



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

2019 Entry Form

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Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation? Under

Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)

These editorials point out that the public's views on marijuana, especially medical marijuana, are transforming and state law should keep up.

Politicians should listen to voters about legalizing marijuana

THE ISSUE Americans now favor legalizing marijuana by 2-1. So why are so few elected officials paying attention to the mood of the public?

Two-thirds of Americans now support legalizing marijuana.

That's the result of a survey released Monday by Gallup, and support for legalizing pot crosses virtually every demographic.

Gallup conducted the poll Oct. 1-10, before Canada last week became the second country in the world to legalize the recreational use of marijuana, after Uruguay.

Who supports legalizing marijuana?

- A slim majority of Republicans (53 percent), two-thirds of Democrats (75 percent) and most independents (70 percent).

- Every region of the country, from the East (67 percent) to the Midwest (65 percent) to the West (65 percent) and, yes, even the South (65 percent). Whichever region, support for legalizing pot is at about the national average.

- For the first time, older Americans favor it. Fifty-nine percent of those 55 and older favor legalization, and the percentages are larger for younger demographics. "Support is strongest among adults aged 18 to 34, at 78 percent, while nearly two in three adults aged 35 to 54 (65 percent) approve of legalizing marijuana," according to Gallup.

All that means marijuana legalization is more popular than than President Donald Trump's tax cuts or President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act. According to a recent Fox News poll, only 51 percent of voters had a favorable opinion of the ACA, and fewer still (40 percent) had a favorable view of Trump's tax cuts.

With legalization now more popular than the signature legislation of the two most recent presidents, the only mystery is why more politicians aren't running on it? Why is no one making marijuana legalization a signature issue?

Attorney General Jeff Sessions has even pledged to crack down on marijuana at the federal level, complicating matters in states that have already legalized marijuana at the state level. So far, however, the Justice Department hasn't acted on Sessions' threats.

Meanwhile, President Trump has hinted he might support a bill allowing states to determine their own marijuana policies.

There are studies that indicate legalizing marijuana could help alleviate the opioid drug crisis. It would certainly help with jail overcrowding. A study released last week by the Alabama Appleseed Center for Law & Justice and the Southern Poverty Law Center estimates enforcement of marijuana possession laws costs the state of Alabama \$22 million a year. The study also found marijuana cases contributing to the state's forensic testing backlog and evidence of discriminatory enforcement, with blacks about four times more likely than whites to be arrested for marijuana possession despite comparable rates of consumption.

Favoring legalization is no longer a brave or risky political stance. It's a popular stance. The only ones who don't know it yet are the majority of politicians.

Medical marijuana bill is past due

THE ISSUE

House Bill 243, sponsored by Rep. Mike Ball of Madison, would make Alabama the 34th state to legalize medical marijuana. It's past time the state of Alabama stopped telling those who might benefit from marijuana use that they must continue to suffer or break the law.

If state Rep. Mike Ball's House Bill 243 successfully navigates the state Legislature to become law, Alabama would join 33 other states and the District of Columbia in legalizing medical marijuana.

Better late than never, as the saying goes.

Alabama would, however, become just the fourth state in the South to do so, joining Florida, Louisiana and Arkansas. For once Alabama could be proud of at least being ahead of Georgia, Tennessee, the Carolinas and Virginia. Of course, we'd also be ahead of Mississippi, as usual.

Any loosening of marijuana laws in Alabama always faces an uphill battle. It took multiple attempts to get Carly's Law and Leni's Law on the books. The first allows the use of marijuana-derived cannabidiol (CBD) under strictly controlled conditions under a research program run by the University of Alabama in Birmingham.

The second "provides a defense against unlawful possession of marijuana for an individual in possession of CBD if the person has a debilitating medical condition."

This is all separate from CBD derived from industrial hemp, with a tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) concentration of not more than 0.3 percent on a dry weight basis, which became legal to produce, sell and process under the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018, which President Donald Trump signed into law in December.

Ball's HB243 would extend Carly's Law, set to expire this year, until 2021 and supersede Leni's Law.

Despite past difficulties getting any sort of marijuana liberalization past the state Legislature, HB243 may have a chance. It's starting out with 21 co-sponsors, many from north Alabama.

Besides Ball, R-Madison, co-sponsors include Rep. Randall Shedd, who represents

part of Morgan County, Rep. Danny Crawford of Limestone County, House Speaker Mac McCutcheon, who represents Limestone and Madison counties, and Parker Moore, who represents Limestone and Morgan counties.

Sponsors include both those aforementioned Republicans and Democrats, including Madison County's Rep. Laura Hall and Rep. Anthony Daniels.

It's a rare bill that gets bipartisan support in the Legislature these days.

HB243 "would exempt from the crime of unlawful possession of marijuana a person with a qualifying condition who has a valid medical cannabis card for the medical use of cannabis."

The bill lists more than 30 qualifying conditions, including terminal illnesses, cancer, Parkinson's disease, glaucoma, anxiety, autism, epilepsy and multiple sclerosis.

The bill sets up a board to oversee the program, which would be authorized to add other qualifying conditions, which must be diagnosed by a licensed physician, physician's assistant or nurse practitioner.

The state would also oversee the provision of medical marijuana, so it wouldn't simply be open season for dealers.

Two-thirds of Americans support the legalization of marijuana for recreation use. In this environment, it makes no sense for Alabama to remain among the minority of states that forbid using marijuana even for medical purposes.

Telling people facing cancer pain, terminal illnesses and debilitating chronic diseases they must continue to suffer is cruel and inhumane.

The Legislature should pass HB243 and put an end to telling patients their pain doesn't matter as much as keeping marijuana completely illegal.