



New Highs: Support for Legalizing Marijuana in California Grows

Proposition 19 Advocates Target Young Voters As U.S. Attorney General Opposes Measure

By HUMA KHAN

Oct. 18, 2010—

Voters in California could set the precedent for the rest of the country Nov. 2 as they go to the polls for a ballot measure that would make California the first state in the country to fully [legalize marijuana](#).

Proposition 19 would allow people 21 and older to cultivate up to 25 square feet of [marijuana](#) and carry up to 1 ounce of [marijuana](#) for personal use at nonpublic locations. The state would regulate businesses selling [marijuana](#) and collect fees and taxes the way it does for cigarettes and alcohol.

Support for the controversial measure is gaining steam, polls show. But it remains to be seen whether [young voters](#), the main demographic group that supports [Proposition 19](#), will come to the polls Nov. 2.

A [Public Policy Institute of California](#) survey released last month found that 52 percent of Californians favored the measure, while 41 percent were against it and 7 percent were undecided.

A [SurveyUSA](#) poll released earlier this month found similar results, with 48-41 percent in favor of the measure.

A majority of the backing comes from young voters, while those 65 and older are mostly against the measure, polls show.

That could pose a problem for [Proposition 19](#) supporters. Young adults aren't as reliable in turnouts, and are much less likely to be registered to vote. An [ABC News/Washington Post](#) poll released earlier this month found that 58 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds were registered, compared with 89 percent of their elders. Those young people who said they were registered were much less apt to say they're certain to vote next month.

Even if [Proposition 19](#) passes in California, it's unlikely to get a pass from the federal government. Recreational use of marijuana is still illegal under federal law, and [Attorney General Eric Holder](#) made it

clear last week that the Justice Department would enforce the federal law even if Proposition 19 passes.

"We will vigorously enforce the CSA [Controlled Substances Act] against those individuals and organizations that possess, manufacture or distribute marijuana for recreational use, even if such activities are permitted under state law," Holder said in a letter to former chiefs of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

Holder added that Proposition 19's passage would be a "significant impediment" to the government's efforts to target drug traffickers, a concern echoed by Mexican President Felipe Calderon.

Proponents of the measure, however, argue that it would not only help California's sizable budget deficit but would in turn reduce crime by shifting law enforcement's focus to harder substances and targeting only serious offenders.

Marijuana is California's biggest cash crop, worth \$14 billion in sales, nearly double the state's second biggest revenue generator, dairy.

The California government projected that at an excise tax of \$50 per ounce, the new law would bring in about \$1.4 billion in additional revenues. It would

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save the state \$960 million a year in enforcement costs, according to the Cato Institute.

Proposition 19 has earned the endorsement of several influential groups, such as California's NAACP, Latino Voters League and unions like Service Employees International Union and the United Food and Commercial Workers.

Several members of Congress, such as Reps. [Pete Stark](#), [Barbara Lee](#) and George Miller -- who represent heavily liberal districts -- have also been outspoken supporters.

Former U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders defended the measure on CNN Sunday, saying that much more harmful substances, such as tobacco and alcohol, are legal, and marijuana should be no different.

"I don't think much could be worse than the present situation that we have, when we have the highest number of people in the world being criminalized [for] many nonviolent crimes relating to marijuana," she said. "Marijuana has not caused anybody directly to die. It's not a toxic substance that would cause people to die and ... we can use our resources so much better."

But politically, marijuana remains a potent issue. The California Democratic Party hasn't taken any position on Proposition 19, and virtually all heavy hitters are opposed to it, including Sen. [Dianne Feinstein](#), Sen. [Barbara Boxer](#), and both gubernatorial candidates.

This is not the first time that a state has dabbled in such a measure. Earlier this year, a marijuana-legalization bill was introduced in Washington, but it was struck down by the state legislature.

But California has been known to lead the country in marijuana laws. It was the first state to legalize [medical marijuana](#), and over time, the state has relaxed its laws governing marijuana.

Last week, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a law reducing the charges for 1 ounce or less of marijuana possession to a misdemeanor from an infraction, essentially saying that those found in possession wouldn't face arrest, a court appearance and a criminal record.

While legalizing marijuana remains a hot-button issue, Americans' views toward medical marijuana have softened in recent years, and more states are paving the way for legal use of marijuana for medicinal purposes.

Currently, medical marijuana is legal in 14 states and

Washington, D.C., and similar initiatives will be up for a vote in three states -- [Oregon](#), [Arizona](#) and [South Dakota](#).



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