

In Calif., debate rages on affirmative action

By Kevin Johnson
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California is beginning to show the strain from a proposed ballot initiative that would abolish affirmative action in the nation's largest state.

"The whole initiative debate is the kind of issue Democrats in California probably wish never happened," said San Francisco pollster Mervin Fields. He said Democrats have the most to lose from the conservative anti-affirmative action movement. "There is a huge hullabaloo out there."

California's powerful Democratic state Assembly Speaker Willie Brown may have taken the debate to a new level Tuesday. In a blistering verbal assault, he said attempts to eliminate minority preferences in hiring, government contracting and school admissions in his state are "totally and completely racist."

"I don't care whether you are a Democrat or a Republican; I don't care whether you maintain (the issue) is a freight train or not, you ought not to try to be half-assed principled on something," said Brown, who is an African-American.

It was his first significant statement on the proposed California Civil Rights Initiative and pending state-

house legislation, both of which seek to dismantle preferences based on race, sex or ethnic background.

Brown's strident entry into the debate raises the volume in an already divisive issue, political experts say.

"Has Willie Brown further polarized the discussion? By strongly introducing race, I think you have to say he has," said Sherry Bebitch Jeffe of the Claremont Graduate

School's Center for Politics and Economics.

Said Glynn Custred, co-author of the anti-affirmative action initiative: "Willie Brown wants to judge people by their color. We're the kind of people, like Martin Luther King who would prefer to judge people by the content of their character."

Custred and co-author Tom Wood of Berkeley hope to qualify the California Civil Rights Initiative for the March 1996 primary.

GOP Assemblyman Bernie Richter is sponsoring legislation and a proposed amendment seeking remedies similar to the initiative.

Brown said the Richter proposal is made of "whole cloth," predicting that it would fail in the assembly.

"You tell me exactly where affirmative action has adversely impacted any white getting the job," Brown said. "Not at all. Not at all."



BROWN: A vocal entry into debate

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