The best route to give

Free public transport: a bad idea in disguise?

The issue of free public transport is at the heart of mobility policies today, and even more so on the eve of elections. It raises many questions about its financing, effectiveness and impact on networks.

In France, fare revenues represent an average 25% of the actual cost of urban public transport services. The remainder is financed mainly by the "Versement Mobilité", a tax paid by employers, and by local authorities. For example, for a standard french monthly pass costing €60 in a large city the passenger actually pays only €15 to €30 on average, depending on the reimbursement or solidarity pricing schemes. By comparison, passes cost €86 in Berlin, €150 in London (zones 1-3) or €90 in Zurich. In France, fares remain among the lowest in Europe.

The experience of cities that have adopted free travel (Aubagne, Dunkerque, Châteauroux) shows an initial increase in ridership (+25% to +50%), but a rapid levelling-off of this growth. Modal shift remains low : The majority of new journeys come from pre-existing users or transfers from walking or cycling, and very few from the car. What's more, operating costs do not fall with free travel: they increase, with greater supply requirements to absorb ridership.

Free travel also implies a serious loss of data: without validation, it becomes difficult to manage the network, monitor demand and adjust supply. It can also create a feeling of anonymity that is detrimental to safety and civility.

A number of recent qualitative surveys show that, while free access is initially attractive, it is quickly downplayed as soon as participants become aware of the budgetary constraints and trade-offs involved. Many express a preference for well-targeted solidarity-based pricing, deemed fairer and more sustainable.

Finally, free fares are often perceived as a potential factor of service degradation and insecurity: in the absence of controls, some fear an increase in damage or unsocial behavior. The ticket or pass also acts as a symbolic barrier. By removing this barrier, universal free travel raises fears among women, the elderly and regular users, who fear a loss of comfort and security.

So, far from being a miracle solution, free travel raises passionate debates. It calls for broader reflection on financing models and public service priorities: quantity, quality or equity?

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The story

The weather is fine on March 25, 2041, 7:32 a.m. Bernard, 45, is walking down the six flights of stairs of his socially responsible building. In front of his home, at the bus stop, around thirty people are already waiting. He whispers to his smartglasses to tell him when the next buses are due. On the left glass of his smartglasses, the buses of lines 7 and 12 are all flashing "Delay +9", "Next passage: unknown". He gets annoyed. It's the same thing every morning. On the right-hand glass, he receives offers from Tesla and Uber: for €30, he can get to work on time. He selects the "Urgent home-work trip" option and a gray autonomous capsule arrives within two minutes.

The capsule stopped gently at the bottom of the building: a short model, one seat. The interface projected on his smartglasses reminded him that he had the option of sharing the ride with two other passengers. Cheaper. But not today. He was annoyed enough already. He'd selected the solo option with the blink of an eye. He'd take the opportunity to call a client in Quebec. As soon as he was settled, the seat adapted to his usual position. The screen appeared on the wall to start his call.

The adaptive light inside adjusted to the rising sun so that his face was not overexposed to the screen. The appointment began at 8 a.m. sharp. At 8:23 a.m, he hung up, relaxed. He had arrived. Bernard told himself that he was spending a fortune on these capsules, fortunately earning a good living. He'd rather pay for his journey than take the free bus.

A few years ago, he only took the bus. But the quality of service had steadily deteriorated. Uber and Tesla had filled the gap. It's better to pay for decent service than to have free but lousy service.

Yet Bernard had been one of the proponents of free service. In 2026, he had voted for the citizens' list led by a charismatic elected representative, Christine Tobiens, a former trade unionist, who promised "mobility for all, no strings attached, no tickets, no hassle. The best of networks". The campaign was based on a simple, hard-hitting message: "The buses are empty, people can't afford them. Let's give them access to the city. The measure seemed to make perfect sense. Fare revenues represented only 20% of the total cost. It was a measure that would make public transport more attractive to meet ambitious decarbonization targets. The future mayor - she was a friend of his mother's - was honest, driven by the common interest and convinced that free public transport was the best policy.

Bernard remembered the first time he had boarded the bus without a card, without validating, on January 1st 2027, when the measure came into force. Even though his employer reimbursed 50% of his fare, he still saved €30 a month. In less than a year, ridership jumped 25%. The mayor was paraded in the media, Aldous became a national example.

But as early as 2029, the first signs of slowdown appeared. With the "New Special Operation" launched in 2028 on the edge of Europe, the cost of raw materials skyrocketed. Inflation reached double digits and economic activity stagnated. Mobility payments were falling, and costs were rising exponentially. For the city council, the financial dead end was clear. The only option was to freeze all modernization projects and reduce service. The already crowded network is becoming overcrowded. Drivers are giving up in the face of increasingly aggressive passengers.

Arthur, who still took line 7 every day, watched helplessly as the system slowly deteriorated. Breakdowns, delays, overcrowding. He went back to his old car, preferring to face the traffic jams. Without validations, it was much more difficult to keep track of ridership. The technical services were powerless, and the director of the Greayer Aldous City Council had great difficulty understanding what was happening on its network. At the beginning, an automatic counting system was to be installed but the project was postponed for lack of funds, and then forgotten.

In fact, it was above all the city center network, already saturated, that saw its ridership explode. Since it was free

people got on for one or two stations, which was quicker than walking. On rainy days, the situation was chaotic. As a result, those living outside the centre had seen their transport conditions deteriorate considerably. Soon, many were saying they missed the old network. In the run-up to the 2032 elections, Christine Tobiens made a mea culpa: free travel had been a mistake, resources were lacking and it was crucial to find funding. In her campaign, she proposed a gradual reintroduction of user fees. She was not re-elected.

In 2036, Uber, and later Tesla, arrived in Aldous. First there were 100 capsules, then 1,000, then 5,000. At first, costs were minimal. For a few euros, Bernard could get to work. Eventually, he scrapped his old diesel car. He didn't buy another one. Many people, like Bernard, had given up their cars because buying an electric one was too expensive. The capsule was the best solution. And we didn't have to take it all the time. There was still the bus.

Then, as more and more Aldous adopted the capsule, prices slowly began to rise. Tesla and Uber charged exactly the same rates. A trip that had cost €5 in 2036 now cost €25, but wealthier residents like Bernard had gotten used to it. But not everyone had. At 7 p.m., he had an appointment with his sister Linda. He knew she'd spend half the dinner talking about her transportation difficulties. They were to meet at one of the few surviving downtown restaurants. People now preferred home delivery by drone. Bernard saw the tired, overcrowded bus and decided to walk the rest of the way - 25 minutes wasn't going to wear him out.

Linda arrived late and quite upset, having had to let three buses go by before she could get on, and the one she'd squeezed into had broken down. She had to walk the rest of the way, the third time this had happened to her since the beginning of March. More modest than Bernard, she lived in a social residence with no direct service and couldn't afford capsules. It took her ten minutes to walk to the only active stop in her area. The buses that passed by were usually packed. She had no choice. She worked at the hospital, starting at 7:15 a.m. and finishing at 3 p.m., with no regular schedule. She kept getting annoyed with Bernard: "You're the one who absolutely wanted free transport in 2027. Free care is dignity. As if ! Aldous is divided into two categories: those who can afford capsules like you and poor bums like me who are stuck with a bus network that's falling apart. I can't wait for that to change!"

Three scenarios: from best case to worst case

BEST CASE SCENARIO
The demanding but sustainable model

This scenario is based on a gradual but explained rate increase, in return for visible and significant investment in network quality: streetcars, comfort, frequency, intermodality. The network continues to expand. A strong solidarity-based pricing policy ensures access for all (young people, senior citizens, the underprivileged). Citizen participation is systematized. The network is growing and generating strong support. Autonomous capsules are regulated and integrated into streetcars. Cities are calmer, traffic jams reduced.

MODERATE SCENARIO
Slow, silent degradation

This is the in-between period, when people want everything without paying the price. Fares stagnate, as does public funding. Supply is slowly deteriorating, due to a lack of investment. Citizens perceive a regression, and departures from the network multiply. Autonomous private capsules are gradually setting up in response to the public service's shortcomings. Equity deteriorates, and the middle and working classes are trapped between a low-cost network and overpriced private services.

WORST CASE SCENARIO
Destructive free services

This scenario describes a region that has introduced universal free travel. Without revenue, the network collapses. In the absence of investment, the offer diminishes and the quality of service deteriorates. Insecurity increases, incivilities multiply. The public network is losing confidence. The more affluent are turning to private capsules, while the rest are suffering from a deteriorating service. Inequalities explode. The initial well-intentioned choices have led to a financial dead end and a setback for the common good.