

These Billionaires Want Affirmative Action Back In California. Voters Remain Divided.

Forbes.com

October 22, 2020 Thursday

Copyright 2020 Forbes LLC All Rights Reserved

Length: 886 words

Byline: Angel Au-Yeung, Forbes Staff

Highlight: Hedge fund founder Tom Steyer, former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer and Patricia Quillin, the wife of Netflix founder Reed Hastings, plus other billionaires have given nearly \$2.2 million toward passage of the proposition.

Body

<figure class="embed-base image-embed embed-3">

<figcaption>

The billionaire donors to Prop. 16 include Connie & Steve Ballmer, Susan Pritzker, Tom Steyer and Patricia Quillin.

Design by Forbes. Photos from left: ERIC FEFERBERG/AFP/Getty Images; Steve Jennings/Getty Images; Michael Kovac/Stringer/Getty Images; AEDT/WENN/Newscom

</figcaption> </figure>

During a summer of nationwide racial justice protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd, California lawmakers added Proposition 16 which would reinstate affirmative action in the state to the November ballot, more than two decades after it was banned.

Since September, at least five billionaires or their spouses have given a total of nearly \$2.2 million to committees that support the passage of Prop. 16. The biggest donations came from Patricia Quillin, spouse of Netflix founder Reed Hastings, who gave \$1 million, and former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer and his wife, Connie, who each gave \$500,000. Gov. Gavin Newsom, vice presidential candidate Sen. Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) and the state's public university system have also come out in favor of Prop. 16.

If Prop. 16 were to pass, it would allow public universities and government offices to factor in someone's race, gender or ethnicity for hiring, spending and admissions decisions in the state. It would also repeal a proposition passed in 1996 under Republican former California Gov. Pete Wilson, which banned the use of affirmative action in the state. Today, affirmative action is banned at public universities in eight states, including California.

In total, the committees that support Prop. 16 including Yes on 16 and the Opportunity for All Coalition have raised more than \$20 million. That is a gold rush compared to the \$1.2 million that the opposition committees have raised. **Forbes** was unable to find any billionaires who have given in opposition to the proposition. Some Asian voting groups, like the Chinese American Civic Action Alliance, oppose the proposition because they are concerned

These Billionaires Want Affirmative Action Back In California. Voters Remain Divided.

it would limit their children's chance of being admitted to the University of California. In 2019, Asian Americans made up 29% of freshmen admitted to the UC system, while Hispanic students made up 24%, despite the fact that there were nearly the same number of applicants from both ethnicities. Other opponents to Prop. 16 include the state's Republican Party, as well as Manuel Klaus, cofounder of the American libertarian think tank Reason Foundation.

I now realize that expecting people to compete when deprived of an even playing field from the beginning is discriminatory. It is no longer sufficient to be non-racist; now it is time for everyone to be anti-racist. <footer> Gary Michelson, billionaire and former orthopedic surgeon </footer>

But despite the war chest, two statewide polls from September suggested that only one third of voters supported the measure; the rest either opposed it or were undecided. Those two polls were done before advertising started, says Amelia Matier, press secretary for Yes On Prop. 16 Campaign Committee, to which Quillin and the Ballmers contributed. Matier says the dollars have been and will continue to be spent on high six-figure media buys on digital advertising, Spanish-language ads and more. An overwhelming majority of Californians do want racial justice measures taken, Matier says. The problem is just connecting the dots.

Another billionaire, former hedge fund investor and former 2020 Democratic presidential candidate Tom Steyer, has so far given \$50,000 in support of Prop. 16. "This is a transformational moment in our country, and it's critical that California show moral leadership in the pursuit of racial justice and economic equity," Steyer said in a statement to **Forbes**. "I'm proud to support Proposition 16, and encourage Californians across our state to match our progressive values with bold action."

Gary Michelson, a billionaire who is a retired orthopedic surgeon, gave \$2,000 toward passage of the proposition. Previously, I believed that rewarding achievement a meritocracy while being blind to race, gender, and sexual orientation, was sufficient," he said in an email. "I now realize that expecting people to compete when deprived of an even playing field from the beginning is discriminatory. It is no longer sufficient to be non-racist; now it is time for everyone to be anti-racist. . . . This measure will help counter systemic racism and create more economic and educational opportunities for California's underserved communities."

Other billionaire donors to Prop. 16 include Susan Pritzker, wife of Nicholas Pritzker, who gave \$100,000. The Pritzkers are one of the wealthiest families in America, with a fortune historically stemming from the Hyatt hotel chain.

Salesforce billionaire founder and CEO Marc Benioff told **Forbes** in January that he and his wife, Lynne, stopped making political contributions due to his ownership of **TIME** magazine (which he bought in late 2018), but his cloud-based software company gave \$375,000 to a committee supporting the passage of Prop. 16. Former billionaire and Qualcomm cofounder Irwin Jacobs and his wife each gave \$50,000 to a support committee. Jed York, the CEO of the NFL's San Francisco 49ers and son of billionaire Denise York, gave \$20,000 toward Prop. 16 as well.

Load-Date: October 23, 2020