

The nation shifts - National votes give boost to reformers

Contributed by Bill Piper

Strong results for state and local ballot initiatives, including an apparent all-time record vote in Nevada to completely end cannabis prohibition, demonstrate greater voter willingness to reconsider cannabis laws, said Rob Kampia of the Marijuana Policy Project (MPP).

Statewide measures to legalize small amounts of cannabis failed in Colorado (41 to 59 percent) and Nevada (44 to 56 percent). South Dakota voters narrowly defeated a medical marijuana initiative (48 to 52 percent). That defeat is especially disappointing because this is the first time medical marijuana has lost at the ballot box. (Voters in eight other states have approved medical marijuana.) Polling all year long showed lower support for the initiatives than had been seen for successful reform measures in previous years.

In California, voters in three cities made cannabis the lowest law enforcement priority (see related story). Voters in Missoula, MT and Eureka Springs, AR approved similar measures. In MA, voters in two districts approved non-binding resolutions to support making possession of an ounce of cannabis a civil violation subject to a \$100 fine. Voters in two other districts approved non-binding resolutions to support legalizing medical marijuana.

The Democratic takeover of the US House and gains in the Senate provide reformers with exciting opportunities next year. Democrats at the federal level are far more sympathetic to reform than Republicans. For instance, 144 House Democrats voted earlier this year to prohibit the US Justice Department from undermining state medical marijuana laws. Only 18 Republicans supported the measure. Since almost all the GOP who were defeated yesterday were bad on the issues, observers expect to see significantly more support next year. (Only one defeated Republican supported medical marijuana.)

Many members of Congress reformers work with were re-elected, including Rep. John Conyers (D-MI), Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA), Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX), and Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA). Senator Bob Menendez (D) was re-elected in New Jersey and Rep. Ben Cardin (D) was elected to the Senate for the first time in Maryland. Both voted for medical marijuana in the House, making them the first two US Senators to have ever voted for medical marijuana, creating an opportunity to advance this issue in the Senate.

The Democrats who will be leaders in the new Congress are better on drug policy than were those of the 1980s and 1990s. Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), the next likely Speaker of the House, is a strong supporter of medical marijuana and sentencing reform. John Conyers (D-MI) is a member of the Drug Policy Alliance's advisory board and will chair the House Judiciary Committee next year. Henry Waxman (D-CA) is a strong supporter of syringe exchange programs and other harm reduction measures who will chair the Government Reform Committee.

Charlie Rangel (D-NY), Maxine Waters (D-CA), and Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX) are strong supporters of drug sentencing reform. All three will likely control key Congressional committees next year.