

# Let's Be Blunt: Public Opinion on the Legalization of Marijuana in the United States

*A report from The Life, Liberty, and Happiness Project*

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In 1996, California passed Proposition 215, becoming the first state in the nation to legalize marijuana for medicinal purposes. Since that time, marijuana laws have gradually changed in numerous other states across the nation. As of 2019, 32 states have followed California in legalizing the medical use of marijuana,<sup>1</sup> while 11 states and the District of Columbia have gone further, legalizing marijuana for non-medical, recreational purposes.<sup>2</sup> Fifteen states also have passed laws that decriminalize the possession of small amounts of marijuana (considered for personal use).<sup>3</sup> And, as recently as October of 2019, Governor Tom Wolf of Pennsylvania, publicly expressed his support for pardoning those convicted of nonviolent marijuana offenses.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the remaining 2020 Democratic presidential candidates agree that marijuana should be removed from the list of controlled substances at the federal level.<sup>5</sup> Many of them view full marijuana legalization as a racial justice issue, with some recommending that marijuana convictions be expunged.<sup>6</sup> Others, such as former Vice President Joe Biden, oppose the legalization of marijuana. This November, while on the campaign trail in Nevada, Biden argued that there is not “enough evidence” to know whether or not marijuana is a “gateway drug” (a term that refers to a drug whose use makes it more likely that a person will later use other harder, more addictive drugs, such as cocaine or heroin).<sup>7</sup>

With marijuana being an ever-present issue in state and national politics, the ECU Center for Survey Research (CSR), as part of its 2019 Life, Liberty, and Happiness Project, surveyed more than 1,000 adults nationwide to examine what the public thinks about marijuana use and its legalization. Specifically, participants answered the following two questions<sup>8</sup> below:

- “Do you think the use of marijuana for recreational purposes should be legal across the United States?”
- “Do you think the use of marijuana makes people more likely to use other drugs that are illegal?”

As this report shows, a significant majority of U.S. adults agree that marijuana should be fully legalized and that it is not a gateway drug.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ More than three out of five (62%) U.S. adults support the legalization of marijuana.
  - > Support for the legalization of marijuana varies significantly by party affiliation and ideology: 91% of those who identify as ideologically liberal and as Democrats (i.e., liberal Democrats) support the legalization of marijuana compared to 24% of those who identify as ideologically conservative and as Republicans (i.e., conservative Republicans). Moderates and independents fall in between. Of note, a majority (55%) of moderate Republicans support legalization.

- > Those living in metro areas are more supportive of the legalization of marijuana than those living in non-metro areas; however, there are no significant differences in opinion when comparing those living in so-called “red” states (i.e., states won by Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election) and those living in “blue” states (i.e., states won by Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election).
- > By a wide margin, those from the “Silent and Greatest Generation” (those born before 1946) are the most likely to oppose the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes. Approximately 76% of those from the Silent and Greatest Generation do not think marijuana should be legalized for recreational purposes compared to 43% of Baby Boomers (those born between 1946-1964), 39% of those in Generation X (those born between 1965-1980), and 24% of Millennials and Post-Millennials (those born after 1980).
- > Even among those who do not use marijuana regularly (i.e., within the past 30 days), support for legalization remains strong at 57%.
- ▶ Less than two out of five (39%) U.S. adults believe marijuana is a gateway drug.
- ▶ Supporters and opponents of marijuana legalization differ significantly on whether marijuana is a gateway drug.
  - > Approximately 81% of those who oppose the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes believe that marijuana is a gateway drug compared to just 14% among those who favor legalization.
  - > Likewise, those who accept the theory that marijuana is a gateway drug are more likely to oppose the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes (78%) than those who do not see marijuana as a gateway drug (12%).
- ▶ Among those who reported using marijuana within the past 30 days, only 8% see it as a gateway drug. By comparison, among those who do not use marijuana regularly, 44% believe marijuana makes people more likely to use other illegal drugs.

## I. OPINION ON THE LEGALIZATION OF MARIJUANA

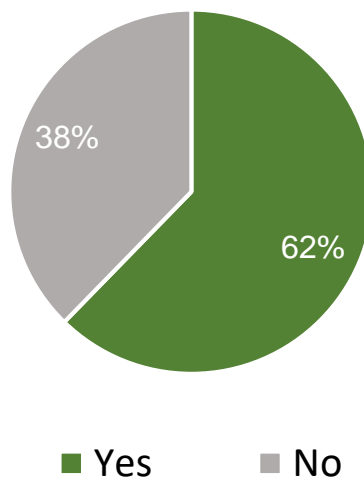
► **Public opinion strongly favors the legalization of marijuana for recreation purposes across the United States.**

- Supporters of the legalization of recreational marijuana outnumber opponents by a 62% to 38% margin.

### Opinion on the Legalization of Marijuana

% of adults who selected Yes or No to the question:

**“Do you think the use of marijuana for recreational purposes should be legal across the United States?”**

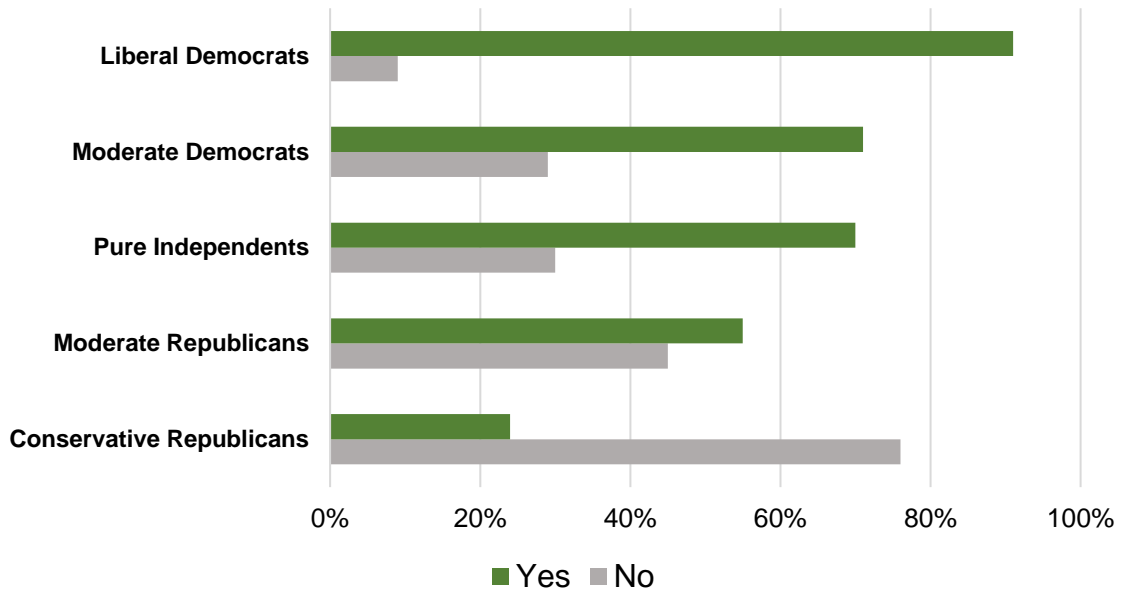


► **Liberal Democrats, moderate Democrats, independents, and even moderate Republicans support the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes. There is solid opposition, however, from conservative Republicans.**

- Those who identify as Democrats and identify their ideological views as liberal are the most likely to favor the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes, whereas conservative Republicans are the least likely. As shown in the chart below, approximately 91% of liberal Democrats support the legalization of marijuana compared to 24% of conservative Republicans. Moderate Democrats (71%), pure independents who have no partisan leanings (70%), and moderate Republicans (55%) fall in between.

## Opinion on the Legalization of Marijuana by Partisanship and Ideology

% of adults who selected Yes or No to the question:  
**“Do you think the use of marijuana for recreational purposes should be legal across the United States?”**



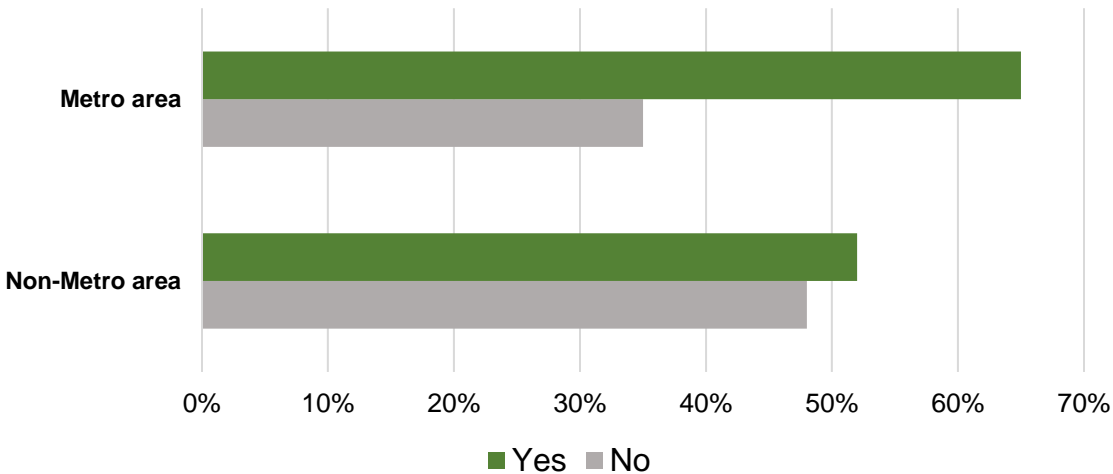
► **There is NO red-state vs. blue-state divide, but there is a metro vs. non-metro divide.**

- When comparing those who live in states where Donald Trump won the popular vote in the 2016 presidential election (red state) to those living in states where Hillary Clinton won the popular vote (blue states), the results reveal no major differences. Blue state residents favor the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes by a 65% to 35% margin, whereas red state residents favor the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes by a 62% to 38% margin.
- However, regional differences do exist when examining those living in metro versus non-metro areas. (Metro area is determined based on U.S. Census classifications. For additional information, see <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/metro-micro/about.html>). As the next chart reveals, metro area residents favor legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes by a 65% to 35% margin. Those living in non-metro areas also support the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes, but by a smaller margin of 52% to 48%.

## Opinion on the Legalization of Marijuana by Metro Area and Non-Metro Area Residents

% of adults who selected Yes or No to the question:

**“Do you think the use of marijuana for recreational purposes should be legal across the United States?”**

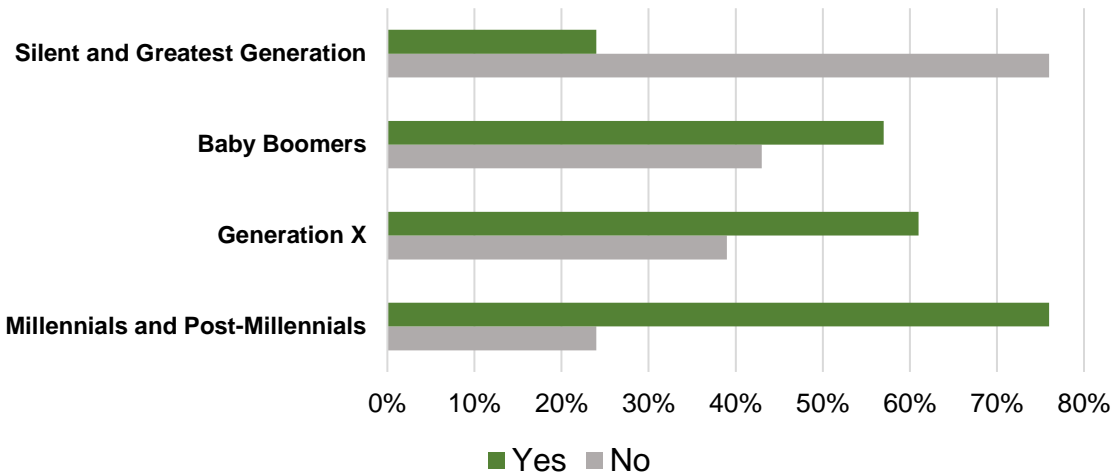


► **Those from the “Silent and Greatest Generation” are the most likely to oppose the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes.**

- Approximately 76% of those from the Silent and Greatest Generation (those born before 1946) do not think marijuana should be legalized for recreational purposes across the United States. This compares to 43% of Baby Boomers (those born between 1946-1964), 39% of Generation X (those born between 1965-1980), and 24% of Millennials and Post-Millennials (those born after 1980). Those from the Silent and Greatest Generation were exposed to movies such as *Reefer Madness* (1936), which suggested that marijuana use would lead to complete madness and loss of self-control. As the results reveal as well, Millennials and Post-Millennials, who were either born after or were too young to remember President Ronald Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign against drug use in the 1980s, are the most supportive of the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes.

## Opinion on the Legalization of Marijuana by Generation

% of adults who selected Yes or No to the question:  
**“Do you think the use of marijuana for recreational purposes should be legal across the United States?”**



► **Among those who have not used marijuana recently, a majority still support the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes.**

- Among those who do not report using marijuana over the past 30 days, support for legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes remains strong at 57%. (As expected, among those who do report using marijuana over the past 30 days, support for legalization is near unanimous.)

## II. OPINION OF MARIJUANA AS A GATEWAY DRUG

During the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan advanced the so-called “war on drugs.” As a part of this campaign, the Reagan administration popularized the term “gateway drug” as way to explain the theory that if young people refused to use marijuana, then they would be unlikely to use other illegal drugs.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Gateway Drug Theory suggests that there is a sequence of stages in drug use, beginning with socially acceptable and legal substances, such as cigarettes and alcohol, followed by illegal and softer drugs, such as marijuana, and then harder, more addictive drugs, such as cocaine and heroin.<sup>10</sup> The Gateway Drug Theory has resurfaced recently. Former Attorney General Jeff Sessions and former New Jersey governor, Chris Christie, have both referenced the Gateway Drug Theory as a reason for their opposition to more relaxed laws governing marijuana use.<sup>11</sup> While politicians continue to debate whether marijuana is a gateway drug, the general public, for the most part, rejects the theory.

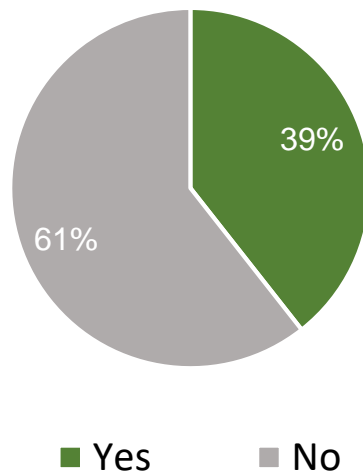
► **Public opinion tilts against the position that marijuana is a gateway drug.**

- Approximately 61% of adults nationwide answered “no” when asked if they thought marijuana makes people more likely to use other illegal drugs, compared to 39% who answered “yes.”

## Opinion on Marijuana as a "Gateway Drug"

% of adults who selected Yes or No to the question:

**Do you think the use of marijuana makes people more likely to use other illegal drugs?**



► **Supporters and opponents of marijuana legalization differ significantly on whether marijuana is a gateway drug.**

- Opinions about marijuana as a gateway drug and marijuana legalization for recreational purposes are closely linked. Even though the Gateway Drug Theory is an issue ultimately for research and science to answer, a person’s opinion of the legalization of marijuana shapes their attitudes on marijuana as a gateway drug, and vice-versa. Approximately 81% of those who oppose the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes believe that marijuana is a gateway drug. That percentage drops to just 14% among those who favor legalization. Likewise, those who accept the theory that marijuana is a gateway drug are more likely to oppose the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes (78%) than those who reject Gateway Drug Theory (12%).



► **Marijuana use is related to opinions about whether it is a gateway drug.**

- Those who have not used marijuana in the past 30 days are 5.5 times more likely to see it as a gateway drug when compared to those who have used. Approximately 44% of non-marijuana users think that marijuana makes people more likely to use other illegal drugs compared to just 8% of marijuana users.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Governors and state legislatures across the United States are currently considering bills and policies to legalize or relax laws concerning marijuana use or possession. At the federal level, presidential candidates are discussing the issue. As recently as this past November, the U.S. House Judiciary Committee voted to approve the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act, or H.R. 3884, that would remove marijuana from the Controlled Substances Act. Although the bill is unlikely to become law any time soon, its progress through the congressional committee process underscores the saliency of marijuana policy in the United States.

As elected officials continue debates into the future about marijuana laws, the current state of public opinion nationwide is rather clear. Most Americans support the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes and reject the theory that marijuana is a gateway drug. Opposition to marijuana legalization, however, is still strong among conservative Republicans. All of this suggests that the debate over marijuana laws in the United States is only likely to continue as we enter 2020 and beyond.

## METHODOLOGY

This report was based on a mixed mode of responses from the Internet and mail. In total, the sample consisted of completed responses from 1,065 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The mail surveys were delivered to 3,500 randomly selected addresses in the United States. Approximately 672 of these addresses were returned as undeliverable. The mail respondents were contacted in three waves, starting with an informational postcard that introduced the survey, the survey, and a reminder to complete the survey. There were 339 completed and returned surveys, producing a response rate of 12 percent. The mail surveys were collected between May 20 and June 28, 2019.

The online portion of the survey was conducted among a demographically representative national sample of 726 adults age 18 or older, living in all 50 states. Respondents for this portion of the survey were selected from a group of over one million people that participate in the Qualtrics survey platform. Participants were self-selected into the survey, rather than through random selection. To avoid self-selection bias, participants were not told the nature of the survey when asked to participate. Additionally, to ensure data quality, three validity checks were included in the online survey to ensure that respondents were reading the questions carefully before answering them. The online interviews were conducted between May 21 and May 30, 2019.

The combined sample of mail and Internet respondents were weighted by age, gender, race, education, party identification, and mode. The credibility interval, much like a margin of error, is plus or minus 3.4 percentage points, and takes design effects into consideration. For additional information, please see the ECU-CSR's AAPOR Transparency Initiative report at <https://surveyresearch.ecu.edu/lifelibertyhappiness/>.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “State Medical Marijuana Laws,” National Conference of State Legislatures, October 16, 2019, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/state-medical-marijuana-laws.aspx>.
- <sup>2</sup> “State Marijuana Laws in 2019 Map,” *Governing*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.governing.com/gov-data/safety-justice/state-marijuana-laws-map-medical-recreational.html>.
- <sup>3</sup> German Lopez, “15 States Have Decriminalized – But Not Legalized – Marijuana,” *Vox*, July 10, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/8/20/17938358/marijuana-legalization-decriminalization-states-map>.
- <sup>4</sup> Jamie Bittner, “Governor Issues Call for People to Apply for Pardons for Non-Violent Marijuana Convictions,” *Fox 43*, October 2, 2019, <https://fox43.com/2019/10/02/governor-issues-call-for-people-to-apply-for-pardons-for-non-violent-marijuana-convictions>.
- <sup>5</sup> Ashley Turner, “Most 2020 Democratic Presidential Candidates Agree on Recreational Marijuana: Legalize It,” *CNBC*, April 20, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/18/2020-democratic-candidates-stand-together-on-marijuana-legalize-it.html>.
- <sup>6</sup> Trip Gabriel, “Legalizing Marijuana, With a Focus on Social Justice, Unites 2020 Democrats,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/17/us/politics/marijuana-legalize-democrats.html>.
- <sup>7</sup> Simon Moya-Smith, “Marijuana Is Not a ‘Gate Drug.’ If Joe Biden Doesn’t Know That, He Shouldn’t Be President,” *NBC News*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/marijuana-not-gateway-drug-if-joe-biden-doesn-t-know-ncna1085866>.
- <sup>8</sup> To examine if marijuana users had different opinions from non-users, the survey also asked, “Have you used marijuana in the last 30 days?” Our results indicate that approximately 14% of U.S. adults report having used marijuana in the past 30 days. Marijuana use is higher among those who are younger (i.e., under the age of 45), the poor (i.e., live in a household with income of less than \$20,000 a year), as well as the unemployed and those unable to work.
- <sup>9</sup> “Debunking the ‘Gateway’ Myth,” Drug Policy Alliance, February 2017, [https://www.drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/DebunkingGatewayMyth\\_NY\\_0.pdf](https://www.drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/DebunkingGatewayMyth_NY_0.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> Adi Jaffe, “Is Marijuana a Gateway Drug?” For Quite Some Time, Marijuana Was Seen as the Start of Trouble, But Why?” *Psychology Today*, July 24, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/all-about-addiction/201807/is-marijuana-gateway-drug>.
- <sup>11</sup> Douglas Quenqua, “A Comeback for the Gateway Drug Theory?” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/07/well/live/a-comeback-for-the-gateway-drug-theory.html>.