
AMERICANS FOR
**PUBLIC
TRUST**

**Foreign-Backed
Spending In State Ballot
Issue Campaigns**

How Sixteen Thirty Fund is Targeting
States in 2024 to Enact Liberal Policies

October 28, 2024

Foreword

In 2009, an innocuous-sounding group called Sixteen Thirty Fund opened its doors in Washington, D.C. Since its inception, the group has poured over \$1 billion dollars into liberal groups and causes.¹

A handful of top donors to Sixteen Thirty Fund have been identified: tech billionaire Pierre Omidyar, liberal megadonor George Soros, and its sister 501(c)(3) New Venture Fund. But none are more notorious than one of its most significant backers: Swiss billionaire Hansjörg Wyss.² Mr. Wyss is a foreign national who once told a Swiss newspaper that he “never felt the need to become an American.” He claimed he found the process “too complicated,” and instead, preferred to call himself “a spiritual dual citizen.”³ According to a biography written by his own sister, Mr. Wyss’ personal goal is to “(re)interpret the American Constitution in the light of progressive politics.”⁴

As a foreign national, Mr. Wyss is prohibited from not only donating directly to U.S. political candidates, but also from directly or indirectly influencing U.S. elections. However, there is no federal ban in place as it pertains to foreign nationals funding state ballot issue campaigns.

In April 2024, Americans for Public Trust published the first version of this report that analyzed how Hansjörg Wyss contributed at least \$243 million to Sixteen Thirty Fund, which turned around and heavily funded state ballot issues.⁵ In the six short months since that report detailed the \$98 million spent by Sixteen Thirty on ballot issue campaigns, the organization dumped over \$32 million more dollars into the states. This continued analysis is intended to demonstrate the urgent need to close this foreign influence loophole to ensure only American citizens are influencing American politics.

Foreign-Backed Spending In State Ballot Issue Campaigns

State ballot issue campaigns are underway in numerous states – some failed to make the ballot, but many others will be voted on this fall. The goals of ballot issue campaigns are twofold. (1) They allow citizens to sidestep the typical legislative process and place important policy issues directly on the ballot, and (2) They drive voter turnout to impact concurrent, contested political elections.

Ballot issue campaigns are *supposed* to be presented as nonpartisan and nonpolitical; however, they are often strategically crafted and deployed to target a specific political party’s voter base.

While these seemingly separate campaigns are taking place across the country, many of them are connected by one underlying thread: the source of their funding.

Sixteen Thirty Fund investing in ballot issue campaigns is nothing new. Since 2014, the dark money behemoth has poured almost \$130 million into 25 states. In 2024, Sixteen Thirty Fund is at it again – targeting battleground presidential states or states with a competitive U.S. Senate election all to enact their liberal wish list. What is concerning about Sixteen Thirty fund is the *source* of their funding.⁶

A reclusive Swiss billionaire by the name of Hansjörg Wyss is one of Sixteen Thirty Fund’s top donors. Since their inception, Wyss has contributed at least \$243 million to the left’s top outside group. After receiving this foreign cash, Sixteen Thirty Fund takes advantage of foreign influence loopholes to bankroll efforts to elevate the Biden-Harris agenda, fund Supreme Court nomination fights, invest in massive voter turnout operations, engage in issue advocacy campaigns, and of course – support ballot issue campaigns.⁷



Foreign Influence Loophole In State Ballot Issue Campaigns

Federal law prohibits foreign nationals from contributing to candidates and Super PACs, but there is no federal prohibition against foreign nationals funding ballot issue campaigns. While some states restrict foreign funding of ballot initiatives, these laws are not widespread and more can be done to strengthen their effectiveness. Without closing this foreign influence loophole, states are leaving their public policy open to being influenced by foreign interests.



2023 - 2024 Spending By Sixteen Thirty Fund

As of October 2024, Sixteen Thirty Fund, which is backed by foreign cash, has funneled over \$37 million and counting this cycle into ballot initiatives to change state laws on everything from abortion access to election reform.

Outside analysis has shown that focusing on certain ballot issues could “help boost Democratic turnout in the presidential election” and that “Democrats want to use these ballot initiatives to their advantage, to counteract what is a flat-out terrible Senate map for them this year.” By having an abortion-related ballot measure in Arizona, outside groups are “hoping its impact will ripple across other races.”⁸

Key Findings

Sixteen Thirty Fund Has Spent **OVER \$37 MILLION** Targeting Ballot Issues In:



Alaska



Arizona



Florida



Missouri



Montana



Nebraska



Nevada



Ohio

TOP ISSUES

The Foreign Dark Money Group Is Spending On Include:



Abortion



Minimum Wage Increases



Paid Sick Leave



Election Reforms

States Sixteen Thirty Fund Is Targeting This Cycle



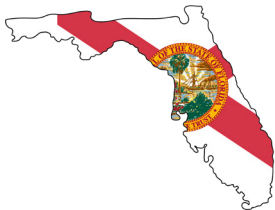
Alaska

Two measures will be on Alaska's ballot this fall, and Sixteen Thirty Fund has financed them both. One of the measures would increase the state's minimum wage and guarantee paid sick leave, while the other would keep the state's ranked-choice voting in place. Between the two initiatives, Sixteen Thirty Fund has already spent almost \$1 million.⁹



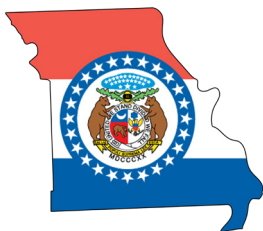
Arizona

An effort to "add a right to abortion to the state constitution" gathered enough signatures and will go before voters in November. While the ACLU and the George Soros network are also supporting this initiative, Sixteen Thirty Fund has chipped in at least \$1.25 million in support. An NBC analysis also found that "[p]utting the abortion issue directly before voters could also help boost Democratic turnout in the presidential election in the state, as well as in critical Senate and House races."¹⁰



Florida

Floridians will also be voting on a ballot initiative this fall that would "amend Florida's constitution and guarantee broader abortion access in the state." Florida Democrats have admitted they "hope young voters will be driven to the polls" by "enshrining abortion rights." This ballot measure has received significant national attention and funding from many liberal dark money groups including Arabella Advisors network stalwarts New Venture Fund and Hopewell Fund. Unsurprisingly, and right on cue, Sixteen Thirty Fund is also a top donor to the effort, and has contributed over \$14 million.¹¹



Missouri

In 2018, Sixteen Thirty Fund dumped \$4.8 million into a Missouri ballot measure that raised the state's minimum wage. Now, they are dusting off their old playbook and again targeting the state in an effort to raise the minimum wage. Within the first few weeks of the ballot issue supporters opening a campaign account, Sixteen Thirty Fund wrote a 6-figure check to fund the measure. As of October 2024, they have invested \$3.5 million that, in addition to raising the minimum wage, would also establish paid sick leave. The measure will be on the ballot this fall.

Sixteen Thirty Fund has separately invested \$4.5 million in a ballot measure that would "guarantee abortion until viability," that will be voted on this fall.¹²

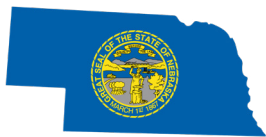


Montana

Two ballot issues are underway in Montana: one to enshrine the right to an abortion in the state's constitution and another to change the way the state conducts primary elections. Sixteen Thirty Fund has already invested over \$3 million to back these measures, and both will be voted on in November.

According to *Axios*, "The effort in Montana is part of a national strategy by Democrats to put abortion issues on the ballot in as many critical states as possible." Abortion-related ballot measures "have proved to be a powerful motivator for Democratic voters in several recent elections in other states," and the Last Best Place seems to be no different.¹³

Nebraska



Much like their neighboring state Missouri, Nebraska is another repeat target for Sixteen Thirty Fund. Their foreign-backed ATM previously provided \$4.5 million to finance liberal ballot initiatives in 2020 and 2022. Now, groups are working on a ballot measure to mandate paid sick leave, where “almost all of the paid sick leave campaign’s...war chest has come from the Sixteen Thirty Fund.” Nearly \$2 million has been funneled into Nebraska, and the proposal will be voted on in November.¹⁴

Nevada



A ballot question to enshrine abortion rights in Nevada’s constitution has met all the requirements to appear on the ballot this November. If it passes this fall, it would still need to be voted on again in 2026 before Nevada’s constitution is “formally amended under state law.” In 2018, Sixteen Thirty Fund contributed almost \$6.3 million to a ballot initiative to implement automatic voter registration. As of October 2024, Sixteen Thirty Fund has given \$500,000 to this new effort. According to *The Nevada Independent*, “Democrats hope the measure will increase voter turnout and enthusiasm in a swing state where both presidential candidates are unpopular.”¹⁵

Ohio



This year, Ohio became the first state in the nation to ban both direct and indirect foreign funding of state ballot issues. The Buckeye State quickly took action after it was previously revealed the Sixteen Thirty Fund spent almost \$15 million to impact the state’s policies. However, the new law did not come easy. On May 23, 2024, Governor DeWine called a special session that had two goals: (1) Ban foreign money in ballot issues, and (2) Find a legislative fix to ensure the Democrat nominee for President would appear on Ohio’s ballot.

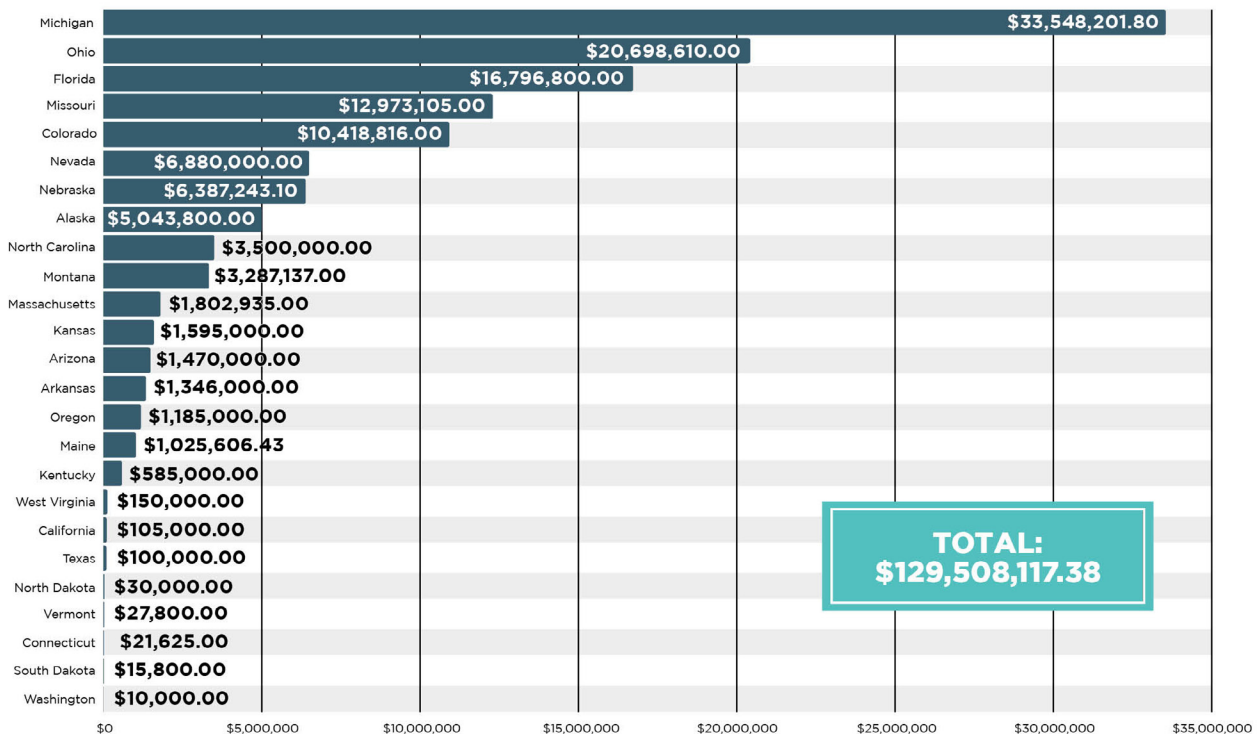
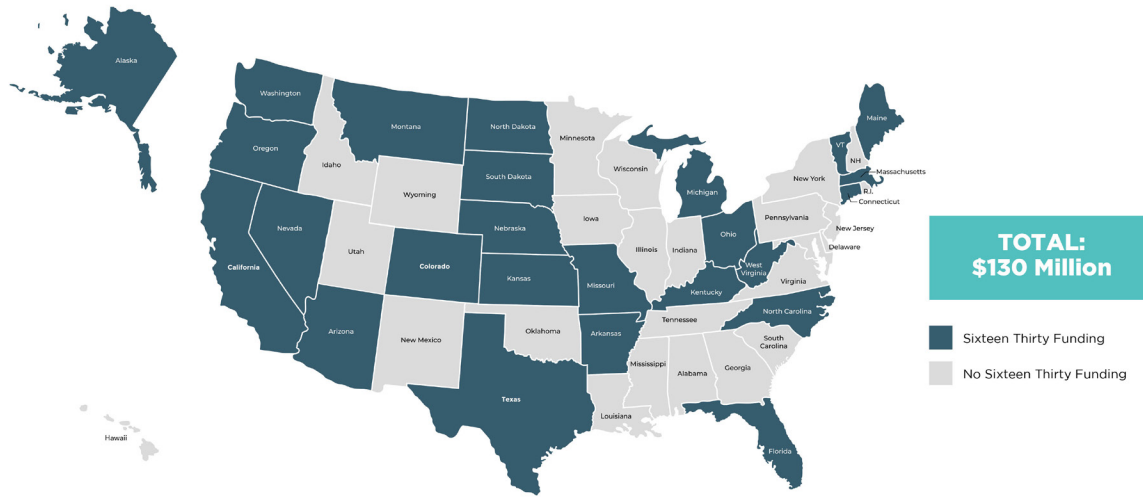
Seemingly knowing that passage of this foreign money ban was imminent, Sixteen Thirty Fund rushed to dump \$6 million also on May 23, 2024 into the ballot issue campaign for Citizens Not Politicians. Citizens Not Politicians, an ironic name given their ties to foreign funding, is behind a measure that would replace the current, voter-approved redistricting process with an unaccountable commission that the group believes would craft legislative maps that are more favorable to their preferred candidates.¹⁶

In the summer of 2024, activists attempted to block Ohio’s law - a first-in-the-nation ban on foreign funding for state ballot issues - from taking effect by suing in federal court. The Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals recently upheld the law, and the ban was allowed to go into effect in October 2024.

Sixteen Thirty Fund State-By-State Spending

While it is important to be educated regarding Sixteen Thirty Fund's spending *right now*, their cumulative impact on state ballot issues should not go unnoticed. Since 2014, the group has funneled almost \$130 million into 25 states. As the map below illustrates, this spending is often concentrated in battleground presidential states such as Arizona, Michigan, and Ohio or states with competitive U.S. Senate races like Colorado, Missouri, and Nevada, raising the question whether foreign funding is being indirectly used to influence U.S. elections.

Sixteen Thirty Fund State-By-State Spending: \$130 Million



The Strategy Behind Ballot Issues



May 2, 2024 - Politics & Policy

How Democrats plan to turn abortion ballot wins into state-level gains



Erin Doherty



State ballot measures in 2024 could drive voter turnout and change the future of elections

Dec 28, 2023 6:35 PM EDT



Democrats seek boost from abortion ballot measures in key battlegrounds

BY JULIA MUELLER - 03/30/24 6:00 AM ET



Dec 7, 2023 - Politics & Policy

Democrats eye Montana abortion ballot measure to boost Tester



Alex Thompson, Stef W. Kight

Conclusion

State legislatures and the U.S. Congress should act to close this foreign influence loophole. Foreign nationals are already prohibited from donating to U.S. political candidates, committees, and Super PACs, and the same prohibition should apply to state ballot issue campaigns. Without closing this loophole, foreign nationals like Hansjörg Wyss are allowed to write blank checks to fund ballot issues that could prioritize their interests over those of the residents of the state. If state and federal laws permit a Swiss billionaire to fund ballot initiative campaigns, there is nothing stopping U.S. adversaries from Communist China, Russia, or North Korea from doing the same.¹⁷

American policy debates should be for American citizens. Stopping foreign nationals – whether they be a reclusive Swiss billionaire or a communist dictator – from funding U.S. policy fights is a simple step that state and federal lawmakers can take. This will also ensure policy battles favor domestic, not foreign, interests. In his 1796 Farewell Address, George Washington cautioned that “foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government.” Over 200 years later, that sentiment remains true.¹⁸

Methodology

Hansjörg Wyss’ history of giving to the Sixteen Thirty Fund, and Sixteen Thirty Fund’s funding of ballot initiatives across the country, have been identified through a comprehensive analysis of the following sources:

1. Tax returns of Mr. Wyss’ nonprofit organization, the Berger Action Fund (EIN:20-8948868, Years 2007 to 2022).
2. Tax returns of Sixteen Thirty Fund (EIN: 26-4486735, Years 2009 to 2022).
3. Media articles, including reporting by the *Associated Press*, *NBC News*, *Politico*, *The New York Times*, and more.
4. Paper and electronic records of state campaign finance filings.
5. Primary source documentation, including the biographical work, *Hansjörg Wyss: My Brother*, written by Swiss author Hedi Wyss, Mr. Wyss’ sister.

Endnotes

- 1 Sixteen Thirty Fund, Form 990, 2009-2022.
- 2 Scott Bland, "Liberal 'Dark Money' Behemoth Funneled More Than \$400M in 2020," *Politico*, 11/17/21, Brian Slodysko, "Group Steers Swiss Billionaire's Money to Liberal Causes," *The Associated Press*, 4/4/23, and New Venture Fund, Form 990, 2022.
- 3 Giorgio V. Müller, "We Have Found A Good Home for Synthes," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)*, 6/11/11.
- 4 Hedi Wyss, Hansjörg Wyss – My Brother, Page #50, eFeF–Verlag Wettingen, 2014.
- 5 Americans for Public Trust, Foreign Influence in State Ballot Issues, *Report*, April 2024.
- 6 Brian Slodysko, "Group Steers Swiss Billionaire's Money to Liberal Causes," *The Associated Press*, 4/4/23 and Caitlin Oprysko, "Wyss' Nonprofit Showered Liberal Groups with More than \$63M," *Politico Influence*, 2/16/24.
- 7 Scott Bland, "Left-Leaning Nonprofit Poured \$196 Million of Secret Money into Political World in 2022," *NBC News*, 11/15/23, Scott Bland, "Liberal Nonprofit Spent \$174M in 2021 as Big Money Kept Flowing After Trump," *Politico*, 11/11/22, and Scott Bland, "Liberal 'Dark Money' Behemoth Funneled More Than \$400M in 2020," *Politico*, 11/17/21.
- 8 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, and Alice Miranda Ollstein, "Democrats Are Counting on Abortion Rights to Win This Battleground State," *Politico*, 3/25/24.
- 9 Becky Bohrer, "Measure Aimed at Repealing Alaska's Ranked Choice Voting System Scores Early, Partial Win in Court," *Associated Press*, 6/10/24 and Lex Yelverton, "New ballot initiative aims to increase Alaska's minimum wage and require paid sick leave," *KTUU*, 1/11/24.
- 10 Walter Berry and Anita Snow, "Abortion Measures Could Be on Arizona and Nebraska Ballots After Organizers Submit Signatures," *The Associated Press*, 7/3/24 and Adam Edelman and Alex Tabet, "Abortion Rights Amendment is One Step Closer to Appearing on Arizona's Ballot," *NBC News*, 7/3/24.
- 11 Hannah Demissie and Adam Carlson, "Florida Voters Will Get to Consider Abortion Rights Ballot Measure in November, Court Rules," *ABC News*, 4/1/24 and Stephany Matat, "Florida Democrats Hope Abortion and Marijuana Questions Draw Young Voters Despite Low Enthusiasm," *The Associated Press*, 4/30/24.
- 12 Annelise Hanshaw, "Missouri Group Turns in Signatures to Put Minimum Wage Hike and Paid Sick Leave on the Ballot," *NPR*, 5/2/24 and Geoff Mulvihill and Kimberlee Kruesi, "Which States Could Have Abortion Rights on the Ballot in November?," *PBS News*, 7/11/24.
- 13 Alex Thompson and Stef W. Kight, "Democrats Eye Montana Abortion Ballot Measure to Boost Tester," *Axios*, 12/7/23.
- 14 Greg Jaffe, "A Boom of Ballot Initiatives is Reshaping this State's Democracy," *The Washington Post*, 11/15/23, Updated 11/21/23.
- 15 Geoff Mulvihill and Kimberlee Kruesi, "Which States Could Have Abortion Rights on the Ballot in November?," *PBS News*, 7/11/24, Adam Edelman and Lindsey Pipia, "Nevada Abortion Rights Groups Submit Signatures to Advance Ballot Measures," *NBC News*, 5/20/24, and Eric Neugeboren, "Constitutional Amendment on Abortion Rights Qualifies for November Ballot," *The Nevada Independent*, 6/28/24.
- 16 Megan Lebowitz and Henry J. Gomez, "Ohio Governor Calls Special Session to Fix 'Unacceptable' Holdup Getting Biden on the Ballot," *NBC News*, 5/23/24 and Josh Croup, "Redistricting Reform Effort Funded Largely by Out-of-state Groups, Records Show," *WTVG News*, 8/1/24.
- 17 Lachlan Markay, "Scoop: FEC Lets Foreigners Finance U.S. Ballot Fights," *Axios*, 11/1/21.
- 18 National Archives, "Founders Online: Farewell Address, 19 September 1796," *Archives.gov*, Speech Given 9/19/1796.