

# *WHO SUPPORTS THE LEGALIZATION OF MARIJUANA?*

The impact of liberalism and age on attitudes surrounding legalization of recreational marijuana.

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## Introduction

In an era of political polarization, the possibility of the legalization of recreational marijuana has become a popular topic of controversy. While few states have passed general legislation (Alaska, Colorado, Washington, and Oregon), the vast majority still prohibit recreational use. But it is clear that opinion is changing, as 23 states and Washington DC have passed varying laws allowing marijuana use under some medical conditions, since 1996 (Marijuana Resource Center 2016). However, the remaining states fully prohibit use, and use of cannabis continues to be a federal offense<sup>1</sup>. In the interest of understanding why there are so many differences between the states, it is necessary to examine who supports recreational legalization, and why they hold those opinions. There are diverse lists of personal reasons people feel the way they do, and research on those arguments, but here, the focus is on *who* those people are. Additionally, the recent increase in positivity toward marijuana held by members of the American public is unprecedented (Saeiva 2008). This suggests an increase in marijuana related ballot initiatives in coming elections.

In order for lawmakers to create quality legislation, it is critical that they understand why people support a topic, so they can reflect the views of supporters while compromising with the opposition. With many states considering legalization, all citizens have the possibility of being affected by the quality of this legislation in the coming years. It is important that officials carefully examine exactly who supports legalization so they can work together to create comprehensive ballot initiatives for recreational marijuana when the time comes. It is for that reason that this paper examines the effects of both liberal political ideology and age on support

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<sup>1</sup>While this research has been completed in 2017, the facts included surrounding state legalization are from 2014 to accurately reflect the political culture at the time of the 2014 General Social Survey.

for the legalization of recreational marijuana to understand if it has a significant impact on support.

### **Literature Review**

The legalization of recreational marijuana is no simple matter. There is much uncertainty in many aspects of legalization; in fact, many people who have voted towards varieties of legalization on ballot measures have done so still feeling uncertainty, but their positive reasons for support have outweighed doubts (Galston and Dionne 2013). The focus here is on support for legalization, but it's important to have an idea as to why people feel negatively toward the possibility. Various oppositions to legalization include the fear that the number of users will increase particularly among young people, doing drugs may be considered morally wrong, it's addictive qualities, an increase in driving under the influence, and that the brain is still developing until age 25 (U.S. News 2012). While the first states legalized recreational marijuana in the 2012 election, that it is too early to draw conclusions about generalizable successes or failures. The speed and scale of commercialization efforts have been slowed by officials working out the legalities of the state vs. federal laws and restrictions on licenses for producers and sellers. These technicalities make the first few years unique, and not a display of what could be normal in the future (Hall and Lynskey 2016). This is unfortunate because the arguments opposing marijuana can't yet be well proven or disproven.

On the other hand, many recreational marijuana supporters argue that based on the number of people who have tried it, prohibition as a deterrent isn't effective, legalization would take control of pricing, potency, and regulate advertising, that too many people are arrested for possession and labeled with a criminal record, and that there are medical benefits from consumption (U.S. News 2012). The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) classifies

marijuana as a schedule 1 drug, along with heroin, ecstasy, LSD, and peyote; all are considered to have a high potential for abuse and no medical use accepted (Drug Enforcement Administration 2016). This is viewed as problematic to legalization supporters for a number of reasons, one being that marijuana prohibition uses resources that could be better utilized in more serious crime-control agendas, and forces users to purchase from criminal drug dealers (Blumenson and Nilsen 2010). From another perspective, the scheduling seriously limits research on the medical effects of marijuana, since researchers have to jump through hoops to even get access to plants to study (Nutt, King, and Nichols 2013).

The increase in use of medical marijuana may be a reason for the recent change in attitudes towards marijuana. Saeiva (2008) discusses the effects of changes in contextual framing of marijuana legalization, explaining that attitudes favorable to medical marijuana or decriminalization are likely to differentiate themselves from general legalization. Galston (2013) agrees that medical marijuana has helped in shaping attitudes, including that more than three quarters of the US believe marijuana has “legitimate medical uses,” and the statistic includes 72% of Republicans and 60% of seniors.

### *Political Ideology*

The majority of the states that have legalized recreational marijuana have had left leaning, “blue” majorities during their years of legalization, with Alaska as an outlier (270 to Win 2012, 2014). There are number of reasons why liberal identifying respondents are likely to support the legalization of recreational marijuana, similar to why mostly liberal states voted for legalization. To begin, liberals are characterized as being progressive and are less bound to tradition than their conservative counterparts. Conover and Feldman (1981) prove this point in their empirical assessment testing ideological self-identification, finding that cognitive and

symbolic sources of meaning contribute to ideological labels of “liberal” such as change, concern with problems, recent social issues, and equality. Meanwhile ideological “conservative” labels were commonly capitalism, law and order, foreign policies, and fiscal policies. Conover argues that conservatives prefer to keep with the status quo, but marijuana breaks social norms, and recreational legalization sends states into uncharted territory.

In addition, liberals support government economic regulation and personal liberty (Swedlow 2008). By legalizing marijuana, personal freedom is expanded in that there isn’t harsh punishment for recreational use. This also corresponds with the libertarian argument that marijuana prohibition infringes on personal liberties (Hall 1997). Although differing from libertarianism, the state would strictly regulate it, i.e., in Oregon, adults over the age of 21 can possess 1 ounce of cannabis in public and 8 ounces at home, and sales are taxed at a rate of 17% (Oregon Department of Revenue 2016). State regulation corresponds with the liberal ideology favoring economic regulation.

Going further, liberal ideology puts a large emphasis on equality and legal due process, and disadvantaged groups experience the heaviest weight of prohibition of marijuana. According to Yankah (2011), by refusing to decriminalize the proven widespread behavior, the state increases “its power to stop, search, seize and monitor its citizens at its whim.” He addresses the racial divide resulting from such behavior; the drug arrest rates for African Americans are disproportionate to their total representation in the US. The evidence of injustice is in the fact that 40% of the arrests made are for the possession of marijuana, while African Americans and whites use the substance at the same rate (Yankah 2011). Legalization of marijuana would benefit minorities and the poor by reducing their likelihood of creating a criminal record for participating in arguably common behavior.

There is widespread evidence that liberal respondents are more likely than conservatives to support legalization of marijuana. In a study comparing support for marijuana in Uruguay and the US, Cruz, Queirolo, and Boidi (2015) find that respondents who self-identify with the political left ideology are at increased odds of supporting legalization, but identifying as conservative doesn't specifically decrease favoring legalization. Additionally, Saeiva (2008) studies the amount attitudes have changed in the past four decades and the social factors known to be associated with attitudes towards legalization have shifted in the same time period. He finds that being politically liberal is a consistent indicative variable for predicting support for legalization over all the decades studied; the 1970s through the 2000s, when compared to those identified as conservatives. Further, the Pew Research Center (2013) has data specifically in relation to inside the Democratic Party, reflecting the importance of understanding the differences between liberal and Democrat, reporting that 73% of liberal Democrats support the legalization of marijuana, but only roughly half of moderate and conservative Democrats favor legalization. These results signify the importance of specification in ideological association when understanding who supports legalization. Finally, Palamar (2014) details specifications surrounding legalization. On the topic of marijuana sales, liberals and moderates are both at high odds of supporting sales limited to adults, and low odds of supporting selling marijuana to anyone, implying an importance in restrictions surrounding legalization.

However, there is agreement across ideological lines in *some* aspects of legalization discussion. In addressing the topic of government efforts to enforce marijuana laws, there is agreement across the grid that "they cost more than they are worth," with 79% of liberals, 65% of conservatives, and 76% of moderates (Galston 2013). Furthermore, there are significant minorities in each ideological area that counter attitude norms in relation to general legalization.

25% of liberals oppose marijuana, but 37% of conservatives support legalization (Galston 2013), which could be a reflection of their preference toward state autonomy.

### *Age*

In addition to liberal political ideology increasing the likelihood of respondents supporting marijuana legalization, there is reason to predict that age plays a significant role in the probability of support. This is to the extent that young respondents, between the ages of 18-29, are more likely than all older respondents to support legalization. One reason young people likely have the highest support is because they have less to lose in the world from trying new and uncertain things, like legalizing an illegal plant. As people age they acquire increasingly permanent responsibilities such as careers and expansion of families. They experience socio-cultural changes that commonly shift behavior and attitudes, especially when they have to consider what is “best” for children or their careers, also often changing behavior (Saeiva 2008). Young adults, experiencing new autonomy and opportunities, often display an exploratory nature, experimenting with new things. This attitude makes young people especially open minded about marijuana legalization. On the other hand, older adults have lived for much longer under the current laws surrounding marijuana. They tend to be more bound to their ways of life, and less optimistic towards changing the system they understand. Galston (2013) explains that the silent generation, who they argue stays in opposition to legalization, came to adulthood in the 1950s, and wasn’t strongly connected to the 60s-70s counterculture often associated with drug experimentation.

The most important factor contributing to the favorable attitudes of young people towards marijuana is that they are most likely to have tried it and/or actively consume it recreationally. Crawford (2013) suggests that marijuana assists in the cultural assimilation process of beginning

university, so teenagers are likely to try it as a seemingly coming of age college preparation. He acknowledges Brown's (1974) findings that after graduating, college students phase out marijuana consumption, with the pressure of social integration and other factors examined earlier. The Pew Research Center (2013) finds that 48% of respondents have tried marijuana in their lifetime (up from 38% ten years ago), and 12% of all respondents report using the substance in the past year. At the same time, 27% of respondents under age 30 say they have used marijuana in the past year, a statistic at least three times the rate of any other age group.

There is an abundance of research supporting the theory that personal use of marijuana increases the likelihood of supporting legalization, as well as work supporting age as a determinant of support for marijuana. Younger adults lead the age groups in numbers, which concludes that young people are likely to have the most experience with the substance. In a phone study of Ontario done by Ogborne, Smart, and Adlaf (2000), they find that males ages 18-25 have a high correlation with marijuana use. In their international study, Cruz et al. (2015) finds that previous personal experience with marijuana contributes substantive support for legalization across all three countries (US, Uruguay, and El Salvador) with the highest odds in the United States.

On the other hand, while Galston (2013) agrees that personal use is important to shaping attitudes, they argue people between 30-64 (30-49 at 51% and 50-64 at 54%) are roughly as likely to have tried marijuana as 18-29 year olds (56%). In this report, seniors aged 65+ are the outliers, with only 22% saying they have used marijuana. These findings could be explained by Crick, Cooke, and Bewley-Taylor (2014), saying that marijuana has always been around in the lives of Generation X and millennials, making it less of a taboo to those age groups, and possibly a reason for support. Still, the Galston (2013) findings don't specify frequency of use, only



stating that people have tried marijuana, and they do include that people who gave up marijuana over ten years ago are less likely to support legalization than more frequent, recent users. This corresponds to Brown's (1974) theory that college graduates phase out of marijuana use, and definitely contributes to why older people are less likely to support legalization than young people, who are more likely to be active, recreational users.

The relationship between liberalism and age is complicated. First, I argue that liberals are more likely than conservatives to use marijuana recreationally, as well as young people in comparison to older people. In regard to a direct connection between age and liberalism, there is a common assumption that young people are liberal and some grow to be more conservative when they become older, but this is not necessarily true (Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb 1991).

Instead, it has been found that generations tend to imprint on early life political experiences (Desilver 2014). This means that major political events, i.e., 9/11, Watergate, impeachments, etc. shape political attitudes that people hold throughout their lives, creating generational differences in the liberal/conservative spectrum (Lackey 2015). From this theory, those in the greatest generation, who were coming of age during Roosevelt's presidency, consistently voted for Democrat presidential candidates until the end of their era, compared to the national average. An important note is that from this model there are intergenerational differences, due to basing group differences off of presidents in office when respondents were turning 18. For example, there are differences within Gen X because those who were becoming adults during the Reagan/Bush administration have consistently voted for Republican candidates for the most part, but those who became adults during the Clinton administration have favored Democrats for the majority of elections (Desilver 2014). In this case, I believe that today's 18-29 year olds are likely to favor candidates with liberal policies, or Democrats, by the data on their

voting patterns, which corresponds to young people favoring marijuana legalization. Over all, I predict that young respondents aged 18-19 and self-identified liberals are at an increased likelihood of supporting the legalization of recreational marijuana.

## **Methods**

The data for this research is from the 2014 General Social Survey (GSS), consisting of 3,842 respondents, from an original sample of 5,125 people, at a roughly 68% response rate. The GSS is a well-known and widely used cross sectional survey of a nationally representative sample of the non-institutionalized English and Spanish speaking adult population aged 18 and older in the US. The sample is a multi-stage area probability sample to the block or segment level using Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs) from the Census. For the particular topic of legalization of marijuana there were 3,800 respondents.

I administer a chi-square test for the independent variables (liberalism and age) through crosstabulation in order to analyze the relationships between all variables, including the dependent (support for legalization). If the results show chi-square p-values of 0.05 or less, they are considered to be significantly correlated, thus providing my hypothesis with adequate support for the existence of the relationship between the variables. If this is the case I can reject the null hypothesis.

The GSS includes a single question on the topic of legalization, asking, “Do you think the use of marijuana should be made legal or not?” It gives the respondents the option of saying it should, or should not. One issue with the data is that respondents may support medical marijuana, but not recreational, and might be compelled to respond with “should not” due to lack of options. However, the question is clear and straight forward, and the assumption can be made

that respondents understood that it was referring to marijuana in general. There also wasn't an undecided option, which could push people to pick an answer that they didn't necessarily agree with. The data shows that 1,419 answers were missing, so many respondents may have skipped the question as a consequence for lack of options.

The measure of liberal political ideology is based off of self-identification from the respondents in the GSS. This form of grouping can be problematic because the concept of liberal ideology might have different meanings to respondents, given that ideology itself is a concept, a basis of ideas that isn't necessarily explicitly shown or proven. For example, income is something that can be proven easily, while liberal ideology really only exists because people who share similar beliefs label it as such. It is those "similar beliefs" that vary over time and place. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2016), liberalism is characterized by "belief in progress, the essential goodness of the human race, and the autonomy of the individual and standing for the protection of political and civil liberties..." The definition includes that government is a critical element in the improvement of social inequalities (Merriam-Webster 2016). This definition is reasonable, but obviously isn't included in the General Social Survey, and therefore respondents are left to make their own conclusions about where they stand.

Another possible consequence of self-identification is that respondents may use the terms "liberal" and "democrat" interchangeably. According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2014, 38% of politically engaged Democrats are consistent liberals, which is an all-time high. This means that to use them interchangeably is incorrect, and it isn't accurate to use Republican and conservative indistinguishably either. However, this measure is important for understanding the demographics of marijuana legalization supporters because liberal political affiliation tends to accompany a progressive attitude and a positivity towards change, both important in regards to

legalization. The GSS question itself was phrased, “We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal (point 1) to extremely conservative (point 7). Where would you place yourself on this scale?” The question was recoded for online analysis, leaving only 5 options for answers, in a range from extremely liberal or liberal, slightly liberal, moderate, slightly conservative, to conservative or extremely conservative. What I needed from the data was only the bracket information on those who identified as liberal/extremely liberal and slightly liberal. The number of respondents who answered both the question about political ideology and marijuana was 2,341. With that said, my prediction was that those who identify as extremely liberal to slightly liberal are more likely than other affiliations to support the legalization of marijuana.

The age variable is quite simple as a form of measurement. In this study age groups were formed into three brackets, 18-29, 30-59, and 60+ because the hypothesis to be researched is that young people are more likely (than older people) to favor legalization. I separated the youngest bracket from the middle because I wanted to have a representation of young, middle aged, and older respondents, but I didn't need too much specification in the results in order to test my hypothesis. Galston (2013) finds that there isn't significant differentiation in support in his groupings of ages 30-49 at 55% support for legalization, versus ages 50-64, at 53% support, leading me to believe that combining those two groups won't cause errors in my findings. The number of respondents who answered their age in addition to the question about marijuana was 2,405.

I predict that those in the 18-29 bracket are the age group most likely to support the legalization of marijuana. This measure is a key indicator of support for legalization of marijuana

because young adults have historically been open to changing norms and having progressive stances on political matters. Meanwhile the older population has been characterized as having traditional values, rejecting change, and associated with more of a conservative ideology than liberal. To conclude, my hypothesis is that respondents self-identified as slightly liberal-extremely liberal and respondents aged 18-29 will be at an increased likelihood of supporting the legalization of recreational marijuana. My null hypothesis is that political ideology and age have no impact on likelihood of support of the legalization of marijuana.

## Results

**Table 1. Support for Legalization of Marijuana by Political Ideology and Age**

	<b>Liberal</b>	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>18-29</b>	<b>30-59</b>	<b>60+</b>
<b>Supportive</b>	77.8	40.4	56.3	67.4	60.2	46
<b>Not Supportive</b>	22.2	59.6	43.7	32.6	39.8	54
<b>Total</b>	100% (652)	100% (773)	100% (916)	100% (331)	100% (1346)	100% (728)

Political Ideology  $\chi^2 = 158.526$   $p = .000$  Age  $\chi^2 = 55.855$   $p = .00$

As hypothesized, table 1 shows that liberal respondents are more likely to support the legalization of recreational marijuana than any other ideology by large margins; with liberal support at 77.8% and moderates at 56.3%, there is a 21.5% difference. The chi-square value for political ideology is 158.526 with a p-value of .000.

Similarly, respondents ages 18-29 have the highest rates of support for legalization at 67.4%, followed by respondents ages 30-59 at 60.2%. This shows that identifying as liberal has the most influence on support of marijuana, but age also increases likelihood, just by smaller margins. The chi-square value for age is 55.855 with a p-value of .000. Given that the p-values for both political ideology and age are .000, there is substantial evidence to reject the null hypothesis in favor of the alternative hypothesis.

**Table 2. Support for Legalization of Marijuana by Political Ideology by Age Multivariate Crosstabulation<sup>2</sup>**

	18-29			30-59			60+		
	Lib.	Con.	Mod.	Lib.	Con.	Mod.	Lib.	Con.	Mod.
<b>Supportive</b>	81.4	60.9	58.4	80.5	43.3	61.5	70.6	31	44.9
<b>Not Supportive</b>	18.6	39.1	41.6	19.5	56.7	38.5	29.4	69	55.1
<b>Total</b>	100% (118)	100% (64)	100% (137)	100% (277)	100% (186)	100% (319)	100% (187)	100% (277)	100% (247)
Ages 18-29 $\chi^2 = 16.733$ p=.000			Ages 30-59 $\chi^2 = 111.401$ p=.000			Ages 60+ $\chi^2 = 70.479$ p=.000			

Table 2 shows evidence supporting my hypothesis that respondents self-identified as liberal and aged 18-29 years old have the highest likelihood of supporting legalization of marijuana at 81.4% with a 16.733 chi-square and a p-value of .000. This table is useful in showing that while age has some influence on support, being liberal has the highest rates of support all across the board (ages 18-29 at 81.4%, 30-59 at 80.5%, and 60+ at 70.6%).

### Discussion

In conclusion, we should reject the null hypothesis for both political ideology and age. The evidence shows that political ideology has the strongest effect on support for legalization of marijuana, followed by age, which also has significant impact. This confirms my hypothesis that liberal people ages 18-29 are the most likely to support the legalization of recreational marijuana. It should be noted that moderates ages 30-59 are 3.1% more supportive of legalization than moderates ages 18-29, which could indicate that age has less significance on support than was hypothesized. At the same time, it is harder to draw conclusions based on self-identified moderate respondents because they may swing in different directions on certain policies. On the

<sup>2</sup>The three ideological categories included in table 2 have been shortened from Liberal, Moderate, and Conservative.

other hand, liberal and conservative respondents are simple because they fall under specific ideological characteristics.

These results aren't too surprising given that they correspond to the existing literature on the topic, but future work should be directed towards more control variables that could be present at the same time as being young and liberal. For example, a sociologist could examine the moderate ideological cohort, in hopes of increasing their predictability. They could also look deeper into the effects of having consumed the substance ever, or in the past year on support in general. There could additionally be more distinction between medical and recreational marijuana in order to compare demographics in support for the two types. I hope these findings may be useful in future research and helping legislators understand the characteristics of recreational marijuana supporters.

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