

Tea Party organizations have ties to tobacco industry dating back to 1980s, study finds

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A Tea Party demonstration in Sacramento, California.

Rather than being a purely grassroots movement that arose spontaneously in 2009, the Tea Party developed in part as a result of tobacco industry efforts to oppose smoking restrictions and tobacco taxes beginning in the 1980s, according to a study by researchers at UC San Francisco.

"Nonprofit organizations associated with the [Tea Party](#) movement have longstanding ties to [tobacco](#) companies, and continue to advocate on behalf of the [tobacco industry](#)'s anti-tax, anti-regulation agenda," said senior author Stanton A. Glantz, PhD, director of the UCSF Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education (CTCRE) and a UCSF professor of medicine and American Legacy Foundation Distinguished Professor in Tobacco Control.

The study, which appears on Feb. 8 in the journal *Tobacco Control*, shows that rhetoric and imagery evoking the 1773 Boston Tea Party were used by tobacco industry representatives as early as the 1980s as part of an industry-created "smokers' rights" public relations campaign opposing increased cigarette taxes and other anti-smoking initiatives.

From previously secret tobacco industry documents available at the UCSF Legacy Tobacco Documents Library, IRS filings and other publicly available documents, the study authors traced a decades-long chain of personal, corporate and [financial relationships](#) between tobacco companies, tobacco industry lobbying and public relations firms and nonprofit organizations associated with the Tea Party.

The research uncovered the tobacco industry's ongoing opposition to health care reform, dating back to a major campaign waged against President Bill Clinton's proposed 75-cent cigarette tax to help finance it.

"Tea party symbolism is nothing new for cigarette companies and their allies, which for many years have been cynically using a hallowed symbol of American freedom in order to advance their own interests," said co-author Rachel Grana, PhD, a CTCRE fellow.



The UCSF researchers sounded a call for greater transparency of organization funding "so that policymakers and the general public – including people who identify with the Tea Party – can evaluate claims of political support for, and opposition to, health and other public policies."

The role of Citizens for a Sound Economy

In 2002, before the mainstream media widely discussed Tea party politics, Citizens for a Sound Economy (CSE), a nonprofit funded in part by cigarette companies since 1987 to support a pro-tobacco political agenda, started its US Tea Party project. Its website stated "Our US Tea Party is a national event, hosted continuously online and open to all Americans who feel our taxes are too high and the tax code is too complicated."

In 2004, CSE split into the Tea Party organizations Americans for Prosperity (AFP) and Freedom Works. Those two groups, say the authors, have since waged campaigns to turn public opinion against

[tobacco taxes](#), smoke-free laws and health care reform in general.

"If you look at CSE, AFP and Freedom Works, you will see a number of the same key players, strategies and messages going back to the 1980s," said lead author Amanda Fallin, PhD, RN, also a CTCRE fellow. "The records indicate that the Tea Party has been shaped by the tobacco industry, and is not a spontaneous grassroots movement at all."

While it is well known that corporations can influence policy, the study "demonstrates the extent to which a particular industry has leveraged its resources to indirectly affect public policy," the authors write. "The tobacco companies funded one of the main Tea Party predecessor organizations, CSE, as well as other conservative organizations...to support the companies' broader economic and political agendas."

The researchers also warn of the Tea Party's efforts to push its political agenda in other countries, pointing out that the Tea Party movement has begun to spread internationally, with Freedom Works training activists in 30 countries including Israel, Georgia, Japan, Nigeria and Serbia. The international expansion "makes it likely" that Tea Party organizations will mount opposition to tobacco control and other health policies "as they have done in the United States," the authors wrote.

"Tobacco control advocates in the United States and around the world need to be very aware of the connections between Big Tobacco and the Tea Party movement and its associated organizations," Glantz said.

Fallin presented the paper at the annual UCSF CTCRE "It's About a Billion Lives" symposium at the UCSF Parnassus campus on Friday, Feb. 8. The symposium webcast can be found at lecture.ucsf.edu/special-events/billion-lives/.

Provided by University of California, San Francisco

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