

'Diversity for diversity's sake': Prop. 16 draws criticism

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In a time filled with protests and challenges to old systems, one of California voters' most controversial decisions, Proposition 209, which prohibited public universities from considering race in admissions, is being given a second look - but not without criticism.

This November, Proposition 16, which was previously known as ACA 5, will be on the ballot for California voters. The proposition has already attracted some resistance, its critics including individuals from Asian American activist groups to conservatives and Republicans.

Although no one is entirely sure of how the demographics of the UC system's student body would change under Prop. 16, the proposition's supporters expect that it would more closely resemble the racial makeup of the state.

As of 2018, African Americans made up approximately 6% of the state population, but only 4% of undergraduate students in the UC system. Latinx students were 24.4% of UC students, but 39% of the state population. Of the UC students, 21% were white compared to 37% in California, and Asians were 33% of the UC undergraduate population compared to 15% in the state.

Critics argue that the proposition will legalize what they consider a form of discrimination, will not deal with the core of the issue of racial inequality and may disadvantage Asian applicants.

Prop. 16's "proposal to legalize racial preferences erodes America's fundamental principles of equal opportunity, merit and individual liberty," states a recent press release from the Asian American Coalition for Education. "It further hurts the unity of our society, at a particularly vulnerable moment facing our nation and California."

UC Berkeley alumnus Aaron Staley, who has been a vocal opponent of the proposition, is more concerned with conflating socioeconomic diversity with racial diversity. Staley anticipates that with affirmative action, schools could end up seeming racially diverse, but in reality still only admit the most privileged members of each racial group.

Staley argued that it is not possible to advantage one group without disadvantaging another.

"Performing negative action on a minority group that suffers racism, to pull up another minority group that suffers racism - I get really uncomfortable with that idea," Staley said. "This really comes down to deeper social problems that affect downstream. Basically, this is one of those policies that has noble goals but the actual result it can achieve doesn't really help."

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Berkeley College Republicans, a conservative club at UC Berkeley, has some of the same concerns but also worries about consequences for more privileged students.

Alex Baptiste, external vice president of the club, said his organization thinks Prop. 16 "punishes those who happen to be from privileged backgrounds," which is "a genetic lottery of sorts."

Baptiste also pointed to the campus's existing systems for promoting diversity in admissions, including attention to context.

"At Berkeley, we already have a way of creating a rich, diverse campus, without just saying we need diversity for diversity's sake," the organization said in a statement.

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