
AMERICANS FOR
**PUBLIC
TRUST**

ORAL TESTIMONY OF
AMERICANS FOR PUBLIC TRUST

BY

CAITLIN SUTHERLAND
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

BEFORE THE

OHIO SENATE GENERAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

FOR A HEARING ON SENATE BILL 215

FEBRUARY 21, 2024

Chairman Rulli, Ranking Member DeMora, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 215, which prohibits foreign nationals from contributing to state ballot issues. My name is Caitlin Sutherland, and I am the Executive Director of Americans for Public Trust, 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.

Multiple press outlets, including the *Associated Press*, *Bloomberg*, and *Real Clear Politics* have confirmed Mr. Wyss is a foreign national.¹ But don't just take their word for it. Listen to what Mr. Wyss has said about the matter. In 2011, Mr. Wyss told a Swiss newspaper that he "never felt the need to become an American."² He claimed he found the process "too complicated," and instead, preferred to call himself "a spiritual dual citizen."³

Despite 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' personal goal is to "(re)interpret the American Constitution in the light of progressive politics."⁴

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.⁵ But Mr. Wyss' direct giving pales in comparison to his current and preferential 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.⁶ In his biography, Mr. Wyss' sister explicitly detailed his ability to "exert an influence on American domestic politics through his foundations."⁷

If this sounds like a staggering amount of money from a reclusive billionaire and organizations you've never heard of, 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.⁸

¹ 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>.

² Giorgio V. Müller, "We Have Found A Good Home for Synthes," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)* (Jun. 11, 2011), <https://www.nzz.ch/wir-haben-ein-gutes-heim-fuer-synthes-gefunden-ld.589550>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Hedi Wyss, *Hansjörg Wyss – My Brother*, eFeF-Verlag Wettingen, Page #50, (2014).

⁵ 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>.

⁶ Hans Nicholas and Stef W. Kight, "Scoop: GOP Plan Targets Foreign Dark Money for 2024," *Axios* (Jul. 10, 2023), <https://www.axios.com/2023/07/10/gop-targets-foreign-dark-money-2024-election>.

⁷ Hedi Wyss, *Hansjörg Wyss – My Brother*, eFeF-Verlag Wettingen, Page #49, (2014).

⁸ *Supra* note 2.

But how exactly, by his own words, does he exert an influence? According to the *New York Times*, Wyss’ “political activism is channeled through a daisy chain of opaque organizations that mask the ultimate recipients of his money.”⁹ The most opaque of those organizations is a little-known group called the Sixteen Thirty Fund. According to the *Associated Press*, Sixteen Thirty Fund “has received \$208 million from Wyss since 2016.”¹⁰ *Bloomberg* has also confirmed “[Wyss] has disclosed giving over \$208 million to Sixteen Thirty Fund, a clearing house for the left...”¹¹ Less than one week ago, *Politico* reported on another cash infusion of \$35 million from Mr. Wyss, bringing the total from him into Sixteen Thirty Fund to a whopping \$243 million.¹²

How does this impact Ohio? In less than a year, the little-known but well-funded Sixteen Thirty Fund has funneled over \$14 million into three Ohio ballot measures – One Person One Vote, Ohioans United for Reproductive Rights, and Citizens Not Politicians.¹³ That’s right – the same group that has received almost \$250 million from a foreign national has turned around and spent \$14 million right here in Ohio. And there’s more spending to come. Citizens Not Politicians – an ironic name given the ties to foreign funds – is currently collecting signatures in Ohio. Given their deep pockets, we can expect even more backing to come from Sixteen Thirty Fund.

This pipeline of foreign cash into Ohio politics should be stopped. Foreign nationals are already barred from donating to candidates directly, so why should ballot issues be any different? The proposed legislation would prohibit foreign nationals from injecting money into Ohio’s ballot issues both directly and indirectly, which includes funneling money through US-based nonprofit organizations. I urge you to support Senate Bill 215 to help stop foreign nationals from influencing important public policy in Ohio. Thank you.

⁹ 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>.

¹⁰ *Supra* note 5.

¹¹ 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>.

¹² Caitlin Oprysko, “Wyss’ Nonprofit Showered Liberal Groups with More Than \$63M,” *Politico* (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>.

¹³ Ohio Secretary of State, “Campaign Finance Disclosure: 1630 Fund,” Ohio SOS (Sep. 8, 2023), <https://boefilesearch.ohiosos.gov>; Ohio Secretary of State, “Campaign Finance Disclosure: Sixteen Thirty Fund,” Ohio SOS (Mar. 29, 2023-Oct. 24, 2023), <https://boefilesearch.ohiosos.gov/>.