

Proposition 54, turning a Blind Eye to Solving the Issues of Racial Equality

On October 7th, voters will be asked if the State of California should no longer collect data on race, color, national origin or sex, in an effort to reach “a color blind society” according to Ward Connerly, the author of the disingenuous Proposition 54. **I am encouraging people to vote NO on Proposition 54.** Passing this initiative will prevent state and local government from collecting the data which is essential to exposing and correcting racist practices in law enforcement, the delivery of health care services, education and other government services.

The problem with Mr. Connerly’s argument is that it assumes the issues of racial discrimination can be corrected by ignoring them-- nothing could be further from the truth. Let’s look at the question of racial profiling for a moment. If police officers are arresting people of color in disproportionate numbers and/or if people of color are serving stricter sentences, how would we know if Proposition 54 is implemented? The solution to the question of racial profiling lies in the analysis of comprehensive data. Who is arrested? What is the sentence given them? Do the sentences differ between people who have committed similar offenses, with similar backgrounds but differ only by ethnicity? We must ask and address these questions, otherwise the issue of racial profiling will continue.

If Proposition 54 passes, it will also prevent effective service delivery by certain government agencies. African Americans suffer disproportionately from hypertension, often related to diet and lifestyle. Health care providers including public health departments have been aware of this issue for decades, and have been delivering messages and developing campaigns that speak specifically to African Americans about high blood pressure. The passage of Proposition 54 means public health departments will no longer be able to direct services to communities most in need, because we won’t know which communities are in need. We won’t know if black folks are continuing to suffer disproportionately, we will just know how many people in Alameda County die of high blood pressure each year.

All levels of government have a history of discrimination, from the unequal application of the law (especially in the case of African Americans), to the use of census data to imprison Japanese Americans during World War II, to the use of the Tuskegee Air Men as medical guinea pigs. The various levels of government have only made progress in these areas, but mostly as a result of public outcry. It will be impossible for the public to ask the appropriate probing questions if Proposition 54 passes on October 7th.

The final issue is that African Americans and others in California must go to the ballot box and tell Ward Connerly and others that we will not be fooled. Proposition 54 is not about equality, it's about the suppression of information essential to addressing and correcting the discriminatory practices in government and in our society. For those who say, everyone should be treated equally, here's a newsflash: African Americans and other people of color endure discriminatory practices on a daily basis. I too dream about the day where people will be judged on the content of their character, however, the reality is that day is yet to come. The dream of a color-blind society will not occur unless we in government and other parts of society continue to look at ourselves honestly, look at others and look at our institutions with a critical eye and a zest for creating an environment that truly treats people equally while respecting their differences.

Keith Carson
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