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WHAT'S THE GVERNATOR BEEN SMOKING?

Legalizing marijuana shouldn't just rest on economics

...Well, I think it's not time for [legalizing pot] but I think it's time for a debate. I think all of those ideas of creating extra revenues, I'm always for an open debate on it...

Governor Schwarzenegger isn't alone. Fifty-six percent of California voters surveyed in the April 2009 [Field Poll](#) said they favored legalizing and taxing pot. Truth be told, the Golden State always had a soft spot for marijuana. Its [Compassionate Use Act](#) was the first, in 1996, to allow physicians to prescribe pot for treating a wide range of maladies including "cancer, anorexia, AIDS, chronic pain, spasticity, glaucoma, arthritis, migraine, *or any other illness for which marijuana provides relief* (emphasis added)". [Twelve more States](#) from Hawaii to Rhode Island have since followed suit.

It's not just about medical use. Support for complete decriminalization has been on the rise throughout the U.S. [Four decades ago](#) the split was twelve percent for and eighty-four percent against. By late 2005 the gap had narrowed to thirty-four yes versus sixty no, with younger men mostly in favor and women and older men largely opposed. As might be expected, attitudes vary by region. There's far more support for pot on the East and West coasts than in the more conservative South and Midwest.

Country	Cannabis	
	Percent	SE
Colombia	10.8	0.6
Mexico	7.8	0.5
US	42.4	1.0
Belgium	10.4	1.6
France	19.0	1.6
Germany	17.5	1.6
Italy	6.6	0.8
Netherlands	19.8	1.3
Spain	15.9	1.3
Ukraine	6.4	1.0
Israel	11.5	0.5
Lebanon	4.6	0.9
Nigeria	2.7	0.5
South Africa	8.4	0.6
Japan	1.5	0.4
People's Republic of China	0.3	0.1
New Zealand	41.9	0.7

In 2008 the World Health Organization surveyed alcohol and drug use around the globe. Its [findings](#) were a bit surprising. The Netherlands only placed third. Despite their permissive drug laws, just twenty percent of the Dutch said they had ever used cannabis. Second place went to New Zealand, with a far higher 41.9 percent. Taking the crown was the

good old U.S.A., where 42.4 percent admitted inhaling at least once. (Incidentally, we were also number one for ever using tobacco, 73.6 percent, and cocaine, 16.2 percent).

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Surveys by the [National Institute of Drug Abuse](#) confirm that marijuana is the most popular illicit drug in the U.S. Parents won't like it but [in 2008](#) nearly one-fourth of 10th-graders and one-third of 12th-graders admitted smoking pot at least once during the preceding twelve months.

Marijuana's proponents claim that it's a harmless mood elevator, no worse than alcohol or tobacco. Many scientists disagree. Smoking pot is believed to pose a host of [significant health risks](#), including cancer and diseases of the lungs and respiratory tract. Because they tend to inhale deeply and hold smoke for a prolonged period, pot smokers are likely worse off than those who only use tobacco. And it doesn't stop there. There is good reason why popular culture pokes fun at potheads. Marijuana's active ingredient, THC (tetra-hydro-cannabinol) affects key brain functions including [memory and learning](#). Pot has been linked with poor performance at school and work, and even low dosages can seriously impair judgment and motor skills, making it dangerous to use machinery and drive a car.

THC does have therapeutic qualities. It's in anti-nausea medications used by chemotherapy patients. Marijuana, a powerful appetite stimulant, is of value for those suffering from AIDS and other wasting illnesses. Of course, it's these benefits (and not pot's recreational potential) that justified medical use laws in the first place.

Yet, as well intentioned as the compassionate use statutes may be, their application leaves something to be desired. California's permissive approach (physicians need only give verbal approval) lets unscrupulous clinics sell pot under the flakiest of pretenses. About the best that can be said of these profitable centers of stoner culture is that they don't sell to children. Calling the situation "Looney Tunes," [LAPD Chief Bratton](#) strongly criticized the lack of oversight: "They pass a law, then they have no regulations as to how to enforce the darn thing and, as a result, we have hundreds of these locations selling drugs to every Tom, Dick and Harry."

The good Chief hasn't seen anything yet. Tom Ammiano (D-San Francisco) has introduced [California State Assembly bill 390](#), which legalizes pot for everyone 21 and over. Although the measure includes detailed provisions for licensing producers and retailers, growing marijuana and making reefers is ridiculously simple, so combating illicit manufacture, collecting taxes, preventing sales to minors and controlling purity and potency could easily drain away a good chunk of the [\\$1.3 billion a year](#) that the law would reportedly generate. (Naturally, it's all contingent on the Feds allowing it. But that's a story for another day.)

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There's little doubt that letting buyers get weed from medical marijuana clinics instead of slimy street dealers has expanded sales. Whatever the gain, it's nothing compared to the [staggering forty percent](#) increase in consumption that State tax authorities estimate Assemblyman Ammiano's bill would yield. So is that what we really want? Given what's known and suspected about pot's effects on health, does it make sense to encourage young people to take on a habit that can cause cognitive disorders and life-threatening medical conditions? That's to say nothing, of course, of having even more Toms, Dicks and Harrys driving around in a drug-induced haze.

After all the jawboning about obesity, unhealthy food in the schools and the evils of alcohol and tobacco, it's now proposed that we do an attitudinal U-turn and embrace a mind-altering drug, and all for the sake of a buck.

Heck, it could make one want to light up!