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Legal weed in Pennsylvania? Not if Doug Mastriano can stop it.

William Bender

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The pattern might be familiar to anyone who has followed the brief political career of Doug Mastriano, the Pennsylvania state senator now running for governor:

Public opinion evolves over time. Mastriano's generally does not.

On abortion, climate change, same-sex marriage, and other key issues, Mastriano has maintained ultraconservative positions years after most voters — including many other Republicans — left them behind.

The latest example involves marijuana.

On Thursday, President Biden pardoned thousands of people convicted in federal courts of marijuana possession and urged states to follow his lead. His announcement thrust the issue into the upcoming midterm elections.

"I'm calling on governors to pardon simple state marijuana possession offenses," Biden said on Twitter. "Just as no one should be in a federal prison solely for possessing marijuana, no one should be in a local jail or state prison for that reason, either."

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf [responded on Twitter](#) that he had coordinated a pardon effort, but that under state law he doesn't have unilateral pardon authority.

"I'm doing everything I can to right the wrongs of the failed war on drugs," said Wolf, a Democrat who is term-limited and will be leaving office in January.

This issue will likely come before the next governor of Pennsylvania. So where do Mastriano and his Democratic opponent, state Attorney General Josh Shapiro, stand on the issue?

Shapiro supports legalizing marijuana for recreational use, with certain conditions that he has laid out in broad terms.

Mastriano, who does not respond to most media inquiries, did not respond to a request for comment from The Inquirer on Friday. Nor did he respond last month when the right-leaning site [Broad + Liberty sought his position](#) on the issue.

But Mastriano's statements in recent years make it clear that he remains opposed to most cannabis reform — even as [polls show](#) a majority of Pennsylvanians now support legalization.

In radio interviews and Facebook live videos, Mastriano has stoked *Reefer Madness*-style fears, contending that legalizing the drug will lead to the breakdown of social order.

“All it’s done is destroy their society,” Mastriano told a conservative radio host in 2019, referring to states like Colorado and California where it is legal for adults to consume cannabis for recreational use. He said such places are “turning into rat holes and third-world backwashes.”

Mastriano, a retired Army colonel, has also claimed that cannabis taxes do not produce significant revenue for states. He said assertions to the contrary are “lies.”

“They lie for a living, the Left,” Mastriano said in a September 2020 Facebook live video in which he discussed marijuana policy.

According to the Marijuana Policy Project, \$11.2 billion in revenue has been reported from the taxation of cannabis sales through March 2022 — \$3.7 billion in 2021 alone. Nineteen states have legalized marijuana for recreational use among adults, including New Jersey, where dispensaries opened this year.

In that same 2020 video, Mastriano said he also opposed legalization because, he falsely claimed, it has caused violent crime to spike.

“A 30% increase in violent crime and domestic abuse, all tied into recreational use of marijuana,” Mastriano said. “Yes, that’s a fact.”

It is unclear what crime figures Mastriano was citing and how he drew a direct connection to marijuana laws. Research by the Cato Institute, last updated in 2021, has found that both opponents and proponents of marijuana legalization have, at times, made unsupported claims, but that “violent crime has neither soared nor plummeted in the wake of marijuana legalization.” (Some studies have indicated that legalization might actually improve police performance in solving certain crimes).

“I can’t tell you what he concocted to come up with that,” Jared Moffat, state campaign manager at the Marijuana Policy Project, said of Mastriano’s crime figures.

Mastriano has a history of making factually incorrect off-the-cuff statements — from tweeting November 2020 election data that were off by more than 1 million mail-in ballots, to undercounting the world population by more than 2.7 billion people.

This year, Mastriano was asked about legalizing recreational marijuana. He called it “a stupid idea.”

Chris Goldstein, a regional organizer for the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) who worked on the decriminalization of marijuana possession in Philadelphia, said he is perplexed by conservative Republicans who run on prohibitionist platforms. The electorate has been moving in the other direction for years.

“I don’t get it. People like Doug Mastriano are completely out of touch with his own voters, his own state, and party,” Goldstein said. “Mastriano’s position is totally bizarre.”

Only one in four Pennsylvanians share Mastriano's position on the issue, with 56% supporting the legalization of marijuana, according to the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion.

“Over the past decade there has been very significant changes among Pennsylvanians in terms of their views on marijuana legalization, with a solid majority of residents now supporting legalization compared to a decade ago, when a solid majority opposed this option,” said Christopher Borick, the institute's director.

“Among older Pennsylvanians, and registered Republicans, support for legalization is fairly soft, but even in these segments, the trend has been in the direction of increasing support” for legalization, Borick said.

Goldstein said he would like Shapiro to take a more progressive approach to marijuana policy, including laying out a detailed legalization plan. But Goldstein gave him credit for at least coming around on the issue. Shapiro previously opposed legalizing recreational marijuana.

As for Mastriano, Goldstein said the state senator is likely fighting a losing political battle if his plan is to keep arresting people for marijuana possession.

“Marijuana is very popular on the ballot,” Goldstein said. “Mastriano is running not just against Shapiro. He's running against cannabis.”