

# Arguing about Prohibition



In 1920, the US government adopted the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, outlawing manufacturing, sale and transport of intoxicating liquors. Many supporters of the constitutional ban, widely known as Prohibition, believed it would be permanent, but a mere 13 years later it became the first amendment ever to be repealed. In the ensuing years, Prohibition was vilified as a failed, unrealistic attempt by religious extremists to impose their values on the public. According to this view, Prohibition foundered because US citizens simply continued to drink as before, as consumption was driven underground. Meanwhile, the legitimate liquor industry was decimated, and illegal alcohol sales became a huge new source of income for organized - crime groups. Today, Prohibition has become a byword for the mistake of attempting to eliminate sin and vice through oppressive legislation, casting a shadow over later discussions of government social initiatives. Advocates of gun control are routinely compared to prohibitionists, and the tobacco industry is said to have befittingly learned from the bad taste that Prohibition left in the public's mouth.

Historians such as Jack S. Blocker Jr. of the University of Western Ontario, however, argue that common perceptions of Prohibition arise from ignorance of historical facts. Blocker holds that Prohibition functioned as a public health initiative in a period before the emergence of modern civic health policies, and he maintains that the Eighteenth Amendment was a rational move that enjoyed widespread support. While admitting that the anti-alcohol movement originated in Protestant churches, he says its proponents came to place a greater emphasis on the medical and social dangers of alcohol consumption. In this, the movement gained backing from physicians and economists worried about the dramatic rise in alcohol consumption in the early 1900s. Moreover, Blocker offers data showing that Prohibition did in fact reduce drinking, and that rates did not return to pre-Prohibition levels until the 1960s.

Author Daniel Okrent offers an alternative view of Prohibition. Okrent says that an “unlikely coalition”, which included anti-immigration activists and advocates of implementing an income tax, was responsible. At a time when millions of immigrants were flooding into the country, native-born white Protestant Americans saw their political power diminishing and sought to weaken the political clout of saloon owners, who had enormous influence over immigrant voters. Fueled by anti-German propaganda during World War I, they also saw breweries, which were largely German-owned, as a menace to society. Prohibition became a stand-in issue that could be used to stem the rising tide of immigrants' political influence. Similarly, income-tax advocates seized on Prohibition as a means for depriving the government of a crucial revenue source. About half the federal government's revenue came from an excise tax on alcohol, and Prohibition would make the implementation of the first US income tax a necessity. Okrent argues that though many people who voted for Prohibition were drinkers themselves, they voted for it as a means to an end that was not what it appeared to be on the surface.

1. If Japan passed a new law like Prohibition, could you stop drinking overnight?