



Marijuana Legalization: The Republican Argument For Doing It

BY [RYAN SCHUETTE](#)

"Children are growing up with a total lack of respect for the Constitution and for the law," Pauline Sabin, the first woman to sit on the Republican National Committee, said in regard to prohibition in 1932. "The young see the law broken at home and upon the street," she added. "Can we expect them to be lawful?"

Sabin was the founder of the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform that helped legalize the sale of alcohol. She graced the cover of *Time* magazine in 1932 for inspiring the movement to overturn the disastrous eighteenth amendment that helped finance Depression-era lawlessness.

Republicans could take a page from her playbook on the issue of marijuana prohibition today. With non-violent arrests [occurring](#) every 36 seconds, overcrowding our prisons, and depleting billions of dollars from our federal and state coffers every year, we — all Americans — should consider prohibition repeal as critical to the state of our nation as debt reduction and healthcare reform.

Doubt me? If I can change my mind, so can you. In 2009, I helped manage a Republican primary campaign in my congressional district to oust Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX), my congressman. One [newsletter](#) that I signed as campaign director called weed a "troubling substance" and any measure to normalize it a "blatant disregard" for our district's values.

My position was pretty standard. Bush speechwriter David Frum, notable for styling himself right-of-center on issues like gun violence, recently [echoed](#) the same rhetoric in

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an op-ed for CNN, warning of the rise of “Big Marijuana” and calling any medicinal use a “laughable fiction.”

Here's the thing: Sabin was right, Frum is wrong, and I was once as wrong as my pro-temperance great-grandmother. We need Big Marijuana. Republicans owe it to their party as much as our Constitution and nation to help decriminalize, legalize, tax, and regulate it as soon as possible.

The benefits far outweigh fears about gateway addiction and moral decline as dated as those of the Temperance Movement.

1. Pot would create jobs and help prevent Detroit-style bankruptcies

With \$20 billion in debt, Detroit became the largest U.S. city to [file](#) for Chapter 11 protection in July. The Michigan metropolis joined a list of [seven other cities](#) to declare bankruptcy after years of crippling debt and financial crisis.

Though far from a magic bullet, studies show that marijuana legalization could help cash-strapped states and cities soldier through ongoing budget shortfalls. [One](#) by the Cato Institute, the libertarian think tank, suggested in 2010 that legalization could generate as much as \$8.7 billion in annual revenue for federal and state coffers. A prominent tax blog [compiled](#) data from different sources last year to show that legalizing marijuana could help nine states slash their deficits by double-digit percentages.

A newly legal pot industry — as well-regulated as businesses licensed to sell alcohol or tobacco — could spur a wave of new jobs and start-ups needed to stimulate the economy. The pro-legalization organization NORML [cites](#) a 1994 study on its website that used job data from Amsterdam to suggest that business spin-offs like coffeehouses, gardening tools, and more could create more than 60,000 retailers and 100,000 careers.

Colorado offers a working example in real-time, with the amendment that passed last year expected to [supply](#) roughly \$100 million in projected annual tax revenue and savings for the state, according to the Colorado Center on Law and Policy. Those dollars will come from a combined \$23.2 million in state and local sales taxes as well as from 372 new jobs created as a result of the amendment, with those numbers set to double over the next four years.

Pot legalization offers a clear advantage to struggling states and cities, and we could use the tax revenue to decrease the chances that other cities will end up like Detroit.

2. We could unplug overcrowded prisons and save tax dollars

According to Cato, we lose \$17.4 billion in taxpayer funds every year to arrests for non-violent drug crimes like sale and possession. The Marijuana Policy Project [counted](#) 872,720 pot-related arrests in the United States in 2007 alone.

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As the [Pew Research Center](#) reports, this surplus of drug-related offenders helped create a U.S. prison system that is near capacity, in crisis, and expensive. Citing more than \$80 billion we spent on our prisons in 2010 — with 47 percent of inmates in jail for drug-related offenses — Attorney General Eric Holder justly [called](#) overcrowding “ineffective and unsustainable” in recent remarks before the American Bar Association that he used to propose alternatives.

Those numbers fail to capture the true human toll for low-level offenders that serve time and leave with stigmas on their records, unable to find work and more susceptible to falling back on drug sales to make ends meet.

Lawmakers could help apprehend the crisis by legalizing the shrub responsible for overpopulating our prisons and making it easier for courts to seal records for those convicted of non-violent marijuana crimes. Maybe the land of the free could then ditch its sadly ironic reputation as the country with the highest incarceration in the world, and the [Population Reference Bureau](#) could confer the heavyweight title on Russia.

3. Legalization could help starve violent cartels at home and abroad

Pot prohibition is big business — especially for the ultra-violent cartels that regularly threaten, kidnap, and kill journalists, public officials, bloggers, and ordinary citizens in Mexico and U.S. border towns. Bringing a black-market industry into the real economy would take away a cash crop that drug traffickers peddle to finance a generational war.

As the [Washington Post](#) reports, studies estimated that the ballot initiatives and votes in Colorado and Washington alone would sap approximately \$2.8 billion in combined business away from Mexican cartels, resulting in 20 to 30 percent less annual revenue for people who truly menace our countries.

To be fair, there are critics who question how much damage legalization would do to cartels. That same story cited a Rand Corp. study that [held](#) that legalization in California would only squeeze revenue for cartels by only 2 to 4 percent, potentially limiting the adverse impact from legalization in the Centennial and Evergreen states.

Retired Air Force Captain Sylvia Longmore, author of *Border Insecurity*, rightly [argued](#) in a *New York Times* column published in 2011 that cartels draw their revenue from several sources including harder drugs like meth and cocaine, and even kidnappings.

Still — with the *Post* [pegging](#) the drug war as responsible for anywhere between 60,000 to 100,000 deaths just from 2006 to 2012 — is any business we take from cartels too small or insignificant?

4. We could ease suffering for those who live with chronic illnesses

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CNN recently ran opposing op-eds about marijuana legalization. The [first](#) belonged to Sanjay Gupta, the news network's chief medical correspondent, who publicly apologized for his earlier assertion that weed is a dangerous gateway drug. He reported making his 180-degree turn after meeting with chronically ill patients who'd seen measurable improvements on the drug.

Frum wrote the second, a counteroffensive that offered few insights and no new medical information.

What do others say? The Drug Enforcement Agency currently [lists](#) marijuana alongside addictive substances like heroin, as a Schedule I drug.

According to one recent [survey](#), however, 76 percent of doctors worldwide would actually sign off on marijuana for medicinal use. The authors who published their work in the *New England Journal of Medicine* surveyed nearly 1500 accredited physicians from 72 different countries and 56 North American states and provinces, and found that respondents would recommend it to a hypothetical woman suffering from breast cancer.

NORML [bullets](#) any number of illnesses that marijuana could treat on its website. These include Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, fibromyalgia, HIV, hypertension, and more. As Gupta points out in his article, regulations hamstringing medical researchers who need access to marijuana samples, limiting their ability to disprove more than 60 years of slanted clinical studies.

This hit home for me in 2009 when my father passed away at age 60 from pancreatic cancer, not long after the campaign to unseat Paul. Imagine my surprise when authorities discovered prescription marijuana in his car. I learned from a family friend that my father, a lifelong Republican, resorted to it out of necessity for the excruciating pain he endured until his death.

This discovery alone didn't change my mind about weed. Even so, it rattles me when I hear conservatives like Frum try to discredit a drug with medicinal value without even touching on real killers like Big Tobacco — the industry that ultimately took my father's life.

Pot legalization is overdue, and Republicans have everything to gain from associating their "R" on the ballot with Sabin's rationale for repeal.