Myth vs. Fact: Foreign Funding in Ballot Initiatives

MYTH #1: This isn't an issue – foreign nationals aren't contributing significant amounts of funding to influence ballot issues.

FACT: As the watchdog group Americans for Public Trust uncovered, a Swiss billionaire named Hansjörg Wyss has contributed at least half a billion dollars to liberal political causes in the U.S., despite being a noncitizen.[1] That huge sum includes $243 million given to an organization called the Sixteen Thirty Fund, a left-wing dark money group that has spent a staggering $130 million on ballot issues to push late-term abortion, skew election laws for liberal advantage, and even decriminalize drugs in 25 states.

MYTH #2: It is already illegal for foreign nationals to influence elections, so nothing more needs to be done.

FACT: Federal law makes it illegal for foreign nationals to contribute to political candidates and Super PACs, but this prohibition does not apply to ballot measures. This critical loophole exposes state and local initiatives and referenda to otherwise illegal foreign influence, and foreign-tied spending will continue in states until it is closed.

MYTH #3: This is all about stopping one Swiss billionaire.

FACT: Wyss and the Sixteen Thirty Fund are just the tip of the iceberg. They have revealed vulnerabilities in our election laws that can be exploited by *any* foreign national or hostile foreign power to influence U.S. domestic policy. While Wyss has been exposed, there may be far more foreign funding lurking beneath the surface. For example, recent reporting has revealed millions in troubling grants from a nonprofit with Chinese ties into U.S. environmental groups, a pattern of giving similar to Wyss's own.[2]

MYTH #4: My state doesn't have initiatives, so there is nothing to worry about.

FACT: The Sixteen Thirty Fund has a history of spending to influence the outcomes of legislatively referred and local ballot measures in states that do not have citizen initiative processes, like Kansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Texas. It is every bit as important to protect these measures from foreign influence.

MYTH #5: Foreign funding bans infringe on donor privacy.

FACT: The Honest Elections Project model protects donor privacy by incorporating existing safeguards like the Personal Privacy Protection Act, in place in many states, to ensure that rooting out foreign interference does not become an excuse to violate the privacy and speech rights of American citizens.[3] The model bill also includes stiff penalties if governmental entities unlawfully disclose donor information.

MYTH #6: Legislation banning foreign funding would grant campaign finance enforcement agencies excessive investigative authority.

FACT: The model leverages existing campaign finance reporting and enforcement schemes, includes protections for donor privacy, and safeguards against foreign funding bans being weaponized to silence political opponents. Groups under investigation for an alleged violation of the law are afforded full due process protections, including an opportunity to quickly present exculpatory evidence in court for in camera review. Furthermore, the model makes it illegal for agencies to leak donor information.

MYTH #7: There is no reason for foreign funding to target ballot measures.

FACT: The ballot measure loophole lets foreign nationals directly influence everything from abortion to energy policy, affect the makeup of state legislatures and Congress through redistricting amendments, and back measures partisan groups acknowledge they are using to drive turnout and impact key races.[4]

Americans for Public Trust has documented extensive foreign-tied spending by the Sixteen Thirty Fund. For the 2024 cycle, the group spent $14 million on a Florida abortion measure, roughly $8 million on two Missouri measures, and nearly $7 million to seize control of redistricting in Ohio.

MYTH #8: Foreign donations are easy to detect, so additional safeguards aren't necessary.

FACT: Tracking foreign contributions to ballot issue campaigns is extremely difficult, with funds able to pass through multiple entities in schemes designed to obscure the foreign source of the funds. It is impossible for outside groups to detect and alert the public to the full scope of foreign influence. Additional safeguards are *required* to stop foreign funding for ballot issues, including making such contributions illegal.

MYTH #9: Legislation prohibiting foreign funding infringes on the free speech of organizations by restricting them from taking donations from foreign nationals.

FACT: It is well within the power of state legislatures to protect core democratic functions from foreign interference. Foreign nationals are generally prohibited from voting, serving on juries, and contributing to political candidates. Nevertheless, this bill does not prohibit any nonprofit group from accepting foreign donations *unless* that group chooses to contribute to a ballot measure committee or make an independent expenditure related to a measure. If so, the restriction is triggered and groups are required to certify they have not received more than $100,000 from a prohibited foreign source in the four years preceding the contribution or expenditure.

ENDNOTES

1 Foreign-Backed Spending In State Ballot Issue Campaigns," Americans for Public Trust, 10/28/2024.

2 Thomas Catenacci and Joe Schoffstall, "CCP-tied group is quietly fueling US-based climate initiatives: tax filings," Fox News, 12/18/23. Thomas Catenacci, "Ex-CCP Officials Funneled Millions to US Universities, Nonprofits To Promote Green Energy, Tax Forms Show," Washington Free Beacon, 12/10/2024.

3 "Model Bill: Ban Foreign Funding for Ballot Measures," Honest Elections Project, accessed 1/17/2025.

4 Adam Edelman and Alex Tabet, "Abortion Rights Amendment is One Step Closer to Appearing on Arizona's Ballot," NBC News, 7/3/24. Andrew Desiderio, "Abortion key in Nevada and other Senate races," Punchbowl News, 8/9/24. Alice Miranda Ollstein, "Democrats Are Counting on Abortion Rights to Win This Battleground State," Politico, 3/25/24.