

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## The Wealthy Want To Raise Taxes on the Non-Wealthy

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October 27, 2020

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Ryan Bourne and I examined the economics and politics of wealth inequality in [this 2019 study](#). We considered whether the wealthy tilt our political system in a conservative direction, which many liberals worry about. We found that the political preferences of the wealthy are not much different than other Americans, and that plenty of top wealth is plowed into liberal causes.

That reality struck me in examining [income](#), [sales](#), and [property](#) tax measures on state ballots. Two-thirds of income and sales tax questions on ballots are for higher taxes, not lower taxes, and wealthy liberals often fund the tax-increase proposals. Funding by businesses and labor unions also play a large role in ballot battles over taxes.

Sometimes wealthy people campaign to raise taxes on the wealthy. In Illinois this year, billionaire J.B. Pritzker has given \$57 million to support a [ballot measure](#) to replace the state's flat income tax with a multi-rate system aimed at hitting high earners. Billionaire Kenneth Griffin has contributed \$47 million to the campaign against passage.

More often, wealthy people campaign to raise taxes on the non-wealthy. In many states, they have pushed to raise sales taxes, carbon taxes, gas taxes, soda taxes, and cigarette taxes.

The following are some wealthy folks and their tax-increase efforts, with the dollar figures from Ballotpedia unless otherwise linked:

- Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, gave \$7.1 million to support [Proposition 15](#) in 2020 to raise California property taxes.
- Stacy Schusterman gave \$500,000 and Pat Stryker gave \$250,000 in 2020 to support [Proposition EE](#) to raise Colorado cigarette taxes.
- Bill Gates and Michael Bloomberg each gave \$1 million to support [Initiative 1631](#) in 2018 to impose a carbon tax in Washington. The initiative failed.
- Michael Bloomberg gave \$2.1 million to oppose [Measure 103](#) in 2018 to ban grocery taxes in Oregon. The measure failed.

- Gail Miller gave \$250,000 to support Question 1 in 2018 to raise Utah gas taxes. The question failed.
- Merle Chambers and Judi Wagner each gave \$100,000 to support Amendment 73 in 2018 to raise Colorado income taxes. The amendment failed.
- Peter Kelley, Laura Arnold, John Arnold, and Menno van Wyk each gave more than \$100,000 to support Initiative 732 in 2016 to impose a carbon tax in Washington. The initiative failed.
- Stacy Schusterman gave \$2 million, David Boren gave \$462,000, and the George Kaiser foundation gave \$350,000 to support Question 779 in 2016 to raise Oklahoma sales taxes. The question failed.
- Tom Steyer gave \$11.5 million and Michael Bloomberg gave \$500,000 to support Proposition 56 in 2016 to raise California cigarette taxes. The proposition passed.
- Tom Steyer gave \$1.7 million to support Proposition 55 in 2016 to extend increases in California income taxes. The proposition passed.
- Michael Bloomberg gave \$18 million to support ballot measures in San Francisco and Oakland to raise soda taxes in 2016. John and Laura Arnold gave \$3.3 million in support of the San Francisco measure. Both measures passed. Bloomberg has spent millions of dollars on soda tax efforts in other cities.
- Bill and Melinda Gates gave \$1 million to support Amendment 66 in 2013 to increase Colorado income taxes. The amendment failed.
- Molly Munger gave \$44 million to support Proposition 38 in 2012 to raise California income taxes. This campaign was remarkable in that total campaign spending was \$48 million in favor and just \$42,000 against, but the proposition failed with just 29 percent voting in favor.
- Lance Armstrong gave \$1.5 million and Michael Bloomberg gave \$500,000 to support Proposition 29 in 2012 to increase California cigarette taxes. The proposition failed.
- Tom Steyer gave \$29.6 million to support Proposition 39 in 2012 to increase California business taxes. The proposition passed.

If you favor limited government, you may want to avoid living in states such as California because they are dominated by liberal politicians. But you may also want to avoid such states because they are home to wealthy liberal elites frequently pushing to raise state taxes. They often fail, but they keep on trying.

For further notes on some of these ballot measures, see [Cato's governor report cards](#).

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