



Past and Present Social and Legal Measures to Control Beer and Alcohol Use in Iceland

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Content of Talk

- Why - reasoning behind the ban of beer 1915-1989
- Social support for ban?
- Abolition of ban – after legalization of beer
- Situation today
- What about youth and young people?

- Questions – Comments from you..





Historical Background

- In 1935 all alcoholic beverages except for beer were allowed in Iceland after 20 years of prohibition. A national referendum voted to end prohibition in 1933 but only by a very close majority.
- The ban on beer lasted until 1989 when the ban of beer was finally lifted.
- Between 1935 and 1988 more than twenty unsuccessful attempts were made in Parliament to repeal the beer ban 'till finally legalized.
- Why leave out beer and allow all other alcoholic beverages?





Historical Background

- A political compromise between opposing sides in Parliament decided to leave out beer – a body very much against alcohol consumption in general.
- And then – beer is of a different nature than other alcoholic beverages.. Devil in disguise?
- Is it?





Arguments Against Beer in Parliament

“The youth starts to drink beer and gets acquainted with the influence of alcohol. This develops step by step, the influence of beer becomes not enough, one wants to enjoy the influence of alcohol immediately which leads to drinking strong liquor” (1934).





Arguments Against Beer

- “Few days ago I witnessed a 13-year old school boy saying that kids his age really needed this beer to get up in the morning to go to school...”
- This boy also believed it to be handy for the homes, because then they did not have to bother about preparing coffee or tea, just grab the beer from the kitchen shelves”. (1960)





Arguments Against Beer in Parliament

“The experience of beer in Scandinavia is frightening, especially the increasing consumption among youth and women....

..Is the MP proposing allowance of beer unaware of that all factories and dock yards in the UK have to lock up their workers during working hours and especially take care to not letting anyone out until the pubs are closed” (1960)





Arguments Against Beer in Parliament

- „that allowance of beer would inevitably add to the overall consumption of alcohol in society and usage of alcohol would start at an increasingly lower age“ (1977).





Pro-Beer Arguments

- „When people get used to beer drinking they do not get drunk from beer (sic!)...MP's must realize what kind of nonsense they are about to pass and change their mind“.
(1934)
- ...Beer brewing and export of beer beneficial to the economy..(1934)
- ...“beer brewing has contributed to moderation and less consumption of hard liquor.“ (1947).





Pro-Beer Arguments

- “Beer is relatively harmless. Beer has a very different influence on people compared to strong liquor.....
-Liquor is stimulating...people become all crazed and stupified”. (1965)





Pro-Beer Arguments

- “..the beer ban in Iceland is an insult to the Icelandic people’s sense of liberty and civilization” (1960)
- “It sounds awfully strange to ban the sale of the weakest substance of all alcoholic drinks, allowing sales of hard liquor. It sounds similar to a ban of aspirin and allowance of morphine” (1984)





Who in Favor of Ban?

- The MP's most in favor of supporting prohibition of beer came from the rural areas – and those in opposition tended to represent urban areas; and since the electoral system has for a long time favored rural areas it helped to maintain the ban well into the latter part of the 20th century..
- In addition, representatives of working class parties also tended to favor the ban; thus a coalition between rural areas and the working class parties made up the back bone of the prohibition law..





Who Against Beer Ban?

- MP's from urban areas most notably the Reykjavik capital area, and MP's from right wing political parties and market oriented political sentiments –
- Political fault lines however never clear cut





Icelandic Public and Beer Ban

- Among the Icelandic public the majority of the older generation supported ban of beer until the very last day of beer prohibition - and the majority of women
- The younger generation in favor of allowing beer, urban residents and males – a clear generation and residence gap was detected in Icelandic society





Impact of Beer Legalization

- What happened after beer was legalized in Iceland?
- What about total alcohol consumption in society?
- What about liquor consumption?
- Moderation in drinking? Binge drinking?
- Did alcohol use among youth increase?
- Did alcohol use in work places increase?





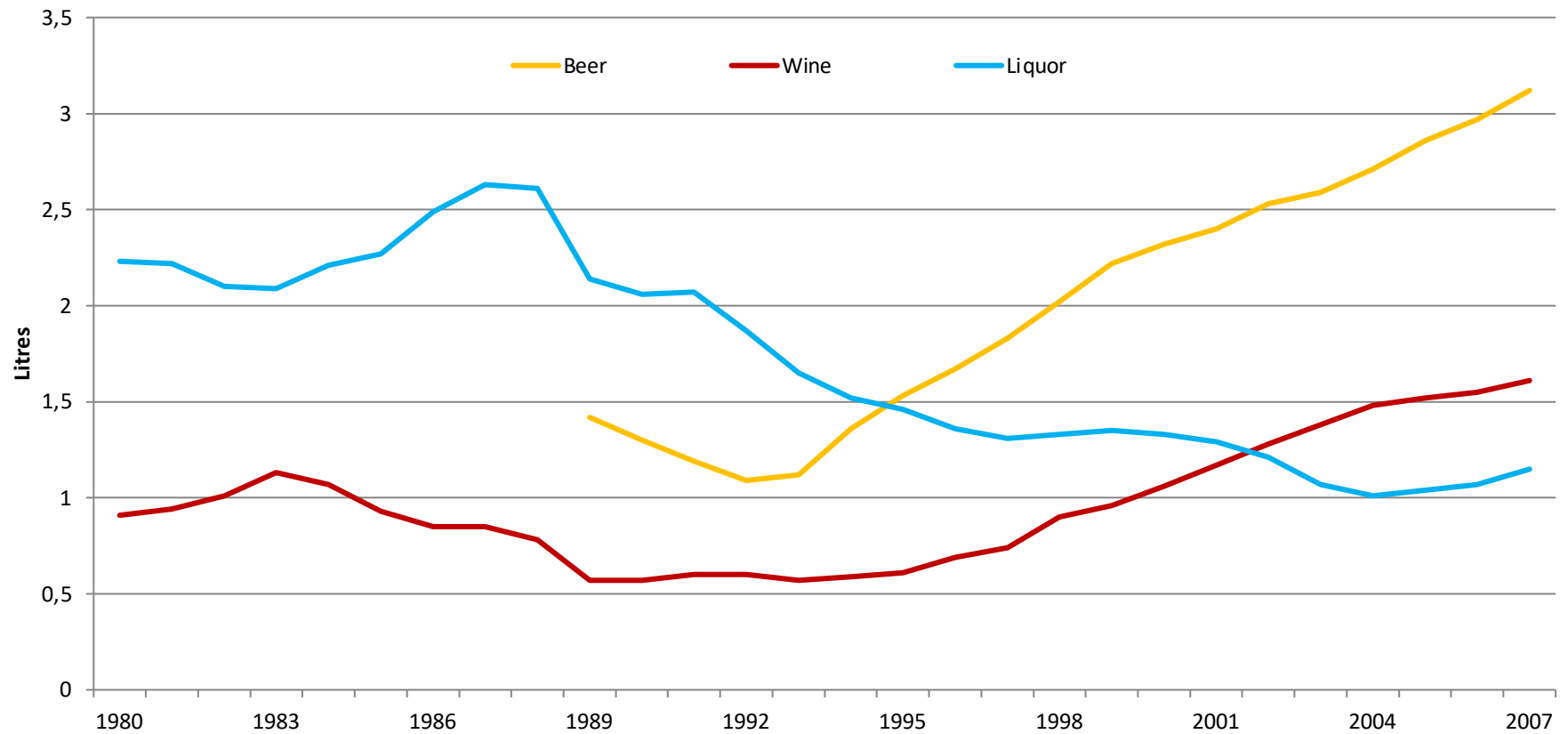
Total Alcohol Consumption

- Total alcohol consumption was 3,5 litres per capita in Iceland in **1990** – 15 yr+
- Had increased to 7,4 litres in **2021**
- Total alcohol consumption in **Denmark** was 10,4 litres per capita in **2021**, 15 yr +





Alcohol Consumption in Iceland 1980-2007





Impact of Beer Legalization

- The increase of total alcohol use comes only from beer and wines; consumption of hard liquor has gone down over time and levelled off in 2005.
- Consumption of wines has increased to a similar degree as beer in most recent years





What about youth?

- Impact on youth drinking behavior is a sensitive topic in society;
- Number of 15-16 year olds who use alcohol consistently went down in the 21st century
- Less heavy drinking among the young (ESPAD).





Tenth Graders and Alcohol in Iceland

- Very often consumed alcohol 14% in 1995,
- Down to 2% in 2022

- Very intoxicated ever 55% in 1995
- Down to 12% in 2022





Why? The Icelandic Prevention Model

- Joint effort of parents, schools, local governments, sports clubs to take alcohol out among students.
- Organized leisure time activities, increased normative pressure - curfew hours and encouragement of joint family dinners without alcohol
- Plays a central role in reducing alcohol and drug consumption among young students





General Increase of Alcohol Use in Iceland: Many liberal policy changes not only beer..

- Number of bars manifolded – only a total of 37 in 1980, more than a thousand bars today
- Alcoholic beverages can be purchased in most restaurants
- Number of alcohol stores (state run and owned) only a total of seven in 1962, 24 in 1994 and more than 50 today, opening hours much longer, open Saturdays till 6pm
- More access to alcohol....more consumption ...doubled since 1990.
- Is it bad?





Societal Change – Impact of Beer Legalization

- Opening of society, globalization, private radio and tv in the 1980's, more liberalized alcohol policies, allowance of beer only one part of the changes, different drinking patterns with less strong liquor and more wines and beer, heavy drinking less frequent, more people treated for substance abuse problems, yet difficult to determine if alcoholism has increased.
- We do not have more alcohol consumption in work places nor during working hours as opponents of beer feared.





Icelandic Lessons to be Learned?

- Relatively strict alcohol policy – age permission to buy alcohol is 20 yrs – alcohol prices high – alcoholic beverages not sold in grocery stores – all alcohol ads banned - helps keep consumption down – Icelandic experience
- If access to alcoholic beverages is easy and free, prices low, you will have more total alcohol consumption
- Yet ban of beer too extreme....still not for kids!
- Remember – beer is alcohol!! Handle with care..

