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Support for marijuana legalization in the US state of Washington has continued to increase through 2016



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ABSTRACT

Background: Support for the legalization of recreational marijuana continues to increase across the United States and globally. In 2016, recreational marijuana was legalized in the most populous US state of California, as well as three other states. The primary aim of this study was to examine trends in support for recreational marijuana legalization in Washington, a state which has had legal recreational marijuana for almost four years, using data collected over the four years post-legalization. A secondary aim was to examine trends in support for the cultivation of marijuana for personal use.

Methods: Data come from geographically representative general population samples of adult (aged 18 and over) Washington residents collected over five timepoints (every six months) between January 2014 and April 2016 (N = 4101). Random Digit Dial was used for recruitment. Statistical analyses involved bivariate comparisons of proportions across timepoints and subgroups (defined by age, gender, and marijuana user status), and multivariable logistic regression controlling for timepoint (time) to formally test for trend while controlling for demographic and substance use covariates. All analyses adjusted for probability of selection.

Results: Support for legalization in Washington has significantly increased: support was 64.0% (95% CI: 61.2%–67.8%) at timepoint 1 and 77.9% (95% CI: 73.2%–81.9%) at timepoint 5. With each six months' passing, support increased 19% on average. We found no statistically significant change in support for home-growing.

Conclusions: Support for marijuana legalization has continued to significantly increase in a state that has experienced the policy change for almost four years.

1. Introduction

The legalization of recreational marijuana sales and use has become a highly debated policy topic in recent years, especially in the US, although scientific research on the effects of these policies is very limited (Kim et al., 2016; Mason et al., 2016). Still, support for legalization of recreational marijuana continues to increase across the United States and globally (Cruz et al., 2016; Galston and Dionne, 2013). In 2016, recreational marijuana was legalized in the most populous US state of California, as well as Massachusetts, Maine, and Nevada. More states and other countries such as Canada are expected to consider recreational legalization in 2017 and beyond making the experiences of US states with existing regulatory systems highly relevant.

While US states have experienced “bottom-up” approaches to legalization, with marijuana legislation generally initiated and voted on by the public, Uruguay undertook a “top-down” approach in which the government legalized marijuana production and distribution in

2012 despite widespread public opposition (Cruz et al., 2016). The Latin American Public Opinion Project found that in 2014, 51.5% of those interviewed in the US supported legalization, while only 34% of those interviewed in Uruguay favored legalization; this underscores the fact that changing a policy does not necessarily change the majority opinion (Cruz et al., 2016).

1.1. National support for the legalization of marijuana and other substance use

Support for marijuana legalization has increased nationally as well as in Washington state. A 2016 Gallup poll found that 60% of Americans favor legalization, an all-time high in the 47 years Gallup has polled on this issue (Swift, 2016). Interestingly, national support for legalization went from 43% in 2012 to 55% in 2014 (ORC International, 2014), which is similar to the magnitude of the increase in support in Washington during that same time period (Subbaraman and Kerr, 2016). Furthermore, among the same 2014 CNN survey

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respondents, 81% said alcohol should be legal; 73% said alcohol is more dangerous than marijuana; 16% thinking drinking alcohol is morally wrong; and 35% said smoking marijuana is morally wrong. Thus, there appear to be complicated and perhaps contradictory relationships between perceptions of risk and morality when compared with opinions on public policy regarding substance use.

The only analogous substance policy shift to marijuana legalization is the end of prohibition of alcohol, which was in effect in America from 1920 to 1933. Six years after Prohibition, a 1939 Gallup poll showed that 30% of respondents favored making the country “dry again” (Gallup Organization, 1939). In 1984, only 17% of Gallup poll respondents were in favor of a law prohibiting alcohol sales (Gallup Organization, 1984); this number grew to 30% in 1988 according to a poll by ABC news (ABC News, 1988). On the other hand, in 1988, only 9% thought drugs should be legal (ABC News, 1988); this number grew to 30% in 1990 according to an Los Angeles Times poll, and then went back down to 15% in 1994 according to CBS news (CBS News, 1994). Importantly, these polls were carried out by different institutions and might not be directly comparable. Still, the support for the legalization of other substance use is relevant for context.

For example, in a 2014 poll conducted by YouGov/The Huffington Post (Moore, 2014) regarding the legalization of methamphetamine, MDMA, LSD, peyote, ayahuasca, and ibogaine, support for legalization ranged from 8% (LSD) to 12% (ibogaine). Similarly, support for other drugs (specifically psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, MDMA, ibogaine, cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine) ranged from 12% (ibogaine) to 22% (psilocybin mushrooms) in a poll conducted by the marketing firm (Lopez, 2016). These polls indicate that while Americans lean towards favoring marijuana legalization, they do not want to legalize all drug use.

1.2. Rationale for current study

In the US, four states have retail systems for marijuana regulation that are legal at the state level. The experiences and opinions of residents of these states are highly relevant to the issue of legalization. An important question for places considering these policies is whether support grows over time or declines as residents experience any positive or negative impacts individually or societally. The state of Washington legalized marijuana through voter initiative in November of 2012, with retail stores first opening in July of 2014. Washington took a relatively cautious approach to regulation of legal sales compared to other legal marijuana states, for example by banning vertical integration in order to avoid monopolization of the marijuana market, limiting the number of retail stores and requiring explicit approval of any processed marijuana products. Only one study has examined support for legalization in Washington through 2014 (Subbaraman and Kerr, 2016), which found continued support in the two years post-legalization with nearly 20% of those who voted against the initiative now supporting it. However, given the limited experience with the new regulatory system and retail marijuana sales in 2014, there is a need for information on support for legalization in 2015 and 2016, by which time residents had over a year of experience with retail stores and three full years of legal recreational marijuana. This paper updates previous results regarding support for legalization by including data collected through April of 2016. This paper also extends previous findings by examining support for home cultivation, which currently remains a felony in Washington though not in other legal marijuana states, and by investigating potential subgroup differences in support, as other studies have shown that demographic factors like age and sex, as well as marijuana use, are related to opinions about marijuana (Cruz et al., 2016; Subbaraman and Kerr, 2016).

2. Methods

2.1. Data

Data come from repeated cross-sectional general population samples of adult (aged 18+) Washington state residents collected over five timepoints (every six months) between January 2014 and April 2016. After combining timepoints, the total sample size was 4101 (1202 from T1; 804 from T2; 823 from T3; 662 from T4; 610 from T5). List-assisted Random Digit Dial procedures were used to recruit the sample, with > 40% from cell phones. The decreasing sample size was by design in relation to funding constraints. The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR2) cooperation rates were 50.9% (landline) and 60.9% (cell phone) in T1; 45.8% (landline) and 62.4% (cell) in T2; 43.7% (landline) and 61.5% (cell) in T3; 41.7% (landline) and 59.6% (cell) in T4; and 49.4% (landline) and 60.9% (cell) in T5; AAPOR has detailed formulas for cooperation rates that can be found on their website (The American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2000). The Public Health Institute’s Institutional Review Board approved this study, and we obtained informed consent from all participants.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Outcomes and exposure

Our primary outcome *support for legalization* was based on the question, “Do you think marijuana should be legal for adults?” We also examined possible trends in *support for home-growing* based on the question, “Do you think adults should be able to grow their own marijuana for personal use?” Answer options were yes, no, I don’t know, and refused. Because we were interested in trends, our primary independent variable was the data collection timepoint (W1–W5), with each additional timepoint representing the passage of approximately six months’ time.

2.2.2. Covariates

As covariates, we included *marijuana user status* (lifetime abstainer, past, current), based on the questions “Have you ever used marijuana at any time in your life?” and “How often have you used marijuana, hash, or pot during the last twelve months?” (those who had used at least once in the last 12 months were classified as current); and *drinking status* (lifetime abstainer, past, current) which was assessed similarly. We also included *perceptions of riskiness* based on the question, “How risky do you think weekly marijuana use is for a person’s health?” (very, somewhat, a little, not at all, or good for health). We also controlled for *gender*, *age* (18–29, 30–49, 50+ years old), *race/ethnicity* (White, African American, Hispanic, Other), *education* (high school diploma or less, some college, college graduate, graduate school), and *employment* (full- or part-time employed vs. unemployed/retired/homemaker/student). Using zip code data, we also classified whether respondents lived in Eastern vs. Western Washington; location data was important to include in the analyses given that Eastern and Western Washington tend to differ politically.

2.3. Statistical analyses

First, in order to show that the sample was geographically state-representative within and across timepoints, we compared the proportion of respondents from Eastern vs. Western Washington for each timepoint. Next, for each timepoint, we calculated proportions of respondents in favor of marijuana legalization both in the sample overall and within subgroups defined by gender, age, and marijuana user status. We calculated proportions of support for home-growing similarly. We used 95% confidence intervals for subgroup proportions to determine significant differences across groups and timepoints. We then used multivariable logistic regression controlling for timepoint to

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