

## Poll: Most Texans favor ban on texting while driving



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Published: 30 April 2014 11:15 PM

Updated: 30 April 2014 11:36 PM

Texas remains one of a handful of states that do not outlaw texting while driving, but new polling shows drivers are warming up to the idea.

Six out of 10 drivers surveyed by the Texas A&M Transportation Institute favored a texting ban. And a slight majority supported prohibiting phone calls without a hands-free device, according to the poll released last week.

It's the latest look at the public's view on using phones behind the wheel, a contentious issue that has divided the candidates for governor.

Republican Greg Abbott, the attorney general, opposes a statewide ban. His Democratic rival, Fort Worth state Sen. Wendy Davis, was the co-author of an anti-texting and driving bill that faltered in the Legislature last year.

In the poll, an overwhelming majority of Texans say distracted driving is a serious problem that needs more attention, but nearly half believe that laws against it are too difficult to enforce.

And in many instances, that's because those who know it's risky behavior won't stop.

Three-quarters of those surveyed say they've taken calls from behind the wheel, and more than 40 percent admitted texting while driving in the past month.

Researchers found that those with more education were more frequently texting or calling while driving.

As part of April's National Distracted Driving Awareness Month, the Texas Department of Transportation launched public awareness efforts to educate drivers.

But texting ban supporters say that such campaigns can only go so far.

"Education and awareness will reach a certain percentage of people," said Jennifer Smith, executive director of the advocacy group StopDistractions.org. "Then you are going to hit a tipping point, and you do need strict laws with the enforcement to back them up."

Smith said that while she was a real estate agent living in Grapevine, she often texted while driving. But when her mother was hit and killed by a 20-year-old driver talking on his phone in 2008, she channeled her grief into advocacy.

Although she now lives in Illinois, Smith's group still lobbies Texas to pass a distracted driving law. All but seven states have banned text messaging while driving.

Texas prohibits hand-held use of cellphones in school zones and forbids drivers up to age 18 to use cellphones while driving.

"We are really up against something that we've never seen before because everyone is using this technology all the time," she said.

Distracted driving crashes killed 453 Texans in 2012, slightly less than one-seventh of the distracted driving deaths nationwide that year. It's unclear how many accidents involve cellphone use, in part because the National Safety Council says cellphones are underreported in accident reports.

The study was based on interviews with 3,000 Texans waiting to receive driver's licenses in 12 cities, including Dallas and Fort Worth. It also organized small focus groups in Austin, College Station and Dallas to examine the issue in greater detail.

Younger drivers seem to be the worst offenders.

The study found that they were more likely to text, read messages or talk on their cellphones while driving and less likely to view those actions as dangerous.

Bill Wade, national program manager for the Tire Rack Street Survival teen driver education program, said young drivers used to almost constant access to their phones don't recognize the consequences.

"We are right now where we were with drunk driving 30 to 40 years ago," he said. "We are just starting to figure out that this is a pretty dumb thing to be doing."

The program heads to Fort Worth's Texas Motor Speedway on Saturday to teach teens safe driving skills.

It's largely considered a given that texting while driving is hazardous — it takes your eyes off the road and makes an accident significantly more likely. But researchers are still calculating the effects of statewide bans.

More than 20 Texas cities — including Austin, Arlington and San Antonio — ban texting while driving. El Paso and Corpus Christi only allow phones with hands-free devices to be used while driving.

The Legislature passed a statewide ban on texting in 2011, but Gov. Rick Perry vetoed the bill. A similar proposal passed the House in 2013 but did not come up for a vote in the Senate.

Rep. Tom Craddick, the Midland Republican and former House speaker who authored both bills, disputed Perry's complaint that such a ban was micromanaging behavior.

Craddick said the state should be more concerned about potential victims of distracted drivers.

"It's my right as an adult in Texas to get in my car and know that I have safe highways to drive on," he said.

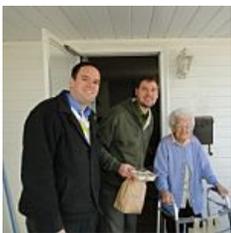
For now, according to the A&M study, Texans don't seem likely to break their habit.

More said they talked on a cellphone within the past month than exceeded the speed limit while driving, and more said they texted on their phones than ran a stop sign.

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