

The WAGER Vol. 7(48) - Gambling vs. Drugs: Public Opinion and the 2002 Elections

November 27, 2002

In addition to the issues that perennially appear on the ballot, the 2002 elections presented American voters with an unprecedented number of initiatives and referenda related to the legalization of drugs and gambling. This week The WAGER explores the implications and outcomes of these initiatives.

Despite federal government efforts to frame marijuana as a public health threat, there was enough public support for the legalization of marijuana for medicinal and recreational purposes to place initiatives on the ballot in four states. Voters throughout the country (with the exception of San Francisco), however, overwhelmingly defeated measures to legalize marijuana—showing that Americans still hold socially conservative views regarding drug use. While Washington D.C. residents voted to allow low-level drug offenders to elect treatment rather than jail time, the results presented in Table 1 indicate that the majority of Americans continue to take a hard-line stance against drugs and drug offenders.

Table 1. Election 2002 Drug Policy Ballot Initiative Examples (1)

State	Initiative Name	Issue Summary	Outcome
Arizona	Proposition 203	Decriminalizes marijuana for personal use; authorizes use of marijuana for medical purposes.	Yes 43% No 57%
California (San Francisco)	Ballot Measure 5	Mandates that city officials explore options for growing and distributing medical marijuana.	Yes 63% No 37%
Nevada	Question 9	Decriminalizes small amounts of marijuana (3 oz. or less) for personal use.	Yes 39% No 61%
Ohio	Issue 1	Mandates that all individuals convicted of possession or use of a controlled substance be eligible for treatment instead of jail time.	Yes 33% No 67%
South Dakota	Initiative 1	Decriminalizes the cultivation and possession of hemp for industrial purposes.	Yes 38% No 62%
Washington, D.C.	Measure 62	Mandates that schedule II drug offenders be eligible for treatment instead of jail time.	Yes 78% No 22%

Until relatively recently, like some patterns of drug use, gambling was considered a deviant behavior and was illegal in most states. However, on this issue the public sentiment has shifted considerably. In the face of mounting deficits, state and local politicians increasingly have turned to legalized gambling as a source of revenues, jobs, and economic development.

Legalization of gambling emerged as a key debate issue in 23 gubernatorial races this year. Further, Tennessee, Arizona, Idaho, and North Dakota voters passed initiatives to legalize, extend, or expand various forms of lottery, commercial, and Native American gambling (see Table 2). The widespread and continued acceptance of gambling was perhaps most evident in Iowa, where riverboat gambling has been in operation since 1991. Iowans residing in gaming counties voted to reauthorize legalized gambling for an additional eight year period suggesting that after a decade of cohabitation with riverboats, Iowans living in gaming communities still believe that the benefits of legalized gambling outweigh the costs.

Table 2. Election 2002 Gambling Policy Ballot Initiative Examples (2)

State	Initiative Name	Issue Summary	Outcome
Arizona	Proposition 200	Allows expansion of tribal gaming by allowing each tribe to control up to 3 facilities, each with up to 1,400 slot machines and 20 gaming tables. State will collect 3% of net gaming revenue.	Yes 15% No 85%
Arizona	Proposition 201	Allows slot machines at non-tribal horse and dog tracks.	Yes 20% No 80%
Arizona	Proposition 202	Allows expansion of tribal gaming by allowing each tribe to control up to 4 facilities, each with up to 1,400 slot machines and 100 gaming tables. State will collect 1%-8% of total net gaming revenue based on incremental scale.	Yes 52% No 48%
Arizona	Proposition 301	Extends the state lottery for an additional ten years.	Yes 73% No 27%
Idaho	Proposition 1	Clarifies law allowing Native American tribes to operate video lottery terminals on reservations.	Yes 58% No 42%
Iowa	Local option vote	Extends riverboat gambling for an additional eight years in all 11 counties currently operating casinos.	Yes, (majority in all 11 counties)
North Dakota	Constitutional Measure 2	Authorizes state to join a multi-state lottery.	Yes 64% No 36%
Tennessee	Constitutional Amendment 1	Nullifies previous constitutional ban on lotteries.	Yes 58% No 42%

While gaming corporations (especially those dealing in slot and lottery technologies) will substantially benefit from these outcomes, the 2002 elections represent a setback for anti-gambling groups. But what do these election results mean for gamblers? Though exposure theory suggests that greater availability of legalized gambling might lead to increased numbers of disordered gamblers, this effect does not necessarily persist over time and a countervailing theory of adaptation might return the rate of gambling disorders to a lower level (Shaffer & Hall, 2001). Thus, while gambling facilities have dramatically increased in number over the past several decades, the prevalence of pathological gambling has remained relatively stable. It is impossible to predict with certainty whether this trend will hold as commercial gaming continues to expand.

The results of the 2002 elections demonstrate that while anti-drug sentiment continues to flourish among the American public, the nation's attitude toward gambling has shifted. The overwhelming support for the expansion of gambling

shows that Americans are increasingly willing to accept gambling as a legitimate form of entertainment, as well as a tool for economic development. In addition, this trend suggests that Americans distinguish drug involvement from gambling participation. However, for legalized gambling to be truly beneficial it must not place undue burden on the communities which it serves. For this reason, future research examining the social impact of gambling in jurisdictions served by existing and new gaming facilities will be especially important.

Comments on this article can be addressed to Tony Donato.

Notes

1. Source: Drug Policy Alliance Web site.
2. Sources: Family Research Council Web site, Arizona Secretary of State Web site.

References

Shaffer, H. J., & Hall, M. N. (2001). Updating and refining meta-analytic prevalence estimates of disordered gambling behavior in the United States and Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 92(3), 168-172.