

Smokes and votes: Could menthol cigarette ban sway US election?

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In a quintessentially American tale of race and politics, the lowly menthol cigarette is playing a curiously large role in the US presidential election this year.

A proposed ban from President Joe Biden's administration on the mint-flavored smokes has miffed some African Americans, a key Democratic Party base. To complicate matters, narratives linked to the tobacco lobby have ginned up fears that the ban could lead to over policing and racism.

Those are normally left-wing concerns, but in an election year, anything goes—and Republicans are using the issue to try to appeal to Black voters.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2022 released draft plans for axing the production and sale of flavored tobacco, to deter future smokers and help current smokers quit.

Biden was due to greenlight a federal rule to that effect last year, but fears of backlash among Black voters meant it was stalled until March—and campaigners now fear the law won't be enacted at all.

Black smokers are far more likely to buy [menthol cigarettes](#) than white smokers, leading to claims from some—including those with links to the tobacco industry—that a ban would disproportionately impact African Americans.

Around eight in 10 African American smokers consume menthol cigarettes, compared with three in 10 white smokers.

"Smoking is bad for you, no question about it, but if it's a health issue, why aren't you banning all cigarettes?" Al Sharpton, a famous civil rights activist and a vocal opponent of regulation, asked at an event in 2019.

In the lead up to the FDA proposal, he wrote a letter to the Biden White House saying "a menthol ban would exacerbate existing, simmering issues around racial profiling, discrimination and policing."

He pushed against a state-level ban proposed last year in New York, according to news outlet Politico.

And with the [presidential election](#) approaching, Republican groups are looking to poach crucial African American votes.

In South Carolina, conservative group Building America's Future sent letters to around 75,000 Democrat voters in February listing Biden's proposed menthol cigarette ban as a reason not to vote for him in that month's primary vote.

An ad from the group says Biden should focus on bigger priorities, rather than "telling adults what they can and can't do."

Tobacco giant Altria, which owns Marlboro and other brands, sponsored a poll last year which found a menthol ban would sway minority voters against Biden, though other polls have found a majority of Black voters support a ban.

'Health above politics'

Health experts have decried delaying the ban, as figures published by the FDA show smoking-related illnesses kill nearly 500,000 people in the US each year.

"The closer you get to an election just ultimately the harder things get," said Emily Holubowich, of the American Heart Association.

"This is the right thing to do. History is on your side, public health is on your side."

Derrick Johnson, president of the NAACP civil rights group, supports the ban, and called for the White House to "focus on the science, the

research and the health outcomes of African Americans" by enacting it.

Calling concerns over the menthol ban a "manufactured political argument," he doubted there was much genuine outrage around the issue.

"No one has raised this as a political issue," he said in a recent anti-tobacco campaign video, besides "the lobbyists of the tobacco industries and those they have paid to carry a... false message."

In 2020 the EU banned the sale of menthol cigarettes and US states California and Massachusetts have since followed suit.

Flavored cigarettes are considered by campaigners to be far more addictive as they mask the taste of tobacco, making it harder for people to stop smoking and acting as a gateway for young people.

Black Americans have been specifically targeted in marketing for menthols, promoted as "refreshing" throughout the 20th century.

The campaign worked: In 1953 some 5 percent of Black smokers consumed menthol cigarettes, rising to around 80 percent at the turn of the century.

A study published in peer-reviewed journal *Tobacco Control* in 2022 estimated that a US ban on menthol cigarettes would save 654,000 lives, of which 255,000 would be African Americans, over the next four decades.

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