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Narratives of Consensus: a Decade of Reddit Discourse on Marijuana Legalization

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Abstract

Defying polarization, U.S. support for marijuana legalization grew from 36% to 67% during 2005-2019 (Pew Research Center, 2019). To identify discourse properties that accompanied this shift, we present the largest social media corpus on the topic (>3M documents) and the first to target Reddit (2008-2019). We used geolocation inference to distinguish U.S. discourse from international chatter and separate pre- and post-legalization content given marijuana's uneven legal status across U.S. states. Research on online discourse has focused on generalized statements (e.g., moral arguments/sentiments). However, we combine topic modeling with hierarchical clustering to show that personal anecdotes and attitudes were a major driver of discourse especially during the legalization drive, at the expense of certain more generalizable themes. We classified comments by expressed attitude and presence of persuasion attempts using neural networks to show that the anecdotal discourse reflected not only social sharing, but also active argumentation.