

The Politics of Public Health in Florida: Insights from Debates over Medical Cannabis and Needle/Syringe Exchange Legislation

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Abstract: This study examined the question of why some health-related legislative bills in the state of Florida pass into law while others do not. Using a retrospective, sequential, mixed methods case study design that included in-depth, key informant interviews, I explored how sociopolitical factors and stakeholder actions influenced policymakers and the outcomes of two Florida bills on medical cannabis and needle/syringe exchange.

Both bills were considered during the 2014 election year by a Republican majority legislature. The medical cannabis bill passed, and the needle exchange bill died in return messages at the end of the legislative session. Several sociopolitical and policy themes influenced the outcome of the bills: window of opportunity; persuasive health and/or economic arguments; effective grassroots mobilization with active, in-person citizen/constituent advocacy; influential legislative relationships (predominantly member-to-member and family members); and constituents and legislators acting as policy entrepreneurs and issue champions. However, certain expected themes were less influential: professional lobbying, state health agency influence, and pre-passage support by the governor's office. The medical cannabis bill had unique favorable factors that helped it pass compared to the needle/syringe exchange bill: the threat of a constitutional amendment that might increase Democratic voter turnout and further influence a gubernatorial election; a CNN documentary on medical cannabis; strong majority party sponsorship; and a sympathetic focus on sick children, viewed as blameless relative to injectable drug users.

This work provides insights into Florida legislative processes and can be used as a roadmap for success for future public health legislation. An advocacy checklist for public health and health-related professionals and organizations provides recommendations on how to strategically invest their resources when pursuing health-related legislation.

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