

## **Prop. 16 has Latinos divided and uncertain; Polls show majority of them favor affirmative action measure, but wording could hurt it.**

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### **Body**

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If you're a low-income Latino or Black student hoping to enter a competitive college, Carlos Cruz has some advice.

Your best option is to continue your studies with free instructional videos on YouTube or online classes in computer coding, carpentry or plumbing, says the Republican candidate for California Assembly District 28, in Silicon Valley.

Cruz, a real estate agent, also thinks that on Nov. 3 Latinos and other voters of color should reject Proposition 16, which would restore affirmative action in California by allowing ethnicity to be considered as a factor in public employment, education and the awarding of public contracts.

"Passing Proposition 16 would only mask a very big problem that we have in poor-quality public schools," said Cruz, who is running against Democratic incumbent Evan Low.

"Giving students an opportunity to enter the university just because of their ethnicity or race is trying to push them into a system they don't know and won't be able to endure," he added. "So they'll only end up in debt, frustrated and without a graduation certificate."

On the opposite side of the Proposition 16 debate -- emphatically -- is Yazmin Lope, owner of Certified Interpreting Services in West Hollywood, who says she has been negatively affected by the lack of a state affirmative action policy.

She supports the new ballot measure that would in effect overturn 24-year-old Proposition 209, which largely forbids state and local governments from granting preferential treatment to individuals or groups on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin.

"As a woman and Mexican, I have seen firsthand what a small business has to go through to get bigger contracts, because we don't have the resources," said Lope, who started her business five years ago and has two employees.

"We are not asking for a free ticket but a fair ticket," she said. "If Proposition 16 passes, we still must do our job to show that we have talent. The same goes for students. They will not get free grades, but they will have a chance to show they can graduate."

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One week before election day, Proposition 16 has California voters -- including some Latinos, the state's largest ethnic group -- divided and possibly confused about its intentions, according to some polls and studies.

A poll released in September by the Latino Community Foundation showed that 50% of Latino registered voters were in favor of "public colleges and universities taking race into account when considering their admissions"; 48% were opposed. Among the survey's "key takeaways" was that "Proposition 16 is popular among the Latino community, but confusing language on the ballot may cause some Latinos to vote against it."

In another poll, by the Public Policy Institute of California, 31% of California voters said they would vote for Proposition 16, while 47% of respondents said they would not. The remaining 22% were undecided.

Among Asian Americans, according to a survey from APIAVote, AAPI Data and Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 36% said they supported the proposal, while 22% opposed it, and 42% were undecided or did not know.

Christian Arana, the Latino Community Foundation's political director, believes voters have a difficult time understanding exactly what affirmative action is about.

"There are many minorities who do not know what the goal of Proposition 16 is, they do not know the history of affirmative action, and there are those who are used to the current problems and do not want to change current policies," he said, although those policies are in many cases "obsolete," denying minorities a chance at success.

"The problem is that other campaigns had much more time and money to advance their messages. This measure was only added to the electoral ballot in the summer."

California's social and political landscape has changed dramatically in the nearly quarter-century since the passage of Proposition 209, the so-called California Civil Rights Initiative.

The conservative measure was one of several endorsed by former Republican Gov. Pete Wilson and came two years after Wilson helped push through Proposition 187, which prohibited immigrants without legal status from using non-emergency healthcare, public education and other services.

Back then, more California voters leaned conservative, but the state's demographics were rapidly evolving in favor of Latinos and other nonwhite groups, said Luis F. Nuno, a sociology professor at Cal State Los Angeles.

"The vote in favor of Proposition 209 was the last attempt by conservative whites to keep California as a conservative white state," Nuno said.

Today, California is one of only 10 states that have banned affirmative action.

Although Latinos make up 54% of students in public schools, they represent only 22% of students in the University of California system. Together, Black and Latino students make up 60% of seniors in the state but only 29% of college students in the UC system.

Maria S. Salinas, president and chief executive of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, which serves more than 235,000 businesses, said passing Proposition 16 also would provide a much-needed boost to minority-owned businesses.

"I can see daily the lack of opportunities that small businesses have to advance or win public contracts," Salinas said, "and it is not because they are not competent. It is because they do not have the opportunity to compete with other larger businesses."

Since the pandemic began, a record number of minority-owned businesses nationwide have closed. There was a 41% decrease in the number of Black business owners from February to April, and a 32% drop in Latino business owners. Asian American businesses reported closings at 26%, and non-Latino white businesses declined by 17%, according to an analysis by Robert Fairlie, an economics professor at UC Santa Cruz.

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Jason Xu, vice president of the Silicon Valley Chinese Assn. Foundation, a leading opponent of Proposition 16, says affirmative action discriminates against qualified Asian Americans.

"Merit is what must count to have access to high-level education, job offers or public contracts," Xu said.

Xu argues that if the goal is equality, then Asians can ask to be more represented in Hollywood films or professional sports teams, "even if those are not their talents."

Bethany Huang, a UC Irvine freshman studying political science and music, also opposes Proposition 16.

Asians make up 35% of UC admissions, but the 18-year-old fears that if the proposition passes, Asian students who deserve to be admitted based on merit will not make the cut.

"The proposition wants to give preference to Blacks and Latinos when California is made up of many diverse minorities," Huang said. "If you want to end systematic racism, you should not focus on two colors but on all."

The movement for more inclusion and race equality comes amid growing criticism of the soaring costs of higher education and mass protests this year against police violence and discrimination.

Vincent Pan, co-executive director of Chinese for Affirmative Action, a community-based social justice organization in San Francisco pushing for Proposition 16, says organizations like his are educating voters through advertisements targeted at Asian, Black and Latino communities.

"For now, we are doing the job of informing and telling them that we all need an opportunity," Pan said, "including the poor, the minorities, whether we are Chinese, Black or Latino."

## Graphic

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PHOTO: YAZMIN LOPE, owner of Certified Interpreting Services in West Hollywood, is an emphatic supporter of Proposition 16. She says she has been negatively affected by the lack of a state affirmative action policy.  
PHOTOGRAPHER:Armando Garcia

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