**Marijuana and the Pennsylvania Governor’s Race**

*The May 20 primary election for Pennsylvania’s governor is approaching and changing the state’s laws on marijuana is part of the discussion. Weed’s gotten some respect since the days when Bill Clinton claimed he didn’t inhale.*

*For those of you passionate about full legalization of marijuana, there was one candidate (that would be John Hanger) who could have earned your vote. Although he’s now out of the race, his spotlight on marijuana policy led the other candidates to take firm positions on the issue. Marijuana legalization for recreational use is probably not in Pennsylvania’s near future, but legal medical marijuana is a possibility.*

*Seventy, as part of its ongoing series on the 2014 governor’s race, will fill you in on the basics, let you know what the candidates think and help you find credible sources of information if you want to dig deeper. Our goal is to encourage you to learn as much as you can about the issues before you head to the polls in May.*

-- March 18, 2014

**The Basics**

**If the gubernatorial candidates are talking about marijuana, can I light up this joint?**

If you’re holding your breath waiting for your first legal toke, don’t exhale just yet. It’s still illegal to possess or sell marijuana in Pennsylvania.

**Okay, so Pennsylvania’s not in the vanguard on this issue. Which states are?**

In 1996, California became the first state to legalize medical marijuana. Today 19 other states, plus the District of Columbia, allow medical marijuana in some form. In 2012, Colorado and Washington took it a step further, legalizing marijuana for recreational use, but with restrictions for buyers and sellers. In both states, for example, adults ages 21 and older can possess up to one ounce of the drug at a time.

**How does the U.S. government feel about that?**

Federal law is basically the same as Pennsylvania’s. The feds also say the drug can harm a user’s heart, lungs and mental faculties. However, Attorney General Eric Holder seems more interested in finding out what happens in states experimenting with legal weed than in cracking down.

**Why are states revisiting marijuana laws to begin with?**

Some experts say the drug’s potential for abuse is overstated and its medical benefits are real. Marijuana has medical value for patients with pain, glaucoma and symptoms of cancer, Crohn’s Disease and AIDS, among other illnesses. And other uses are still being discovered. New information suggests oil from a specific kind of marijuana could help seizure sufferers.

**Okay, but why not just allow it for medical purposes and end it there?**

Legalization advocates say marijuana is mostly harmless, but great harm is done by the laws that make it illegal. For example, a 2013 American Civil Liberties Union report found African-Americans are 3.7 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana use than whites, though both groups use the drug at a similar rate. And enforcing marijuana laws is expensive in a time when cities and states are strapped for cash.

**I knew money would come into the conversation eventually.**

Legalized weed creates new revenue streams. Colorado earned $3.5 million in tax revenue just in January 2014 through marijuana. Their model has consumers paying sales taxes on recreational marijuana, while retailers pay an excise tax. There’s a separate tax structure for medical marijuana.

**Great, but I live in Pennsylvania and folks in the Keystone State aren’t like those latte-drinking crunchies out west. Are we really going to legalize it?**

Probably not for recreational use right now, but a poll of Pennsylvanians taken earlier this month by Quinnipiac University found 85 percent of respondents supported legalization of marijuana for medical purposes. Forty-eight percent supported full legalization of pot. There’s also a bill in the state Senate that would legalize marijuana for medical use.

**So what’s the hang-up over some weed?**

Legalization opponents argue it would create more marijuana users and a state-sanctioned market for an addictive and harmful substance. They also argue that marijuana does little more than legal drugs can accomplish for the sick, and has more serious side effects.

**What about here? Is the City of Brotherly Love showing any love for weed?**

In Philadelphia, having weed gets you arrested, but the city offers a shot at a clean slate. People arrested with 30 grams of weed or less may qualify to pay a fine, take a class and get the offense expunged. The District Attorney’s office says this diverts 4,000 cases a year and saves $2.5 million. Also, City Council held a hearing last week to consider a bill proposed by Councilman Jim Kenney that would end mandatory arrests for possession of small amounts of the drug. However, the bill doesn’t address medical marijuana and is not proposing legalization for recreational use.

**What the Candidates Say**

**Why is this part of the conversation during this gubernatorial race?**

Hanger proposed immediate legalization of medical marijuana, elimination of criminal penalties for possession of small amounts of marijuana and a move to legalize the drug for recreational purposes but with regulations and taxes. The two prime sponsors of the state Senate bill to legalize medical marijuana – one a conservative Republican; the other a liberal Democrat – credited Hanger for raising public awareness of the issue.

**What does Tom Corbett have to say about legalizing marijuana?**

Corbett until recently has said “no way” to any form of legalization. However, he also says that if the U.S. Food and Drug Administration does trials on marijuana’s medical value and changes its classification of the drug, he would listen to the evidence. Corbett makes his case in this [radio interview](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i39xWG99Hqc).

**Where do the Democratic candidates fall?**

Allyson Schwartz, Tom Wolf, and Katie McGinty are for medical marijuana and decriminalization – eliminating many penalties for possession for personal use – but don’t support legalization for recreational use. According to the Associated Press, Jack Wagner, who joined the race in February, doesn’t favor any reduction in penalties. Rob McCord wants to see how legalization plays out in Colorado, but sees full legalization on the horizon. [Click here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjalbzv4QLo) to watch the Democratic candidates debate the issue in January.

**Get More Information**

The [Office of National Drug Control Policy](http://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/frequently-asked-questions-and-facts-about-marijuana#harmless) is a good place to start if you have questions about marijuana policy at the state or federal level. To find out more about states that have some level of marijuana legalization, try the [National Conference of State Legislators](http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/state-medical-marijuana-laws.aspx). But for a quick explainer on Pennsylvania law, see [Criminal Defense Lawyer.com’s](http://www.criminaldefenselawyer.com/marijuana-laws-and-penalties/pennsylvania.htm) page on marijuana.

[The Drug Policy Alliance](http://www.drugpolicy.org/blog/everything-you-need-know-about-marijuana-legalization-drug-war-and-future-drug-policy) has a wealth of information on arguments for legal medical marijuana and where the movement stands nationally. A local organization fighting for a change in Pennsylvania’s marijuana laws is [Philly NORML](http://www.phillynorml.org). For arguments against legalization, visit the [Drug Free America Foundation](http://companymanstudios.com/dev/dfaf/modx-2.2.9-pl/index.php?id=3) or a group Patrick Kennedy started (yep, Ted Kennedy’s son) called [Project SAM](http://learnaboutsam.com).

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