

# How small bars resist smoking bans in the Netherlands

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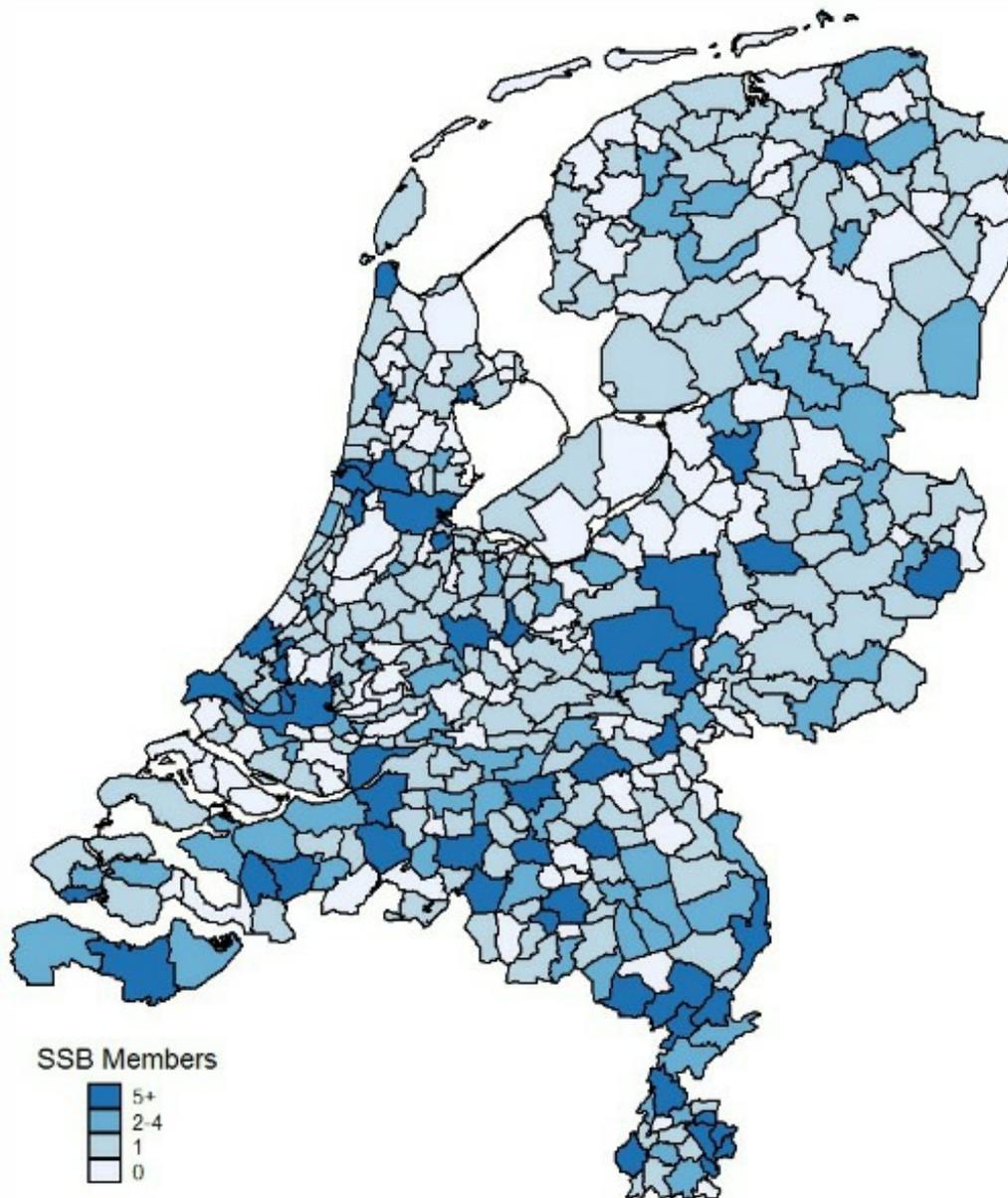


We all know that smoking is bad for you. Yet, smoking regulation remains contentious on the basis of endangering individual rights, their discriminatory potential, and, notably, due to economic considerations. Smoking bans are part of a larger agenda of tobacco control focusing on health issues and involving, on one side, various activist groups whose interests are often aligned with those of the state as a powerful ally, and on the opposing side the tobacco firms as well as various organizations such as bars. This ongoing contention results in smoking bans being difficult to implement. In our study we focus on the resistance to smoking bans by small bars in the Netherlands. We investigate how small bars engaged the state in a David-versus-Goliath scenario, in order to overturn the smoking ban and avert the economic hardship they expected to incur resulting from it.

As mentioned, fiercely opposing the new smoking regulations were small bar owners who joined the lead resistance association: the ‘Save the Small Bars’ (SSB) Foundation. However, the campaign against the smoking ban was not only framed in economic terms focusing on the economic hardships, but significantly it also centred on the bans conceivably undermining the bars’ ‘community function’: “A small bar in Holland has a social function and what you are doing is that you rip that out of the society through this stupid law” (co-founder of SSB). The bars’ social function in their communities is further illustrated by a patron stating that “I come here for the *gezelligheid* (literally, sociability and conviviality). If all smokers go outside I will be here all by myself. I have asked the bar owner if my friends could please smoke again.”

Clearly, bars play an important role in defining the identities of groups, communities and societies, and in defining the relationship between individuals and the wider social context. And as such, bars perform an important social function in local communities. However, it can be expected that communities differ and, resulting from that, in some regions in the Netherlands resistance was much fiercer compared to other regions (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Save the Small Bars Foundation’s membership by region**



Taking into account the characteristics of communities, specifically their social cohesion, we focused on the struggle between the state and small businesses. We found strong support for the prediction that the communities' social cohesion (as expressed in their residential stability and in the sense of identification of residents with the collective) matter and influence local organizations' actions above and beyond a multitude of other factors. It can thus be concluded that the level of resistance from small powerless organizations is determined by that, i.e., the community's overall social endowment as well as its specific local economic features, which we control for.

In our case, local communities could facilitate, support and even stimulate the resistance of small bar owners against a powerful actor. We showed that community cohesion is a multidimensional construct that consists of the residential stability fostering a latent relational infrastructure in the community, and kinship, which generates a sense of belonging and care for the community. Further, a highly cohesive community has boundaries that are less open or receptive to external information, ideas, and values, and we show that in such cases the effect of resistance in neighbouring communities is weaker. It is important to note that we distinguished between the 'physical permeability' of a community boundary, which means that the likelihood of ideas to be 'physically carried in' is reduced due to lesser movement of residents across shared boundaries, and the 'cognitive permeability' of a community boundary, which refers to the strong sense of belonging to a particular community and the accompanying normative framework that limits the utilization of ideas, norms and values from beyond the community's boundary.

The bars' successful action reveals a case in which the state was unsuccessful in imposing regulations on small business organizations due to strong community forces. Our case is especially noteworthy given that the organizations in question are not giant businesses with very deep pockets and throngs of lobbyists. The organizations considered are small bars, owner-run establishments. As described above, they were able to challenge the regulations and prevailed (see also Table 1). It is indeed the interrelation among the bars and their cohesive, supportive community that provides the foundation for these powerless organizations to resist state regulations.

With the enforcement of strong governmental pressures that are seen as harmful to members of a community (the small bars), the social cohesion of a community might be even further increased and offers relatively powerless actors strong arms to oppose a regulatory force. This outcome provides additional support to the idea that the social context matters and when an organization, however small, serves an important social function in its community and joins forces with other, similar, organizations in its immediate environment, it may have the ability to exert power and influence above and beyond its net economic contribution and/or value even in the face of strong institutional pressures.

**Table 1. Bar owners' responses**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Motivation/actions</b>	<b>Representative quotes</b>
Resistance	Economic reasons	I was able to comply for a month or three. My turnover went down 25 per cent. If my customers ask me, they are allowed to smoke. You have to do something, otherwise they will stay away.
	Atmosphere in the bar	I personally think that a smoking ban for a restaurant is good, that it will benefit the flavour of the food. But the atmosphere has really changed. You are having a nice conversation and when someone wants to smoke he or she has to go outside. Sometimes you will be alone just waiting for your partner.
	Principal issue	If it is not allowed to smoke in my joint, I quit. If you kill someone in the Netherlands, you get less punishment than a bar owner leaving ashtrays in his bar. I risk 18.000 Euros of fines. Why? To protect people from smoke. But I refuse to comply. I prefer to close the doors.
Compliance	Mimetic behavior	It does not really affect me. It would be different if the bars in my direct environment would have ashtrays back on the table. Then your customers are gone. It is as simple as that. But we have an agreement: no ashtrays.
	Fear of fines	Yes, I am one of the few bars in [municipality] where the ashtray is not back on the table. Some of my customers are laughing at me. They say that I am an idiot because other bars do allow smoking. But within a day or ten I expect the first serious fines. The pressure from politics to enforce the law will be high. So that will happen.

Response	Motivation/actions	Representative quotes
	Community solidarity	I am optimistic about the future of the village bar. Many regular patrons have said: I will be coming. This village is very solidary; people will not miss out on their beer. And another advantage: I do not have to clean dirty ashtrays again.
Resistance Tactics	Symbolic actions	We got a lot of nice reactions on the tipi. Friday a lot of police officers were in it, and people who went to church were also enthusiastic. But it is obviously ridiculous that you ask your guests to smoke in a tipi. We would have liked to smoke the peace pipe with the Minister though.
	Monetary actions	We ask smokers for a voluntary contribution for paying the fines.  We have a smoking pot, where regular customers donate money to pay for the first fine of 300 Euro.
	Actions against inspections	We agreed that we would call each other when the inspector visits us.  The action committee is about to publish pictures of inspectors on the internet. "It is not our intention to publicly disgrace these people, but we should know who is coming in our bars".



Notes:

- This article is based on the authors' paper [There's No Beer Without a Smoke: Community Cohesion and Neighboring Communities' Effects on Organizational Resistance to Antismoking Regulations in the Dutch Hospitality Industry](#), in *Academy of Management Journal* (2016), Vol. 59, No. 2, 545–578
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