

Days before Ohioans decide whether to guarantee abortion and legalize recreational marijuana, what's the tenor on college campuses?

By Laura Hancock, Jeremy Pelzer
cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio – Abortion has been the most politically charged issue of the last 50 years. As Ohioans prepare to decide whether to enshrine abortion rights in the state constitution and legalize recreational marijuana, how is the issue resonating on college campuses, where social dynamics for young adults clash with political polarization?

[Cleveland.com](#) and The Plain Dealer spent a day at a pair of Ohio colleges -- its largest, Ohio State University, and a small private school, Otterbein University -- speaking to dozens of students near the epicenter of state lawmaking in Ohio. The survey wasn't scientific, but anecdotal evidence suggests many college students are only vaguely aware of the historic Nov. 7 election.

"I'm not sure how I feel yet," said Ohio State University freshman Alejandro Sotl, who said he would have to look up his polling place if he were to vote. "I don't know how I feel on each issue. I would have to research it."

While national polling suggests that abortion and marijuana are big motivators for young voters, it's unclear whether they'll turn out in significant enough numbers to tilt the Tuesday election.

Exit polling showed that abortion was a top tier issue for young voters in the 2022 midterms, according to [the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement](#) at Tufts University in Boston. Its research found that out of five possible issues, young voters listed abortion as the one that most influenced their vote. Voters 18 to 29 were the only group in that analysis to list abortion as their top issue.

The youth vote in Ohio, however, [dipped in the 2022 election](#) compared with the 2018 midterm. The center found that youth voter turnout in Ohio in 2022 was less than 22%, down from more than 27% in 2018. That was still nearly double the youth voter turnout from 2014.

Whether young voters, thousands of whom matriculate on Ohio's college campuses, cast ballots on state Issue 1 and Issue 2 could help swing the outcome.

Issue 1, [the abortion rights amendment](#), would add a section to the Ohio Constitution saying that individuals can generally make their own decisions about pregnancy, abortion, contraception, fertility treatment and miscarriage care until fetal viability. After viability, the state can ban abortion, except in cases in which an abortion is needed to protect a woman's life and health.

[Issue 2](#) would legalize possession and purchasing of marijuana from licensed dispensaries for people aged 21 and older. Marijuana would be taxed at 10%. People could grow up to six plants at home, with no more than 12 plants per household. Issue 2 is being proposed as a state law, not a constitutional amendment, so the legislature will be able to make changes if it passes.

Cleveland State University's Office of Civic Engagement works in a nonpartisan way to help students register to vote and learn about what's on the ballot. Anita A. Ruf-Young, the office's director, said she saw a lot of interest from students, including a lot of views on her office's social-media accounts, leading up to the Aug. 8 special election on an unsuccessful Republican-backed attempt to pass a constitutional amendment to make it harder to pass future amendments, such as Issue 1.

"I think more of the organizations were trying to get on campus and engage students leading up to the August election," Ruf-Young said. "We're not seeing that as much leading up to the November election."

Ruf-Young said she's not sure how students are engaged with the November election, though she said she thinks many CSU students are researching and getting involved with Issue 1 and Issue 2 on their own, in ways like social-media browsing.

"All I can tell you is that they're paying attention to what we're posting and putting up, but I don't know if that will turn it into votes," she said. "We're hoping so."

Passions generally run higher on social media, but during visits to Ohio college campuses, interest in the election seemed divided by gender and by area of study.

For instance, Rosie Miller is studying finance at OSU. She's a freshman who voted early at home in Cincinnati with her sister, Anna Miller, a senior who is studying public health. They both voted "yes" on issues 1 and 2.

As a public health major, Anna Miller said she has given a lot of thought to the topics of abortion and recreational marijuana.

"I think I know more about it than most of my friends, a lot of other people in different majors, because that is a big part of public health," she said. "The classes I'm taking definitely makes me more interested in it."

In a study lounge at OSU's John Glenn School of Public Affairs, Jake Parish, a junior majoring in finance, said he didn't plan to vote because the election is not on his radar.

"Honestly, I didn't even know there was an election on Tuesday," Parish said. "It's a lack of publicity about the election, and maybe a little bit of negligence on my part."

Ciara Sinkuc, an OSU junior studying microbiology from Brookfield in Trumbull County, voted "yes" for both issues by absentee ballot because she couldn't get home to vote in person.

She voted in favor of adult-use cannabis because 23 other states already legalized it and she hadn't heard of any major problems. For abortion, "I am pro-life, but I think people should have the choice," she said.

At Otterbein University, a private liberal arts college of about 2,200 students in the leafy Columbus suburb of Westerville, many students said there has been more visible signs about Issue 1 than Issue 2 – including sidewalk chalk messages outside the library and signs in nearby yards urging a "yes" vote on the abortion-rights measure, as well as anti-Issue 1 booths and regular anti-abortion demonstrations on campus.

But several Otterbein students said that, at a time when the American public has become politically polarized, they and their friends are often reluctant to talk with each other or in class about the ballot issues – or any other divisive political topics – for fear of getting into an argument.

"I would say (Issues 1 and 2 are) probably more below the radar just because they try to keep like politics out of school and stuff like that," said Max Esque, an Otterbein freshman from the Columbus suburb of Bexley. "Like, teachers don't talk about it and

people don't talk about it a lot because it's a gray area for people. I feel like people don't like to talk about it because it can create conflict."

"These days, some people don't know when to stop an argument or even listen, so it's better for people to just withdraw from, even, the topic in general," said Caroline Knopf, a freshman student at Otterbein.

As Issues 1 and 2 aren't talked about as much on campus, Knopf said, "people really don't see it as urgent or as something that really needs to be looked into."

By contrast, she said, in her hometown of North Ridgeville, "everyone's got signs out and everyone's very urgent about (the election), especially on social media too. But here, it's not really a topic that comes up very often."

Tom Sutton, a Baldwin Wallace University political science professor and director of the university's Community Research Institute, said that according to both academic research and his own personal observations, college students in recent years have, overall, become more hesitant to express their opinion if it might spark a conflict or a disagreement.

"There's always been an element of this in this age group, where they're very focused on socialization, making friends, keeping friends, family dynamics, that sort of thing," Sutton said. "But I think ...starting from 2015 on out, the (political) polarization is affecting them at a personal level."

While high-profile ideological battles have recently been waged at schools like Harvard University and Stanford University, Sutton said, the "vast majority" of public universities around the U.S. are seeing the reverse trend, where conspicuous political activism and militant views are more common outside of campus than from within them.

One side effect of that, according to Sutton, is that some students become less informed about political issues, as they aren't as exposed to them as often.

"I don't have much contact with the undergraduates, but that's been my experience with my law students when I started talking to them back in September," said Dan Kobil, a law professor at Capital University in Columbus who supports Issue 1. "I told them, 'You know, there is a big reproductive freedom amendment on the ballot,' and I got crickets in both my constitutional law class and my criminal procedure class. And those were students who were second-year law students, who I assumed would really be informed. Some of them had heard about pot. But virtually none of them had heard about abortion."

However, a number of Otterbein students expressed strong and/or nuanced views about Issues 1 and 2.

Alexa Luebbe, a sophomore Otterbein student from Columbus, said while she's "really passionate" about voting against Issue 1, she doesn't know a lot about Issue 2.

At the same time, she said, she's heard people talk more about Issue 2 on campus – but in the form of jokes, rather than serious discussion.

"I definitely think more people are talking about Issue 2, just because (marijuana use) is a college thing," she said.

Joshua Goshay, a freshman Otterbein student from Columbus, said he voted for Issue 1 but against Issue 2.

Goshay said he opposes legalizing recreational marijuana. "I'm Christian, so, you know you have to be sober-minded," he said. As for abortion rights, he said he's "not necessarily for it," but he voted for Issue 1 because he believes abortion should be allowed in cases of rape or incest.

"Just thinking about if it was my daughter, you know, and that we would want her to be able to make the decision that she would think would be best for her," he said.

Goshay said he thinks Issues 1 and 2 are extremely important, but he said he doesn't think they are getting enough attention at Otterbein.

On the Oval at OSU, a handful of young people were holding large boards with anti-abortion messages. Sophomore marketing major David Wang spoke with Rachel Burkey, who came to Ohio from out of state as part of her work with Abolitionists Rising, an opposition group based in Norman, Oklahoma, that is working with End Abortion Ohio, a group that is further to the right than most of the state's other anti-abortion groups.

Wang is leaning toward voting "yes" on Issue 2. He's doesn't necessarily care about Issue 1, and he may not vote at all, he said.

He wants to hear more about the economics of the clinics that perform abortions and the money that nonprofits that oppose abortion earn, as well as industries that benefit from their opposition, such as printers who make signs and pamphlets against abortion, he said.

“I do want to say I am a PhD student here,” biochemistry doctoral student Robert Lee Shinkle, who was with Burkey, told Wang. “So if you have any questions about the science behind abortion, embryology, or cannabinoid (marijuana chemicals) science, feel free to ask.”