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Running on Cannabis

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With the 2018 midterm elections around the corner and the 2020 presidential election field beginning to take shape, a growing number of politicians are making cannabis legalization a central pillar of their policy platforms—and with good reason. According to the latest Gallup polling data, a record 64 percent of Americans now favor legalization, and this support cuts across party lines. As of October 2017, 72 percent of Democrats, 67 percent of Independents, and 51 percent of Republicans support legal adult-use access to marijuana, making cannabis legalization at the state and federal levels one of the few truly bipartisan issues in the nation.

Recent demographic data and polling figures from Pew Research Center underscore another reason why politicians are increasingly running on cannabis legalization: 71 percent of millennials, who recently became the largest living generation in America, support legal adult-use access to cannabis. As millennials become an increasingly important voting bloc, politicians' public support for legalization will resonate broadly among the U.S. electorate.

Beyond voter sentiment, cannabis legalization is also a proven driver of voter turnout, which has the potential to change the outcome of elections for candidates who are supportive of the issue. In an October 2016 analysis of exit polling data, the Brookings Institution identified so-called "cannabis coattails" wherein the presence of marijuana legalization initiatives on the 2012 ballots in Colorado and Washington significantly increased voter turnout in those states. While additional research is needed, Brookings' Senior Fellow John Hudak has concluded that "the initiatives themselves can dramatically transform turnout and can have significant effects on other races as well."

Cannabis legalization has an added advantage for supportive candidates because it allows them to leverage the tax and job-creation benefits legalization offers to reach new voter segments. Conversely, the data from adult-use legalization in Washington, Colorado, Oregon and Alaska have showed that no material harms have followed legalization in terms of youth usage, crime rates or increased use of other drugs; to the contrary, several studies have indicated that marijuana legalization reduces opioid usage and abuse. In a report reviewing research on the effects of legalization, the conservative-leaning Cato Institute noted that the "absence of significant adverse consequences [from marijuana legalization] is especially striking given the sometimes dire predictions made by legalization opponents."

From California to New Jersey, cannabis legalization has transitioned from a fringe issue that could potentially jeopardize candidates' political futures, into a mainstream campaign policy position that can garner considerable grassroots support and election day votes.

Nothing illustrates this fact more than New Jersey's 2017 gubernatorial race. Throughout the election, Governor-elect Phil Murphy campaigned with cannabis legalization as a platform centerpiece, citing the policy's many tax revenue, economic development, and social justice benefits.

Ultimately, the Murphy campaign won a landslide victory, commanding 55.7 percent of the vote relative to the Guadagno campaign's 42.2 percent share. South of the Mason-Dixon line in Virginia, Governor-elect Ralph Northam campaigned on marijuana decriminalization and similarly won the Commonwealth's gubernatorial race by a wide margin.

As the 2018 gubernatorial elections approach, many candidates are taking notice of shifting public sentiment and have placed legalization at the center of their policy platforms.

- In Connecticut, where outgoing Governor Dannel P. Malloy—a Democrat and one of America's least popular governors—has staunchly opposed adult-use access to cannabis, Democratic challengers Dan Drew, Jonathan Harris, and Micah Welintukonis have all backed legalization. Such public support for legalization likely stems from a recent poll, which found that 71 percent of Connecticut voters support legalization.
- In New Hampshire, where 68 percent of voters support legalization, Democratic gubernatorial candidate Steve Marchand has championed the regulation and taxation of marijuana.
- In Michigan, which will have both a legalization initiative and competitive gubernatorial race on the 2018 ballot, four Democratic candidates and one Republican candidate have publicly supported adult-use access to cannabis.
- In Illinois, Gov. Bruce Rauner has opposed marijuana legalization, while leading Democratic candidates Daniel Bliss and J.B. Pritzker have supported legalizing cannabis.

The list goes on, and the message is clear: nationwide, gubernatorial candidates are making cannabis a big ticket item in 2018. Prospective governors' emphasis on this issue in some of the most competitive swing states highlights just how far the American public has progressed in embracing safe, responsible, and rational cannabis policies.

While the 2020 presidential election is far off, several potential Democratic candidates have made their support for legalization clear.

- Most notably, U.S. Sen. Cory Booker introduced the Marijuana Justice Act in August 2017, was a sponsor on the 2015 CARERS Act, and has placed legalization at the center of his expected presidential bid.
- U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, another 2020 presidential hopeful, advocated for removing marijuana from the Controlled Substances Act.

U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand has been a leading advocate for medical marijuana on the federal level and co-sponsored the 2015 CARERS Act.

As American support for cannabis legalization expands, we should expect to see more candidates on both sides of the aisle come forward with proactive positions on federal and state cannabis policy. Public opinion clearly favors legalization, so it's only a matter of time before more politicians align their official campaign platforms with the American electorate's overwhelming acceptance of legal adult-use access to cannabis.