

Pot Politics 2020 Edition: Trump and cannabis

Listen, I know that marijuana reform is not even close to the top of anyone's political wishlist for the 2020 election. Which makes sense — in a political climate where every vote cast feels like a vote for critical issues like climate change, economic justice and human rights, who is really thinking about cannabis legalization? And judging by the current major party platforms, we aren't likely to get it anytime soon. At least not at the federal level, despite the fact that two-thirds of Americans support legalization, according to a recent PEW study.

Still, I think it's worthwhile to take a look at the presidential frontrunners' history, policies and opinions on cannabis, at the very least so we can have a sense of what to expect from them. In this issue, I will cover Trump's wishy-washy history of "opinions" on cannabis policy, and in the next issue we will take a deep dive into the policy promises of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, as well as their checkered past on drug policy issues.

Way back in 1990, long before he set his sights on the White House, Donald Trump apparently had some semblance of logic and reason when it came to cannabis: "We're losing badly the war on drugs," he said. "You have to legalize drugs to win that war. You have to take the profit away from these drug czars..." Which may literally be the only sentence this man has ever said that I agree with completely. It was because of this stance that many drug policy advocates, while dismayed at his election in 2016, thought (for better or for worse), that Trump might actually be the president to usher in a new era of legalization in America. Where Obama laid the groundwork with his justice department memos that deprioritized enforcement of marijuana prohibition in states experimenting with legalization, Trump could have been the one to take it one step further, by descheduling, decriminalizing or federally legalizing the plant during his first term in office.

On the campaign trail in 2016, most likely in an attempt to appeal to his conservative base, Trump's opinion was apparently that he saw cannabis as a states' rights issue. In a classic Trump quote in which he strings words together without saying anything, he stated, "We're going to see what's going on. It's a very big subject and right now we are allowing states to make that decision. A lot of states are making that decision, but we're allowing states to make that decision." A seemingly promising sign for advocates of drug policy reform, many of whom would rather see imperfect progress than prohibitionist regression.

Alas, no one is really surprised when Trump's statements vary wildly from moment to moment. Was anyone surprised to hear Trump praise Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte in 2017 for doing "an unbelievable job on the drug problem" by sanctioning the extrajudicial killings of over 6,000 suspected drug dealers, with blatant disregard for due process or basic human rights? I am not sure, but I suspect not. Trump's been a fan of the death penalty for decades (remember the Central Park Five?), and he has recently offered praise to China and Singapore for their willingness to turn to the "ultimate penalty" when it comes to dealing with drugs in society: "I don't know that our country is ready for that, but if you look throughout the world, the countries with a powerful death penalty .. with a fair but quick trial, they have very little if any drug problem." Nevermind the premise of his argument is completely false, Trump is clearly fine with killing people in an attempt to solve complex social problems.

In 2018, long-time drug prohibitionist and Trump-appointed Attorney General Jeff Sessions made the

first real policy change related to cannabis law enforcement when he rescinded the Cole Memo, one of the aforementioned federal recommendations remaining from the Obama administration, which were hugely important for the economic and legal security of the nascent cannabis industry. This move put advocates and industry professionals on high alert, afraid that the Trump administration would crack down on state-legal cannabis businesses at any moment. But then again, in June 2018, months before Sessions' forced resignation in November, Trump stated that he "really" supported Republican senator Cory Gardner of Colorado, and that he would "probably support" the STATES Act, a bipartisan bill that would effectively end the federal prohibition on marijuana and leave the issue up to the states.

This year, cannabis initiatives will again be on the ballot in six states, and Trump is reportedly concerned about how that might affect his chances at re-election. And he's not wrong to be worried — cannabis initiatives may have the ability to increase democratic voter turnout, and Trump can't afford to lose in states like Arizona, where the polls are close and the margin for victory is already small. The Trump campaign has even taken to attacking Biden as an "architect" of the War on Drugs, and is framing Trump as the criminal justice reform candidate.

More on that in the next issue, but for now, remember that local elections impact cannabis policies, too! Whatever your political beliefs, make sure you educate yourself on the candidates and the issues that matter to you, and get out there to cast your vote in the RI Primary on Sep 8 and in the general election on Nov 3.