

# Why people ban others' actions: A norm conformism hypothesis

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People sometimes want to ban other peoples' actions, even when there are no obvious externalities (see, e.g., Roth 2007 on repugnance, Elias et al. 2019; Ockenfels et al. 2020). Examples include bans on gay marriage, prostitution, surrogacy, gender-neutral language, and horse meat eating. Such bans vary with respect to time and space (Roth and Wang 2020) and there are likely many underlying motivations, beliefs and incentives contributing to the implementation of bans. Here, we argue that one motivation may be a desire to conform with the social norm. An aversion to violate the social norm is a well-established and robust human trait (Bernheim 1994, Bicchieri and Xiao 2009, Köbis et al. 2015, Krupka and Weber 2013). The link between bans and norms is that instead of adjusting one's own behavior, another way to have one's own behavior conform with others' behavior is to adjust others' behavior. Banning behavior that other people would like to engage in helps promoting one's preferred norm.

Indeed, Festinger's (1954) sociological theory of conformity suggests that we respond to the dissonance created by differences between our own actions and those of our social group by either (i) changing our actions (which creates cognitive dissonance that we resolve by changing our preferences), or (ii) convincing others to change their actions. While the first channel has been well-studied and confirmed many times (e.g., Bardsley and Sausgruber 2005, Köbis et al. 2015, Panagopoulos 2010, Velez et al. 2009), we are offering a variant of the second channel: Dissonance can be eliminated by pushing others to change their behavior when it is not in line with one's own view of appropriate behavior.

We suppose that many models that include a sufficiently strong desire to conform to the social norm will also predict a desire to ban others' actions (e.g., Bernheim 1994, Jones 1984, Kuran and Sandholm 2008, Michaeli and Spiro 2015), regardless of the exact specification of the underlying motivation to conform with the norm. Yet, because adjusting others' behavior was no available strategy in previous theoretical and laboratory models, it was so far not studied in this context. We fill this gap with a simple model to illustrate how bans naturally arise from norm conformity if they can be endogenously determined by a majority voting. We characterize the unique equilibrium set of allowed actions and show that the ultimate social norm corresponds to the most preferred action of the median agent type. We also show that the endogenous imposition of bans is always detrimental for the overall welfare relative to the unrestricted equilibrium. Finally, we address a fundamental puzzle about the imposition of bans: Taxing rather than banning the minority's actions seems to not only bring the minority's actions closer to the majority's preferred norm, but also to raise revenue for the majority. However, we show that when norm conformity is a strong motivation, incommensurability arises endogenously in the sense that there is no majority willing to abandon bans and tax the minority's actions instead.

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