

California Is Considering Affirmative Action In Public Colleges

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Body

AILSA CHANG: Here in California, voters are considering a ballot measure that would once again allow affirmative action in the state's public universities. Proposition 16 would overturn a ban on the practice that has been in place for more than two decades. The University of California Board of Regents is meeting today to discuss the ban and the ramifications it has had.

We're joined now by Katie Orr, Sacramento-based politics reporter from member station KQED. Welcome.

KATIE ORR: Thank you for having me.

AILSA CHANG: So tell us a little more about this ban on affirmative action that's been in place in California for so long. And why is it coming up now?

KATIE ORR: Right. In 1996, voters passed Proposition 209 under Republican Governor Pete Wilson, and that prohibited the state from considering race, ethnicity or sex when hiring, awarding contracts or admitting students into the state's public universities. Supporters of affirmative action like California Assemblywoman Shirley Weber have been fighting to overturn it ever since. This is Weber on the floor of the state Assembly earlier this summer.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

SHIRLEY WEBER: California's regressive ban on equal opportunity programs such as affirmative action denies women and people of color a level playing field in the workplace and in education.

KATIE ORR: And the effort to overturn the ban seems to have gotten a big push following the killing of George Floyd and recent attention to racial justice in the country.

AILSA CHANG: OK. So then over the years while this ban has been in place, how would you characterize its impact on California?

KATIE ORR: Well, advocates say women and minority-owned businesses have missed out on valuable state contracts. But the debate is really about the effect on education, and there are conflicting studies. One of the latest was done for the University of California's Office of the President. And it finds that affirmative - the affirmative action ban resulted in about 800 fewer underrepresented minorities attending a university in the UC system each year, and it deterred about 1,000 from even applying. The study finds that the ban also had a big ripple effect.

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Those students that would have gone to more prestigious schools went to less prestigious universities and pushed out students who would have otherwise gone to those universities and on and on and on. And the study found that it resulted in a loss of income in future years.

But again, this is one of many studies that have been done. And another study from a professor at UCLA found while enrollment of underrepresented minorities initially fell after the ban went into place, those numbers recovered, and graduation rates increased.

AILSA CHANG: OK, so where does the UC Board of Regents stand on Prop 16 exactly? This is the proposition that would overturn the ban on affirmative action.

KATIE ORR: Exactly. And in June, the board unanimously voted to support overturning the ban. They voted to support Prop 16. Now, it was a symbolic vote, but it's important because in 1995, a year before voters approved the ban, the University of California was actually the first university system in the country to ban affirmative action. Today they met to review some new analysis of what effect it's had on undergraduate admissions and their hiring practices, but their position hasn't changed. They support Prop 16.

AILSA CHANG: Well, what do you think the chances are of Proposition 16 ultimately passing then?

KATIE ORR: Well, supporters are hoping the nationwide conversation around race and equality will help attract voters, but it's not clear that's happening. A new poll from the Public Policy Institute of California shows two-thirds of voters either oppose the measure or are undecided. And it might be confusing for people, too. This is one of 12 ballot propositions that are being - voters are being asked to be considered this fall. So there's a risk they might just skip it or vote no, which happens a lot in California.

AILSA CHANG: That is Katie Orr of member station KQED. Thank you, Katie.

KATIE ORR: You're welcome.

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