

Burlington County Times

Poll finds New Jersey residents are divided about legalizing marijuana

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Released this week, the poll by the Stockton University Polling Institute revealed that 49 percent of adult residents support legalizing the drug for adult recreational use, compared to 44 percent who oppose the idea and 5 percent who responded they were “unsure.”

New Jersey may have overwhelmingly elected a governor who supports legalizing marijuana, but a new poll finds that the state remains divided on the issue.

Released this week, the poll by the Stockton University Polling Institute revealed that 49 percent of adult residents support legalizing the drug for adult recreational use, compared to 44 percent who oppose the idea and 5 percent who responded they were “unsure.”

Among those who responded, 75 percent indicated they do not currently use marijuana and would not use it if it became legal; 15 percent don't use the drug now but would likely use it if legalized and 9 percent currently use the drug and would continue to if New Jersey legalized the drug. The remaining 1 percent were not sure or did not answer.

“These poll results suggest there is not a consensus in New Jersey on whether marijuana should be made legal,” said Michael W. Klein, interim executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton.

The poll results were based on a survey of 728 adult residents who were interviewed between March 22 and 29. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.65 percent, according to the university.

The issue has become a hot one in the New Jersey Statehouse as lawmakers weigh whether the Garden State should become the latest to launch a legal pot program as a way to combat the black market sale of the drug, address the disparity of minorities arrested for drug crimes and raise tax revenue.

Nine states and the District of Columbia have already legalized the drug in some manner, and Gov. Phil Murphy has called on New Jersey lawmakers to approve legislation to create a regulated, recreational program here in time for a Jan. 1, 2019, launch.

A bill has been introduced by Sen. Nicholas Scutari, D-22nd of Linden, that would create a recreational marijuana program that would license its cultivation, manufacture and sale, and legalize possession of up to an ounce by adults over age 21, as well as comparable amounts of marijuana-infused “edibles” or infused liquids, but that measure has yet to receive a legislative hearing or be advanced for votes. Instead, lawmakers have begun holding hearings to receive feedback about the issue in general rather than a specific bill.

The governor, who campaigned on a pro-legalization platform, introduced a proposed budget that relies on \$60 million in tax revenues from a recreational program, but says the main reason he supports the idea is to reduce the number of minorities incarcerated for minor drug offenses.

“We have the widest white, nonwhite disparity of incarcerated people. I’m not going to stand for that,” Murphy said Wednesday during a town hall meeting in Willingboro. “If we didn’t make a dime off it, count me in to break the back of this horrible inequity.”

Although Murphy has argued for legalization for social justice reasons, Stockton’s poll found “tax revenues” was the most frequent response from residents when asked why they support legalization (24 percent), followed by medical benefits (15 percent). Eleven percent of respondents who supported legalization indicated they believed it to be safer than tobacco or alcohol, and another 11 percent indicated legalization would reduce the costs of prisons and police in New Jersey.

Among those who opposed legalization, 24 percent said they believed using marijuana could lead to the use of other more-powerful drugs and 20 percent cited the harmful health effects of the drug. Eleven percent cited the fear of marijuana addiction and 10 percent indicated regulating the legal sale of the drug would be too difficult.

The poll also asked residents for their opinion of Murphy and some of his other policy initiatives, revealing that 40 percent of those polled view him favorably compared to 27 percent who view him unfavorably. About 33 percent were either not familiar with the new governor or indicated they still didn't have an opinion about his performance.

Thirty-six percent of those surveyed said they believed New Jersey was currently headed in the right direction, while 45 percent said they believed the state was on the wrong track.

Also, 68 percent of respondents said they supported Murphy's proposal to raise the income tax on households earning more than \$1 million, compared to 29 percent who oppose the so-called millionaires tax. Seventy-three percent said they support Murphy's plan to make county colleges tuition-free, and 75 percent said they support greater gun control legislation such as a federal ban on semi-automatic rifles.