

# Weed Politics: Parties, Voters and Attitudes towards the Legalization of Soft Drugs in Europe \*

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**Abstract.** National policies about cannabis use have dramatically changed both in Europe and the US throughout the last decade. The growing relevance of this issue in advanced industrial democracies has resulted in a relatively sizeable body of academic works dealing with the legislative aspects of these policy changes. However, public opinion research has devoted surprisingly little interest to this topic. So far, no study has investigated the dynamic interplay between public opinion and political parties' position on the issue in comparative perspective. Our contribution aims at "bringing politics back" into this debate, through an investigation of the political factors that drive citizens' attitudes towards legalization. We focus on Europe, taking advantage of a unique dataset provided by the **euandi** project. The results show the crucial importance of "politics" in explaining citizen preferences. Ideological orientations at the individual-level appear to be the key explanatory factor in the model. Perceived salience of the issue is also linked positively to favourable attitudes towards legalization. Yet, the most interesting finding of the analysis relates to the role of party politics *vis-a-vis* legislation in driving individual attitudes. Whereas country legislation does not seem to make a difference, systemic differences across party systems relate significantly with individual's dispositions towards legalization. Citizens tend to favour legalization more in those countries where parties are overall more in favour and where polarization of the issue is higher – and this *regardless* of the legislation in place.

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## **Introduction: Bringing politics back into the debate on cannabis legalization**

Over the past decade, national policies about soft drug regulation have dramatically changed both in Europe and in the US. In a majority of cases, these changes have gone in the direction of decriminalizing (e.g., Portugal, Czech Republic, and, more recently, Austria) or even legalizing (e.g., Colorado, Washington) the recreational use of soft drugs. In some other instances, relatively tolerant policies have been fully reversed (e.g., Italy, United Kingdom). The relevance of this issue in advanced industrial democracies is growing, and there is a relatively sizeable body of academic works dealing with question of legalization or other forms of policy change on the use of cannabis.

Some studies focus on the macro-level and try to evaluate the economic efficiency of legislations prohibiting cannabis (Miron and Zwiebel, 1995; Pudney, 2010). Most of these studies are rooted in a public health perspective (for a review of the effects of cannabis use on health see: Hall, 2015), or more widely on assessing the individual level consequences of cannabis consumption and policy change on education or labour-market entry and crime (Adda *et al.*, 2014; van Ours and Williams, 2015). Against this background, public opinion research has devoted surprisingly little interest to this topic. Comprehensive studies limit themselves to briefly mentioning public support for cannabis-related policy change (Caulkins *et al.*, 2012), while studies on the determinants of citizens' attitudes towards legalization tend to focus on socio-demographic characteristics. Individuals in favour of the legalization of cannabis tend to be more male, educated and young (Hathaway *et al.*, 2007; Williams *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, patterns of consumption appear to be the chief explanatory factor of support for legalization: individuals who use cannabis are the most in favour of its legalization (Palali and van Ours, 2014). Conversely, individuals who have never used soft cannabis are more likely to support its prohibition (van der Sar *et al.*, 2011).

Overall, findings on the determinants of individual support for the legalization of cannabis – or, more widely, soft drugs – are incomplete. First, only one study investigates these results comparatively, but still for a subsection of the European population – the youth (European Commission, 2011). Second, and to some extent most importantly, previous studies tend to omit the *political* dimension of support for the legalization of cannabis. Yet, some results hint to the relevance of political factors in explaining support for legalization. Tolerance towards soft drugs and its use is linked to the general post-materialist transformation of public opinions in advanced democracies. Such issues that belong to a *liberal-traditional* dimension are increasingly politically relevant – and post materialist issues are even the most significant for some electoral constituencies (Inglehart, 1990). In this line of research, Cao and Zhao (2012) show that “residents of nations where the expressionist dimension of societal cultural systems is relatively high will be more apt to hold tolerant views towards ascetic deviance, such as soft drugs” (p. 296). Their argument entails that socio-cultural factors at the aggregated level (that is, the degree of liberal expression of a society) shapes an individual’s attitude towards soft drugs. Furthermore, an individual’s political placement on a left/right scale is also a significant determinant of support towards legalization: voters of the left are more supportive of the legalization of cannabis (Palali and van Ours, 2014). In other words, both the aggregate-level socio-cultural context and the individual-level ideological preferences determine support for legalization. Yet existing research has only partially addressed the significance of politics on the issue of legalization. The goal of this paper is thus that of uncovering its role in the support for legalization, and particularly the interplay between public opinion and the political supply’s position on this issue.

There is a significant difference on that regards between the US and the European context. Indeed, in the US, legalization policy change is the result of voters’ mobilization. In several states, legalization was adopted through procedures

of direct democracy: 55 percent of voters supported *Amendment 64* in Colorado (2012), 56% of voters supported *Initiative 502* in Washington (2012), and 56% of voters supported the *Oregon Ballot Measure 91*. On the other hand, in Europe, policy changes of this sort are initiated and implemented by political parties. By bringing politics and its major actors back in the debate on support for legalization, we ask the question of congruence of positions between political parties and voters on the legalization of cannabis. More precisely, we ask to what extent citizens' opinions mirror those of parties that represent them and implement cannabis policies in parliament in turn.

This question is rooted in the wider literature that studies the congruence of preferences between parties and their voters. Do parties represent their voters? Or do voters follow their parties? The question of linkage between parties and their voters was spelled out by Sartori: "citizens in modern democracies are represented *through* and *by* parties. This is inevitable" (Sartori 1968, *italics* in original). The question we ask, is whether this linkage is really "inevitable". This linkage can work into two directions: top-down and bottom-up. Top-down conceptions of party linkage posit that the voters adapt to the views of the parties and their leaders. The bottom-up theory argues that political elites adopt the positions of the mass public, and more precisely, parties adopt the preferences of their constituents (or electoral base). Both these processes are largely supported by evidence (Steenbergen *et al.*, 2007). Yet, contextual factors, such as party positions and the way they are expressed, as well as the specific policy field they relate to have considerable impact public opinion, and on voter-party linkage (Dalton, 1985). In this paper, we therefore look at the relationship between the preferences of both sides of the electoral market, in order to provide a political account of what drives mass support for legalization.

Previous scholarship faced major limitations with regards to the political dimension of support for the legalization of cannabis. So far, no comparative dataset that measured both parties' and voters' positions on the issue has been made

available to the research community. In this paper, we resort to a unique dataset, as provided by **euandi**, a Voting Advice Application (VAA) that served European citizens during the 2014 elections to the European Parliament. During the making of this VAA, all relevant parties contesting elections in the EU28 have been coded on 30 concrete policy positions including that on legalization of soft drugs. The dataset is complemented by the opinions of almost half a million European citizens on the 30 issues, again including legalization.

In order to uncover the political dimension of support for the legalization of cannabis, the remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we present our unique dataset and a descriptive analysis of the key measures that will be employed in the analysis. Then, we provide a multivariate analysis of the individual-level drivers of attitudes towards legalization, focusing on the political determinants at both micro-level (i.e., ideological characteristics of voters and perceived saliency of the issue) and macro-level (party system's overall position and degree of polarization over the issue). Finally, we briefly discuss the potential political implications of our findings, and set out an agenda for further scientific research.

### **A unique dataset and a few descriptive statistics**

This paper is based on the data collected in April/May 2014 as generated by the **euandi** project. This was a transnational VAA used during the 2014 European elections campaign. Essentially, VAAs are online applications that compare the political preferences of users with the positions of political parties on the same policy issues. The goal of VAAs is to provide voters with an “advice” on vote choice, by informing them on the parties that represent their positions better. **euandi** is distinctive from other VAAs as it provides comparative data on every European party systems and hundreds of thousands of voters based on the same questionnaire. Party positions were coded through an iterative method which

combines expert coding of party positions and self-placement of the parties themselves. This method provides a consolidated placement of 274 political parties across the EU28 countries (for a more detailed discussion of the iterative method of party placing and extensive presentation of the dataset, see: Garzia *et al.*, 2015). The questionnaire comprised of 30 questions that were then administered to users. In this paper, we rely on the following questionnaire item: “*The legalization of the personal use of soft drugs is to be welcomed*”.<sup>1</sup> This item provides data for all relevant parties in the EU28 and users of the VAA. This statement is coded on a 5-point scale (answer options for both parties and voters: *completely disagree, tend to disagree, neutral, tend to agree, completely agree*). Positive scores on this scale (which is graduated from -2 to +2) are associated to preference for the legalization of cannabis. The remaining of this section presents descriptive statistics on the preferences of European parties and voters in turn on the legalization of cannabis.

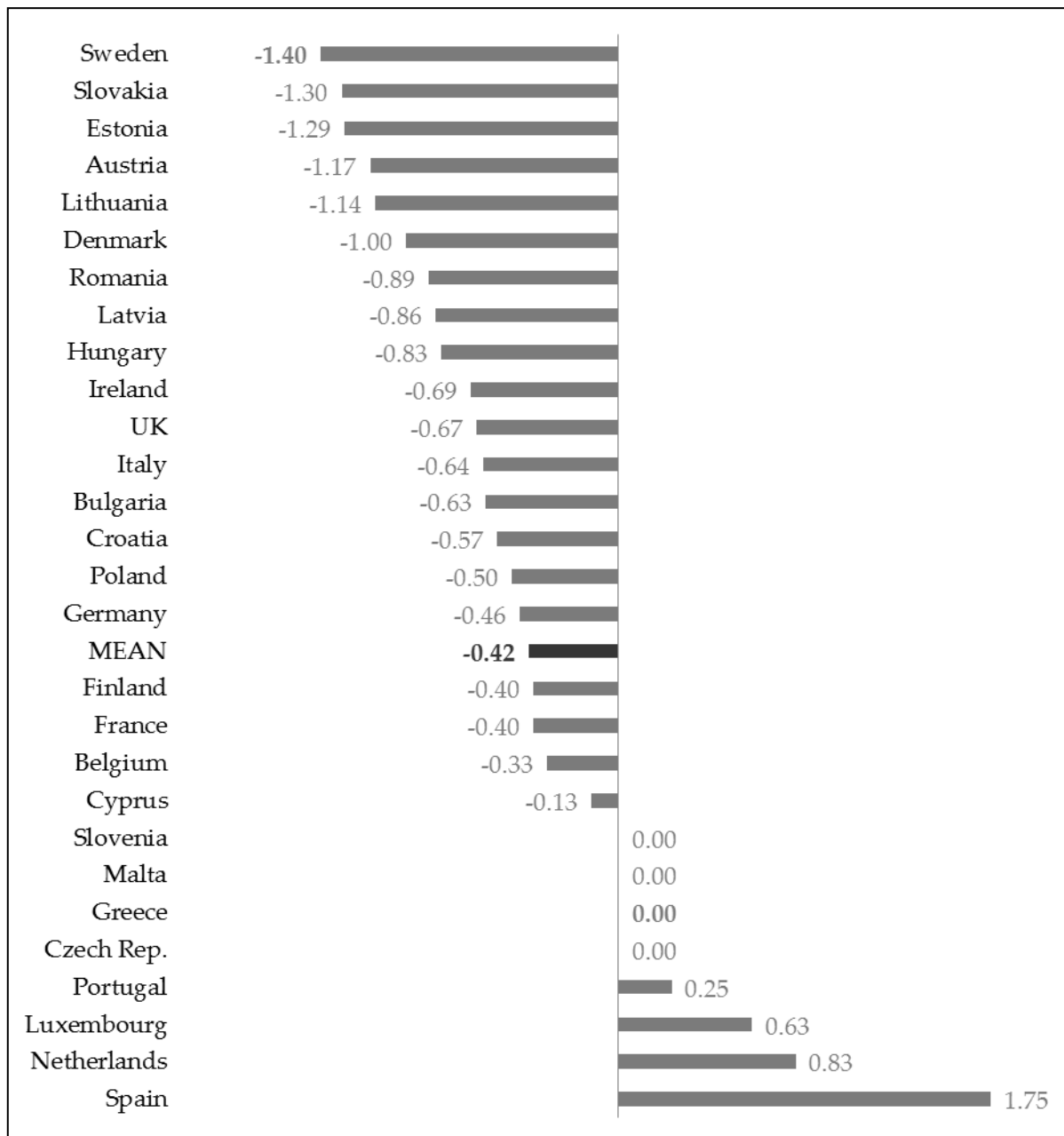
First, we turn to the position of European political parties towards the legalization of cannabis. Because we hypothesized that contextual political factors have an influence on individuals’ preference, we look at the aggregated positions of each country’s party system on the issue of cannabis legalization (i.e., mean value for all parties in a given country). Figure 1 presents the preferences for legalization in the 28 countries of the EU. On average, political parties in Europe ‘tend to disagree’ with the legalization of cannabis. In 20 out of the 28 EU countries, party systems do not favour legalization. Only 4 party systems in Europe display preferences for legalization, while this position is neutral in 4 others. One notes that Portugal, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Spain – the party systems more in favor of legalization – are countries that already implemented progressive legislation

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is aimed at contributing to the debate on the legalization of *cannabis*. Although the question in the euandi questionnaire dealt with the legalization of “soft drugs”, we believe it can serve as a safe proxy for the legalization of cannabis.

towards cannabis consumption (it is also the case in the Czech Republic, where parties are neutral).<sup>2</sup> Conversely, the top of the figure features the party systems'

**Figure 1.** Party systems preferences for the legalization of cannabis



<sup>2</sup> The status of cannabis legislation across EU28 countries is presented in Appendix A.

that are the most opposed to legalization (mainly Eastern European countries) which also happen to be the countries with the least favourable legislations towards cannabis consumption.<sup>3</sup>

Our dataset also provides an abundant amount of user information. To avoid confusion, we consider users in this paper as individuals who answered the questionnaire (they “used” the **euandi** VAA), and not cannabis users. The dataset provides over 300,000 completed user profiles, which we consider as valid responses. In addition to their preference, each individual also provided their perceived importance of the issue, their general ideological positioning, and basic socio-demographics.<sup>4</sup>

On average, citizens in Europe are slightly in favor of the legalization of cannabis. This is consistent with survey research on the American case (Caulkins *et al.*, 2012) and where state referenda on legalization were passed by a 5 to 6 points margin. Overall, citizens are almost equally divided on the issue of cannabis legalization. However, the variation of preference towards legalization within European countries is important, and it varies by almost 2 points on our 5-point scale. If citizens are more supportive of legalization than political parties, a somewhat similar pattern emerges. Citizens’ preference for legalization is higher in countries which have progressive laws regarding cannabis use.

Overall, these descriptive results point to the imperfect linkage between parties and voters on the issue of cannabis legalization. Looking at dyads of representation in each countries, the party system/voters linkage on legalization is contrasted. In 13 countries, the preference for legalization of voters is not translated at the party system level. Furthermore, in all of these cases, voters support

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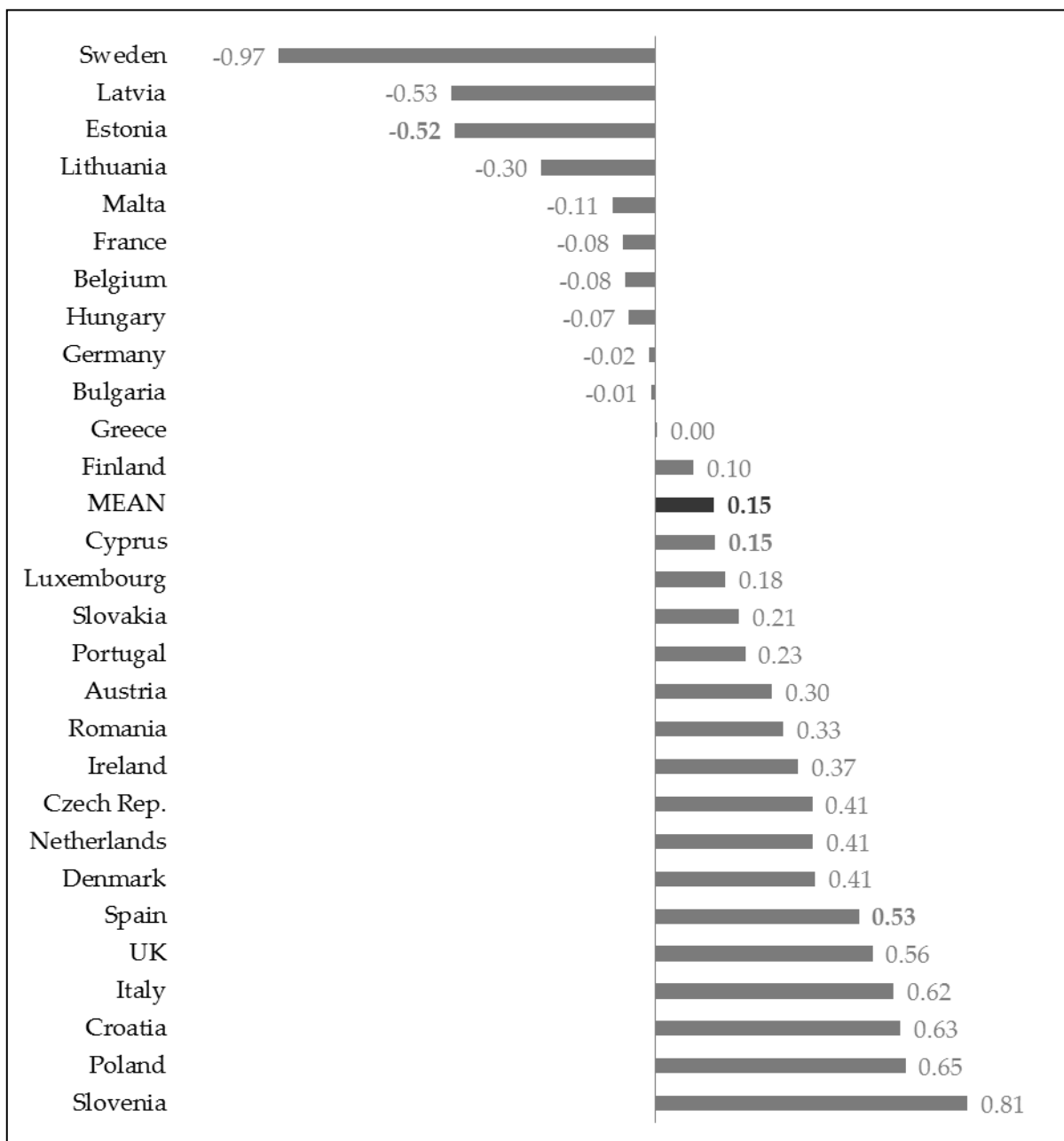
<sup>3</sup> A rather more surprising result, is the stark opposition to legalization of the Austrian party system in 2014, as the country decriminalized cannabis use and possession in 2016.

<sup>4</sup> One notes that these data are not sampled randomly; rather, users self-selected themselves into the **euandi** application. As is the case with other VAAs, male, young and highly educated respondents are slightly over-represented in this kind of sample.



legalization whereas party systems don't. On the other hand, in 15 countries the preferences of voters and party systems go in the same direction: in 4 countries the dyads are in favor of legalization, whereas they are opposed to it in 11 countries.

**Figure 2.** Citizens' preferences for cannabis legalization in Europe (mean values by country)



At the aggregate level, the correlation between the preferences for legalization of party systems and voters is moderately strong ( $r = .40$ ), but the strength of this relationship appears to vary a lot across country cases. In order to disentangle the relation between public opinion about legalization and parties' preferences on the issue, we turn to a multivariate analysis.

### **Explaining citizens' support for legalization: The "Weed Politics" model**

As noted in the introduction, previous research has so far only hinted at the role played by "politics" in shaping attitudes towards legalization. We distinguish political factors that can influence individuals' support for legalization at both individual and contextual levels. More than a general left-right positioning, we expect post-materialist values to be an important driver of legalization support at the individual level. We expect individuals with liberal socio-cultural values to favour legalization more. When it comes to contextual factors, previous research has shown some of them – such as the degree of cultural liberalism of a society – to significantly shape opinion towards soft drugs. We expect that these contextual factors are (also) translated by – or expressed *through* – political parties. More specifically, we hypothesize party systems to influence individuals' preferences on legalization in two ways. First, we expect the average preference of party system to be in line with that of voters. At this stage we are agnostic to the question of "who is cueing who?" (are parties mirroring public opinion, or are voters positioning themselves on party cues), and remain with a non-directional expectation that the more party systems are in favour of legalization, the more voters should support this policy change. Second, we expect that the most polarized a party system is on the issue of legalization, the most salient the issue will be in the public debate; as a result individuals are more likely to express strong support or opposition on this salient issue.

We tested our "Weed Politics" model through OLS regressions with clustered robust standard errors at the country level (N=28). In the analysis, we rescaled all variables on a 0 to 1 scale. Our dependent variable is preference for legalization, where '0' stands for complete opposition and '1' for complete support. At the individual level, we included three sets of independent variables. First, socio-demographic controls comprise gender, age category, and educational level. Second, we included a set of variables on the political preferences of citizens on three major political dimensions: socio-economic left/right (where '0' is the most on the left), pro/anti-EU ('0' is anti-EU), and a liberal/authoritarian scale ('0' is the most liberal). These measures were calculated by an automated algorithm on the basis of respondents' answers to the full **euandi** questionnaire. Finally, we added the importance that respondents assigned to the issue of legalization ('0' for least important, '1' for very important) as revealed at the end of the VAA questionnaire.

At the country level, our independent variables include the mean position of parties in the country of the respondent ('0' stands for opposition, '1' for support). The model takes into account the polarization of parties on the issue of legalization within party systems, which is calculated by the standard deviation of the mean of party systems for each country. Finally, one could charge that individual preferences for legalization will vary depending on the legislation in place, of which the average position of the parties in the system is a mere reflection. To rule out this alternative explanation, the model includes control variables tapping cross-national differences in the legislation on cannabis use. We coded four macro-groups of legislation types (i.e., illegal, party decriminalized, decriminalized, and almost legal) based on the data from the *European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction*. The results are presented in Table 1, while descriptive statistics for all variables included in the model are presented in Appendix B.

Model 1 of our analysis is in line with previous research: socio-demographics are significant determinants of support for the legalization of cannabis. Typically,

supports of legalization tend to be male, younger and highly educated. However, the explanatory ability of socio-demographic characteristics is rather limited ( $R^2 = .03$ )

**Table 1.** Explaining support for the legalization of cannabis: OLS Regression

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Individual level</i>				
<i>Socio-Demographics</i>				
Gender (Female)	-.10***	-.11***	-.11***	-.10***
Age	-.13**	-.02	-.02	-.01
Educational level	.02**	-.08***	-.06***	-.04**
<i>Ideological Orientations</i>				
Socio-economic left-right	-	.14**	.14**	.15***
Anti/pro EU integration	-	-.05	-.04	-.07*
Liberal-traditional	-	-.70***	-.68***	-.69***
Perceived importance of the issue	-	-	.14***	.13***
<i>Country level</i>				
<i>Legislation (Ref.: Illegal)</i>				
Partly decriminalized	-	-	-	-.08
Decriminalized	-	-	-	.09
Almost legal	-	-	-	-.06
<i>Party System</i>				
Mean position	-	-	-	.07*
Polarization	-	-	-	.10*
R-Squared	.03	.39	.41	.45
N	341331	341331	341331	341331

Note: Cell entries are beta coefficients from OLS regression. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$   
Significance test is based on clustered robust standard errors at the country level

Model 2 introduces the individual-level political factors. Ideological orientations are the key variables in our explanatory model. First, we note a dramatic

bust in R-squared (variance explained is 10 times higher than in Model 1). Holding liberal or traditional socio-cultural values is the strongest predictor of preferences for legalization. The more an individual is liberal, the more likely is she to support the legalization of cannabis. The effect of age vanishes with the introduction of liberal socio-cultural values, and the effect of education even changes sign. Age and education are indeed correlated to liberal/traditional values, and much of the explanatory power of our model lies in the attitudinal variables.

In Model 3, we add the importance individuals grant the issue of the legalization of cannabis. Support for legalization and higher salience of this issue are positively associated, while previous factors remain stable. This means that individuals who support the legalization of cannabis are also more likely to be those who deem the issue as an important one.

Finally, Model 4 includes the aggregate level political factors, which increases 4% of the explained variance. Both party system variables are significant and positively associated to support for legalization. This confirms our core hypothesis: contextual political factors are determinants of individual preference for the legalization of cannabis. More precisely, the preferences of party systems and citizens are positively associated: the more parties foster legalization, the more also citizens do. Interestingly enough, these conclusions are not affected by controlling for legislation on cannabis use in a given country, which turns out to be statistically insignificant in each model.

Taken together, these findings would seem to confirm that there is a somewhat coherent representation of European citizens by political parties on the issue of cannabis legalization. In addition, the more party system are polarized, which implies that political parties are holding strongly opposed preferences, the more citizens are in favour of cannabis legalization. A possible interpretation of this effect is that in countries where the debate on legalization is relatively more lively

and contrasted at the party level, a greater share of citizens is likely to respond by expressing their support for this policy change.

### **Political implications and concluding remarks**

Making use of a unique dataset measuring parties' as well as voters' opinion on the legalization of cannabis use in the EU28, this paper highlighted interesting patterns of covariance between public opinion and the political supply side, and tried to account for them through a multi-dimensional explanatory model. Aimed at bringing politics back into the debate over legalization, the analysis showed indeed the crucial importance of "politics" in explaining citizen preferences. Ideological orientations at the individual-level appeared (somehow unsurprisingly) the key explanatory factor in our "Weed Politics" model. Perceived salience of the issue also linked positively to favourable attitudes towards legalization. Yet, the most interesting finding of this analysis relates to the role of party politics *vis-a-vis* legislation in driving individual attitudes. Whereas country legislation does not seem to make a difference, systemic differences across party systems relate significantly with individual's dispositions towards legalization. Citizens tend to favour legalization more in those countries where parties are overall more in favour and where polarization of the issue is higher.

Overall, the findings presented in this paper suggest a tentative dynamic interpretation, whereby the more salient the issue is for parties, the more parties are likely to discuss legalization, and the more citizens are likely to support it in turn. Indeed, this dynamic does not need to limit to the issue at stake in this paper, but it will work for other "libertarian" issues such as, e.g., gay marriage. Through discussion and eventual implementation of such issues, parties might lead voters who assign a low saliency to the issue (i.e., the wide majority of them) to translate their weak attitudes into a (passive?) consent. Here, one notes that the cross-sectional

data employed in this paper does not allow deriving such a causal interpretation. We cannot elaborate on the direction of party/public opinion linkage (from public opinion to parties or the other way around), but we find that party systems and individuals relate fairly well on the issue of cannabis legalization. As it stands, however, this paper hints at the crucial need for further research to take into account the key interaction between public opinion and partisan offer as a driver of policy change, and leaves to future longitudinal studies the task of unpacking causal mechanisms, also taking into account the (potentially crucial) intervening effect of policy change itself on both voters and parties.

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## **APPENDIX A.**

### *Cannabis legislation in the EU28*

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#### **Illegal**

*Bulgaria*  
*Cyprus*  
*Finland*  
*France*  
*Hungary*  
*Lithuania*  
*Poland*  
*Romania*  
*Slovakia*

#### **Partly Decriminalized**

*Croatia*  
*Denmark*  
*Greece*  
*Ireland*  
*Latvia*  
*Sweden*  
*United Kingdom*

#### **Decriminalized**

*Austria*  
*Czech Republic*  
*Estonia*  
*Italy*  
*Luxembourg*  
*Malta*  
*Slovenia*

#### **Almost Legal**

*Belgium (illegal but unenforced)*  
*Germany (illegal but unenforced)*  
*Netherlands*  
*Spain*  
*Portugal*

Source: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction

## APPENDIX B.

### *Descriptive statistics of independent variables*

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	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
<i>Individual level</i>					
<i>Socio-Demographics</i>					
Gender (Female=1)	345612	0,31	0,46	0	1
Age category	346205	0,54	0,22	0	1
Educational level	345217	0,75	0,23	0	1
<i>Ideological Orientations</i>					
Socio-economic left-right	387876	0,39	0,17	0	1
Anti/pro EU integration	387876	0,61	0,17	0	1
Liberal-traditional	387876	0,42	0,18	0	1
Perceived importance of the issue	387876	0,46	0,29	0	1
<i>Country level</i>					
<i>Legislation</i>					
Illegal	387876	0,20	0,20	0	1
Partly decriminalized	387876	0,10	0,31	0	1
Decriminalized	387876	0,50	0,50	0	1
Almost legal	387876	0,20	0,40	0	1
<i>Party System</i>					
Mean position	387876	0,38	0,12	0,15	0,94
Polarization	387876	0,39	0,07	0,13	0,53

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