

**Voter Attitudes in Massachusetts  
Proposal to Increase Cigarette Excise Taxes**

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**Conducted for:  
The Tobacco Institute**

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## **1. Introduction**

This report summarizes the findings of a survey of 600 registered voters conducted in Massachusetts. The survey was commissioned by the tobacco industry in order to assess the odds of passage of an initiative to increase cigarette excise taxes in the state. The goals of the project might be summarized as follows:

- To evaluate voter support for the proposed initiative.
- To evaluate voter reaction to the detailed provisions of the initiative
- To assess voter response to a variety of messages that might be used to defeat the initiative.

## **1 Summary and Conclusions**

The following summarize the most important findings and our recommendations:

- The political environment is quite hostile to a campaign against an initiative to increase cigarette excise taxes. First of all, the demographics of the state's voting public are quite upscale, while experience suggests that downscale voters are more receptive to anti-tobacco tax campaigns. Second, the public's issue concerns are pre-occupied with issues that the initiative addresses. Specifically education and health care are some of the state's top concerns, while relatively few people mention balancing the state's budget as a top concern.
- Initial support for an increase in excise taxes is quite high. 70% of the voters say they would vote for such a measure, while another 3% lean in that direction. Only 22% says it is planning to vote NO at this time, mostly based on the fact that they themselves smoke, and to a lesser extent on a generic anti-tax sentiment.
- An examination of the details of the initiative suggests a substantial positive response. People support the idea of higher taxes and support the idea of using those taxes for anti-smoking activities and a variety of other spending purposes. The margins of support are quite high.
- Specific testing on the need for further anti-smoking education indicates mixed results. On the one hand, people feel that most people already know about the risks of smoking. On the other hand, people feel anti-smoker education programs in the state are generally ineffective and that more are needed. Only when weighed against other priorities do the voters in our sample indicate that there are more important things to be done than increased spending on anti-smoking programs.
- Testing of persuasive messages failed to come up with a message or a set of messages that would lead the voters to oppose the initiative. One possible reason is that the messages were simply not framed correctly. Another possible reason is that a substantial proportion of the public in the state is simply not interested in hearing any arguments against a tobacco tax. There is evidence for both possibilities in the results.

**2. Background / Climate of Opinion**

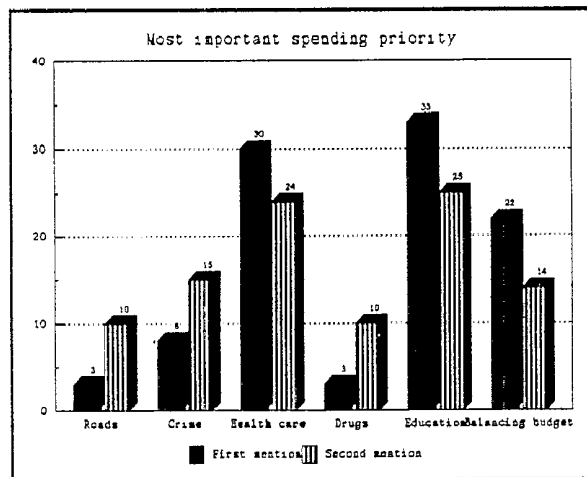
The survey on a number of points vindicated the Massachusetts voters' reputation for liberalism. First of all, the state is one of very few states in the Union in which a majority of the voters identify themselves as political liberals. In the present survey, 47% of the voters identified themselves as liberals while only 43% identified themselves as conservatives.

A number of other points in the results suggest that the state's political climate is not particularly hospitable to tobacco industry initiatives. First of all, the demographic properties of the voters are quite upscale:

- 16% of the sample had a post-graduate education, while a total of 40% of the voters have completed a college degree.
- in spite of the state's long lasting recession, 41% of the voters reported an annual family income in excess of \$ 40K
- the state's voting population is quite young -- 53% of the voters are under 45 years of age

On issues, the state's political climate is not particularly friendly either. We specifically asked the voters which of a series of issues represented the state's most urgent spending priorities. The two issues mentioned most frequently are two issues touched on by the initiative:

- 54% of the voters mentioned health care
- 58% mentioned education
- Only 36% of the voters mentioned balancing the budget as an important priority in this regard



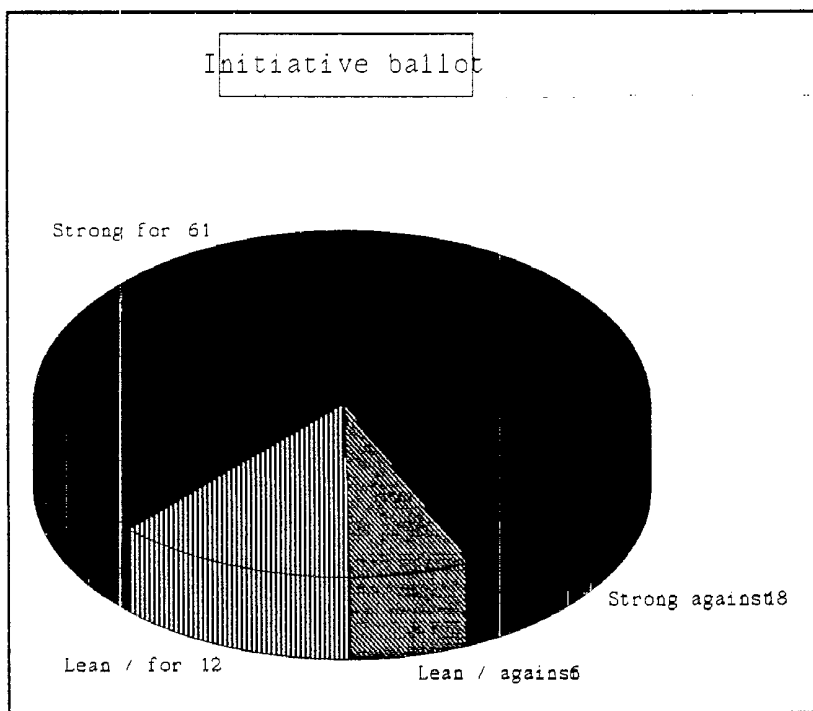
**3. Voter reaction to the proposed initiative**

Prior to asking people how they planned to vote on the initiative, we first examined how many people were aware of its existence. We measured this in two ways, first by asking people if they were aware of any initiatives without specifically mentioning it, and then by asking people if they had heard of a tobacco tax initiative. The results were as follows:

- Only 1% of the voters spontaneously mentioned a tobacco related initiative or an initiative to increase tobacco excise taxes without specifically being prompted on the point.
- 36% of the voters were aware that "One issue that will be on the ballot would increase cigarette excise taxes".

Support for the initiative was measured in a number of ways, all indicating high levels of support. First of all, we looked at voter support for the initiative based on a very abbreviated description of the ballot language read to the voters:

*This initiative would increase cigarette excise taxes by 25 cents a pack in order to fund a Health Protection Fund to pay for health programs relating to tobacco use. From what you have heard about it, would you vote for or against this initiative?*



Two follow-up questions asked people for the reasons for their position. First of all the reasons given by the people who intend to support the initiative might be summarized under relatively few captions:

- Most of the comments reflected reasons having to do with a desire to see people quit smoking. 32% said that the initiative might help people stop smoking for instance. Another 32% said they would vote YES because smoking is bad for you.

- A second group commented on the spending aspect of the proposal. 20% of the yes voters said for instance that a cigarette tax was the best way to fund the proposed Health Fund. However, **very few** of the respondents commented on the specific spending goals of the initiative. A few people mentioned that it might help teenagers

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stop smoking. Also, a small group commented on the desirability of educating people on smoking.

- A small group of people simply stated that *the state needs the money*.
- A number of people commented on smokers, rather than smoking. For instance, 13% of the yes voters felt it was a good idea to let smokers pay. A smaller group of people said specifically that smokers should pay for the problems they cause. Finally small group of people said that cigarettes are a luxury, not a necessity and therefore should be taxed.

Similarly, comments on the "NO" side can be captioned under very few comments as well:

- Most comments are from smokers. Some people simply said they were smokers or that a cigarette tax is just not fair to smokers. In addition, a substantial proportion of the "NO" voters said that the tax would drive up the price of cigarettes too much.
- A second major type of comment might be labelled a more broad anti-tax sentiment. Some people said they would oppose the initiative because they oppose all tax increases. Others simply stated that the money would be wasted, or that the initiative would not work.

A second elaboration of these findings concerns a summary of the results by subgroup. Few groups stood out as substantially different from the sample as a whole, however. Regional breaks suggest relatively little variation for instance, as do age and gender breaks. Some differences worth noting were as follows:

- Smokers were substantially more likely to vote "NO" than non-smokers. Nevertheless, even among smokers, 46% plan to vote for the initiative at this time.
- Middle and lower income people are slightly less supportive of the initiative than higher income people. 78% of the high income people plans to vote for the initiative, for instance, compared to 66% of the lower income people.

In addition to asking people overall support or opposition to the initiative, we examined whether or not people might be persuadable on the initiative. A series of questions was asked to assess to what extent respondents had made a decision on the issue, were interested in it or were open to persuasion. By combining the responses into a compound index, the public can be segmented as follows:

	Percentage:
Committed Yes	22
Medium Yes	42
Soft Opinions	16
Medium No	14
Committed No	6

Although a large proportion of the public is not committed to a hard-core "NO" position, later testing will suggest that very few of these people actually change their views in the course of the questionnaire. The

present results indicate that a substantial proportion of the YES vote may be persuadable. However, in the course of the questionnaire little actual persuasion of this group took place.

The questionnaire examined reactions to the details of the proposed initiative as well. Following the reading of the abbreviated ballot language, we read the public a series of detailed statements describing components of the initiative. All of the provisions were supported by large majorities of the public:

Although all provisions were quite popular, some are more important to people than others. When ask to pick the most and least important of these provisions, 'anti-smoking school education' was selected most often (45%). Least important were 'anti-smoking advertising' (30% least important) and 'workplace smoking cessation programs' (27% least important).

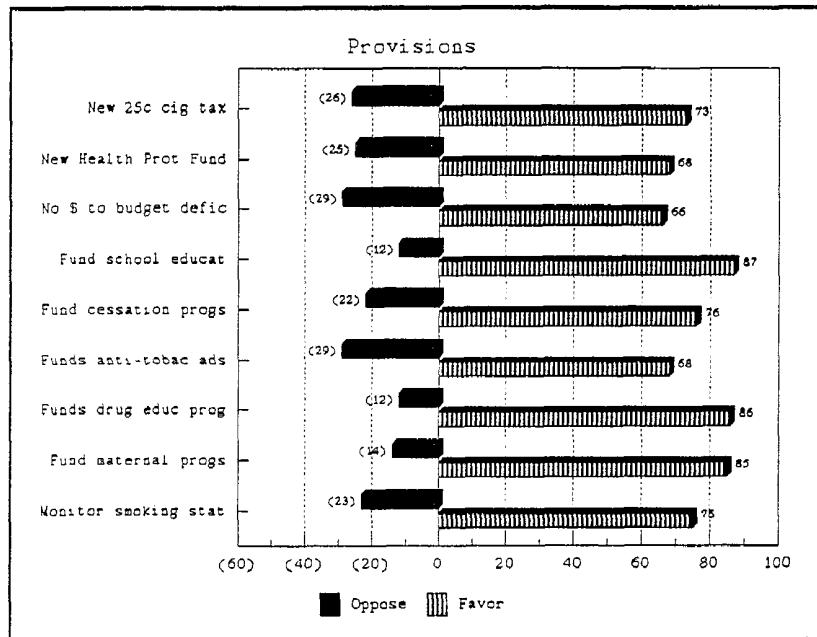


Figure 3 Please tell me for each one whether you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose that particular provision of the initiative ...

**4. Attitudes towards Smoking Education**

In researching attitudes towards alcohol and cigarette consumption, one frequently finds that education is seen as the best way of dealing with smoking and drinking related issues. However, one also finds that people tend to think that most people already know about the hazards of smoking and drinking. Some of this was found in Massachusetts as well. For instance, 92% of the sample agreed with a statement that "Most people seem to know about the risks of smoking these days". In addition, we asked people their perception of current smoking education efforts in the state:

*Thinking about programs in Massachusetts to educate people about the risks of smoking, from what you have heard about them, do you feel that these programs are generally effective or generally not effective?*

Generally effective	38%
Generally not effective	46%

In addition we asked people whether they felt enough was being done about smoker education

*And from what you have heard about it, do you feel that too much is already being done about anti-smoking education, that about the right amount is being done, or that not enough is being done about anti-smoking education?*

Too much	9%
About right	30%
Not enough	57%

We found only two weaknesses in the argument that more needs to be done about smoker education. One is that other budget priorities are more important. However, this argument accepts the premise that cigarette taxes will be increased:

*In view of the budget crisis facing the state of Massachusetts, do you feel that increased expenditures for anti-smoking programs are an important priority, or do you feel that the tax revenue would better be spent on other programs?*

Anti-smoking important	26%
Spend other programs	66%

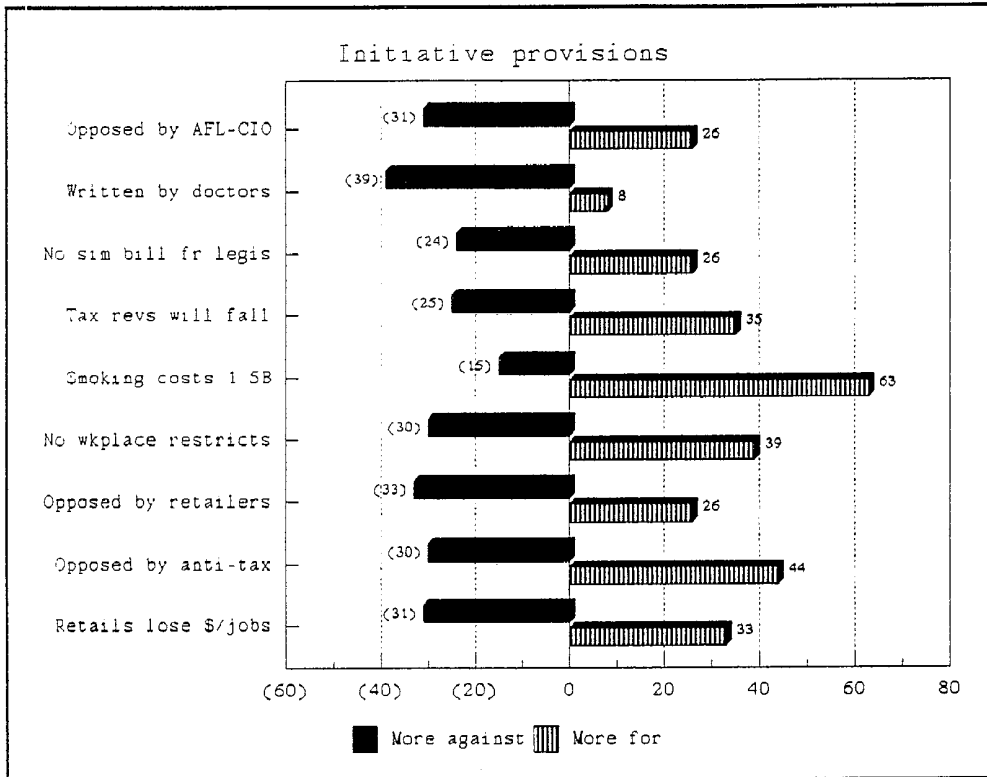
A second argument against increased education is more directed against smoking. During focus groups conducted last August in the state, a number of people complained about lax or non-existing enforcement of smoking restrictions in the workplace. It turns out that this sentiment can be expressed as an argument against further smoking education:

*What's needed is not more anti-smoking programs, but better enforcement of existing anti-smoking provisions*

Strongly agree	34%
Somewhat agree	23%
Somewhat disagree	22%
Strongly disagree	17%

**5. Persuasion**

A number of arguments against the initiative were presented to the respondents at the end of the questionnaire. The arguments were formulated in a 'what-if-you-knew' format<sup>1</sup>. The norm for questions of this type is that approximately 50% or better of the public should indicate that they would vote against the initiative in view of the statement read to them. None of the statements against the initiative tested so far was effective at that level:



A second look at these results details the percentage voting no for each of these argument by the persuadability of respondents:

<sup>1</sup> Now I will read you some statements that have been made about this initiative, both by its supporters and its opponents. For each of these, please tell me whether in view of that statement you would be more likely to vote FOR the initiative or more likely to vote AGAINST it. If the issue doesn't matter to you, or you believe the statement is not correct, just say so.

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	<u>Sample</u>	Medium Yes	Soft Opi- nions	Medium No
The initiative is opposed by the AFL - CIO because most of the new tobacco taxes raised would be paid by poor and lower income families	31	21	40	66
The initiative was written by doctors in order to be able to raise their own medical fees	39	39	44	54
The initiative was filed because its supporters could not get a similar bill out of the legislature	24	19	30	45
Because of lost business due to increased taxes, state tobacco revenues will fall, and some government programs currently funded with tobacco taxes will have to be cut	25	17	28	52
Smoking in Massachusetts costs one-and-a-half billion dollars in higher health care costs and lost wages each year	15	10	16	35
The initiative would do nothing to restrict smoking in the workplace or to better enforce existing smoking restrictions	30	24	36	44
The initiative is opposed by Massachusetts retailers because with higher taxes, more people will go shopping in new Hampshire, leading to a loss of jobs and revenues in Massachusetts	33	27	37	58
The initiative is opposed by anti-tax groups who feel Massachusetts should not start any new spending programs until it gets its existing budget under control	30	23	33	53
Massachusetts alcohol and tobacco taxes are already so high that Massachusetts retailers have lost one-hundred thirty million in sales and fifteen hundred jobs, because people go shopping out of state.	31	21	42	56

Two principal reasons may be surmised why these arguments are so ineffective. One reason is that we simply have not found the arguments yet that the voting public in Massachusetts cares about, or presented them in a way that they respond to. The other reason is that the voters in Massachusetts are so cynical towards anything that might be said against a tobacco tax that any reasoning, including reasons that might work well on a different issue, are not going to work. There is evidence for both points of view.

To take data pointing to the second possibility first, we gave people an opportunity on the series of questions being discussed here to indicate that they did not believe the reason or that it was irrelevant

to them<sup>2</sup>. Since we use this format in a number of places, we have some fairly good normative data<sup>3</sup>. Usually, fewer than 10% on any given issue responds to a statement with the indication that they don't feel it is true. Here the only statement meeting that norm was the 'pro' statement (Q34) that "*smoking in Massachusetts costs one and a half billion dollars in higher health care costs and lost wages each year*". In fact 41% of the voters chose not to believe the statement that the initiative is being sponsored by physicians *in order to be able to raise their own medical fees*.

The same is true for the proportion of the public responding that the issue raised is not important to them. The normal response to this question is between 5% and 10% of the sample giving that response. On the present survey between 12% and 19% gave that response, again with the exception of the one 'pro' statement. Nineteen percent reported for instance that "*the initiative is opposed by the AFL-CIO because most of the new tobacco taxes raised would be paid by poor and lower income families*". Similarly 18% indicated that the economic argument (people buy out of state, hurting jobs and Massachusetts retailers) was irrelevant to them.

Some evidence for the first point of view -- we just did not make the argument right -- exists as well. For instance, a second test of the regressivity argument shows it has some more credibility than the 'what if you knew' question suggested.

*Because they smoke more, most of the increased tax would be paid for by poor people.  
Of the two statements about this, which one comes closest to your point of view?*

*the view that making poor people pay more is unfair since they can afford new taxes the least* 46%

*the view that because poor people need education about the risks of smoking the most, it's only fair that they should pay more* 28%

Similarly, a series of agree / disagree items suggests that there is a substantial amount of resentment and distrust of state government that the 'what if you knew' questions simply did not pick up on. We found for instance that a substantial proportion of the public feels that:

- *Most of the tax revenues will be eaten up by administrative costs -- 63% agree*
- *Until the state gets it's spending under control any tax increases are a bad idea -- 56% agree<sup>4</sup>*
- *The money will probably be diverted and used for some other purpose -- 61% agree*

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<sup>2</sup> Included in the introduction to the series was the prompt *If the issue doesn't matter to you, or you believe the statement is not correct, just say so.*

<sup>3</sup> In fact the only other campaign in which we found this much disbelief was the campaign against higher alcohol excise taxes in California.

<sup>4</sup> The 'what if you knew' counter-part to this question did not work: only 30% said they would vote against the initiative in view of the statement that *the initiative is opposed by anti-tax groups who feel Massachusetts should not start any new spending programs until it gets its existing budget under control*

In the end the information in the survey failed to persuade Massachusetts voters to any extent. By repeating the ballot question at the end of the survey, we attempted to find out whether any shifting had taken place. The results suggest that very few people changed their mind in the course of the survey:

*In view of the issues we have just discussed, if the election were held today, would you probably vote FOR this initiative, or would you probably vote AGAINST it?*

<i>probably vote FOR</i>	68
<i>probably vote AGAINST</i>	28

Again, it is important to keep normative data in mind. Using this pre-post design one does not accurately estimate the amount of shift that will take place in the course of a real campaign. However, it does tend to indicate whether people move at all. During alcohol excise tax campaigns for instance, more than 50% on late ballots still said they would vote for the measures, while in fact during the campaign much larger proportions of the public shifted to a 'NO' position. However, these results indicate virtually no movement at all from the early version of the ballot to the late version:

	Early Vote	Late Vote
Vote YES	70	68
Vote NO	22	28

**6. Credibility.**

A final series of question simply tested spokesperson credibility. We examined a series of persons and organizations that might speak out on the proposed initiative, and asked respondents to rate their credibility on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 was a negative and 10 was a positive score:

	% rating 7 - 10
The AFL- CIO	12
Governor William Weld	28
The American Cancer Society	77
The Tobacco Institute	8
State Senator Lois Pines	9
Massachusetts Blue Cross and Blue Shield	35
The Massachusetts Human Services Coalition	32

**7. Methodology**

The sample was designed as a probability-proportional-to-size sample of the Massachusetts voter population. A total of 600 interviews were conducted, selected at random from across the state. The margin of error of a survey of the type conducted here is a function of sample size and the value of the estimated percentage. In other words, just as the margin of error of a survey with 400 interviews is larger than that of a comparable 800 interview survey, the margin of error of an estimated percentage of 50% is larger than that of an estimated 10% value. The margin of error is calculated as follows for PPS sample surveys:

$$e = \pm \sqrt{\frac{p(1 - p)}{(n - 1)}}$$

The margin of error for various sample sizes and estimated percentages is as follows:

	.01	.02	.03	.04	.05	.06	.07	.08	.09
100	5.88	7.85	9.00	9.62	9.82	9.63	9.01	7.87	5.91
200	4.16	5.55	6.36	6.80	6.94	6.80	6.36	5.55	4.17
300	3.40	4.53	5.19	5.55	5.66	5.55	5.19	4.53	3.40
400	2.94	3.92	4.49	4.80	4.90	4.80	4.49	3.92	2.94
500	2.63	3.51	4.02	4.30	4.38	4.30	4.02	3.51	2.63
600	2.40	3.20	3.67	3.92	4.00	3.92	3.67	3.20	2.40
700	2.22	2.96	3.40	3.63	3.71	3.63	3.40	2.96	2.22
800	2.08	2.77	3.18	3.40	3.47	3.40	3.18	2.77	2.08
900	1.96	2.61	2.99	3.20	3.27	3.20	3.00	2.61	1.96
1,000	1.86	2.48	2.84	3.04	3.10	3.04	2.84	2.48	1.86
1,100	1.77	2.36	2.71	2.90	2.96	2.90	2.71	2.36	1.77
1,200	1.70	2.26	2.59	2.77	2.83	2.77	2.59	2.26	1.70
1,300	1.63	2.17	2.49	2.66	2.72	2.66	2.49	2.18	1.63
1,400	1.57	2.10	2.40	2.57	2.62	2.57	2.40	2.10	1.57
1,500	1.52	2.02	2.32	2.48	2.53	2.48	2.32	2.02	1.52