



Marijuana legalization is on N.J.'s horizon

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If you are among the dejected legions who believe Election Day had nothing to celebrate, think again: More than a quarter of the U.S. population will soon be legally permitted to purchase or grow recreational marijuana.

Ballot initiatives passed in California, Massachusetts, Maine and Nevada this week, raising the number of states with legal pot to eight (along with Washington D.C.), which is a strong indication that the drive for national reform is reaching critical mass.

Meanwhile, three more states passed measures permitting medical marijuana, which means more than half will provide relief to those who suffer chronic or severe pain. There may even be a hidden benefit to this: A recent [Johns Hopkins](#) study found that states that legalized medical marijuana have seen a 25-percent drop in opioid overdose deaths.

Clearly, the momentum for legalization seems irreversible, and that's good thing – not because blue-staters need to fire one up to get through four years of President Trump (help yourself), but because of the horrendously outdated and destructive laws that are a blight on our criminal justice system.

Consider our state, which could and should be the next to legalize: A New Jerseyan is arrested every 22 minutes for marijuana possession, which is twice the national rate. We spend \$127 million on such arrests in our state every year.

Most first-time convictions for possession lead to fines – a \$500 enforcement penalty is the most common – but repeat offenders can be given probation and are often subject to regular testing, depending on the municipal judge. But high penalties remain on the books – even for less than 50 grams, if you're a repeat offender – and they include jail time, license suspensions, and many civil penalties.

There is no way to justify giving Draconian punishments for such a small crime – especially since it is no longer a crime for nearly 100 million other Americans.

Legalization would not only save our criminal justice system \$127 million, it would also add \$300 million in annual revenue, according to New Jersey Policy Perspective.

It's also become more politically palatable, as no fewer than three bipartisan legalization bills are expected to be introduced as early as January. Chris Christie, however, has always been opposed to legal recreational marijuana, but he may soon plot his exit. If Phil Murphy takes the oath in Jan. 2018, it wouldn't be long before he signed a legalization bill, he confided to a town hall four weeks ago.

There are three pieces of legislation now, which won't get past the current governor's desk. But the next governor, if he's a democrat, is receptive.

The Obama Administration has followed a policy of general non-interference with state laws. And Donald Trump, who is "100 percent in favor" of medical marijuana, said he would not undermine state legalization efforts for recreational pot.

Say this much for the president-elect: He can track the political winds, and this one is easy – especially in New Jersey, where 58 percent of the population favors legalized, taxed, and regulated marijuana for adults 21 and over.

The 39 percent who oppose it might consider a new Cato Institute study which found that legalization has minimal negative consequences - no increase in use by teenagers, no rise in crime rates or drug-related traffic accidents.

In fact, since Colorado became the first to legalize in 2012, drug-related school suspensions have actually decreased.

Yes, there must be tight regulations and an oversight force. Yes, there should be an intelligent tax plan and provisions for home-growing and employment protection. Yes, public consumption and driving under the influence must be met harshly.

But diverting money from criminal syndicates to companies that will check IDs and work under government inspection is a budget bonanza. And New Jersey is in no position to leave tax revenue on the table, or human capital in jail.