

Marijuana Moves: Opinions on a Policy in Flux

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Introduction

This paper examines the intensity of people's interest in changing marijuana policy. It is based on a survey of 484 individuals at the Rochester Institute of Technology's Imagine Innovation Festival in May 2014. The vast majority of respondents supported legalization of medical marijuana, and roughly half supported legalization for recreational use, which is similar to national estimates, but few expressed intentions to use marijuana if it were legal. Overall, most survey respondents underestimated the overall level of support for marijuana policy changes. Respondents with the most intensely-held opinions, however, either for or against legalization, also tended to think that most other people agreed with them.

Marijuana Laws

Support for changes in marijuana laws has increased dramatically in the past decade, with polls now showing a narrow majority in support of legalization for recreational use. Between 2007 and 2013, support grew from 35% to 52%.¹ Nonetheless, analysts caution against assuming support will continue to grow, as most people do not find marijuana use to be positive but rather express ambivalence towards the issue. Supporters tend to believe that enforcement of marijuana laws is unfairly distributed socioeconomically and unnecessarily expensive. Many hope that taxing marijuana sales will be a major source of public revenue.

As of 2014, sixteen states have decriminalized marijuana possession in various small amounts. In New York State, possession of 25 grams or less (7/8 of an ounce or less) was decriminalized in 1977. Possession at that level is a Violation, punishable with a maximum fine of \$100. Possession of 25 grams to 2 ounces, or having marijuana in public view, can be a misdemeanor, and the felony level is reached for possession of more than eight ounces. With passage of a law going into effect in October 2014, Maryland became the most recent state to

decriminalize possession of small amounts of marijuana. Twenty-one states and Washington D.C. have legalized medical marijuana, all since 1996, and two states, Colorado and Washington, have recently legalized use for recreational purposes.

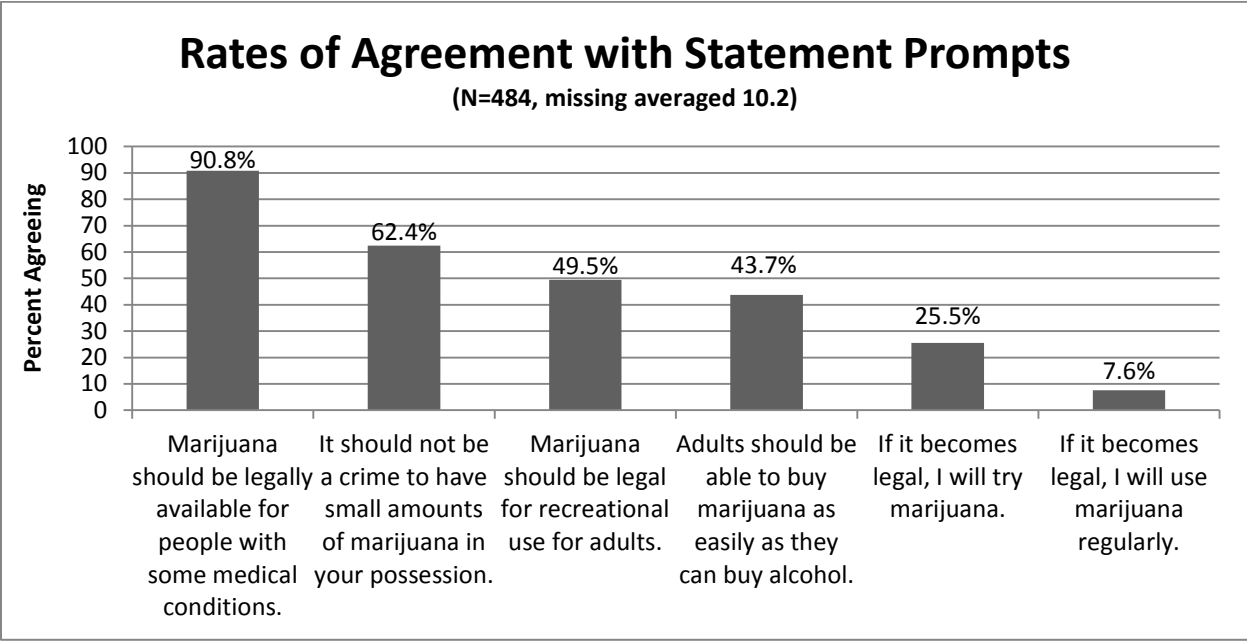
In light of these changes to state marijuana legislation, and growing public support for legalization, we sought to better understand not only whether people supported legalization, but also the intensity of their opinions and how accurately they were able to estimate others' opinions.

The Survey

At the Center for Public Safety Initiatives, we have utilized a "Brief Survey Method" in which respondents are asked opinions on a small number of questions, and demographic information is collected in a process that takes less than 5 minutes. We distributed brief surveys at the annual Imagine RIT festival on May 3, 2014 asking people whether they agreed with several statements related to marijuana policy change. Surveys were completed by a total of 484 adults.² This survey is included in Appendix A. Our respondents thus form a large opportunity sample but are not a scientifically selected representative public sample. It is worth noting, however, that overall support for legalization in our respondents closely mirrors results from other research.

Opinions on the Law

As shown below, the vast majority of respondents (90.8%) agreed that marijuana should be legally available to people with certain medical conditions. Over 60% agreed that possession of small amounts should be decriminalized. Half (49.5%) of the respondents agreed that marijuana should be legalized for recreational use by adults. Despite those views, few respondents reported that they would use marijuana if it were legal. Only 25% said they would try marijuana, and just over 7% said they would use it regularly.



There were also some significant differences across respondents with different characteristics. As seen below, with regard to the support for legalization for recreational use, analysis of gender, age and life experience variables showed significant differences across respondents.³ The one variable not achieving significance was whether the person lived in or outside of a city.

Respondent Characteristic	% Agreeing that MJ should be legal for recreational use
Male	57.5
Female	41.8
30 years and younger	59.7
Over 30	42.6
Have no children	57.9
Have Children	43.3
City Resident	51.3
Not City	48.2
Smoked Cigarettes	60.1
Never Smoked	44.2
Use Alcohol	59.8
Not Use Alcohol	44.1

Intensity of Support for Change

In our formulation of the survey, we sought to develop questions that reflected what we saw as a continuum by asking about support for relatively minor changes (medical marijuana) to including more extreme changes in marijuana law and related behavior (expecting to use marijuana regularly if legal).⁴ With that aspect of the survey design, the figure above shows expected declines in agreement levels as the status of proposed changes deviated further from the current law in New York.

The table below shows the cumulative levels of agreement across the six policy questions. It shows that a small number of respondents (7.7%) did not support any of the changes in policy and that a small number (6.4%) agreed with all of the statements. Nearly half (46.6%) supported 2 to 4 of the policy change statements. This supports the view that there are few people who do not favor some change in marijuana policy. There is wide support for some change, including legalization for recreational use. And, there are also few people who expect to use marijuana regularly regardless of its legal status.

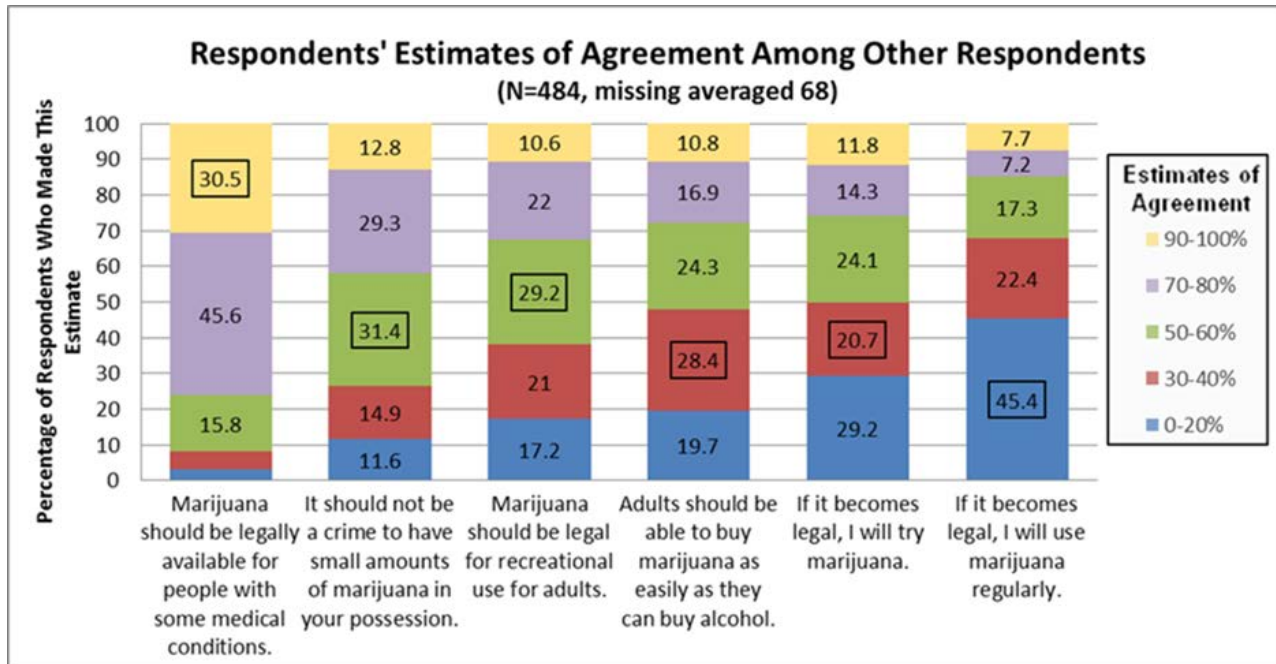
Level of Agreement Across Statements	
Number of Statements Agreed with	% Of Respondents
0	7.7
1	26
2	14.1
3	10.2
4	22.3
5	13.2
6	6.4

As shown in the section above, in our analysis we found that some opinions differed across characteristics of our respondents.⁵ Two significant predictors of the strength of respondents' opinions were their age and a history of smoking cigarettes. Younger people and those who have smoked were likely to agree with more of the policy change statements. Also, men were likely to agree with more statements than women.

What We Think Others Think

We were also interested in understanding what our survey respondents thought others would think about changing laws on marijuana. Do they think their views are widely shared, or do they think their views are different than everyone else? And of course, regardless of whether they think they are in the majority or in the minority, are they right or are they wrong in their estimates of others' opinions?

Our survey respondents were not very good at estimating the opinions of others.⁶ The **boxes in the chart below** indicate the percentage of people who estimated in the correct range (within 20% of the actual level) of agreement across all respondents. With regard to medical marijuana, fully 75% of respondents underestimated the level of support by more than 20%. For legalizing marijuana for recreational use, nearly a third (32.6%) overestimated support and nearly 40% underestimated support. When it came to using marijuana regularly if it were legal, 54.6% of respondents thought at least 30% of others would agree when only 7.6% actually did. Another third of respondents thought that at least 50% would use it regularly.



On each item, correct estimates of others' opinions were never reached by even a third of our respondents. In other words, the survey group as a whole agreed with more of the statements than they thought other individuals would. Most survey takers dramatically underestimated the level of support for medical marijuana, were split in underestimating and overestimating support for legalizing recreational use, but they dramatically overestimated the number of people who would smoke marijuana regularly if it were legal.

Do Others Think Like You Do?

Knowing respondents own views, as well as their estimates of other's opinions, made it possible to identify those who were the most accurate and least accurate in their estimates. We started by examining the average level of error in the estimates across all five policy statements. For the most part, respondents' estimates of what other people would say on the survey were inaccurate by underestimating levels of agreement. The table below shows that most people fell

into the middle ranges when averaging their errors across the items. Only 16.2% of those surveyed predicted averages within 20% of the actual level of agreement. At the opposite end, 12.6% of respondents were very inaccurate by virtue of making estimates that averaged over 60% below the actual level of agreement.

Average Level of Error Across Estimates	
Error Level	% of Respondents
Within 20%	16.2
20-40% low	40.0
41-60% low	31.2
Over 60% low	12.6

Comparing the strength of respondents' own opinions on the 0-6 point scale to the accuracy of their estimates of others' opinions can tell us how much the respondents believed that their views were supported by others. Given the high levels of support for change, the more statements a respondent agreed with, the more they were supported by others and the more accurate were their estimates of other people's opinions. But, as is also shown in the table below, respondents who did not agree with any of the policy statements also made very low estimates of how many other people would agree with those statements. Nearly half of them estimated 60% too low. Similarly, more than half of those agreeing with only one statement estimated agreement to be more than 40% below the actual level. This is to say that those who had the highest level of opposition to changes also made the mistake of thinking their views were widely shared.

At the opposite end of the continuum, those agreeing with all six statements also felt their views were widely shared by others. Like those who rejected all or most change, those that endorsed most or all change felt their views were shared by others. But the strongest supporters

of change also made the most accurate estimates of other people’s opinions. Nearly 70% of their estimates were within 20% of the reality. Only 6.4% of respondents agreed with all six statements, but they were the best judges of others’ opinions. Those who agreed with five statements also estimated quite well, with about three quarters of them making estimates within 40% of reality.

Average Error in Percent for Estimating Others Opinions by Respondents Level of Agreement Across Statements							
Average Error	Number of Statements Agreed with						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Within 20%	12.1%	8%	12.7%	13.2%	9.5%	20.4%	67.9%
20-40% low	15.2%	35%	36.4%	42.1%	52.4%	53.7%	21.4%
41-60% low	27.3%	30%	43.6%	39.3%	34.5%	25.9%	10.7%
Over 60% low	45.5%	27%	7.3%	5.3%	3.6%	0%	0%

So the surveys show that those with the strongest opinions (i.e. those who agreed with 0 or 1 statement, and those who agreed with 5 or 6 statements) tended to feel that other people would agree with them. Those that disagreed with all statements thought many more people shared their views than actually did. People who agreed with most statements also felt that other people would agree with the statements. In actuality, most people *did* agree with at least half of the statements, so those who agreed with more statements were more accurate in their estimates.

There are some possible explanations for this phenomenon. Those with strong opinions (in agreement or disagreement) might often be around other people who share their opinions. This would lead them to believe that most people in the general population agree with them. In contrast, those with more neutral opinions may have more mixed social groups and therefore estimate agreement levels more neutrally. Alternatively, those who agree with most statements may be particularly passionate about legalization of marijuana and may, therefore, be more well-

informed about the current public stance on the issue, helping them make more accurate estimates.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago, few people would have thought that the legal status of marijuana would be in such a state of flux across the country today. That alone makes public policy in this area a fascinating case study. In New York, even prior to our survey, the Governor announced support for a limited program allowing use of marijuana for medical reasons. Against this background of change, however, many are carefully watching states where major policy changes have already occurred.

Our survey here is consistent with other opinion studies which have documented support for change, including findings that medical marijuana is endorsed by an overwhelming majority, and legalization for recreational use is supported by approximately half of those asked. But those facts do not seem widely understood. This survey has shown that the vast majority of people tend to underestimate the strength of other people's support for marijuana policy change. We also found, however, that those with the most extreme views, either in support of marijuana policy change or against it, are likely to think that everyone else agrees with them. This may make the debate about marijuana policy more polarized than it needs to be.

Indeed, our survey as well as other research would lead us to expect that this debate is now more likely to be met with ambivalence than by strong feelings. Few people expect they would use marijuana regularly even if that were legal but few also see no need for any change at all. So, to the extent that the public influences policy, it seems likely that greater understanding of the opinions of others and learning from the experiences of places where policy changes have occurred will be needed to move the public off of its middling position.

Appendix A

CPSI Innovation Festival Survey

Thank you for your help with this brief survey.

Please check the appropriate box.

	Agree	Disagree	
1.			Marijuana should be legally available for people with some medical conditions.
2.			It should not be a crime to have small amounts of marijuana in your possession.
3.			Marijuana should be legal for recreational use for adults.
4.			Adults should be able to buy marijuana as easily as they can buy alcohol.
5.			If it becomes legal, I will try marijuana.
6.			If it becomes legal, I will use marijuana regularly.

7. Have you ever smoked cigarettes? _____
8. Do you regularly drink alcohol? _____
9. What is your highest level of education? _____
(ex-high school, some college, BS, MS, PhD, etc.)
10. Do you have children? _____
11. What is your age? _____yrs.
12. What is your gender? Male____ Female_____
13. What town or city do you live in? _____

The results of this survey, as well as other researcher papers done at the Center for Public Safety Initiatives (CPSI) will be available on our web page. You can find them at www.rit.edu/cpsi and clicking on **“Our Work.”**

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What percentage of other respondents do you think agreed with the following statements?

Circle your best estimate.

% % % % % % % % % % %

1.	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	Marijuana should be legally available for people with some medical conditions.
2.	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	It should not be a crime to have small amounts of marijuana in your possession.
3.	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	Marijuana should be legal for recreational use for adults.
4.	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	Adults should be able to buy marijuana as easily as they can buy alcohol.
5.	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	If it becomes legal, I will try marijuana.
6.	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	If it becomes legal, I will use marijuana regularly.

Endnotes

¹ Galston, W.A., & Dionne Jr., E.J. (May 2013). The new politics of marijuana legalization: Why opinion is changing. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, p. 5. Retrieved from http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2013/05/29-politics-marijuana-legalization-galston-dionne/dionne-galston_newpoliticsofmjleg_final.pdf

² A large population with this sized sample would yield a 95% confidence interval of + or – less than 5%.

³ Chi Square significant beyond .01 level.

⁴ One goal of these questions was to form what is known as a Guttman Scale which would allow a single quantitative score to summarize responses. For additional information see; Trochim, W.M.K. (2008). *Guttman Scaling*. Web Center for Social Research Methods. Retrieved from <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/scalgutt.php>

⁵ Chi Square significant beyond .01 level.

⁶ This table provides a summary but uses averages only and does not fully depict variation in the data.

Mean A ctual level of Support and Mean E stimated of support (rounded)	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Marijuana should be legally available for people with some medical conditions.								E		A	
It should not be a crime to have small amounts of marijuana in your possession.							E/A				
Marijuana should be legal for recreational use for adults.						E/A					
Adults should be able to buy marijuana as easily as they can buy alcohol.					A	E					
If it becomes legal, I will try marijuana.			A		E						
If it becomes legal, I will use marijuana regularly.		A		E							