
AMERICANS FOR
**PUBLIC
TRUST**

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
AMERICANS FOR PUBLIC TRUST

BY

CATLIN SUTHERLAND
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION

FOR A HEARING ENTITLED

“AMERICAN CONFIDENCE IN ELECTIONS: PREVENTING NONCITIZEN VOTING
AND OTHER FOREIGN INTERFERENCE”

May 16, 2024

Chairman Steil, Ranking Member Morelle, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Caitlin Sutherland, and I am the Executive Director of Americans for Public Trust (APT), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to restoring trust in government by holding politicians and political groups accountable. Since our founding in 2020, APT has devoted extensive resources to uncovering, mapping, and publicizing outside money and influence in politics and policy.

Americans should have every confidence that their elections are free from foreign interference and influence. But, unfortunately, a significant source of foreign cash is flowing into politics from a Swiss billionaire named Hansjörg Wyss, who “follows American politics closely.”¹ In fact, Wyss’ interest in the U.S. political system is such that his sister once exclaimed that “behind the scenes a Swiss plays an important part in American politics.”²

This is incredibly concerning because, as the *Associated Press* has detailed, Mr. Wyss is “a foreign national [who] is prohibited from donating to candidates or political committees. But his influence is still broadly felt through millions of dollars routed through a network of nonprofit groups that invest heavily in the Democratic ecosystem.”³ In 2011, Mr. Wyss told a Swiss newspaper that he “never felt the need to become an American.”⁴ He claimed he found the process too “complicated,” and instead, preferred to call himself “a spiritual dual citizen.”⁵

Despite Mr. Wyss’ disinterest in becoming an American citizen, he made it a personal goal to influence American politics. According to a biography written by his own sister, Mr. Wyss’ goal is to “(re)interpret the American Constitution in the light of progressive politics.”⁶

So how is Mr. Wyss, who is not a U.S. citizen, and therefore prohibited from directly or indirectly influencing our elections, doing just that? Well first, in the ‘90s and early ‘00s he – seemingly illegally – gave more than \$100,000 directly to candidates and political committees.⁷ But Mr. Wyss’ direct giving pales in comparison to his current and preferred method of influencing our politics: his nonprofits.

Mr. Wyss uses his two nonprofits – the Wyss Foundation, a 501(c)(3), and the Berger Action Fund (formerly called the Wyss Action Fund), a 501(c)(4) – to fund liberal groups across the nation. He has used these two nonprofit vehicles to pump almost half a billion dollars into the U.S. political system.⁸ In his biography, Mr. Wyss’ sister also explicitly detailed his ability to “exert an influence on American domestic politics through his foundations.”⁹

¹ Philip Wegmann, “Swiss Billionaire’s Mega-Influence On U.S. Politics,” *Real Clear Politics* (May 17, 2022), https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2022/05/17/swiss_billionaires_mega-influence_on_us_politics_147610.html.

² *Ibid.*

³ Brian Slodysko, “Group Steers Swiss Billionaire’s Money to Liberal Causes,” *The Associated Press* (Apr. 4, 2023), <https://apnews.com/article/dark-money-democrats-wyss-politics-elections-601d40cd01569190559d545418afe396>; Emily Birnbaum, “Meet the Swiss Billionaire Cast by US Conservatives as the ‘New Soros,’” *Bloomberg* (Jan. 25, 2024), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-25/meet-the-swiss-billionaire-cast-by-us-conservatives-as-the-new-george-soros>; Philip Wegmann, “Swiss Billionaire’s Mega-Influence On U.S. Politics,” *Real Clear Politics* (May 17, 2022), https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2022/05/17/swiss_billionaires_mega-influence_on_us_politics_147610.html.

⁴ Giorgio V. Müller, “We Have Found A Good Home for Synthes,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)* (June 11, 2011), https://www.nzz.ch/wir_haben_ein_gutes_heim_fuer_synthes_gefunden-ld.589550.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Hedi Wyss, *Hansjörg Wyss – My Brother*, eFeF–Verlag Wettingen, Page #50, (2014).

⁷ Brian Slodysko, “Group Steers Swiss Billionaire’s Money to Liberal Causes,” *The Associated Press* (Apr. 4, 2023), <https://apnews.com/article/dark-money-democrats-wyss-politics-elections-601d40cd01569190559d545418afe396>.

⁸ Hans Nichols and Stef W. Kight, “Scoop: GOP Plan Targets Foreign Dark Money for 2024,” *Axios* (July 10, 2023), <https://www.axios.com/2023/07/10/gop-targets-foreign-dark-money-2024-election>.

⁹ Hedi Wyss, *Hansjörg Wyss – My Brother*, eFeF–Verlag Wettingen, Page #49, (2014).

If this sounds like a staggering amount of money from a reclusive, foreign billionaire and organizations that are far from being household names, that's because it's all by design. Again, while speaking to foreign media, Mr. Wyss admitted that he was fighting laws in Arizona that "give police too many rights," working to nominate progressive federal judges, and funding abortion clinics. But the catch? He also *bragged* that his "name never appears" linked to his efforts.¹⁰ In fact, the *Associated Press* described Berger Action Fund as "a nondescript name for a group with a rather specific purpose: steering the wealth of Hansjörg Wyss, a Swiss billionaire, into the world of American politics and policy."¹¹

So how exactly, in his own words, does he exert an influence? According to the *New York Times*, Mr. Wyss' "political activism is channeled through a daisy chain of opaque organizations that mask the ultimate recipients of his money."¹² The most opaque of those organizations is a little-known group called the Sixteen Thirty Fund, which according to *Bloomberg*, serves as "a [clearinghouse] for the left," and has also received \$243 million from Mr. Wyss.¹³ Sixteen Thirty Fund bankrolls efforts to elevate President Biden's agenda, funds Supreme Court nomination fights, invests in massive voter turnout operations, engages in issue advocacy campaigns against vulnerable Republican senators and representatives, and has funneled nearly \$100 million and counting into state ballot issue campaigns across 25 states.¹⁴

Without a federal prohibition against foreign nationals funding ballot issue campaigns, Sixteen Thirty Fund has been able to receive money from Mr. Wyss, and in turn, bankroll ballot issue campaigns across the country. According to an April 2024 report released by APT:

"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."¹⁵

Drawing from the same report, an examination of paper and electronic state campaign finance filings found that Sixteen Thirty Fund's spending is often concentrated in battleground presidential states like Michigan and Ohio, as well as states with competitive U.S. Senate races like Colorado, Missouri, and Nevada.¹⁶

Almost \$34 million has poured into Michigan from Sixteen Thirty Fund since 2017, funding 10 ballot campaigns intended to place onerous burdens on small business, rewrite the state's election laws, and

¹⁰ *Supra* note 4.

¹¹ *Supra* note 7.

¹² Kenneth P. Vogel, "Swiss Billionaire Quietly Becomes Influential Force Among Democrats," *The New York Times* (May 3, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/03/us/politics/hansjorg-wyss-money-democrats.html>.

¹³ Emily Birnbaum, "Meet the Swiss Billionaire Cast by US Conservatives as the 'New Soros,'" *Bloomberg* (Jan. 25, 2024), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-25/meet-the-swiss-billionaire-cast-by-us-conservatives-as-the-new-george-soros>; Caitlin Oprysko, "Wyss' Nonprofit Showered Liberal Groups with More Than \$63M," *Politico Influence* (Feb. 16, 2024), <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-influence/2024/02/16/wyss-dark-money-group-showered-liberal-groups-with-more-than-63m-00142025>.

¹⁴ Scott Bland and Maggie Sevens, "Documents Reveal Massive 'Dark-Money' Group Boosted Democrats in 2018," *Politico* (Nov. 19, 2019), <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/11/19/dark-money-democrats-midterm-071725>; Scott Bland, "Liberal 'Dark-Money' Behemoth Funneled More than \$400M in 2020," *Politico* (Nov. 17, 2021), <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/11/17/dark-money-sixteen-thirty-fund-522781>; Brian Slodysko, "Group Steers Swiss Billionaire's Money to Liberal Causes," *The Associated Press* (Apr. 4, 2023), <https://apnews.com/article/dark-money-democrats-wyss-politics-elections-601d40cd01569190559d545418afe396>; Scott Bland, "Left-Leaning Nonprofit Poured \$196 Million of Secret Money into Political World in 2022," *NBC News* (Nov. 15, 2023), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/left-leaning-sixteen-thirty-fund-196-million-secret-money-2022-rcna125082>; Americans for Public Trust, *Foreign Influence in State Ballot Issues: How Sixteen Thirty Fund's Pipeline of Foreign Cash Impacts State Politics*, Americans for Public Trust, (2024), <https://americansforpublictrust.org/document/sixteen-thirty-fund-ballot-spending-report/>.

¹⁵ Americans for Public Trust, *Foreign Influence in State Ballot Issues: How Sixteen Thirty Fund's Pipeline of Foreign Cash Impacts State Politics*, Americans for Public Trust, (2024), <https://americansforpublictrust.org/document/sixteen-thirty-fund-ballot-spending-report/>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

enshrine the right to an abortion in the state's constitution.¹⁷ Sixteen Thirty Fund's first forays into Ohio politics came in 2018 when it quietly funded a weak-on-crime ballot initiative, that among other things, would have lessened the penalties for fentanyl possession and shortened some prison sentences.¹⁸ In an eight month period in 2023, Sixteen Thirty Fund's ballot campaign spending skyrocketed to over \$14 million.¹⁹ As of May 2024, active ballot issue campaigns are underway in Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, and Nevada, all being financed by Sixteen Thirty Fund.²⁰

Sixteen Thirty Fund is not the only organization that has been the beneficiary of funds from a foreign national. The League of Conservation Voters (LCV) network has received over \$20 million from Mr. Wyss' entities.²¹ In March 2024, LCV, "a leading climate organization that is among the biggest spenders on progressive causes," pledged \$120 million "to lift President Biden and his allies."²²

Mr. Wyss has also heavily contributed to Fund for a Better Future, "a dark money group that supports causes like abortion rights, social justice immigration and public health, and is behind the green group Climate Power."²³ Climate Power announced a plan to spend \$80 million on advertising to "lift President Biden's standing on environmental issues and inform voters about the impact of legislation he signed last year [2022]."²⁴ In the 2022 midterms, "Climate Power also spent about \$5.3 million on ads supporting about 30 House Democrats."²⁵

It is alarming that groups that are receiving funding from a foreign national turn around and spend money on issue advocacy campaigns, voter registration, get-out-the-vote efforts, Super PACs, and state ballot issue campaigns.^{26x}

¹⁷ Alice Miranda Ollstein, "Michigan Votes to Put Abortion Rights into State Constitution," *Politico* (Nov. 9, 2022), <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/11/09/michigan-abortion-amendment-results-2022-00064778>; Scott Bland, "Left-Leaning Nonprofit Poured \$196 Million of Secret Money into Political World in 2022," *NBC News* (Nov. 15, 2023), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/left-leaning-sixteen-thirty-fund-196-million-secret-money-2022-rcna125082>; Matthew Miller, "Michigan Supreme Court Will Rule on Tactic that Weakened Minimum Wage, Sick Leave Initiatives," *MLive* (June 21, 2023, Updated Dec. 6, 2023), <https://www.mlive.com/news/2023/06/michigan-supreme-court-will-rule-on-tactic-that-weakened-minimum-wage-sick-leave-initiatives.html>; Americans for Public Trust, *Foreign Influence in State Ballot Issues: How Sixteen Thirty Fund's Pipeline of Foreign Cash Impacts State Politics*, Americans for Public Trust, (2024), <https://americansforpublictrust.org/document/sixteen-thirty-fund-ballot-spending-report/>.

¹⁸ German Lopez, "How Ohio Voters Could Upend the State's War on Drugs This November," *Vox* (Nov. 6, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/10/12/17957006/ohio-issue-1-drug-crimes-felonies-misdemeanors>.

¹⁹ Ohio Secretary of State, "Campaign Finance Disclosure: 1630 Fund," Ohio SOS (Sept. 8, 2023); Ohio Secretary of State, "Campaign Finance Disclosure: Sixteen Thirty Fund," Ohio SOS (Mar. 29, 2023-Oct. 24, 2023).

²⁰ Kacen Bayless, "Missouri Abortion Rights Campaign Raises Nearly \$5 Million Ahead of Signature Deadline," *The Kansas City Star* (Apr. 15, 2024), <https://www.kansascity.com/news/politics-government/article287702410.html>; State of Montana, Campaign Electronic Reporting System, "Public Access Search Results: Contributor Search Results: Sixteen Thirty Fund," State of Montana, *Search Term: Sixteen Thirty Fund* (Nov. 20, 2023-Apr. 5, 2024), <https://cers-ext.mt.gov/CampaignTracker/public/searchResults/searchFinancials>; Erin Bamer, "Nebraska Petition Drive for Paid Sick Leave Has \$1.7 Million in Funding," *Omaha World-Herald* (Oct. 4, 2023, Updated Nov. 11, 2023), https://omaha.com/news/state-regional/government-politics/nebraska-petition-drive-for-paid-sick-leave-has-1-7-million-in-funding/article_17132264-62de-11ee-8e63-9b0765606a26.html; Eric Neugeboren and Tabitha Mueller, "Millions Roll in to Nevada Ballot Initiatives from Unions, Uber and Dark Money Groups," *The Nevada Independent* (Apr. 19, 2024), <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/millions-roll-in-to-nevada-ballot-initiatives-from-unions-uber-and-dark-money-groups>.

²¹ Americans for Public Trust, *Foreign Influence in U.S. Elections: How Swiss Billionaire Hansjörg Wyss and Arabella Advisors Network Uses Foreign Dark Money to Sway American Politics and Policy*, Americans for Public Trust, (2023), <https://americansforpublictrust.org/document/report-foreign-influence-in-u-s-elections/>; Caitlin Oprysko, "Wyss' Nonprofit Showered Liberal Groups with More Than \$63M," *Politico Influence* (Feb. 16, 2024), <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-influence/2024/02/16/wyss-dark-money-group-showered-liberal-groups-with-more-than-63m-00142025>.

²² Reid J. Epstein, "Outside Groups Pledge Over \$1 Billion to Aid Biden's Re-Election Effort," *The New York Times* (Mar. 19, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/19/us/politics/biden-election-donation.html>.

²³ Caitlin Oprysko, "Wyss' Nonprofit Showered Liberal Groups with More Than \$63M," *Politico Influence* (Feb. 16, 2024), <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-influence/2024/02/16/wyss-dark-money-group-showered-liberal-groups-with-more-than-63m-00142025>.

²⁴ Reid J. Epstein, "Climate Advocacy Group Plans to Spend \$80 Million on Ads to Aid Biden," *The New York Times* (Oct. 16, 2023, Updated Oct. 17, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/16/us/politics/climate-group-advertising-biden.html>.

²⁵ Brian Slodysko, "Group Steers Swiss Billionaire's Money to Liberal Causes," *The Associated Press* (Apr. 4, 2023), <https://apnews.com/article/dark-money-democrats-wyss-politics-elections-601d40cd01569190559d545418afe396>.

²⁶ Scott Bland, "Left-Leaning Nonprofit Poured \$196 Million of Secret Money into Political World in 2022," *NBC News* (Nov. 15, 2023), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/left-leaning-sixteen-thirty-fund-196-million-secret-money-2022-rcna125082>; Andrew Mark Miller, "GOP Bill Cracks Down on 'Loophole' Allowing Foreign Donors to Pump Dark Money into US Elections," *Fox News* (Apr. 17, 2024), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/gop-bill-cracks-down-loophole-allowing-foreign-donors-pump-dark-money-us-elections>.

These foreign influence loopholes must be closed. Foreign nationals are already barred from donating to candidates directly, so why should all these vehicles that influence elections be any different? American elections 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 to take. In his 1796 Farewell Address, George Washington cautioned that “foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government.”²⁷ Over 200 years later, that sentiment remains true. Thank you.

²⁷ National Archives, “Founders Online: Farewell Address, 19 September 1796,” Archives.gov, Speech Given (Sept. 19, 1796), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-20-02-0440-0002>.