

The Washington Times

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Group seeks affirmative action vote

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Published May 28, 2006

A civil rights group in Michigan will ask voters through a ballot initiative this November to decide whether to abolish affirmative action for college admissions, government hiring and contracting.

The Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (MCRI) has been trying for three years to pose the question to voters, all while fending off lawsuits and other civil rights groups, Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm, a Democrat, and some prominent state lawmakers who oppose it.

The state's Republican Party chairman, Dick Devos, who is running for governor, has said he is opposed to it, as has Keith Butler, a high-profile Republican state Senate candidate.

The initiative was announced after a pair of U.S. Supreme Court rulings regarding the University of Michigan's admission policy.

One of the cases was brought in 1997 by Jennifer Gratz, now MCRI's executive director, who was rejected by the university despite her 3.8-grade-point average.

"The Michigan case was based on a points system and the system was heavily slanted," said attorney Terry Pell, who heads the Center for Individual Rights. "On a 150-point scale, a person could get 20 points based on your race, and in that scale, many people could be denied."

While Mrs. Gratz won her case, the university's law school was allowed to keep its points system.

Mr. Pell said the question he and other advocates of abolishing racial preferences has is how long the courts will allow them to be used.

"What happens is each time you bring it up or think you are at the end of the 25 years, the court says we will allow it to go on for another 25 years and the problem is the Supreme Court has never allowed this to come to an end or given an opportunity for it to come to an end," he said.

Mrs. Gratz said that is the purpose of the initiative.

"This initiative is moving the timeline forward, and I firmly believe the people of Michigan believe in the fairness of law," she said. "What the courts and these universities have been saying all this time is that if you have good intentions it is OK to do the wrong thing, and taking race into account is choosing winners and losers based on race."

She said affirmative action policies have gone much farther than they were intended to,

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when they were created by executive order of President Nixon.

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