

A Half-Century of Polling on Tobacco: Most Don't Like Smoking But Tolerate It

By Lydia Saad

Government policies on smoking have changed enormously over the past 50 years. And what was once a socially accepted behavior, freely enjoyed in public by close to half of Americans, is now frowned upon as a serious health risk, practiced increasingly in private. (Still, roughly one in three adults uses a tobacco product). Results of both governmental and private medical research on smoking have led to increased public awareness of the risks involved, and to increased government restrictions on the sale and use of tobacco. How do all these changes reflect public attitudes over the years, including the conflict between the risks of smoking and Americans' regard for personal freedom?

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Government Regulation Generally Supported

A review of polling indicates that, historically, the public has generally supported governmental efforts to regulate smoking. Shortly after cigarette ads were banned on TV and radio in 1969, two-thirds of Americans in a Louis Harris and Associates survey rated Congress' work in this area as “excellent” or “pretty good.” A poll conducted by the American Medical Association in 1987—the same year that smoking was banned on airline flights of two hours or less—found two-thirds of Americans in favor of banning all smoking on domestic trips. A Gallup poll in 1990, one year after that ban was extended to flights under six hours, found the public even more supportive of a total ban, with 78% in favor.

Even in 1976 a Roper Organization poll found that 51% of Americans favored banning smoking in public places, with 44% opposed. Then, in 1982 the American Cancer Society issued its first major report on the hazards of second-hand smoke, saying that secondary exposure was correlated with increased mortality from lung cancer and heart disease. From this point, the campaign to ban smoking from public buildings and workplaces essentially was launched. Over the next 15 years, various polls showed that support for such bans had increased to two-thirds of Americans.

Public concern about second-hand smoke has grown rapidly in the 1990s. When Gallup first asked Americans to rate the seriousness of the risk posed to non-smoking adults from it in 1994, only 36% considered second-hand smoke “very harmful,” 42% said “somewhat harmful,” and 18% mentioned “not generally harmful.” By 1996, however, the “very harmful” figure had risen to 48% and it reached 55% in 1997.

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of cigarettes to minors, starting with a 1962 Gallup poll in which 79% favored making it illegal to sell cigarettes to children under age 16, and 57% favored making it illegal for children to smoke at all. In 1995 the Associated Press found 74% favored requiring the tobacco industry to spend millions on anti-smoking campaigns targeted at teens. A 1997 Princeton Survey Research Associates survey found 87% in favor of strengthening enforcement of laws prohibiting the sale of tobacco to minors. The list of examples goes on and on, with rates of public support in the range of 70% to 80%.

The Right to Smoke Is Entrenched

The consistent support for restrictions that would protect both non-smokers and underage smokers should not, however, be construed as rampant anti-smoking zealotry. In a 1994 Gallup poll, only 11% of Americans felt smoking should be made totally illegal in the US. Similarly, Harris and *Time/CNN* surveys have recorded solid support for preserving the right to smoke. When forced to choose between the competing interests of individuals and society, three-quarters or more of Americans say, in a variety of polls, that the individual's right to smoke should prevail over the social benefits that might be gained by banning it.

Two recent poll findings conjoin public attitudes about laws on smoking nicely. A 1998 *Time/CNN* survey found that by a nearly three-to-one margin, Americans agree that “everyone should have the right to make his or her own choice about whether to smoke” rather than with the statement “smoking is a bad habit and our society should do everything possible to stamp it out.” At virtually the same time, a 1997 American Medical Association survey found, by a 76% to 10% margin, that “the right of non-

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smokers to a smoke-free environment” is viewed as more important than “the right of smokers to smoke anywhere.”

Considering these findings, it is not surprising that the public has not been quick to embrace federal regulation of the production and distribution of tobacco products. Federal Drug Administration head David Kessler contends that cigarettes are addictive and that their addictive power is deliberately controlled in the manufacturing process through the addition of nicotine. On that basis Kessler has advocated classifying cigarettes as a drug and bringing them under the jurisdiction of his agency so that the FDA can regulate the manufacture and sale of cigarettes as it does prescription drugs.

Polling, however, has revealed public resistance to this proposal. A 1996 Gallup poll found that only 38% endorse the FDA’s position; 57% prefer the government not classify tobacco as a drug but allow it to be sold and used as it is now. As expected, support for such FDA regulation is particularly slim among smokers (21%); non-smokers are split on the question with 48% on each side of the issue.

Smokers Are Responsible for Habits

In recent years, anti-tobacco measures have spread from government to the courtroom. Smokers and the families of deceased smokers have lined up to sue cigarette manufacturers over deaths or serious illnesses allegedly caused by tobacco. At last count, 41 states had filed suit against cigarette manufacturers to recoup state health care costs attributed to patients with smoking-related illnesses. Assigning blame for the health effects of smoking and seeking financial recovery are developing into the key smoking issues of the 1990s. Current polling finds Americans quite unsympathetic to the plaintiffs’ arguments in these cases,

ruling that smokers—not tobacco companies—are to blame for the consequences of their decisions to smoke. In a 1989 Gallup poll, only 16% of Americans said tobacco companies should be held responsible for smokers’ health problems, while 79% said they should not. Almost a decade later, a 1998 NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll found practically no change in attitudes, with 16% indicting the companies and 72% the smokers. The personal responsibility assumed by people who smoke is of more than general interest; it has become a pivotal issue in tobacco litigation.

It is difficult for those who began smoking after the first cautionary health labels were posted on cigarette packs (in 1966) to argue that tobacco companies bear responsibility for their habits. The congressional act which required warning labels largely shielded the tobacco industry from responsibility for the decisions of new smokers to light up. But what about people who started smoking before the warning labels? How tenable is the argument made by these individuals that “big tobacco” failed to warn them about dangers that were known within the tobacco industry but not to them? The primary issue is whether prior to 1966 the average person should have known, at the time he or she started to smoke, that smoking was associated with increased risk of lung cancer (and possibly many other diseases).

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In a Florida case involving a woman stricken with lung cancer (she started smoking in 1961), the judge’s written instructions to the jury stated, “A manufacturer does not have a duty to warn of risks associated with its products when those risks are reasonably known to the average consumers with knowledge common to the community.” At what point was the risk of contracting lung cancer from smoking cigarettes commonly known to average consumers? Here the polling industry has an abundance of data.

Awareness of Hazards Has Come Gradually

Magazine ads of the 1950s are emblematic of the state of public opinion at the time: “Your voice of wisdom says smoke Kent!” “More vintage tobacco makes Philip Morris so popular with younger smokers.” “Smoke only Camels for the next 30 days...and see how mild Camels are, pack after pack... how well they agree with your throat as you steady smoke.” These ads ran in an era when smoking was much more prevalent and when the hazards of cigarettes were not as well known. Medical information about the health risks of smoking was beginning to reach the public, including a major report by the American Cancer Society in 1954, but it would be another decade before the Surgeon General issued his first public report on smoking (in 1964).

In 1954, 90% of the public told Gallup they had heard or read about reports that cigarettes “may be one of the causes” of lung cancer. However, this is a mild test of association because it doesn’t say that cigarettes are a primary or even major cause. Further, the question does not ask if they have heard of the risk of smoking as a fact, but whether they have heard of what is essentially a controversy over the accuracy (or legitimacy) of a fact: that smoking “may” be a cause of lung cancer. When asked in the same poll whether they believe these reports linking tobacco and cancer, only 41% said

they did. Close to one-third believed smoking was not one of the causes of lung cancer while another 29% were unsure. The same poll also found most Americans (70%) answering "yes" to the question "Is smoking harmful?" But in a follow-up question, only a handful of respondents mentioned cancer as a specific hazard of tobacco. Altogether, only 7% of Americans in 1954 mentioned cancer of any kind as a health risk of smoking. Another 36% mentioned serious health effects such as asthma, or shortening of breath, or that smoking was generally "bad" for the lungs or heart. A majority of Americans—55%—told Gallup that smoking caused a variety of non-life-threatening problems such as coughing, sinus irritation, ulcers, nervousness, and bad breath as well as general complaints such as fatigue.

Flash forward to 1990 when Americans accepted the link between cigarettes and cancer unequivocally, with 94% saying that smoking is one of the causes of cancer, only 4% saying it is not, and 2% unsure. With the benefit of hindsight, it now seems clear that in the early years of polling on tobacco, public recognition of the link between smoking and deadly cancer was in its infancy. Back then Americans may have been aware of the controversy over smoking, evidenced by the 90% who had heard about it and the 70% who recognized it was harmful in some general sense, but the real connection between smoking and lung cancer was not common knowledge.

This transformation of public opinion, from widespread doubt and disagreement about the cigarette-cancer connection to near unanimous agreement about it, happened gradually. Throughout the 1950s, less than half of Americans believed smoking caused cancer but that figure rose to 70% by 1969 after two major Surgeon General reports and after the first cautionary labels appeared on cigarette packs. Still, close to one-third of Americans denied the connection or remained unsure.

A Harris poll conducted around the same time clarifies the nature of this doubt. In 1966, only 40% recognized smoking as a major cause of cancer, and another 27% said it was a minor cause, while fully one-third were unsure, saying "science had not yet determined the relation between smoking and lung cancer." After 1969, public belief that cigarettes caused cancer grew by an average of one percentage point a year, reaching 81% in 1977, 83% in 1981 and 94% in 1990. Depending on one's definition, the standard for asserting that common knowledge existed about the link between smoking and cancer was probably established somewhere in the 1960s or 1970s.

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According to the Center for Disease Control, it is now well documented that "smoking can cause chronic lung disease, coronary heart disease, and stroke, as well as cancer of the lung, larynx, esophagus, mouth, and bladder," and that "smoking is known to contribute to cancer of the cervix, pancreas, and kidney." The CDC also says that "Women who use tobacco during pregnancy are more likely to have adverse birth outcomes, including babies with low birth weight" (a syndrome they report to be the leading cause of death among infants).

The major national public opinion polls have not done an exhaustive job of measuring public awareness of all these risks. Most polls have asked about the nature of the health risks in general terms, or have focused specifically on cancer. One major exception is Gallup's long-term trend on the link between smoking and heart disease

which was asked from 1957 through 1997. Throughout most of the 40-year trend, public awareness of the risk of heart disease lagged behind lung cancer by 10 to 15 percentage points. In 1957 only 38% of Americans recognized heart disease as a risk of smoking, but by 1990 awareness had reached 85%.

One in Three Still Uses Tobacco

Despite widespread awareness of the risks of tobacco, approximately one in four Americans still smokes cigarettes in 1998. Factoring in those who smoke cigars or pipes or use chewing tobacco, about a third of Americans can be classified as tobacco users while two-thirds are total non-users. Men and women are about as equally likely to smoke cigarettes: 29% of men and 25% of women. However, when taking into account those who use pipes, cigars or chew, men are the greater users of tobacco: 39% of men versus 25% of women.

Whatever the number, smokers today can no longer credibly claim they are not aware that their behavior can lead to lung cancer. But do they accurately estimate the extent of the risk? Are they aware of all the other medical risks? Did they understand their chances of becoming addicted to cigarettes when they started smoking? If the answer is "no" to any of these questions then cigarette manufacturers may be more vulnerable to charges of marketing an unreasonably dangerous product.

Certainly, addiction is a key issue in tobacco litigation. Regardless of whether addiction to tobacco is physiological, psychological or some combination, or whether it is manipulated by the addition of nicotine to cigarettes, most smokers (69%) consider themselves hooked.

What smokers said about their habit in a recent Gallup poll suggests an ever higher rate of addiction: 73% say they would like to quit (but evidently cannot), and an equal number (74%) say they have tried to quit, (but evidently failed).

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At the same time, most smokers (69% in 1993) remain optimistic that they can quit. If smokers' success in quitting is any indication of the nature of addiction, it appears that as many as two out of three smokers are able to quit in their lifetime. This figure is based on the smoking habits of Americans aged 50 and older in a 1994 Gallup survey. Close to six in 10 people in this age group indicate that they regularly smoked cigarettes at some point but barely one-third continue to smoke. However, the rate of quitting is reversed among middle-aged smokers where two-thirds continue to smoke. Very few young adults who have ever smoked are already in the ex-smoker category. In order to arrive at a truly accurate lifetime figure for quitting smoking, other factors need to be taken into account, including the number of people who will start smoking again after quitting, and the rate of death due to smoking related illnesses. However, roughly speaking, the incidence of quitting is about 50%: for every adult still smoking there is another adult who has quit. Whether this validates or refutes the notion that tobacco is highly addictive is then a matter of interpretation.

Teen Smoking Is Seen as Inevitable

Although cigarette smoking among adult Americans (18 and older) has dropped substantially in the past 50 years, two trends concern anti-smoking activists: First, rates of adult smoking have reached a plateau at around 25% in the past decade rather than continuing to drop, and second, reported rates of teenage smoking are on the rise. The latest University of Michigan estimates for the percentage of students reporting any cigarette smoking in the past 30 days rival estimates of the adult smoking rate in this country. Their 1996 cigarette smoking rates for teens are 21% among eighth-graders, 30% among tenth-graders, and 34% among twelfth-graders. These figures represent a 10% increase

compared to 1995 and the fifth year in a row that smoking among secondary school students has risen. The significance of these rates is underscored by the fact that most adult smokers started the habit as teens, according to the CDC.

No doubt these statistics encouraged supporters of the 1998 tobacco settlement bill to frame it as a major piece of anti-teen smoking legislation. While much of the bill, particularly the increased cigarette tax, was controversial, elements concerning protection of minors from tobacco had broad public support. One recent Gallup Poll found 87% in favor of putting severe restrictions on the advertising and sale of cigarettes to minors.

So when the tobacco deal fell apart in Congress, why did so few Americans seem concerned or angry? (A June Gallup poll found the public opposed to the bill by a 44% to 36% margin with 78% saying its failure would have no effect on their vote for Congress in November.) In addition to widespread skepticism about the true intent of the bill, the answer may lie in Americans more basic belief that teen smoking is inevitable. Most Americans tell pollsters they have an unfavorable view of tobacco companies and believe they encourage teenagers to smoke. A 1997 Harris poll found 80% saying they think tobacco companies purposely target kids in their advertising. Yet, according to recent polls, only a third of Americans believe the anti-smoking measures in the tobacco settlement bill would be effective at reducing teen smoking.

Americans may ascribe teenage smoking to many factors, but the least important of these appears to be tobacco advertising. A poll conducted by Frank Luntz in 1997 found only 6% of Americans choosing banning cigarette ads as the most effective anti-teen smoking measure. Highest support was given to educational programs (35%) followed

by stricter enforcement of cigarette sales (30%) and higher cigarette prices (15%).

Smoking: Choice and Responsibility

Regardless of their personal habits, many Americans seem to be saying that adult smoking is an individual's right, choice, and responsibility. That sentiment works in smokers' favor when it comes to keeping tobacco legal, but it works against them in cigarette liability cases. It even works against long-time smokers who would seem, from the historical trends, to have a legitimate claim based on the fact that when they picked up the habit 30 or 40 years ago, the risk of lung cancer was widely underestimated and poorly understood. For now the tenuous balance between preserving the freedom to smoke on the one hand, and protecting non-smokers and society from the health and financial consequences of smoking on the other, seems to be holding. Smokers seem to be graciously accepting the continuous wave of new government restrictions.

As of 1994, 60% of smokers said that public smoking restrictions are justified, while only 39% felt "unjustly discriminated against." Non-smokers seem sympathetic to the rights and convenience of smokers in many areas. As recently as 1994, they still favored accommodating smokers by providing separate smoking areas in the workplace and hotels rather than creating outright bans. Whether this amiability and acceptance of government regulation will continue—if concerns about second-hand smoke are heightened or stricter regulations and more taxes on smokers are enacted—remains to be seen.



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