

HIGH TIMES

Oregon, Alaska are ground zero in pot fight

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GRANTS PASS, Ore. (AP) — From slick video ads online to scrawled chalk messages on college campus sidewalks, intense get-out-the-vote drives are mobilizing in Oregon and Alaska to legalize retail sales of marijuana to anyone old enough to drink.

But backers of the legal-pot ballot measures in both states have a challenge that their predecessors in Colorado and Washington state didn't face two years ago — increasing turnout of young voters in a midterm election.

Young voters, who as a generation are more likely to support recreational marijuana, usually turn out during presidential years like 2012, but stay home during midterms, when the electorate skews older and more conservative.

If young people 18 to 29 years old vote like they did in 2012, Oregon's Measure 91, for example, would pass, said Ethan Nadelmann, head of Drug Policy Action, a major contributor in the national campaign to legalize marijuana.

"That's really what it boils down to," he said.

Washington, D.C., is voting on whether to make it legal to possess marijuana, but not sell it.

Whatever happens in the states and the nation's capital, advocates plan to quickly shift their attention to the 2016 presidential elections and the big prize: California, where hopes are high for approval of legal pot despite a 2010 rejection.

"Even if all those things go down to defeat, I still think it's a clean slate in 2016," said Jeffrey Miron, an economist at Harvard University and the Cato Institute who follows national drug policy.

Mark Kleiman, a drug policy consultant who helped Washington set up its legal marijuana industry, said the outcomes in Oregon and Alaska "will help determine the enthusiasm of funders financing the legalization campaign in California."

In the meantime, the focus is on Oregon and Alaska.

Oregon is a blue state that decriminalized marijuana in 1973 and authorized medical marijuana in 1998.

The state's southwestern corner is renowned for growing some of the nation's best marijuana, and attracts outlaw growers from the U.S. and Mexico. Medical pot dispensaries were approved last year to sell to nearly 70,000 patients.

Alaska, by contrast, is more conservative, but there's a strong libertarian streak, and small amounts of marijuana have been legal for personal use since a 1975 state Supreme Court ruling. Medical pot is legal, but not dispensaries.

Both states have seen previous initiatives to legalize marijuana fail. This time around, campaigns have major contributions from out-of-state donors who want see the legal pot movement garner more victories.

In Alaska, supporters of Measure 2 have raised more than \$890,000, nearly all of it from the Marijuana Policy Project, the largest federal spender on marijuana advocacy. Opponents have raised nearly \$150,000.

Despite the difference, the no campaign — "Big Marijuana. Big Mistake — is not giving up, relying heavily on volunteers, social media, letters to the editor and word of mouth.

"More and more Alaskans are donating to the no campaign," said spokeswoman Deborah Williams. "They're convinced we need to defeat this measure. And we will win this measure."

In Oregon, two groups backing Measure 91 have raised a total of nearly \$4 million, most of it spent on TV ads. Opponents have raised \$168,000.

In the state, where elections are settled exclusively by mail ballots, "closing the deal" means a two-step process, said Liz Kaufman, campaign director for Yes on 91. People need to mark their ballots, and then turn them in.

The campaign is reaching out with TV, phone trees, door-to-door canvassing and chalking on college campuses.

"You'd be surprised how many people mark up their ballots and don't turn them in," Kaufman said.

In Alaska, a recent poll for initiative proponents shows overwhelming support among voters under 35, with the measure winning by 18 points. Another for opponents shows it losing by 10 points.

"It's a very polarized race," said Anchorage pollster Ivan Moore, who conducted the poll for the initiative sponsor. "Young people like it and old people don't. And the trouble for the yes side is that old people vote and young people don't."

Another key demographic is mothers.

With only \$168,000 to spend, the No-on-91 campaign in Oregon used most of it to mail 155,000 postcards to mothers from Portland to Eugene. It focused on fears that marijuana-infused candy and sodas pose a danger to kids.

They have also flown in people from Colorado to speak out, said Clatsop County Sheriff Tom Bergin, a leader of the no campaign. "It's really difficult," he said. "We've got daytime jobs. The potheads don't. This is their job to get this legalized."

Polls in Oregon have shown support for legalization declining as election day approaches, but still with a fair chance of passing, said Seattle pollster Stuart Elway.

"In Washington's experience, the measure out-performed the polls," he said. "What we have in Oregon right now is a statistical dead heat. It's going to depend in large part on who votes."