

Where there is smoke, there is fire? Making sense of the past failure and future prospects of cannabis reform in Chile

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Abstract

A decade ago, cannabis reform was on the public and political agenda in Chile, but the reform process eventually broke down with no marijuana legalization. This article focuses on the different stages of agenda politics to explain the reasons for the failure of cannabis reform in Chile. Drawing on original data, including 36 interviews with key actors, the article traces the reform process. Through a combination of process tracing and counterfactual analysis, the article establishes the causal weight of explanatory factors and distinguishes between activities and their effects. The evidence shows that cannabis reform in Chile failed not only because of a lack of governmental support and agenda setting but also because reform proponents were unable and unwilling to maintain the agenda after initially setting it successfully. By contrast, insider and outsider reform opponents were effective at agenda denial and counter-framing cannabis reform. Despite producing lots of smoke, recreational cannabis reform efforts have burned out without blazing the trail toward marijuana legalization in Chile. By unearthing the factors that led to initial success in gaining attention and to eventual failure in securing approval in the recent past, this article points out the difficulties of legalizing marijuana in Chile in the near future.

KEYWORDS

agenda politics, Chile, counterfactual analysis, drug policy, marijuana legalization, policy reform, process tracing

INTRODUCTION

The 2021 election of Gabriel Boric, a 35-year-old, left-wing, former student leader, has inspired hope for meaningful change in Chile's polarized politics and unequal society. What does his election mean for the prospects of marijuana legalization in Chile? At first glance, Boric's