



US Voters Back State Measures on Marijuana, Minimum Wage

By Mike Richman
November 5, 2014

Americans voted Tuesday for members of the House of Representatives, one-third of the Senate and more than half of the nation's state governors. In many states, the vote included so-called ballot initiatives giving voters a say on how their states should handle specific issues affecting people's lives.

In the two most eye-catching moves, voters agreed to legalize marijuana in two U.S. states and in Washington, D.C., and agreed to increase the minimum wage in four states.

Earlier this year, the states of Colorado and Washington state began selling legalized marijuana, after voters approved the legalization years before.

Growing trend

Analysts say the decisions Tuesday by voters in Oregon, Alaska and Washington, D.C., to also legalize pot are part of a growing trend.

Jocelyn Kiley of the Pew Research Center says the group's polling has shown a "fairly steady" rise in national support for marijuana legalization over the past decade. She says that support has been driven partly by age-based demographics.

"Support for marijuana legalization is going up across the board, but it also has a generational component. So, younger people are more likely to support marijuana legalization. So, to the extent that as more and more millennials enter the electorate and fewer and fewer of those in the older generations are in the electorate, I think you'll continue to see an overall shift in opinions about this," says Kiley.

On Tuesday, Oregon and Alaska passed measures that allow people 21 and older to buy and possess marijuana. Their programs are similar to those set up in Colorado and Washington state.

The initiative in Washington, D.C., lets people 21 and older possess and grow marijuana, but not buy it. That measure is subject to a congressional review before taking effect.

CATO Institute economist Jeff Miron says it is not shocking that Oregon, Alaska and

Washington, D.C., legalized marijuana, because voters there have long been inclined to do so. He sees a political element behind the trend.

"I think it's part of the more broader trend toward... [a] moderate to libertarian perspective that's part of the American electorate, instead of just the hardcore conservative or hardcore liberal outlook," says Miron.

Meanwhile, voters in the southeastern state of Florida rejected a proposal to legalize marijuana for medical purposes. Medical marijuana is legal in 23 other states.

Minimum wage boost

On the minimum wage issue, voters in Arkansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Alaska approved initiatives to raise the rate above the federal hourly minimum of \$7.25. Alaska saw the highest increase, up to \$9.75 an hour.

Those four states have a majority Republican voting bloc, and Republicans generally oppose minimum wage increases partly out of fear they will hurt business owners.

Miron says minimum wage increases are popular even in Republican-dominated states because voters are unaware of any potentially negative economic impact.

"I think it says that the minimum wage is a broadly appealing policy to people who haven't really accepted the economic perspective on it. It feels like a free lunch because it seems like some people are benefiting - the employees who get a higher wage - and the money to pay for that comes from somewhere, nowhere, thin air, magic fairies or whatever," says Miron.

Also Tuesday, the ballot in Washington state had two competing gun control initiatives. Voters approved one to expand required background checks for gun sales to include those online and at gun shows.