

★★ DEMOCRATS: LEGALIZE IT

Candidates line up for federal pot legalization

The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A growing list of Democratic presidential contenders want the U.S. government to legalize marijuana, reflecting a nationwide shift as more Americans look favorably on cannabis.

Making marijuana legal at the federal level is the “smart thing to do,” says California Sen. Kamala Harris, a former prosecutor whose home state is the nation’s largest legal pot shop. New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker, a prominent legalization advocate on Capitol Hill, says the war on drugs has been a “war on people.”

Former Texas Congressman Beto O’Rourke, who appears

poised to join the 2020 Democratic field, has written a book arguing marijuana legalization would hobble drug cartels. In an email to supporters this week, he called again to end the federal prohibition on marijuana: “Who is going to be the last man — more likely than not a black man — to languish behind bars for possessing or using marijuana when it is legal in some form in more than half of the states in this country?”

It’s a far different approach from the not-so-distant past, when it was seen as politically damaging to acknowledge smoking pot and no major presidential candidate backed legalization.

In 1992, then-White House candidate Bill Clinton delivered a famously tortured response about a youthful dalliance with cannabis, claiming he tried it as a graduate student in England but “didn’t inhale.” And two decades before that, President Richard

Nixon unleashed a war on marijuana and it helped carry him to a second term.

This year, leading Democrats hold similar positions supporting legalization. Presidential hopefuls in the Senate who have co-sponsored Booker’s legislation to end the federal prohibition include Harris, New York’s Kirsten Gillibrand, Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Vermont’s Bernie Sanders, who campaigned on decriminalizing pot in his 2016 presidential bid.

Another 2020 Democratic candidate, Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar, supports legalization and believes states should have the right to determine how to handle marijuana regulation within their borders but hasn’t signed on to Booker’s legislation.

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, who entered the contest this month, said in his announcement speech it’s “about time” to legalize the drug nationally.

During his 2012 run for governor, Inslee opposed the ballot initiative that made Washington one of the first two states to legalize so-called recreational marijuana. As governor, however, he has frequently touted what he describes as Washington’s successful experiment with regulation and has urged the Obama and Trump administrations not to intervene. He recently began pardoning people with small-time marijuana convictions.

The widespread endorsement for national marijuana reform among Democrats tracks the nation’s evolving views.

In the late 1960s — the era of Woodstock and Vietnam — 12 percent of Americans supported legalization, according to the Gallup poll. By last year, the figure hit a record 66 percent. About 75 percent of Democrats support legalization, along with a slim majority of Republicans.

Most Americans now live in

states where marijuana is legal in some form. Pot dispensaries are familiar sights in cities like Los Angeles and Denver, and conservative strongholds like Utah and Oklahoma have established medical marijuana programs.

To Mason Tvert of the Marijuana Policy Project, a pro-legalization advocacy group, it’s not surprising there’s broad support among candidates to end the federal prohibition.

“It’s no longer popular to be in favor of marijuana prohibition,” Tvert said.

But there are limits: “We are not seeing any candidates saying, ‘I am currently a marijuana user,’” he added.

President Donald Trump’s position on cannabis remains somewhat opaque. He has said he supports laws legalizing medical marijuana but hasn’t offered a definitive position on broader legalization.

Some 2020 Democrats hit SXSW festival

The Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — A big chunk of the 2020 Democratic field began making Texas an unlikely early-state stop Saturday and pushed back on big tech in front of young, social-media savvy crowds in a city where companies including Google and Apple have big footprints.

Texas is an early primary state, but the real draw of the South by Southwest Festival in Austin for Democrats is face time with the party’s ascendant young and liberal wing.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts defended her new call to break up tech giants to an audience dotted with employees of some of those very companies. Her appearance began with her interviewer asking tech employees in the crowd to stand up. Warren scanned the room as several people got on the feet.

“There are parts about big tech that are frankly just like railroads of the Teddy Roosevelt era,” she said. “What’s new is old. When someone gets market dominance, how then they start to destroy competition.”

Other Saturday campaign



Sen. Amy Klobuchar, right, was interviewed by Kara Swisher of Recode on Saturday in Austin, Texas.

highlights:

AMY KLOBUCHAR The Minnesota senator kicked off SXSW with promises to reign in tech companies and saying that she has spoken to former President Barack Obama about her own

presidential ambitions.

Klobuchar wouldn’t go as far as Warren when asked whether Google or Facebook should be broken up. “I would want to have it investigated. That is how I do things,” she said.

KAMALA HARRIS The California senator said she’s committed to shoring up rural communities, a message the Democratic presidential hopeful shared with voters in some of the most sparsely populated parts of the early vot-

ing state of South Carolina.

Harris told a crowd of several hundred gathered in tiny St. George that a national infrastructure of crumbling roads and bridges makes it difficult for people in communities like this one to get to their jobs, which may be miles and miles away.

BERNIE SANDERS Sanders told a packed house in Des Moines that as president his power to reform industries and institutions would be limited, but he’d still fulfill his campaign promises with their support.

The Vermont senator said “no president, not the best-intentioned in the world, can take on those extraordinarily powerful forces.” He went on to say: “But we have something they don’t have — we have the people.”

BETO O’ROURKE O’Rourke swung by the trendy and techie SXSW, too, but still didn’t announce whether he will embark on a White House run.

Officially, O’Rourke wasn’t part of the lineup at SXSW. The former Texas congressman attended a documentary about his U.S. Senate campaign that may or may not become the springboard to a White House run.