

Cato expert: Conservatives betraying small-government values by opposing pot legalization

By [Sahil Kapur](#)

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A drug policy expert at the Cato Institute challenged conservatives to take a principled limited-government stance on marijuana, arguing that the feds are only exacerbating the problems with regulations.

"There are conservatives who take a big-government stance on this," Tim Lynch, director of Cato's Project on Criminal Justice, told Raw Story in an interview. "It's hard to explain. They're just not being consistent with their stated principles there."

The right-wing Heritage Foundation, for instance, strongly advocates for small government but has concluded that government must play a large and continued role in the drug war.



Lynch viewed the problem as "a combination of being inconsistent" and a political "reluctance to step out on the issue because it'll only endanger their prospects in the next election."

As California's pot decriminalization measure, Proposition 19, [waned in the polls](#), Lynch also lamented the lack of support from Democrats and newspaper editorials in the progressive state. Neither of the two high-ticket Democratic candidates this election, Barbara Boxer for senate and Jerry Brown for governor, have endorsed the measure.

"But even if we don't win in California," he said, "it's going to be enough to shake up this debate."

On Tuesday, it was announced that billionaire financier George Soros had given \$1 million in an effort to pass the measure. The \$1 million came a day after "Yes on 19" proponents launched their first television ad.

Having extensively studied the impacts of drug criminalization, Lynch concludes that America's policies are irrational -- that legalizing marijuana and other substances with the "alcohol model" would have few downsides while decreasing crime and violence, enhancing tax revenues, and permitting us to better address the social problems from drug abuse.

Opponents of marijuana legalization, he charged, are clinging to "emotional" theories that have been discredited -- "fear of the unknown," as he put it. Parents remain concerned about their children using drugs, and believe legalizing certain drugs would make that more likely to happen.

"But the criminal laws have not in any way kept marijuana and other drugs away from the schools," he said, nor have real-life case studies in drug legalization -- most notably Portugal -- brought about increased abuse of the substances.

An [extensive Cato Institute study](#), undertaken by Salon's Glenn Greenwald, found that Portugal's law decriminalizing personal drug use in 2000 has led to decreased usage, as well as the elimination of a socially destructive black market. Portugal's politicians have no buyers remorse and the new policy is viewed as a success.