

Public opinion lights the fire for politicians to adopt anti-smoking bans

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Smoking and legislation image courtesy of Don Hammond

(Medical Xpress) -- Citizens aren't just blowing smoke when it comes to anti-tobacco legislation—and they tend to copy what neighboring states do, new research shows.

In adopting anti-smoking bans, [public opinion](#) is much more important than originally thought, said University of Michigan School of Public Health researcher and lead study author Julianna Pacheco. The closer a person lives to a state that has enacted smoking bans the likelier it is for that person to support smoking bans. Eventually, politicians respond by enacting bans in those home states.

"Democratic responsiveness is alive and well at the state level," said

Pacheco, who is also a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health & Society Scholar.

"We've always thought that public opinion was important for state policy making, but this is the first paper to empirically test the causal relationship between opinion and policy over time," Pacheco said.

"Furthermore, this paper suggests that public opinion is the driving force behind why policies often spread across neighboring states."

The study looks at legislation through the lens of the social contagion theory. The first stage in social contagion occurs as individuals become aware of policies adopted in neighboring states. The second stage occurs as state officials respond to changing opinion on those neighboring policies in the home state. This seems intuitive, but hasn't been studied before, she said.

"There are methodological challenges to measuring state public opinion," Pacheco said. "We have not had very good measures of state opinion that vary over time, which are needed to study the social contagion model."

The social contagion model and the role of public opinion can be applied to other public [policy](#) areas as well, Pacheco said.

"Anti-smoking policies are unique in that these policies are easy for people to understand and directly experience, but that doesn't mean that the social contagion model cannot be applied to other issues," Pacheco said.

The paper, "The Social Contagion Model: Exploring the Role of Public Opinion in the Diffusion of Anti-Smoking Legislation across the American States" will appear in *The Journal of Politics*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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