MEDICIAL MARIJUANA AND PENNSYLVANIA

By

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On August 3, a coalition of mostly liberal activists initiated a national campaign to legalize marijuana using the slogan, “Just Say Now.” The first test case occurs this fall in the likeliest of places, California, when voters will decide whether to legalize marijuana. This year eighteen states have considered permitting the use of medical marijuana and several have ballot initiatives before the voters, according to Stateline. Fourteen states already have medical marijuana laws on the books. In addition to its use for medicinal purposes, many state legislatures are debating whether they should loosen marijuana laws as a way of boosting tax revenues.

In April, state house member Mark Cohen (D-Philadelphia) introduced a bill to legalize medical marijuana. Does this measure have any chance of passing in a state that most political observers think of as being culturally conservative? Pennsylvanians’ views about medical marijuana might surprise some.

Predictably, most Pennsylvanians oppose legalizing marijuana. What might be a surprise is that they also overwhelmingly favor permitting its medicinal use. The May 2010 Franklin & Marshall College Poll found that only one in three (33%) voters’ favors the outright legalization of marijuana. This is an increase from an F&M survey conducted two years earlier when only about one in five (22%) supported its outright legalization. Support for legalizing marijuana declines with age, among self-described conservatives, and with born again Christians.

The proportion of Pennsylvanians that favor medical marijuana is striking; four in five (80%) voters favor allowing adults to legally use marijuana for medical purposes. More remarkable is the percentage that strongly favors its use, 53 percent compared to only 13 percent that strongly opposes it. Just about every demographic group supports the use of medical marijuana, but the likelihood of supporting it is higher among women than men, among liberals and moderates than conservatives, and among those who do not consider themselves born-again Christians.

Even though there is broad popular support for legalizing medical marijuana in the state, prospects for its legalization seems slim. The legislature has not shown much inclination to take
on many controversial issues, even one with the support that medical marijuana exhibits in the state. And voters don’t have access to initiative or referendum procedures that would allow them to seek a statewide vote on the matter.

Legislators legalized gaming in the state in 2003 in large part because they wanted the revenue it could generate. A majority of Pennsylvanians supported legalized gaming at the time, but not nearly as many supported legalized gaming as favor the use of medical marijuana. One can’t help but wonder whether the state’s declining fiscal condition coupled with the overwhelming public support might not encourage legislators’ to act—even if the tax proceeds from the use of medical marijuana are not substantial.

Opponents of medical marijuana might also point to the state’s experience with gaming as one reason it should be opposed. Opponents of the first gaming laws that permitted only slot machines in the state argued that the expansion of gaming was inevitable. They were right. Would the passage of a medical marijuana law in the state lead to the eventual loosening of other marijuana laws to obtain additional tax revenues? Such an argument could compel many in the legislature to “just say no.”

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