Marijuana Regulation and Federalism

John M. Greabe
University of New Hampshire School of Law, john.greabe@law.unh.edu

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Recommended Citation
John M. Greabe, Marijuana Regulation and Federalism, Concord Monitor, Mar. 12 2017 at D1, D4.

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Marijuana regulation and federalism

Federal law makes the cultivation and use of marijuana illegal for all purposes. Yet, over the past two decades, 28 states plus the District of Columbia have legalized marijuana for medicinal purposes, and eight states plus the District of Columbia have legalized it for recreational purposes. Marijuana regulation thus provides a useful and timely example for exploring the ways in which the distribution of power between the federal government and the states can facilitate policy change.

Let's start with the basics. The Constitution performs three principal functions. First, it creates a federal government of three branches - the legislative branch (Congress), the executive branch (the president) and the judicial branch - and provides them with separate but somewhat overlapping powers. We refer to this arrangement as our "separation of powers."

Second, it specifies the powers that the federal government may exercise. Most of these powers are held concurrently by both the federal government and the states, but a few (for example, the power to coin money) are given exclusively to the federal government. If the Constitution does not explicitly confer a power on the federal government, that power is understood to reside solely with the states. But federal law is supreme, and

See Constitution D4

A Little Perspective

NOAH SMITH, WRITING FOR BLOOMBERG:
"The first and most obvious hurdle to integration is xenophobia. If the Trump administration manages to whip up hostility to Hispanic, Asian and Muslim immigrants, they may feel they have no choice but to retreat into ethnic enclaves. Anti-immigrant fears would then become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The country must therefore maintain a welcoming and inclusive attitude. Another way to encourage fast integration is to shift the immigrant mix toward the high-skilled. Though all immigrants integrate, those with more education and skills tend to do so faster. Fortunately, U.S. immigration has been moving quickly toward a more educated population, probably as a result of the end of legal immigration. The Trump administration should be very careful not to choke off this positive trend by scaring high-skilled immigrants away or restricting their entry. A shift to a Canada-style merit-based immigration system, which Trump has promised but not yet delivered, could be a plus. If the U.S. manages to tamp down its latest wave of anxiety, the future is bright. Once again, immigrants will fulfill George Washington's dream, and the country will remain 'one people' - bigger, stronger and more dynamic than before. The great American experiment is still working. The country's leaders just have to step back and let it work."

NHsnapshot

ON MARCH 12, 1986, Gov. John Sununu signs into law a measure providing money to pay for placing children in group and foster homes. The measure provides money to cover court-ordered placements. It is a result of the state's failure to pay for a law it approved the year before.
CONSTITUTION FROM D1

precepts any conflicting state laws. We refer to this general distribution of power between the federal government and the states as our "federalism."

Third, it recognizes certain zones of liberty surrounding the individual. Some of these zones belong only to citizens, but most are held by all persons within the jurisdiction of the United States. Some limit only the actions of federal government, but most constrain both the federal government and the states. We refer to these zones of liberty as our "individual constitutional rights."

Back to marijuana. The Constitution does not explicitly give Congress the power to regulate marijuana. But it does grant a number of relevant powers. It empowers Congress to regulate interstate commerce and to adopt additional measures that are necessary and proper for putting this power into operation. It also vests the president with general law enforcement powers while directing him to take care that federal laws be faithfully executed. In 1976, Congress used its commerce clause powers to pass the federal Controlled Substances Act. The goal of the CSA was to combat drug abuse and control the trafficking of drugs such as marijuana. It provided a federal monopoly to manufacture, distribute, dispense or possess marijuana.

In 2002, not long after California had legalized marijuana for certain medical uses, a dispute arose over whether state authorities could constitutionally enforce the CSA against a disabled California resident who was lawfully growing and using marijuana under state law.

The resident sued, claiming that the CSA could not constitutionally be applied to her. She claimed that her conduct had no bearing on interstate commerce and thus was beyond Congress's power to outlaw.

In 2006, the Supreme Court disagreed and held that federal authorities could constitutionally enforce the CSA against her. The Court said that they were not engaged in conduct that affected interstate commerce.

Nonetheless, the court said, the Constitution's Interstate Commerce Clause gives Congress the power to regulate commerce, and its purpose is to prevent states from interfering with that commerce.

And a majority of the court said that growing marijuana is not an interstate activity. The upshot of this decision is that there are no real limits on the federal government's power to outlaw marijuana.

Congress has passed a law that completely bans its cultivation and use, and the Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of that law's enforcement in every extreme circumstance.

So why do states continue to enact laws legalizing marijuana? Aren't such efforts a waste of time?

They are not. Our constitutional system of checks and balances pressures the states to seek federal reform. If they don't, Congress will legalize marijuana.

Moreover, law enforcement is conducted mostly by state and local officials who cannot be conscripted into federal service. Police officers in states that have legalized marijuana are unlikely to spend their limited resources combating that, although technically illegal.

The federal law enforcement agency is unlikely to be entirely rolled back.

One of the principal reasons that the founders adopted a federalist system was to enable local resistance to unpopular federal policies.

The recent success of the marijuana legalization movement suggests that, at least sometimes, the system continues to work as the founders intended.

--John Grebe teaches constitutional law and related subjects at the University of New Hampshire School of Law. He serves on the board of the New Hampshire Institute for Civic Education.)