



March Madness, lottery tickets and our government

By John Stossel

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Did you fill out a March Madness bracket this year? In many states, if you put money in a pool, that's illegal! The NCAA website warns, "Fans should enjoy ... filling out a bracket just for the fun of it, not ... the amount of money they could possibly win."

Give me a break. Americans bet more money on March Madness this year than on the Super Bowl.

With gambling, as with so many other activities, government tells us it knows best, and then makes matters worse by banning things.

Politicians can't quite make up their minds about gambling: They approve certain casinos and promote state lotteries but crack down on sports bets and some charity poker games. It seems that government dislikes gambling, unless government gets to be the house.

Increasingly, government is. After locking up bookies for "dangerous and criminal" activities, like running "numbers rackets," most states now offer much worse odds in state lotteries. Then they take money from taxpayers to advertise their scams.

Some states even run commercials that mock hard work, pushing the benefits of a long-shot jackpot. Poor people become poorer, because they buy most of the lottery tickets. Then politicians brag how money from the lottery helps the poor.

It's disgusting hypocrisy.

Politicians award casino permits to politically connected businessmen who make most of their money from slot machines that offer miserable odds. But when "unapproved" websites offered Internet poker, at far better odds, the federal government charged the operators with "money laundering" and shut the sites down.

Recently, three states noticed that people like Internet gambling so much that millions of dollars leave America and go to overseas websites. So New Jersey, Delaware and Nevada begged federal officials for permission to legalize some Internet betting and got it. Now other states may do it, too.

A group called the Coalition to Stop Internet Gambling wants to prevent legalization. It warns: "gambling will be available in every home, every bedroom, every dorm room, on every phone, tablet and computer!"

It's revealing that its ads are funded by casino magnate Sheldon Adelson. He doesn't mind you gambling, obviously. He just wants you to go to casinos, like those he happens to own.

Government, just as hypocritical, invites people to buy lottery tickets while simultaneously stamping out rival forms of gambling and warning us of the damage gambling can do.

And, yes, gambling hurts some people. Some wreck their lives and gamble away their life savings. How many gamblers? That's not clear. Maybe 2 percent, say critics of gambling.

But Patrick Basham of the Cato Institute argues that gambling is often a symptom rather than a cause. "It's very hard to disentangle all the things that are going wrong in that person's life," perhaps depression and other psychological problems.

"The people who get into these problems tend to have difficulties." I love gambling. But on my Fox Business TV show, I gave Basham a hard time for arguing that gambling is "healthy."

Fun, maybe, but I told him I don't think it's healthy.

"You're wrong," he answered. "It's good for our emotional health ... physical health ... It provides social interaction, which has all kinds of physiological benefits. Older people who gamble have less alcoholism, less depression than older people who do not gamble."

I can't vouch for the statistics. You can read his book, "Gambling: A Healthy Bet," and judge for yourself.

What I do know, and hate, is that with gambling, as with so many other activities, government tells us it knows best, and then makes matters worse by banning things. The bans drive betting into the hands of criminals.

Politicians turn small problems into big ones. I wish politicians would notice that their clumsy one-size-fits-all laws can never take into account how 300 million different Americans react to a complex experience like gambling.

The way people gamble will vary, just as the way they drink or play sports varies. Most people are careful; some are reckless. But we don't respond by forbidding drinking or sports.

Individuals' brains, habits and tolerance for risk vary. It makes little sense for government to barge in and tell *people* how much money they can risk, or where they can do it.

John Stossel joined Fox Business Network (FBN) in 2009. He is the host of "Stossel" (Thursdays at 9 PM/ET), a weekly program highlighting current consumer issues with a libertarian viewpoint. Stossel also appears regularly on Fox News Channel (FNC) providing signature analysis.