



Gas Station Socialism Rules in New Jersey



“THE MORE REGULATIONS IN PLACE, THE HARDER IT WOULD BE FOR START-UPS TO COMPETE. NEW JERSEY’S GAS LAWS ARE A PARADIGMATIC EXAMPLE,” WRITES MAX RASKIN. (WILLIAM GOTTLIEB/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Republicans and Democrats alike disguise labor regulations and entrenched interests as cultural heritage —and everyone pays for it.

By Max Raskin

10.27.25 —U.S. Politics

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In New Jersey's tight and fierce governor's race, the Republican and Democrat seem to agree on one thing only: You shouldn't be trusted with a gas pump. This bipartisan consensus over a Garden State quirk says more about the state—and the country—than first appears. New Jersey is the only state left in America where it is illegal to [pump your own gas](#), a relic defended as tradition but born of protectionism. It's not so much a local curiosity as it is a window into our national malaise—how we learned to live with inefficiency and stifle innovation, and call it consensus.

Until the 1973–74 [oil embargo](#), full-service stations were the standard everywhere in America. Attendants would not just fill your tank, but would wash your windshield and check your oil. While the trend of allowing self-service began with legal challenges in the 1960s, major reforms occurred on the state level as Americans became more price-sensitive during the embargo. Only New Jersey has refused to adapt, disguising labor regulations and entrenched interests as cultural heritage.

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The same tale can be told about many pieces of [Progressive Era](#) economic legislation. The standard story we are taught in high school is that do-gooder progressives stood up for the little guy against rapacious Big Business, and helped pass enlightened laws like the [Pure Food and Drug Act](#) establishing the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The historian Gabriel Kolko, in his 1963 book *The Triumph of Conservatism*, turned this picture on its head by detailing how these laws were actually a result of big businesses lobbying to prevent competition. The more regulations in place, the harder it would be for start-ups to compete. New Jersey's gas laws are a paradigmatic example.

In 1949, New Jersey passed its Retail Gasoline Dispensing Safety Act under the pretext of preventing fire hazards. The actual reasons were predictably corrupt. A maverick entrepreneur named Irving Reingold opened a gas station on Route 17 in Hackensack that charged 13 percent less than his colluding competitors, who had set the price at around 22 cents a gallon. When shooting up the station didn't work—[Reingold installed bulletproof glass](#)—the cartel turned to progressives in Trenton to help solve their problem.

The law's defenders frame the issue as allowing New Jerseyans to enjoy the option of self-service. But no one is proposing to make full-service illegal.

The result was a law that mandated economic inefficiency. By mandating extra labor for a service, the state increased gas prices for every driver more than they would otherwise have been. By allowing self-service, New Jersey drivers could see their prices fall from 7 to 23 cents a gallon, the New Jersey Gasoline-Convenience-Automotive Association found [in a survey](#). The purported rationale for the bill—preventing fire hazards—is a farce when you consider that New Jersey is now the only state in the country with such a regulation, and that Oregon did not see its gas stations destroyed in a carnage of fireballs after [changing its law](#) in 2023.

The law's defenders frame the issue as allowing New Jerseyans to enjoy the option of self-service. But no one is proposing to make full-service illegal. Repealing the law simply would give consumers the option to choose whether the extra money in their pockets is worth pumping their own gas (even in cold weather). The law's defenders note that New Jersey has lower gas prices than its neighbors. True, but they would be even lower if self-service were legal.

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The costs are not just economic. I am from New Jersey. I didn't pump my own gas until after college. This was a small humiliation that everyone who leaves our state experiences. Even David Chase, the creator of *The Sopranos*, had the good sense to depict his mafiosos [pumping their own gas](#) in the show. Though factually inaccurate, it is simply unfathomable that a mafia capo would accept such infantilization.

In 1961, William F. Buckley famously [criticized libertarians](#) as not a serious political movement because they were "pursu[ing] their busy little seminars on whether or not to demunicipalize the garbage collectors." But he was wrong. These small issues are important because underlying them are the principles that lead to our bigger problems. The thought of a 1940s cartel shooting up a competitor is not just a historical curio. It is a present-day phenomenon that simply exists on a more sophisticated and profitable scale. From the Federal Reserve to the FDA, our national government is plagued with regulatory relics whose occasional benefits are constantly touted, but whose diffuse costs are enormous but unseen. Until New Jersey politicians are willing to tackle the small but egregious injustices, we'll keep paying for bigger ones.



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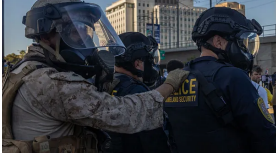
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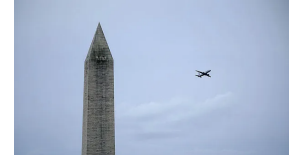


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