

Calif. to vote on lighter penalties to relieve prisons

By Michael B. Marois, Bloomberg

California voters are being asked to lighten criminal penalties for low-level drug possession and nonviolent thefts such as shoplifting, to help ease crowding in the state's prisons.

Support for the ballot initiative is uniting billionaires on opposite ends of the political spectrum, from financier George Soros and Netflix Inc. Chief Executive Officer Reed Hastings to Republican donor B. Wayne Hughes Jr., son of the founder of Public Storage, the largest self-storage business.

Proposition 47, reducing certain non-violent property and drug crimes from felonies to misdemeanors, is a turnabout for the state that enacted one of the first Three Strikes laws in 1994. It's one of six measures on the statewide ballot that also asks voters to sell bonds for water works, stash money away for a rainy day, restrict increases in health care insurance premiums, and boost malpractice civil judgments.

"This is incredibly significant," said Nichole Porter, director of policy advocacy for the Sentencing Project in Washington. "This could set the stage for the next 20 years in terms of rethinking the nation's approach to criminal justice policy. If the voters of California authorize this ballot measure, that will really change the conversation nationally."

Simple drug possession, bad checks under \$950, shoplifting and petty theft with the same limits would be misdemeanors, generally punishable by a fine or a term in county jail, rather than a felony, requiring a prison sentence.

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