



UNPACKING DESECURITIZATION: ANALYZING THE EVOLUTION OF UNITED STATES CANNABIS POLICY THROUGH HANSENIAN DESECURITIZATION THEORY

Nurridho Aryawan

Universitas Gadjah Mada; nurridhoaryawan@mail.ugm.ac.id

Abstract

Securitization and desecuritization emerged as companion concepts within international security studies, yet desecuritization has not received a comparable degree of theoretical development. Scholarship on desecuritization remains fragmented, and existing accounts often contradict one another. This paper uses the transformation of United States cannabis policy, both domestically and abroad, to examine how Lene Hansen's concept of desecuritization allows several distinct desecuritization logics to operate within a single case. Three types of desecuritization drove the transformation of United States cannabis policy: (i) change through stabilization, in which the issue's dynamics remained stable over an extended period and thereby moved cannabis out of the security realm; (ii) replacement, in which the emergence of new threats rendered the cannabis issue less relevant within security discourse; and (iii) rearticulation, in which political actors actively worked to alter established cannabis policy patterns. These three processes did not always occur in tandem, yet each contributed to the passage of cannabis from a security issue to a normal-political one.

Keywords: Cannabis Policy, Desecuritization, Security, United States of America, War on Drugs

INTRODUCTION

For more than fifty years after the 1970s, United States cannabis policy followed a fixed pattern. Washington's approach to cannabis rested on two pillars (Ferreira, 2015, pp. 275–279). The first pillar criminalized cannabis production, consumption, and distribution. The federal government pursued criminalization at home through legislation, and abroad through



diplomatic pressure and conditional donor assistance aimed at shaping other countries' cannabis policies. The second pillar targeted the cannabis supply chain directly, combining financial incentives with military measures at home and overseas.

These two pillars persisted from the Nixon administration onward. Nixon's War on Drugs doctrine placed cannabis within the security discourse, which licensed the use of extraordinary measures, including military engagement and intervention in the territorial jurisdiction of other states, to address the issue without delay (Siff, 2014). The Reagan administration entrenched this framing further. Reagan's rhetoric intensified the War on Drugs campaign and expanded U.S. intervention in Latin America (Morales, 1989, pp. 153–156). Together, the Nixon and Reagan administrations established cannabis as a security threat and locked United States cannabis policy into a single pattern for five decades.

That pattern began to shift in the 2010s. Colorado became the first state to legalize the cultivation, sale, and recreational use of cannabis in 2012, a step that other states soon followed through decriminalization, medical legalization, or full legalization (Lopez, 2020). As of 2024, 38 U.S. states had legalized cannabis for medical purposes, and 24 of these states had also legalized it for recreational use (U.S. National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023; Newsweek, 2024). Public opinion moved alongside these policy changes. A 2022 Pew Research survey found that 88 percent of American adults favored some form of legalization: 59 percent supported legalizing cannabis for both medical and recreational use, and a further 30 percent supported medical legalization alone, while only 10 percent opposed legalization outright (Van Green, 2022). A subsequent Gallup survey recorded 70 percent support for legalization (Gallup, 2023). A policy area that had remained anchored in security discourse for half a century moved toward normal political debate, a shift that could only take place through a process of desecuritization.

Using the transformation of United States cannabis policy as a case study, this paper demonstrates how Hansenian desecuritization allows several distinct desecuritization logics to operate concurrently within a single case. It identifies three such logics behind the transformation of United States cannabis policy. First, the change-through-stabilization type, in which decades of stagnant and ineffective cannabis policy opened space for legalization to emerge as an alternative. Second, the replacement type, in which new threats displaced the old

cannabis-as-threat narrative and rendered earlier approaches irrelevant. Third, the rearticulation type, in which political actors made deliberate efforts to alter established cannabis policy patterns. The paper argues that although these three processes did not unfold simultaneously, each has shaped the transformation of United States cannabis policy.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

The Development of Desecuritization Theory

The Copenhagen School, the originator of the desecuritization concept, holds that an issue does not automatically qualify as a security concern merely because it poses a real existential threat. Identifying what warrants protection, and what counts as a threat to it, is an intersubjective process that depends on the interpretive authority of actors positioned to make that determination (Rachmat, 2023, p. 110). By the same logic, a security issue cannot revert to a normal-political issue open to free debate on its own. Desecuritization is the process that moves an issue framed as dangerous, urgent, and requiring immediate attention back into the space of ordinary political debate (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 2–4). It leads a political community to stop treating an issue as an existential threat and to reduce or withdraw the extraordinary measures previously used to address it (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 488–489).

Desecuritization emerged alongside securitization within the Copenhagen School framework, but it has not received comparable theoretical attention. Scholars disagree, often sharply, on how an issue exits security discourse and re-enters ordinary political debate. Lene Hansen's work addresses this disagreement directly. Hansen first mapped the range of positions scholars have taken on desecuritization, and then showed that these positions are not mutually exclusive: several desecuritization logics can operate together within a single case. This paper refers to that combined application as Hansenian desecuritization.

Hansen's mapping identifies four broad positions on how desecuritization occurs. The first holds that an issue leaves the security realm only once the threat it poses is neutralized or no longer perceived as threatening. Because such shifts in perception typically unfold over time, this position treats time itself as a variable that can alter an issue's security status. When an issue's underlying dynamics remain unchanged over an extended period, that very stability can shift how the threat, its mechanisms, and its associated actors are perceived (Hansen, 2012, pp. 540–541). A stable threat with no new developments creates room for new discourse, new perspectives, and new actors offering alternative narratives (Hansen, 2012, pp. 538–539),

which in turn pushes policy responses toward less militaristic and less coercive measures. Wæver's (1995) account of the Cold War's exit from security discourse illustrates this logic: the term *détente* captured how the stability of Cold War dynamics, absent meaningful new action from the parties involved, moved the issue out of the security realm. This first position, change through stabilization, thus attributes desecuritization to the absence of change in a threat over a long period.

The second position locates desecuritization in the emergence of a new issue that poses a greater threat to the same referent object. As a new threat displaces an older one, the narratives and threat perceptions attached to the old issue become obsolete (Hansen, 2012, pp. 540–542). When both the actors capable of speech acts and the broader audience shift their views on the threat, the measures used to address it, and the referent object at stake, desecuritization follows. Aras and Polat's (2008) analysis of Turkey's desecuritized relations with Syria and Iran illustrates this replacement logic: the emergence of Northern Iraq as a new security threat to Turkey displaced Syria and Iran as the primary threats in Turkish security discourse.

The third position holds that desecuritization can result from deliberate efforts by actors capable of shaping public perception, who offer alternative solutions to a threat through political and bureaucratic channels (Hansen, 2012, pp. 543–544). Mahendra et al.'s (2023) analysis of China's use of the Belt and Road Initiative to desecuritize its relations with ASEAN states illustrates this rearticulation logic. The fourth position holds that desecuritization can also occur when a securitization attempt simply fails: not every effort to frame an issue as a security threat succeeds in shifting audience perception, and when such an attempt fails to produce its intended effect, desecuritization follows by default (Hansen, 2012, pp. 544–545).

This paper draws on three of these four positions, change through stabilization, replacement, and rearticulation, to analyze the transformation of United States cannabis policy. It argues that although each process unfolded on its own timeline rather than in lockstep with the others, each has meaningfully shaped the trajectory of United States cannabis policy.

RESEARCH METHOD

Causal Process Tracing

This paper adopts a case study design using causal process tracing (CPT) to trace how each strand of Hansenian desecuritization operated in the case of United States cannabis policy. CPT focuses on identifying causal relationships within a single case (Bennett, 2004) and guides

the analysis of how each desecuritization process connects to the observed shifts in United States cannabis policy.

CPT draws on three types of evidence. Comprehensive storylines construct a coherent, chronologically organized narrative that supports an understanding of the causal relationships under study (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, pp. 110–115); this paper builds its storylines from journal articles, books, government and policy reports, and news coverage of the transformation of United States cannabis policy at home and abroad. Smoking-gun evidence connects specific events causally to one another (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, pp. 115–117); this paper uses such evidence to establish strong causal links between the transformation of cannabis policy and the broader desecuritization of cannabis discourse. Confessions, in the form of direct statements from actors involved in the discourse, reinforce the causal connections built from the first two evidence types (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, pp. 117–118); this paper draws such confessions from textual, audio, and audiovisual records of statements made by actors influential in United States cannabis discourse.

Case Selection

This paper selects the transformation of United States cannabis policy as its case study for two epistemic reasons.

The first concerns the relationship between the Copenhagen School's theoretical commitments and the role of case studies. The Copenhagen School does not treat findings drawn from a single case study as a universal truth (Malik, 2015, pp. 77–79); a case study instead supplies evidence for which theoretical account best explains the social dynamics of a given issue (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, pp. 9–12). The transformation of United States cannabis policy offers rich material across political, economic, and sociocultural dimensions, which allows the case to be examined through at least three of the four desecuritization logics within the Hansenian framework. The case also parallels the historical trajectory of alcohol and tobacco regulation in the nineteenth-century United States, both of which moved through cycles of criminalization and subsequent legalization within a similar geographic and institutional context.

Second, cannabis constitutes a positive case in methodological terms. Cannabis has historically been classified alongside other narcotics in both social perception and formal law, yet its status has shifted markedly in recent decades while the status of most other narcotics has

not. This divergence makes cannabis a productive case for comparison. More importantly, the cannabis case supplies the observed outcome that a CPT-based case study requires to support causal inference, since establishing whether a given variable has a causal effect depends on observing the outcome it is thought to produce (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, pp. 99–102).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Hansenian desecuritization allows one desecuritization logic to operate alongside another within a single case. The desecuritization of cannabis in the United States proceeded through three such pathways: change through stabilization, replacement, and rearticulation. Together, these three processes drove the transformation of United States cannabis policy at both the federal and state levels. By 2024, 38 states had authorized the medical use of cannabis, and 24 of these had also legalized recreational use, a shift that began when Colorado became the first state to legalize cannabis cultivation, sale, and recreational use in 2012 (Lopez, 2020; U.S. National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023).

Change Through Stabilization: Stagnation and Ineffectiveness of War on Drugs Measures at Home and Abroad

Change-through-stabilization desecuritization occurs when a security issue undergoes no substantive change over time. That stability creates an opening for new political actors to redefine the nature of the threat, the mechanisms through which it operates, and the actors involved, and it opens space for new discourse on the issue within society. As the issue remains stable and new narratives and actors emerge, the measures used to address it tend to shift toward less militaristic, more normal-political approaches (Hansen, 2012, pp. 539–540).

Fifty Years of Stagnation in the War on Drugs

Ferreira (2015) describes Washington's cannabis policy as resting on two pillars: the criminalization of narcotics-related activity, both domestically and abroad through conditional aid to targeted states, and the disruption of narcotics supply chains through incentives and military measures. Through the 2010s, this basic approach changed little. Enforcement continued along the same lines without producing the results authorities sought, a shortfall the American public itself registered: a Gallup survey from October 2023 found that 57 percent of Americans believed the government's anti-narcotics efforts had failed to achieve their goals (Gallup, 2023).

Domestically, Washington addressed cannabis primarily through criminalization and incarceration. The Obama administration voiced a commitment to reduce what it termed racially biased and disproportionate incarceration and to prioritize prevention and rehabilitation, yet incarceration data tell a different story (Cooper, 2018, p. 256). Cannabis-related arrests rose from fewer than 5,000 in 1965 to 663,000 in 2018 and continued climbing into the early Biden administration (Sawyer & Wagner, 2023). This trajectory points to two failures at once: state authorities did not curb illegal distribution channels despite escalating enforcement, and they continued relying on criminalization even as its ineffectiveness became increasingly apparent.

The measures pursued abroad showed a similar pattern. Efforts to dismantle narcotics supply chains through incentives and military engagement continued under successive administrations, and under the Trump administration these efforts were frequently paired with anti-immigration policy (Cooper, 2018, pp. 282–285). Illegal cannabis continued crossing U.S. borders throughout this period, as the rising domestic arrest figures indicate, yet the underlying approach remained unchanged.

After the George W. Bush administration, no securitizing speech act on cannabis captured comparable public attention. Barack Obama, in a 2015 address on criminal justice, explicitly broke from that pattern, stating that arrests and prosecutions of drug users conflicted with the principle of equality before the law, and that mass incarceration harmed not only individuals but their families and communities, particularly communities of color (The Obama White House, 2015). In the absence of renewed securitizing measures, whether extraordinary policy actions or speech acts, cannabis settled into a stable, unchanging policy status. That stagnation, sustained over decades without substantive redirection, created an opening for new political actors to enter the discourse.

Entry Points for New Actors in the Desecuritization of Cannabis Discourse

Within the epistemic community, this opening produced fresh criticism of existing cannabis policy and new proposals for addressing it. Jenner (2011) argued that criminalizing cannabis and other narcotics made treatment harder to access for people struggling with addiction, and proposed legalization as a route to expanding treatment access. Borden (2013) argued that direct military intervention against narcotics production tends to deepen poverty: such interventions can suppress illegal cannabis production in a given area temporarily, but

production typically resurfaces locally or relocates, and the resulting violence and crime compound poverty in the areas affected.

At the grassroots level, organizations including NORML (National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws), MPP (Marijuana Policy Project), and DPA (Drug Policy Alliance) used the social costs of mass incarceration at home and violence linked to military intervention abroad to campaign for legalization. The same stagnation, combined with growing public support for legalization, fueled the growth of industry organizations such as the NCIA (National Cannabis Industry Association), which promoted legalization at the federal level alongside its advocacy for the cannabis business sector.

This period also produced new legislative entrants offering alternative policy. Senator Charles Schumer introduced the Marijuana Freedom and Opportunity Act on May 20, 2019, aimed at decriminalizing cannabis at the federal level (U.S. Congress, 2019a). Representative Jerrold Nadler introduced the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act of 2020, which the House approved by a vote of 228 to 164 and which would reclassify cannabis out of its Schedule I status (U.S. Congress, 2020). On the executive side, the Biden administration issued amnesty for federal simple-possession offenses, urged state governments to adopt similar decriminalization and amnesty measures, and called on relevant agencies to review cannabis's Schedule I classification (The White House, 2022). Each of these developments signaled growing room for alternative cannabis policy.

As these developments accumulated, the securitization of cannabis weakened, and debate over whether cannabis constitutes a genuine security threat, and how policy should respond, became an increasingly ordinary feature of American political discourse.

Replacement: Changing Perceptions of the Cannabis Threat and the Rise of Legalization

Replacement desecuritization occurs when an issue previously framed as a security threat is displaced by a different threat. In the cannabis case, the very measures adopted to protect American society from illegal cannabis came to be perceived, particularly by minority communities, as threats in their own right. Domestically, many Americans came to fear the consequences of incarceration for cannabis-related offenses more than the effects of cannabis use itself. Internationally, U.S. military intervention against narcotics trafficking inadvertently strengthened drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and intensified violence in the regions where these interventions took place.

The Declining Relevance of the Old Cannabis Threat and the Rise of New Threats

Cannabis entered U.S. security discourse in 1973, when President Nixon delivered his Special Message to the Congress on Drug Abuse Prevention and Control, framing cannabis as a threat to the physical and moral health of American citizens (Siff, 2014). The Nixon administration reinforced this framing through the National Drug Abuse Mass Media Information Campaign, which placed forty television advertisements, sixteen radio advertisements, eleven magazine advertisements, thirty-three newspaper advertisements, and more than a dozen billboards between 1970 and 1973, spending 45 million dollars in 1972 alone and ranking as the seventeenth-largest media campaign that year (Siff, 2018, pp. 172–177). The campaign shaped public opinion accordingly: elite donors contributed 100 million dollars to anti-drug campaigning, and public approval of marijuana criminalization rose to 82 percent by 1965, the highest level recorded in Gallup’s tracking of the issue (Daniller, 2019). Siff (2018, pp. 227–233) attributes much of this shift to Nixon’s rhetoric, which intensified public fear of drug users and cast cannabis users as criminals rather than victims of substance abuse.

That threat construction no longer matches how Americans understand cannabis today. Gali et al. (2021) found that Americans increasingly perceive cannabis as offering health benefits, including pain relief for certain conditions and improved mental health outcomes, and that this perception has strengthened as more states have legalized the substance. A Pew Research survey found that 91 percent of Americans support legalizing cannabis for medical use (Schaeffer, 2023), and a May 2023 Gallup survey found that most Americans now regard cannabis use as morally acceptable (Gallup, 2023). Nixon’s original threat framing, both physical and moral, no longer holds public purchase, and the security construction attached to cannabis has shifted accordingly.

The Reagan administration extended this threat construction, framing American youth and families as the referent object requiring protection from cannabis (Lee, 2012, pp. 157–193). Reagan compared the War on Drugs to the wartime effort of American soldiers in the Second World War and described it as a national crusade involving all citizens (Reagan Library, 2016). This framing resonated with the public at the time: a March 1988 CBS survey found that nearly half of Americans wanted narcotics prioritized in foreign policy above terrorism and arms control (Morales, 1989, pp. 147–149), and a separate “American Talks Security” survey found that 44 percent of Americans viewed international drug trafficking

organizations as the greatest threat to U.S. security, compared with 18 percent who named the Soviet Union (Morales, 1989, pp. 147–149).

That framing, too, has lost its purchase. A 2023 Gallup survey found that 73 percent of Americans no longer believe cannabis use damages families (Gallup, 2023). Fear of incarceration now outweighs fear of cannabis's direct effects, particularly among minority families, since Black Americans face cannabis-related detention at roughly four times the rate of white Americans despite comparable usage rates (Hudak, 2020). Eighty-three percent of Americans believe legalization would protect users from this disparate enforcement (Gallup, 2023). The threats Reagan-era framing emphasized no longer align with what the public actually fears; instead, Americans increasingly identify the enforcement apparatus itself, rather than cannabis, as the source of harm.

The rationale for pursuing War on Drugs measures abroad has also lost credibility among policymakers and analysts. Cannabis and other narcotics continue entering the United States at scale, as reflected in the 1.6 million narcotics-related arrests recorded in 2023 (Sawyer & Wagner, 2023), a figure that suggests interdiction efforts have not meaningfully curtailed supply despite their continuation.

These same measures produced a new threat in their own right: drug trafficking organizations. Decades of U.S. military intervention abroad combined with domestic criminalization concentrated the cannabis and narcotics trade in the hands of DTOs, generating substantial spillover violence in the regions where U.S. counter-narcotics operations have taken place (Kilmer et al., 2010). Kilmer et al. (2010) estimate that Mexican DTOs earn as much as 1.5 billion dollars annually from cannabis exports to the United States alone, revenue that sustains their capacity for extortion, kidnapping, and human trafficking alongside drug trafficking. President Trump acknowledged this threat directly in his inaugural address, stating that gangs, drugs, and the crime associated with them had taken too many lives and stolen too much from the American people (Politico, 2017).

Legalization as a Response to Old and New Cannabis Threats

Legalization has gained support as an alternative response to both the older cannabis threat narrative and the newer threats that enforcement measures produced. Its appeal rests on several distinct grounds.

First, legalization strengthens the government's capacity to monitor and regulate cannabis distribution (Reuter, 2013, p. 81). Following the precedent of nineteenth-century alcohol and tobacco regulation, licensing and taxation offer more effective tools for controlling distribution than criminalization does, and the data such mechanisms generate can inform further policy refinement. Regulated markets, unlike criminalized ones, also give the state direct leverage over underage access, since informal black markets tend to make cannabis more accessible to minors than a licensed retail system would.

Second, legalization addresses mass incarceration and the racial disparities embedded in cannabis enforcement. Legalization removes the threat of incarceration for cannabis possession, along with its downstream costs to families and communities, and it narrows the enforcement gap in which Black Americans face detention at roughly four times the rate of white Americans (Hudak, 2020).

Third, legalization undercuts the revenue base of drug trafficking organizations. Kilmer et al. (2010) estimate that cannabis sales account for between 15 and 26 percent of Mexican DTO revenue, with some estimates running considerably higher; removing that revenue weakens the DTOs' capacity to acquire weapons and finance other criminal activity, including extortion, kidnapping, and human trafficking, and over time reduces the economic incentive to join such organizations.

Fourth, legalization carries clear economic benefits. Ending cannabis-related prosecutions is projected to save between 7.7 million and 13.3 million dollars annually in legal costs (Evans, 2013), and legalization creates a new, taxable industry: Washington State's Initiative 502 was projected to generate up to 500 million dollars in revenue, and Colorado's cannabis tax scheme was projected to generate between 47 and 100 million dollars (Evans, 2013). Legalization also carries productivity benefits, since simple possession accounts for roughly 40 percent of the 1.6 million annual drug-related arrests and nine in ten cannabis arrests involve simple possession rather than distribution or trafficking (Gramlich, 2020); removing these arrests frees the time and resources that courts, defendants, and communities would otherwise spend on prosecution.

President Biden's administration has endorsed legalization on similar grounds, arguing that the existing approach to cannabis has failed and produced substantial harm, particularly through racially disparate incarceration, and that convictions for simple possession have limited Americans' access to education, housing, and employment (The White House, 2022).

Taken together, the declining credibility of the old threat narrative and the emergence of new threats tied to enforcement itself have pushed multiple constituencies toward legalization as the preferred response. The securitization of cannabis established under earlier administrations continues to erode as public understanding of the threat, and of viable alternatives, keeps changing.

Rearticulation: Grassroots Advocacy for Cannabis Legalization through Political and Bureaucratic Channels

Rearticulation desecuritization occurs when actors deliberately work to change what has already been securitized (Hansen, 2012, pp. 543–544), typically by offering alternative solutions through political and bureaucratic channels. In the cannabis case, grassroots organizations pursued this through campaigns, public education, lobbying, and ballot initiatives. Their success at the state level through the 2010s and into the 2020s positioned them to pursue federal legislative change as well.

Pro-Cannabis Organizations and State-Level Advocacy

Advocacy for cannabis legalization predates the desecuritization era itself; some organizations formed during the early years of Nixon-era securitization in the 1970s. Their early efforts had limited policy impact at either the state or federal level, and it took decades of sustained campaigning, lobbying, and public education before these efforts began producing results in the 2010s, when the current wave of state-level legalization began.

These organizations fall into two broad categories: those focused primarily on legalization as a matter of civil liberties and public health, and those focused on the commercial cannabis industry, most of which emerged after the 2010s once several states had already legalized.

The first category traces to the LeMar (Legalize Marijuana) movement, founded in New York in 1964, which organized small protests around the slogan “Pot Is Fun” in an effort to recast cannabis’s public image (Davis, 2017). LeMar later merged with Amorphia, a California-based pro-legalization group formed in 1971 that focused on decriminalization at the state level and funded its campaigning through a rolling-paper business (Davis, 2017). Amorphia’s donations supported decriminalization efforts in Oregon and California; the Oregon effort succeeded, making it the first state to decriminalize cannabis in 1973, while the California effort failed (Davis, 2017). Amorphia subsequently joined NORML, which went on

to support decriminalization campaigns in ten additional states between 1973 and 1978, including California, New York, Maine, Alaska, Colorado, North Carolina, Mississippi, Ohio, Minnesota, and Nebraska (Davis, 2017). This momentum stalled once the Reagan administration intensified securitization and parent-led anti-cannabis movements mobilized a counter-narrative (Davis, 2017).

Momentum resumed in the 2000s, when NORML, MPP, and DPA refocused their efforts on decriminalization and medical legalization at the state level. MPP pursued this goal through two parallel tracks: direct advocacy and lobbying aimed at changing state law, and public campaigning and education (Davis, 2017). DPA, founded in 2000 with a broader mandate than cannabis alone, contributed advocacy, campaigning, and public education highlighting the harms of existing enforcement measures (Davis, 2017). Collectively, these organizations are credited with securing medical cannabis legalization in twelve states during the 2000s, whether through state legislatures or ballot initiatives (Davis, 2017), a foundation that carried into the following decade and culminated in Colorado's full legalization of cannabis in 2012 (Lopez, 2020).

Colorado's example spurred the growth of the second organizational category, industry groups drawn by the cannabis market's commercial potential, then projected to reach 24 billion dollars (Dorbian, 2020). These groups also emerged in response to the regulatory complexity that legalization introduced: legal status alone did not guarantee market access, since producers and sellers still had to navigate substantial licensing and compliance requirements, and cannabis remained criminalized in several states and at the federal level, limiting the addressable market. The National Cannabis Industry Association (NCIA), among the first organizations in this category, pursued federal legalization through advocacy centered on the tax revenue and employment the cannabis industry could generate (Davis, 2017).

Pro-Cannabis Organizations and Federal-Level Advocacy

Having achieved substantial success at the state level, both categories of pro-cannabis organizations turned toward federal policy change. With 38 states having legalized cannabis in some form by 2024, federal legalization increasingly appeared within reach.

Both categories pursued federal change through two main channels. The first channel involved public education, through campaigns and advertising, highlighting the costs of incarceration and international intervention alongside the tax revenue and employment

potential of a legal cannabis industry. NORML's 2021 campaign for the Marijuana Freedom and Opportunity Act drew significant public attention and brought the bill to congressional discussion, though legislative progress subsequently stalled; Senator Schumer, the bill's sponsor, pressed the issue directly with President-elect Biden, and NORML supported this effort through a letter-writing campaign urging Biden to prioritize the legislation (Fertig, 2021). The second channel involved direct lobbying and legislative advocacy. DPA and NORML, working through the Cannabis Justice Coalition, helped draft and promote the MORE Act, which the House approved by a vote of 228 to 164 and which would reclassify cannabis out of Schedule I status (U.S. Congress, 2020). Industry organizations pursued a parallel legislative track: NCIA's policy team supported Representative Earl Blumenauer's Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol Act (U.S. Congress, 2019b).

Neither category of organization has yet secured comprehensive federal reform, but the Biden administration's shift on cannabis policy has kept that outcome within reach.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of United States cannabis policy shows that several desecuritization logics can operate concurrently to move an issue from security discourse into normal political debate. Three Hansenian desecuritization processes drove this shift. The first stemmed from the stagnation and ineffectiveness of U.S. enforcement measures at home and abroad, which created openings for alternative policy proposals and for new actors to challenge the prevailing approach. The second stemmed from a shift in how Americans perceive the cannabis threat itself: domestically, fear of incarceration for cannabis offenses has come to outweigh fear of cannabis's direct effects, while internationally, the War on Drugs generated the very threat it aimed to prevent, in the form of drug trafficking organizations and the violence associated with them. Legalization gained traction as a response to both dimensions of this shift, since it removes the threat of incarceration for possession and undercuts DTO revenue. The third stemmed from sustained rearticulation efforts by pro-cannabis organizations through campaigning, public education, and advocacy. These three processes have moved cannabis from a security issue on par with other narcotics toward a normal-political issue, even as remnants of the earlier securitization period persist in federal law.

This paper does not claim that cannabis has been fully desecuritized. Since the 2010s, no securitizing actor has issued a speech act with enough force to reassert cannabis as a security threat, and public opinion, as reflected in the 2022 Pew Research and 2023 Gallup surveys

cited above, has moved decisively away from that framing. Following Buzan's account of securitization, in which a fully securitized issue cannot be reopened for ordinary debate, the fact that cannabis policy is now openly debated in both academic and public settings indicates that its securitization has lapsed. Thirty-eight states have legalized or decriminalized cannabis for medical use, twenty-four of them for recreational use as well, federal elites have shifted their stated positions, and federal-level policy initiatives, including amnesty for simple-possession offenses, review of cannabis's Schedule I status, and legislative proposals such as the Marijuana Freedom and Opportunity Act of 2019, the MORE Act of 2020, and the Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol Act of 2019, all point toward the same trajectory.

At the same time, the federal government continues to enforce legal remnants of the securitization period both domestically and abroad, which indicates that cannabis has not yet fully exited the security realm. This paper therefore concludes only that the desecuritization of cannabis in the United States remains ongoing and incomplete, shaped by the social and political dynamics traced here.

Further research should track this desecuritization process as it continues, particularly given the Biden administration's stated position that the existing approach to cannabis has failed and stands in need of correction (The White House, 2022). Subsequent shifts in federal policy, and in the political dynamics surrounding them, warrant continued scholarly attention.

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