

## OP-ED

# Californians narrowly passed Proposition 1. But will it work?

By Neil Gong

**I**N A CONTEST SO close that it took more than two weeks to call the race, Californians narrowly passed Proposition 1, a \$6.4-billion bond measure and reallocation of existing funds to address mental health and homelessness in the state.

Proponents of Proposition 1 say it will create direly needed treatment facilities and housing that can also address the state's addiction and homelessness crises, including among veterans. Opponents see state funds being diverted from core psychiatric services to housing and facility construction, and a worrisome shift from voluntary to involuntary treatment that will re-create the asylum era, when people were forcibly placed into psychiatric hospitals long-term.

In truth, the estimated 4,350 housing units to be funded will not make a dent in the homelessness crisis, nor will the estimated 6,800 added treatment beds return us to the psychiatric dark ages. The measure is poised to fund new treatment infrastructure but remains opaque on the type, quality and continuity of care. We should now ask what treatment people

will receive in these residential programs and how they will be supported if they move to independent housing.

I study how inequality shapes the psychiatric care that people receive. I have observed everything from street outreach and supportive housing programs for the homeless to exclusive private residential facilities for the rich. When people receive high-quality mental healthcare and social services, whether from a public or private entity, it can fundamentally improve their life trajectories. Yet adding more money and beds doesn't necessarily mean better care. If we create facilities without a plan to provide effective treatment, we may not just squander this opportunity — we could make things worse.

Consider the housing-first model, which provides immediate housing and then mental healthcare. Some research indicates that, when implemented correctly, it can lead to long-term housing retention and improved health and addiction outcomes. Yet other research shows huge variation, with residents in poorly run programs experiencing health outcomes no better than those on the streets. I've witnessed inspiring care, but

I've also seen under-resourced providers engage in "tolerant containment": leaving people alone to use substances and self-destruct on the condition they stay in the provided housing.

For a person in immediate crisis, forced care such as hospitalization and locked residential facilities may well be lifesaving. Yet considerable research also shows that poorly implemented coercion can backfire. Patients describe humiliation and a loss of bodily autonomy. They disengage with treatment as a result and are at an elevated risk of suicide. People may stomach coercion if they are treated with dignity — but too often, they are not. A lot can go wrong, so with billions of dollars at play, it's important we find what models work best.

Getting people stable and off the street is obviously a good baseline in the hierarchy of needs, but it is far from enough. Many people benefit from serious programming that continues from residential to independent living, and from having the support of providers who are committed to helping them achieve more than simply staying housed. This only works, of course, if there are resources for providers and opportunities for patients to

## Newsom touts the measure as a way to curb homelessness and address mental health. But the state's plan isn't clear.

find meaningful roles in society. Money and thought must go into programming, not merely housing construction. That's why critics argue that Proposition 1 will do harm by redirecting some funds used for existing mental health programs toward building housing.

When the state takes bids for constructing residential facilities, it should not just be eyeing who can build for the cheapest rate. Rather, officials should look for who can design the right kind of settings for patients. Research shows how the physical layout of hospital wards can drastically alter people's experience. The state should also be thoughtful about balancing the types of facilities it will create. As sociologist Alex Barnard argues, adding "beds" conflates important distinctions: California may actu-

ally have sufficient facilities for psychiatric emergencies, for instance, but not enough longer-term options for people who are almost ready to live on their own again.

Above all, we must listen to patients, who often have untapped expertise in what makes for sound care. Many patient rights groups took a stand against Proposition 1 and warned of the dangers of coercion. Although their voices should have been prioritized from the start, it's not too late to include their insights in helping craft smart policy choices.

When state officials face a massive homelessness crisis and visible public suffering, they can be preoccupied with speed: build as many facilities as quickly as possible. But if we do not account for what it means to truly support people in their healing and independence, we risk throwing money away.

Poorly delivered care often backfires and can be worse than nothing. We should start delivering the high quality care that Californians deserve — with dignity, choice and promises of a real future — or we'll end up paying for one more failed reform.

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**SCHOOLS** outside the U.S. offer an alternative to our low admission rates and high tuition.

## How to skip the admissions rat race and still get a degree

You might think, say, Oxford University is as difficult and expensive to get into as Harvard or Stanford. You'd be wrong.

By Greg Kaplan

**C**OLLEGE ADMISSIONS in the United States have evolved into a rat race.

Seniors will be getting their acceptance and rejection notices in the next few weeks. They will have spent years cramming for grades, toiling at college-level courses, prepping for entrance exams and spreading themselves thin with clubs, sports, the arts and volunteer work, all for the singular goal of being admitted to their dream schools. At the same time, their equally anxious parents have been scrambling to figure out how to finance their children's education if they are fortunate enough to be admitted.

This leaves many, including admissions consultants such as myself, to rightfully question whether our higher education system is broken.

There is an alternative to the shockingly low acceptance rates and high-priced tuition that mark the college admissions sweepstakes in the United States: international universities. Studying abroad for a semester has long been a rite of passage for college students seeking to explore the world. But attending an international university to obtain an undergraduate degree is becoming increasingly popular as well.

Storied universities abroad offer strong preparation for post-graduate employment or graduate school, and their admissions process is often more straightforward, their acceptance rates higher and their tuition costs lower than comparable schools at home.

Let's take Oxford University as an example. You might suspect it would be just as difficult to be admitted to and as expensive as, say, Harvard or Stanford. But depend-

ing on what a student wants to major in, acceptance rates can reach up to 17%, compared with 3% to 4% for equally highly regarded universities in the U.S. At Oxford, like most international schools, you can't tap U.S.-style financial aid packages, but the cost is lower all around. Tuition for many programs starts at 33,000 pounds for international students. That's about \$42,000, significantly less than what many private universities in the United States charge.

The cost difference looks even better when you consider that most U.K. programs are completed in three years, not four. And for American high school students and their families, the process of applying is much less cumbersome and stressful.

Most British schools straightforwardly weigh applicants' college entrance exams and their demonstrated interest in their intended fields. This holds true for well-regarded options in Canada, Ireland, France, Spain and other countries, where universities publish test score requirements, removing the guesswork about what it takes to be admitted. In addition to increased transparency, these universities do not obsess over personal essays and extraneous extracurricular activities.

You may wonder if attending college abroad will limit your job prospects at home after graduation. With few exceptions — primarily programs such as nursing or accounting, where students use their undergraduate education as part of a licensing process in the U.S. — the answer is no. Employers and graduate schools appreciate applicants with diverse perspectives and experiences that can help them navigate an increasingly global workforce and

marketplace.

I speak from experience counseling students to ensure that their college choices will help them achieve their long-term goals. One student was passionate about motor-sports engineering, but he was not excited about pursuing a general mechanical engineering degree, which is typically offered in the United States. Instead, he was admitted to a program at Oxford Brookes University tailor-made for his interest in performance automotive engineering. When he graduated, he had job offers in the U.S., U.K. and other countries, including from Formula One teams that recruited at his university.

Regardless of what a student studies, many find developing foreign language skills and an international perspective to be invaluable when applying for jobs or grad schools. This matches my own experience. I applied for investment banking positions on Wall Street prior to graduating from college, and the only offer I received was from a bank that valued the semester abroad I spent in Argentina; it was looking for a Spanish-speaking analyst to assist with South American clients.

Going abroad for a college education is far from the norm among American students. But thinking outside the box is a skill that will serve them well in the admissions process wherever they decide to apply, not to mention for the rest of their lives. Why not employ it to escape the rat race of U.S. admissions?

GREG KAPLAN heads a Newport Beach-based college admissions advising firm. His book "The Journey: How to Prepare Kids for a Competitive and Changing World" will be published in May.

## Preventing a voter disinformation crisis

AI is turbocharging disinformation, especially in communities of color. The state must step in.

By Bill Wong and Mindy Romero

**A**S THE GENERAL election campaign begins in earnest, we can expect disinformation attacks to target voters, especially in communities of color. This has happened before: In 2016, for example, Russia's disinformation programs zeroed in on Black Americans, creating Instagram and Twitter accounts that masqueraded as Black voices and producing fake news websites such as blacktivist.info, blacktolive.org and blacksoul.us.

Advances in technology will make these efforts harder to recognize. Envision those same fake accounts and websites featuring hyper-realistic videos and images intended to sow racial division and mislead people about their voting rights. With the advent of generative artificial intelligence, that is possible at little to no cost, turbocharging the kind of disinformation that has always targeted communities of color.

It's a problem for candidates, election offices and voter outreach groups in the months ahead. But voters themselves will ultimately have to figure out what is real news or fake news, authentic or AI-generated.

For immigrants and communities of color — who often face language barriers, distrust democratic systems and lack technology access — the challenge is likely to be more significant. Across the nation, and especially in states such as California with large communities of immigrants and people with limited knowledge of English, the government needs to help these groups identify and avoid disinformation.

Asian Americans and Latinos are particularly vulnerable. About two-thirds of the Asian American and Pacific Islander population are immigrants, and a Pew Research Center report states that "[86%] of Asian immigrants 5 and older say they speak a language other than English at home." The same dynamics hold true for Latinos: Only 38% of the U.S. foreign-born Latino population reports being proficient in English.

Targeting non-English-speaking communities has several advantages for those who would spread disinformation. These groups are often cut off from mainstream news sources that have the greatest resources to debunk deepfakes and other disinformation, preferring online engagement in their native languages, where moderation and fact-checking are less prevalent.

Forty-six percent of Latinos in the U.S. use WhatsApp, while many Asian Americans prefer WeChat. Wired magazine reported that the platform "is used by millions of Chinese Americans and people with friends, family, or business in China, including as a political organizing tool."

Disinformation aimed at immigrant communities is poorly understood and difficult to track and counteract, yet it is getting easier and easier to create. In the past, producing false content in non-English languages required intensive work from humans and was often low in quality. Now, AI tools can create hard-to-track, in-language disinformation at lightning speed and without the vulnerabilities and scaling problems posed by human limitations. Despite this, much research on misinformation and disinformation concentrates on English-language uses.

Attempts to target communities of color and non-English speakers with disinformation are aided by many immigrants' heavy reliance on their mobile phones for internet access. Mobile user interfaces are particularly vulnerable to disinformation because many desktop design and branding elements are minimized in favor of content on smaller screens. With 13% of Latinos and 12% of African Americans dependent on mobile devices for broadband access, in contrast to 4% of white smartphone owners, they are more likely to receive — and share — false information.

Social media companies' past efforts to counter voter disinformation have fallen short. Meta's February announcement that it would flag AI-generated images on Facebook, Instagram and Threads is a positive but minor step toward stemming AI-generated disinformation, especially for ethnic and immigrant communities who may know little about its effects. Clearly, a stronger government response is needed.

The California Initiative for Technology and Democracy, or CITED, where we serve on the board of directors, will soon unveil a legislative package that would require broader transparency for generative AI content, making sure users of social media know what video, audio and images were made by AI tools. The bills would also require labeling of AI-assisted political disinformation on social media, prohibit campaign ads close to an election from using the technology and restrict anonymous trolls and bots.

In addition, CITED plans to hold a series of community forums around California with partner organizations rooted in their regions. The groups will speak directly to leaders in communities of color, labor leaders, local elected officials and other trusted messengers about the dangers of false AI-generated information likely to be circulating this election season.

The hope is that this information will be relayed at the community level, making voters in the state more aware and skeptical of false or misleading content, building trust in the election process, election results and our democracy.

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