

The Gazette

Iowa Democrats' infamous 'legalize all drugs' stance is aging well

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Iowa Democrats adopted the country's most radical stance on drug reform in the state party's 2016 platform — “Legalize all drugs.”

The short and simple platform plank caught international attention and criticism, and even many progressives said the stance went too far or that it **opened the party up to easy mockery**.

Democratic leaders in state government at the time quickly distanced themselves from the position, saying they had no interest in legislation to legalize cocaine, meth and heroin in the **Hawkeye state**.



“That legislation will not move through the **Iowa Legislature**,” **then-Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal told The Gazette**.

Just a few years later, “legalize all drugs” is not as outlandish as it was back then. Several of the most prominent figures in progressive politics are embracing the vision of Iowa’s ardent drug reformers.

Last month, U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez reignited the debate with a **Twitter** post arguing “**drug consumption should be decriminalized**,” presumably referring to all drugs, not just politically popular ones like marijuana.

Every notable 2020 presidential candidate supports easing restrictions on marijuana, including **President Donald Trump**, who is opposed to drug use, and former Vice President **Joe Biden**, who recently faced criticism for wrongly calling marijuana a “**gateway drug**.”

Most of the Democrats support full marijuana legalization. Several would decriminalize other substances, and at least one candidate — **South Bend**, Ind. Mayor **Pete Buttigieg** — supports **decriminalizing possession of all drugs**.

Liberal candidates recognize that drug prohibition has been a disaster, squandering vast sums of taxpayer money and utterly failing to reduce the harmful effects of drug use. They wisely favor government spending on public health programs and addiction treatment over enforcement and incarceration.

There's also a conservative case for accelerating drug reform. For one thing, it's a matter of individual liberty. For another, it would save a lot of money.

State and local governments spend \$47 billion on prohibition each year, according to a **paper published last year by Harvard University scholar Jeffrey Miron** for the **Cato Institute**. The report also estimates full legalization would yield \$58 billion annually in tax revenue. That's a total windfall of more than \$100 billion, not including potential economic stimulus.

Change happens slowly, but the case for sensible drug laws is building strength.

The 2016 “legalize all drugs” moment was a lesson in the way parties determine platforms. Debates over the platform often take place late in the convention, after the high-profile business is done. The people most likely to endure the lengthy process are hard-core and single-issue party activists.

The latest edition of the Iowa Democratic platform is more reserved in style but still pursuant to the same policy objectives, calling to end criminalization and to treat addiction as a public health issue.

This is also an exercise in the power of grassroots radicalism. Today's kooky platform plank might be tomorrow's presidential talking points.