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[New Polls Show Libertarian Trends on Marriage, Marijuana, Guns](#)

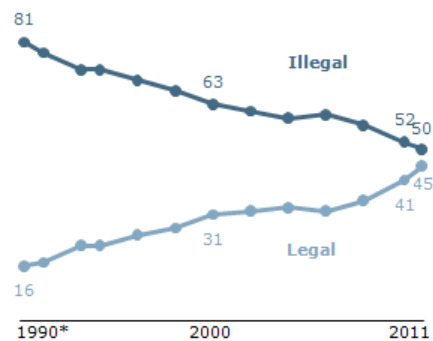
[David Boaz](#) - March 7, 2011



Many commentators have seen a shift to the right in American politics over the past two years — the reaction to spending, bailouts, and Obamacare; the rise in conservative self-identification in polls; the 2010 elections. But there's another trend going on as well. I described it in 2009 as a "[civil liberties surge](#)." And this week there's new evidence.

A [new study](#) from the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press finds long-term growth in support for legal abortion, gun rights, marijuana legalization, and gay marriage. They're all still divisive issues. But support in the Pew (and General Social Survey) polls for marijuana legalization has risen from 16 percent in 1990 to 2011:

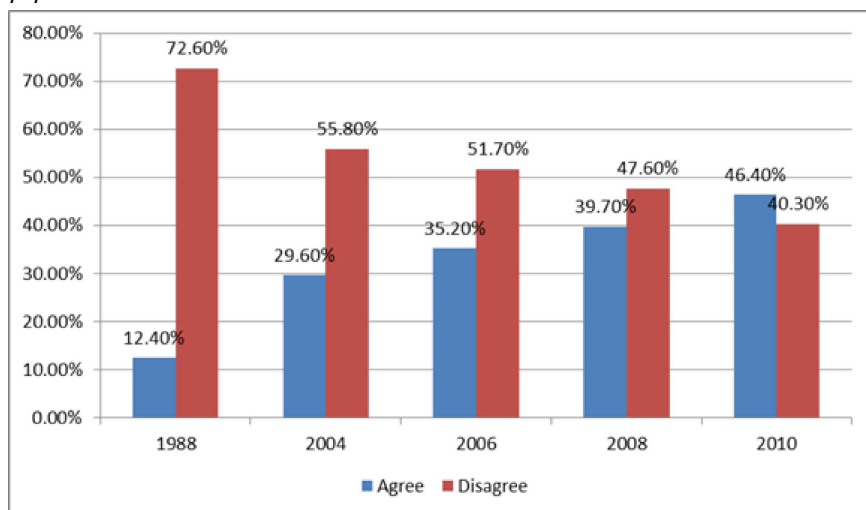
Should Marijuana Use be Legal?



PEW RESEARCH CENTER Feb. 22-Mar.1, 2011. QA63.
* 1990-2008 data from the General Social Survey

(And with [Pat Robertson on board](#), how long can other conservatives hold out?)

Support for [Second Amendment](#) rights has risen substantially since the 1990s, and has not fallen in the aftermath of the Tucson shootings. Opposition to gay marriage has moved from 65-27 in 1996 to 46-45 in Pew's new poll. The trend is even stronger in this [presentation](#) of the latest General Social Survey results:



Marriage equality was defeated in California in 2008, and yet [within just a few months](#) of President Obama's election, gay marriage became legal in several states, and the trend is continuing. The once-again-heavily Republican legislature in New Hampshire, one of the most libertarian states, decided to put off a marriage repeal bill until 2012 after a [poll](#) found that only 29 percent of voters supported repeal. The overwhelmingly Republican State Senate in rugged-individualist Wyoming [rejected a bill](#) to ban recognition of out-of-state gay marriages. Liberal Maryland is debating a marriage bill.

Despite the failure of a marijuana legalization initiative in California in 2010, perhaps reflecting the preponderance of older voters at the polls, reformers are still optimistic. We may see legalization initiatives in Colorado, Washington and Oregon in 2011 and 2012 — and possibly in California again. A number of mega-millionaires from Silicon Valley made contributions to Proposition 19, suggesting a new funding base. Drug reformers were disappointed that no major newspaper in California supported Proposition 19 but heartened that most of them did acknowledge the need for reform.

Time is on the side of both marijuana and marriage reformers. One striking point in all these polls, of course, is the age difference. An [ABC News/Washington Post poll](#) "showed just how much of the movement is occurring among younger voters. Support for gay marriage has grown somewhat among voters over age 65, from 15 percent to 28 percent, but six in 10 remain strongly opposed. Among those under 35, though, two-thirds support it, up from 53 percent in 2006, and nearly half support it strongly." And "[s]upport for legalizing small amounts of marijuana for personal use is nearly twice as high among young adults (57 percent of those under 30) as seniors (30 percent), with middle-aged Americans split about evenly." Obama carried young voters by 2 to 1. If the Republicans get out front on opposing marriage equality and marijuana reform, they can make that a permanent Democratic majority.

These new poll results should be no surprise. Part of the American project for more than 200 years has been extending the promises of the Declaration of Independence — life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — to more and more people. America is a country [fundamentally shaped](#) by libertarian values and attitudes. In their book *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*, Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marx write, "The American ideology, stemming from the [American] Revolution, can be subsumed in five words: antistatism, laissez-faire, individualism, populism, and egalitarianism." If Herbert McClosky and John Zaller are right that "[t]he principle here is that every person is free to act as he pleases, so long as his exercise of freedom does not violate the equal rights of others," then marriage equality and marijuana freedom are only a matter of time.

And none of these socially liberal results challenge the general perception of a conservative trend, as long as that trend is understood as a reaction to bailouts, takeovers, and other elements of "big government." Americans [continue](#) to tell pollsters they prefer "smaller government with fewer services" to "larger government with more services." And when you remind people that the cost of "more services" is "higher taxes," the results get even stronger. So the good news for libertarians is that there are libertarian trends in public opinion on a wide range of issues. The bad news is that some of those trends are in response to the massive expansion of government of the Bush-Obama years.

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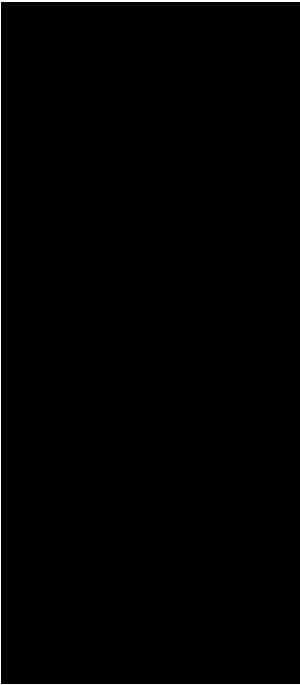
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