

California raises smoking age to 21, other states set to follow (+video)

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Path to progress

California became the second state to raise the minimum legal age to buy tobacco to 21, showing the continuing momentum for laws that target youth smoking.

By [Jessica Mendoza](#), Staff writer

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Glendale, Calif. — Selling tobacco to anyone under age 21 became illegal in California on Thursday, marking a milestone in an ongoing shift in American policies on tobacco use.

The new law is part of a sweeping package of antismoking measures that Gov. Jerry Brown [signed into law in May](#). In addition to raising the minimum smoking age, it defines e-cigarettes as tobacco products – an attempt to address the tripling of e-cigarette use among middle and high school students from 2013 to 2014, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data.

The laws signify the continuing potency of the sea change in attitudes around tobacco that started in the 1980s. While the tobacco industry resisted the restrictions on some fronts – winning an exception for active-duty military

personnel, for instance – the effort to cast tobacco as a public-health issue continues to gain momentum.

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Ahead, some analysts say, is the spread of laws like California's to states nationwide.

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“After places pass these laws and you get experience with them, then you know that: A) The sky didn’t fall; B) They’re popular; so politicians are less frightened of them, and they work,” says Stanton Glantz, director of the Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education at the University of California, San Francisco.



In 2015, Hawaii became the first state to implement the 21-year-old age limit. More than 100 cities across the country have passed similar measures, including New York; Boston; Columbia, Mo.; and Evanston, Ill.

About [three-quarters of Americans](#) – including about 70 percent of current smokers – favor raising the minimum legal age of smoking from 18 to 21, the CDC reports.

The notion of 21 as the legal age for buying tobacco products is far from new. In 1920, between 14 and 22 states had minimum legal age laws set at 21 years, according to a [March report](#) by the American Journal of Public Health.

During the next few decades, the tobacco industry would fight to lower those age restrictions as part of efforts to market their products to children, the report found. The drive was largely successful, says Professor Glantz, who co-authored the study.

It wasn't until mid-1980s that the combined efforts of the American Medical Association, then-Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, and the Environmental Protection Agency outlined the [public health impact](#) of smoking.

In 2005, Needham, Mass., became the first US city to raise the legal age to buy tobacco to 21. By 2010, smoking among students at Needham High School had dropped to nearly half the rate among those in nearby communities, where the age restriction did not apply, according to [a longitudinal study](#) from 2006 to 2012.

“When you increase the minimum sales age, you’re not only reducing teenagers’ direct access to cigarettes,” said Shari Kessel Schneider, co-author of the study, [to the Monitor](#). “You’re also reducing the social sources who may be giving them cigarettes.”

Part of the drive to raise the minimum sales age stems from a sharpened focus on preventing smoking at young ages – which is when majority of smokers get hooked. Defining e-cigarettes as tobacco is a new front in that effort.

“The surge in e-cigarette use among teens and young adults is no accident. The tobacco industry’s aggressive marketing of e-cigarette gadgets and candy flavors is jeopardizing the health of our young people,” said Karen Smith, California Department of Public Health director and state health officer, in a telephone press briefing Thursday.

Still, getting the bills through the State Assembly was no easy task. The debate prior to the vote, which took place in March, took 48 hours, [the Los Angeles Times reported](#). Opponents of the bill argued that if 18-year-olds in California can enlist in the military, they should also be able to smoke.

“You can give your life but you can’t buy a pack of cigarettes,” said Assemblyman Chad Mayes (R) of Yucca Valley, who opposed the bill.

Indeed, the tobacco industry remains a political player. As recently as 2014, the industry poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into both Democrat and Republican campaigns in California, [the Sacramento Bee reported](#).

But the passage of the new measures likely heralds a more permanent shift – one that is moving away from cigarette smoking as a social norm, says Richard Daynard, president of the Public Health Advocacy Institute at Boston’s Northeastern University.

“I don’t think the tobacco industry lobby is what it once was,” he says. “I think the tide has turned.”