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GOVT 2306 – Federal Government

Public Opinion on the Use and Legality of Cannabis
among the Lone Star College – Montgomery Community

Abraham Lincoln once said: “Public opinion in this country is everything.” And today, almost 200 years later, it couldn't be truer. Public opinion is not only a benefit, but also a driving agent of democracy, at least with regard to social issues. In the United States, it is an important building block of our political culture and directly affects politics.

This study investigates the role of public opinion in the American political system, observing how the two interact. Additionally, the research entails a case study in which a primary source investigation is conducted based on survey data. This information contributes to an analysis of the LSC – Montgomery community's opinions on different degrees of legalization of cannabis.

Given the fact that this community has a predominantly young population, it would seem reasonable to predict that the majority of respondents would lean towards legalization. However, its location in a highly Republican area of Texas, known for its very conservative views and high levels of religiosity, may suggest otherwise. This potential ambiguity will make the result of this case study interesting as it will determine how demographic factors, such as age, race, political ideology and religiosity correlate with public opinion on cannabis use and legality.

Public Opinion

Public opinion is the sum of individuals' attitudes and conclusions when confronting a given public issue at a particular moment in time (Ginsberg, 2012). This “sum” might be interpreted as a common collective agreement of ideas, though it may vary, change or dissolve as the issue evolves.

Nearly all scholars of public opinion, regardless of the they may define it, agree that in order for a phenomenon to count as public opinion, at least four conditions must be satisfied: (1) there must be an issue, (2) there must be a significant number of individuals who express opinions on the issue, (3) there must be some kind of a consensus among at least some of these opinions, and (4) this consensus must directly or indirectly exert influence (Crespi, 1997).

Ansolabehere, et al (1993) suggest the idea of social media affecting public opinion using a wide variety of advertising techniques. Moreover, since the 1950's, television has led the stream for molding public opinion. Mass media may not only used for broadcasting commercial advertising, but for spreading political positions as well.

Mutz, (1989) observes another intervening factor in the formation of public opinion: the existence of so-called influential individuals in society. These opinions are not restricted to politic or religious leaders, but also famous or relevant people, such as celebrities. Their positions and ideas on specific issues exert a notable influence in public attitude. Also, interest groups share a collective point of view and frame of ideas, whether transitory or permanent, their impact on issue definition and agenda setting can be significant.

Public Opinion and Democracy

In a democratic system, public opinion and politics should be very closely related. There are many ways in which one can shape the other. Many argue that it is public opinion that shapes the attitudes of politicians. Miller and Stokes proposed this in 1963, affirming that elected officials are directly influenced by the opinions of their constituents. And, truly, it seems that over the years, politicians have taken advantage of public surveys to get feedback from the citizens on matters like candidate preferences, position on issues among other things.

Since the 1980s however, the idea of reverse causation has been popular; that those in charge can create and frame opinion instead of just responding to it. Small (2002) notes that historians and political scientists report that American decision makers pay little direct attention to public preference. Moreover, Bachner and Wagner (2014) explain how political elites can directly influence the views of the population. They base their argument on the idea affirmed by Delli et al. (1996) that the average citizen is politically uninformed, and relies on cues from government representatives and political parties.

While both hypotheses regarding the relationship between public opinion and politics find supporting evidence, the two causal mechanisms are not inverse of each other. The reality is that they have more of a symbiotic relationship, constantly interacting, affecting, and changing one another.

Measuring Public Opinion

Public opinion is measured by polling. However, in a big country such as the United States, it would be impossible to poll every citizen. Because of this, pollsters resort to sampling. Hillygus

(2011) draws importance to the decisions pollsters have to make regarding timing, method, and formulation of their polls and how these decisions can bias results. Ideally, a sample should accurately represent the total population to be polled and be stratified along relevant variables. Thus, the more accurate the sample, the more precise the results.

There are many methods these researchers may use to extract a sample but the most common ones are probability sampling and random digit dialing (Ginsberg, 2012). In the first case, they assign a number to each person in a list called "sampling frame", then random numbers are drawn from it to reveal the respondents. Random digit dialing, on the other hand, involves generating as many random phone numbers as needed to conduct the survey. Another method starting to be used is internet polling although it's only in a developing stage.

Depending on the kind of poll to be conducted, one method can be a better fit than another. For example, when polling a known group of people, such as the members of a political party, the preferred method to use would be probability sampling. However, in order to survey a big group such as the entire population of the United States, where there is no list with information from every single citizen, random digit dialing is more reasonable and easier to use.

Despite the best attempts to choose appropriate methods and have a representative samples, the predictions of a poll can never be a hundred percent accurate and there are always errors of varying degrees. Selection bias is one of the most common sources of error when polling. This occurs when the sample chosen doesn't accurately represent the population, and leads to erroneous results. To add to these problems, people also can refuse to participate and therefore compound the misrepresentation, this is called “non-response bias”. Inaccurate results

can also be produced by sampling error, when the sample is too small to represent the population. Because of this, it is said that the bigger the sample, the more accurate its results. Other times, there can be measurement error due to poorly designed instruments.

Overall, it has been shown that national public opinion polls can be accurate when using the right methods and better formulated surveys. However, there will always be a margin of error, often within the range of 2-4%, separating the results obtained from reality. Regardless, these polls provide an idea of people's attitudes and therefore are a useful tool in a democratic system.

Case Study:

Attitudes of the Lone Star College Montgomery Community on the legality of Cannabis

In order to ascertain the campus population's opinions regarding cannabis, a survey was conducted during the fall of 2014. With the help of academic literature, a questionnaire was designed to anonymously gather information from the community. Results were organized by age, partisan association, religious beliefs and other demographic factors to better understand how these variables correlate with the attitudes of the respondents.

Age, political partisanship and ideology were initially the factors to be considered, given that the population was overall young and located within a highly Republican and conservative area. However, other demographic identifiers such as race, religion and others were added to the survey to analyze their potential relevance. Previous investigations, such as those conducted by Pew Research (2013-2014), Van der Sar (2011) and Resko (2014), were excellent guides when designing the instrument, given their similarity with the present study.

Besides demographics, the survey also asked about personal usage of cannabis in order to observe the difference in opinions between users and non-users. Subsequently, the second and most important part of the questionnaire asked about the participant's attitude towards different levels of legality of cannabis and the reasons they had for this opinion. This questionnaire can be seen below (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Public Opinion Survey on the Legality of the Use of Cannabis

ⓘ This survey is for an honors project and is **completely anonymous**. Please fill out each section to the best of your ability.

Demographic Information

Gender:

☐ Female ☐ Male

Age group:

☐ 18-29 ☐ 50-64
☐ 30-59 ☐ 65+

Generation:

☐ 1981-present *(Millennial)*
☐ 1965-1980 *(Generation X)*
☐ 1946-1964 *(Baby Boomer)*
☐ 1925-1945 *(Silent)*

Race and ethnicity:

☐ White ☐ Black
☐ Latin American ☐ Asian
☐ Pacific Islander ☐ Native
☐ Mixed
☐ Other: _____

Political Ideology:

☐ Very Liberal
☐ Moderate liberal
☐ Moderate
☐ Mildly Conservative
☐ Very Conservative
☐ Libertarian

Partisan Association:

☐ Democrat ☐ Independent
☐ Republican ☐ No Association

Religious Affiliation:

☐ Christianity ☐ Judaism
☐ Islam ☐ Buddhism
☐ Hinduism ☐ Unaffiliated
☐ No religion
☐ Other: _____

Check one that applies:

○ Practicing
○ Non-practicing

ⓘ Remember that these questions are **confidential**; there is no way you could be identified by your response.

Cannabis background Information

Usage of cannabis

☐ User ☐ Non-user
○ One-time event
○ Occasional
○ Frequent

ⓘ People have different attitudes towards the use of cannabis. The following questions will help us learn more about the opinions of the LSC-Montgomery community about the legality of cannabis use in the United States

Attitudes and opinions

The use of cannabis should be:

☐ Illegal
☐ Decriminalized
☐ Legal only for medical purposes
☐ Legal

Check all that you agree with:

☐ Cannabis use is immoral
☐ Cannabis use poses physical and mental health risks
☐ Cannabis use leads to addiction
☐ Cannabis use threatens public safety
☐ Cannabis use leads to use of other drugs like cocaine, heroin, etc.
☐ Legalization would lead to other drugs like cocaine, heroin, etc., being legalized
☐ Decriminalization would reduce overpopulation and government expending in penitentiary facilities
☐ Decriminalization would free law enforcing institutions to pursue other crimes
☐ Decriminalization would not lead to greater cannabis use
☐ Cannabis use has favorable medical applications
☐ Cannabis is more effective than other available treatments for certain health conditions
☐ Prohibition has failed to control the use and production of cannabis
☐ Legalization would make way for a regulated market and reduce its incidence in the black market
☐ Legalization would make way for a regulated market and reduce cannabis sales and use among teenagers
☐ Legalization would reduce crime related to the illegal production and sale of cannabis
☐ Legalization would contribute to the economy by eliminating flow of money to international, illegal vendors

(Optional) Provide your reason(s) behind your opinion on the use and legality of cannabis:

_____

_____

_____

The surveys were distributed in a wide range of classes and response was voluntary. This is why, in addition to the questionnaire, a consent form had to be designed. The form provided participants with information about the project and requested written consent to take part in the investigation. To guarantee anonymity, consent forms were gathered separately, before handing out questionnaires.

Survey results were manually inputted in a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel. The program allowed for counting functions and different options for visual data representation. Initially, the sample was classified by each demographic variable. Then, trends were identified by comparing demographic data with different attitudes towards cannabis.

Sample

Throughout the two short weeks of data gathering, a total 328 members of the LSC – Montgomery community participated in the study, including faculty, staff and students from different departments and classes around the campus. The sample turned out to be very representative of the community; visual representation of sample and results can be seen below, within “Additional Figures”. There was a slight majority of women (Fig. 2), and an overall young population (Fig. 3 and 4) from the millennial generation and within the 18 to 29 age group. Political ideology was predominantly moderate leaning towards conservative (Fig. 6). As far as political partisanship (Fig. 7), the plurality self-identified as Republican, followed closely by no association. Regarding race, there was a white majority (Fig. 8), surpassing the next most common race, Latin American, three times. Religiosity was composed of a majority of Christian association, followed by Catholic and “no religion” tied in second place (Fig. 9). Lastly, two thirds

of the sample stated they had never used cannabis while the rest identified themselves as active or previous users (Fig. 5).

Results and Discussion

The study revealed a tendency within the community to favor change from the current political stance on cannabis (Fig. 10). Only 15% agreed with existing policies of prohibition, arguing that it's risky, addictive and a “gateway drug”. The remaining portion was dominated by those who supported full legalization (44%), citing its potential of reducing crime and contributing to the economy as reasons for their opinion. Additionally, almost one third of the sample approved legalization of medical use because they believe it has favorable medical applications. Lastly, only 12% favored decriminalization, reasoning that it would reduce related crime while prohibition has failed to control the situation.

When contrasting demographic factors with attitudes towards cannabis, some important trends were observed. For example, men were considerably more supportive of legalization than women (Fig. 13). Regarding age (Fig. 17), underage respondents had very similar opinion to those between the ages of 30 to 49, possibly because they are more likely to mimic their parents' stance on the issue. Additionally, and as expected, participants in the 18 to 29 age group and the millennial generation, were the most supportive of full legalization. Also, the older respondent's attitudes were perhaps the most surprising; 0% agreed with the current prohibition policies and, instead, supported various degrees of legalization, especially for medical purposes.

Factors like ideology and partisan association followed the expected trends (Fig. 18); the more liberal the respondents, the more receptive they were to change from the current ban and

the higher support for legalization. Similarly, democrats and independents were more approving of legalization (Fig. 17). Conversely, those with more conservative views leaned towards prohibition policies. Most races had fairly similar stances on the issue (Fig. 15), however, people self-identified as Asian, Pacific Islander, native or other were least likely to support legalization.

Concerning religion, a trend worth nothing was observed among the non-religious population; this group had a high tendency to support full legalization and very low levels of agreement with current policies (Fig. 16). Usage also followed an expected pattern, with active users being more likely to support legalization. However, it is interesting to see that support for legalization in no way implies use (Fig. 11 and 12): almost half of those in favor of legalization were non users.

Conclusion

Today, legalization of cannabis is a highly topical issue, and like any other public opinion matter, it is always evolving. Current polls seem to suggest that it is at a turning point, with more states taking actions to change prohibition policies, namely Alaska, Oregon, Colorado, Washington and D.C. Texas, however, is one of the states that hasn't altered cannabis related legislation and change will depend on the shifting attitudes of its people as well as its law makers. Within the community examined during this investigation, high levels of disapproval towards current policies were observed. Even though the population and sample studied are not a representation of the state of Texas, these results provide a rough idea of the overall attitudes of our surrounding communities and how these attitudes are changing, even in the highly

conservative Montgomery County. Based on this, it can be said that Texas too is advancing towards a more accepting and even supportive position on the issue of legalization of cannabis.

Additional Figures

Fig. 2: Gender

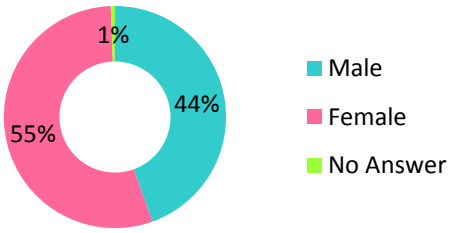


Fig. 3: Age

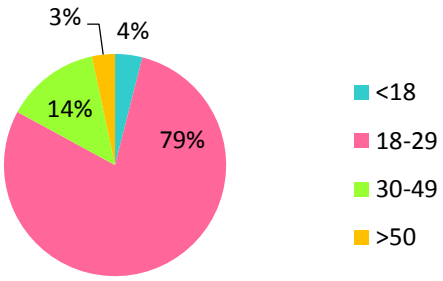


Fig. 4: Generation

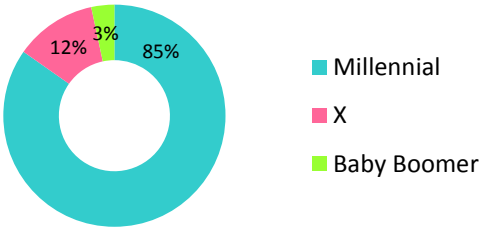


Fig. 5: Usage

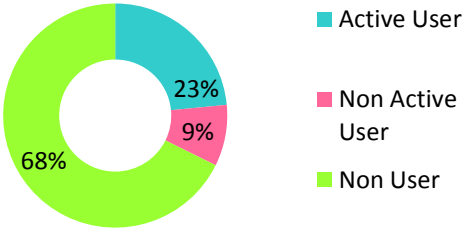


Fig. 6: Ideology

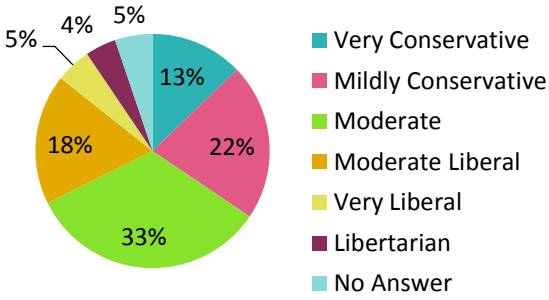


Fig. 7: Party

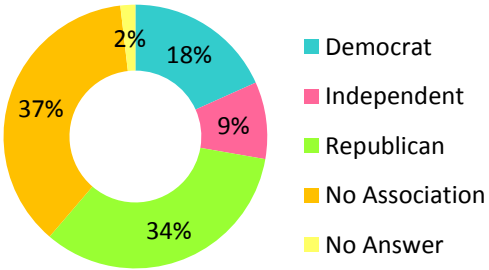


Fig. 8: Race

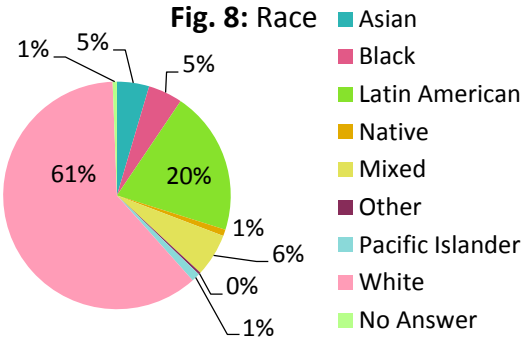


Fig. 9: Religion

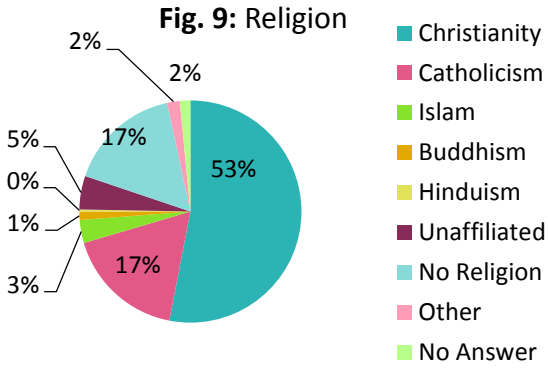


Fig. 10: Attitudes towards Cannabis Use

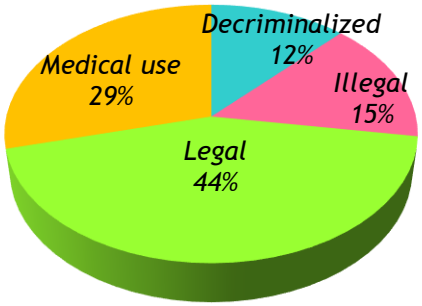


Fig. 11: Attitudes and Usage: *Legal*

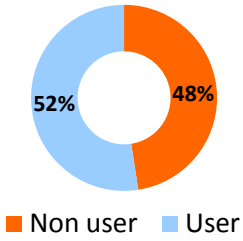


Fig. 12: Attitudes and Usage: *Illegal*

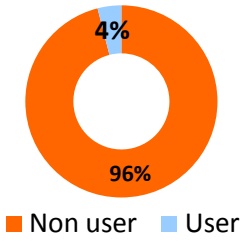


Fig. 13: Attitudes by Gender

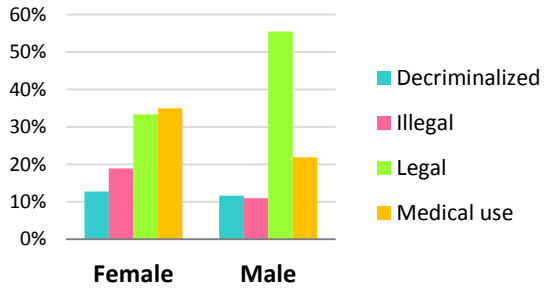


Fig. 14: Attitudes by Age

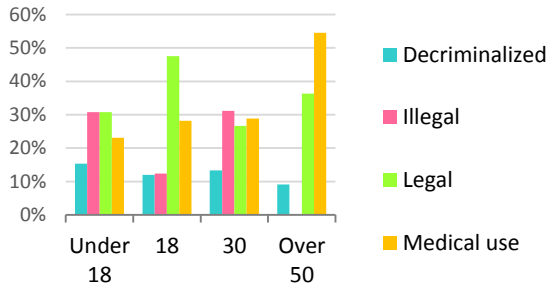


Fig. 15: Attitudes by Race

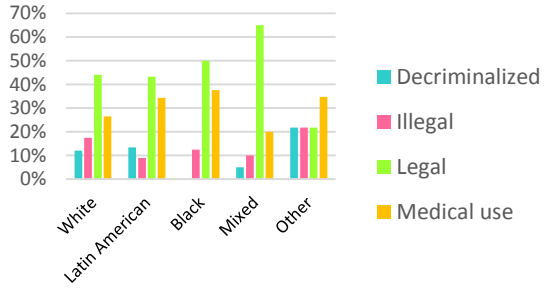


Fig. 16: Religion

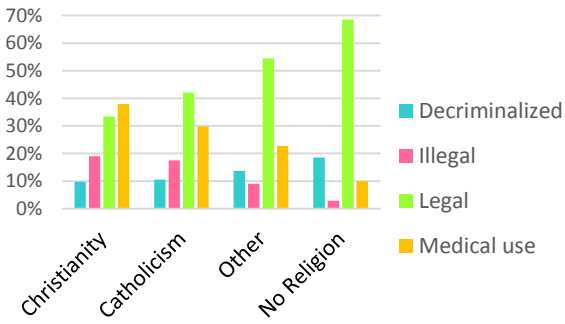


Fig. 17: Attitudes by Political Party

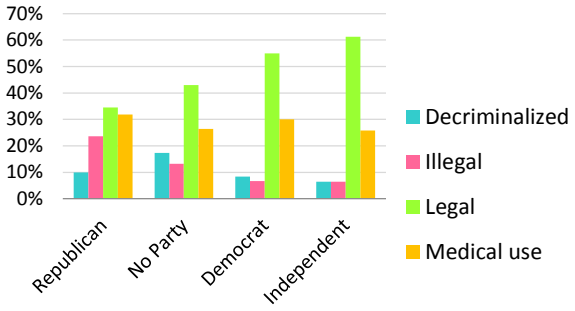
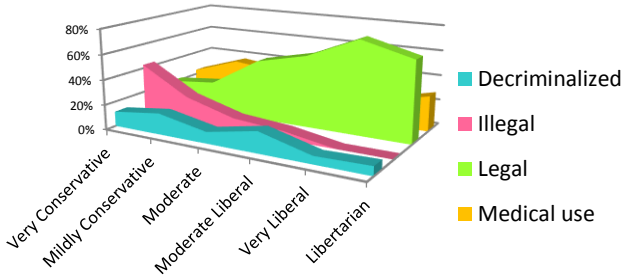


Fig. 18: Attitudes by Political Ideology



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