

EDITORIAL: Prop 16 will help level the playing field in California

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Body

Sept. 24-- Sep. 24--Opponents of Proposition 16 on the Nov. 3 ballot would have you believe that California is a color-blind meritocracy, at least so far as university admissions and government contracts are concerned. It isn't.

For high school students hoping to attend selective schools like Cal and UCLA, straight A's don't guarantee admission. Neither does a fixed SAT score.

Instead, admissions officers weigh grades against various subjective factors, everything from athletic skills to overcoming difficult personal circumstances. And, as the state auditor just reported, the children of some big donors are afforded special treatment.

Since 1996, however, California's public universities have been prohibited from considering some of society's most deeply entrenched inequities: race, sex and ethnicity. So have government agencies with regard to hiring and contracts.

We have a diverse society, but it isn't colorblind or merit-based.

Women, on average, are paid 80 cents for every dollar paid to men. Women of color are paid even less than white women.

African Americans and Latinos are still unrepresented in the state's universities and overrepresented among the unemployed and in California's vast prison system.

The #MeToo movement and Black Lives Matter didn't emerge from a color-blind, general-neutral society. Even the coronavirus has spread disproportionately, with Latinos and other minority groups more likely to be infected than whites.

Everyone should support the goal of a level playing field. We simply aren't there yet.

As the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote in a 2003 decision upholding affirmative action, "It remains the current reality that many minority students encounter markedly inadequate and unequal educational opportunities."

Proposition 16 would allow public universities and government agencies to consider race, ethnicity and sex along with myriad other factors, aligning California with 42 other states and the federal government.

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Indeed, contracts involving federal money are often exempt from California's ban on affirmative action. And contracts involving state and local money can be granted based on factors other than the lowest cost, including preferences for local bidders and disabled veterans, among others.

Let's be clear about what Proposition 16 would not do.

It would not institute quotas; they have been banned since 1978 by the U.S. Supreme Court's Bakke decision, which nonetheless allowed race to be considered as a factor in university admissions. It doesn't mandate affirmative action programs, leaving that choice to the UC regents, the Legislature and hundreds of cities, counties and school districts.

Opposition to Proposition 16 is concentrated among conservative including Ward Connerly, an ally of Pete Wilson who led the campaign against affirmative action in the 1990s.

There also is opposition in California's Asian community. Asians and Pacific Islanders compromise 33% of UC's undergraduates, twice their share of the state's population, and there are fears that enrollment will be cut to ensure racial parity.

A parity system hasn't been proposed and almost certainly would violate the Bakke decision. Opponents overlook an important consideration: increasing enrollment doesn't have to be a zero-sum game.

California State University's freshman admissions increased more than 25% between 2014 and 2019, according to university statistics. UC, meanwhile, offered admission to a record number of in-state applicants, both freshman and junior college transfers, this year.

The shift to distance learning during the coronavirus pandemic also may show a path for expanding access to the state's four-year universities for all prospective students.

The Press Democrat opposed Proposition 209, the 1996 initiative that banned affirmative action in California, arguing that "discrimination is a continuing reality in our society." We hope that one day that's no longer true. For now, it still is. The Press Democrat recommends a yes vote on Proposition 16.

You can send a letter to the editor at letters@pressdemocrat.com

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