

ORANGE COUNTY

Los Angeles Times

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 15, 1996

COPYRIGHT 1996/THE TIMES MIRROR COMPANY/CCY/ 114 PAGES

PERSPECTIVES ON PROP. 209 / JOHN BALZAR

Amid the Rhetoric, Four Voters Explain Support

From David Duke to Pete Wilson and Newt Gingrich, professional politicians have said plenty in favor of Proposition 209, which would abolish affirmative action preferences in government. How about a few words from voters?

Such as Martha J. House, who has faced prejudice much of her life and says, "Don't call me African-American. That hyphen is the cause of more racism than anything since the 1960s."

Or Korean-born Andrew S. Cho, who says he aches for the small minority-owned businesses that will disappear if Proposition 209 passes, but

believes America must put principle first.

And Shawn Steel, a white who is married to an Asian American and wants a future in which his children do not have to wonder which box to check on forms that ask ethnic grouping.

Or lawyer David West, another white, who worries about the quiet, dispiriting "taint" that affirmative action can leave on its beneficiaries without regard to merit—"that is, it's too bad that some truly talented people will suffer from generalizations about their achievements."

Over dinner recently, these
Please see PROP. 209, A22

PROP. 209: Voters Discuss Support for Measure

Continued from A1

four Southern Californians were invited by The Times to discuss their support for Proposition 209 on their own terms, never mind official sloganeering.

Polls suggest that six of 10 Californians lean in favor of the Nov. 5 ballot measure—the second proposition in two years to probe California's sensitive politics of ethnicity. Some supporters, it seems, are comfortable letting experts and advertising jingle writers argue the case for them. Others, however, chafe at the persistent suggestion that hostility to minorities is the only motive behind this proposed retreat from 30 years of civil rights tradition.

No scientific conclusions are implied by such a small and arbitrary gathering, but perhaps a few thoughtful supporters, talking among themselves, help illuminate the debate. You decide.

Because she is a woman and black, House's opposition to government affirmative action quickly turns heads her way at the table.

She begins by challenging the hyphenated term African-American. "I am," she explains, "an American who happens to be black."

She lives in Alhambra, serves as trustee of the Mt. San Antonio Community College District and is resident of the Los Angeles County Federation of Republican Women.

About Proposition 209 and affirmative action, she says: "I don't think this is what Martin Luther King had in mind . . . and I guess I'm one of those people who all this is designed to help."

She is speaking of contract set-asides for minorities and women, special admission considerations in public education and advantages in government hiring and promotion. Those are the targets of Proposition 209, which would amend the state Constitution to forbid any affirmative action by state or local governments based on race or gender.

Like an alpine mountaineer, House seems to thrive on the steep, slippery and difficult uphill of life. Born in Arkansas, she recalls, "I watched federal troops come in and segregate Central High School in Little Rock."

It was a racially oppressive world, which House said she fled as soon as she was out of high school.

"I was a victim of prejudice in every sense of the word. However, I'm not a professional victim. What I mean is, then was then. Now is now."

She ended up in California, where opportunity did not seem beyond hope. In 10 years of work and study, she earned two college degrees and became the controller of a small business. She went on to be corporate accounting manager of a \$600-million-a-year company.

For House, California proved to be the land of opportunity.

Her philosophy: "The most popular color in this country is green. If you do a good job, you don't have to worry about color or

gender. My success could have had something to do with my color, but I like to think it was my dedication and determination. . . . I think it's ironic that today the government is the leader in discrimination. Government should be protecting us from discrimination."

Korean American Cho is a Santa Monica attorney specializing in bankruptcy and credit restoration, a practice that brings him in contact with those struggling to make their way up in society. Likewise, his father was an accountant who helped small businesses.

Cho's support for Proposition 209 is idealistic, but he says he remains realistic about the state of American society.

"I agree there is a lot of racial, ethnic prejudice against minorities. But I am unwilling to think of it in terms of groups. I'm willing only to think of it in terms of individual acts of prejudice," he says.

"I think of my father and his clients. Some cannot get any

business without government set-asides. So what would I say to them? I would say that the law establishing set-asides is morally wrong. It was a misguided attempt to achieve equal outcomes. . . . What we need is to strengthen the laws against discrimination."

Although unmarried, Cho is thinking ahead. "I will be able to tell my grandchildren that in 1996 Californians had a choice. And the choice was this: Do we have a government that treats all people equally, or different people differently? That's the simple moral value that 209 embodies."

By this time in the dinner, it is apparent that these supporters have not arrived at their decision without consideration of the fact that affirmative action is a lifeline for many disadvantaged Californians. Or that it has become even more, a society's offer of advantage now in acknowledgment for generations of unfairness.

Against that, though, is a righteous principle, they agreed. And further, America is at its best when guided by principles. The word comes up repeatedly.

"I'd say this is one of the greatest moral challenges of our time," says Steel, who serves in the unpaid position of treasurer of the state GOP and is a white lawyer whose Beverly Hills practice includes work in the Korean community.

"My children are half Korean and half whatever I am. And this vote will help determine what kind of future they will have," he says. "Today, they face all these boxes on forms which ask their race and ethnic group. But the American ideal is to look at people as indi-

viduals, not members of groups."

Steel argues that government affirmative action programs based on gender and race have themselves become distorted. They were designed as a ladder upward for the disadvantaged. Steel believes that is no longer always the case, and that the beneficiaries of minority admission considerations at the University of California are disproportionately from middle class and elite families.

"The underclass gets little benefit," he says, "and that's a fact that liberals have a hard time reconciling."

Still, Steel acknowledges, Proposition 209 will claim victims if it passes, such as fewer minorities in incoming classes at the best public universities.

"With this reform there are going to be people hurt," he says. "And not bad people. The people who already have benefited are not going to lose anything. But those people in the pipeline will. They will be disappointed. But they will not be ruined."

Steel argues that imperatives of the free market ultimately will carry on the aims of affirmative action without the need for government intervention. "That's why we speak nine languages in my office," says the lawyer.

At this evening's dinner, David West carries the burden of stereotype backlash: He is a white male, successful as a partner in a prestigious Los Angeles law firm, and married to a white businesswoman.

"But I'm not an angry white male," West says. "I can't think of being deprived of any benefit offered by society because a lesser-qualified minority or woman got a break. And further, my wife has benefited in her business from preferences for women."

"So you probably wonder what has me so fired up about this issue? It is the passion of the principle. There is something corrupt about a system that focuses so much on ethnic status or gender."

Many opponents of Proposition 209, of course, believe that its core supporters are people like West—white men who have enjoyed their domination of society and are fighting now to maintain it. And indeed, polls show that more than 70% of white males are inclined to

'I agree there is a lot of racial, ethnic prejudice against minorities. But I am unwilling to think of it in terms of groups. I'm willing only to think of it in terms of individual acts of prejudice.'

PROPOSITION 209 SUPPORTER ANDREW S. CHO

West makes a different argument. "When government plays favorites, it's divisive. The government should not play favorites. It's turned the public sector into a spoils system."

Although his name offers no hint, West is Jewish, a fact that emerges in the conversation. He is asked by Steel if he ever was the target of anti-Semitism.

"No, not really," West replies. But he has heard it voiced against others, and so shares with the dinner group firsthand experience with ethnic prejudice. But he argues that definitions of racism and sexism have become arbitrary and sometimes absurd.

"Today a man can be accused of sexism in the office if he talks in a baseball metaphor," he says.

The table is energized by the turn in conversation. House has her favorite example: "That little boy who kissed a girl and was accused of sexism. Now that's the epitome."

But there is another issue in Proposition 209, its symbolism.

Those at the dinner table are asked to imagine a black youth who is watching the campaign from the vantage of inner-city poverty, where repeal of affirmative action is widely viewed as racially motivated and nothing less than the haves taking from the have-nots. What would this evening's dinner group say to such a person?

West: "I would say that we're going this kid no favor by planting him at UC Berkeley if he is unprepared to compete. The solution is to prepare him properly. There can be good to come out of this [campaign]. It is my hope that we will improve our schools and institutions so that everyone has a fair chance."

Steel: "I would say, 'Kid, you've been hoodwinked, scammed.' Something is terribly wrong with letting the government grant favors based on skin color. Your opportunities are infinitely greater in the marketplace, not with the government. This [proposition] is such an overwhelmingly popular issue it simply cannot be racist—too many good people are for it. . . ."

House: "You have to tell that kid that he must prepare. Has he ever been in a fight? He knows. Life itself is a fight, and you wouldn't go into a fight without preparing—preparing to conquer no matter what happens. You have to be strong enough."

Cho: "Don't believe the hype. Do your homework. Read this initiative. Understand what people are really saying. . . . Proposition 209 is the right thing historically, politically, philosophically and legally."

Wednesday: Dinner with opponents.