



Why hasn't Congress legalized yet?

There are several reasons why Congress has not legalized cannabis at the federal level. First of all, the War on Drugs did an effective job of training government officials and workers to dislike cannabis. Many career politicians and members of law enforcement continue to carry beliefs they've held since the 1980's. Fifty percent of the senate is 65 years old or older, which is the age group least likely to support cannabis reform laws. While many do promote reform measures, it is still a common reaction for many elected officials to oppose reform, marginalize supporters, and make jokes about pot.¹

Secondly, marijuana reform voices in the conversation don't all agree, and that creates challenges. Although many Republicans and a large percentage of Democrats support full legalization of marijuana, there are many voices now in Washington D.C., all asking for different things. Too many voices means too many proposals and ideas are being advanced at the same time. Without the urgent need for Congress to act, that confusion is a recipe for stalling legislation.

Third, there are party differences between Democrats and Republicans in Congress that go well beyond marijuana policy, and that impacts reform discussions. While cannabis is supported by a majority of voters in both parties, Democrats often look to advance criminal justice or social reform policies as marijuana laws change, which can lack Republican support needed to advance legislation, even where both agree prohibition is harmful.

To get to legalization, we need to overcome the stigma associated with marijuana inside the Beltway. Reformers should recognize that both parties in Congress will need to take an active role and that solutions must have appeal for both parties. And finally, reformers should seek to align on key policies that will guide a regulatory program. Progress is being made in all these areas, but it is frustratingly slow.

¹ Chris Cillizza, " 2 charts that show just how old this Congress actually is," CNN, January 29, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/29/politics/congress-age/index.html>