



Public Supports Strong Alcohol Policies

A SHORT REPORT

By Pamela S. Erickson

Volume 2/Issue 1/April 2016

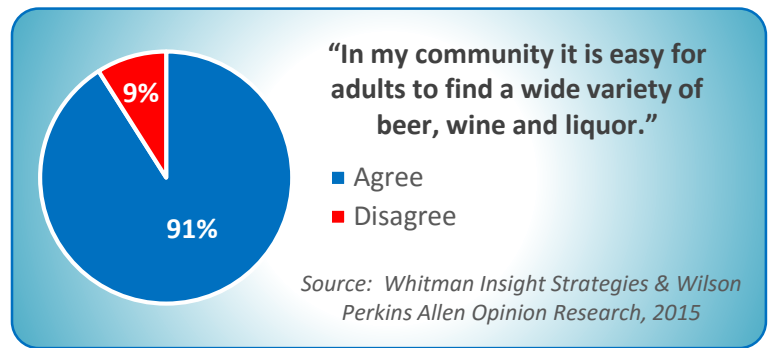
There is no cry for greater convenience!

Today, local and state government officials are faced with many attempts at loosening alcohol regulation with a stated goal of creating more outlets, increasing the days and hours of sale, and increasing convenience. But, these changes are not being driven and demanded by the public. In fact, according to recent surveys, the public is very supportive of the current alcohol regulatory system; and is more likely to support stronger policies in some areas. There is simply no evidence of general dissatisfaction with alcohol regulations or shopping experiences. Many of the current legislative changes making alcohol more available are opposed by substantial majorities. This report uses recent survey data to identify public attitudes toward alcohol regulation including proposed changes.

Proposed alcohol law changes are often touted as possible ways to increase jobs and business opportunities; however, most proposals just shift jobs from one segment of the economy to another. For example, allowing a brewer to be a taproom may just take business from a bar.

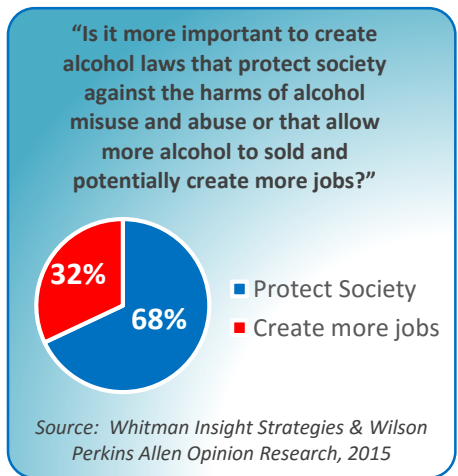
More importantly, the public does not view this as a good trade-off. In a national random sample survey commissioned for the Center for Alcohol Policy (CAP), 68% of respondents said it is more important to protect society than create more jobs.

Contrary to what you might expect from political discussions, there seems to be almost no demand for additional locations to



sell beer, wine and liquor. In the CAP survey, a whopping 91% agreed that “In my community it is easy for adults to find a wide variety of beer, wine and liquor.”

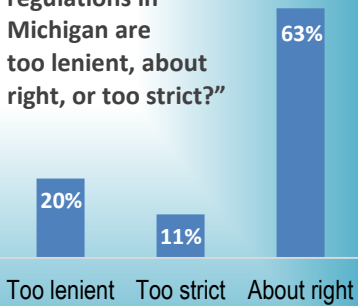
This same sentiment was echoed in a survey of Michigan voters. Respondents were asked whether they thought there were enough places to buy or drink alcohol. Notice that only 3% said there were not enough!



General Attitudes about Alcohol Regulation

Surveys reveal that most members of the public understand the need for regulation of alcohol. In the CAP survey, a large majority felt it was important to keep the alcohol industry regulated and only 30% thought alcohol should be sold just like other consumer goods.

“Do you think that current alcohol regulations in Michigan are too lenient, about right, or too strict?”

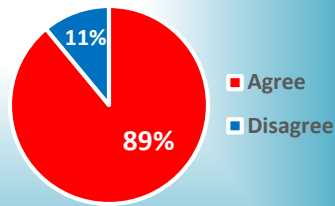


Source: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research & Public Opinion Strategies, 2015

In the state of Michigan, a majority of survey participants thought alcohol regulations are about right (63%). Few suggested they are too strict (11%) and 20% said they are too lenient.

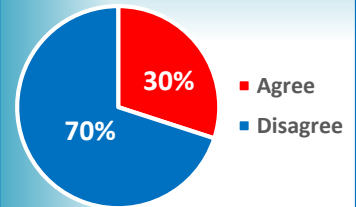
Contrary to what some people think, the public appears to support the idea that some industries and products need strong regulation.

“It is very important to keep the alcohol industry regulated.”



Source: Whitman Insight Strategies & Wilson Perkins Allen Opinion Research, 2015

“Alcohol should be sold just like other consumer goods such as lawn furniture or cereal.”



Source: Whitman Insight Strategies & Wilson Perkins Allen Opinion Research, 2015

severe (52%), there was little support for dropping the BAC limit of .08. There also wasn't a lot of support for a higher excise tax. In the CAP survey, 56% said it should stay the same, 28% wanted it lower and 15% thought it should be higher. Regarding the recent issue of powdered alcohol, a majority (55%) in the CAP survey supported a ban on the product.

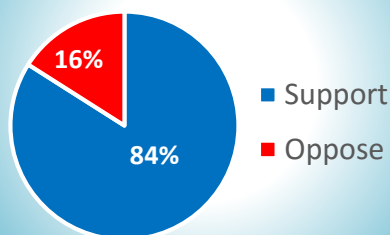
Current Regulatory Issues

In looking at specific regulatory issues, there seems to be great concern about underage drinking and drunk driving. The CAP survey showed very high support for the 21-age limit for purchase of alcohol. Eighty-four percent support this regulation.

A total of 94% said that people selling or delivering alcohol should verify age to ensure the person is 21. With regard to “getting rid of alcohol rules, regulations, and safeguards”, 82% agreed that things would get worse because “parents, police officers and retailers already have a difficult challenge keeping alcohol out of the hands of minors.” Among Michigan voters, reducing problems such as drunk driving, underage and binge drinking were high on the list of policy concerns, more so than consumer choices or lower prices.

As the CAP survey revealed, while most felt the penalties for drunk driving should either remain the same (43%) or be more

“Do you support or oppose the current law making 21 the legal age at which you can purchase alcohol?”



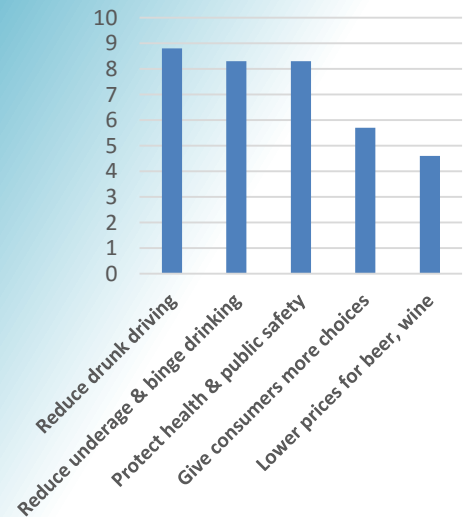
Source: Whitman Insight Strategies & Wilson Perkins Allen Opinion Research, 2015

Importance of state/local control

After Prohibition, the task of regulating alcohol was given to the states. Some states also grant local government substantial power to regulate alcohol in their communities. This appears to be quite important to the public. In the CAP survey, 81% said they support “the right of individual states to set their own laws and regulations surrounding the manufacture, distribution and sale of alcohol.” Also, 76% said they support the 3 tier system where producers must sell products to licensed distributors who then sell to individual retailers.

When asked about local control, 70% said that communities should be given notice if a new store that will provide alcoholic products is being considered. Many communities do have such laws.

Michigan voters’ rank importance of policy considerations for lawmakers on a scale from 0 to 10 (0= not important, 5= neutral, 10= very important)



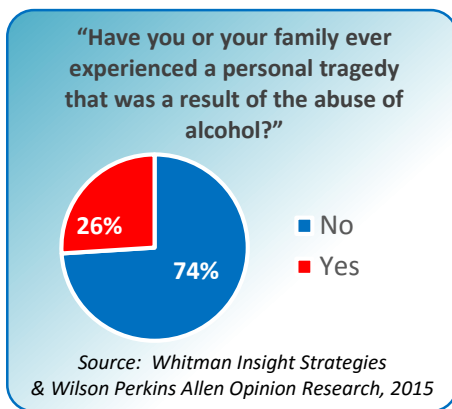
Source: Whitman Insight Strategies & Wilson Perkins Allen Opinion Research, 2015

Possible reasons for strong support for alcohol regulation

None of the surveys used for this report asked respondents why they support alcohol regulation. But, there are clues to why support is high. Here are some possibilities:

1. Alcohol harm is very personal for a segment of the public because they have experienced its negative impact.

The Gallup organization has conducted polling on alcohol issues since the 1930's. Beginning in 1947, they asked, "Has drinking ever been a cause of trouble in your family?" In that year, 15% said "yes." In the most recent survey, it is much higher (32%). This is despite the fact that the number of people who do drink is not much higher. Something has happened to make alcohol more of a problem. In the CAP poll, a similar question was asked but one that may represent a problem of greater magnitude. That question concerned whether the respondent had experienced a



“personal tragedy” due to alcohol abuse. This may partially explain the high level of support for strong alcohol regulation.

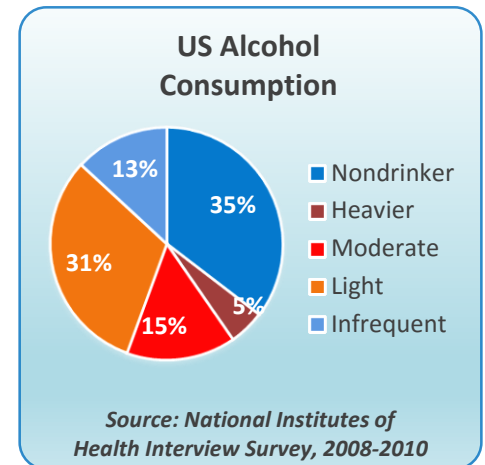
2. The public perceives that alcohol and drug abuse are not just personal, but community problems.

In a survey conducted in February 2016, the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research participants were asked how serious of a problem were various types of substances in their community. “Other drugs” (cocaine, methamphetamines, etc.) and alcohol got the highest ratings for “extremely serious.” But, when you combine the responses for extremely and moderately serious, alcohol comes out on top with 76% versus 67% for prescription pain relievers and 64% for “other drugs.”

3. A majority of the public do not benefit from additional convenience because they either do not drink at all or drink quite infrequently.

For many, alcohol is a specialty item they buy only occasionally.

The chart below portrays the responses to a question about alcohol consumption from a National Institutes of Health Interview Survey. As one can see, 35% of Americans do not drink at all, and another 13% drink



infrequently meaning only a few times a year. In addition, 31% who are “light drinkers”

have three drinks or

fewer per week. This suggests they buy less than a six-pack of beer or one bottle of wine a week. This leaves moderate drinkers (1-2 drinks per day) and heavy drinkers (3 or more drinks per day) as regular alcohol customers.

Thus, the expanded availability of alcohol would benefit only 20% of the population at most, but any increased social and law enforcement costs would be borne by every taxpayer.

Conclusions and How to Use this Report

It is very important that elected officials, regulators and other policy makers understand public attitudes about alcohol when considering regulation changes. These officials need to know that:

- 1. There is little evidence of public support for widespread deregulation of alcohol.** The public considers alcohol problems in their community to be quite serious. As a result, one should not expect the public to favor weakening current control measures even if the change would create new jobs and government revenue.
- 2. There is no general evidence that the public needs or desires additional alcohol outlets.** There is considerable satisfaction with the availability of alcohol products. Given the research that increased alcohol availability is associated with increased problems, adding more outlets would increase the risk for community safety. (See <http://www.thecommunityguide.org/alcohol/outletdensity.html>.) Those pushing for more access may be looking at their financial interest, not public interest.

3. The public is especially supportive of measures that deal with underage drinking and drunk driving. Those considering such things as lowering the drinking age should know that public support for the 21 age limit is over 80%. While there was some support for stronger drunk driving measures, this didn't translate to strong support for dropping the Blood Alcohol Content level below .08.
4. There is no evidence of a public desire for a "free market" for alcohol. The public seems to have a clear understanding about the need to regulate certain products and industries due to public health and safety concerns. Claims that alcohol regulation is just a form of the "nanny state" should be countered with information about the strength of public support for current regulations.
5. The data in this report supports the important role that regulators play in fostering the public health and safety of their communities. This recognition may be useful in countering proposals to reduce enforcement or funding of regulatory efforts.

Methodology

This report summarizes information from recent survey research on alcohol issues. Only two recent surveys were located that dealt primarily with alcohol policy. The first is a random sample national survey conducted by Whitman Insight Strategies and Wilson Perkins Allen Opinion Research for the Center for Alcohol Policy. The survey of 1,005 people was conducted during April 27th-May 3rd, 2015. A second, state level survey, was conducted in the state of Michigan by Public Opinion Strategies and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research of 500 likely voters during March 25-March 29, 2015. That survey was commissioned by the Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association. In both surveys, two polling firms were used to ensure a bi-partisan orientation.

No recent surveys on alcohol policy from universities or non-profit research institutes were located via web searches.

A number of surveys exist that ask some questions about alcohol policy. In three cases, survey results for specific questions were used from the following organizations: Gallup.com, the National Institutes of Health, and the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. More information on sources used in this report can be accessed at the websites listed below.

Notes

- 1) <http://www.gallup.com/poll/174200/reports-alcohol-related-family-trouble-remain.aspx>
- 2) <http://www.centerforalcoholpolicy.org/2015/08/18/national-survey-finds-americans-very-satisfied-with-current-alcohol-laws-and-regulations-3/>
- 3) http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_10/sr10_257.pdf
- 4) <http://mbwwa.org/AboutUs/OurStaff.aspx>
- 5) http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/Drugs/AP-NORC%20Substance%20Use%20Report_March%202016.pdf

This is a series of short reports in a simple format. All such reports are available at www.healthyalcoholmarket.com.

Public Action Management, PO Box 4364, Scottsdale, Arizona 85261