

George Soros' real crusade: Legalizing marijuana in the U.S.

Billionaire philanthropist [George Soros](#) hopes the U.S. goes to pot, and he is using his money to drive it there.

With a cadre of like-minded, wealthy donors, [Mr. Soros](#) is dominating the pro-legalization side of the marijuana debate by funding grass-roots initiatives that begin in New York City and end up affecting local politics elsewhere.

Through a network of nonprofit groups, [Mr. Soros](#) has spent at least \$80 million on the legalization effort since 1994, when he diverted a portion of his foundation's funds to organizations exploring alternative drug policies, according to tax filings.

His spending has been supplemented by [Peter B. Lewis](#), the late chairman of [Progressive Insurance Co.](#) and an unabashed pot smoker who channeled more than \$40 million to influence local debates, according to the [National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws](#). The two billionaires' funding has been unmatched by anyone on the other side of the debate. [Mr. Soros](#) makes his donations through the [Drug Policy Alliance](#), a nonprofit he funds with roughly \$4 million in annual contributions from his Foundation to Promote an [Open Society](#).

[Mr. Soros](#) also donates annually to the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), which in turn funds marijuana legalization efforts, and he has given periodically to the [Marijuana Policy Project](#), which funds state ballot measures. [Lewis](#), who died in November, donated to legalization efforts in his name and through the [ACLU](#) and the [Marijuana Policy Project](#), on which he served as the chairman of the board. [Lewis](#)' estate declined to comment for this article.

"The pro-legalization movement hasn't come from a groundswell of the people. A great deal of its funding and fraud has been perpetrated by [George Soros](#) and then promoted by celebrities," said [John Walters](#), director of the [White House Office](#) of National Drug Control Policy under George W. Bush. "The truth is under attack, and it's an absolutely dangerous direction for this country to be going in."

[Mr. Soros](#)' [Open Society](#) Foundations have annual assets of more than \$3.5 billion, a pool from which he can dole out grants to pet projects, according to 2011 tax returns, the most recent on file for his charitable organizations. [David](#) and [Charles Koch](#), the billionaire brothers who often are cited for their conservative influence, had \$308 million tied up in their foundation and institute in 2011.

[Mr. Soros](#) did not respond to a request to be interviewed.

'A question of when'

In his book "[Soros](#) on [Soros](#): Staying Ahead of the Curve," he said the U.S. policy of criminalizing drug use rather than treating it as a medical problem is so ill-conceived that "the remedy is often worse than the disease."

Although [Mr. Soros](#) didn't outline an alternative in his book, he wrote that he could imagine legalizing some of the less-harmful drugs and directing the money saved from the criminal justice system to treatment.

"Like many parents and grandparents, I am worried about young people getting into trouble with marijuana and other drugs. The best solution, however, is honest and effective drug education," [Mr. Soros](#) said in a 2010 op-ed in The Wall Street Journal.

"Legalizing marijuana may make it easier for adults to buy marijuana, but it can hardly make it any more accessible to young people. I'd much rather invest in effective education than ineffective arrest and incarceration."

The [Drug Policy Alliance](#) stands firmly behind [Mr. Soros'](#) position.

"Drug use, the use of any substance, is a health issue and we shouldn't be throwing people in jail for health issues," said [Bill Piper](#), the [alliance's](#) director of national affairs in Washington. "The No. 1 reason why people with substance abuse disorders don't seek help is because they're afraid of getting arrested. From a constitutional and legal perspective, states can legalize marijuana if they want, and there's nothing the federal government can do," he said. "State after state decided to end the prohibition of alcohol and forced the federal government to change federal law.

"What we're going to see over next decade is states repeal marijuana prohibition and then the federal government following suit. It's not a question of whether it's going to happen; it's a question of when."

[Drug Policy Alliance](#) Executive Director [Ethan Nadelmann](#) said in an email that funding levels from [Mr. Soros](#) "have bounced around a bit over the years but it's roughly \$4 million per year (i.e., 1/3) of [DPA's](#) general operating budget."

"Other funding comes from other wealthy individuals (including quite a number who agree with [Soros](#) on little apart from drug policy), foundations and about 25,000 people making smaller contributions through the mail and Internet," [Mr. Nadelmann](#) said in the email. [Mr. Soros](#) and [Lewis](#), with help from the [Drug Policy Alliance](#) and [Marijuana Policy Project](#), helped 2012 ballot initiatives that legalized the recreational use of marijuana in Washington state and Colorado. Federal law still outlaws possession, use, sale and distribution of the drug.

[Mr. Soros](#), [Lewis](#) and their various nonprofits provided 68 percent of the funding that went to New Approach to Washington, the group that mobilized signatures to get the initiative on the state ballot and then promoted it.

The Campaign to [Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol](#), a grass-roots group that supported pot legalization in Colorado, was established by the [Marijuana Policy Project](#) and was 67 percent funded by nonprofits associated with the two billionaires. The campaign then bankrolled Moms and Dads for [Marijuana Regulation](#), a seemingly unassociated group of pro-legalization parents that in reality consisted of only a billboard and a press release, according to state election records.

"The other side has so much money, it's incredible, and the bulk of it is coming from a handful of people who want to change public policy," said [Calvina Fay](#), executive director of Save Our Society From Drugs, whose organization was the largest donor to Smart Colorado, the initiative opposed to legalization.

"When we look at what we've been able to raise in other states, they raise millions. We're lucky if we can raise \$100,000. It's been a process of basically brainwashing the public. They run ads, put up billboards, get high-profile celebrity support and glowing media coverage. If you can repeat a lie often enough, the people believe," [Ms. Fay](#) said.

Other states line up

[Mason Tvert](#), co-director and spokesman for the [Marijuana Policy Project's](#) Colorado campaign, disagrees. "There simply is no grass-roots support for maintaining marijuana

prohibition,” he said. “Anyone who suggests otherwise is just not paying attention. They’re railing against a public policy that most Americans support.” [Mr. Tvert](#) said the [Marijuana Policy Project](#) collected no money from [Mr. Soros](#) or [Lewis](#) for the 2012 initiative. “Not that we would turn away [Mr. Soros](#)’ money in the future,” he said. “There are countless people that want to make marijuana legal, but only so many people who can afford to make it possible.”

Those people are turning out to make the 2014 election cycle look much like the 2012 cycle in Colorado and Washington, state election records show.

- In Alaska, the grass-roots Campaign to [Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol](#) has emerged with the help of funding from the [Marijuana Policy Project](#), which gave the campaign its first big contribution of \$210,000.

If history repeats itself, then a few months before the election in Alaska, the Drug Policy Action group, the political arm of [Mr. Soros](#)’ [Drug Policy Alliance](#), will start contributing hundreds of thousands of dollars to help fund a media blitz and drive voters to polls to help support the measure.

- In Oregon, New Approach Oregon has collected enough signatures to get a legalization initiative on the ballot and has cashed its first checks: \$96,000 from [Lewis](#) before he died last year and \$50,000 from [Mr. Soros](#)’ [Drug Policy Alliance](#), according to state election records.

- In Florida, [Mr. Soros](#) has teamed up with multimillionaire and Democratic fundraiser John Morgan to donate more than 80 percent of the money to get medical marijuana legalization on the ballot through its initiative “United for Care, People United for Medical Marijuana.”

Calls to Tim Morgan, John Morgan’s brother who is handling press inquiries, were not returned. The [Marijuana Policy Project](#) and [Mr. Soros](#)’ [Drug Policy Alliance](#) aim to support full legalization measures in 2016 in Arizona and California — where they have funded and won ballot initiatives for medical marijuana use — and in Massachusetts, Maine, Montana and Nevada, [Mr. Tvert](#) said.

The [Marijuana Policy Project](#) also is “focusing a lot of time and resources passing bills” in Delaware, Hawaii, Maryland, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont, where it considers legalized marijuana to be a realistic prospect in the next few years, he said.

‘Phony propaganda’

[Mr. Soros](#) also is putting money into studies that show economic benefits from marijuana legalization. In Colorado, the [Drug Policy Alliance](#) helped bankroll the Colorado Center on Law and Policy’s study that found marijuana legalization could generate as much as \$100 million in state revenue after five years. That research was widely considered to have influenced the election.

The [ACLU](#) also has penned studies supporting legalization, and the [Marijuana Policy Project](#) commonly cites these and [Drug Policy Alliance](#) research to argue its case for legal marijuana. Calls and emails to [ACLU](#) headquarters in New York were not returned, but its website says that “removing criminal penalties for marijuana offenses will reduce the U.S. prison population and more effectively protect the public and promote public health.”

Last year, [Mr. Soros](#), via donations from his Open Society Foundation and the [Drug Policy Alliance](#), helped fund Uruguay's effort to become the first country to legalize the commercialization of pot. He also offered to pay for a study to evaluate the ramifications of the experimental legislation, which he has said will reduce overall drug use and help fight illegal drug trade, according to news reports.

"There are addictive, harmful effects of smoking marijuana," said [Mr. Walters](#), citing studies by the federal government and organizations such as the American Medical Association. "The silliness of pop culture is pretending this isn't a serious problem. Their entire message is built on phony propaganda that has been far too successful in the mainstream media." The Drug Enforcement Administration agrees, despite President Obama's proclamations that marijuana is no worse than alcohol.

In the official "DEA Position on [Marijuana](#)" paper last April, the agency said marijuana has a "high potential for abuse, [and] has no accepted medicinal value in treatment in the U.S." It also cited that "a few wealthy businessmen — not broad grassroots support — started and sustain the 'medical' marijuana and drug legalization movements in the U.S. Without their money and influence, the drug legalization movement would shrivel."

Even Mr. Obama's drug czar said the legalization of marijuana is dangerous.

"Young people are getting the wrong message from the medical marijuana legalization campaign," drug czar Gil Kerlikowske said in December. "If it's continued to be talked about as a benign substance that has no ill effects, we're doing a great disservice to young people by giving them that message."

But the message is being propagated by [Mr. Soros](#) and groups of his supporters who have created their own nonprofits and political action committees. Although these organizations appear on the surface to have no affiliation, closer examination shows all are linked through their personnel and cross-promotion.

[Drug Policy Alliance](#) President Ira Glasser is a former executive director of the [ACLU](#). [Marijuana Policy Project](#) co-founders Rob Kampia, Chuck Thomas and Mike Kirshner originally worked at the [National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws](#), which hosts industry conferences attended and promoted by [Drug Policy Alliance](#) staff, and has a political action committee that donates to marijuana advocacy candidates.

The [Marijuana Policy Project](#)'s co-founders also frequently speak at events sponsored by the [Drug Policy Alliance](#). The National Cannabis Industry Association — known as the chamber of commerce for marijuana — was co-founded by Aaron Smith, who previously worked at Safe Access Now, another [Soros](#)-backed nonprofit that promotes the legalization of pot.

After 20 years trying to influence policy, [Mr. Soros](#)'s army is winning the marijuana debate. Last year, for the first time in four decades of polling, the Pew Research Center found that more than half of Americans support legalizing marijuana, compared with 30 percent in 2000. Lawmakers are following suit, with an unprecedented number of legalization bills brought to the floors of state legislatures.

"It's only a matter of time before marijuana is legalized under federal law," said Tom Angell, founder and chairman of the Marijuana Majority, an advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. "We now have 20 states plus the District of Columbia considering legalization efforts, two states have already legalized it for all adults over the age of 21 — politicians will have to follow the will of the people on this."

Or follow [Mr. Soros](#)' money. Mr. Angell's group is funded, in part, by a grant from the [Drug Policy Alliance](#).

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