Ron Paul and Barney Frank's 'unusual' alliance to legalize pot

Can a Texas libertarian and Massachusetts liberal really get the feds to mellow out and quit prosecuting weed smokers?

One's a Texan gunning for the GOP presidential nomination. The other's an outspoken Massachusetts Democrat and one of the first openly gay members of Congress. But though Reps. Ron Paul (R-Texas) and Barney Frank (D-Mass.) are an odd couple, they've found common ground in marijuana. The two have formed an unusual congressional alliance to co-sponsor a bill that would give states the right to legalize and tax marijuana, just as they currently do with booze. Here, a brief guide to the initiative:

What would the bill do?

H.R. 2306, the Ending Federal Marijuana Prohibition Act, would allow states to dictate their own pot policies, and repeal federal penalties for marijuana production, distribution, and possession. The feds' role in reefer regulation would be winnowed down to merely preventing marijuana from being imported into states where it is not legal. H.R. 2306 is modeled after the 21st amendment, which repealed national alcohol prohibition in 1933.

Who else is sponsoring it?

A handful of Democrats: Reps. John Conyers (Mich.), Steve Cohen (Tenn.), Jared Polis (Colo.) and Barbara Lee (Calif.). "Paul's presence atop the legislation clears the way for advocates to slap the 'bipartisan' tag on the proposal," says Josh Voorhees at Slate.

Does this mean Paul and Frank are big potheads?

No. Frank says "he's not advocating marijuana use, but believes that criminal prosecution is a waste of resources and an intrusion on personal freedom." His office has been quick to emphasize that this "is not a legalization bill," but merely one that limits the federal government's role. Paul has long been a vocal supporter of state sovereignty when it comes to marijuana legalization. Still, now that he's a Republican presidential candidate, this is a "gutsy move," says Stephen Reader at WNYC.
How many states is marijuana legal in?
According to the Medical Marijuana site ProCon.org, 16 states have enacted laws legalizing marijuana for medicinal use, though federal law still prohibits pot and some medical pot dispensaries have been raided by the feds. Because of the cloudy legality, some states that have passed medicinal marijuana legislation have been hesitant to implement it.

Does the Paul-Frank pot bill stand a chance?
It's a long shot, but advocates say the point is to draw attention to the issue. "A bill like this is going to get talked about quite a bit," says Morgan Fox with the Marijuana Policy Project. "I think it will spark a strong debate in the media, and we hope to get some [House] floor time for it."

Sources: CNN, NPR, ProCon.org, Slate, Wall Street Journal, WNYC

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