



A Conservative Case on Marijuana

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In 1972, William F. Buckley Jr.'s conservative magazine *National Review* published a cover headline titled "The Time Has Come: Abolish the Pot Laws," a proposal Buckley, himself, supported. Nearly 50 years later, it may be time for conservatives to consider that he was right.

On Dec. 4, the House of Representatives passed a bill decriminalizing marijuana that is sure to fall flat in the Senate. But it shouldn't. A Republican myself, I think my party should reconsider its position on marijuana.

Conservatives, especially younger ones, are likely familiar with political commentator Ben Shapiro's catch phrase "facts don't care about your feelings," an appeal to logic over subjectivity. It's a plea to base our opinions on evidence, not how we feel about a certain issue. According to this principle, we should go where the evidence leads, even if it's contrary to our intuition. In this case, the data seems to support removing prohibitions on marijuana.

Marijuana decriminalization is fiscally conservative. A statistical analysis conducted by the Cato Institute revealed that removing marijuana prohibitions would save the government \$8.7 billion per year on law enforcement costs and bring in an additional \$8.7 billion per year in taxes. Nowhere near enough to balance the government's budget, but progress in the right direction. The additional funds could go toward lowering the deficit (my preferred option to avoid austerity measures falling on younger generations), toward job training and substance abuse treatments (as the current bill provides), or for reinvestment in better policing for safer communities.

But conservatives don't care about money for money's sake, we care about it because of its effect on people. It's the same reason why we care about limited government; we believe it improves people's lives. In this way, marijuana decriminalization is consistent with the principle of limited government because it removes governmental barriers to opportunity. In 2018, more than 608,000 people were charged with marijuana law violations after being arrested for possession. And being charged with drug offenses makes it more difficult for individuals to get jobs or rent places to live, two necessities for economic mobility. Conservatives want to increase opportunity and get the government out of people's way. Marijuana decriminalization helps achieve that.

But what about the other legitimate human concerns? What about the potential for increased crime, decreased traffic safety, worse public health and lower educational attainment? Well, if

evidence from states that have already legalized marijuana are any indicators, these fears should be calmed. While it is still early to reach concrete conclusions, a growing body of literature shows that these concerns have not come to fruition. For example, a study conducted by researchers Jeffrey Miron and Angela Dills on outcomes in Colorado, Washington, Oregon and Alaska post-legalization found no statistically significant effects on traffic accidents, public health, or crime rates. While it is safe to assume that marijuana use increases with relaxed laws, the other adverse effects that opponents worried about have not materialized.

This does, however, bring up another legitimate concern — that consistent use by younger Americans will have negative health consequences in the long term. Though more research is necessary, let's assume that marijuana does indeed have long-term health consequences. In this event, the government should treat marijuana like tobacco and tax it to account for the externality, while relying on educational campaigns and personal responsibility to decrease usage. Paternalism is not what conservatism is about.

National Review got it right in 1972. Republicans, the time has come — abolish the pot laws.