

Tobacco Control in the Land of the Golden Leaf

Has Political Perception Kept Pace with Reality?

Peg O'Connell, JD

In their issue brief on the challenge of youth smoking in North Carolina, Sally Malek and her colleagues describe well what scientific research has shown to be effective in tobacco use prevention and control. There is clear evidence that a fully funded comprehensive program containing all the essential elements outlined in the article does reduce the number of children and adults who smoke. I would submit, however, that there is one essential component missing from both the article and from the scientific literature—and that is the component of advocacy. How do we find, or create, the political will to fund comprehensive, evidence-based programs that we all know work to reduce the single most preventable cause of death in North Carolina and the nation? And how do we change the public and private policies that stymie implementation of these programs?

Including advocacy in the same sentence with scientifically proven methods of tobacco control is meant as no disrespect to my friends in public health and medicine. I appreciate the rigor with which all the recommendations were tested and the seriousness with which the scientists approach this important public health issue. But until we can change the “political norm” among our policymakers—national, state and local—I fear that many of our good programs and our best science are destined to remain on the shelf. Recent evidence suggests that the “norm” in our state is changing; with a little help from advocates and concerned citizens, this could be a sea change for North Carolina.

For years, policymakers have argued that they cannot take strong stands for tobacco control policy because it would be political suicide—that the voters in their districts would

throw them out. I would argue that this perception is wrong. A recent poll commissioned by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids¹ suggests that the political perceptions of tobacco's hallowed place in our economy and in our culture have not kept pace with the opinions of voters in North Carolina.

According to the poll, which was conducted by Global Strategy Group, Inc., 62% of likely North Carolina voters indicated their support for a 50-cent increase in the cigarette tax as a way of dealing with our budget crisis. This is remarkable on two fronts. First, voters are telling elected officials that they are willing to accept an increase in taxes, and, secondly, they want it to be tobacco that is taxed. Clearly, the public views the tobacco tax in a separate category from income or other taxes.

Tobacco Tax Support Crosses Party Lines

Even more remarkably, voters surveyed indicated that they would cross party lines to vote for a candidate who supports a substantial tax increase on tobacco. Those polled stated that they would favor a Democrat who supports the tax over a Republican who opposes it by a margin of 49% to 29%. This includes 34% of Republicans who would cross over to the Democrat. Similarly, voters would favor a Republican who supports the tax over a Democrat who opposes it by a margin of 46% to 30%. This includes 38% of Democrats who would cross over and vote for a Republican who acts to protect children and help balance the budget. This issue does not benefit one party over another, but clearly it demonstrates

The author is Director of External Relations at Medical Review of North Carolina, the healthcare quality improvement organization for North and South Carolina. She also serves as Chair of the Board of Directors of North Carolina Prevention Partners. She can be reached at poconnel@mrnc.org or 919/851-2955.

that voters will choose candidates who are focused on the health of our children and on the state's financial health. Candidates who are looking for "swing" voters need look no further than those who are interested in the tobacco tax issue.

Health Concerns Trump Regional Economics

Quite suprisingly, the support for the tax increase comes from all parts of the state. When the numbers are broken out by region, there is as much support for the tax among voters in the eastern part of the state as there is in the Triangle and in the west. Sixty-seven percent of the voters in eastern North Carolina express support for a 50-cent tax increase—this is higher than the statewide average.

Obviously, the demographics and the opinions of the citizens of North Carolina have changed dramatically in the past decade. The state is more urban and much of the current population comes from other parts of the country. Expectations for policy-makers have changed also. Voters expect progressive policies that foster a good educational system and a healthy environment for our children. They also expect a fair tax system that keeps the budget in balance.

As we enter an election year when so many things are uncertain—including the date for the primary and the geography of our state's legislative districts—the time is ripe for the health community to place a tobacco tax increase, and other tobacco use prevention issues, on the front burner. Voters are clearly indicating that they are ready to support candidates who address issues surrounding tobacco. It is the

job of advocates—and this includes anyone who is concerned about the creation of sound tobacco use prevention policy, as outlined in Malek's article—to convince policymakers that there is no longer a political downside to supporting policies aimed at reducing the single most preventable cause of death in North Carolina and the nation. In fact, we can demonstrate that voters will reward candidates who pursue these policies with their votes.

Sound Science Is Also Sound Politics

The tobacco use prevention community has its feet firmly placed on sound science. We know what works when it comes to reducing tobacco use among children and adults. Now we must venture into an area where the rules are not quite so clear, but the evidence is just as convincing. Scientific arguments alone will not win the day when it comes to convincing policymakers that they must step forward to create a healthier North Carolina. We must make them understand that it in their political best interest to do so.

Note

- 1 The survey was conducted by the polling firm Global Strategy Group, Inc., and was commissioned by the national Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. The statewide poll has a random sample of 600 registered North Carolina voters and was conducted June 8 to June 11, 2002. The poll has a margin of error of +/- 4 percentage points.