

"You're Not the Boss of Me" Reading

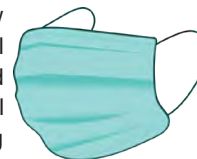
"You're Not the Boss of Me!" - Individual Rights Versus Public Health & Safety

The government is often faced with the disparate tasks of protecting public health while also protecting individual rights. For example, by 1974, all new automobiles were manufactured with integrated seatbelts, but by 1982 only around 11% of drivers and front seat passengers were using them. By 1996, many states had mandatory seat belt use laws and usage increased to around 50%. By 2009, usage was up to 88% and was higher in states with strong seat belt laws (and lower in states with weaker laws), which illustrates the power and effectiveness of law as a means to shape behavior in society.



While we may not think of seat belt laws as controversial, they were at the time. There was public backlash against them and many people feared they would actually be less safe wearing a seatbelt because it might "trap" them in their car in the event of a crash. This was not the case and studies have repeatedly shown that seat belt usage saves lives and also saves the taxpayers millions of dollars in costs from motor vehicle crashes each year.

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided a real-time case study in how governments navigate the balancing act between public health and individual rights and it has highlighted the legal authority to act at the local, state, and federal level. For example, the federal government restricted international travel. The state government mandated the wearing of masks and the closing of certain businesses, and then allowed the reopening of businesses at differing capacities. Some local governments instituted a curfew or declared emergency orders. Agencies at each level of government were also rapidly responding to the pandemic and getting guidance from one another in their respective areas of expertise.



Many other issues have sparked discussion of how best to weigh individual liberties against public health concerns. Can you think of other aspects of your daily world where these may come into play? Consider the following:

- What other issues, past or present, can you think of that require(d) laws, regulations, or guidelines in order to address public behavior?
- How might these issues sit at an intersection of public health and individual freedoms?
- In your opinion, what do you think is the most effective way to alter dangerous behavior? Would you strengthen laws or penalties? Weaken laws or penalties? Appeal to the public for voluntary compliance? Why?
- While there are no easy answers to these questions, it's important to consider that the local, state, and federal governments each have different considerations and constituents to think about. Which levels of government do you feel are best equipped to handle the issues above?

"You're Not the Boss of Me" Socratic Seminar



Instructions: In small groups, discuss the topics below. Remember to use each other's names as you consider opposing viewpoints. Throughout your discussion, remain supportive, inclusive, and professional.



1. In 2021, a 1.5 trillion dollar federal infrastructure bill was introduced to upgrade and repair America's roads, bridges, and other various infrastructure elements. Farm groups expressed excitement about how the bill would meet rural infrastructure needs, but also voiced concern that some portions of the bill could hurt rural America.

- a. What might be the benefit of such a bill? What might be some drawbacks?
- b. What department(s) in the Executive Branch might want a say on how this bill is implemented? Why?
- c. In discussing the pros and cons, would you support such legislation? Why or why not?
- d. What are some rules and regulations that might be put in place to support the integrity of the bill? What department, or agency, might hold the oversight for these entities?

2. During the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer cars were on the road; however, this did not translate to safer driving. In fact, Texas saw a 6% increase of car crash fatalities in the first three months of the pandemic in 2020.



- a. Why? What would cause this increase? (THOUGHT: There could be multiple factors at play causing this rise - think of how those factors might compound the situation)
- b. If one of the roles of government is to keep its people safe, how could the state of Texas have avoided this statistic?
- c. In moving forward, what can you do as a citizen to help lower crash fatalities?
- d. Is there a bureaucratic department that could have stepped in to help with this issue? If so, which one(s)?



3. According to the CDC, the use of seatbelts substantially reduces car crash fatalities and various additional costs associated with motor vehicle collisions. In fact, Texas was one of the first states to pass mandatory seatbelt laws in 1985. Conduct an internet search to better answer the questions offered for consideration below:

- a. What is the CDC and what is their objective?
- b. Who is the current head of the CDC?
- c. Are they a department of the US Government? Or an Independent Agency?
- d. After a quick Google search on the CDC, what additional details did you discover?

4. The invention of self-driving autonomous cars is causing a disruption to the transportation market and forcing Americans to debate the pros and cons of these vehicles' existence.



- a. What might be some of those pros and cons?
- b. If you were a concerned citizen with a strong desire to address this issue, what government agency might you contact? Why?
- c. What US Senate, or House Committee might you contact to voice your concern? Why that one? (NOTE: There are certainly more than one committee that might hold a strong interest in your opinion on the matter - be sure to clearly explain why you picked the committee you picked.)
- d. What kind of regulations may be necessary in the future?



5. Many states, (but not Texas) have legalized or decriminalized marijuana for individuals 21 and over. This has had significant impact on the day-to-day practices of law enforcement and prosecutors in those states.

- a. Do you think marijuana should be a federal, state, or local issue? Why?
- b. In states that have legalized marijuana, what policies or laws do you think are still necessary to protect public safety? Should they mirror policies related to alcohol (which is legal for those 21 and over)?
- c. Regardless of whether a state has legalized marijuana or not, should local law enforcement agencies from different jurisdictions in a state collaborate to form uniform policies for handling marijuana cases? Why or why not?



Resources for future exploration:

1. **How the \$1.5 trillion infrastructure bill would impact rural America:**
https://www.capitalpress.com/ag_sectors/rurallife/how-the-1-5-trillion-infrastructure-bill-would-impact-rural-america/article_e6ace322-b6fa-11ea-936c-df62cc567f61.html
2. **Fatal car accidents spike in Texas during COVID -19:**
https://www.capitalpress.com/ag_sectors/rurallife/how-the-1-5-trillion-infrastructure-bill-would-impact-rural-america/article_e6ace322-b6fa-11ea-936c-df62cc567f61.html
3. **Article from the CDC regarding seat belt laws. Uploaded in 1998:**
<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00000596.htm#:~:text=Two%20states%20>
4. **Autonomous driving vehicles:**
<https://www.ncsl.org/research/transportation/autonomous-vehicles-legislative-database.aspx>
5. **Marijuana derivative:**
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/27/health/marijuana-hemp-delta-8-thc.html?auth=link-dismiss-google1tap>

