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# CANNABIS RACIALIZATION AND EXCEPTIONALISM UNDER NIXON AND TRUMP

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## Abstract

This study examines how the Nixon and Trump administrations contributed to the racialization of cannabis policy in the United States. The purpose of this study is to analyze how political rhetoric, relationships, and legislation have been used to construct cannabis as a racialized tool of social control. Using a qualitative methodology, this study analyzes presidential speeches, public statements, political affiliations and drug-related policies from both administrations. The findings indicate that Nixon and Trump each employed distinct but inherently related strategies to reinforce racial hierarchies through cannabis policy. Nixon explicitly racialized cannabis to target communities of color, later shifting towards selective cannabis enforcement. Trump relied on cannabis exceptionalism to distinguish between medical and recreational use, while maintaining racialized enforcement practices. Overall, the study demonstrates that cannabis policy has been continuously adapted to serve political agendas while perpetuating systemic racial disparities.

## Keywords

Cannabis, Racialization, Exceptionalism, Nixon, Trump, Criminalization

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## 1. Introduction

The War on Drugs, officially declared by Richard Nixon in 1971, has historically had disproportionate impacts on communities of color throughout the United States. The centrality of cannabis in the War on Drugs has played a significant role in reinforcing these inequities, leading to lasting consequences for marginalized communities. Racialized cannabis policy has resulted in disparate incarceration rates, targeted enforcement by police, and harsher sentencing. These policies, both before and after Nixon, contributed to a systemic pattern of racialized drug enforcement that disproportionately targets communities of color.

Although the War on Drugs formally began with Nixon, the penalties for the possession and distribution of cannabis and other illicit substances had long operated as a mechanism of racialized control. Politicians, both before and after Nixon, have used racially charged language in regard to drug use in order to justify harshly punitive laws. This rhetoric is closely linked to their support for specific legislation and the political relationships they built and nurtured throughout their tenure as politicians. Specifically, this can be seen through Nixon, who launched the War on Drugs, and Donald Trump, who is presently working to amplify the same broader trend of racialized narratives that were deeply rooted in Nixon's War on Drugs.

The Nixon administration intensified this through its public framing of cannabis as a crime issue and a danger to public safety and health. Privately, the administration had political targets and agendas that were made clear through racially charged rhetoric. His cannabis and drug policies built a framework that would last for decades, disproportionately impacting communities of color across the United States. The Trump administration worked within Nixon's systems using a modernized approach. While adopting a progressive facade surrounding cannabis, he worked to maintain the racialized hierarchies that Nixon facilitated the creation of within drug policy. Both administrations ultimately reveal how racialized approaches to regulating cannabis have shaped drug policy across the decades that separate these two presidential administrations.

This paper will examine how Nixon and Trump's rhetoric, political relationships, and legislation were leveraged to racialize, and in doing so, criminalize the use of cannabis.

Additionally, parallels will be drawn between the racialization of cannabis by each president, while analyzing how it was applied to distinct groups to benefit the political needs of each president. In addition, the concept

of cannabis exceptionalism will be considered in respect to both administrations, as they both used this framing to selectively regulate cannabis to reinforce racial disparities and serve political objectives. This paper will investigate the following question: How did the Nixon and Trump administrations respectively contribute to and reinforce the racialization of cannabis?

## 2. Literature Review

The existing literature has studied the roots of the War on Drugs and its effects, including its racial and political motivations. Under the Nixon administration, the use of illicit drugs was framed as a cultural threat, undermining the existing social order (Blumenthal, 2016). By appealing to a conservative Southern audience, Nixon was able to construct cannabis use as symbolic of racial anxieties and a decline in traditional morals (Blumenthal, 2016). Within this broader context, the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse, also known as the Shafer Commission, was created with the intention of providing policy recommendations to the Nixon administration. The commission consisted of a variety of experts: health professionals, public officials, and drug abuse researchers (Musto & Korsmeyer, 2002). The Shafer Commission found that physical and mental issues experienced by cannabis users could not be linked directly to their use of cannabis (Musto & Korsmeyer, 2002). They also denied the long-standing claim that cannabis was a gateway drug that led to the use of higher-risk substances (Musto & Korsmeyer, 2002).

Despite the Shafer Commission's conclusions that cannabis was not a danger to public safety and their recommendation that possession of small amounts be decriminalized, Nixon blatantly ignored these recommendations (Blumenthal, 2016). Rather, he only listened to the commission's recommendation for a crackdown against traffickers, citing that cannabis was "becoming a white problem" as well (Blumenthal, 2016). Additionally, Nixon was facing the issue of soldiers returning to the United States from Vietnam, with a portion of them sporting new heroin addictions (Saloner et al., 2025). To kill two birds with one stone, Nixon perpetuated an association between Black Americans and heroin.

Nixon's War on Drugs created the framework that has continued within the contemporary war on drugs. Under Nixon, policing and federal drug penalties were increased, having a disproportionate effect on marginalized communities (Saloner et al., 2025). His administration also established federal institutions that are still involved in the war on drugs today, including the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the Office of National Drug Control Policy (Saloner et al., 2025). Although Nixon authorized a large amount of federal funding for methadone treatments, this initiative was put on the backburner to remain focused on a tough-on-crime approach (Saloner et al., 2025).

Over the course of his first presidency, Trump reinforced his own War on Drugs through heavy punitive approaches with a focus on racialized governance, border securitization, and geopolitical coercion (Regilme, 2025). Trump's rhetoric was largely based on depicting drug offenders, specifically those from marginalized communities, as threats to society that could not be rehabilitated (Regilme, 2025). To normalize extreme levels of state sanctions and violence against drug offenders, Trump suggested that drug dealers should be given the death penalty (Regilme, 2025). In characterizing drug offenders as unredeemable monster-like figures, he was justifying policies that contributed to the disproportionate mass incarceration of people of color in the U.S. Trump also weaponized cannabis by indicating a correlation between its use and lowered IQ scores (Regilme, 2025).

These racialized narratives and associations have been reflected in federal actions. To combat state-level legalizations of cannabis, Trump implemented federal crackdowns against dispensaries with a focus on those operated by Black and Latinx entrepreneurs (Regilme, 2025). Under the leadership of Attorney General Jeff Sessions from 2017 to 2018, the Department of Justice reverted to harsher sentencing for drug offenses, which disproportionately impacted marginalized communities (Regilme, 2025). More recently, Trump has been attempting to reduce the independence of the DOJ, downsize federal public health agencies, and cut down on federal funding for biomedical research, which could ultimately have lasting impacts on marginalized communities in the U.S (Saloner et al., 2025).

In his shift away from blatant cannabis racialization, Trump created a fear-driven association between traffickers of synthetic drugs, like fentanyl, and immigrants coming into the U.S. across the southern border (Bustanza & Witkowski, 2022). As of 2025, the Trump administration has linked fentanyl to Canada, Mexico, and China, framing these associations as necessary to protect the United States while using these links to justify tariffs against each of these countries (Saloner et al., 2025). Additionally, portraying drug traffickers, undocumented immigrants, and other global forces as a single threat exploiting the open-border policies of the U.S. has been part of the rationale for his mass deportation efforts (Saloner et al., 2025).

Cannabis exceptionalism is the idea that cannabis differs from other illicit drugs in that it is a softer, safer, and more natural drug. Despite this, cannabis has played a central role in the War on Drugs both in the United States and globally (Polson, 2021). In a critique on cannabis exceptionalism, Polson argues that when political figures and policymakers create exceptions for cannabis without extending the same courtesy to other illicit drugs, it preserves the systems created by the War on Drugs (Polson, 2021). Without challenging the broader framework, attempting to remove cannabis from its pivotal position in the War on Drugs perpetuates the same pattern of disproportionate drug arrests and incarcerations while shifting the racialized lens onto other illicit drugs (Polson, 2021). Various politicians

have participated in this idea of cannabis exceptionalism, seemingly when it benefits them to move away from the racialization of cannabis and onto the racialization of another illicit substance.

### 3. Methodology

To answer this question, a focused analysis will be done on public statements made by Nixon and Trump, public statements made by people who they had strong political alliances with, and the drug-related legislation they supported, particularly legislation pertaining to cannabis. Nixon's dataset will include his publicly available speeches, statements, and conversations between 1968 and 1974, his political ties to John Ehrlichman and Egil Krogh Jr., and legislation he advocated for. Trump's dataset will include his public speeches, statements, and social media posts from 2015 to the present day, his political connection to Jeff Sessions, and legislation he sponsored or promoted.

Arguably, this research will show that Nixon and Trump both utilized strategies through their rhetoric, political ties, and support of legislation that worked to racialize cannabis and other illicit substances in ways that changed public perception and benefitted their political agendas. For Nixon, this involved the creation of a divide between people of color and the white population as cannabis users. Through an eventual shift towards targeting cannabis distributors rather than users, he was able to maintain the portrayal of people of color as criminal, while providing white cannabis users with more leniency in cannabis enforcement. For Trump, this operated through a distinction between medical cannabis as legitimate and recreational cannabis as culturally deviant. This research will demonstrate how both Nixon and Trump relied on different approaches to cannabis exceptionalism when the full racialization of cannabis no longer served their respective political priorities.

### 4. Nixon Administration on Cannabis

The Nixon administration's approach to cannabis was largely defined by a broader political strategy. While public statements and legislation appeared neutral to race and centered around public health and safety, private conversations revealed how the administration intentionally framed cannabis in ways that led to racialized policies and enabled racial targeting by law enforcement. This framing also laid the groundwork for Nixon's form of cannabis exceptionalism, in which he distinguished between cannabis users as redeemable and distributors as inherently criminal. The following sections will examine Nixon's rhetoric, political relationships, and legislation to effectively demonstrate how the Nixon administration's approach to cannabis was racialized.

#### 4.1 Rhetoric

Despite Nixon's public presentations of his war against cannabis as a fight against crime and a measure to protect public safety, his rhetoric reveals that the matter of cannabis and his methods of addressing it were primarily centered on race. While consistently framing cannabis through a racialized morality lens, he readily modified his stance about the dangers of cannabis depending on the populations using it. Through the framing of cannabis as a racial threat and moral failure, he laid the groundwork for punitive drug policies that continue to target people of color in the United States.

Nixon racialized cannabis through the broader narratives he chose to attach to the substance. Nixon framed cannabis as emanating from an external threat by describing cannabis as being "produced abroad and clandestinely imported" (Nixon, 1969). This worked to tie cannabis distribution to foreign and non-white entities rather than discussing it as an American-originated issue. By racializing cannabis distribution and depicting it as an external threat, Nixon established a distinct narrative that the criminality surrounding cannabis stemmed from the distribution of the substance.

He continued to tie cannabis use to moral failings and criminality by asserting that cannabis users "find it necessary to steal, to commit crimes," implying that they are "destroying the lives of hundreds of thousands of young people" (Nixon, 1970). He grounded cannabis use within the moral and cultural decay of communities of color that were already being stigmatized. Within this framing, Nixon's concern about cannabis as a threat to youth was centered on white youth, whose vulnerability was used to amplify cannabis as something in need of national concern. This came together when he stated that "America's public enemy number one" was "drug abuse" (Nixon, 1971a). By transforming the issue of cannabis into a largescale national threat, he amplified racialized fears about cannabis throughout the country. Considering all these statements together, this demonstrates how Nixon constructed cannabis use as something symbolic of a racialized disorder necessitating a rigorous and racially selective punitive response. One of Nixon's clearest statements that demonstrated his intention of using cannabis policy in a racialized manner came when he said, "it's now becoming a white problem" as rates of white cannabis users began to rise (Nixon, 1971b). In making this claim and then immediately suggesting that incarcerating a cannabis user alongside "a bunch of hardened criminals" wouldn't be appropriate, Nixon exposed his own link between white cannabis use and a need for a strategically altered approach (Nixon, 1971b). By making a distinction between the race of cannabis users, Nixon proved that his departure from a law-and-order approach was less about the harsh realities of the punishments he had been vouching for, but rather about concern for who would be on the receiving end of the penalties. This

suggests that these kinds of severe punishments for cannabis possession, use, and distribution only became “absurd” when white Americans, especially white youth, faced them (Nixon, 1971b). Although Nixon publicly dismissed most of the Shafer Commission’s recommendations, he selectively implemented their suggestion to focus on penalties for cannabis distributors, which was a group that could remain racialized and heavily criminalized. This is a clear illustration of how Nixon’s racially charged rhetoric created a double standard for cannabis punishment that gave way to disproportionate enforcement of cannabis laws.

#### **4.2 Political Relationships**

Nixon’s own racialized rhetoric was not an isolated instance but rather reinforced by some of his political allies. An examination of Egil Krogh Jr., Deputy Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs, and John Ehrlichman, White House Domestic Affairs Advisor, illustrates how this racialized framing of cannabis was a logic shared throughout the administration, guiding their policy work and public framing of cannabis. In their rhetoric, as well as Nixon’s, it’s clear that racial coding of cannabis was used as a strategic political tool to advance the administration’s agendas. While Ehrlichman had a hand in the damage done by the War on Drugs at the time, he retroactively took responsibility for what the Nixon administration had been doing. In a 2016 interview, Ehrlichman admitted that the Nixon administration “had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people” (Baum, 2016). This in itself outright names these two populations as the administration’s targets. The War on Drugs, specifically the approach to cannabis, was used as a tool to mark the alleged criminality and moral failures of these groups in a way that would benefit the Nixon administration. He went on to explain that their plan was to disrupt those populations by “getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin” (Baum, 2016). This serves as evidence that the administration was purposefully creating racial connections to specific substances within the public eye. While communities of color weren’t specifically named as being associated to cannabis in this statement, people of color were often included within the antiwar groups. This also aligned with Nixon’s own rhetoric about the criminality associated with cannabis use that largely drove policymaking and law enforcement. Finally, Ehrlichman described their plan to “arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them” (Baum, 2016). Not only does this confirm how the administration used cannabis as a racialized political weapon, but it also exemplifies how the Nixon administration’s rhetoric translated into concrete actions. In this, it’s clear that the Nixon administration based their cannabis policies on targeting specific populations rather than out of any concern for public health or safety.

In a stark contrast to Ehrlichman, Krogh participated in an interview in 2000 where he gave bureaucratic, rehearsed responses essentially denying any wrongdoing within the War on Drugs. He described heroin as “the real focus,” indicating that it was the one that “created a lot of the crime problem” (Krogh, 2000). This acts to shift away from the racialized strategies used to deal with cannabis, while discussing another substance that was heavily associated with Black communities. While he didn’t explicitly discuss race, the mention of a crime problem acts as a symbol for the racialized fears surrounding disorder and moral failings. He continued to explain that the administration had no intention of labeling cannabis users and users of other substances as “bad people,” insisting that Nixon did not participate in “imposing some kind of a moral judgement on people” (Krogh, 2000). This contradicts Nixon’s private rhetoric, as well as Ehrlichman’s 2016 confession, suggesting that this statement reflects how the administration attempted to obscure their racially motivated decisions through an excess of rhetoric related to public health and safety. Considering the rhetoric of two of Nixon’s political allies together, it becomes evident that the administration’s racialized constructions of cannabis use were both deliberate and normalized within the administration.

#### **4.3 Legislation**

Nixon’s legislative approach to cannabis converted his own racially coded rhetoric into federal law, which contributed to the establishment of a punitive system that has been disproportionately targeting communities of color for decades. On October 27, 1970, Nixon signed the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act into effect. The purpose of this statute was in part to conduct more research into illicit substances, provide treatment for substance use, strengthen law enforcement regarding illicit drugs, and prevent future drug use (Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970, 1970). Although presented as neutral public health-oriented policy, it aligned closely with Nixon’s law-and-order platform, which disproportionately targeted Black communities under the guise of public safety and drug abuse prevention.

The Controlled Substances Act of 1970 was embedded within the Comprehensive Drug Abuse and Prevention and Control Act. This defined “marihuana,” all parts of the cannabis plant, as a hallucinogenic substance (Controlled Substances Act, 1970). Along with this, the CSA established the federal drug scheduling system, creating five distinct schedules that categorize illicit substances based on its potential for abuse and its medical value. The CSA defines Schedule I substances as having the highest potential for abuse, no currently accepted medical use, and being unsafe for use even when done under medical supervision (Controlled Substances Act, 1970). Cannabis was placed into the Schedule I category, resulting in incarceration and fines that varied according to possession amount, intent to distribute, and prior drug convictions or felonies. Although this doesn’t appear explicitly racially targeted,

placing it into the context of Nixon's political goals and private conversations demonstrates how cannabis policy was strategically used to racialize cannabis and crime, as well as to target specific racial communities. While the penalties attached to the scheduling of illicit substances were presented as race-neutral, measures like mandatory minimums and federal arrests were enforced disproportionately within communities of color.

The CSA, as outlined in Part F, also created the Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse, which later became known as the Shafer Commission. The Commission was to be comprised of two members of the Senate appointed by the President, two members of House of Representatives appointed by the Speaker of the House, and nine other members appointed by the President with the goal of conducting a study of cannabis to better understand it. This included the extent of cannabis use in the U.S., the usefulness of cannabis laws, long-term impacts of cannabis use, and connections between cannabis use and crime. While the commission was created to support a scientific and balanced approach to cannabis policy, Nixon made it clear in his private conversations that any findings from the commission would not alter his political strategies. The scientific findings of the commission that suggested cannabis was not the public health threat and danger to society it was believed to be; nevertheless, Nixon maintained that its use and distribution should remain criminalized, as the conclusions conflicted with his law-and-order agenda. The enactment of these pieces of legislation ensured that Nixon's racialized cannabis framework would exist well past his presidential terms.

## 5 Trump Administration on Cannabis

Cannabis under the Trump administration has remained a highly politically charged issue shaped by broader political agendas. While public statements and promises for new legislation have appeared race-neutral and progressive, patterns in enforcement and lack of changed federal legislation indicate that the administration's rhetoric has not translated into equitable changes in cannabis policy. Through distinguishing between medical and recreational cannabis while simultaneously shifting racialized enforcement and policies towards synthetic drugs rather than cannabis, Trump reinforced a form of cannabis exceptionalism that allowed him to appear progressive regarding cannabis while maintaining other racialized drug control policies. The following sections will examine Trump's rhetoric, political relationships, and legislation to effectively demonstrate how the Trump administration's approach to cannabis remains racialized.

### 5.1 Rhetoric

Trump's rhetoric within his public statements and social media posts has been inconsistent and largely ambiguous on the surface but reveals a pattern of cannabis exceptionalism and racialized categorizations of cannabis use as acceptable and unacceptable. Although his rhetoric regarding recreational cannabis use has shifted repeatedly between 2015 to 2025, his support for medical cannabis remained stable.

In a 2015 interview at the Conservative Political Action Conference, he vouched for medical cannabis while condemning recreational cannabis use, as he said "I think it's bad and I feel strongly about that" regarding decriminalization and legalization of recreational cannabis (C-SPAN, 2015). This began his clear distinction that marks medical cannabis as legitimate, while maintaining recreational uses of cannabis as criminal. Similar differentiations persisted as he continued to voice his support for medical cannabis use in 2025 via a Truth Social post sharing a video promoting hemp-derived CBD in healthcare for senior citizens (Trump, 2025). In framing these two forms of use in contrast to one another, Trump worked to position medical cannabis as safe and beneficial, while maintaining recreational cannabis use as dangerous and deviant, thus implicitly reinforcing the racialized narratives that have tied recreational cannabis use to communities of color. These distinctions that Trump has maintained allows for recreational cannabis to remain federally criminalized despite growing support from the public and reinforces racialized policing regarding cannabis-related crimes that disproportionately impact people of color.

Later in 2015 at one of his rallies in Nevada, he shifted towards a proclamation that cannabis should be an issue decided by each state depending on the needs of the state (LiveNOW from FOX, 2015). In saying that it should be made a state's issue rather than a federal decision, he avoided making any statements endorsing full federal decriminalization and legalization of recreational cannabis use. Employing this kind of ambiguity rather than taking a definitive position allows federal prohibition to continue and thus allows racialized cannabis law enforcement to persist as well. This allows for political flexibility without entirely alienating stakeholders on either side of the debate, while also preserving racially structured institutions.

As recently as 2024 and 2025, Trump has made statements indicating that his administration might be open to rescheduling cannabis, moving it from Schedule I to Schedule III. While this could be construed as his full support for both medical and recreational cannabis, rescheduling allows Trump to appear supportive of cannabis use without taking the step to legalize it at the federal level. In this way, he appeases the pro-cannabis population while legitimizing a structure with a racialized history related to arrests and incarcerations. These statements regarding cannabis as a state issue and federal rescheduling portray a false openness to cannabis use while upholding strict regulations.

## 5.2 Political Relationships

Arguably, Trump's most pertinent political relationship with respect to cannabis is Jeff Sessions, who was appointed Attorney General under the first Trump administration. While it should be taken into consideration that Sessions was the acting Attorney General for less than two years before being asked to submit his resignation, his statements as someone representing the administration regarding cannabis during this time make very clear how the administration viewed cannabis. Although Sessions' rhetoric didn't make an explicit connection between cannabis and race, he continuously used specific imagery and poignant rhetoric indicative of racialization.

Sessions made his views on cannabis clear in 2016 before his nomination for Attorney General when he claimed that "good people don't smoke marijuana," citing that the substance is "dangerous" (U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2017). In constructing a binary between non-cannabis users as good and cannabis users as bad, he drew on the same idea of cannabis use as a moral failure within a person that Nixon utilized. Even without specifically naming race, this statement becomes racialized as it connects to a long-standing history of an association between cannabis users and people of color.

When asked at his nomination for Attorney General if he would prioritize the prosecution of high-level drug offenders over low-level drug offenders, he chose to point out that a "400 percent increase in drug possession offenses is almost entirely attributable to marijuana offenders arrested at or near the United States' border with Mexico". Sessions depicted migrants and immigrants from Mexico, and the entire Latinx community by extension, as "drug traffickers who are smuggling their life-destroying poisons across the border and into our communities to turn a profit for violent drug cartels" (U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2017). In this statement, Sessions used the dangerous other trope to villainize the Latinx community and immigrants. He suggests that cannabis-related crimes are a result of outsiders invading U.S. communities, which reinforced a racialized distinction between U.S. citizens and people who originated from countries outside of the U.S., specifically Mexico.

In 2017, he went on to suggest that if cannabis, which is "only slightly less awful" than heroin, were legalized it would be "sold in every corner store" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). By drawing directly on Nixon's rhetorical strategy of framing cannabis as a threat to social order, Sessions revived a similar moral panic by suggesting that federal legalization would lead to widespread, uncontrolled cannabis sales, invoking racialized fears of disorder surrounding communities of color. In comparing cannabis to heroin, a drug historically associated with Black communities, he worked to justify harsh penalties for cannabis-related crimes. Across these statements, Sessions racialized cannabis through language with historically racialized connotations and by placing it within the context of institutions, like law enforcement, built upon racial inequalities.

## 5.3 Legislation

While Trump has not passed any legislation that changed the racialized foundation of how cannabis is managed in the United States, he has both endorsed bills and discussed possible future policy moves regarding cannabis. This makes clear that he has relied heavily on administrative moves and symbolic politics, like endorsements, rather than real structural change in terms of cannabis legislation. In 2018, Trump signed the Agriculture Improvement Act into effect. Although cannabis was not the central target of the legislation, it did legally redefine hemp as cannabis containing a level of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) amounting to 0.3% or less (Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, 2018). This worked to remove hemp from the federal definition of cannabis under the updated Controlled Substances Act, which is the first time a form of cannabis had been removed from its categorization as a federally prohibited Schedule I substance since the enactment of the Controlled Substances Act of 1970.

Although it's a step towards the decriminalization of cannabis, it only legalized a part of cannabis that would benefit agricultural and wellness institutions rather than have an impact on cannabis-related arrests. In turn, this maintained the structure that perpetuates disproportionate arrests among people of color, while opening doors for economic success in predominantly white industries of agriculture and wellness. This legalization contributed to the expanding hemp market, which continues to benefit a primarily white population while offering no benefits to those most impacted by racialized cannabis-related enforcement.

As part of his ongoing move towards a more tolerant approach to cannabis, Trump endorsed a Florida bill that aimed to legalize recreational cannabis use for adults. While the bill ultimately did not pass, the Florida native took to his Truth Social platform in September of 2024 to express his support for the amendment (Trump, 2024). In the post, he stressed the importance of "end[ing] needless arrests and incarcerations of adults for small amounts of marijuana" (Trump, 2024). Given that this post came shortly before the presidential election, these statements appear to have been politically motivated in an effort to appeal to younger voters rather than truly encompassing his own ideologies. Due to Trump's lack of action to alter federal cannabis laws, his public endorsement of this bill is largely symbolic as it does not change cannabis' status as federally criminalized or address the federal racialized enforcement of cannabis laws.

He went on to promise that his administration would pursue rescheduling cannabis from Schedule I to Schedule III, primarily to expand possibilities for its medical uses (Trump, 2024). Although this could be viewed as progressive, recreational cannabis use would remain federally criminalized. It would open opportunities for further research into cannabis for medical uses, which reinforces Trump's distinction between medical cannabis as beneficial

and recreational cannabis as harmful. This shift towards rescheduling cannabis coincided with Trump using legislation and increasing funding to governmental agencies, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), to racialize synthetic drugs, specifically fentanyl. While softening his rhetoric and tone regarding cannabis, his approach has grown harsher and more racially charged against synthetic drugs, which redistributes the racialized drug panic onto a different substance and a new threat. In this way, Trump's approach to cannabis policy operates as symbolic politics rather than real reform, which leaves racialized structures intact while redirecting the racialized punitive focus towards synthetic drugs.

## **6 Conclusion**

The Nixon and Trump administrations within their respective political landscapes are indicative of how cannabis policy has historically been and continues to be used as a racialized political tool. While their rhetoric differed, both used cannabis to signify broader societal issues of moral failings, urban and cultural decay, and rise in crime, as well as to define people as inherently bad and deviant. By examining these administrations collectively, it becomes clear that racialized cannabis policy is a strategy that has continuously changed over time to adapt to political agendas and historical contexts.

Both Nixon and Trump framed cannabis through their rhetoric as a sign of moral and cultural declines. Nixon's rhetoric relied on ideas of crime and disorder, while Trump's rhetoric relied on separating the legitimate cannabis uses from the illegitimate. Their respective rhetoric heavily shaped public perceptions of cannabis use and policies leading to disproportionate policing in communities of color. Their rhetoric was reinforced by that of their close political confidants. Nixon worked closely with Ehrlichman, who appeared to experience remorse over their racial targeting, and Krogh, who continued to obscure the motivations behind the administration's actions even years later. Trump had significant political ties to Sessions, whose rhetoric created extreme associations between crime and cannabis users, who he deemed as bad people. Both the Nixon and Trump administration's legislative moves were fueled by their racialized rhetoric, demonstrating how it translates into policy. Nixon's creation of substance scheduling laid the framework for the punitive systems that continue to persist today. Trump's legislative and administrative actions were progressive on the surface but continued to reinforce racialized narratives surrounding cannabis.

In order to selectively shape cannabis policy in ways that most effectively served their political goals, both administrations used distinct forms of cannabis exceptionalism. After racializing cannabis altogether, Nixon shifted towards distinguishing between cannabis users, who he could frame as redeemable, and cannabis distributors, who could be heavily criminalized while appeasing white voters. In this, he was able to target communities of color while creating new protections for white cannabis users. Alternatively, Trump distinguished between medical cannabis as safe and recreational cannabis as dangerous. In this, he has pushed for expansions in the medical cannabis sector, which largely benefits white-dominated industries, while maintaining disproportionate penalties for recreational cannabis use against communities of color. He paired this distinction with shifting racialized enforcement and policy strategies towards synthetic drugs, which he associated mainly with immigrants from Latin American countries. The use of cannabis exceptionalism by these administrations demonstrates how they were each able to appear responsive to public needs and progressive in certain areas, while reinforcing racialized disparities within enforcement and policy.

Across both administrations, this demonstrates how racialized cannabis policies adapt rather than dissipate. Both administrations relied heavily on cannabis as a symbolic political tool, using it in ways that reflected who or what needed to be framed as criminal or deviant based on the political landscape. Furthermore, the use of cannabis exceptionalism demonstrates how these selective distinctions allow racialized hierarchies to continue while presenting the appearance of reform. These racialized patterns to approaches to cannabis emphasize how continued conversations about cannabis can't be removed from its racialized past. In order to bring about equitable change regarding cannabis, the racialized narratives that led to disproportionate policies, policing, and incarceration must first be addressed.

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