
AMERICANS FOR
**PUBLIC
TRUST**

**Foreign Influence
in State Ballot Issues**

How Sixteen Thirty Fund's Pipeline
of Foreign Cash Impacts State Politics

April 2024

Foreword from the Author

On a bustling street in Washington, D.C., an innocuous-sounding group called the Sixteen Thirty Fund quietly operates the most influential liberal dark money powerhouse in the nation. Named after the year – 1630 – in which the Winthrop Fleet journeyed from England to America, the group has poured more than \$1 billion dollars into liberal groups and causes since its inception in 2009.¹

A handful of top donors to Sixteen Thirty Fund have been identified: tech billionaire Pierre Omidyar, liberal megadonor George Soros, and their sister 501(c)(3) New Venture Fund. But none are more notorious than one of their most significant backers: Swiss billionaire Hansjörg Wyss.²

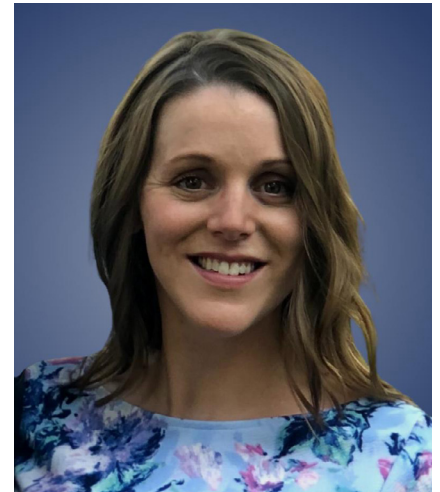
Mr. Wyss is a foreign national who once told a Swiss newspaper that he “never felt the need to become an American.” He claimed he found the process “too complicated,” and instead, preferred to call himself “a spiritual dual citizen.”³

Despite Mr. Wyss’ disinterest in becoming an American citizen, he has leveraged his considerable wealth to influence American politics. While many liberal groups have been the beneficiaries of Mr. Wyss’ foreign cash, none have received more than Sixteen Thirty Fund. Through Berger Action Fund, the 501(c)(4) he controls, Mr. Wyss has funneled **\$243 million** into Sixteen Thirty Fund.⁴

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.”⁵

To that end, Sixteen Thirty Fund uses its war chest – which includes Mr. Wyss’ hundreds of millions of dollars – to support massive get-out-the-vote drives, issue advocacy campaigns bolstering President Biden’s agenda, liberal pet projects from abortion to immigration, and attack ads against Republican lawmakers. The group has also dumped tens of millions of dollars into state ballot issues.⁶

This report will analyze the ways the Sixteen Thirty Fund weaponizes ballot issue campaigns to support liberal political causes and candidates. The findings reveal an urgent need to close this foreign influence loophole to ensure only American citizens are influencing American politics.



Caitlin Sutherland
APT Executive Director

Key Findings

After a thorough examination of over a decade’s worth of tax returns filed by Sixteen Thirty Fund and state campaign finance disclosures, Americans for Public Trust has identified nearly \$100 million (\$97,593,151.38) in funding for ballot issues by Sixteen Thirty Fund across 25 states over the last 10 years.⁷

No part of the United States has been spared from Sixteen Thirty Fund’s foreign money. Ballot initiatives in Michigan, Ohio, Colorado, Nebraska, Missouri, and Nevada have received the highest concentration of funding – ranging from \$6 million to almost \$34 million. Deep red states, like Arkansas, North Dakota, and South Dakota have also had their ballot issues bankrolled by Sixteen Thirty Fund. The group has used this foreign-backed cash to influence state policy on abortion rights, minimum wage, paid leave, drug policy, and voting rights.



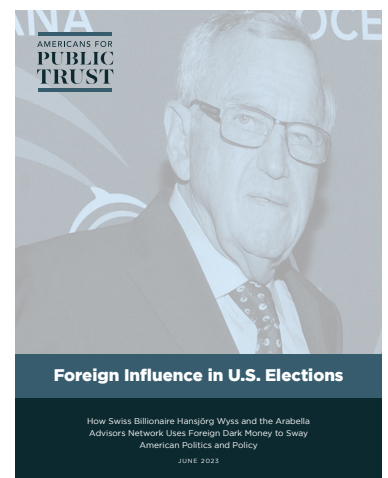
What is a Ballot Issue?

A ballot issue is a form of direct democracy that allows citizens to enact laws by placing legislative or constitutional proposals directly on the ballot as an alternative to the ordinary legislative process. While the issues in ballot campaigns are presented as nonpartisan and nonpolitical – and the campaigns themselves are perhaps the most direct way the voices of every individual voter can be heard – they can be strategically crafted and deployed to specifically target a given political party’s voter base.

In addition to being used to implement state policy changes, ballot issue campaigns are also used as a tactic to drive voter turnout in order to impact concurrent, contested political elections. For instance, a ballot initiative designed to appeal to liberal-leaning voters could also turn out support for a liberal officeholder who faces a competitive reelection in the same cycle.

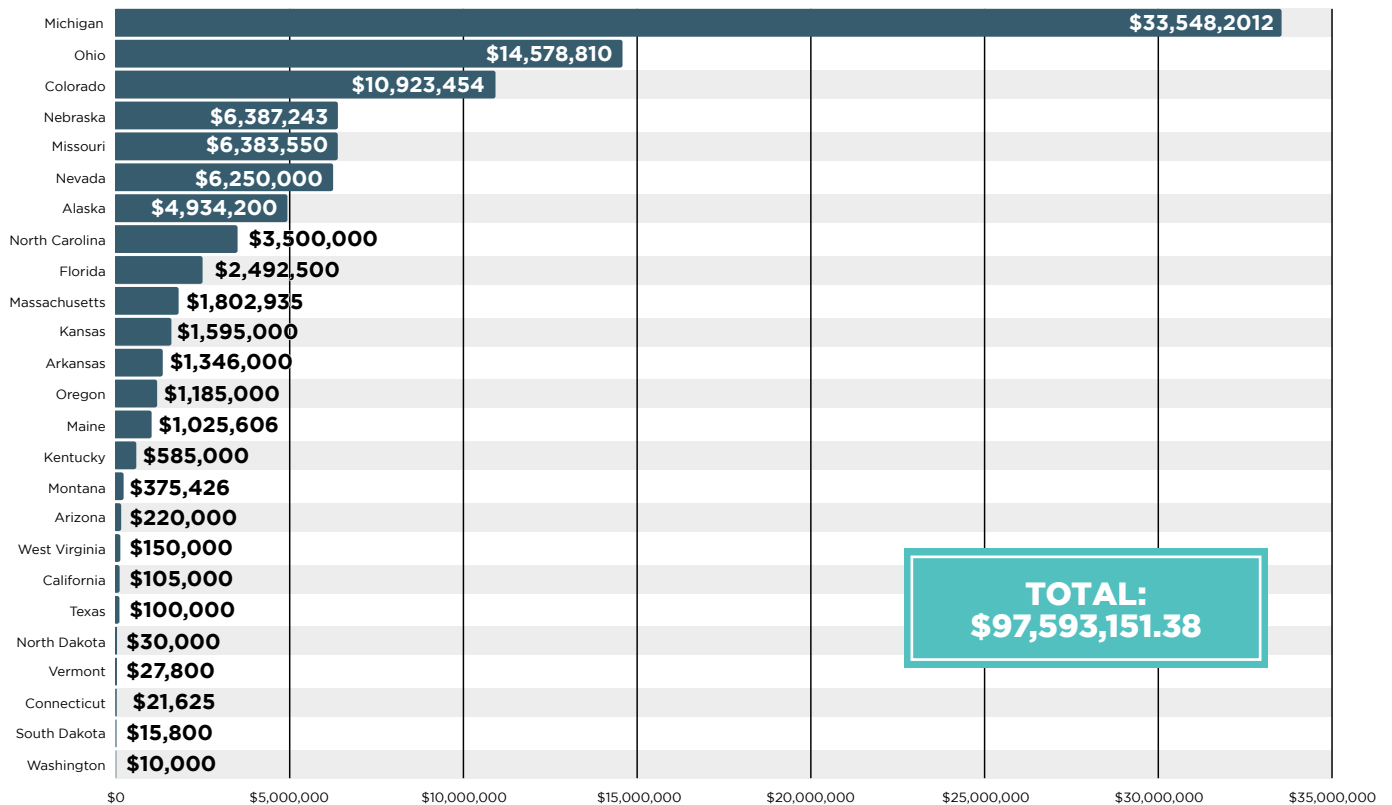
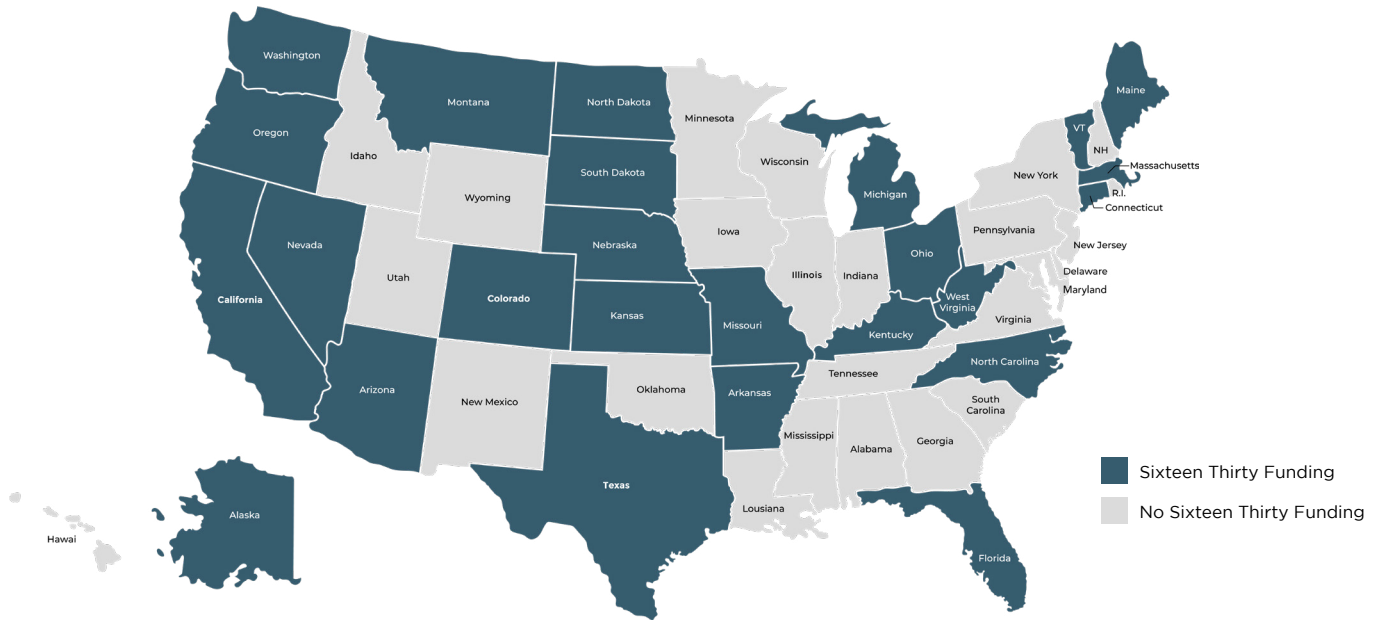
How Can Foreigners Fund Ballot Campaigns?

Federal law prohibits foreign nationals from spending in connection with federal, state, and local candidate elections, but there is no federal prohibition against foreign nationals funding ballot issue campaigns. While some state laws restricting foreign funding of ballot initiatives exist, these laws are not widespread and more can be done to strengthen their effectiveness. Foreign influence loopholes open the door to state policies being influenced by foreign interests. Both federal and state law has long reflected the view that U.S elections and policy should not be impacted by foreign interests and foreign funding. The fact that Sixteen Thirty Fund counts a foreign national as a top donor, while concurrently pumping almost \$100 million into ballot issues across the nation, is a pressing problem that demands attention. For more information on Hansjörg Wyss and the foreign influence loophole he is exploiting visit CloseTheWyssLoophole.org.



Sixteen Thirty Fund State-By-State Spending

Sixteen Thirty Fund’s spending in state ballot issues is nothing short of prolific. Since 2014, the group has funneled nearly \$100 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.



Top States Flooded With Sixteen Thirty Fund's Foreign Dark Money



\$33.55 MILLION

Michigan

Almost \$34 million has poured into Michigan from Sixteen Thirty Fund since 2017. This foreign-backed money has been spread across nearly 10 ballot campaigns intended to place onerous burdens on small businesses, rewrite the state's election laws, and enshrine the right to an abortion in the state's constitution.⁸



\$14.58 MILLION

Ohio

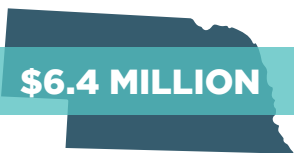
One of Sixteen Thirty Fund's first forays into the Buckeye State came when it quietly funded a weak on crime ballot initiative in 2018, that among other things, would have lessened the penalties for fentanyl possession, and shortened some prison sentences. In 2023, Sixteen Thirty Fund's ballot campaign spending in the state skyrocketed, with over \$14 million targeted in just eight months.⁹



\$10.92 MILLION

Colorado

Colorado was one of the first states where Sixteen Thirty Fund started financing ballot issues – funding ballot campaigns on a range of issues from opposing tax cuts to allowing abortion in the second trimester. Sixteen Thirty Fund is not only monetarily invested in Colorado, but personally as well. The group's founder, Eric Kessler, is an alum of the University of Colorado, and Hansjörg Wyss' first job in the United States was with the Colorado Highway Department.¹⁰



\$6.4 MILLION

Nebraska

Sixteen Thirty Fund has provided nearly all the financial backing for three separate ballot issues in Nebraska – two of which successfully passed in 2020 and 2022, and one of which is currently in the signature gathering phase as of March 2024. The latest effort underway to mandate paid sick leave, which at one point was 95% financed by Sixteen Thirty Fund, could drive small, rural businesses into bankruptcy by increasing their overhead costs.¹¹



\$6.4 MILLION

Missouri

Much like its neighboring state Nebraska, Missouri has experienced a similar pattern of financial infiltration from the foreign-funded Sixteen Thirty Fund. In 2018, the same year Senator Roy Blunt faced a tough reelection, Sixteen Thirty Fund was the number one donor to a ballot campaign to raise the state's minimum wage. With a 2024 campaign underway to raise minimum wage again, and multiple statewide races on the ballot, history is set to repeat itself. Within weeks of opening up a campaign account for this ballot issue, Sixteen Thirty Fund wrote a 6-figure contribution.¹²



\$6.3 MILLION

Nevada

In 2018 – again a year with competitive statewide elections – Sixteen Thirty Fund was the number one donor to a ballot issue that implemented automatic voter registration (AVR) in Nevada. AVR risks bloating voter rolls with inaccurate and duplicative voter registrations, and can even lead to ineligible voters, including noncitizens, being registered.¹³

Conclusion

Foreign nationals are prohibited from donating to U.S. political candidates, committees, and Super PACs, but there is no federal law prohibiting foreign nationals from donating to ballot committees. Some state laws exist to try to prevent this type of foreign influence, but in a majority of states, 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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*, *Vox*, 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 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.
- 5 Hedi Wyss, *Hansjörg Wyss - My Brother*, Page #50, eFeF-Verlag Wettingen, 2014.
- 6 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.
- 7 See "Methodology" section of this report.
- 8 Alice Miranda Ollstein, "Michigan Votes to Put Abortion Rights into State Constitution," [Politico](#), 11/9/22, Scott Bland, "Left-Leaning Nonprofit Poured \$196 Million of Secret Money into Political World in 2022," [NBC News](#), 11/15/23, and Matthew Miller, "Michigan Supreme Court Will Rule on Tactic that Weakened Minimum Wage, Sick Leave Initiatives," [MLive](#), 6/21/23, Updated 12/6/23.
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- 10 The New York Times, "Campus Life: Colorado; Students Reject Ban on the Sale of Coors Beer," [The New York Times](#), 11/25/90 and Rhett A. Butler, "One Man's Quest to Save the World's Wildest Places: Hansjörg Wyss," [Mongabay](#), 10/18/17.
- 11 Erin Bamer, "Nebraska Petition Drive for Paid Sick Leave Has \$1.7 Million in Funding," [Omaha World-Herald](#), 10/4/23, Updated 11/11/23, Greg Jaffe, "A Boom of Ballot Initiatives is Reshaping this State's Democracy," [The Washington Post](#), 11/15/23, Updated 11/21/23, and Martha Stoddard, "Nebraska's Paid Sick Leave Petition Drive Raises More Than \$500,000," [Omaha World-Herald](#), 8/3/23, Updated 2/23/24.
- 12 Kurt Erickson, "Campaign to Raise Minimum Wage in Missouri Lands Big Contributions," [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#), 10/19/23.
- 13 Nevada Secretary of State, "Campaign Finance Disclosure: Sixteen Thirty Fund," [NVSOS.gov](#), 7/13/18-10/12/18, Search Term: "Sixteen Thirty Fund."
- 14 Lachlan Markay, "Scoop: FEC Lets Foreigners Finance U.S. Ballot Fights," [Axios](#), 11/1/21.
- 15 National Archives, "Founders Online: Farewell Address, 19 September 1796," [Archives.gov](#), Speech Given 9/19/1796.