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## Marijuana on the Ballot

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Voters in five states weighed in on whether to legalize the use and sale of marijuana on Tuesday. Maryland approved a measure that legalizes drug use for adults 21 and older and allows the General Assembly to set a tax rate on its sale. In Missouri, a slim majority approved marijuana use and set a 6 percent tax rate on the sale of the substance. The state's constitutional amendment will also clear nonviolent marijuana charges from criminal records.

But results were mixed. Voters in North Dakota and Arkansas struck down similar measures, and almost 53 percent of voters rejected an initiative in South Dakota. The Supreme Court struck down an earlier amendment legalizing recreational marijuana in 2020 because of a technicality.

The split decisions parallel rising concerns about the long-term effects of marijuana legalization on young people and crime rates. A growing number of states are decriminalizing the drug, and federal efforts to do the same are gaining traction. But experts say the results don't indicate a significant shift in nationwide support for legalization.

Nineteen states have legalized recreational marijuana, and all but 11 permit the use of medical marijuana. In October, President Joe Biden announced he would pardon individuals with federal convictions of simple marijuana possession and block future federal prosecutions. The pardon was largely symbolic. About 6,500 people have federal convictions for illegal drug use, but none of these individuals are serving time in federal prisons for simple possession alone.

But the move signaled a shift in the federal government's attitude toward pot. In a video statement, Biden urged state governors to pardon individuals convicted of possession at the state level. "Too many lives have been upended because of our failed approach to marijuana," he said, "There are thousands of people who are convicted for marijuana possession who may be denied employment, housing, or educational opportunities as a result."

Six U.S. senators called on the president to revoke the drug's status as a "Schedule I substance" in September. Legislation to legalize marijuana passed the House of Representatives. Such a status change could effectively decriminalize the drug at the federal level. Biden commissioned a review of the drug's status in his October announcement.

In September, a *Los Angeles Times* report found that legalizing marijuana has fueled political corruption in California. Advocates for legalizing the drug argued the new industry would create thousands of new jobs in rural communities, but the report revealed the industry is riddled with corruption throughout the state. *The Wall Street Journal* documented marijuana's contribution to the surge in violent crime and mass shootings.

Through in-school surveys, another study found youth are consuming marijuana more frequently than their elders did when they were young, and they are doing so in higher doses. The stronger concentrations and larger doses mean more young people are getting hooked, and antisocial behavior is increasing along with addiction.

Some states that legalized marijuana several years ago are now researching the effects of high-potency THC in cannabis products. At a forum earlier this year for the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Dr. Nora Volkow warned about the mental health implications of using high-potency THC products. "We are seeing a very significant rise in psychosis associated with the consumption of marijuana," she said.

Missouri passed its constitutional amendment to legalize the drug with 53.1 percent of voters despite strong opposition. "The devil is in the details, and we will remain actively involved in Missouri implementation because we don't need another Big Tobacco industry harming kids in Missouri," said Kevin Sabet, who heads the anti-legalization group, SAM Action.

Jeffrey Miron, the vice president for research at the CATO Institute, said Missouri's decision to legalize marijuana is the most surprising. The results indicate that there is still broad support for legalization among most Americans, even in red parts of the country.

CATO Institute research indicates that claims on both sides of the debate are often overstated. In states that have legalized pot, "none of them has witnessed any dramatic negative. They clearly witnessed one noticeable positive, which is the collection of tax revenue," said Miron. But legalization also hasn't resulted in "huge amounts of tax revenue," nor a "grand blooming economy."

John Payne heads Who We Are, the campaign to legalize marijuana use in Missouri. He said the results in Missouri indicate growing bipartisan support for the drug across the country. "It just shows that this is not a partisan issue," he said, "This is something that transcends partisan divides."

Though more states voted against legalization on Tuesday, they are more sparsely populated, said Miron, and don't signal a notable decline in nationwide support. "Overall, there's pretty strong support if you look at the details of the votes, not just whether the ballot measures passed," he said.