

CRS Report for Congress

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Tobacco Issues: National Public Opinion

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ABSTRACT

This report provides a sample of public opinion questions concerning tobacco issues, including the proposed settlement agreement between tobacco companies and the states' attorneys general. It provides survey questions and responses on the specifics of the proposed settlement, teenage smoking, and tobacco product advertising. It will be updated as new poll results become available. The report is for the use of Members as they consider legislation currently before the 105th Congress.

Tobacco Issues: National Public Opinion

Summary

Six bills related to the tobacco settlement proposal are currently before the 105th Congress: H.R. 3474, S. 1415, S. 1492, S. 1530, S. 1638, and S. 1648. The Senate intends to begin floor debate on S. 1415 during the week of May 18, 1998. Opinion polls over the last several months indicate mixed public views of the tobacco settlement proposal. A September 1997 poll showed that 49% of those surveyed were in favor of the proposed settlement between tobacco companies and the states' attorneys general and 42% were opposed. In response to a follow-up question, 30% of those opposed to the settlement said it did not go far enough to protect public health, 27% said it gives too much control to government, and 25% thought it did not go far enough in regulating tobacco companies. When respondents were asked to speculate about their perceptions of the final settlement, 32% expected the settlement would be too easy on tobacco companies, 29% thought it would be about right, and 27% said they expected it would be too hard on tobacco companies.

A number of surveys included questions about specific details of the proposed settlement. When respondents were asked in a July 1997 poll whether tobacco farmers should be given government assistance to help them switch to growing other crops, 63% answered yes, and 32% answered no. On the question of whether tobacco companies should be required to provide refunds to states for medical costs for poor people who contracted diseases related to smoking, 24% answered that they strongly agreed, 17% somewhat agreed, 16% somewhat disagreed, and 38% strongly disagreed. A related question asked whether respondents approved of a provision that would limit the ability of people with smoking-related illnesses to sue tobacco companies: 48% approved of imposing limits, and 47% disapproved.

Concerning teenage smoking, one poll found that 65% of respondents believed that government and the tobacco companies cannot have a significant impact on teenage smoking, while 33% believed that they can. In response to a differently worded question on the same topic, 75% of those surveyed believed that the "likely settlement" will not reduce the number of teenagers who begin smoking in the near future, and 19% said they believed it will. With regard to advertising tobacco products, 60% of those surveyed by Gallup in June 1997 approved of a ban on outdoor advertising of cigarettes, and 36% disapproved. A later poll provided a range of possible responses and found that 32% of respondents strongly agreed that tobacco companies should be banned from advertising their products, 19% somewhat agreed, 21% somewhat disagreed, and 26% strongly disagreed.

Contents

Public Opinion Polls	1
General Attitudes Concerning Tobacco	3
Attitudes Concerning the Settlement	5
Teenage Smoking and the Impact of the Settlement	13
Attitudes About Tobacco Advertising	15

List of Tables

Table 1. Would You Rate Your Feelings Toward Tobacco Companies?	3
Table 2. Do You Use Tobacco Products?	3
Table 3. Would You Support Raising Taxes on Tobacco Products?	4
Table 4. Would You Be More or Less Likely to Vote for a Candidate Who Is Associated with Tobacco Companies?	4
Table 5. Have Tobacco Companies Been Treated Fairly in Congress?	5
Table 6. What Should Be Done Now Concerning the Settlement?	5
Table 7. Should Congress Pass the Legislation It Is Considering?	6
Table 8. Is the Proposed Legislation Too Lenient, Too Tough, or About Right?	6
Table 9. Are Supporters of the Legislation More Interested in Cutting Teen Smoking or Raising Revenue?	7
Table 10. Should Congress Proceed If Tobacco Companies Refuse to Enter a Settlement?	7
Table 11. Would You Be More Likely to Vote for a Member of Congress Who Opposed the Settlement?	8
Table 12. Do You Favor the Settlement with Tobacco Companies?	8
Table 13. Why Do You Oppose the Tobacco Settlement?	9
Table 14. Do You Think the Final Settlement Will Be Too Hard or Too Easy on Tobacco Companies?	9
Table 15. Should Tobacco Companies Provide Money for Health Insurance for Children Who Have None?	10
Table 16. Should Tobacco Companies Provide Refunds to States for Medical Costs Related to Smoking?	11
Table 17. Should Tobacco Farmers Get Government Assistance to Grow Other Crops?	11
Table 18. Do You Approve of the Provision in the Agreement That Limits Tobacco Company Liability for Smoking-Related Illnesses?	12
Table 19. Do You Think Tobacco Companies Should Be Protected from Group Legal Actions Under the Agreement?	12
Table 20. Can Government and the Tobacco Industry Have an Impact on Teenage Smoking?	13
Table 21. How Much Would Cigarette Prices Have to Increase to Keep Young People from Smoking?	13
Table 22. Will the Settlement Reduce Teenage Smoking?	14
Table 23. Should Outdoor Advertising of Cigarettes Be Banned?	15
Table 24. Should Tobacco Companies Be Banned from Advertising?	15

Tobacco Issues: National Public Opinion

Last year's proposed settlement between tobacco companies and the state attorneys general focused public attention on a range of issues concerning tobacco production and use. Since the settlement was announced on June 20, there has been widespread debate on its potential impact on tobacco farmers, the effect it might have on reducing underage tobacco use and restricting tobacco advertising and promotion, and the size and allocation of industry payments. Six bills concerning the tobacco settlement are currently before Congress: H.R. 3474, S. 1415, S. 1492, S. 1530, S. 1638, and S. 1648. The Senate intends to begin debate on S. 1415 during the week of May 18, 1998.

This report summarizes the public's views on a variety of tobacco settlement issues, based on responses to a selected sample of opinion polls. The report is divided into four parts. Part one includes polling questions on general attitudes towards tobacco products and the industry. Part two includes questions on the tobacco settlement. Part three includes questions about reducing teenage smoking. Part four includes questions on restricting tobacco product advertising.

Public Opinion Polls

Public opinion polls are conducted on most important public policy issues, and the results are routinely reported and analyzed in the media. Most polls are limited to presenting respondents' beliefs and attitudes at a fixed point in time (when the poll was conducted), and they necessarily rely on a method that formulates often complicated concepts and issues as questions that can be posed to those being interviewed. Despite these limitations, public opinion polls provide insight into public perceptions of important issues and may help those who consult them to frame issues and consider how much public support exists for various ideas and solutions.

The polls cited in this report, like all public opinion polls, are subject to possible bias or error for a variety of reasons having to do with design or execution. Among some of the most common types of error are: coverage errors, sampling error, measurement error, specification error, and non-response error. *Coverage errors* result when the sample does not represent the population it seeks to represent, because segments of the population were left out of the sample or were included in the sample but should not have been. A poll that intends to represent the views of the electorate (eligible voters), but that includes ineligible voters in the sample, would contain coverage error. *Sampling error*, commonly referred to as a "margin of error," is introduced because the sample represents only a fraction of the population studied. It is the potential difference, calculated mathematically, between the result from the sample and the result that would occur if the entire population were surveyed. *Measurement error* occurs when the question is not properly devised and, as a consequence, does not measure what it purportedly seeks to measure. *Non-response error* occurs when a sizeable portion of the sample does not participate in the survey.

The views of this segment of the population cannot be represented in the results of the poll.¹

The survey questions included in this report have been drawn from the database of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut. The Roper Center's Public Opinion Online (POLL) database contains 250,000 records from surveys conducted since 1936. It is updated bi-weekly and includes surveys by Gallup, Harris, Roper, Hart, Teeter, Yankelovich, Market Opinion Research, Associated Press, Research & Forecasts Opinion Research Corporation, National Opinion Research Center, ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*.

Survey research data is available on a wide variety of public policy topics.. Congressional staff who require a detailed search on a specific topic should contact CRS for further assistance.

¹ For a more detailed explanation of potential error in surveys, see Robert M. Groves, *Survey Errors and Survey Costs* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1989).

General Attitudes Concerning Tobacco

Table 1. Would You Rate Your Feelings Toward Tobacco Companies?

“(I’m going to read you the names of several public figures and organizations, and I’d like to rate your feelings toward each one as either very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, or very negative. If you don’t know the name, please just say so)...Tobacco companies.

Very positive	4%
Somewhat positive	9
Neutral	21
Somewhat negative	18
Very negative	46
Don’t know name/Not sure	2

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,214 adults between October 25 and 28, 1997.]

Table 2. Do You Use Tobacco Products?

“Do you happen to smoke cigarettes or other tobacco products, or not?”

Yes	26%
No	74

ABC News Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,011 adults on June 18 and 19, 1997.]

Table 3. Would You Support Raising Taxes on Tobacco Products?

“Would you support or oppose raising federal taxes on cigarettes and other tobacco products?”

Support	67%
Oppose	32
No opinion	2

ABC News/Washington Post Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,206 adults between January 15 and 19, 1998.]

Table 4. Would You Be More or Less Likely to Vote for a Candidate Who Is Associated with Tobacco Companies?

“Would you be more likely or less likely to vote for a candidate for public office if that candidate were closely associated with tobacco companies?”

More likely to vote for	11%
Less likely to vote for	64
Depends (volunteered)	15
Not sure	10

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,214 adults between October 25 and 28, 1997; question asked of half of the sample population only.]

Attitudes Concerning the Settlement

Table 5. Have Tobacco Companies Been Treated Fairly in Congress?

"In your view, has Congress treated the tobacco companies fairly or unfairly in developing legislation to regulate tobacco?"

Fairly	58%
Unfairly	31
Not sure	11

Time/CNN/Yankelovich Partners Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,011 adults between April 9 and 10, 1998.]

Table 6. What Should Be Done Now Concerning the Settlement?

"As you may know, the tobacco companies recently pulled out of an effort to reach an agreement with the federal government in Washington over legislation regulating tobacco. What do you think should be done now? Do you think the government should: try to pass restrictions that the tobacco companies agree to voluntarily, force a settlement on the tobacco companies, or leave things as they are now?"

Pass restrictions	33%
Force a settlement	28
Leave things as they are	31
Not sure	8

Time/CNN/Yankelovich Partners Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,011 adults between April 9 and 10, 1998.]

Table 7. Should Congress Pass the Legislation It Is Considering?

"As you may know, Congress is now considering a bill that would impose an additional one-dollar-and-ten-cents-a-pack tax on cigarettes, restrict advertising and marketing of cigarettes, and put an annual limit on the amount of money that tobacco companies would have to pay out each year to settle smoking-related lawsuits. Supporters say that this tobacco bill would reduce teen smoking while also raising billions of dollars to improve children's health. Opponents say that it could drive tobacco companies out of business by giving them too little protection from lawsuits and making cigarettes so expensive that a new black market would emerge. Based on this information, do you think Congress should pass this bill or not?""*

Congress should pass the bill	47%
Congress should not pass the bill	46
Not sure	7

*This question was asked of one-half the respondents in the survey.

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,004 adults between April 18 and 20, 1998.]

Table 8. Is the Proposed Legislation Too Lenient, Too Tough, or About Right?

"Do you think that this proposed bill is too lenient, about right, or too tough toward the tobacco companies?"

Too lenient	19%
About right	32
Too tough	37
Not sure	12

*This question was asked of one-half the respondents in the survey.

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,004 adults between April 18 and 20, 1998.]

Table 9. Are Supporters of the Legislation More Interested in Cutting Teen Smoking or Raising Revenue?

"What do you think supporters of the proposed tobacco bill are mainly interested in—cutting teen smoking by raising cigarette prices, or getting the additional tax revenue for the federal government that would come from higher cigarette prices?"*

Cutting teen smoking by raising cigarette prices	20%
Getting additional tax revenue for the federal government	70
Neither of these	2
Both of these	5
Not sure	3

*This question was asked of one-half the respondents in the survey.

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,004 adults between April 18 and 20, 1998.]

Table 10. Should Congress Proceed If Tobacco Companies Refuse to Enter a Settlement?

"If tobacco companies refuse to enter a tobacco agreement, should the government proceed without them to raise prices and strengthen regulation?"*

Yes, the government should proceed without the tobacco companies	58%
No, the government should not proceed without the tobacco companies	37
Not sure	5

*This question was asked of one-half the respondents in the survey.

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,004 adults between April 18 and 20, 1998.]

Table 11. Would You Be More Likely to Vote for a Member of Congress Who Opposed the Settlement?

"If your Member of Congress opposed comprehensive tobacco legislation, would this make you more likely or less likely to vote for this person, or would it make little difference either way?"*

More likely to vote for	13%
Less likely to vote for	22
Make little difference either way	63
Not sure	2

*This question was asked of one-half the respondents in the survey.

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,004 adults between April 18 and 20, 1998.]

Table 12. Do You Favor the Settlement with Tobacco Companies?

"As you may know, the nation's biggest tobacco companies reached an agreement with the nation's attorney general to settle lawsuits filed against these companies. The tobacco companies agreed to allow strict federal regulation of cigarettes, to pay more than three hundred billion dollars for tobacco-related health costs, and to pay additional penalties if youth smoking does not decline. In return the tobacco companies will be protected from certain types of lawsuits and punitive damages. Based on this information, do you favor or oppose the settlement in the tobacco company lawsuit?"

Favor	49%
Oppose	42
Not sure	9

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 2,004 adults between September 11 and 15, 1997.]

Table 13. Why Do You Oppose the Tobacco Settlement?

“Which of the following reasons best explains why you oppose the tobacco settlement (the tobacco companies agreed to allow strict federal regulation of cigarettes, to pay more than three hundred billion dollars for tobacco-related health costs, and to pay additional penalties if youth smoking does not decline. In return the tobacco companies will be protected from certain types of lawsuits and punitive damages)...if doesn’t go far enough in protecting public health, it gives too much control to the federal government, it does not go far enough in regulating tobacco companies, or it would hurt tobacco farmers?”

(Asked of those who responded “oppose” on the previous question; see Table 5.)

Does not go far enough in protecting public health	30%
Gives too much control to government	27
Does not go far enough in regulating tobacco companies	25
Would hurt tobacco farmers	7
All (volunteered)	3
Not sure	8

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 2,004 adults between September 11 and 15, 1997.]

Table 14. Do You Think the Final Settlement Will Be Too Hard or Too Easy on Tobacco Companies?

“From what you’ve heard or read about these negotiations (between government officials and the tobacco industry), do you think the final settlement will be too hard on the tobacco industry, too easy on the tobacco industry, or will the settlement be about right?”

Too hard	27%
Too easy	32
About right	29
Don’t know/no answer	12

CBS News Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,051 adults between September 18 and 20, 1997.]

Table 15. Should Tobacco Companies Provide Money for Health Insurance for Children Who Have None?

“Do you approve or disapprove of each of the following provisions of the agreement (announced last week) with the tobacco companies (and the plaintiffs who are suing them)..a requirement that tobacco companies contribute money to provide health insurance to children who do not have any?”

Approve	63%
Disapprove	33
Don't know/refused	5

Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,030 adults on June 23 and 24, 1997.]

Table 16. Should Tobacco Companies Provide Refunds to States for Medical Costs Related to Smoking?

“Let me read you several statements. For each one, please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with that statement. Tobacco companies should be required to refund states for the cost of medical care for poor people who contract diseases related to smoking.”

Strongly agree	24%
Somewhat agree	17
Somewhat disagree	16
Strongly disagree	38
Not sure	5

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,002 adults between July 26 and 28, 1997.]

Table 17. Should Tobacco Farmers Get Government Assistance to Grow Other Crops?

“Do you think that tobacco farmers in this country should or should not be given government assistance to help them switch to growing other types of crops?”

Yes, should be given assistance	63%
No, should not be given assistance	32
Not sure	5

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,002 adults between July 26 and 28, 1997.]

Table 18. Do You Approve of the Provision in the Agreement That Limits Tobacco Company Liability for Smoking-Related Illnesses?

“Do you approve or disapprove of each of the following provisions of the agreement (announced last week) with the tobacco companies (and the plaintiffs who are suing them)...limits on the ability of people who have smoking-related illnesses to sue the tobacco companies?”

Approve	48%
Disapprove	47
Don't know/refused	5

Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,030 adults on June 23 and 24, 1997.]

Table 19. Do You Think Tobacco Companies Should Be Protected from Group Legal Actions Under the Agreement?

“Under the settlement (by the big tobacco companies to settle state lawsuits), no group of people could join together to sue the tobacco companies over smoking-related illnesses. Do you think reaching a nationwide settlement is worth giving the tobacco companies this legal protection or not?”

Worth it	31%
Not worth it	54
Depends (volunteered)	3
Don't know/no answer	13

Associated Press Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,003 adults between August 20 and 24, 1997.]

Teenage Smoking and the Impact of the Settlement

Table 20. Can Government and the Tobacco Industry Have an Impact on Teenage Smoking?

“Do you think the government and the tobacco industry can have a significant impact on teenage smoking, or not?”

Can	33%
Cannot	65
Don't know/no answer	2

CBS News Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,051 adults between September 18 and 20, 1997.]

Table 21. How Much Would Cigarette Prices Have to Increase to Keep Young People from Smoking?

“If the settlement (by the big tobacco companies to settle lawsuits) goes through, cigarettes will be more expensive. How much do you think the price of a pack of cigarettes would have to go up to keep a significant number of young people from becoming smokers...50-75 cents a pack, \$1 a pack, or more than a \$1 a pack?”

50-75 cents a pack	6%
\$1 a pack	10
More than \$1 a pack	70
Price doesn't matter	4
Other (volunteered)/Don't know/No answer	10

Associated Press Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,003 adults between August 20 and 24, 1997.]

Table 22. Will the Settlement Reduce Teenage Smoking?

“Do you think the likely settlement between the government and the tobacco industry will significantly reduce the number of teenagers who begin smoking in the near future, or not?”

Will	19%
Will not	75
Don't know/no answer	7

CBS News Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,051 adults between September 18 and 20, 1997.]

Attitudes About Tobacco Advertising

Table 23. Should Outdoor Advertising of Cigarettes Be Banned?

“Do you approve or disapprove of each of the following provisions of the agreement (announced last week) with the tobacco companies and the plaintiffs who are suing them...a ban on outdoor advertising of cigarette.”

Approve	60%
Disapprove	36
Don't know/refused	4

Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,030 adults on June 23 and 24, 1997.]

Table 24. Should Tobacco Companies Be Banned from Advertising?

“Let me read you several statements. For each one, please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with that statement...tobacco companies should be banned from advertising their products.”

Strongly agree	32%
Somewhat agree	19
Somewhat disagree	21
Strongly disagree	26
Not sure	2

Hart and Teeter Research Companies for NBC News/Wall Street Journal. [The results are based on telephone interviews with 1,002 adults between July 26 and 28, 1997.]