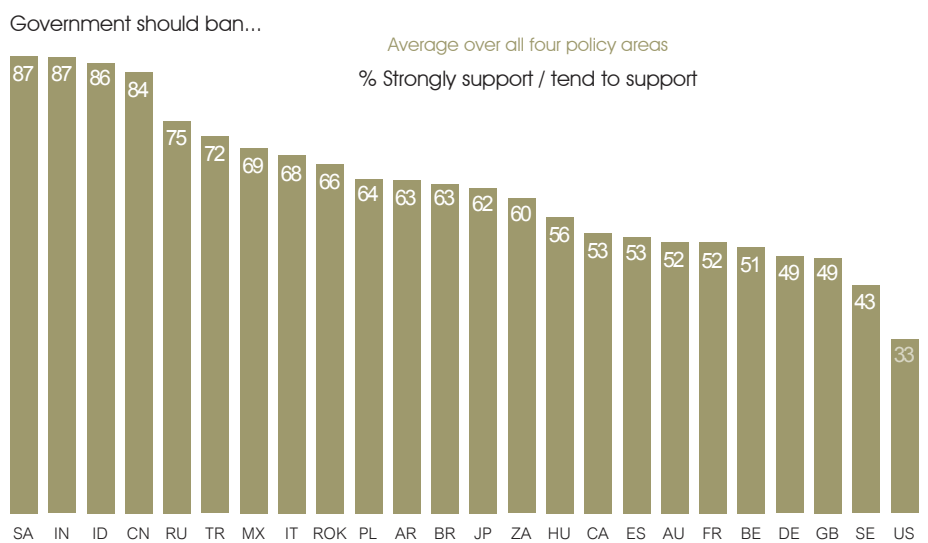
tax” on sugary items, such as sweets and fizzy drinks, the context in this country may differ significantly from that in many of the countries in our poll.

**STRONGER INTERVENTIONS
DIVIDE GLOBAL OPINION**

Our study also makes clear that there are marked differences between countries in levels of support for different types of intervention. This data emphasises the diverse challenges faced by policy-makers across the world in their promotion of behaviour change, but they also provide insight into the varied factors that drive opinion about behaviour change policies.

Looking at the differences between the 24 nations in our Global @dvisor survey,

CHART 3: SUPPORT FOR OUTRIGHT PROHIBITION SHOWS THE FULL EXTENT OF POLITICAL DIVERSITY



Base: c.500 - 1,000 residents aged 16-64 (18-64 in the US and Canada) in each country, November 2010, Source: Ipsos Global @dvisor

we find that divergence between opinions increases with the force of intervention. Our results show that nudge policies are broadly popular across the globe, while shove policies are significantly more divisive, revealing large differences between countries.

Unsurprisingly, support for the provision of information about how to change one's behaviour is uniformly high (four out of five or higher), such that there is not a great deal of difference between the support it receives in countries as different as Indonesia (98%) and the USA (82%). Support for financial behaviour change incentives has a slightly broader range of 22 percentage points (from 95% in China to 73% in Sweden), but support for partially-restrictive legislation is much more divisive. Global support for these policies, aimed at somewhat prohibiting a behaviour or making it more expensive, has a range of 42 percentage points, from 88% in China to 46% in the USA.

And the question of mandatory legislation, which would impose an outright ban on the behaviour in question, reveals the full extent of global diversity. Propositions such as an absolute smoking ban and compulsory participation in pension schemes receive a high of 87% average support in Saudi Arabia and India, but a low of 33% average support in the USA: a range of 54 percentage points (see chart 3).

One clear pattern in our data is that, on average, the global public does

not differentiate in a nuanced manner between different degrees of behaviour change legislation. By charting support for outright bans against support for partially-restrictive legislation we find a very strong correlation, from the very liberally-minded USA at one end of the scale to the greatest supporters of paternalism – China, India, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia – at the other end. In other words, there tends to be a fairly consistent pattern: if a country is in favour of one type of more restrictive intervention, then it will also be in favour of another (see chart 4).

Having said that, a comparison of different modes of intervention in closely-related behavioural areas does reveal more subtle national characteristics. Swedes, for example,

have particularly negative views about incentive schemes, while the French react strongly against proposals to make a behaviour more expensive. And by charting support for incentive schemes against support for banning legislation across the similar policy areas of food and smoking, we can observe that people in Australia and South Africa are relatively more favourable towards incentives for good behaviour than towards banning the bad behaviour.

Conversely, the public in Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia all exhibit the opposite tendency, with relatively stronger support for authoritarian approaches to bad behaviour over incentivising good behaviour. Of course, in this case the

CHART 4: THE HIERARCHY OF SUPPORT FOR BEHAVIOUR CHANGE LEGISLATION

What, if anything, do you think government should do?

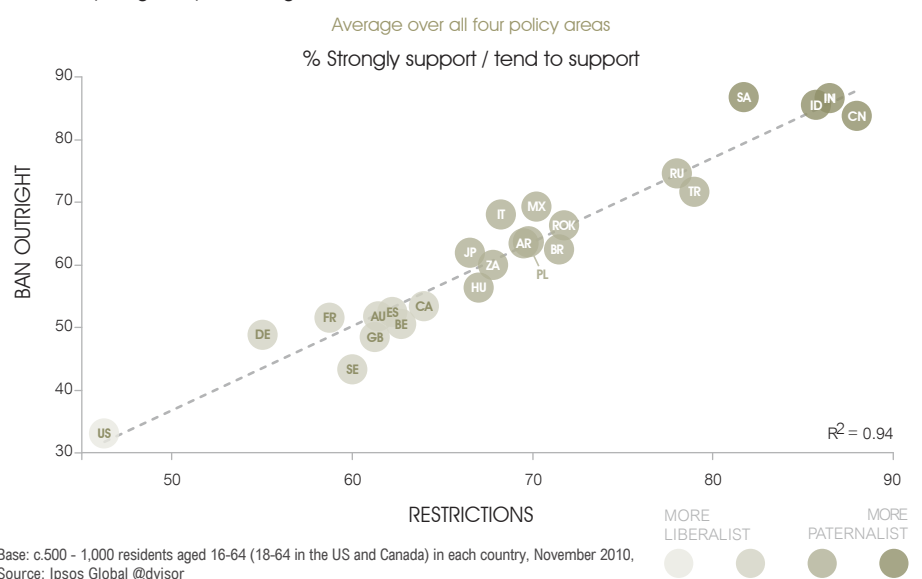
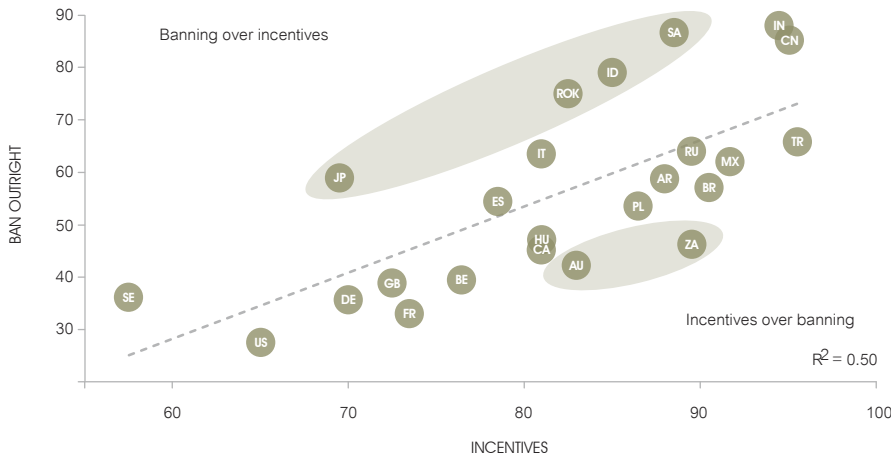


CHART 5: SUBTLE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NATIONS EMERGE: AUTHORITARIANS AND INCENTIVISERS

% Strongly support / tend to support for food and smoking (average)



Base: c.500 - 1,000 residents aged 16-64 (18-64 in the US and Canada) in each country, November 2010. Source: Ipsos Global @dvisor

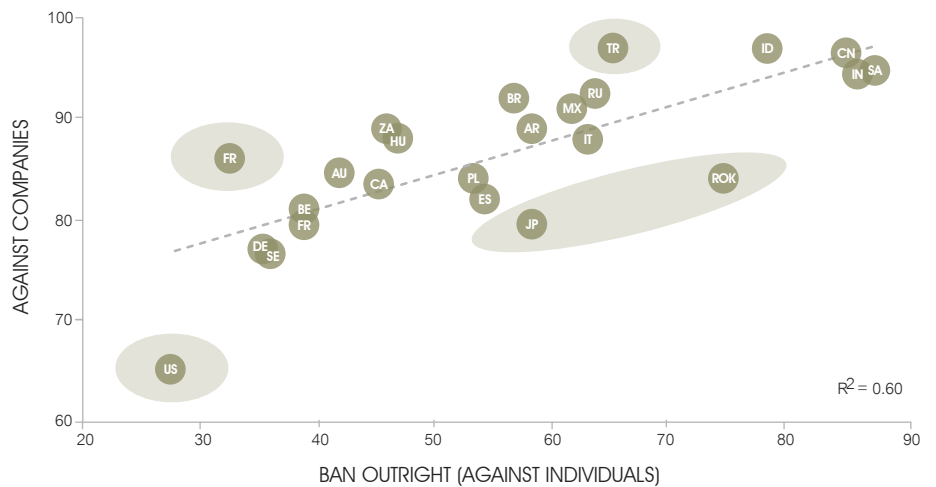
differences between nations are relative to their position in the “hierarchy” of support for intervention. After all, in all nations polled we observe stronger support for incentive schemes than for legislative prohibitions (see chart 5).

Likewise, attitudes towards business can helpfully be put into context by comparing support for strong legislation against individuals with support for strong legislation against companies (see chart 6). Here we observe that citizens in France and Turkey are relatively hard on business compared with their views on legislation aimed at the general public, while the Far East Asian democracies of Japan and South Korea are relatively liberal towards business, yet relatively hard on individuals – a result that appears particularly suggestive of cultural factors. But when it comes to attitudes towards companies the

real outlier is the USA, where the lowest proportion (66%) approve of behaviour change legislation targeted at businesses.

CHART 6: FRANCE & TURKEY RELATIVELY HARD ON BUSINESS, FAR EAST ASIAN DEMOCRACIES RELATIVELY LIBERAL

% Strongly support / tend to support strong intervention in food and smoking (average)



Base: c.500 - 1,000 residents aged 16-64 (18-64 in the US and Canada) in each country, November 2010. Source: Ipsos Global @dvisor



WHY DO COUNTRIES DIFFER?

Understanding variations in acceptability of behaviour change interventions across different countries is useful – but it’s also important to consider what underlying factors may be causing these. This section looks at some possible explanations, revealing a significant association between public acceptability and wealth, but also with the political culture and distribution of power within a society. We also demonstrate that there is little relationship between two other indicators – trust in government and income inequality – which, prior to the research, we might have expected would have had some clear association with public acceptability. Finally, we outline how views vary by demographic sub-groups, looking across the whole sample for patterns in how different types of people respond.

WEALTHIER NATIONS LESS SUPPORTIVE OF INTERVENTION

When we consider the relative per capita wealth of nations a strong pattern emerges: the more prosperous the nation, the less likely its people are to favour government intervention against the public. The correlation is particularly strong when we compare GDP per capita (after accounting for purchasing power) with support for partially-restrictive legislation against individuals (see chart 7). As the chart shows, the USA is both the wealthiest and least supportive of intervention that makes a behaviour more difficult or expensive, with India, China and Indonesia being least wealthy but most supportive of this level of intervention. Likewise, wealthier countries tend to show weaker support for interventions aimed at business, with Indonesia at one end of the scale (97%

support) and Sweden and the USA at the other (80% and 66% support respectively).

BUT WEALTHIER INDIVIDUALS MORE SUPPORTIVE OF INTERVENTION

Yet when we investigate wealth distribution within nations we find that those in the top income brackets for their country tend to be slightly more supportive of each level of intervention than those with low incomes. For example, when it comes to legislation making the behaviour more difficult or expensive, 71% of high earners support the intervention, compared with 67% of low earners (average across all four policy areas), and we find the same pattern when it comes to the question of outright bans. In fact, the only case where that pattern is not seen is with money-off incentive vouchers for healthy foods, which are supported by 83% of those in

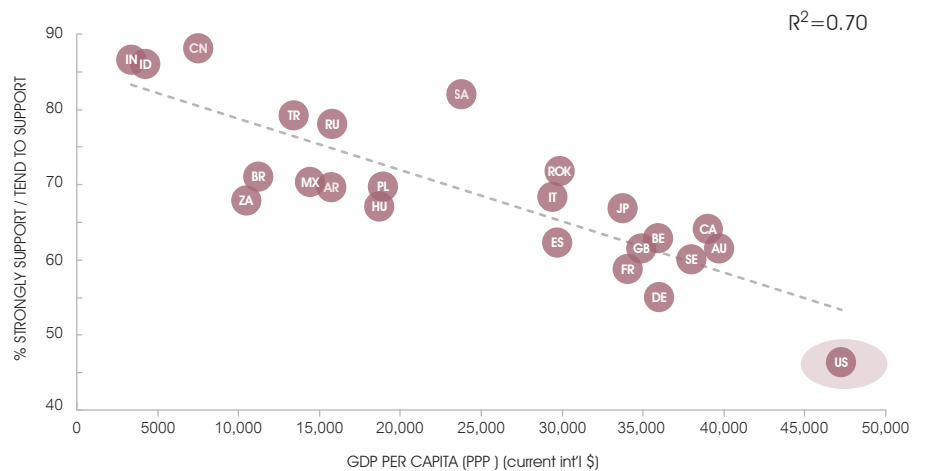
the low income bracket, compared with 81% of high earners. These findings make broad intuitive sense, given that we would expect higher prevalence of these behaviours among lower earners, such that they will be doubly-hardest hit, while those more capable of adapting to an intervention might be expected to show more approval. But, in light of our broader finding that wealthier countries as a whole are less supportive of intervention, this pattern does suggest an interesting paradox concerning the relationship between wealth and support for intervention – somewhat reminiscent of the Easterlin paradox on happiness and wealth.²⁷

MIGHT CULTURAL FACTORS EXPLAIN ACCEPTABILITY?

This pattern can possibly be understood by

CHART 7: WEALTHIER NATIONS LESS LIKELY TO FAVOUR GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

The government should make the behaviour more difficult/more expensive (average over all four policy areas)



Base: c.500 - 1,000 residents aged 16-64 (18-64 in the US and Canada) in each country, November 2010. Source: International Monetary Fund, 2010 / Ipsos Global @dvisor

investigating other cultural factors behind the acceptability of intervention. Identifying and measuring cultural characteristics is not straightforward, but there are a few useful measures we have examined, which suggest a strong relationship between national public acceptability and the political and social power structures of the state.

Geert Hofstede's 'Power Distance Index' (PDI) is a measure of the extent to which members of society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.²⁸ The index was developed with particular reference to cultures within businesses, but includes wider measures around class and political history. A high power distance will indicate that inequality due to power or status has come to be entrenched. Cultures with a high PDI tend towards centralised, top-down control, whereas low

power distance implies greater equality and empowerment of citizens.

When we plot our Global @dvisor data against the Power Distance Index, we find that support for mandatory legislation, aimed at banning behaviours, is particularly strong in countries with a high PDI (see chart 8). As such, a broad polarisation between conservative cultures and liberal democracies might prove a more useful way of understanding differences in national support for intervention than the appeal to GDP. We find a similar pattern when comparing our data with Inglehart and Welzel's 'Survival/Self-Expression values,' which measures the extent to which the immediate concern of individuals in a nation has to do with material essentials or personal interests.²⁹

These findings suggest that a consideration of the cultural values of a country may help inform us of the extent to which strong "shove" policies in particular may or may not be met with approval.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND INCOME INEQUALITY SEEM LESS HELPFUL EXPLANATIONS

Given that support for a behaviour change intervention means supporting a governmental policy, we might expect that trust in government would prove a strong factor in this support. Yet, apart from those countries whose trust in government is particularly high (such as Saudi Arabia), we find little correlation between confidence in government and support for interventions. It appears that when it comes to behaviour change policies, individuals tend to think about the issues independently of their trust in the government of the day.

CHART 8: COUNTRIES WITH A HIGHER INEQUALITY OF POWER MORE SUPPORTIVE OF PROHIBITIVE LEGISLATION

The government should ban the behaviour (average across all four policy areas)



Base: c.500 - 1,000 residents aged 16-64 (18-64 in the US and Canada) in each country, November 2010. Nb. PDIs for China, Hungary, Poland & Russia are estimate values; there is currently no individual PDI for Saudi Arabia. Source: Ipsos Global @dvisor; Hofstede Cultural Dimensions

And while inequality in the distribution of power does seem to matter to public acceptability of interventions, income inequality does not. The literature around income inequality, popularised by Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level*,³⁰ shows widespread agreement about its correlation with a wide range of health and social problems. However, in almost all cases we find no strong relation between support for intervention and inequality of personal income.

The exceptions to this rule are incentive schemes that "pay" the individual, such as money-off vouchers for healthy foods and schemes to encourage people to

stop smoking. There we find that the nations with the highest measured levels of income inequality – Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and South Africa³¹ – are also among those showing the strongest support for directly-rewarding financial incentives. As such, in these countries, it appears that a financial aid to help narrow the difference in opportunities between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ would be particularly welcome. Nevertheless, more generally, inequality of income does not help explain why support for intervention decreases with wealth.

THERE ARE SOME CONSISTENT VARIATIONS BY GENDER AND AGE

If understanding the overall cultural and political climate of the nation is the first challenge for policy makers interested in behaviour change, then the second is that of getting to grips with the diversity of the population. As we have seen, attitudes towards intervention can differ substantially by country, but our Global @dvisor data also reveal differences by socio-demographic group, such as between high- and low-income groups, as discussed above. It is important to note, however, that we are generally dealing with small percentage point differences here – socio-demographic differences, where they occur, are generally not as pronounced as differences between countries.

This lack of difference is interesting in itself, since in policy areas where we might expect pronounced socio-demographic differences there is often no significant

difference in opinion. When it comes to policies about retirement, for example, we might expect younger people to be less supportive of policies forcing them to save for a pension, but in fact we find little difference in support by age – globally, 68% of those aged under 35 support mandatory enrolment in a pension scheme, compared with 70% of 50-64 year olds.

Nevertheless, the data do reveal small, clear differences in attitudes to levels of intervention depending on people’s genders and ages, on their incomes, and on their education and employment status. These kinds of demographic differences are often consistent across countries.

For instance, when it comes to the question of incentives to eat more healthily, similar gender differences exist across different countries. In Saudi Arabia, where the population tends to be strongly in favour of government intervention, 79% of women strongly support government incentives to eat healthily, versus 64% of men. In the UK, where support for intervention generally tends to be much lower, 35% of women strongly support healthy eating incentives, versus 25% of men. This question of money-off vouchers for healthy foods also divides young and old, with 86% of under-35s supporting this proposal, and 74% of 50-64 year-olds in approval.

Indeed, while differences in support for intervention by gender tend to be minimal, greater divergence in opinion can be observed between age-groups.

Older people, for example, are generally more supportive of interventions that ban the behaviour in question outright. The exception is the case of smoking: when it comes to smoking, younger people are more supportive of every level of intervention than those in the oldest age bracket, with disagreement growing as the “force” of intervention increases. While 56% of under-35s support an outright smoking ban, just 45% of 50-64 year-olds are in favour.

PREVALENCE MAY BE A FACTOR – BUT NOT ALWAYS

These age patterns are likely to reflect differences in the cultural outlook of different generations – but they will also reflect the prevalence of the “bad” behaviour that we’re examining. Our findings suggest that, when it comes to some behaviours, prevalence may explain support – but not in all cases.

No proposition divides nations more than that of “The government should introduce laws to ban unhealthy foods.” While 89% of Chinese and Korean citizens support this statement, just 21% of Americans are in favour: a range of 68 percentage points. But in this case, prevalence of obesity, seems to have little effect on support. For example, just 13% of Swedes are obese, but they support a “fat ban” hardly any more than do their significantly more obese American counterparts (34% obesity).³²

In contrast, when it comes to the question of an outright smoking ban,

heavy-smoking countries tend to be far less supportive than they are of the prohibition of unhealthy foods, while nations with lower smoking rates tend to be slightly more supportive of a smoking ban. Most dramatically, in Russia and Turkey, where over 35% of adults smoke, we find only half the level of support for a blanket ban on tobacco than the level of support we find for a ban on unhealthy foods (86% support for a “fat” ban compared with 42% support for a smoking ban in Russia, and a drop of 87% to 44% in Turkey).

But while Turkey, with its long history of tobacco use among men, opposes an outright smoking ban, among European nations it shows relatively high support for a ban in indoor public spaces

(75% support). It should also be noted that between 2002 and 2008 Turkey experienced a significant decline in smoking prevalence.³³

Both these facts may reflect a strong and consistent approach to tobacco control in the nation. According to a Tobacco Control Scale (TCS) analysis,³⁴ Turkey not only has the most extensive labelling provisions in Europe (a pictorial health warning covering 65% of the front of the pack), but also doubled the price of cigarettes between 2005 and 2010³⁵ and successfully introduced comprehensive smoke-free legislation in 2009. Given that “of all tobacco control policies... price policies showed the strongest association with quit ratios, followed by an advertising ban”,³⁶ Turkey’s success

in reducing the prevalence of smoking may be unsurprising, but it may also be significant that the Turkish PM, a well known anti-smoking advocate, has provided highly visible political leadership by banning smoking in cabinet meetings.

In contrast to Turkey, Germany has a somewhat liberal approach to advertising and incomplete public smoking bans, scoring poorly on the TCS.³⁷ Of all the nations we surveyed, Germans are the least supportive of interventions against smoking (with just 60% in favour of a ban in public places), and Germany has seen only a minor decline in prevalence over the last decade.³⁸ A recent referendum in Bavaria, however, which resulted in the first comprehensive smoke-free legislation in a German state, suggests the possibility of greater interventions in future - if the public deem this to be acceptable.

These examples suggest the importance of both shoves and nudges in combination, but also suggest that underlying social norms, including the strength of attachment to particular habits and practices, are vital considerations when designing interventions to change behaviour. In countries where smoking plays a particularly significant social role the shoves of a price shift or restrictive legislation may need to be preceded by a series of nudges that effectively communicate the dangers of smoking and ultimately succeed in shifting social norms.

CHART 9: PREVALENCE DOES NOT APPEAR A FACTOR IN THE CASE OF FOOD

Government should introduce laws to ban unhealthy foods



Base: c.500 - 1,000 residents aged 16-64 (18-64 in the US and Canada) in each country, November 2010 . Source: Ipsos Global @dvisor; International Obesity Taskforce



CONCLUSIONS

Our report presents a number of clear messages about the public acceptability of behaviour change interventions. Firstly, and perhaps surprisingly, there are relatively high levels of stated support across a wide spectrum of the world's population for even the more forceful behaviour change interventions we asked about.

However, there is also a significant range of response between countries. Public support for outright prohibition is as high as 87% in Saudi Arabia and India, for example, but is only 33% in the USA. As outlined in the report, it initially seems that socio-economic factors may help explain this. The more prosperous a country is, the less likely its public are to support the full range of behaviour change interventions. But, interestingly, wealthier individuals across countries tend to be slightly more supportive of each level of behavioural intervention than those with lower incomes.

The most likely explanation for this apparent contradiction is that neither are straightforward causal relationships. At an individual level, the greater acceptance of government action on these issues among the better-off will be explained not only by wealth but also a further mix of factors, including education levels and knowledge of the issues. And the reverse pattern at national levels is likely to reflect wider cultural contexts. In particular, the distribution of power within the country appears to be highly related to the public acceptability of legislation that reduces behavioural freedom. Countries with more authoritarian cultures and centralised political structures - as

measured by the Power Distance Index³⁹ - tend to have very high levels of support for the most forceful types of intervention. These countries also tend to be in the less developed world, and so have lower incomes.

Another finding we may have predicted in advance is that public acceptability tends to fall as more freedoms are lost due to the intervention. However, there are cases where people are slightly more in favour of "choice editing" through banning unhealthy or less sustainable products than they are of increasing their price. This could reflect concerns about the inequity of using a price mechanism (i.e. that it will hit the poorest harder) - or just that people do not trust themselves to make the "right" choice and would rather the temptation of a more expensive option was removed entirely.

But a further message is somewhat at odds with our first conclusion. That is, despite the relatively high levels of stated support for behaviour change interventions, there is still a significant reaction against a 'nanny state' among many. Across all the areas we asked about - diet, retirement saving, sustainable living and smoking - around half believed government should 'not get involved' in people's decisions about how to behave.

This probably reflects a couple of interrelated points. Firstly, it is not lost on us that there are issues with using structured survey questions to measure people's real beliefs on this subject. A key premise of behavioural economics is exactly that we don't have full cognitive understanding of how we actually make decisions, and there

is a parallel literature in survey methods that make similar points about the shortcuts people take when answering surveys on these types of topics.

However, the contrast here is very stark and it seems unlikely to be driven by the complexity of the questions or concepts themselves. Hence a second, possibly more persuasive explanation is that this is a striking example of "cognitive polyphasia," which is where people hold two opposing views about an issue without being conscious of the contradiction or suffering from dissonance. The finding that 36% of people agree both that government shouldn't get involved in what people save for retirement and that the government should change the law so that everyone has to enrol in a pension makes the point very clearly.

We see this phenomenon a lot across our qualitative and quantitative studies, and it tends to be most prevalent, firstly, where we are looking at issues people don't normally give a lot of active thought to, and secondly where there are emotional responses that may lead to different conclusions than rational responses (which includes anything related to "government" intervention for many people). This reflects psychology's theory of dual processes,⁴⁰ recently popularised by Kahnemann's discussion of "fast" (System 1) and "slow" (System 2) thinking, which in turn result in either more intuitive or more reflective responses.⁴¹

We frequently observe this dynamic in deliberative workshops when considering issues of government intervention in citizen

behaviour. Even over the course of a short discussion, an initial, automatic response tends to be tempered through deliberation and debate, leading to a more reflective, and often different, response. This might seem to suggest that if people are not really sure what they think, and can be swayed by a few hours in a workshop, then public acceptability cannot really matter.

And there are seemingly plenty of examples where bold moves by government that go against the grain of public opinion have been successful, not just in terms of affecting the behaviour, but also in shifting public views of acceptability. To take just one example, opinion tracking studies on public space smoking bans in countries such as the UK and Ireland show opposition declining significantly after the intervention has been introduced and the public experience the benefits.

However, this misses the point that these smoking bans were preceded by years of softer interventions from communications campaigns, price mechanisms, more targeted bans on smoking on transport, seeing public space bans introduced in other countries and so on. Indeed, the debate encouraged by raising the possibility of a ban itself caused views to shift significantly in favour in a relatively short space of time.⁴²

There are a number of studies that show a “cycle of public acceptability”⁴³ where public support changes significantly before, during and after any intervention. In particular, the increased acceptance of interventions after their introduction

can be explained in a number of ways. In a study of opinion on the introduction of congestion charging in Stockholm, for example, explanations for increased acceptance included the realisation that the benefits were greater than anticipated and the fact that people have a tendency to “accept the inevitable,” since it takes significant energy to maintain their opposition. This acceptance is accommodated through a corresponding shift in the underlying belief system of the individual which had previously made them reluctant to lose what they saw as a “free good” (travel into the city).

The evidence in our report also suggests that the variety of cultural norms seen across different countries place people in different baseline states of acceptance of government intervention – which also helps make acceptability alone a relatively weak measure. An example that illustrates this is again a public space smoking ban, this time in China. Here a ban has been introduced, but is widely ignored – despite the very high acceptability of that type of action among the population seen in our survey. There will be a number of explanations for why the ban hasn’t worked in China, but a large part is likely to be that social norms have not shifted in the way we’ve seen in other countries in the run-up to similar interventions. Most telling perhaps is that only a quarter of Chinese people are aware of the health impacts of smoking and second-hand smoke.⁴⁴

All this lends weight to the idea, presented in the House of Lords report on behaviour change, that “a measure which does not

have public support is, in general, less likely to succeed.”⁴⁵ But, as the quote also implies, acceptability is not the whole story. Reviews that focus on whether or not interventions have “passed a public acceptance test”⁴⁶ rather miss the point in suggesting that ‘acceptance’ is a state rather than a process.

In most cases when considering the actual likely success of an intervention, a better concept is how “prepared” the public are for it. This will include acceptability of the action, but also further measures such as recognition of the issue, understanding of the potential benefits of dealing with it and belief in the effectiveness of the actual measure proposed. As this analysis has shown, these need to be measured carefully and with a close understanding, not just of the issue itself, but also of the cultural context of the people affected.

A clear message here is that there are no magic bullets or single levers to pull that will result in a desired change in a specific behaviour. But by drawing on a broader notion of public preparedness, that understands public acceptability as part of a cycle of change and not simply as a static indicator of support, politicians and policy-makers can increase the effectiveness of behaviour change interventions. Leaders need to combine subtlety with courage, and understanding what the public really thinks is vital for knowing which is needed, and when.



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TECHNICAL NOTE

The Ipsos Global @advisor is a monthly online survey conducted by Ipsos MORI via the Ipsos Online Panel system in 24 countries around the world. The countries reporting herein are Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Great Britain, Germany, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the United States of America.

For the results of this survey, an international sample of 18,787 adults aged 18-64 in the US and Canada, and age 16-64 in all other countries, were interviewed. Approximately 1000+ individuals participated on a country by country basis via the Ipsos Online Panel with the exception of Argentina, Belgium, Indonesia, Mexico, Poland, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden and Turkey, where each has a sample approximately 500+.

Weighting was employed to balance demographics and ensure the sample's composition reflects that of the adult population according to the most recent country Census data available and to provide results intended to approximate the sample universe, (in the small number of developing countries where access to the internet is limited respondents are more likely to be affluent and well connected than the average member of the population).

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