

Perspectives

David Clement and Yael Ossowski

Pa. can, should legalize cannabis, but do it right

State should ensure that taxation and regulation of products are reasonable and fair

If the General Assembly takes up Gov. Tom Wolf's call, Pennsylvania could become the 12th state to legalize recreational cannabis. They should absolutely follow through. But it won't end there.

Legalizing cannabis is a no-brainer. Any negatives from legalization pale in comparison with the costs of prohibition. The failed war on drugs has criminalized otherwise peaceful citizens, torn minority communities apart and locked up far too many of our friends, family and neighbors. We know the cost.

But legalization in itself isn't virtuous. State legislators must ensure that legislation does not end up causing even more problems. We need only look at other states, as well as our friendly neighbor to the north, to understand why smart cannabis legalization is necessary.

To begin, it has been suggested that Pennsylvania use its model of state retail of alcohol — namely through the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board — as a template for selling cannabis products. Though Harrisburg legislators are tempted, this would be an outright disaster.

The state should lean on the private sector and avoid treating cannabis like alcohol. It is well known that Pennsylvania's alcohol retail market is one of the most archaic and anti-consumer markets in the country, one that artificially raises prices, causes massive inconvenience and



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Gov. Tom Wolf presents his fall legislative agenda in Harrisburg in August.

pushes thousands of Pennsylvanians to buy alcohol out-of-state. We especially saw this during the pandemic. That's hardly an example to emulate.

In states where it is legal, cannabis retail is offered by licensed private businesses rather than state monopolies. Ontario, Canada's most populous province, now has only private retail storefronts and is proceeding to have a retail market where licenses are uncapped. That means there can be better competition, a more responsive market and better customer service than in a state store.

A licensed private retail market would be wise for Pennsylvanians, as it would allow the market to determine the number of stores available to consumers, rather than a bureaucracy in Harrisburg.

The legal market would be dynamic enough to respond to consumer demand, an important factor in prying consumers away from the illegal market. Stopping the black market would help raise the tax revenue Mr. Wolf intends to offer to minority communities and small businesses in need of assistance post-COVID-19.

Added to that, Pennsylvania should ensure that taxation and regulation of cannabis products are reasonable and fair.

Though Colorado and Washington have raised an impressive amount of revenue since legalization, California — with higher-than-average taxation, counties that don't allow legal shops, and a myriad of red tape governing who can grow and sell — has one of the largest cannabis black markets in

the country. Nearly 80% of cannabis consumed in the state remains in the illegal market, depriving the state treasury of much-needed revenue, but also locking out entrepreneurs who could otherwise operate successful dispensaries and contribute to their communities.

Another issue is which products will be legal to sell and use.

Canada, the largest industrialized country to legalize cannabis, mandated that only dried cannabis and oils be made legal on day one. That meant harm-reducing alternatives, such as beverages or edibles, were not available for sale until the next year. Giving the green light on product variety would benefit consumers and the retailers who are permitted to sell legal products, and would help the legal market compete against illegal alternatives.

If the General Assembly acts, there will be a lot of temptation to treat cannabis as nothing more than a cash crop for government coffers. But if legislators want to help benefit the minority communities who have been hurt by prohibition, future consumers and prospects for raising enough revenue to ease the pain caused by the pandemic, they would be wise to enact a smart cannabis policy.

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As Others See It

The metastasizing cancer of Trump

An excerpt from The Weekly Dish by Andrew Sullivan

Tit-for-tat shootings in the wake of police protests would prompt any other president of either party to join with his political opponent to call for calm and peace. But Donald Trump actually thrills to the conflict, inflames it with ever viler rhetoric, and stokes it. He is even trying to destroy in advance the legitimacy of an election that might turf him from office — by raising the idea that mail-in votes make a fair result impossible. He has doubled down on voter suppression. He is urging his own supporters to break the law and vote twice. He is deliberately spreading conspiracy theories about shadowy figures controlling his opponent.

If, because of mail-in ballots, it takes time to get the final result,

and Mr. Trump leads in early counts only to lose as the days go by, we all have every reason to believe he will claim fraud, never concede and instigate civil violence if Joe Biden is deemed the winner. It is insane that we have to contemplate such a strategy from the man responsible for the entire system of government. It is disqualifying in itself. I beg my conservative and Republican readers to see what is in front of their noses.

When I say "metastasizing," I mean he has turned some of his opposition into a mirrored version of himself. Civil servants, diplomats, judges and journalists have, understandably but fatally, leaked and over-reached, propagandized and cut corners, hyperbolized, and inflamed — in ways that have only weakened our system even further. When the governor of New York seems to threaten a sitting president with violence if he visits New

York, as Andrew Cuomo just did, Mr. Trump wins. When the former Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, urges Mr. Biden not to concede "under any circumstances," Mr. Trump wins. God knows I appreciate why they have these responses. But they only unwittingly deepen Mr. Trump's assault on our democratic liberal norms.

The only way out of this spiral is an unlikely figure, Joe Biden. An old-school moderate representing a party fast moving leftward, he is, quite simply, the least worst we've got. I'm worried the far left will eat his lunch in office, but that is a less pressing worry than the potential destabilization of the entire system if Mr. Trump wins in November. The potential for spiraling unrest in a Trump second term could prompt the dictatorial nightmare many of us have been worried about for years.

Mr. Biden is not perfect.

He's too old. But he understands our democratic system; he loves this country and has a grasp of the Constitution. He's trusted by African American voters who gave him the nomination and has not alienated white voters in the middle who loathed Hillary Clinton. He is not deranged; he is not lacking in basic human empathy; and he does not treat all his opponents as enemies.

Some Democrats mock his vow to restore a semblance of dialogue with some Republicans. And I understand their position. It is not without reason. But I reject it. If Mr. Trump is defeated, and a modicum of reason and decorum returns, and the embers of liberal democracy are not completely extinguished, we have a chance to rebuild the republic. But it may be our last one.

Vote Joe Biden. Vote as soon as you can. And save this democracy from itself.