

Will NJ Get High on Marijuana Proposal?

[By Donald Scarinci](#)

With all the talk about the Democratic nominee for NJ Governor centering around Mayor Steve Fulop and Senator Steve Sweeney, will Senator Nicholas Scutari capture the liberal and progressive Democrats with his marijuana legalization bill?

Progressives, liberals and educated voters in every political party in NJ love a candidate who is not afraid to speak frankly and engage in honest debate about scientific evidence, changing social norms, and outside of the box revenue sources that do not involve increasing taxes. That was Governor Chris Christie's voter appeal. Senator Scutari's initiative to legalize marijuana is bold and creative. It positions him as the straight talking Democrat's Chris Christie candidate.

No one privately thinks that marijuana should be illegal when cigarettes and alcohol are legal. There has been no science in the last 50 years to support the theory that marijuana is addictive or that non-abusive use of marijuana is harmful. The social stigma against the marijuana plant stems from the Nixonian war against drugs of any kind—that is, drugs manufactured or distributed by companies that did not contribute to President Nixon's campaigns.

New Jersey is currently one of several states to legalize medical marijuana; however, [medical marijuana dispensaries](#) have been slow to get off the ground. New Jersey's Compassionate Care Medicinal Marijuana Program is the strictest in the country, requiring both dispensaries and patients to satisfy a lengthy list of requirements.

Under Scutari's proposal, recreational marijuana sale and possession would also be legal for those over the age of 21. While he has yet to release formal legislation, Scutari envisions a system like Colorado. "The war on marijuana has been a failure," he stated. The state should "legalize it, regulate it and tax it."

Sen. Scutari does not currently have any co-sponsors for the legislation, but public opinion is on his side. A recent poll by the Drug Policy Alliance found 57 percent of New Jersey residents are in favor of legalization efforts. Also of note, support was above 50 percent for Democrats, Republicans, and Independents alike. Even President Barak Obama recently characterized marijuana more no more dangerous than drinking alcohol.

On the federal level, changes are also afoot. Many Americans don't realize that while some form of marijuana use is legal in more than 20 states, it is still classified as a Schedule 1 Drug under federal law. The designation is reserved for drugs with high potential for abuse but no accepted medical use. (For a history lesson on U.S. marijuana regulation, see my prior post, ["Marijuana Is Richard Nixon's Fault?"](#)).

In response to what they call "arcane laws," 17 Democrats and one Republican recently sent a [letter](#) to President Obama calling on him to change the classification of marijuana. "You said that you don't believe marijuana is any more dangerous than alcohol: a fully legalized substance, and

believe it to be less dangerous 'in terms of impact on the individual consumer.' This is true," the letter states.

"Marijuana, however, remains listed in the federal Controlled Substances Act at Schedule I, the strictest classification, along with heroin and LSD. This is a higher listing than cocaine and methamphetamine, Schedule II substances that you gave as examples of harder drugs."

Don't expect legalization to happen overnight. In Colorado, it took eight years to get the law passed. Gov. Christie's strong opposition will also make it difficult for New Jersey to follow the trail "blazed" by Colorado and Washington State. However, NJ legislation will cause political pundits to watch Senator Nicholas Scutari as a candidate in the next gubernatorial election.

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