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Uruguayans are Skeptical as the Country Becomes the First to Regulate the Marijuana Market

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In December 2013, the Uruguayan Congress approved Law 19.172, effectively making the Uruguayan state the first in the world to control and regulate all activities related to the marijuana market, from growing to distributing and selling cannabis and all its byproducts. The unprecedented policy decision put the small Latin American country in the spotlight. On one hand, the law has been praised for its liberal and creative approach to drug policy, which together with other pro-civil liberties policies such as equal marriage and abortion, granted Uruguay the title of “Country of the Year” by *The Economist*.¹ On the other hand, the new law’s measures violate treaties that comprise the International Drug Control Regime (IDCR).

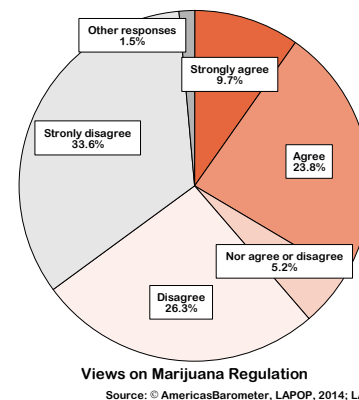
However, unlike other liberal policies such as the legalization of same-sex marriage, which is widely supported by the Uruguayan population (Boidi 2013), or abortion rights, which are conditionally supported by the public (Boidi and Corral 2013), the regulation of the marijuana market is opposed by a majority of the Uruguayan public. This *Topical Brief*² assesses the state of public opinion

¹ “Earth’s got talent,” December 21, 2013. Accessed March 23, 2015.

<http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21591872-resilient-ireland-booming-south-sudan-tumultuous-turkey-our-country-year-earths-got>

² The LAPOP *Insights* series (with *Topical Briefs*) can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>. The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>

Figure 1. Support for Marijuana Regulation in Uruguay



Views on Marijuana Regulation
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; LAPOP UY vMay2014

toward the regulation of a legal marijuana market in Uruguay.

The 2014 AmericasBarometer³ survey asked Uruguayans to what extent they agree with the measure captured in this statement: “Since a few weeks ago, the marijuana market in Uruguay is no longer penalized and it is regulated by the government.”⁴ Figure 1 shows

³ Funding for the 2014 round of the AmericasBarometer mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and Vanderbilt University. This *Topical Brief* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of USAID or any other supporting agency.

⁴ The law passed in December 2013, and data collection took place in March 2014. In addition to the options offered in the question it was possible to give the following responses “neither agree nor disagree” (5.2%), and “agree with non-penalization but disagree with regulation,”

the majority of the population rejects the new measure: 33.6% indicate they disagree a lot with the measure, and an additional 26.3% indicate they simply disagree. Adding these two categories together, *almost six out of ten Uruguayans (59.9%) disagree with the new marijuana policy.* On the other hand, only 9.7% fully support the measure, and an additional 23.8% agree with it. Adding the two categories expressing positive attitudes toward the measure together, just one in three persons (33.6%) supports the new marijuana law.

Beyond approval for the law itself, views about the use of marijuana are rather negative among Uruguayans. The AmericasBarometer survey asked respondents to what extent they agreed with a series of statements about marijuana, including the following: “Consuming marijuana is harmful to health;” “Marijuana is a gateway drug;” and “Marijuana users are a threat to society.” Respondents expressed their agreement with each of the statements using numbers from a scale ranging from 1 “Not at All” to 7 “A Lot.” To facilitate the analysis and simplify interpretation, the original responses were recoded onto a 0-100 scale that maintains the same substantive meaning of responses, but for which 0 represents that the respondent does not agree “at all” with the statement, and a score of 100 means that the respondent agrees “a lot.”

The numbers displayed in Figure 2 reflect the average of responses given by the Uruguayan survey respondents, which constitute an estimate of the average degrees of acceptance (on the 0-100 scale) of each statement among the Uruguayan public. The grey areas around the dot represent the confidence interval for the estimate.

Average agreement with the statement that marijuana is harmful to health is 71.8 degrees on the 0-100 scale. Considering the fact that the midpoint of the scale is situated at 50, then it is

“doesn’t know”, and “doesn’t answer,” which added together sum 1.5%

Figure 2. Public Beliefs about Marijuana

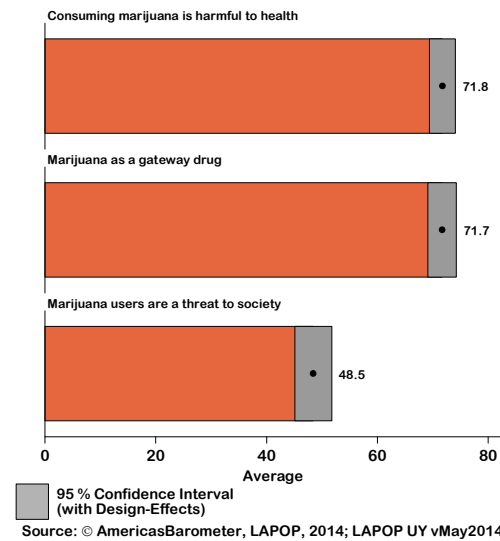
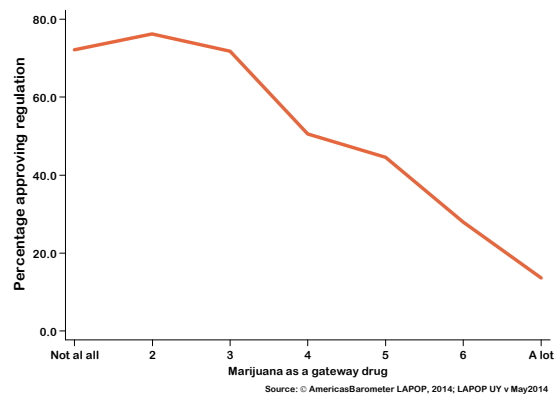


Figure 3. Rates of Approval of the Market by Belief that Marijuana is a Gateway Drug



easy to see that with an average of over 70, *Uruguayans tend toward agreeing strongly with the general idea that marijuana is harmful to health.* Similarly, respondents tend to believe that marijuana is a gateway drug, an idea that was salient in the meager public debate that preceded the approval of the law (an average of 71.7 degrees of agreement with the statement). On the contrary, Uruguayans tend not to believe that marijuana users are a threat to society, with the score on that measure averaging 48.5, a value that falls below the midpoint of the scale.

Beliefs about and experiences with marijuana are closely related to rates of approval of the new law. One of these beliefs is that marijuana is a “gateway drug;” Figure 3 shows that, among those who do *not* believe marijuana is a gateway drug, 72% approve of the law. At the other end, only 13% of those who agree “a lot” with the idea that marijuana is a gateway drug support the law.⁵

The AmericasBarometer survey in Uruguay also asked about the respondent’s own experiences with marijuana. Analyzing this question allows us to see how familiarity with marijuana is associated with support for the new law. As shown in Figure 4, a quarter (25.7%) of those who have never tried marijuana support the law, while 62.7% of those who have tried it at least once in their lifetime approve of it. Similarly, 22.2% of the Uruguayans who do not know anyone who uses marijuana approve of the law, while approval more than doubles among those who do know someone who uses it (46.4%).

Nonetheless, *the most powerful variables associated with support for marijuana are not related to marijuana itself: they are political.* Figure 5 clearly shows that approval of the marijuana law is strongly predicted by an individual’s ideological stance, with those self-identified on the “left” holding more positive attitudes towards the law than those who place themselves on the “right.” Further, approval of the law is strongly related to approval of José Mujica’s government, which held the Executive at the time of the 2014 AmericasBarometer data collection.

Now, with Tabaré Vázquez taking office as President, a puzzling question about the future of public support for the marijuana law is presented. Unlike President Mujica, who was

Figure 4. Approval of the New Marijuana Law by Individual Experiences

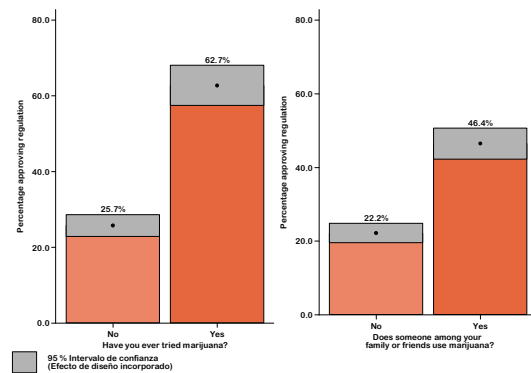
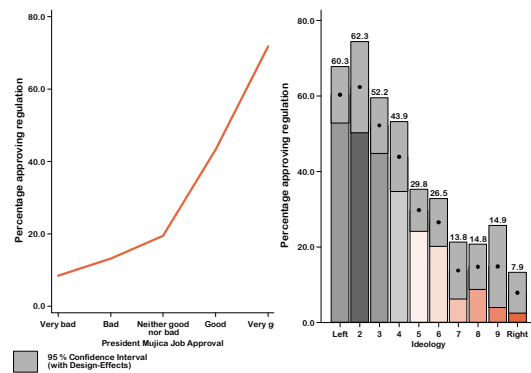


Figure 5. Approval of the New Marijuana Law by Political Orientations



the critical proponent and advocate for this law, President Vázquez has milder views towards it and has publicly expressed his concern about some aspects of the law (though he has stated his commitment to continue its implementation).⁶ In the coming months, it might be possible to see the link between presidential approval and support for government regulation of the marijuana market unravel. But, at the same time, as implementation of the law advances, new considerations might come to citizens’ minds in

⁵ In this and all subsequent figures the measure of approval adds together those who “strongly agree” and those who simply “agree” with the new marijuana regulation law. This and all the other bivariate relationships discussed in this document achieve statistical significance in a regression analysis (not shown here, but available upon request from the authors).

⁶ “Tabaré Vázquez admitió que es ‘increíble’ que las farmacias vendan marihuana en Uruguay,” October 16, 2014. Accessed March 23, 2015. <http://www.infobae.com/2014/10/16/1602164-tabare-vazquez-admitio-que-es-increible-que-las-farmacias-vendan-marihuana-uruguay>

ways that reshape their support for the law and their attitudes toward marijuana use more generally.

As a pioneer in the realm of a regulated legal market for marijuana, Uruguay stands as a critical case for understanding not only how such a law is implemented but, also, how the process of putting that law into action affects public attitudes on issues of marijuana cultivation, sales, and use.

References

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The 2014 AmericasBarometer is available online. Full results of the AmericasBarometer surveys in Uruguay and the additional 27 countries surveyed in the region can be consulted on-line at www.LapopSurveys.org. The country data sets are available for on-line analysis or download (in SPSS and Stata formats) at no cost.