

A Stereotype Guide to Ending Cannabis Prohibition



With the midterm elections taking place in November, politicians across the nation have been hitting the campaign trail hard; shaking hands and kissing babies. They are out “trick-or-treating,” looking to discuss the Affordable Care Act, unemployment rates, public assistance and how they need our help to make our communities better places to live (and maybe score some candy).

Now it seems that the latest “posh” Halloween costume for these politicians has come in the guise of the Cannabis Abolitionist. They like to focus on a few staple topics that revolve around preventing access to minors, providing tax revenue and social disparity in the justice system; all topics that weigh heavily on the working class family. Indeed, the lower income demographics are by far the most affected by such social injustices, which are perpetrated by the U.S. War on Drugs. However, I do not believe that this is the demographic that is going to sway public opinion in one way or another, nor do I believe that this is the demographic that is going to make the difference at the polls.

If you look at data collected from the *US Government’s Substance Abuse and Mental Health Data Archive (SAMHDA)* and the National Survey on Drug Use and Health from 2012, you can see an extreme contradiction to what cannabis prohibitionists and the government have been telling us for over 75 years. Cannabis is not a low-income, minority based epidemic. Even though marijuana arrest and incarceration rates are disproportionately biased toward minorities, the use of cannabis is equally consistent among white people and spans a multitude of demographics.

Of everyone in the U.S. who has reportedly tried marijuana, 76% are white and only 11% are black. However, when marijuana users are divided by race, whites and blacks have tried it at about the same rate (38-39%). In addition, the relation between cannabis use and different income levels is almost non-existent, with 38% of all people who earn less than \$75,000 having tried marijuana, compared to 39% of those who earn over that amount. Finally, the age demographic to participate in cannabis use the most is between the ages of 26 and 34, at 55%. Ages 18 to 25 fall close behind at 52%, with 35- to 49-year-olds coming in third, at nearly 50%. Only 37% of those over the age of 50 have ever smoked pot. The gender gap is fairly narrow between males and females as well, with 47% of all men and 38% of all women having tried cannabis. Therefore, attempting to create a generalized profile for those who smoke cannabis becomes quite a challenge, as there is an equal chance that anyone under the age of 50 from any walk of life has smoked pot as there is that they haven’t.

Studying the information gathered from the census reports (as well as exit polls conducted by Edison Research of Somerville, N.J., for the National Election Pool) we can define a more appropriate target

demographic for the campaign to end marijuana prohibition. When broken down by race, the voting demographic is directly proportionate to the demographic of those who smoke weed. The white demographic made up 72% of the total vote for the 2012 elections. African Americans made up 13% of the vote, with the hispanic demographic coming in third at 10%. Asians and all other races made up the remaining 5% of the voter turnout. Does this mean that everyone who smoked marijuana voted? I highly doubt it (no pun intended) but it does raise the question, "How can the minority vote be persuaded to become more engaged in the political system?"

I believe this is the reasoning behind a misguided concentration on the minority population, by people advocating an end to prohibition. There has always been an assumption that the minority communities have more of a stake in the cannabis movement because statistics show that they are more likely to be implicated in criminal activities by the authorities. However, this does not in any way represent the majority of the cannabis community. Indeed these communities would benefit the most from such changes to marijuana prohibition, but judging by the voter turnout from past elections, even if this demographic doubled their political involvement toward an end to prohibition, this would not be enough to sway an outcome.

If you take into account the age demographics for past major elections, there is another interesting parallel to be drawn. Voter turnout by age was the highest between 40 - 64 year olds, at 48%. 30 - 39 year olds brought in 17% of the vote, followed by 16% from those over the age of 65. The 18 - 24 year old demographic brought in 11% of the vote, with only 8% coming from the group ages 25 - 29. The elderly community (as well as that 30 - 39 age group) represent the second highest turnouts for voter activity at the polls. However, these two demographics represent the lowest groups for those who have actually used marijuana.

I find the elderly demographic to be the most surprising, especially with the major advancements that have been found with cannabis use in the treatment of Alzheimer's. This is a group that has been molded by more than sixty years of anti-cannabis propaganda and it could be argued that they are likely set in their beliefs. They tend to represent old Republican ideals and come from a generation that has always viewed the use of drugs as an ugly mark on our society. This generation will eventually be replaced by those 40 - 64 year olds, who dictate the current elections and are not as opposed to the current views and science that surround cannabis use.

Finally, we can review the income demographic that participated in the last presidential election. Voter turnout in 2012 was far higher for those who earned above \$75,000 (at 77%) than it was for those who made less than \$50,000, which rose from 59% - 62% since 2008. Although there is a significantly larger number of Americans who earn under \$50,000 annually, those in the higher income bracket vote in larger numbers. Because of this fact, the percentage of the actual vote weighs in favor of the wealthy. This higher income demographic is where I see the largest potential to market the legalization campaign in the U.S.

If legalization efforts would provide more of a focus toward those people from higher income brackets, there is a chance that cannabis initiatives could gain some momentum at the polls. I don't believe that these initiatives are defeated due to a lack of conviction by those in low income areas or minorities that have been affected by the war on drugs. I believe that the data, gathered over a multitude of election years, proves that voter participation "is what it is." The turnout may fluctuate from election to election, but over a ten year period, there are no consistent trends in any one direction. These figures provide a basic prediction of what to expect through each election and the predominant determining

factor tends to be that high income, white people determine election outcomes.

For the cannabis initiative to have the highest success rate, groups need to focus their efforts on demonstrating an appeal to the high-income, white demographic. To accomplish this goal, the effort will have to demonstrate that there is a proven potential to generate revenue. Since it's already been proven through various models of taxation and regulation around the world, including those in Colorado and Washington, there should be a plethora of persuasive information. If presented by the right people (see previous paragraph), there is a chance that those in the \$75,000 and up category will finally put their money where their mouths are.

Considering that 39% of this demographic have smoked weed, I would imagine that they wouldn't have any moral issues with legalization, yet they do not seem to be expressing their views on the ballots. Maybe their views would change if they saw a way to benefit from it? Not only has the marijuana industry generated more new employment opportunities in our staggering economy than any other U.S. industry in the past decade, but there are billions of dollars to be made in this new market. Without the support of the people who can fund these opportunities, the fruits of our labors will never grow.