

Oregon Becomes First State to Decriminalize Drugs As State's Voters Approve Ballot Measure

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Oregon's voters made history in Tuesday's election as the majority approved a ballot measure that decriminalized all drugs in the West Coast state.

With the passage of Measure 110, Oregon has become the first state in the nation to decriminalize drugs. The measure also expands access to addiction treatment and health services for drug users. The initiative was led by Drug Policy Action—the advocacy and political branch of the non-profit Drug Policy Alliance.

"Today's victory is a landmark declaration that the time has come to stop criminalizing people for drug use," Kassandra Frederique, executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance, said in a statement emailed to *Newsweek*.

"Measure 110 is arguably the biggest blow to the war on drugs to date. It shifts the focus where it belongs—on people and public health—and removes one of the most common justifications for law enforcement to harass, arrest, prosecute, incarcerate, and deport people. As we saw with the domino effect of marijuana legalization, we expect this victory to inspire other states to enact their own drug decriminalization policies that prioritize health over punishment," Frederique said.

The Drug Policy Alliance spent \$4 million in its campaign to promote the passage of Measure 110, while opponents spent just \$95,000, *The Oregonian* reported. Facebook founder and CEO [Mark Zuckerberg](#) gave \$500,000 to support the initiative, while the the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon and the national ACLU each contributed \$150,000.

Singer John Legend tweeted his support of the measure in late October.

"OREGON: I support Measure 110 to decriminalize drug possession and fund more treatment services. Please @VoteYeson110 to reform the criminal justice system," Legend wrote.

The Oregon Secretary of State's office released a report by the state's Criminal Justice Commission in August, which projected that the arrest of Black residents of the state for drugs would decline by 95 percent if the measure passed. "In addition, Native American Oregonians would go from being overrepresented, to underrepresented compared to white individuals," the report said.

The Oregon measure aims to follow a similar model as that of Portugal, which decriminalized drugs in 2001. The European country has seen significantly positive results since that decision, including an increase in drug users voluntarily seeking treatment. Overdose deaths and HIV infections among drug users have also declined sharply there.

"While drug decriminalization cannot fully repair our broken and oppressive criminal legal system or the harms of an unregulated drug market, shifting from absolute prohibition to drug decriminalization is a monumental step forward in this fight. It clears the path toward treating drug use as a health issue, restores individual liberty, removes one of the biggest underpinnings for police abuse, and substantially reduces government waste," Frederique said.

Meanwhile, several states across the country voted on ballot measures to legalize the sale and use of marijuana—which was already legal in Oregon. Although results are still pending in South Dakota and Montana as of the time of writing, Arizona and New Jersey joined the 11 other states that have previously legalized cannabis for recreational use by adults 21 and older.

"According to the latest Gallup poll, 66 percent of Americans support marijuana legalization, and this victory further reinforces that stance," Steve Hawkins, executive director of the Marijuana Policy Project, said in a statement emailed to *Newsweek*. "We are poised for major marijuana reform federally. Regardless of who controls the White House, the House, or the Senate, Americans are ready for legal marijuana."

Polling conducted by the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank, in March 2019 found that the majority of Americans favor decriminalizing all drugs. The survey showed that 55 percent of respondents favored decriminalization while just 44 percent were opposed. The poll had a margin of error of plus or minus 2.2 percentage points, with a 95 percent level of confidence.

Despite the decision by Oregon's voters, drugs remain strictly illegal under federal law. Even though a growing number of states have legalized marijuana, the plant is still classified as a schedule 1 illegal substance (alongside heroin and meth) by the Drug Enforcement Administration.