

AlterNet

VOTER GUIDES



Progressive Voter Guide to Drug Issues



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Twelve states now have medical marijuana laws on the rolls, and hardly a week goes by without the announcement of a medical study touting the healing effects of cannabis. Yet the drug war in the United States keeps on rolling: More than 870,000 people were arrested¹ on charges relating to marijuana last year, and Congress approves larger budgets each year for the White House drug czar.

What can we expect from Obama on drug issues² if he's elected? "Bottom line," marijuana policy expert Paul Armentano³ recently wrote, "no administration since Jimmy Carter's has proactively taken steps to liberalize federal drug penalties, and there's little indication that Obama and Biden will possess either the desire or the political will to buck this long-running trend." We can expect even less from John McCain, given his history of statements on issues relating to the war on drugs.

Nevertheless, nuance does matter at the scale of the presidency, and there are some major distinctions in the positions of the two candidates on drug-related issues. Read below to find out how Obama and McCain compare on everything from drug sentencing laws to drug use in politicians' personal lives.

1 http://www.alternet.org/drugreporter/98952/the_drug_war%27s_latest_tally%3A_872%2C721_pot_arrests%2C_an_all-time_high/

2 <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/03/nation/na-campaign3>

3 http://www.alternet.org/story/97810/obama%27s_biden_pick_signals_%27more_of_the_same%27_stupid_drug_policies/

1. FEDERAL RAIDS ON MEDICAL MARIJUANA USERS, DEALERS AND GROWERS

In the 12 states where medical marijuana laws are on the books, the federal government has continued to conduct raids, arrest dealers and issue harsh fines and penalties.

Solution: The president can redirect law enforcement away from this issue and signal other priorities to law enforcement agencies.

Obama's position: Obama has said he wouldn't use federal funds on raids in the 12 states where medical marijuana has been legalized.

McCain's position: When asked in April 2007 if he would end the federal raids on medical marijuana patients, he answered, "I will let states decide that issue." However, his voting history in the Senate and his record on drug issues indicate that McCain would "stay the course."

Learn more: Granite Staters for Medical Marijuana -- McCain¹, Granite Staters for Medical Marijuana -- Obama², Drug Policy Alliance Center³

2. DECRIMINALIZING MARIJUANA

Despite majorities of state residents demonstrating overwhelming support for the decriminalization of marijuana (more than 70 percent of residents in Massachusetts, for example), the federal government lags far behind in de-prioritizing marijuana enforcement.

Solution: Support the passage of Rep. Barney Frank's bill in Congress, the Personal Use of Marijuana by Responsible Adults Act of 2008, which would remove federal criminal penalties for possession of up to 100 grams of marijuana and the not-for-profit transfer of up to one ounce (28.3 grams) of marijuana. It would not change marijuana's status as a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substances Act and would not change federal laws prohibiting the cultivation of marijuana, sale of marijuana for profit, or import or export of marijuana. It also would not affect any state or local marijuana laws or regulations.

Obama's position: Obama's record is mixed. He has stated both support and opposition to decriminalizing marijuana. In 2004, he said, "We need to rethink and decriminalize our (nation's) marijuana laws." In 2007, however, he reversed his position, with his campaign saying he was opposed to it.

McCain's position: McCain has indicated he wouldn't support decriminalizing marijuana.

1 http://granitestaters.com/candidates/john_mccain.html

2 http://granitestaters.com/candidates/barack_obama.html

3 <http://www.drugpolicy.org/marijuana/medical/>

Learn more: [Oops, Obama Was for Decriminalizing Marijuana Before He Opposed It](#)⁴

3. RECOGNIZING THE LEGITIMACY OF MARIJUANA AS A VIABLE PAIN-RELIEVING MEDICINE

Numerous powerful arms of the federal government -- the National Institutes of Health, the Office of National Drug Control Policy and others -- have filibustered or smeared valid medical research and reports indicating marijuana's viability as a pain reliever for numerous medical issues.

Solution: Change the culture of federal government to reflect contemporary science and push for funding to pursue study on marijuana's medical properties.

Obama's position: Obama has stated, "When it comes to medical marijuana, I have more of a practical view than anything else. My attitude is that if it's an issue of doctors prescribing medical marijuana as a treatment for glaucoma or as a cancer treatment, I think that should be appropriate because there really is no difference between that and a doctor prescribing morphine or anything else."

McCain's position: "Every medical expert I know of, including the AMA (American Medical Association), says that there are much more effective and much better treatments for pain than medical marijuana. ... I still would not support medical marijuana because I don't think that the preponderance of medical opinion in America agrees with (the) assertion that it's the most effective way of treating pain." (Obama's vice presidential pick, Joe Biden, has made very similar comments to McCain's on this issue.)

Learn more: [Sen. Barack Obama \(D-III.\) Speaks on Medical Marijuana](#)⁵, [Health Diaries](#)⁶, [Join Together](#)⁷

4. HARSH SENTENCING LAWS AFFECTING NON-VIOLENT OFFENDERS

The "War on Drugs" mentality in law enforcement has created a justice system that treats harmless drug offenders with the same level of punishment as rapists and murderers.

Solution: Push for Congress and the White House to redress its sentencing guidelines for federal offenses.

Obama's position: Obama has indicated that he would give some first-time, nonviolent offenders alternatives to serving time in prison. Obama has said he opposes "the blind and counterproductive warehousing" of drug users.

4 <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/washington/2008/02/oops-obama-was.html>

5 http://granitesters.com/candidates/video_obama_02.html

6 <http://politics.healthdiaries.com/john-mccain-quotes-on-medical-marijuana.html>

7 <http://www.jointogether.org/news/features/2008/obama-and-mccain-where-they.html>

McCain's position: McCain has indicated he would begin new prison expansion initiatives to cope with the rising number of convicted criminals, including those convicted of drug-related crimes. But in a recent speech to the Urban League, he spoke in favor of diverting more nonviolent drug law offenders to treatment instead of prison.

Learn more: Stop the Drug War⁸

5. REHABILITATION VS. INCARCERATION

The U.S. justice system continues to incarcerate people for drug-related offenses, a primitive and crude approach with a high recidivism rate.

Solution: Adopt an approach similar to that of other countries, such as the United Kingdom and Germany, which have enjoyed far higher success rates with rehabilitation programs.

Obama's position: Obama co-sponsored the federal Second Chance Act, passed this year, which provides up to \$360 million to support job training, counseling and mentorship for inmates released from custody. Obama has emphasized, as an alternative to incarceration rates, "training them in skills and literacy," which would be more effective at "reducing recidivism rates."

McCain's position: McCain has paid lip service on some rehabilitation issues. In 2007, McCain indicated he thinks that rehabilitation for drug offenders can work as an alternative to incarceration: "Now I will agree ... that too often we put first-time drug users in prison. In my home state of Arizona, we have a program that puts first-time drug offenders, not dealers but first-time drug offenders, that they have the eligibility on rehab programs that is associated with very significant testing procedures. And if they successfully complete that rehabilitation course, then they are allowed to move forward with their lives. We have too many first-time drug offenders in prison." But McCain has recently called for greater penalties for drug offenders, including extending the death penalty for "kingpin" drug dealers.

Learn more: Obama's Web site⁹, Send the Right Message¹⁰, On the Issues¹¹

6. DRUG ERADICATION IN SOUTH AMERICA

The United States spends billions of dollars on "drug prevention" programs in South America, with no clear effects in curbing local production of these drugs, while devastating local economies and promoting the widespread spraying of herbicides, which contribute to the destruction of rain forests and uproots people from their homelands.

8 http://stopthedrugwar.org/chronicle_blog/2008/jan/17/obama_pledges_to_continue_the_dr

9 http://obama.senate.gov/press/080312-obama_hails_pas_1/

10 http://sendtherightmessage.com/Officer_Surprises_McCain

11 http://www.ontheissues.org/Domestic/John_McCain_Drugs.htm

Solution: Cut such funding and “assistance” to these foreign governments.

Obama’s position: He has lobbied in favor of increased funding for U.S. drug interdiction efforts in Colombia.

McCain’s position: He advocates more money and military assistance to drug-supplying nations such as Colombia to stop the flow of drugs into the United States.

Learn more: McCain and Obama Ignore Abuses in Colombia and Mexico¹², Plan Colombia Fails to Stem Cocaine Supply¹³, McCain to Travel to Colombia to Talk About Trade, Drugs¹⁴

7. MEXICO AND THE DRUG WAR

There is a constant flow of guns, money and drugs across the U.S.-Mexico border as a result of the United States’ prohibition of numerous drugs, putting billions of dollars in the hands of drug cartels, causing the deaths of thousands of innocents and creating a “narco-terror state.”

Solution: There are many progressive solutions to this problem, from decriminalizing the smuggled drugs in the United States to de-incentivizing drug smuggling across the border.

Obama’s position: He has called for increasing “technology and real-time intelligence-sharing to allow U.S. and Mexican authorities to track and dismantle drug-trafficking cartels,” “investing in anti-drug education on both sides of the border to reduce demand for illicit narcotics,” and “making a concerted effort to disrupt arms smuggling and money laundering from the United States that supplies Mexican drug cartels with weapons and funds.”

McCain’s position: McCain believes the Merida Initiative, a plan to provide the Mexican government with millions in U.S. funds to combat drug-related crime, is a good first step in the cooperative effort. He recently commended Mexican President Felipe Calderon for his cooperation with the United States in drug prosecutions: “He’s a good man,” McCain said. “For the first time in history he extradited drug dealers to the U.S.” McCain has called the surge in drug-related violence along the border “a serious challenge to the authority of the government of Mexico. ... What happens when drug cartels take over? Drugs flow into the United States of America. It is clearly in America’s interests to cooperate.”

Learn more: Barack Obama: I Will Repair Our Relationship With Mexico¹⁵, On the Issues¹⁶, U.S. Department of State¹⁷

12 http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=91bc226f23422f0eb0d07ad10056f21a

13 <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/sep/18/world/fg-cocaine18>

14 <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/06/24/mccain-to-travel-to-colombia-to-talk-about-trade-drugs/>

15 http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/viewpoints/stories/DN-obama_20edi.ART.State.Edition1.464da8e.html

16 http://www.ontheissues.org/Domestic/John_McCain_Drugs.htm

17 <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/scp/2008/103374.htm>

8. RACIST DRUG SENTENCING LAWS

In federal court, crack cocaine offenses have historically generated sentences approximately 100 times greater than comparable powder cocaine crimes. This has disproportionately affected African-Americans across the United States.

Solution: Emphasize rehabilitation and reduce the disparity in penalties.

Obama's position: As Paul Armentano wrote for AlterNet, "Joe Biden was a key architect of the 1988 Omnibus Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which enacted mandatory sentences for minor crack cocaine possession (five years in prison for possession of more than five grams) and redefined low-level drug mules as drug 'conspirators' (allowing these defendants to face the same penalties as drug kingpins.") Biden has since recanted his position on this issue, and along with Obama, favors major reforms in federal sentencing guidelines. Obama supports eliminating sentencing disparities and applying guideline changes retroactively. He was co-sponsor of Biden's Senate equalization bill, which eliminates the five-year mandatory minimum prison term for first-time possession of crack cocaine and increases the amount of a controlled substance or mixture containing a cocaine base (i.e., crack cocaine) required for the imposition of mandatory minimum prison terms for crack cocaine trafficking, thus eliminating the sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine.

McCain's position: McCain has voted in the Senate for mandatory prison sentences for drug crimes.

Learn more: Obama's Biden Pick Signals 'More of the Same' Stupid Drug Policies¹⁸, Clinton, Obama, Edwards Differ On Retroactivity¹⁹, Political Base²⁰

9. AFGHANISTAN'S POPPY FARMS AND HEROIN PRODUCTION

Afghanistan now supplies around 93 percent of the world's opium, a number that has increased ever since Bush invaded Afghanistan. Various attempts at eradication have failed miserably.

Solution: Drug Policy Alliance Director Ethan Nadelmann has proposed this concept: "Let's just accept opium as a global commodity, and let's think of Afghanistan as the global equivalent of a local red light district. It has all sorts of natural advantages in opium production -- it's a low-cost producer, and there is a history of opium growing there. With global opium production centered almost exclusively in Afghanistan, as it is now, there is less likelihood it will pop up somewhere else, possibly with even more negative consequences."

18 http://www.alternet.org/story/97810/obama%27s_biden_pick_signals_%27more_of_the_same%27_stupid_drug_policies/

19 http://marcambinder.theatlantic.com/archives/2007/12/clinton_obama_edwards_differ_o.php

20 <http://www.politicalbase.com/issues/mandatory-sentencing/34/>

Obama's position: He has called for more “agricultural specialists in Afghanistan ... people who can help them develop other crops than heroin poppies, because the drug trade in Afghanistan is what is driving and financing these terrorist networks. So we need agricultural specialists.”

McCain's position: In a 2007 speech, McCain said: “Ending the pernicious effect of drugs on Afghan society is no easy task, but it begins with projects that provide economically sustainable alternatives to poppy cultivation. In presenting such projects, however, it is necessary to realize that their success is intimately connected with the need for infrastructure, such as irrigation for crops and a road system that can bring goods to market. Britain, which has the lead on counternarcotics programs, can help marshal the international community to take a comprehensive approach to this pervasive threat that directly impacts our own societies.”

Learn more: Let Afghanistan Grow the World's Opium Supply²¹, Hillary's 'Almost Heaven' -- Signs of a Coming GOP Cataclysm²², Munich Conference on Security Policy²³

10. HONESTY ABOUT DRUG USE IN POLITICIANS' PERSONAL LIVES

One of the biggest issues at the heart of America's bad drug policies is that politicians don't have an easy time admitting drug use in their own lives, or in the lives of their family members.

Solution: Greater honesty about drug use and better media reporting on hypocrisy.

Obama's position: Obama has admitted to using drugs such as cocaine and marijuana with some frequency as a young man, but he has since suggested it was the wrong path to take. Still, Obama has characterized his drug use as irresponsible, as opposed to normal. “Growing up to be a man involves taking responsibility. By the time I was 20, I was no longer engaged in any of this stuff,” Obama has said of his drug use.

McCain's position: John McCain's wife, Cindy, became addicted to the prescription drugs Percocet and Vicodin in the '90s, stealing the drugs from her own nonprofit medical relief organization. She is also an heiress to a large beer distribution network. McCain has said repeatedly that he sees a distinction between alcohol and illegal drugs, even though medical professionals and drug experts view alcohol as a drug.

Learn more: Barack Obama, Asked About Drug History, Admits He Inhaled²⁴, How Cindy McCain Was Outed for Drug Addiction²⁵

21 <http://www.alternet.org/audits/61144/>

22 <http://www.politico.com/playbook/0508/playbook305.html>

23 <http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?id=186&sprache=en>

24 <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2006/10/24/news/dems.php>

25 <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/1999/10/18/drugs/>