



- ▶ [Home Page](#)
- ▶ [Local News](#)
- ▶ [Sports](#)
- ▶ [Features](#)
- ▶ [Obituaries](#)
- ▶ [Business](#)
- ▶ [Editorial](#)
- ▶ [About Us](#)
- ▶ [Classifieds](#)
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- ▶ [Stocks](#)
- ▶ [Amusement](#)
- ▶ [Town Hall](#)

## Drinking game: Bill to prohibit online sales of wine is about profits, not kids

A classic battle is shaping up in Michigan, with wine distributors and retailers lining up against in-state wineries in a fight that will play out in the corridors of power in Lansing.

It's not difficult to decide who to root for in this drama, as it is a classic test of the little guy (wineries) going up against the establishment, which for decades has enjoyed a choke-hold on beer, wine and liquor sales in Michigan.

The fight is on because of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling last month striking down laws in Michigan and elsewhere that allowed wineries to make direct shipments of wine to in-state customers, but barred out-of-state shipments. The high court ruled that states either have to allow all direct shipments, or pass laws prohibiting such sales practices.

Now here comes a big, well-funded push by the Coalition for a Safe and Responsible Michigan, which calls itself a "grassroots" group opposed to potentially opening up wines sales to underage drinkers. But this doesn't pass the laugh test. The group's own Web site acknowledges that it is supported by the Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association (the same group that commissioned a survey on the issue) and other groups with a financial stake in this fight.

The coalition claims it is motivated by a strong desire to prevent kids from getting their hands on alcohol via the Internet. We don't want to dismiss the problem of underage drinking in Michigan, but online sales of alcohol to minors is hardly a blip on the radar when college towns are teeming with underage drinkers who have no problem finding other ways to get ahold of beer, wine and liquor. And underage drinking among high schoolers has long been a problem, long before little Johnny could ever have envisioned using his Visa or Mastercard to order up a bottle of chardonnay from a winery half way across the state - as unlikely as that sounds.

No, despite what the coalition claims, this fight is not about protecting kids, it's about distributors and retailers wanting to protect their profits. If wineries can market directly to customers, it potentially cuts out the middleman and promotes competition in a free marketplace.

This isn't to say that we think the state should abandon post-Prohibition reforms that lay out the state's regulatory role in controlling alcohol sales. But the state can still do that by issuing liquor licenses and aggressively punishing those caught selling to underage drinkers.

We support efforts by state Rep. John Proos, R-St. Joseph, and other lawmakers to thwart protectionist bills on the issue, such as the proposal that passed this week out of a House committee that would prohibit all direct shipments of alcohol

products.

Proos and other lawmakers on this side of the issue may have an uphill battle, as the liquor lobby has a reputation for throwing its weight - in other words its money - around to great effect in Lansing.

Here's lifting a glass in hopes that the little guy in this fight gets a fair shake.

(An opinion of The Herald-Palladium editorial board)

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