

# TEMPERANCE REVIVED:

## THE CORE TENETS AND TACTICS OF NEOPROHIBITIONISM

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# ABSTRACT

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The present paper provides an amended institutional and public choice analysis of prohibitionist politics and policy. Its purpose is to answer several questions. How do groups advocating for lifestyle restrictions such as the \$220 million Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use or Movendi International become politically successful? Can the same be said of other countries outside the United States? What lessons does the prohibitionist past hold for the future of these movements?

The answers the article delivers revolve around an original interpretation of public choice failures based on moral norms as the cultural background shaping political agents' thoughts and behavior. In doing so, the text introduces and develops the concepts of "culture of prohibition" and "neoprohibitionism". The "culture of prohibition" refers to the widespread ethical approval of lifestyle restrictions and the simultaneous acceptance of individuals privately benefitting from stringent policies. "Neoprohibitionism" is the current social and political movement dedicated to banning or limiting any substance considered dangerous to public health. Neoprohibitionist actors use moral arguments to bring a "culture of prohibition" into being using three different methods. The first involves framing lifestyle choices in a way that moralizes externalities as emergencies worthy of intervention. The second is downplaying the private interests involved in prohibitionist policies using appeals to ethics. The third strategy is to marginalize opponents of neoprohibition by depicting them as nefarious or creating legal barriers to their participation in the discussion. The text then illustrates these dynamics



# ABSTRACT

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and the continuity between prohibition and neoprohibition via a comparison between two case studies, the United States and Russia, stretching from early modernity to the present day. Neoprohibitionism is consequently revealed to be a dominant force in public policy in different countries worldwide.

The paper concludes by proposing a culture of consumer choice as a viable counterweight to neoprohibitionism and suggesting novel directions for future research.



# INTRODUCTION

Listen to mass media, and you might think politics is a story about charismatic figures and groups moving to shape the world to their whims. However, using the theory of public choice, we can apply the same economic analysis of markets to governments and correctly emphasize institutions and the constraints that institutions place on political decision-making and behavior ([Holcombe, 2016, p.5](#)). After all, public figures do not act within a social void. They work through a broader political process driven by rules (on voting, the way regulation is supposed to work, and who gets to make or unmake public policy) that discourage some behaviors and reward others ([North, 1992](#)). And when these rules put personal interests at odds with the interests of other individuals, we should not be surprised by rent-seeking, special interest groups, and the explosion of needless bureaucratic red tape. In such a system, unscrupulous individuals enjoy an elevated status, a higher income, and more political success than altruists. Short-term, destructive thinking is favored, whereas a more long-term approach is disfavored. The structure of politics, not individual will, makes that true.

In politics, emphasizing specific interests means less attention is paid to the other side of the coin, the role of ideas in shaping institutions. One of the most powerful tools to change or maintain the game's rules is by invoking right and wrong. Only recently has the use of morality in politics received more attention from economists. Ambitiously, [Elinor Ostrom \(2015\)](#) and the Bloomington School have explored morality both as a limit and an enabler of broader institutional change for managing common-pool resources on a global scale.

However, even authors such as Ostrom often ignore some aspects of the equation. In particular, they do not discuss the dark side of using morality to get what one wants politically at the expense of others. Far from a tool to solve issues, ethics can sometimes turn a harmless issue into a damaging controversy and political disagreement into a zero-sum, "I win, you lose" game, creating new ways for specific groups to gain at the expense of everyone else. Moreover, discussions tend to shy away from the discourse of ethics and its effects on the institutional background, and these are topics mostly relegated to cultural analysis (separate from an economic appraisal).

The most important aspect of our work is the case study we have chosen for the theory. We will

focus on one of the most prominent examples of such reasoning in politics – neoprohibitionism. This social and political movement tinkers with public policy to restrict any substance or practice deemed inimical to public health. [We follow Seung Ginny Choi and Virgil Henry Storr's \(2019\)](#) account of a “culture of rent-seeking,” which shows how societies often perceive rent-seeking as a valuable means of allocating resources for personal benefit above and beyond methods like the voluntary exchange of market goods and services. Our unique contribution enriches this account and dovetails public choice explanations with an understanding of moral discourse’s crucial role in a culture of prohibition and government failure in general. Political figures use morality to influence how people evaluate the costs and benefits of health issues and public policy, how opponents and supporters are treated, and what sort of rent-seeking becomes normalized and accepted in politics.

By painting health problems in moralistic tones, neoprohibitionists single out obesity, smoking, or drunkenness in the public eye as uniquely dangerous externalities worthy of government intervention, creating institutional space for their movement where none may have existed prior. Moreover, framing proposed policies as issues of the common good hides the private forces behind neoprohibitionism. Finally, the same groups use ethical discourse to shape what is not permissible to advocate within the political process. In doing so, they have often eliminated all other non-interventionist solutions and marginalized political opponents. It is no wonder, then, that neoprohibitionism has successfully managed to impose its worldview in public policy over the last decades.

We divide our paper into two parts. The first part focuses on laying out our framework in detail and applying it to the particularities of neoprohibitionist discourse, which have helped them promote new institutional forms characteristic of government failure in public choice. The second half of our paper traces these insights throughout the history of neoprohibitionism to explain the origins and development of the movement via an analysis of moral discourse vis-à-vis institutions, all set within our broader public choice framework.

Before we begin, we must stress the extent of the present discussion. For one, our text will not cover in any depth the negative consequences of prohibition policies as ineffective at best and destructive at worst. An extensive literature devoted to the counterproductive nature of

prohibition already exists, from well-known articles on alcohol prohibition in the United States to the more granular case studies at the level of specific countries, the failure of tobacco prohibition in Bhutan being just one recent example ([Wangdi, 2011](#)).

We are also not wading into the extant discussion on the ethics of prohibition and paternalism in general, nor the implications of it for the philosophy of public policy ([Glod, 2013, p.409](#)). Other authors have described neoprohibitionism as a form of illiberal monistic thinking and have made the case for neoprohibitionism violating state neutrality (because it is a worldview that sees a “healthy” life as the one correct way to live and interprets the purpose of statecraft as enforcing this singular lifestyle)([Clarke, 2006, p. 111](#)). We are limiting ourselves to describing, not condemning. With this work, we seek solely to focus on the cultural-institutional dimensions of neoprohibitionism. The subjects of this article are the people engaged in political exchange – the activists in support of neoprohibitionism, the organizations they are part of, the organizations’ backers, and policymakers who are in the position to weaken or curtail neoprohibitionist policies but who choose to promote them ([Choi & Storr, 2019, p. 102](#)). Regarding objects, our study dissects the moral motivations they put forward for their actions, the ambitions (running from personal enrichment to bringing about a teetotaler world) they hope to achieve, and how they used existing institutions or invented new strategies to achieve their ambitions.

# HOW TO ACHIEVE A CULTURE OF PROHIBITION

How do individuals arrive at a particular set of interests? It is vital to investigate what they perceive as an interest in the first place, how political actors conceive institutions, how they believe people around them will react to their actions, and the choices these agents think are available to them. In other words, a realistic explanation of institutions like governments and political agents' behavior should focus on ideas instead of simply given interests, on potential ignorance rather than complete knowledge of all preferences, and processes instead of the fixed equilibria characteristic of conventional economic thinking ([Boettke, 2019, pp. 236-237](#)). That way, we know how they will arrive at 'supply meeting demand' in fortunate cases or (as we shall see with prohibitionism) disequilibrium in less fortunate ones.

Moral ideation profoundly shapes people's impressions of political and economic exchanges. For our discussion, 'morality' is interchangeable with 'ethics' and 'normative'. It is the collection of social meanings, either inherited intergenerationally or conveyed between persons, about what attitudes and behaviors are right or wrong ([Choi & Storr, 2019, p. 109](#)). One does not require a fully articulated philosophical worldview to adhere to this definition (though some neoprohibitionists in our analysis fall into this more demanding category). As long as a political actor describes, supports, or condemns a policy while appealing to terms such as harm and legitimacy or cites failures or virtues of moral character, they invoke morality.

In our analysis, ethics represents the missing causal link in the practical application of public choice. That is because it represents the social background through which the structure of politics makes sense and takes

shape for actual political actors. Earliest theorists in the field, like [Gordon Tullock \(2002\)](#), characterized the act of rent-seeking and other public choice failures (corruption, economic privileges, concentrated benefits, and dispersed costs) as the political creation of negative social value. Nevertheless, Tullock never elaborated on what was supposed to be a "negative social value," what was not, and how political agents decided which was which ([Choi & Storr, 2019, p. 102](#)). By introducing the notion of ethics, we can see that individuals may classify an action like lobbying for restrictions as an instance of rent-seeking because they perceive it to be ethically harmful, setting back the interests of most of their fellow citizens, even though lobbying is neither inherently negative nor positive in a public choice framework.

Furthermore, a morality-based explanation neatly explains the variations in reactions to rent-seeking that Gordon Tullock observed. Because morality is socially malleable, what an individual in the United States deems corruption, another in Russia may perceive as appropriate gift-giving and proper social connections ([Choi & Storr, 2019, p.117](#)). The outcome may differ even with identical institutional constraints due to local normative beliefs that privilege special interests in a collective rent-seeking culture. The path to success is then one of zero-sum policymaking, whereby success can only come at the expense of other political factions, and one that redistributes the spoils of victory to one's group. This bleak prospect stands in contrast to a culture of enterprise that values private property, novel enterprise, lifestyle experimentation, and voluntary exchange under the rule of law ([Choi & Storr, 2019, p. 120](#)). A culture of enterprise is why federal lawmakers in the United States are more likely to respect legislation against graft in Congress. On the other hand, Russian decision-makers may flaunt an equivalent law at any opportunity. Hence, the introduction of liberal-democratic institutions in 1990s-era Russia failed to persist long term due to a



culture of rent-seeking ([Boettke et al., 2008, p. 351](#)).

More than any political movement, neoprohibitionism understands the importance of social background to institutions and human action. A well-known example comes from [Cass Sunstein and Richard H. Thaler \(2009\)](#), who argue for the inadequacy of voluntary individual choice alone due to inherent biases and faulty heuristics. They advocate changing the “architecture of choice” to favor what they consider healthier decision-making. In doing so, policymakers can “nudge” ordinary consumers in the direction of specific options without specifically interdicting certain behaviors or products; thus, it is, in their interpretation, a form of “libertarian paternalism” ([Thaler & Sunstein, 2003, p. 175](#)). High-profile neoprohibitionist advocates like [Michael Bloomberg \(2017\)](#) have made similar comments on fast food, tobacco, vaping and the need for sin taxes to shift consumer behavior away from such products toward what Bloomberg regards as a healthy direction.

Beyond Thaler, Sunstein, and Bloomberg’s psychological-heavy explanations, though, we contend that neoprohibitionists have managed to exploit the moral framing of public health issues (our “architecture of moral thinking,” so to say) to their benefit through a three-pronged strategy.

Firstly, neoprohibitionists have successfully controlled the framing of lifestyle choices to introduce their solutions in the political process. Most of our daily actions generate what economists call externalities, positive or negative consequences for parties outside of a transaction. The same is true of health concerns, where a person’s relationship with drinking might damage their friendships and marriage or cause public unrest. However, just because an externality is present does not automatically mean it merits elimination – its effects might be too small, the individuals involved compensate for the externality by engaging in other

safe habits (a smoker is not necessarily a skydiver), or political action may generate even worse externalities of its own.

Nevertheless, neoprohibitionists have successfully depicted personal habits like smoking, vaping, drinking, and gambling as moral problems requiring novel institutional intervention in several ways. One instance uses exaggerated consequentialist language to amplify the externalities involved, thus making them more deserving of political attention. Though bad relationships and skydiving may land one in an emergency room, smoking, eating, and drinking are framed as costing the public purse and endangering health services. Similarly, neoprohibitionists may describe the activity in morally loaded terms to distinguish it from other externalities. There is no “epidemic” of noisy parties, but there is one of alcoholism, conjuring up images of pandemics and helpless individuals needing a savior. Smoking is a “crisis” that demands immediate attention and less reflection on the matter at hand. Vaping may harm “children,” a stereotypically vulnerable group evoking strong general feelings of protection (unlike the teens or adults who tend to vape).

On the same note, neoprohibitionists deploy ethical arguments to downplay the external downsides of new interventionist policies. Novel restrictions on essential items of food and drink that are economically destructive and generally unacceptable in other areas of consumers’ lives are nurtured and even celebrated because neoprohibitionists have identified their causes with public health and public health with what is morally good. New e-cigarette and alcohol taxes “save lives,” justifying the use of public coercion above any concerns for externalities.

Once established, neoprohibitionists employ the second strategic element, where normative statements shroud the personal interests involved in restrictive



policies. These personal interests include money, reputation, status, and other privileges. Policymakers, media figures, and researchers have staked entire careers on prohibitionist policies and thus have a strong incentive to uphold their importance in the face of counter-arguments. Similarly, entire bureaucratic teams will seek to expand their budgets to justify the existence of their department and survive any significant restructuring ([Blais & Dion, 1990, p. 656](#)). Wealthy donors cultivate valuable connections with political and non-governmental figures and can tilt policies bent to their preferences (the public choice phenomenon known as regulatory capture). All the while, the costs of said measures fall on ordinary consumers and taxpayers. Neoprohibitionists can brush aside all these concerns with warnings that scaling back spending or denying private interests would be catastrophic for health, denial of civil society, and an act of economic callousness.

This accusation of callousness brings us to the third and final aspect of the neoprohibitionist strategy. The movement has effectively defused criticism by delegitimizing political disagreement. Methods are both direct and indirect. Direct strategies involve legal covenants that bar any organizations or firms deemed to be “linked” to commercial interests from participating in the policy or comment process, such as Article 5.3 of the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control ([WHO FCTC, 2013](#)). Similar measures are being considered by various UN agencies for commercial interests in alcohol and sugar products, as well.

Neoprohibitionists also use straightforward moral accusations to support these legal declarations. While neoprohibitionist private interests remain uncontested, critics are consistently dismissed as the thralls of corporate and corrupt forces. Similarly, they stand accused of being at odds with the well-being of the population rather than just opposed to prohibitionist methods of achieving well-being.

Indirect measures include guilt by association, with opponents of prohibition linked to undesirable individuals and organizations. Another indirect instance relates to how actors weigh the evidence of prohibitionist policy. Anti-prohibitionist arguments always involve “questionable” proof, whereas pro-restrictionist evidence does not. As such, dysfunctional policymaking remains unchallenged.

The result has been a culture of prohibition, where increasing sanctions on lifestyles are morally acceptable, and gaining personally and politically from promoting prohibition policies becomes a legitimate and heralded form of political activity. The UK’s Behavioral Insights team (nicknamed the Nudge Unit), created during David Cameron’s premiership in 2010 and jointly owned by the Cabinet Office, Nesta, and its employees, now exports and promotes interventionist methods worldwide ([Rutter, 2020](#)). Their campaign (and the campaign of similar groups in the United States) has normalized restrictions in previously skeptical populations. Where the US public used to be split on the topic of soda taxes, 57% are now convinced that the extra charges are necessary for the well-being of their fellow citizens ([Evich, 2017](#)). Far from being seen as a rich meddler in politics like other billionaires, Michael Bloomberg finds himself lauded as a supporter of health and science as well as a generous philanthropist ([Winslow, 2016](#)). His views of what should count as “healthy” have defined the policy mainstream. In turn, neoprohibitionists can expect further success thanks to these changes in attitude, as more restrictive policies become socially noncontroversial, paving the way for even stronger future campaigns.

# NEOPROHIBITIONISM, PAST AND PRESENT

Our text engages with the history of neoprohibitionism for two reasons. One is that it provides us with a straightforward test for our framework. If moral ideas shape institutions more than vice-versa, we would expect similar normative strategies to lead to a culture of prohibition at different times and places. That is what we find when we examine the records of countries as different as the a) United States and b) Russia regarding prohibitionism. The second reason is that it demonstrates the historical continuity between yesterday's prohibition and today's 'concerned citizens.' Similar or identical organizations are often shoring up the same institutional failures using the same tactics.

For long, prohibitionists have sought to articulate an understanding of public health as an externality requiring social engineering, domination, and control. Earlier temperance movements have demonized opponents (sometimes quite literally). Criticized after the failure of prohibitionist measures, they used repeated moral arguments to retrench and re-emerge, continuing to work on restrictionist measures that continue in earnest.

## a) The United States

Though steeped in the practice of individual rights and lifestyle freedom, the United States is no stranger to the moral discourse of prohibition. Indeed, research traces the beginnings of modern-day prohibitionist attitudes in America to the early 19th century and the rise of the Clean Living Movement. Like modern advocates, the Clean Living Movement lobbied to transform concerns over smoking, alcohol, and sexual health externalities into moralized concepts ([Engs, 1991, p. 155](#)). In the late 18th century, the perception

arose that businesspeople who sold goods to consumers were not very concerned about the latter's health. While there are always reasonable worries about the safety of any given product, early writers of "moral" lifestyles did not only care about health issues but emphasized the ethical implications of this action. No less a figure than Benjamin Rush, one of America's Founding Fathers, was among Clean Living's earliest and staunchest advocates. In his 1798 essay '[Observations Upon the Influence of the Habitual Use of Tobacco Upon Health, Morals, and Property](#)' (2018), Rush nourished the early anti-tobacco movement, describing smoking as 'offensive,' a corrosive influence on morals.

Tobacco was not the only adversary of the early Clean Living movement.

Besides alcohol, substances such as tea and coffee were considered harmful in awakening "evil traits." Men were considered to become debilitated by alcohol and tobacco, and women were believed to be injured by coffee and tea. Along with temperance reform, anti-tobacco sentiment arose during the first Clean Living Movement. ([Engs, 2011](#)) Dietary reformers such as Sylvester Graham also demonized sugar, spices, and especially masturbation, which was considered a cause of insanity ([Whorton, 2001](#)). Rush also believed a connection existed between bad habits. The rowdiness of drinking owed its existence to the restlessness of tobacco consumption. Linking the purported vices together consequently served to amplify the negative externalities of each habit.

Graham and other clean living adepts promised adherents the return of traditional family values and the emergence of a crime-free Garden of Eden by adopting absolute teetotalism ([Engs, 1991, p. 156](#)). However, their efforts were not wholly successful in dispelling the resentments of working-class people toward prohibition. Where clean living advocates saw moral redemption, ordinary workers saw a movement

fundamentally elitist and oriented toward political-economic control through lifestyle restrictions ([Magavern, 1987, p.4](#)). It did not help that supporters of clean living from places like Rochester referenced “a disciplined and docile labor force, and an opportunity to assert moral authority over men,” with opponents routinely characterized as sloppy, unclean, and possessed of evil spirits (quoted in [Magavern, 1987, p. 4](#)). In return, workers sabotaged any attempt at private gains from employers and politicians. When authorities in Pawtucket tried to enforce stringent liquor licensing rules with the blessing of the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1824, local opposition from ordinary laborers sabotaged its implementation ([Magavern, 1987, p. 5](#)).

This first phase of the movement ended with mixed results. On the one hand, it managed to moralize externalities that had previously been the domain of households in the public eye. On the other hand, it failed to leverage its moral discourse to gain significant institutional traction and defuse political opposition. The first cycle marked the Jacksonian Era and lasted from 1830 to 1860.

What had begun in the 19th century returned with renewed purpose at the beginning of the 20th. Like its predecessor, the Progressive Era Movement was a coalition of diverse and often contradictory economic, social, and political forces (devoted Protestants, political progressives, industrialists, and some womens’ rights figures). Unlike its forebears, however, it succeeded in its objectives to outlaw ‘immoral’ behavior, normalize prohibitionism, and embed the interests of its advocates within public policy ([Alston et al., 2022, p.425](#)). Building on the momentum of Clean Living’s ethics discourse, the Progressive Era prohibitionists stigmatized smoking and narcotics, with fifteen states banning the sale of cigarettes and drugs in 1903 ([Alston et al., 2022, p.425](#)). An even more significant victory for prohibitionists came with

the Harrison Act of 1914, which made it mandatory for producers and retailers to register with the Bureau of Internal Revenue. Thus, the door was open to federal prohibitionist intervention ([Holcombe, 1996, p. 192](#)). Their efforts to depict alcohol as immoral and dangerous peaked in 1919 with the adoption of the U.S. Constitution’s 18th Amendment, which enshrined Prohibition for over a decade.

Behavioral moralizers from the Jacksonian Era had one significant political advantage the Clean M’ovement lacked: bureaucracy. In his 1887 essay “The Study of Administration,” political scientist and future US president Woodrow Wilson set out the need for a civil service as “government in action” ([Wilson, 1887, p. 198](#)). Bureaucracy would be the professional, hierarchical administrative wing of government acting independently of Congress via top-down structures run by experts ([Ostrom V., 2008, pp.24-25](#)). The state would expand dramatically in size to accommodate these changes, with real per capita federal spending spiking from modest figures of \$95.02 in 1915 (\$2,888.48 adjusted for 2023 inflation) to \$1,329.77 per person in 1919 (\$24,743 in today’s currency) when the 18th Amendment was adopted ([Holcombe, 1996, p.182; see Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023](#)). Moreover, it would expand in scope and be responsible for more economic and social development areas than ever before.

With the rise of bureaucracy came the opportunity to control entire departments and subsequently write regulations favoring prohibitionist interests. In 1927, Calvin Coolidge’s administration (usually but erroneously associated with a laissez-faire approach) created a separate Bureau of Prohibition within the Treasury to oversee the enforcement of the 18th Amendment ([Holcombe, 1996, p. 192](#)). Its employees had personal reasons to support restrictions and not lose their employment, acquired status, and prestige in government. This Bureau alone spent roughly \$11

million (\$195 million today) enforcing bans on alcohol, tobacco, narcotics, and other substances, providing the American state with a financial incentive to continue backing prohibition ([Holcombe, 1996, p. 193](#)). The Coast Guard was created to physically protect the US's maritime borders, but by 1925, half of its budget was devoted to upholding prohibition. This meant that other federal agencies and departments, too, had become dependent on the existence of the 18th Amendment ([Holcombe, 1996, p.193](#)).

As expected from our theoretical framework, professionalism and moralism created the perfect mix to maintain the status quo and dismiss opponents or even skeptics. The new public health domain included legitimate health concerns – preventing disease, promoting sanitation and personal hygiene, and education efforts. Nevertheless, the Progressive Era movement was able to define a notion of public health in ethically charged terms as *the development of social machinery which will ensure to every individual in the community a standard of living adequate for the maintenance of health* [emphasis added] ([Winslow, 1920, p. 23](#); also see [Pennington, 2021, p. 132](#)). This revised definition was then used to legitimize the creation of a pure prohibitionist department, the takeover of old institutions by prohibitionist goals, and the ever-increasing spending of these departments on prohibitionist pursuits. Opponents were ignorant failures, the puppets of the “robber barons” and corporations, and restrictive policies were infinitely better than the ceaseless daily bickering of American politics ([Ostrom V., 2008, pp.24-25](#)).

Standard historical accounts claim the second phase ended in 1933, with the repeal of the 18th Amendment (via the 21st Amendment) and the official end of alcohol Prohibition in America. Far from being efficient, the burdensome regulations of the Progressive Movement proved incapable of stopping the sale, production, and consumption of alcoholic beverages even during

this time. Instead, they created an extensive criminal network of smugglers supplying “speakeasies” with liquor ([Klein, 2023](#)). Seventeen of the same Senators who had voted for Prohibition then voted against the legislation ([Klein, 2023](#)). After the abolition of the Bureau of Prohibition in December 1933, the efforts of prohibitionists seemed definitively undone.

Moving forward, the 1960s promised to be a time of pure lifestyle libertinism. Collective memory remembers the era as one of easygoing drug use when Harvard professors like Timothy Leary and music stars like the Beatles openly encouraged LSD and cannabis use ([Robison, 2002](#)). By 1965, about 42% of all adults in the US were smokers (compared to 11.5% in 2021), including 40% of doctors across America ([Cummings & Proctor, 2014](#); see [Smith, 2008](#); [CDCa, 2023](#)). Smoking was permitted everywhere, with workers lighting cigarettes in bars, restaurants, offices, homes, and public transport ([Cummings & Proctor, 2014](#)). Per capita alcohol consumption rose through the 1960s and 1970s to an annual high of 2.8 gallons per person in 1981 ([Dufour, 1995](#)). Theological arguments for restrictions faded from the public eye amid the increasing secularization of public discourse. With some notable exceptions (controversies regarding sex work), they persisted mainly in the form of voluntarily assumed rules, the way followers of Islam or Judaism refrain from pork consumption of their own volition. Other norms remained within specific professional associations, such as the ongoing convention for athletes not to drink during NFL events, even though the same practice does not apply to others like players in the FIFA World Cup or American cyclists in the Tour de France ([Williams, 2022](#)).

In reality, restrictionist messaging and techniques marched on in the supposedly carefree 1960s, when neoprohibitionism's approach began to take shape. The tipping point for this third wave was the Surgeon General's 1964 campaign to end smoking ([Cummings](#)

[& Proctor, 2014](#)). Issued annually, the series of reports established the current pattern of neoprohibitionist discourse, portraying smoking as a moralized health hazard, a harmful habit for others and oneself, and a disproportionate danger to young people ([Cummings & Proctor, 2014](#)). Unlike previous eras, mass media played a crucial role in spreading the Surgeon General's messaging about externalities to a larger public than ever before. Professional newspapers and television stations quickly circulated the research papers from the late 1950s linking smoking to lung cancer and provided vivid updates on medical cases linked to smoking throughout the United States ([Cummings & Proctor, 2014](#)).

In the years since, content reach and tailor-made communication strategies have peaked with the contemporary rise of social media. If public health moralizing used to resonate among a handful of people or a coalition based on a leaflet, in today's movement, detox trends, wellness regimens, healthy dieting, and (mis)information about alcohol or smoking can achieve instant moral indignation for millions of followers via a targeted hashtag on Instagram, a well-crafted viral post on X/Twitter or a snappy video on TikTok.

Movendi International is a prime example of an obscure organization empowered by the digital world to instill a culture of prohibitionism. The organization might seem archaic to an unassuming observer. Founded in 1851 in New York as the International Order of Good Templars, Movendi aims to uphold, among other things, alcohol and narcotics abstinence. Looking closer, one can see that Movendi has positioned itself as a crucial actor in public health circles thanks to the group's masterful use of language designed to downplay the implications of neoprohibitionism and generate positive impressions. The body's "About" page conspicuously avoids mentioning the word "ban" in favor of charged normative language ("living free from alcohol," "free healthy citizens contributing to society")

([Movendi, 2023](#)). On the other hand, the organization's website consciously adopts public health terminology that endows alcohol consumption with negative undertones. Besides the phrases mentioned in part one of this paper, words like "chronic" suggest the lack of individual control over the situation (and thus the moral permissibility of outside restrictions) ([Movendi, 2023](#)). The group's essential points end with a call to action, encouraging readers to join Movendi for the seemingly righteous cause of stopping its opponents, referred to under the moniker "the aggressive and merciless alcohol industry" ([Movendi, 2023](#); see also [Dunstone et al., 2017, p. 3](#) for an analysis of similar campaign messaging).

Movendi's moralizing model is the template by which other organizations also speak about alcohol neoprohibition. The group's collaboration with the World Health Organization has resulted in a comprehensive journalistic guide for reporting on alcohol, complete with a glossary of terms to avoid, guidelines for framing news pieces, and high taxation, restriction, plus total abstinence for "cost-effective" health policies ([WHO, 2023, p. iii](#)). Cross-pollination of methods from other neoprohibitionist groups is evident in the text. Inspired by the mandatory frightful imagery of cigarette packaging, the report urges communicators to associate gloomy photos with alcohol consumption in news articles and recommends the adoption of health warning labels ([WHO, 2023, p.24](#)). In turn, the guidelines prompted the US National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (part of the US National Institutes of Health) to consider modifying national guidelines for alcohol consumption ([Clement, 2023](#)).

While Movendi has had a significant impact as a neoprohibitionist organization, its impact and scale pale compared to the influence of American billionaire Michael Bloomberg, who has grown to become a massive funder of various lifestyle regulations.



Bloomberg is a former economic entrepreneur, the founder of the multi-billion dollar firm of the same name, and the seventh wealthiest person in the world ([Forbes, 2023](#)). Nonetheless, he has emerged as the foremost ideological entrepreneur of neoprohibition in the United States: a political agent with the uncanny ability to identify the best opportunities for political change and take advantage of the opportunities by nurturing a movement around them ([Storr, 2008, pp.103-104](#)). The consequence of his success has been increasing acceptance of revolving-door politics, whereby Bloomberg has shifted between the public role of a politician and the private position of an activist unperturbed. Moreover, the conversation around neoprohibitionism has been made more difficult by Bloomberg-affiliated outlets and Bloomberg-funded research marginalizing any counter stance.

Uniquely for an ideological entrepreneur, Bloomberg began his neoprohibitionism advocacy from the position of an already established political figure. He was elected New York City's mayor on behalf of the Republican Party, succeeding Rudy Giuliani for an unprecedented three terms. Bloomberg quickly identified the "health in all policies" discourse as the niche that would bring him political victory ([Columbia, 2018](#)). "Health in all policies" allowed him to manifest arguments prioritizing public health in policy areas not traditionally associated with healthcare under the aegis of community and personal well-being. The result was that each year of Bloomberg's incumbency saw at least one neoprohibitionist law enacted ([Columbia, 2018](#)). He pursued a ban on trans fats, outlawed smoking in all establishments, forced nutritional counts in restaurant meals, banned extra large drink sodas like the infamous "Big Gulp" (a decision later reversed by New York City's appeals court) and sought to limit the availability of cigarette packs at the point of sale ([Dunlap, 2004](#); see also [CBS, 2013](#); [Chasmar, 2013](#)).

Bloomberg only accelerated his efforts once out of office. Beginning in 2010, he committed to "The Giving Pledge," promising to donate most of his wealth (estimated to be \$94.5 billion in total) during his lifetime ([The Giving Pledge, 2023](#)). The direction of those donations and the expansive network of NGOs and causes have aligned with Bloomberg's preeminent political views on fast food products, smoking, and vaping. In 2016, he donated \$220 million to curb tobacco use globally, launching "The Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use" ([Bloomberg Philanthropies, 2012](#)). Bloomberg personally championed and funded the campaign to pass the nation's first-ever soda tax in 2014 in Berkeley, California, and expanded those efforts successfully in 2016 in Oakland, San Francisco, and Philadelphia, usually with moderate injections of \$1.6 million or more in each city ([Vinton, 2016](#); see also [Kell, 2016](#)).

The work of charitable organizations like Bloomberg Family Foundation Inc., known publicly as Bloomberg Philanthropies, undoubtedly leaves a positive impact on the world when limited to donations for the disadvantaged or general health education. However, it does not follow that one should overlook Bloomberg's interference in institutions and the less-than-desirable outcomes of this intervention. Bloomberg Philanthropies has sponsored research on the Berkeley soda tax, distorting the research process in a direction favorable to neoprohibitionist conclusions and crowding out alternative studies (see [Silver et al., 2017](#), for one example). His \$220 million donation covers the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, the National Foundation for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization, and the World Lung Foundation/International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, strongly incentivizing these major public institutions and private bodies to spread his message ([Bloomberg Philanthropies, 2012](#)).

Apart from some social disapproval (New Yorkers bestowing him the nickname “Nanny State Mike”), Bloomberg has garnered support for his neoprohibitionist engagement ([James, 2012](#)). For instance, he was named the World Health Organization’s “Global Ambassador for Noncommunicable Diseases and Injuries,” a mission he personally funded for several years ([UN News Center, 2016](#)).

Most enduringly, neoprohibitionist actors similar to Movendi and Bloomberg help preserve and evolve the legacy of prior regulatory capture. Though the Bureau of Prohibition has disbanded, around 18 million Americans live in “dry counties” (where alcohol is strictly prohibited) across 10% of the United States ([The Economist, 2018](#)). In addition, liquor control boards continue to be primarily responsible for issuing strict licenses for local establishments ([Consumer Choice Center, 2023](#)). Only 12 states allow delivery of all types of beverages to consumers’ doorsteps, with a majority (31 states) prohibiting the direct delivery of spirits and seven not allowing for any shipment of alcohol (Consumer Choice Center, 2023). Arkansas attempted to remove its dry counties (37 out of the state’s sectors are dry) in 2014. Nevertheless, an alliance of neoprohibitionists and licensed liquor dealers (wanting to keep their privileged status) blocked any change, citing the familiar arguments related to health and disorder brought on by alcohol ([Ehrenhalt, 2014](#)).

Unless trends reverse, this age promises to be a flourishing era of neoprohibitionism. General government spending in the United States has ballooned well past the point of inter-war times, reaching 44.93% of total GDP in 2023, or \$31,538 per person ([OECD Data, 2023](#)). The stakes have never been higher for distributing the spoils of the administrative state, with myriad federal government agencies jostling to expand their policy portfolio and appropriate a growing piece of the government pie. To take just one example, the two highest items on

the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) budget for the fiscal year 2024 are primarily \$133 million for “enhancing food safety, nutrition, and cosmetics” and \$131 million for “strengthening the FDA’s public health and mission support capacity” ([FDA, 2023](#)). Pressure has been building from the institution, neoprohibitionist supporters, and policymakers to relax Sections 768-769 of the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill and receive more funds ([US Appropriations Committee, 2023](#)). The impetus for the expansion comes from the FDA’s recent anti-tobacco decisions. Having introduced warning imagery on cigarette packaging in 2020, the agency is finalizing its menthol cigarettes and cigar flavor ban in the name of protecting citizens’ health ([Howard, 2020](#); also see [Christensen, 2023](#)).

The following years promise an expansion into harsher measures. Neoprohibitionists in the United States were successful in passing the first-ever policy measure known as a “generational” ban on tobacco in the city of Brookline, Massachusetts in 2021 ([Rimer, 2022](#)). This means that any individual born after January 1, 2020 will be barred from purchasing tobacco in this small New England town for their entire lives.

That policy is now being adopted wholesale in other countries as well. In 2022, New Zealand adopted a generational smoking ban for “longer, healthier lives, and the health system will be \$5bn better off from not needing to treat the illnesses caused by smoking” ([McClure, 2022](#)). The latter country has made it illegal for anyone born after the 1st of January 2009 to smoke tobacco-based products over the whole individual’s life, punishable by a fine of up to \$95,910 ([Jackson, 2022](#)). In a potential turn away from its successful harm-reduction approach, the United Kingdom has added to the momentum for generational bans with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s initiative to phase out smoking by 2040 through a year-on-year rise in



smoking age limits ([Reuters, 2023](#)). Concerns about the consequences of generational bans (illicit trade, discrimination in applying the law) were swept aside as the complaints of financially interested parties ([Reuters, 2023](#)).

Spurred on by these international examples, California legislators introduced a very similar provision to ban the sale of all tobacco merchandise (cigarettes, cigars, vaping liquid) for anyone born after the 1st of January 2007 until they are at least 67 years of age ([Beam, 2023](#)). The bill has been shelved, mainly due to differences in vision between the anti-tobacco neoprohibitionist groups supposed to support it. But it may return at any time ([Koseff, 2023](#)).

Though we have primarily mentioned these restrictions and bans on tobacco, what is evident so far is that harm-reduction technologies are bearing the brunt of the neoprohibitionist wave. Popular products in this category are vaping devices, nicotine pouches, heated tobacco devices, and various patches, lozenges, and gums that contain nicotine. In the wake of neoprohibitionism, vaping devices, also known as e-cigarettes, have shouldered most of the attacks despite their utility for public health. Rigorous evidence points toward vaping being 95% less harmful than smoking combustible tobacco ([Public Health England, 2015](#)). This makes them a vital and necessary tool for adult smokers looking to quit. While that remains true, much of this success has been weighed down by harm-reduction technologies' impact on youth, particularly in the United States, and led to a declared "epidemic" by the Surgeon General in 2018 ([Stein, 2018](#)). At that time, a survey found that 20% of high school students reported having used a vaping device at least once in the last 30 days, a marked increase ([CDC, 2021](#)).

However, later evidence has shown us that as many as half of the high schoolers were using vaping devices to

consume cannabis rather than nicotine, which elicits more nuanced questions about access to drugs that are, at least in most states, not yet legal ([Richtel, 2019](#)). While youth experimentation with vaping devices – either for nicotine or cannabis – has predictably risen, it has happened at the same time as youth cigarette uptake is at an all-time low. According to a 2021 Center for Disease Control survey, only 1.5 percent of US middle and high school students reported smoking within the past 30 days ([Gentzke et al., 2022](#)).

A mere glance at articles in the field is enough to reveal mounting proof that there is no gateway effect either. A literature review of fifteen studies revealed no phenomenon of young adults and adolescents switching from vaping to smoking en masse; other variables (anxiety, peer pressure, parental smoking habits, and attitudes) warranted more consideration ([Lee, Coombs & Afolalu, 2018](#)). Numerous other studies question the causality of the "gateway effect," suggesting a selection explanation instead. In other words, those facing adverse circumstances, genetic liabilities, or certain personality traits are more likely to switch to behavior like smoking ([Khouja et al., 2021](#); see also [Hiemstra et al., 2021](#)).

Defying the research, an emergent coalition of neoprohibitionist groups, activists, and official bodies have mobilized against promising harm-reduction tools like vapes. In their view, the public health victory offered by harm-reducing technologies for adults should be considered null if it has an impact on youth. In 2019, Michael Bloomberg donated \$160 million to the "Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids" for a three-year campaign to address vaping uptake among American youth – even though the practice is not widespread among the young ([Gunther, 2021](#)). The CDC has chimed in as well, claiming, "A study from 2013-2014 showed that most youth who use e-cigarettes first start with a flavored variety, and flavors are the primary reason youth report using e-cigarettes" – notwithstanding

that the evidence for gateway reactions is dubious when looking at more than a single paper ([CDCb, 2023](#)). Similarly, the American Lung Association (ALA) explicitly supports “clearing all flavored products from the market, including menthol,” accusing tobacco companies of using flavors “to entice today’s youth into trying e-cigarettes” - disregarding the substitution and harm-reduction effect of vaping in favor of this moralized narrative of youth harm ([ALA, 2023](#)).

Despite its inaccuracy, the narrative has enjoyed success, indirectly reshaping America’s perceptions of vaping and leading to fresh lifestyle constraints. A 2019 Gallup survey revealed that approximately one-fifth of young US adults, 40% of 30 to 64-year-olds, and 48% of those 65 years and older erroneously believed that vaping is on par with cigarettes as “very harmful”([Schaeffer, 2019](#)). More acceptance of neoprohibitionism has allowed for more restrictions and increased neoprohibitionist leverage over policy. In 2020, the FDA prohibited (“finalized enforcement policy”) vape flavors like fruit and mint because they “appeal to children” ([FDA News Release, 2020](#)).

In 2022, the popular vaping company Juul was forced to remove its products from shelves after receiving a denial of marketing order by the FDA for doing “more harm to young people than good to cigarette smokers trying to quit.” ([Richtel & Jacobs, 2022](#)). Experts invited to comment by prominent newspapers such as the Guardian or the New York Times lauded the FDA for its decision and urged the regulatory body to go further and remove all vapes sold without market authorization from online and retail stores ([Gammon, 2022](#)). The most vocal requests came from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, a recipient of Bloomberg’s \$220 million donation ([Gammon, 2022](#)). The background context of the institution was left unspecified ([Gammon, 2022](#)).

## b) The Russian Federation

Prohibitionism and neoprohibitionism are not exclusively Anglo-American phenomena. They found fertile ground in Russia, one of the first countries in the world to enact modern restrictive policies. Like the American experience, the first wave of Russian prohibitionists framed lifestyle habits in ethical terms and achieved short-lived victories. Unlike their American counterparts, Russian supporters had to contend far less with political opposition and institutional corruption was generally perceived as morally permissible.

A culture of prohibition, therefore, manifested much earlier and deeper than in the US. The Russian Empire was an absolutist monarchy with a powerful religious message. The Tsar insisted that he or she was the heir of Byzantium (the true Third Rome) and that the word of religion was the word of law. It proved simple for any eager prohibitionist clergyman to get their way, so long as they caught the ear of the tsar and the chancellery. Another factor that made prohibition easier was Tsarist Russia’s highly communitarian social life. The average village ran according to norms of joint responsibility and communal property. The Russian peasant dreamt of communal harmony (mir) via such norms. In reality, the rules invited constant accusations of irresponsibility toward fellow villagers and mutual policing of ‘deviant’ behavior ([Hosking, 2012, pp.17-18](#)). Significantly, there were no opportunities to express political objections. Villages and small towns stifled dissent via communal enforcement, and authorities legally frowned upon any organized opposition ([Hosking, 2012, p.5](#)).

These authoritarian norms justified stringent measures on drinking. By the nineteenth century, clergymen aligned with the state and temperance movements began to frame the unwelcome social consequences of alcohol as destroying families

(the basic economic unit of the Russian village) and promoting the amorphous accusation of “rampant hooliganism” as a moral panic to have alcohol regulated ([Hosking, 2012, pp.12-13](#)).

The result was the 1893 proposal under Tsar Alexander III for a state monopoly over vodka sales, duly achieved in 1902. The measure did not curb excess consumption. If anything, it led to a focus in Russian culture on the more expensive, more potent drinks like vodka over less potent beverages like kvass ([Hosking, 2012, p. 2](#)). Rather than promote responsible drinking, the main impact was the filling of the Russian state’s coffers. Revenue from the sale and taxation of alcohol constituted a third of all state earnings by the beginning of the 20th century ([Hosking, 2012, p. 12](#)). The ones to benefit were the special tax collectors (who often pocketed the levy behind the government’s back), state sales representatives (who directly controlled the supply of alcohol), and the church continuing its close relationship with Russian authorities ([Hosking, 2012, p. 12](#)).

Laws against smoking stretched back even further in time. Mikhail I (first tsar of House Romanov) enacted one of the first successful smoking bans in modern history. In 1633-34, he forbade all trade and use of nicotine in the Empire; the penalty for breaking the law was the confiscation of all smuggled goods and/or death ([Romaniello, 2009, p.15](#)). Michael acted on the advice of Patriarch Filaret, under whom the Church denounced smoking as “an abomination to God” – and who just so happened to be the Tsar’s father ([Frederiksen, 1943, p. 40](#)). The measure would last until 1697, when it was repealed under Peter the Great ([Frederiksen, 1943, p. 40](#)). Peter changed the law not out of concern for prohibition’s effects on the population but to collect more taxes in preparation for the Great Northern War of 1700. Mirroring alcohol legislation, he ordered the creation of a supposedly health-oriented tobacco state monopoly in 1697

([Frederiksen, 1943, p.41](#)).

Prohibitionist ethics would only grow alongside official restrictions, with personal, religious, and health arguments on its side. By the 19th century, celebrated author Count Lev Tolstoy would denounce smoking, drinking, and consumption of narcotics as products of social alienation and failure of character in the essay “Why do men stupify themselves” ([Tolstoy, 1998, p.1](#)). Remarkably, the Count’s essay was meant to be a preface for a medical book: Dr. P.S. Alexeyef’s tract on drunkenness and other perceived vices ([Tolstoy, 1998, p.1](#)). Like other doctors at the time, Alexeyef suggested nicotine led to sexual impotence, criminality, and social disintegration ([Starks, 2017](#)). Health and social externalities thus collapsed into a moralizing whole with historical (albeit limited) institutional success.

Despite dysfunctional monopolies and a history of rent-seeking, Alexeyef and Tolstoy wanted to see Russia do more to instill teetotaler virtue in its subjects. They would get their wish, but not in the way they imagined. It was the Soviet Union, the Empire’s successor, that would prove harsher on smoking and drinking in the name of the worker’s revolution and proletarian values. The Soviet Union spoke of a “new Soviet man,” a perfect exemplar of bodily and mental virtue within a collective socialist society ([Hoffmann, 2000, p. 1](#)). In 1920, the Soviet Union officially introduced school and academic programs to promote healthy dieting, clean living, and mandatory physical fitness regimens designed to end the supposed bourgeois decadence of the past ([Hoffmann, 2000, p.1](#)).

References to Soviet virtues helped obscure the reality of the situation. The measures were another means of crushing ‘bourgeois elements’ in society and creating what the Communist Party saw as a subservient and able workforce ([Hoffmann, 2000, p. 1](#)). Most enduringly, though, slogans of proletarian health served as a legitimizing cover for the professional

Soviet nomenklatura, civil administrators with infinitely more power and considerably less restraint than in the United States.

Chief among them was the newly constituted People's Commissariat for Public Health (Narkomzdrav, later known as the Ministry of Health of the USSR), which earned the favor of Vladimir Lenin. Lenin had a personal distaste for smokers, whom he once described as 'smoking cockroaches' ([Starks, 2017](#)). He tasked the head of Narkomzdrav, Nikolai Alexandrovich Semashko, with maintaining anti-tobacco policies in the Union ([Starks, 2017](#)). Semashko created a ten-point plan to tackle the issue. The most important of these was "energetic" anti-smoking propaganda. The Commissariat used the opportunity to inculcate tacit support for anti-smoking policies among the population and expand its political reach ([Starks, 2017](#)). From 1920 to 1923 (while the civil war prompted by the October Revolution continued), the Commissariat published over 13 million health pamphlets, research materials, posters, movies, and public displays ([Starks, 2017](#)).

Semashko and his team thus laid the foundations for the original anti-smoking campaign that encouraged a "new Soviet lifestyle" bereft of any "paper-wrapped poison" against "the enemy of the working class" ([Starks, 2017](#)). This normative stance would spread through curated social support groups, workshops, and events advertising complete smoking cessation ([Starks, 2017](#)). The evidence for the effectiveness of these activities is inconclusive - official figures mention a 40% to 50% cessation rate, but the statistics have failed to replicate ([Starks, 2017](#)). Nevertheless, what the restrictions did accomplish was to catapult Semashko and the Commissariat to the heart of Soviet politics. The Semashko model would soon spawn imitators beyond the USSR throughout Warsaw-Pact Eastern Europe, cultivating a culture of prohibitionism that persists ([Heinrich, 2022, p.35](#)).

Alcohol posed a different challenge for the Narkomzdrav by exposing contradictory interests within the prohibitionist administrative apparatus. Here, the Commissariat's pursuit of rent-seeking clashed with the earlier rent-seeking of the Russian state, as alcohol taxation remained integral to state revenue. In recognition of its fiscal importance, the Bolsheviks began to relax the Tsarist restrictions on drinking (maintaining them only for strong beverages) in 1922 ([Starks, 2017](#)). Semashko once again resorted to an indirect yet more limited campaign in 1922, arguing in the newspaper *Izvestiia* and other Communist Party outlets for the moral importance of a healthy proletariat building a socialist utopia above the concerns of everyday economics ([Starks, 2017](#)).

However, unlike the Commissariat's anti-tobacco campaign, this effort did not gain ground. Far from banning the practice, the Bolsheviks fully legalized alcohol consumption in 1925. In 1927-1928, half of all excise tax revenue (around 12% of total state proceeds) came from spirits ([Starks, 2017](#)). Officials would campaign again on drinking in 1929, which saw attempts to ban home distillation, limits on vodka sales, and the outlawing of "liquor profiteering", around the same time as the American Prohibition activists ([Tarschys, 1993, p.18](#)). In 1960, Krushchev made producing moonshine a criminal offense, and Brezhnev raised the price of beverages by 17% in 1979 and 27% in 1981 ([Tarschys, 1993, p. 18](#)). Authorities drew explicit plans to reduce the supply of alcoholic drinks via central planning, but they were unsuccessful in stemming the black market tide they unleashed ([Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2020](#)).

Attempts to reconcile these rent-seeking contradictions ultimately contributed to the fall of the USSR. Mikhail Gorbachev did not intend to become the last leader of the Soviet Union. Rather, he believed the Soviet Union required a moral revival through which Soviet citizens would rediscover notions of

sound lifestyles free of physical debilitation and administrative corruption ([Tarschys, 1993, p.7](#)). One of his first actions as part of 'perestroika' (restructuring) and 'glasnost' (openness) was to promote a harsher approach to alcohol. Beginning in 1985, party-controlled stores would no longer sell beer, wine, and spirits, no drinks would be allowed in restaurants before 2 p.m., and arrests for illegal alcohol distilling rose from 80,000 in 1985 to 397,000 in 1987 ([Tarschys, 1993, p.7](#)). Additionally, authorities actively championed 350,000 teetotaler organizations (numbering 12 million members) across the Union ([Tarschys, 1993, p.19.](#)). The reaction from the population ranged from disbelief and mockery to angry protests ([Tarschys, 1993, p.21](#)). Open contestation followed in the Politburo (the Party's central committee), and Gorbachev's popularity and internal support plummeted ([Crowcroft & Davlashyan, 2021](#)). Gorbachev rowed back the measures in 1988, yet the damage had been done. By making political opposition open and acceptable, he unwittingly eroded the culture of prohibition in the Soviet Union and the authority of the nomenklatura ([Crowcroft & Davlashyan, 2021](#)).

Vladimir Putin's neoprohibitionism is determined not to repeat the mistake of condoning criticism again. Under his control, Russia is undergoing an authoritarian renaissance, incorporating aspects of all previous prohibitionist eras. The state's legitimizing discourse is a quasi-ideology emphasizing Russian cultural exceptionalism, Pan-orthodoxy, great power status, strong leadership, and social order (grouped under the title of *Ruskyi Mir* - the "Russian World" and a nod to the older community value of harmony) ([Plokhly, 2017, pp. 328-329](#)). Crucially, Putin's Russia rejects the idea of individual consumer choice inherent in liberal Western values, emphasizing the necessity of collective sacrifice in its stead ([Plokhly, 2017, pp. 328-329](#)).

Banned under the Soviet Union, the Church has

returned to the center of political power under Patriarch Kirill to reinforce the Kremlin's message. Kirill regularly issues blanket denouncements against lifestyle freedom, denounced as "moral relativism," "Western decadence," and a general threat to the social cohesion of the Russian people ([Luxmoore, 2022](#)). Religious organizations play a 'stakeholder' role (though not always the deciding factor) in tobacco and alcohol cessation centers ([Gil et al., 2010](#)).

Health externalities are similar to religious discourse in making coercive policies palatable to the Russian public. The country's low life expectancy is a concern frequently invoked by authorities. Russian men can expect to live to 64 years of age, while the comparable figure for women is 75 years ([World Bank, 2021](#)). The discrepancy in lifespan is generally attributed to excessive drinking, heavy smoking, and narcotics consumption among men ([Gil et al., 2010](#)). To be a severe drinker, smoker, or drug user cannot only be classified as an individual problem or a negligible externality when it is a cultural threat to the nation's identity and a healthcare hazard for its future. To oppose such measures is to risk the punishment allotted to any dissident in Russia: being labeled a foreign agent and arrested ([Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2022](#)).

Through this messaging, neoprohibitionism has pacified the Russian population on previously controversial subjects such as drinking. Vladimir Putin (a well-known non-drinker) cited the yearly statistic of 40,000 fatal alcoholic poisonings in his 2005 address to the Duma (Russia's Federal Parliamentary Assembly) ([Neufeld et al., 2020](#)). Echoing Semashko's model, campaigns began pushing in 2009 for the ideal Russian lifestyle, featuring workplace and youth-oriented promotional material designed to encourage cessation ([Neufeld et al., 2020](#)). At the same time, 'harmful' advertisements for alcoholic beverages were banned during live broadcasts and sporting



events entirely in 2019, conveniently preventing any competing narrative from taking hold ([Neufeld et al., 2020](#)). Thanks to Putin's new framing and the Kremlin's line, 58% of Russians believed in 2006 that Gorbachev had not gone far enough to stamp out alcohol, a seismic shift from previous attitudes ([Report of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, 2009, p.5](#)). According to a 2016 VTsIOM poll, 78% of Russians are prepared to take limitations further and raise the drinking age to 21 from the current legal age of 18 ([The Moscow Times, 2018](#)).

However, behind the Kremlin spin doctors' invocations of national collective responsibility are the personal interests that define contemporary Russian prohibition. The various factions in the security apparatus (the "siloviki"), oligarchs, youth political organizations, and the Kremlin's bureaucracy are all tied together in a public choice scenario wherein ineffective policies only serve to provide contracts to "private entities" that are owned by the very same political figures around Putin.

Policies against drinking are emblematic of this pattern. Putin's first premiership reversed former premier Viktor Chernomyrdin's privatization plans, creating the state-owned distillery company Rosspirtprom in 2000. The firm's stated purpose is to combat bootleg products, stop the rise in mortality rates attributed to chronic drinking, and provide regulatory guidance for the alcohol market ([Neufeld et al., 2020](#)). In reality, it has proven a vehicle for favoritism, elevating Putin's inner circle to critical positions and helping the agency's head amass a personal fortune. The first head of Rosspirtprom was Arkady Rotenberg, Putin's childhood friend and close confidant, who assumed ownership of over a hundred liquor factories ([Rosalsky, 2022](#)). In a move no different than the Soviet nomenklatura and the Tsar's entourage, he established supply quotas and minimum alcohol pricing, distorting market competition and swelling his personal coffers.

Rosspirtprom became the nation's largest spirits supplier, and Rotenberg became a billionaire virtually overnight ([Rosalsky, 2022](#)).

The use of neoprohibitionist norms stretches beyond such revolving door politics. Citing the dismal state of the nation's health, the Duma changed the Federal Law On State Regulation of the Production and Turnover of Ethyl Alcohol and Alcoholic Products in 2005 ([Neufeld et al., 2020](#)). Among a slew of increased taxes on non-beverage alcohol and counterfeit excise stamps was a novel monitoring tool. The EGAIS (Unified State Automated Information System) is a mandatory surveillance system that officially tracks licensed ethanol producers to eliminate unrecorded beverages in the country ([Neufeld et al., 2020](#)). Unofficially, the system makes ordinary Russians accustomed to high levels of government intrusion (like vast information collection, supervising online social media and offline activity, and location tracking). It is a form of authoritarianism mobilized in the name of their own collective good.

Other so-called national vices do not fare any better. The 2006 Federal Law 244-FZ banned all casino and electronic gambling machines and introduced licensing for bookmakers and totalizator betting in Russia ([Marionneau, 2020, p.123](#)). This measure was followed in 2014 by a blanket prohibition against all private lotteries ([Marionneau, 2020, p.124](#)). In a familiar twist, the government reaped the financial rewards of its gambling policies. Four administrative regions (Kaliningrad Oblast, Primorsky Krai, Altai Republic, and Krasnodar Krai) became the sites of government-controlled establishments. The turnover of state lotteries in 2016 amounted to ₹24.8 billion (approximately ₹16.5 billion, or \$161,610 million in 2023), with the state doubling the price of tickets ([Marionneau, 2020, p.124](#)). Casinos earned the Kremlin ₹404.9 million from casinos (₹271 million, or \$2,65 million in 2023), ₹379.9 million from bookmakers (₹254

million or \$2,48 million in 2023), and ₺24.5 million (₺16,4 million or \$160 700 in 2023) from totalizator betting ([Marionneau, 2020, p.128](#)).

Once cheap, cigarettes are subject to an excise tax of ₺2,552 (\$26.89 in 2023) rubles plus 16% of the estimated cost (based on the highest retail price) per one thousand pieces ([TASS, 2023](#)). Federal Law 15-NZ bans indoor public smoking in bars, restaurants, offices, parks, and near government buildings and playgrounds ([Balmforth, 2014](#)). Stores cannot sell cigarettes. With some artistic exceptions, it is illegal for films and shows to show anyone inhaling tobacco smoke in a regular setting ([Balmforth, 2014](#)). Russia flirted with a total generational ban before New Zealand, the United Kingdom, or the US, proposing in 2017 that every Russian citizen born after 2014 be barred from smoking ([Dyer, 2017](#)).

The consumer response has been one of soft non-compliance, similar to US Prohibition-era scofflaws, with observations generally showing that 27% routinely violate the smoke-free environment law ([Merkin et al., 2021, p.4](#)). Illegal gambling is still a large sector. Illegal bookmaking alone was an industry worth ₺520 billion in 2016 (₺348 billion, or \$3.37 billion in 2023) ([Marionneau, 2020, p.124](#)). However, passive resistance is often met with active shaming and discouragement. Kremlin youth groups like “STOPHAM” are mobilized under the guise of grassroots youth activists to record, disrupt, and humiliate those skirting the public smoking ban, gambling law, and other neoprohibitionist policies ([Balmforth, 2014](#)). Such movements reinforce the legal status quo by creating a false sense of social agreement on these topics and deter citizens from voicing their concerns.

Neoprohibitionism has only intensified after the country's illegal and unjustified invasion of Ukraine. Russians are told to embrace personal deprivation for the sake of victory, just as their grandparents once

did during the Second World War (“The Great Patriotic War”). The specter of ever-higher minimum pricing for strong drinks looms large, with the Ministry of Finance planning to raise minimum prices for vodka from ₺261 (around \$4.4) to ₺281 (\$4.8), citing Western sanctions as the justification to derive more revenue from the populace ([Bickerton, 2022](#)). However, excise taxes on cigarettes are set to rise in 2023 by 2% to 2603 rubles (\$27.42), and authorities are introducing a new 11% levy on vaping liquids and heated tobacco ([TASS, 2023](#)). A complete ban on vaping has been scrapped, but flavored vaping liquids and devices will still be illegal by 2024 ([Goryacheva, 2023](#)). The suggestion for a generational ban was adopted by the Russian Ministry of Health in 2021, with a plan to ban the sale of all tobacco products for people born after 2014 to be put in motion by 2033 ([Merkin et al, 2021](#)). Moreover, a cash-strapped Kremlin is contemplating a minimum retail price on vaping products equal to the minimum cigarette retail price ([Goryacheva, 2023](#)). Russia's future is unrelentingly neoprohibitionist.



# CONCLUSION

One possible objection to our model is that our framework proves overly deterministic. Prohibitionist normative strategies appear self-reinforcing over time, with each successive wave building on the lessons of its predecessors to produce a more constricting outcome with broader public appeal. Consequently, prohibition cultures seem to be expanding as history progresses. American neoprohibitionism builds on the ethical legacy of a progressive administrative apparatus and the health worries of clean living to arrive at the current intricate entanglement between influential private actors, activist organizations, and the federal and state governments under the uncompromising banner of public health. Russian neoprohibitionism combines tsarist religious links, Semashko's bureaucratic practices, and a moral-traditionalist exclusion of political opposition to achieve unprecedented social control. Lenin or Wilson could only dream of today's sophisticated tactics and precise results. One can be forgiven for thinking there can be no viable alternative to neoprohibitionism and no means of building one.

However, our study also points to the real possibility of change. No culture of prohibition, not even one in an authoritarian regime like Russia, is absolute. Any set of norms enjoys only partial social support, must compete with alternative social positions and legacies, and can erode over time. This fact is evident in the historical contradictions of alcohol legislation in Russia, the non-compliance with the Kremlin's recently introduced tobacco restrictions, the worker-driven pushback in late 19th century America, the fading away of religious prohibitionist demands, the resounding victory over alcohol prohibition in the 20th and contemporary discussions and debates.

There is thus room for a counterculture to take root. Proponents can tap into ideas of pluralism, tolerance, the rule of law, consumer choice, personal privacy, and bodily integrity to challenge existing neoprohibitionist framings, unveil corruption and private interests, and restart legitimate political disagreement. This feat is undoubtedly easier to accomplish in a country with an existing culture of enterprise like the US. Nonetheless, it remains an option even in Russia – after all, Russian liberalism still represents a political force despite its suppression. Far from set in stone, neoprohibition may give way to a counterculture of consumer choice.

Future research will be better positioned to offer an in-depth analysis of anti-prohibitionist normative strategies and how far these tactics succeed in popularizing consumer choice based on new case studies.

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