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Affirmative Action's Future on the Line

By Jennifer Millman

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October 13, 2006

What is the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (MCRI)? A proposal to ban affirmative action in state public education, employment and contracting, initiated by affirmative-action foe Ward Connerly, who has had success with similar legislation in California and Washington state.

MCRI proponents have garnered support by calling affirmative action just a black-white issue. With less than 30 days until the Nov. 7 vote, national civil-rights leaders are racing to inform the public that it's not true. Will they get their message across in time?

A Call to Action

What You Can Do

- Promote awareness about the implications of the MCRI
- Volunteer in your community
- Contact your local representative or newspaper
- Attend political meetings and local rallies
- Pay attention!

Where to Get Involved

- [One United Michigan](#)
- [Detroit Regional Chamber](#)
- [Asian Pacific American Caucus](#)
- [NAACP](#)
- [American Civil Liberties Union](#)
- [Triangle Foundation](#)
- [American Arab Chamber of Commerce](#)
- [American Association of Retired Persons](#)

*Stay tuned for more in-depth DiversityInc coverage of the campaign to end affirmative action in Michigan and what **you** can do to help.*

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The Rev. Jesse Jackson recently reached out to Michigan voters at a local rally.

Jackson told the crowd, "Affirmative action is not a black issue. Affirmative action is not a minority issue. Affirmative action is a majority issue," the Flint (Mich.) Journal reported.



The bipartisan opposition to the MCRI supports Jackson's contention. Local chapters of the American Civil Liberties Union, National Organization for Women, Triangle Foundation, United Auto Workers and the American Arab Chamber of Commerce have united to defend affirmative action's contribution to economic opportunity.

This is why Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., urges Michigan voters to say 'no' to the MCRI.

"From the Detroit Regional Chamber to the Grand Rapids Chamber to our largest corporations, the message has been the same: Diversity is critical to our economic future," he told BlackAmericaWeb.com. "Given the economic challenges facing our state, we must turn back this proposal and not turn on our neighbors. If Michigan becomes known as the place that tried to turn back the clock on affirmative action, we will send a negative signal at a time when we can least afford it."

Michigan employment has spiraled downward for the last six years, while national employment rates have risen. This has hit the Michigan economy hard.

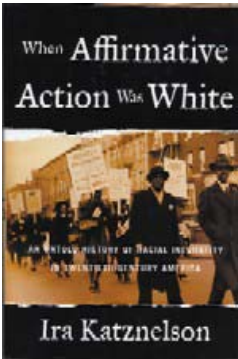
Michigan Future, a nonprofit think-tank, attributes the decline to slow adaptation to the global economy. Knowledge-based industries now account for 43 percent of American jobs—a 32 percent jump since 1990—and Michigan has been reluctant to abandon hopes of reviving the Industrial Age.

In "A New Agenda for a New Michigan," Michigan Future's 10-member leadership council unveils its plan for the state's economic recovery. What's their top priority?

Prepare, retain and attract talent.

"Unfortunately, in Michigan, we have a long way to go," the report states. "As a state we remain one of the most segregated in the country. Racial and ethnic conflicts among all groups remain too prevalent ... In both Detroit and its suburbs, too many politicians have found a formula for success is to play the race card."

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When Affirmative Action Was White

An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America

Political science and history professor, Ira Katznelson, explains that all the key programs passed during the New Deal and Fair Deal era of the 1930s and 1940s were created in a deeply discriminatory manner. This was no accident...

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NAACP President and CEO Bruce Gordon and National Urban League President Marc Morial also have campaigned to educate Michigan about the dangers of approving the MCRI. Despite their efforts and others, the latest poll paints a bleak picture for affirmative action in the state.

Michigan voters now favor the MCRI 47 percent to 38 percent with 15 percent undecided, according to the Detroit News. Unfortunately, the poll did not break down respondents by race, but U.S. Census Bureau data shows Michigan is 80 percent white.

Surprisingly, the poll indicated even more support for the ban in Metro Detroit—an area that is 49.4 percent people of color, according to the Census Bureau.

In mid-September, Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm and state Sen. Debbie Stabenow, as well as other civil-rights and political leaders, told a crowd of nearly 2,000 Michiganders why their state still needs affirmative action.

"This is about everybody having a chance to make it in Michigan," said Stabenow. "When everyone has a chance, we are a stronger state."

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