Beat: Politics

Why the Fight for Legal Weed Looks a Lot Like the Battle for Gay Marriage

The controversy on legal cannabis

San Francisco, CA Belo Horizonte, MG, 23.10.2025, 12:40 Time

USPA NEWS - Imagine someone flying from San Francisco to Palm Springs with a few joints in their pocket — a perfectly ordinary act within California, where cannabis is legal for both medical and recreational use. But what if that same person decided to continue their trip to Texas? Suddenly, the simple possession of a small amount of cannabis could turn from a harmless act into a serious criminal offense. This contradiction reveals one of the most confusing and unequal aspects of American law: what's perfectly legal in one state can make you a criminal in another.

This situation mirrors what once happened with same-sex marriage in the United States. Before the landmark Supreme Court decision in Obergefell v. Hodges (2015), a same-sex couple legally married in California would not have their marriage recognized in Texas, or many other states. Their love and commitment were valid in one jurisdiction — and invisible in another. Equality was dependent on geography.

The same legal patchwork exists today with cannabis. While states like California, Oregon, and Colorado allow adult use and tax it heavily — sometimes collecting over 30% in state and local taxes — cannabis remains illegal under federal law. It is still classified as a Schedule I substance under the Controlled Substances Act, alongside heroin. That means technically, transporting even a small personal amount of cannabis across state lines — or through an airport regulated by federal law — is illegal, even if both your departure and arrival states have legalized it.

In this sense, cannabis users today live in a similar legal gray zone that same-sex couples once faced. Their rights, freedoms, and safety depend on which state they happen to be standing in.

Now imagine if cannabis rights, like marriage equality, were ultimately decided by the courts rather than by the slow process of individual state legislation. A national court ruling could declare that the right to use, possess, and grow cannabis responsibly falls under personal liberty, protected by the Constitution. Such a decision could harmonize state laws, remove the contradictions at airports and borders, and end the confusing criminalization of citizens who are following the law in their own states.

In the same way that love once had to be defended as a constitutional right, personal freedom of health, consciousness, and choice may one day require a similar judicial recognition. Cannabis legalization, like marriage equality, might not only be about policy — it could become a defining test of how far America is willing to go in recognizing personal liberty and equality under the law.

What if cannabis legality in the U.S. were decided not just by state legislatures or ballot initiatives, but by a court ruling — perhaps the Supreme Court or a powerful federal appeals court — declaring that criminalizing possession or regulated personal use violates constitutional rights such as due process, equal protection, maybe privacy or liberty under the 14th Amendment? If that were to happen, what might follow? Below are some of the likely changes, potential benefits, but also challenges. Then we'll compare to what the data shows — what the states are already collecting, and what harms criminalization seems to cause.

What a National Ruling Could Do
A court decision establishing a constitutional right to possess/use cannabis under certain limits could:

- Preempt state law inconsistencies. Federal law (e.g. Controlled Substances Act) currently treats cannabis as illegal, even though many states have legalized it for medical or recreational use. A court ruling could force the federal government to change policy (or find a way to recognize state laws) so people aren't criminalized for acts that are legal in their home state.

- Protect against criminal penalties across jurisdictions. For example: flying, driving, crossing state lines, mail, etc. Today, even if both origin and destination states permit cannabis, federal law (which governs airports, postal services, interstate commerce) could still treat transport as illegal.

Standardize protections and regulations. This could include rights for patients, for personal cultivation, for regulation of quality, safety, etc. It might force federal agencies to reclassify cannabis (e.g. remove from Schedule I) or regulate in a different way.

Tax and regulatory frameworks. Once legalized nationally (or constitutionally protected), there would be pressure to create consistent regulation — e.g. how much tax is allowed, federal oversight, distribution, licensing — possibly with federal revenue or at least federal standards.

Equal protection implications. If cannabis use becomes a constitutional right (within defined bounds), then individuals in states where cannabis remains illegal could have legal claims. Courts might require states that criminalize cannabis use (in the personal / non-violent domain) to justify those laws against constitutional rights.
Reduction of enforcement costs. The courts might lead to fewer arrests, prosecutions, and incarcerations for small possession, which could save state and federal money, reduce misdemeanor caseloads, and reduce social harms.

How Much Are States Already Collecting in Tax Revenue

To understand what's already happening under state-legal frameworks, here are some numbers (recent if possible), showing how much revenue legal use of cannabis generates, which helps to see the opportunity cost of prohibition:

In 2024, states with legal adult-use cannabis sales collected over $4.4 billion in tax revenue.
Since the first states legalized adult-use (around 2014), combined tax revenue has run to $24.7–25 billion so far.
In 2023 alone, legal cannabis tax revenues exceeded $4 billion nationwide.

State-by-state examples:
- California collected just over ~$1 billion in adult-use cannabis taxes in 2023.
- Illinois collected ~$550-600 million in the same period.
- Michigan around ~$470-500 million.
- Washington State has collected over $4.1 billion in cannabis tax/fee revenue since legalization in 2014.

These revenues are used for all kinds of public goods: education, infrastructure, substance abuse programs, community reinvestment, public health, etc.

Implications of Prohibition vs. Regulation: Violence, Social Problems, and Lost Opportunities

If cannabis remains criminalized in some states, or under federal law, there are a number of negative outcomes that already seem to show up in reality. If instead there were national legalization (via court) or at least decriminalization with regulation, some of those harms could be mitigated.

What Happens If Legalization Comes From the Court?

Returning to the idea of a court-mandated or court-recognized national policy:

The illegal market wouldn't immediately disappear. Even with legalization, there will always be a leftover illicit market — people who don't want to follow regulation, want lower prices, or live in places where legalization is slow to roll out.

But the legal market would greatly undercut it, and importantly, the state or local government would be collecting revenue from the legal market. That money could then be used for social programs, drug education, health, repairing damage from prior criminalization, etc.

Closing: The Old Debate, Revisited
In some ways, this is an old discussion: is criminalizing cannabis doing more harm than good? Opponents of prohibition have long argued that:

The law's attempt to suppress cannabis use doesn't stop people from using it. Users still buy it; they just do so illegally. Because it's illegal, there's no oversight and no tax revenue, and often violence and crime are more prevalent.

The cost of policing, arresting, prosecuting, and imprisoning people for cannabis offenses is huge — both financially and socially.

Thus, legalizing cannabis (especially through a national court ruling) could transform this dilemma. It would mean acknowledging that while cannabis won't vanish — but regulating it, taxing it, bringing it into the system, would allow society to manage its risks, address past injustices, gain revenue, reduce violence, and strengthen public health.

Article online:
https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-26168/why-the-fight-for-legal-weed-looks-a-lot-like-the-battle-for-gay-marriage.html

Editorial office and responsibility:
V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDStV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): Ricardo De Melo Matos

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