

# Support for Tobacco Control Policies

## How Congruent are the Attitudes of Legislators and the Public?

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** To examine the congruence in perceptions and attitudes of legislators and the public regarding tobacco and tobacco control policies.

**Methods:** Two cross-sectional surveys were used, one of elected federal and provincial legislators and one of adult residents in Ontario, Canada. Perceptions and attitudes were analyzed as dependent variables using multiple logistic regression, and adjusted for age, sex, educational attainment, and smoking status.

**Findings:** Congruence was found in most instances, however, some differences were found. Legislators were more likely than the public to agree that most smokers are addicted and were more supportive of a smoking ban in workplaces, but these differences disappeared after controlling for socio-demographic characteristics. Legislators were also more aware than the public of the magnitude of deaths due to tobacco compared to alcohol, whereas the public was more supportive of strong penalties against stores that sell cigarettes to minors.

**Conclusions:** Our findings provide considerable evidence for congruence in the “real-world” (unadjusted) perceptions and attitudes of Ontario legislators and the Ontario public toward tobacco control policies. Such findings are positive for tobacco control advocates and should be leveraged to bring forward strong tobacco policies in the political arena.

*La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.*

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Tobacco control legislation is an essential part of a comprehensive approach to reducing the harm caused by tobacco use.<sup>1-6</sup> Because legislators are key players in the public policy process, and their support is required to enact many tobacco control policies, it is important to understand factors that shape their attitudes toward tobacco control. Popular support for tobacco control measures helps put issues on the public policy agenda and provides some assurance that tobacco control measures will meet with compliance. The likelihood that legislative strategies will be initiated and eventually adopted may be increased if the attitudes and opinions of the elected and the electorate are supportive and congruent.

While attitudes of the general public toward tobacco control policies have been reported extensively,<sup>7-12</sup> legislators' opinions have been reported in only a few studies in Canada,<sup>13-15</sup> the United States,<sup>16-19</sup> and the Netherlands.<sup>20</sup> Only one study, in the US, has systematically compared the views of both groups toward similar tobacco control policies. Hahn et al.<sup>21</sup> found that support was higher among the Kentucky public than among Kentucky state legislators regarding restricting smoking in restaurants and workplaces and providing communities with the option of enacting local laws. Both groups showed congruent levels of support for cigarette tax increases. These findings, however, should be considered in light of an extremely low response rate from the public (28%), different item wording and response categories, and the lapse of nearly two years between the conduct of the legislator survey and that of the public survey.

Characteristics of legislators as a political elite may explain why legislator opinions might differ from those of the public. Legislators are lobbied by interest groups and receive campaign contributions,<sup>22</sup> factors that may influence their attitudes toward tobacco policy issues.<sup>23-29</sup> Most legislators are male, better educated and come from more affluent backgrounds than the public at large.<sup>30,31</sup> This bias in political representation, in that an elite group is elected to represent the mass, has been documented extensively in the political science literature.<sup>32,33</sup>

In this study, we compare attitudes of legislators elected in Ontario (Ontario legislators) with those of adults living in Ontario (Ontario public) concerning various tobacco policy options.

## METHODS

Data on tobacco-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours of legislators were obtained from the Ontario component of the "Canadian Legislator Study", in which all federal and provincial/territorial legislators were surveyed on tobacco and tobacco control options. Comparable data for the Ontario public were obtained from the "Smoking, Smoking Cessation, Tobacco Control and Programming: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study" (Q&Q), in which a representative sample of the Ontario adult population, aged 18 and over, was surveyed on a variety of tobacco-related topics. In both studies, data were collected using structured computer-assisted telephone interviews conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University in Toronto. Data collection for the Canadian Legislator Study took place between July 1996 and June 1997, while the Q&Q survey was carried out between April and June 1996. Substantive and technical reports on both surveys are available.<sup>34-37</sup> Socio-demographic information for legislators was extracted from the Canadian Parliamentary Guide.<sup>38</sup>

More than half (122 of 227) of Ontario federal and provincial legislators completed interviews (54% response rate). Respondents and non-respondents did not differ by sex, age, educational attainment, total years of service as a legislator, and having served as a municipal councillor. Respondents were less likely to be a member of the governing party, or currently or ever be a party leader or minister ( $p < 0.05$ ). Legislator responses were weighted according to their party response rates at each of the provincial and federal levels of government.

In the Q&Q study, which employed a two-stage stratified design with oversampling of Metropolitan Toronto (now Toronto), 1,764 adults were surveyed (65% response rate). Compared to 1991 Ontario census population estimates, Q&Q respondents were comparable in terms of sex, age, and marital status, but had higher levels of formal education, a common finding in survey research.<sup>37,39</sup>

Comparisons between legislators and the public were limited to question items in the two surveys that were identical in wording or related in concept (see Appendix). Topics included were perceptions regarding

### TABLE I

Comparison of Ontario Legislator and Ontario Public Respondents (age 18+), by Sex, Age, Education, and Smoking Status (Weighted Estimates), 1996/1997

	Ontario Legislators (N =122)	Ontario Public (N=1764)	P
Sex			
Male	80%	48%	<0.001*
Female	20%	52%	
Age			
Mean	51 years (n=98)	44 years	<0.001†
Range	32-68	18-95	
S.D.	8.6	15.9	
Education			
High school or less	23%	46%	<0.001*
Some post-secondary education	17%	28%	
University degree	61%	26%	
Smoking status			
Smoker	17%	24%	0.103*
Nonsmoker	83%	76%	

\* Pearson's chi-square

† T-test

the harmful effects of tobacco use, attitudes toward smoking bans in specific sites, and attitudes toward other tobacco policy issues, specifically event sponsorship, penalties for sales to minors, and the effectiveness of tax measures. For analysis purposes, responses were collapsed into two categories ("support" versus "did not indicate support"). Four items were posed to a random half of Ontario legislators as part of the original study design.

Analyses were performed using Stata v.6,<sup>40,41</sup> taking into account the complex survey design (stratification and weighting) of the Q&Q Study. Logistic regression (maximum likelihood estimation) was carried out with a group indicator (legislator versus public) as a covariate. Analyses were repeated, adjusting for sex, age, educational attainment and smoking status, the latter being an important determinant of tobacco control attitudes among the general public.<sup>8,42-45</sup> Unadjusted results, which reflected "real-world" differences between legislators and the general public, are the primary interest of this paper. Adjusted results are also reported to show whether socio-demographic differences between these two groups account for differences in responses.

## RESULTS

### Socio-demographic characteristics

Ontario legislators and the Ontario public differed significantly with regard to sex, age, and educational attainment ( $p < 0.001$ ) (Table I). Ontario legislators were predominantly male, middle-aged, and well educated. Over 60% had university degrees. The sample of the general public encom-

passed a much broader age range, had a lower mean age, was split almost evenly by sex, and had less formal education (only one quarter had university degrees). Although the smoking rate among legislators (17%) was lower than that among the Ontario public (24%), the difference was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.103$ ).

### Perceptions of tobacco's harmful effects

Legislators and the public did not differ in their perceptions that second-hand smoke could cause lung cancer (90% and 89%, respectively) (Table II); however, legislators were more likely to believe that most smokers are addicted (94% versus 86%,  $p = 0.031$ ) and that tobacco causes a lot more deaths than alcohol (46% versus 22%,  $p < 0.001$ ). With adjustment for covariates, differences in perceptions about addiction disappeared.

### Support for bans on smoking

Both legislators and the Ontario public expressed similar levels of support for a complete ban on smoking in hockey arenas (59% and 54%), restaurants (31% and 37%), and bars and taverns (10% and 14%) (Table II). Legislators were more likely than the public to support workplace bans (55% versus 40%,  $p = 0.003$ ). With adjustment for covariates, this difference disappeared.

### Attitudes toward other tobacco policy issues

A clear majority of respondents from each group felt that stores convicted of selling to minors should not be able to sell cigarettes. However, greater support was expressed by the Ontario public than by Ontario legislators (87% versus 63%,  $p < 0.001$ ) (Table

**TABLE II**  
**Perceptions of Tobacco's Harmful Effects and Support for Tobacco Control Measures, Ontario Legislators and Ontario Public Respondents (age 18+) (Weighted Estimates), 1996/1997**

Item	Ontario Legislators % (95% CI)	Ontario Public % (95% CI)	P unadj†	P adj‡
Perceptions regarding tobacco's harmful effects (% agreement)				
Second-hand smoke can cause lung cancer	90% (83-95)	89% (87-91)	0.720	0.961
Most smokers are addicted	94% (87-97)	86% (84-88)	0.031	0.096
Tobacco causes a lot more deaths than does alcohol	46% (37-55)	22% (20-24)	<0.001	<0.001
Support for a complete ban on smoking, by site (% support)				
Hockey arenas§	59% (45-71)	54% (52-57)	0.516	0.861
Workplaces	55% (46-64)	40% (38-43)	0.003	0.088
Restaurants§	31% (20-44)	37% (35-40)	0.324	0.342
Bars and taverns§	10% (5-22)	14% (13-16)	0.426	0.294
Attitudes toward other tobacco policy issues (% agree)				
Stores should not be able to sell cigarettes if convicted of selling to minors§	63% (51-74)	87% (85-88)	<0.001	<0.001
Higher cigarette taxes discourage youth from smoking	60% (50-69)	51% (49-54)	0.091	0.042
Higher cigarette taxes reduce amount people smoke	55% (46-64)	46% (43-48)	0.059	0.250
Event sponsorship by tobacco companies should be banned	44% (35-53)	41% (38-43)	0.541	0.213

† logistic regression using indicated item as dependent variable and group identity as independent variable  
‡ adjusted for smoking status (smoker/nonsmoker), age, sex, educational attainment (some post-secondary, university degree versus high school or less)  
§ question posed to random half of legislator respondents in original study design

II). With respect to the belief that higher cigarette taxes would discourage youth from smoking, legislators and the public showed similar levels of agreement (60% versus 51%,  $p=0.091$ ). With adjustment for covariates, legislators showed significantly higher agreement ( $p=0.042$ ). About half (55%) of Ontario legislators thought that higher cigarette taxes would reduce the amount people smoke; about the same proportion of the Ontario public shared this view (46%). Support for a ban on event sponsorship by tobacco companies was also similar among Ontario legislators (44%) and the Ontario public (41%).

## DISCUSSION

Our findings provide considerable evidence for congruence in the "real-world" perceptions and attitudes of Ontario legislators and the Ontario public. Such findings are positive for tobacco control advocates and should be leveraged to bring forward strong tobacco policies in the political arena. Adjustment for socio-demographic characteristics did not alter the findings substantially, except in three instances: differences between legislators and the public in perceptions of the addictiveness of tobacco and

support for a smoking ban in workplaces were no longer significant at the  $p<0.05$  level, while the difference concerning the role of higher taxes in discouraging youth from smoking became significant. For the most part, similarities and differences between legislator and public opinion appeared to arise from factors other than socio-demographic differences.

Legislators appeared to be much better informed than the public about the health burden of tobacco in Canadian society, as reflected in their responses concerning the relative magnitude of deaths caused by tobacco compared to alcohol. However, this difference in knowledge did not translate into significantly higher support among legislators compared to the public for many of the tobacco policy measures surveyed, which may be due to the influence of the tobacco lobby or sensitivity to constituents with an economic interest in tobacco.

Support for complete smoking bans was similar in both groups, except for workplaces. This general congruence may be explained by the similar legislator and public opinion regarding the cancer-causing effects of second-hand smoke, the principal rationale for bans on smoking in public places.<sup>46</sup> Higher support among legislators

than among the public for workplace smoking bans may reflect the fact that smoking bans have long been in effect in Canadian and Ontario government workplaces.<sup>47,48</sup> In contrast, just under half (46%) of the public sample reported working in smoke-free environments.

Other evidence of attitude congruence deserves mention. For smoking bans across four sites, both groups showed the same order of degree of support: support was highest for a ban in hockey arenas, followed by workplaces, restaurants, then bars and taverns. Both groups showed higher levels of support for sales-to-minors penalties compared to levels of support for an event sponsorship ban. These findings not only point out priority areas for further policy development, but they enable advocates to assure legislators that their support is matched by support among the electorate.

Our analyses also identify tobacco policy areas where both Ontario legislators and the public could benefit from further education. At the time of the surveys, the inverse relationship between price and youth smoking was already well established,<sup>6,49</sup> yet our findings suggest that this knowledge was not widely held by either legislators or the public. The substantial death toll from tobacco compared to alcohol was not common knowledge in either group, despite the fact that in Canada, tobacco-caused deaths outnumber alcohol deaths by more than five to one.<sup>50</sup>

Simply educating legislators and the public may not be enough. Although an overwhelming majority of both legislators and the public knew that second-hand smoke could cause lung cancer, this did not translate into strong support for smoking bans in all four sites examined. This may indicate the need to fine-tune the risk communication strategy and to counter the appearance of "controversy" about second-hand smoke, a documented strategy of the tobacco industry.<sup>51-53</sup> Nonetheless, for one location – hockey arenas – majority support was found in both groups, suggesting that this is one site for immediate policy intervention.

One limitation of this study is that differences in item wording may have an impact on response comparisons between the two groups. Substantially higher support from the public than from legislators regarding a penalty for stores that continue to sell to minors may reflect the wider amplitude in



the responses permitted in the public sample's item wording compared to that of the legislators (strongly and somewhat agree/disagree categories versus yes/no). The same is true to a lesser extent for the item regarding the impact of higher cigarette prices on youth smoking. On the one item where wording was not a potential issue (banning tobacco sponsorship), the attitudes of the groups were very similar.

Our study and the Kentucky study<sup>19</sup> have begun the process of researching attitude congruence between legislators and the public with regard to tobacco control. Future research could identify which determinants of attitudes toward tobacco control are common and which are unique to legislators and the public. The role that political ideology plays in determining the attitudes of both groups appears to be one salient factor for further research.<sup>54</sup> Other studies could track legislator and public opinion over time to investigate whether legislators "lead" or "follow" the public in terms of support for tobacco control measures.<sup>55</sup> Such knowledge would help advocates focus their activities and ensure that strong tobacco policies are on both the public and political agendas.

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## RÉSUMÉ

**Objectifs :** Examiner la concordance dans les perceptions et les attitudes des législateurs et de la population en ce qui a trait au tabac et aux politiques de lutte contre le tabagisme.

**Méthode :** À l'aide de deux enquêtes transversales (l'une auprès des législateurs fédéraux et provinciaux élus et l'autre auprès des résidents adultes de l'Ontario), on a analysé les perceptions et les attitudes des répondants en tant que variables dépendantes, par régression logistique multiple. On les a ensuite ajustées selon l'âge, le sexe, le niveau d'instruction et le statut de fumeur ou de non-fumeur.

**Constatations :** Dans la plupart des cas, on observe une concordance. Les législateurs sont proportionnellement plus nombreux que l'ensemble de la population à convenir que la plupart des fumeurs sont dépendants et à approuver l'interdiction du tabagisme sur les lieux de travail, mais cette différence disparaît lorsqu'on tient compte de l'effet de la variable socio-démographique. Les législateurs sont aussi plus sensibles que l'ensemble de la population à l'ampleur des décès dus au tabac (par comparaison avec les décès dus à l'alcool). Dans l'ensemble de la population, on approuve davantage l'imposition de lourdes sanctions aux magasins qui vendent des cigarettes à des mineurs.

**Conclusions :** Ces constatations témoignent d'une forte concordance entre les perceptions et les attitudes (non ajustées) des législateurs ontariens « dans le monde réel » et celles de la population ontarienne en ce qui a trait aux politiques de lutte contre le tabagisme. C'est une bonne nouvelle pour les porte-parole de la lutte contre le tabagisme, qui devraient s'en servir pour promulguer le renforcement des politiques en ce domaine.

## Appendix

## The "Canadian Legislator Study" and the "Qualitative and Quantitative Study": Question Items and Responses Compared

Canadian Legislator Study	Qualitative and Quantitative Study	Responses Compared
Second-hand smoke can cause lung cancer in nonsmokers. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?	Do you think other people's smoking is a cause, may be a cause, or is not a cause of lung cancer?	<strongly/somewhat agree> to <is/may be a cause>
Most smokers are addicted to nicotine. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?	Thinking about people who smoke every day, how many would you say are addicted? Would you say all are addicted, most are addicted, about half, less than half, or none?	<strongly/somewhat agree> to <all/most are addicted>
Compared to deaths due to alcohol, including deaths caused by drinking and driving, do you think tobacco causes a lot more deaths, somewhat more, about the same, somewhat fewer, or a lot fewer deaths?	Same	<a lot more deaths>
Should smoking not be permitted at all, be permitted in restricted areas, or should smoking not be restricted at all in hockey arenas?	Same	<not be permitted at all>
Should smoking not be permitted at all, be permitted in restricted areas, or should smoking not be restricted at all in workplaces?	Same	<not be permitted at all>
Should smoking not be permitted at all, be permitted in restricted areas, or should smoking not be restricted at all in restaurants?	Same	<not be permitted at all>
Should smoking not be permitted at all, be permitted in restricted areas, or should smoking not be restricted at all in bars and taverns?	Same	<not be permitted at all>
Would you support not allowing stores to sell cigarettes at all the second time they were convicted of selling cigarettes to young people who are under the legal age?	Stores convicted of selling tobacco to young people under 19 years of age should lose their licence to sell tobacco. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?	<yes> to <strongly/somewhat agree>
Do you think increasing the price of cigarettes by (50 cents/\$1) per package would greatly reduce, somewhat reduce, or make no difference in the number of young people, between the ages of 12 and 18, who start to smoke regularly?	Higher taxes on tobacco will help prevent children from becoming smokers. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?	<greatly/somewhat reduce> to <strongly/somewhat agree>
Do you think increasing the price of cigarettes by (50 cents/\$1) per package would greatly reduce, somewhat reduce, or make no difference to the amount adults smoke?	Higher taxes on tobacco would help people to quit smoking. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?	<greatly/somewhat reduce> to <strongly/somewhat agree>
Would you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose a ban on the sponsorship of cultural events by tobacco companies?	Tobacco companies should be allowed to sponsor sporting and cultural events. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?	<strongly/somewhat support> to <strongly/somewhat disagree>
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