



To: Interested Parties
From: Danny Franklin, Partner, Bully Pulpit Interactive
Re: American Attitudes on the War on Drugs
Date: June 9, 2021

Overwhelming Majority Say War on Drugs Has Failed, Support New Approach

As the 50th anniversary of President Richard Nixon’s declaration of a “War on Drugs” approaches, the vast majority of American voters believe the policy has been a failure. The majority of voters believe that current drug policies have made the problem of drug use and addiction worse and only served to overcrowd the nation’s jails. As a result, nearly two-thirds of the country believes we need a new approach based in public health, not law enforcement. Moreover, 66%, including majorities of Independents and Democrats, would support eliminating all criminal penalties for drug possession and reinvesting saved resources into treatment and addiction services.

The breadth and depth of support for change suggests that there are few issues for which the nation’s laws so misrepresent the preferences of the American people as for drugs.

American Attitudes on the War on Drugs

- 83% say the War on Drugs has failed. Only 12% believe it has been a success.
- 65% support ending the “War on Drugs.”
- 66% of voters support “eliminating criminal penalties for drug possession and reinvesting drug enforcement resources into treatment and addiction services.”
 - Support among Democrats is 85%. Among Independents, 72%. Among Republicans, 40%.
- 64% of Americans support repealing mandatory minimum sentences for drug crimes.
- 61% of voters support commuting, or reducing, the sentences of people incarcerated for drugs.

The sense urgency for a new direction is among the few truly bipartisan issues in American politics. Belief that the War on Drugs has failed exceeds 80% among Democrats (83%), Independents (85%), and Republicans (82%).

Similar numbers within each party believe it is important that the President and Congress “reform the country’s drug laws.” Eighty-two percent (82%) say reform is important, including 92% of Democrats, 79% of Independents, and 76% of Republicans. While the poll did not include an exhaustive list of policies against which to compare drug policy reforms, it is noteworthy that as many Americans believe it is important to reform drug laws as believe it is important to ensure “access to health care for everyone,” (also 82%).

Driving this urgency is a pervasive sense that drug policy has not only failed to achieve its goals, but in many senses has had a negative impact on communities and the country. Two-thirds (67%) of Americans agree that the War on Drugs has “overcrowded our prison systems, drained resources and diverted needed funding from more effective programs like rehabilitation and treatment”; 57% agree that “it has worsened the problems of addiction and problematic drug use in the US;” and 73% agree that “the War on Drugs has not made America safer or healthier.” Only 27% agree that “the War on Drugs has successfully decreased the problems of addiction and problematic drug use in the U.S.,” while 69% disagree.

Recognition around the limitations and negative consequences of the War on Drugs leads to a 2-to-1 margin supporting the end to the War on Drugs (65% to 31%), including majority support from 77% of Democrats, 66% of Independents, and 51% of Republicans.



Voters are seeking a different direction for drug policy. When asked which they would prefer, 63% say drug use should be addressed as a public health issue while only 33% say it should be addressed as a criminal justice issue.

While Americans have long expressed an interest in a public health approach to drug use, our poll shows this is translating into specific policy programs. For instance:

- 66% support eliminating criminal penalties for drug possession and reinvesting drug enforcement resources into treatment and addiction services.
- 64% support repealing mandatory minimum sentence for drug crimes.
- 61% support commuting or reducing the sentences of people incarcerated for drugs.

Beyond the public health benefits of change, voters also show an interest in addressing racial inequities in drug enforcement. 71% of voters say it is important that Congress and the President work to “root out institutional racism,” including 50% who say it is “very important.” Meanwhile, 58% of voters support repealing “the laws and policies that impose longer sentences for crack cocaine than for powder cocaine,” which research has shown disproportionately impact Black people.

Common arguments against drug policy reform do not resonate with majorities of Americans. When asked to choose which they agreed with more:

- 58% agree that “The War on Drugs has failed, and we need a new approach that eliminates criminal penalties for possession, and treats drug use as a health issue, not a criminal problem,”
- 37% agree “illegal drugs destroy communities, and we need to continue to prosecute all drug offenders, including both dealers and users.”

Voters’ rejection of traditional arguments against reform suggests that the desire for a new approach to drugs is both broad and deep. Moreover, with support for commutation of sentences above 60%, voters show strong approval for policies that not only change the direction of drug policy, but address its problems retroactively.

Methodology

Bully Pulpit Interactive (BPI) conducted a nationally representative survey among 800 registered voters between May 17- 20, 2021. 400 interviews were conducted via phone (40% cell) and 400 conducted online. Results were weighted to be representative of the nation’s registered voters. While margin of error calculations do not apply to non-random samples, the margin of error on a truly random sample of 800 is +/- 3.46 percentage points at the 95% confidence interval.