

Pot, gay marriage, assisted suicide on US ballots

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This Sept. 18, 2012 file photos shows a caregiver picking out a marijuana bud for a patient at a marijuana dispensary in Denver. After all the economy-focused campaign talk, voters in some states will get a chance on Election Day to sound off on intriguing topics that the presidential rivals ignored, including marijuana legalization, death penalty repeal and assisted suicide.(AP Photo/Ed Andrieski, File)

(AP)—Voters in some U.S. states will get a chance on Election Day to decide intriguing topics that President Barack Obama and Republican rival Mitt Romney have ignored, including death penalty repeal, marijuana legalization and assisted suicide.

In all, there are 176 measures on the Nov. 6 ballots in 38 states, according to the Initiative and Referendum Institute at the University of

Southern California.

Some, if approved, would be historic milestones for U.S. social policy.

Any of three states—Maine, Maryland and Washington—could become the first to legalize same-sex marriage through a popular vote, a potentially momentous development that could influence future Supreme Court deliberations on the issue. Thus far, all 32 states with referendums on [gay marriage](#) have rebuffed it, while the six states that have legalized it did so through legislation or court orders.

Washington, Oregon and Colorado could become the first states to legalize recreational use of marijuana, allowing adults to possess small amounts of pot under a regimen of state regulation and taxation. The Oregon proposal appears to be fizzling, but the Washington and Colorado measures have led in opinion polls and are backed by wealthy out-of-state donors.

A "yes" vote in any of the states could set up a showdown with the federal government, which continues to consider marijuana an [illegal drug](#). The Justice Department has declined to elaborate on how it would react.

Two other states, Arkansas and Massachusetts, will be deciding whether to allow marijuana use for medical reasons, as 17 states have done previously. Arkansas would be the first southern state to join the group.

Another emotionally charged measure in Massachusetts would legalize physician-assisted suicide. Massachusetts would join Oregon and Washington in allowing terminally ill patients to obtain lethal doses of medication if doctors say they have six months or less to live.

The measure raises "the most profound questions that an individual can

wrestle with," said the Rev. Tim Kutzmark, a Unitarian Universalist minister who shifted from a foe of [assisted suicide](#) to a supporter after watching a close friend slowly die from Parkinson's disease in 2002.

California has numerous attention-getting measures, including one that would abolish the state's [death penalty](#). If approved, the more than 720 inmates on California's death row would have their sentences converted to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

While 17 states have ended capital punishment, most did so through legislative action. Only in Oregon, in 1964, did voters choose to repeal the death penalty, and they later reversed themselves to reinstate it.

Another contentious measure in California would require most genetically engineered processed foods and produce sold in supermarkets and other outlets to be labeled as such. These GMO foods also will be prohibited from carrying the term "natural" on their labels.

Consumer groups and the organic food industry support the measure as a way of giving shoppers more information about what they purchase and consume, while many retailers are opposed, saying grocery bills would increase. Food and chemical conglomerates, including Monsanto Co. and DuPont Co., have contributed nearly \$41 million to defeat the measure—close to 10 times what its supporters have raised.

California labor unions are the target of another measure, aimed at depriving them of tens of millions of dollars they use to finance campaigns and political organizing.

The battle follows conflicts in Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and elsewhere where Republican efforts to weaken organized labor have produced protests and political tumult.

In Michigan, labor unions are fighting back. On Nov. 6, voters there will be deciding on a first-of-its-kind ballot initiative that would put collective bargaining rights in the state constitution—and out of lawmakers' reach.

If successful, the strategy could serve as a model for other states, encouraging unions to bypass hostile officeholders and take their case directly to voters.

"Labor is on the defensive," said Lawrence Mishel, president of the Economic Policy Institute, a liberal research organization in Washington, D.C. "This could very well be a turning point if the people of Michigan affirm collective bargaining."

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