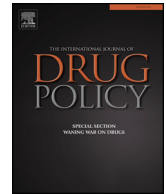




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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## International Journal of Drug Policy

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo)

Research Paper

## Postmaterialism and referenda voting to legalize marijuana

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Post-materialism  
 Marijuana  
 Referendum  
 Voting  
 Direct democracy

## ABSTRACT

This analysis of county-level voting on 22 state referenda that sought to legalize marijuana for medical purposes or recreational use is driven by hypotheses from post-materialism theory. Separate regression models for each type of policy largely, though not entirely, support our expectations. Voting to legalize both medical and recreational marijuana was greater in counties with larger college-educated populations, a partisan preference for Democratic presidential candidates, and smaller percentages of Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical adherents. The findings for age, the other primary driver of post-materialist values, are counter-intuitive, but holding these referenda during a U.S. presidential election year had statistically significant though different impacts on the outcome. The higher turnout during presidential elections seemingly facilitated voting in favor of recreational marijuana while lower turnouts during non-presidential elections aided voting for medical marijuana. Finally, population density was not statistically significant in either model.

## Introduction

Over most of the twentieth century there was a policy consensus among federal and state authorities that marijuana is a dangerous illicit substance that should be severely punished with criminal sanctions (Bonnie & Whitebread, 1974; Meier, 1994; Musto, 1999). President Nixon inaugurated the modern-day “War on Drugs” which was reignited under Reagan and continued under Clinton and his successors (McWilliams, 1991; Timberlake, Lock & Rasinski, 2003). Even today marijuana is classified along with heroin and cocaine as a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substances Act (CSA) of 1970. Nonetheless, that federal law has been largely ignored by the thirty-two states which authorized the medical use of marijuana and, beyond that, by ten states with enactments that fully legalized marijuana for recreational purposes. Most important for our purposes, seventeen medical marijuana laws<sup>1</sup> and nine recreational marijuana laws<sup>2</sup> were enacted by referenda.

The longstanding policy consensus about “Killer Weed” stigmatized and discouraged any effort to legalize marijuana, as Ferraiolo (2007, p. 161) explains: “The federal government’s drug policy regime persisted in large part due to its ability to cement drug control legislation and antidrug attitudes in place as part of a deviance model that for decades brooked little vocal opposition.” In order to break that

ideological stranglehold against policy change, reformers employed two strategies (Ferraiolo, 2007). First, they re-framed the issue of marijuana legalization as a medical benefit to alleviate the suffering of those who endure debilitating injuries or terminal illnesses. Second, they turned to citizen-initiated referenda to legalize marijuana precisely because they wanted to bypass opposition within the executive and legislative branches of state government. From 1972 to 2018, there have been 59 ballot referenda on marijuana in nineteen states. Forty-two of those referenda sought to legalize the possession of marijuana and all these plebiscites, whether they passed or not, had been citizen-initiated through ballot petitions and not authorized by state legislatures (Ballotpedia, 2018).

The prohibition on illicit drugs is a morality policy which involves policy debates over fundamental principles (Meier, 1994; Mooney, 2001) and religious beliefs (Permoser, 2019) rather than economic interests. But more precisely, the contemporary debate over legalizing marijuana illustrates the conflict between post-materialist values and traditional mores often grounded in religious beliefs. Like the United States, most European nations had enacted highly restrictive policies on illicit drugs, and whenever morality entered the policy debate opponents of legalization characterized drug use as “inherently evil behaviour” while proponents criticized governmental interference

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<sup>1</sup> AK 1998; AZ 2010; AR 2016; CA 1996; CO 2000; FL 2016; ME 1999; MA 2012; MI 2008; MO 2018; MT 2004; NV 2000; ND 2016; OK 2018; OR 1998; UT 2018; WA 1998. Note that Nevada requires two consecutive referendum votes to approve constitutional amendments, which were held in 1998 and 2000. Here 2000 indicates the date of final referendum enactment, but both the 1998 and 2000 votes are included in our analysis.

<sup>2</sup> AK 2014; CA 2016; CO 2012; ME 2016; MA 2016; MI 2018; NV 2016; OR 2014; WA 2012

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2019.11.003>

with individual liberties and free choice (Raschzok, 2015, p. 235).

Our goal in this research is to understand the bases of electoral support for legalization of marijuana, a policy stance by the voters that stands in sharp contrast to the elite opposition to legalization. We focus here on county-level voting results on successful and unsuccessful referenda to legalize marijuana, seeking answers to several questions: which type of counties voted in those state referenda to support or oppose legalized marijuana? Did those demographic patterns comport with the expectations of post-materialist theory? Were there any differences in the demographics of the referendum votes to legalize marijuana for its limited purpose as a medical treatment as compared to fully legalizing marijuana for recreational purposes? What impact, if any, did turnout have on the outcomes of those referenda? These are the research questions that drive the analysis which follows.

### Hypotheses on post-materialism and legalized marijuana

The leading proponent of post-materialism is Ronald Inglehart (1971; 1977; 1990; 1997), who argues that westernized nations are evolving from societies where materialist concerns about survival and economic security are yielding to post-materialist values that emphasize self-fulfillment and personal choice, as well as civic and political engagement. Inglehart's post-materialist thesis has generated a huge body of scholarship since being introduced to political science.<sup>3</sup> True to the original formulation of post-materialism, much scholarship has focused on cross-national (Clarke & Dutt, 1991; Knutsen, 1990) but also country-specific (Anderson, 1990; Lafferty & Knutsen, 1985) studies, while other works have scrutinized his methodology (Davis & Davenport, 1999; Lakatos, 2015), and applied the post-materialist thesis to electoral and political behavior (Brooks & Manza, 1994; Brown & Carmines, 1995; Carmines & Layman, 1997; Copeland, 2014; Davis, 2000). Our analysis is unique insofar as we apply post-materialism to county-level referenda voting patterns.

With regard to marijuana, Inglehart fully expects that post-materialist value shifts would extend to a greater tolerance for its recreational use (see below). Post-materialism builds upon the "hierarchy of needs" theory by Maslow (1954) who postulated that once lower-order physiological needs are satisfied then individuals will seek to satisfy higher-order values like self-actualization. Thus, Inglehart hypothesized that a "value shift" from materialism to post-materialism is driven by intergenerational change, and the two fundamental social forces that fuel intergenerational change are age and education. The older generation that experienced the hardships of the Great Depression and the sacrifices of World War II has yielded to the post-war era of general prosperity where younger generations enjoy sufficient affluence that they can now satisfy needs beyond economic well-being. In addition, as larger numbers of persons in the post-war generation achieved post-secondary educations, they were able to secure professional employment with sufficient economic security that they could devote more time and energy to leisure and quality-of-life experiences. Some research argues that education is even more important in fostering value change among the younger generations than age-cohort differences (Graaf & Evans, 1996; Duch & Taylor, 1993).

Inglehart and his associates developed a World Values Survey (WVS) to track cross-national value changes. While environmentalism (Inglehart, 1995; Kidd & Lee, 1997; Pampel, 2014) and women's rights (Inglehart & Norris, 2003) lie at the cutting edge of post-materialism, cultural change also encompasses questions of personal morality. Multivariate analysis of the WVS in the United States, Canada, and Europe using a "moral permissiveness" scale (based on seven issues though not illicit drugs), for example, showed that younger and

especially the more educated respondents were more supportive of moral permissiveness (Nevitte, 1996, p. 221). On cannabis, which was popularized as the drug of choice by the youth "counter-culture" of the 1960s, when the WVS asked whether "using marijuana is never justified," Inglehart (1997, p. 280) reported that respondents in nine nations including Great Britain, Italy, Norway, and West Germany became more tolerant over the 1980s but that Americans and those surveyed in eight other nations were less tolerant. A recent study, in fact, found that smoking cannabis is more likely among young adults who express post-materialist values than those who hold onto materialist concerns (Lindström, 2007). Other research on adolescents who use cannabis found that the primary justification was based on their "permissive" beliefs that marijuana is not dangerous or less serious than taking hard drugs (Chabrol, Massot & Mullet, 2004).

These post-materialist expectations about age and education are confirmed in studies of public opinion. Surveys taken by the Pew Research Center (2010) indicate more people favor medical marijuana than recreational marijuana. The 73% who favored medical marijuana included broad support from every demographic group, though the widest disparities involved partisanship (19%) and age (17%), as Democrats and those aged 18–29 were more supportive than Republicans and people aged 65 or over. On recreational marijuana, the Pew Research Center (2015) reported lower overall support (53%), and again the disparities were widest with respect to age, partisanship and education level. A decade earlier three Gallup Polls (Carroll, 2005) asked respondents the same question posed by Pew – whether "the use of marijuana should be made legal, or not?" – and the combined results showed the largest differences in support for legalization due to age, then education, party affiliation, and ideology (self-described liberals were more supportive). A 30-year review of General Social Surveys (GSS) found more support for legalization from Democrats, younger respondents and the college-educated, though level of education was less consistent over time (Denham, 2019). Another longitudinal analysis of GSS data reported that Democrats and the college-educated favored legalization whereas respondents without a high school degree or who were Evangelical Protestants were more opposed (Schwadel & Ellison, 2017). Other statistical analyses also confirmed that Republicans (Collingwood, O'Brien & Dreier, 2018; Nielsen, 2010; Schnabel & Sevell, 2017) and older individuals (Caulkins, Coulson, Farber & Vesely, 2012) are more opposed to legalization.

Inglehart (1971) also believed that the "new" post-materialist agenda would influence parties of the Left while disgruntled elements of the working class would seek refuge with parties of the Right, which was confirmed in a 1992 American National Election Study by Davis (2000, p. 472) that found that post-materialists were more likely to be Democratic than Republican in their party preference. Moreover, like the "culture wars" that engulf America (Hunter, 1992), there is evidence that religion similarly divides the major two U.S. political parties. Republicans are increasingly aligned with conservative Christians while Democrats are religiously liberal or secular (Brooks & Manza, 2004; Layman, 2001). Layman and Carmines (1997, p. 753) would agree that "the Republican party is becoming the political home of religious traditionalists while the Democratic party is becoming increasingly attractive to religious liberals and secularists" but also conclude that this partisan cultural divide has not fully aligned with the cleavage between materialists and post-materialists.

Taken together, these findings suggest three post-materialist hypotheses for our consideration. Hypothesis 1 posits that *counties with a younger age profile will cast more votes in favor of marijuana legalization*. Hypothesis 2 posits that *counties with a higher education profile will cast more votes in favor of marijuana legalization*. Hypothesis 3 posits that *counties with a partisan preference for Democrats will cast more votes in favor of marijuana legalization*.

Any "value shift" towards post-materialism must confront the forces of conventional morality and tradition, especially from organized religion. Inglehart later acknowledged that strong religious traditions can

<sup>3</sup>To illustrate, a search of Google Scholar using the keywords "Ronald Inglehart post materialism thesis" retrieved 2,970 references to articles, monographs, and unpublished works.

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