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Debate over government's role fizzles around soda ban

By [TIM MAK](#) | 6/13/12 7:02 PM EDT

Many Americans are having a hard time swallowing New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's proposed ban on the sale of big sodas – but it's not just about the sugar.

The micro public health policy issue of restricting the sizes of some drinks — and the strong public reaction to it on both sides — has become a touchstone for the polarized and passionate debate over the proper role of government.

"We have very deep divisions in American society, so this [soda policy] reflects that — it's about the role of government in American life, and the public is deeply divided on that," said Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University. "It's clear it taps into very deep emotions, because it got a very emotional reaction."

"I don't think anybody in Kansas cares what they do in New York, but the larger issue [of the role of government] is something they want to fight about," pollster Scott Rasmussen, who has surveyed the soda issue nationally, told POLITICO.

In a [Reuters/Ipsos](#) poll, Americans opposed the proposed limit on the size of sugary drinks, 64 percent to 36 percent.

"The real reason this issue caught on is because this is exactly the dividing line that is splitting people. There are some that just think government has to do these things, and there are others that are saying 'no, this is precisely not the role of government.' It's such a clear example - this is not a convoluted, long health care bill," said Rasmussen, the president of polling firm Rasmussen Reports.

On the other hand, he said, "Among those who support it, there is a belief that government should be in charge of things like health, and this is a prudent measure. I don't think that anyone disputes that large, sugary drinks are good for health. So there's this sense that it's part of the role of government."

Rasmussen's own [national poll](#) on the issue shows similar levels of opposition as those found by Reuters/Ipsos: 65 percent oppose it and 24 percent approve of it.

Bloomberg has proposed a ban on the sale of all sugary drinks over 16 ounces in the city's restaurants, street carts and stadiums. Only grocery stores and convenience stores would be exempt. If approved, it would take effect next year.

On its face, the issue of soda sizes seems rather trivial compared to more pressing political and economic matters, but while the impact of government regulations can often seem abstract, there's no confusion over what Bloomberg's new rule would mean.

“No one can comprehend a \$15 trillion debt, but when you tell someone how big a soda we can buy, that we can get a sense of, and we can feel the restriction on it,” said David Boaz, the executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute. “It’s like, drone attacks in Yemen are one thing — but being groped by the TSA, I can understand that.”

As for New York City itself, a [Quinnipiac poll](#) released Wednesday shows that borough-by-borough breakdowns reflect the broader ideological reactions to the soda policy.

In Manhattan, regarded as the city the most liberal borough, voters support the ban 55 percent to 41 percent, while in Staten Island, the most conservative borough, voters oppose it by a better than 2-1 margin, 65 percent to 32 percent. Citywide, voters narrowly favored the mayor’s plan, 51 percent to 45 percent.

“The people who are against it aren’t against it because it’s bad health [policy] but that it’s over-intrusive government,” argues Mickey Carroll, director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute. “New York is pretty tolerant about stuff like this...(but) even in New York, there’s a lot of resistance.”

Experts said the sizable opposition to the ban both nationally and in New York City should be seen not as a negative assessment of Bloomberg’s public health policy itself, but rather an annoyance with being dictated to by what is seen as an over-intrusive government.

“The initial public reaction reactions to these kinds of things, where you’re being what to do, tend to be somewhat negative, whether it is about seatbelts or health mandates,” notes Karlyn Bowman, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who specializes in polling. “They’re reacting to it as a command from on high, even though they understand what the health benefits are.”

New York City political consultant Joe Mercurio said, “You have a mayor in a large city again doing government control over people’s behavior,” adding the for some the mayor has become a “symbol of big government squashing freedom.”