

# Hill: Buyers' remorse on marijuana?

By David Hill –

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I was recently moderating several nights of focus groups in Denver when the subject of marijuana suddenly and unexpectedly broke into the conversation.

At the beginning of each group I asked respondents to introduce themselves, stating their favorite hobbies or leisure time interests, and one thing they would change about Colorado. I've been doing this for decades and am used to hearing "the usual suspects" when it comes to what respondents want to change. Fix the traffic. Improve the schools. Stop the influx of new residents, particularly those from California and Texas. I even got a few mentions of the oddly standard, "I wish we had an ocean and a beach."

But this time, in every group, someone mentioned he or she would go back on the state's wholesale legalization of marijuana. I probed Coloradans some on the topic this trip, and the buyers' remorse is palpable. People didn't really know what they were getting into.

I wrote about the possibility of second thoughts on marijuana previously, in early April; ordinarily I wouldn't circle back so quickly, but I am seeing too much evidence to ignore the growing backlash.

It's not just ordinary voters who now are second-guessing the move. Leaders are wondering aloud whether they should have done more to fight against approval of the referendum. Colorado's mainstream civic elite, which ordinarily and routinely organizes large coalitions to fight ballot measures it deems bad for the state, generally chose to stand aside during the two referenda — one on medical marijuana and the other on leisure use — leaving the opposition to movement to conservative groups alone.

The problem with new policies enacted through the referendum process is that there are always unintended consequences. I spotted one on this last trip to Mile High country. Some voters now think that the marijuana trade, and the associated tax revenue, is such a financial bonanza that it should pay for most everything. It's going to be a lot harder to pass any increases in general sales or property taxes because voters will instead want pot tax dollars to carry the burden.

It may be only a statistical margin of error quirk, but looking at the latest CBS News polling on marijuana legalization, I am wondering if there is a larger doubting of the wisdom of legalization.

For the first time in any time series I've monitored, support for legalization actually declined in mid-May's CBS poll.

CBS found that just 48 percent of Americans believe marijuana should be legal, down from 51 percent in two earlier polls taken by CBS in January and February. Given that each study interviewed samples of approximately 1,000 adults, for a 3 percent margin of error, a 4-point drop in legalization support is just outside the margin — and more importantly, it's a rare drop of any magnitude in momentum for legalization. For more than a decade, every successive poll saw rising support for marijuana. The latest CBS numbers are a throwback to a poll the organization took in 2012. That's a serious regression for marijuana advocates.

Pot's regress since January in the CBS polling is most noteworthy among the middle-aged (45-64) population (-13 percentage points in support for legalization) and by liberals (-9 points in support). Frankly, I am not at all surprised by the latter. Overall, support by liberals still stands at a stout 63 percent, but if I had deeper crosstabs, I'd expect that some green liberals with children under the age of 18 are starting to have some reservations about pot, just as many do about tobacco.

Pollsters will be keeping a close watch on these numbers. Is the trend in rising support for marijuana reaching a ceiling? Could there even be a growing pushback? Could the backlash be more about health and air quality than about conservative ideology?

*Hill is a pollster who has worked for Republican campaigns and causes since 1984.*