

Is America's Cannabis Divide Finally Coming to an End?

Presidential Candidates Signal Support for Cannabis Reclassification as States Push for Legalization

The divide between state and federal marijuana policies in the U.S. may be narrowing, as both major presidential candidates signal support for reclassifying cannabis and several states prepare to vote on legalization measures this fall.

Growing Bipartisan Support

Recent political developments suggest a shift towards greater acceptance of cannabis. Both President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump have expressed support for reclassifying marijuana from a Schedule I drug to a less restrictive Schedule III category.

Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic presidential nominee, has criticized marijuana's current Schedule I status, arguing it is absurd to classify it alongside substances like heroin and LSD. On the other hand, former President Donald Trump has shown support for the reclassification, indicating his focus on researching marijuana's medical uses and endorsing a Florida ballot proposal to legalize recreational marijuana.

Federal and State Legal Landscape

Marijuana remains illegal under federal law, with possession and cultivation carrying significant penalties. However, public approval and state-level legislation have increasingly moved in favor of cannabis.

Currently, 24 states and the District of Columbia have legalized marijuana for recreational use, with an additional seven states decriminalizing small amounts. Moreover, 38 states and the District of Columbia permit medical marijuana use. Despite these developments, federal reclassification remains a lengthy process, with the Drug Enforcement Administration scheduled to hear comments on the proposal on December 2. A final decision may not come before President Biden leaves office in January.

Upcoming State Ballot Measures

This fall, voters in several states will have the opportunity to shape marijuana policy further. In Florida, a costly initiative seeks to legalize recreational marijuana sales, allowing adults over 21 to purchase from existing medical dispensaries. The measure requires a 60% majority to pass and would be enacted six months after approval.

North and South Dakota will also vote on marijuana legalization measures for the third time, with these initiatives needing a simple majority to pass. Additionally, Nebraska is expected to have medical marijuana

initiatives on the ballot, pending certification of petition signatures.

Public Opinion and Usage Trends

Support for marijuana legalization has reached new heights. A Gallup poll from last year found that 70% of American adults support legalization, the highest level recorded since the question was first asked in 1969. The same poll highlighted strong support among young voters, a crucial demographic in presidential battleground states.

Usage statistics reflect this growing acceptance. In 2022, an estimated 17.7 million Americans reported using marijuana daily or near-daily, surpassing the number of daily alcohol users for the first time.

Addressing Unregulated Products

As legal marijuana becomes more widespread, states are grappling with the sale of unregulated hemp-derived products, such as delta-8 THC, which is often marketed in candy-like packaging. Some states, like South Dakota and Wyoming, have enacted new laws to restrict these products, while Indiana has issued warnings to retailers.

In Missouri, where marijuana was legalized in 2022, Governor Mike Parson has raised concerns about hemp-derived products being marketed to children. The state has announced a task force to address issues related to unregulated psychoactive cannabis products.

The shifting landscape of marijuana policy reflects a growing consensus on the need for reform. With bipartisan support for reclassification and increasing state-level legalization, the U.S. may be on the verge of a significant policy shift. As both federal and state governments address these changes, the impact on public health, safety, and the cannabis industry will continue to unfold.

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