

The Tobacco Bill and American Public Opinion

By Everett Carl Ladd

On June 17, the US Senate rejected a motion to waive the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 with respect to S 1415—popularly known as the Tobacco Bill—recommitting this proposed legislation to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, and thus effectively killing it.

The bill's defeat was by no means unexpected, though assessments of its chances had swung back and forth like a pendulum throughout the spring. But if the legislative outcome was always uncertain, the politics of the bill always seemed clear: Legislation to "keep cigarettes away from the kids" was wildly popular, and those seen opposing it were likely to suffer politically. Congressional opposition to S 1415

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centered in the Republican party, of course, and many Democrats were certain they would win politically, regardless of the bill's fate. Many Republican politicians and strategists agreed. Senator Phil Gramm (R-Texas) remarked in May, for example, that "anyone who opposes the bill knows that they are going to be tarred as being the spokesman for the tobacco industry, which in this debate has become the embodiment of all evil on the earth."

It's not hard to see why the politics seemed so clear. Tobacco is, emphatically, not a popular product, and the tobacco companies are indeed unpopular. Public sentiment against smoking has been on the rise for some time now, and there's broad recognition of the health hazards. Furthermore, while the bill had other provisions, it was effectively portrayed as an effort to curb youth smoking—and even when smoking found its greatest acceptance, in the 1940s and 1950s, efforts to stop or reduce use by the young were favored.

Naturally, then, there would be a firestorm of protest upon the bill's demise, heading right at Republicans. It seemed logical—but it didn't happen. Why it didn't is important, not so much in assessing the proposed legislation's fate as in giving us another clear glimpse of underlying American values. These commitments shape public sentiment on many policies, most seemingly unconnected to the tobacco bill.

Polling on the public's reaction to the defeat of S 1415 confounded political Washington's calculations. For example, when Gallup asked in a survey done June 22-23 whether "you personally feel the Senate should or should not have passed the tobacco bill," only 36 percent said it should have (see p. 10). The same survey asked respondents whether, if no tobacco legislation were enacted this year, they would be more likely to vote Republican for Congress, or vote Democratic, or if their vote wouldn't be affected. Just 12 percent said they would be more inclined to back the Democratic candidate, compared to 8 percent the Republican. A huge majority said

the outcome wouldn't affect their vote at all (see p. 10).

This reaction to the defeat of S 1415 shouldn't be seen in any way challenging the view that popular sentiment has turned against tobacco. Smoking is less popular today than at any time in recent decades. It's not true, by the way, that smoking is less popular now than it ever was. We don't have polls from the 1910s and 1920s, but lots of other historical evidence show widespread opposition to the use of tobacco products and emphasis ("coffin nails," etc.) on the health risks. Smoking didn't start to become chic until the 1930s, and it held this status for only four decades or so. If one's starting point is the 1930s, though, sentiment has indeed turned sharply against smoking—as data on the proportion who smoke clearly show. The percentage of Americans who smoke is declining steadily (pp. 7-9). Consumption of cigarettes reached its all-time high (640 billion) in 1981; it had dropped sharply (to 487 billion) by 1996. The decline is even more striking in per capita terms: from 4,664 in 1968 to 2,510 in 1996 (with the base here, voting age population).

So, if tobacco companies are in the doghouse, smoking increasingly unpopular, and efforts to curb smoking by the young almost universally applauded, why wasn't the defeat of S 1415 widely deplored? There are three main reasons—and tobacco company advertising and PR efforts aren't one of them.

First, the tobacco bill called for increases in cigarette taxes by \$1.10 a pack over five years, and Americans these days generally say no to tax hikes. More people saw the bill as an effort to pull in more money for government spending than to reduce teen smoking (pp. 10-11).

Smoking and American Values

Second, and perhaps even more importantly, Americans are strongly committed to the principle of individual responsibility. The health risks of smoking are widely recognized—and have been for a long time. Back in January 1954, when Gallup asked whether “do you think cigarette smoking is harmful or not,” 70 percent said it is. If I choose to smoke, then, I must accept responsibility for the consequences. I may dislike the tobacco companies and their product, but my sense of individual responsibility holds me back from hailing efforts to punish them. Any way the question is asked in polls, overwhelming majorities say that health problems facing smokers are their own fault, rather than that of the tobacco companies (p. 16). It may seem ironic that a company may be genuinely unpopular but that majorities will resist efforts to “go after it” legislatively, but that’s where American opinion is vis-à-vis the tobacco industry—for reasons that are deep-rooted.

Third, we believe in individual choice. I may not want to do something, but I shouldn’t stop someone else from

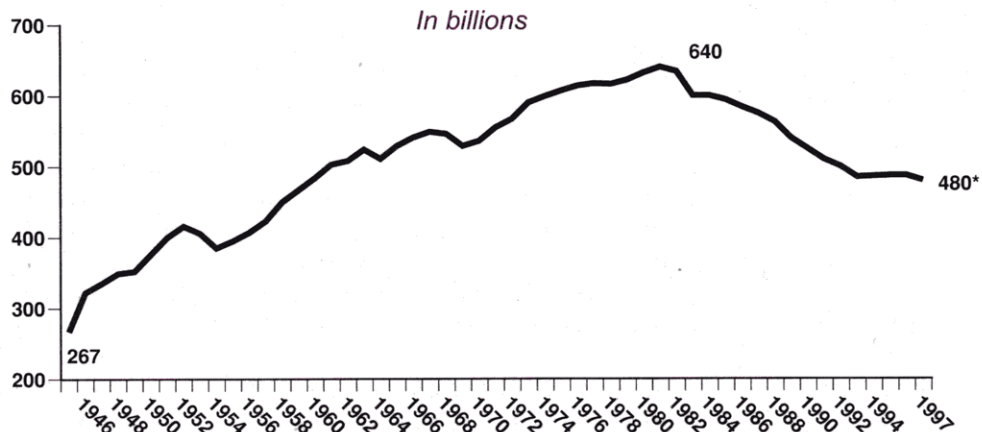
doing it unless his/her doing it clearly confounds the public good. By overwhelming majorities, we say that ultimately the decision to smoke or not should be a personal one that adults are free to make. When your smoking directly affects me, however, I have a right to try to curb it. There’s strong sentiment for restricting smoking in public places to set-aside areas—though not to ban it totally (p. 17).

Contemporary opposition to the growth of government, including tax hikes, together with long-standing commitments to individual choice and individual responsibility, came together, then, to make the tobacco bill anything but a winner in the court of public opinion. That the response to the defeat of S 1415 surprised many in the political community only underscores their need to understand better the public they are supposed to serve. In many ways, the political community’s misunderstanding of public views on the tobacco bill is an exact replay of its misreading of opinion on health-care reform and the Clinton plan in the 1993-94 debate.



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Cigarette Consumption is Down Sharply Since the 1970s



*The 1997 figure is preliminary.

Source: Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture.