

Table gaming continues to be the hot topic here in West Virginia, even before Kanawha County's razor thin outcome on the matter in the recent election. Opponents of the measure cited everything from inability of table gaming to provide a stimulus to our stagnant economy to increased crime around casinos. Even issues of morality came into play.

Let's take a look at these issues.

Entrepreneurs are looking for the best return on their investments. If table gaming provides the best return on investment, then capital will flow into casinos and the highest possible returns will be realized—not only at the benefit of those owning the casinos, but those who are employed there and those who serve those who are employed there. Economic growth helps everyone—from the employee getting a raise to her favorite restaurant getting a more frequent customer, to the chef's son getting more toys.

If table gaming did not provide the best option for investment, then money would not flow there. When casinos, or any potential activity, are not the best possible investment, money will move to where a higher return can be earned.

Thus, banning table games is, in economic terms, either a harmful decision (in the sense that it prevents investment on the activity with the highest possible return) or a neutral one (in the sense that it reinforces the outcome of casinos not being the highest valued investment). If economic growth is the goal in this state, we would be wise not to outlaw *any* voluntary economic activity, as you will always observe the same harmful/neutral policy result.

It should not be overlooked that activities which will provide the highest return are a reflection of preferences within the state. If table gaming provides the highest return on investment, it comes out of the reality that table gaming is valued and demanded. Table gaming cannot be forced onto an unwilling society; it is the existing consumer preference for table games that drives entrepreneurs to build casinos, just as it is the demand for burgers that results in more Burger Kings. The reverse does not hold. This is the underlying beauty of the market process—success is born in providing people with what they want.

The assertion that casinos increase crime in surrounding areas is questionable at best. Depending on the study, the effects of casinos on crime span from harmless to harmful. A casual look at crime information should show some increase in crime around casinos—not because of any sort of unique “gambling effect” on mischief, but simply because there are more people gathering in those areas than elsewhere. Opening a mall would show the same effect. The difficulty in conclusively judging table gaming with respect to crime comes from isolating the “more-people effect” from the potential “gambling effect.” If a true effect of gambling on crime actually exists—and there's reason to believe either way—it has not yet been clearly fleshed out in the data.

One's moral stance on gambling is certainly a personal issue, and it is not my place to determine anyone's morality but my own. However, it is also not anyone's place, on behalf of their morality, to prevent the voluntary association of two parties. While it is completely within the bounds of reason to personally oppose gambling, and to act accordingly, preventing a willing casino and a willing gambler from engaging in a voluntary transaction violates the liberty granted to Americans by the Constitution.

Many moral opponents of gambling feel that they are doing a service to society by making gambling illegal, and their desire to make society a better place certainly should be commended. However, the simple act of making an activity illegal does not prevent it from occurring (if it were only so easy!). I witnessed a number of wonderful fireworks displays in my cousin's neighborhood this past 4th of July, despite the fact that fireworks are illegal there. The War on Drugs is a burden *because* the simple act of making an activity illegal does not prevent it from happening. And how many times have you driven just a bit above the posted speed limit in the last month? I'm not justifying any of these activities—but there exists a very real difference between what is forbidden in law and what occurs in society.

In closing, banning table games in West Virginia will likely harm the state's economy, likely have a negligible effect on crime and will not stop anyone from gambling. In a state that could use any sort of economic boost it could find, banning tables games might not be the wisest decision.