

Kamala Harris Backs Cannabis Legalization as Top Candidate

Vice President Kamala Harris's Evolution on Cannabis Reflects Shifting American Views

Like most Americans, Vice President Kamala Harris has evolved on cannabis. In 2010, when she was San Francisco's district attorney, Harris urged voters to reject a proposed ballot initiative to legalize the adult-use marijuana market. At the time, Harris's position aligned with that of most California voters, 54 percent of whom ultimately decided against the measure. However, Harris—and most Americans—soon changed their stance.

Changing Public Opinion on Cannabis

In 2016, Californians reversed course and passed Proposition 64, legalizing marijuana statewide. By 2019, Harris, then California's junior U.S. senator, sponsored legislation to end the federal prohibition of cannabis. That same year, Gallup pollsters reported that two-thirds of Americans believed that "the use of marijuana should be legal"—up from 46 percent in 2010. Today, public support for legalization stands at 70 percent.

Harris's Advocacy in Office

As vice president, Harris has repeatedly stated that Americans should not be incarcerated for marijuana use. She has championed the Biden administration's efforts to pardon low-level marijuana offenders and to loosen certain federal cannabis restrictions. As the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, she's the first major party candidate to have ever called for the plant's legalization and regulation.

Personal and Public Shifts in Perspective

Harris's trajectory from marijuana legalization skeptic to proponent mirrors that of many Americans. Like most voters, her views on cannabis softened following the legalization of marijuana for medical purposes. As district attorney of San Francisco, Harris pledged not to prosecute people who either used or sold medical cannabis.

"In my own life, I have had loved ones and close friends who relied on medical marijuana to relieve their suffering and even prolong their lives," she acknowledged. Many Americans had similar experiences, which is why nearly 20 states approved medical cannabis access between 1996 and 2011, almost all by voter initiative.

State-Level Legalization and Its Impact

It wasn't until 2012 that voters gave the green light to outright legalization. That year, voters in Colorado and Washington became the first to approve measures regulating the adult-use cannabis market. By 2016, the total number of legal states had risen to nine. Today, 24 states—home to more than half of the U.S. population—have legalized marijuana.

Successful Outcomes of Legalization

How has America reacted to this real-world experiment? For Harris, living in a legal state likely influenced her transition from a one-time critic into a staunch advocate. That's been the case for many others too. In states like California and Colorado, a greater percentage of voters back legalization now than they did when the laws were initially enacted. No state has ever repealed its marijuana legalization laws, as these policies largely work as intended and are preferable to cannabis criminalization.

State-level legalization has led to a drastic reduction in low-level marijuana arrests and prosecutions, significantly disrupted the illicit marketplace, and created over 400,000 full-time jobs. Taxes from regulated cannabis sales have generated over \$20 billion in state revenue. Contrary to critics' fears, marijuana legalization and regulation have not led to any increase in cannabis use by young people.

Federal Policy Lagging Behind

While Americans' attitudes have shifted over the years, federal marijuana policies have largely remained static. In Congress, far too many politicians remain wed to the sort of "Reefer Madness" view that most voters have long since abandoned. Like Harris did, they also need to evolve their views on cannabis to more closely align with current scientific and public consensus. Those who refuse to adapt do so at their own political peril.

Vice President Kamala Harris's journey from skepticism to advocacy on marijuana legalization reflects the broader shift in American public opinion. As more states continue to embrace cannabis reform, it is imperative for federal policymakers to update their perspectives and policies to match the evolving views and needs of their constituents.

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