

# Viral Campaign to Put a Woman on the \$20 Bill Chooses Harriet Tubman

A New York businesswoman is risking her retirement savings on the chance to change the twenty. Already, she says it's been worth it.

BY BRIAN RESNICK

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(Photo Illustration/Brian Resnick; via Women on 20s)

*Update May 12: After 10 weeks of voting, the Women on 20s campaign announced that Harriet Tubman is the [winner of its online poll](#). But they'll still need to convince the White House to replace Andrew Jackson on the \$20 bill. "The plan," their [website reads](#), "is to get as many people as possible to take to social media with the hashtag #DearMrPresident to send President Obama a resounding message for change." The campaign has some political momentum: Since the campaign launched, two bills, [one in the House](#) and [one in the Senate](#), have been introduced in Congress in support of putting a woman on the \$20 bill.*

When the \$1 coin featuring Susan B. Anthony debuted in January 1979, it was a total flop. Small, silver, and round, it looked too much like the quarter, critics complained, making it hard to find in a crowded pocket. By September, banks stopped ordering the coins due to overwhelming stockpiles.

"Miss Anthony is having as rough a time breaking into the pockets and purses of America as she did breaking down its political processes 100 years earlier," A.O. Sulzberger Jr., now chairman of the *New York Times* company, [wrote](#)

in the paper as a reporter at the time. More than 35 years later, a woman has still not broken into our pockets. (The Sacagawea dollar, released in 2000, was met with a similar collective "meh.")

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America is the greatest force of capitalism in the world. Our money is our national identity, and the most visible venue we have for commemorating our heroes. Every day, millions get a glimpse of Washington, Jackson, and—if they're lucky—Franklin.

That's why Barbara Ortiz Howard, the owner of an exterior restoration company, and Susan Ades Stone, a journalist, are taking a stand. They say it's time for a woman to appear, regularly, in our billfolds. The U.S. dollar is an international currency. People around the world interact with it every day. "We need to show them we have a commitment to women," Ades Stone says.

Ortiz Howard and Ades Stone, respectively, are the founder and executive director of [Women on \\$20s](#), a national campaign seeking to nominate a woman to replace Andrew Jackson on the \$20 note.

The pair drafted an initial list of 100 women, and with the help of volunteers and historians, selected 15 women as finalists in a national contest to adorn the \$20 bill. Around 188,000 people have voted [on their website](#) so far. After an initial primary round, three candidates, plus Wilma Mankiller, will be up for a final vote sometime in the next few weeks. (Facing some criticism, they decided that the first female chief of the Cherokee Nation should automatically advance to the final. More on that below.) The vote is just an online poll. But Ortiz Howard and Ades Stone intend to present the results to the White House. President Obama said last summer he thought putting more women on currency was "[a pretty good idea](#)."

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Candidates include Alice Paul (the suffragist leader), Shirley Chisholm (the first African-American woman elected to Congress), Sojourner Truth (the abolition activist), Margaret Sanger (the founder of Planned Parenthood), and Rosa Parks (needs no introduction).

It's a relatively simple process (by Washington standards, that is) to update portraits on U.S. currency. The power resides [wholly with the secretary of the Treasury](#). The Treasury routinely redesigns the paper currency as to thwart counterfeiters. The law requires only that the people on the portraits be deceased. Changing the portrait on the \$20 bill would not require any additional appropriation or approval from Congress.

Recently, I spoke with Ortiz Howard and Ades Stone over the phone. They discussed how their initiative became a worldwide sensation (with news pickups in Russia and China, and celebrity endorsements—Gloria Steinem [has weighed in](#)), and the controversy over whether a Native American woman should replace Jackson, who backed the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**What happens once all the votes are in, and you have a final nomination for the 20? Are you then going to post a petition to the White House's "[We the People](#)" page?**

**Susan Ades Stone:** We're not going to use the *WhiteHouse.gov* system. We're going to do our own thing. We figure they're hearing us now. The press has brought our message out, where they can see it, and the public is being heard. We do have people who have offered to make good introductions to people in the White House. So that would be a very nice place to start when we're ready.

We want to have a powerful mandate, a meaningful mandate before we go [to the White House]. We're getting there.

**What if the White House does not respond? What are you prepared to do?**

**Ades Stone:** Well, Barbara has pledged to chain herself to the fence the way Alice Paul did.

[Ortiz Howard laughs]

She's channeling Alice Paul. So she might be staging some kind of a hunger strike in front of the White House.

*[Editor's note: [Scholars say](#) the story about Alice Paul chaining herself to the White House fence is more apocryphal than factual.]*

**Have you been in contact with any member of Congress?**

**Ades Stone:** No. We don't see any need to. We did not want to politicize this. That was important to us. We wanted to keep this as more of a national conversation about valuing women and respecting the women who have shaped this country—and have not really gotten enough credit for what they've done. And we thought that if we started getting a lot of political chatter, it would overshadow that.

**Barbara Ortiz Howard:** We really want this to be from the people.

**What has the public reaction been like?**

**Ades Stone:** As of right now, there has been almost 513,000 unique visitors to our website since March 1. They've seen more than 3 million pages. I hope that means that people are reading about the candidates. That's the other goal of this campaign: to have the public learn about women who have not been easy to discover.

**Ortiz Howard:** We thought maybe we would get 100,000 votes. But then when we started to experience the continued, robust voting, we had to maintain the integrity of the platform [i.e. their website was overwhelmed].

**Ades Stone:** Yesterday [March 24], we had our first celebrity endorsement [Susan Sarandon]. She was promoting people taking selfies. What was really interesting, was that people interpreted that, at first, as they should post a picture that illustrated their feeling about the campaign. And all of a sudden there was this slew of images that hit Twitter and Instagram of foreign money with women on it, from all over the world. And all of a sudden it became this colorful collage of women's faces from everywhere else. And people were saying, "Where are we in this?" "How can we be so far behind?" So a whole other conversation got triggered—an awareness of where we are, and how we are comparing to the rest of the world.

**Your end goal is to get a woman on the \$20 bill. But if you don't get there, will you be happy with at least provoking a conversation?**

**Ortiz Howard:** At first we thought we had to have a specific campaign to go to schools, but now they are picking it up organically. That is very inspiring to us. It makes my heart leap with joy. At the same time, what we set out to do was to truly accomplish this. Other countries have it. We should have it. I will want to see this fully realized.

**Ades Stone:** We have gotten a lot of interest from press around the world who are excited that we are doing this. Barbara did an interview yesterday with CCTV in China. I did one [with Sputnik News in Russia](#).

**China and Russia? What do you think the news appeal is in those countries?**

**Ades Stone:** The reporter asked me the same things all the American press asks: How did you come to do this? What is your motivation? What's the public's reaction? The same interest as everyone else. Barbara, did you have the same experience with CCTV?

**Ortiz Howard:** They had some pretty pointed questions for me. Like: What do I think that means to the rest of the women in the world? And I had to point out that other countries—New Zealand, Australia, India, Israel, England, Dominican Republic—they all have women on the currency and they also have leaders who are women. In some sense, maybe we can look to other countries for strength for our own women. Maybe we have a little to learn here.

**Have you received any criticism?**

**Ades Stone:** The question of not having a Native American end up in the last 15 is one issue that has come up over and over again. When we were putting this list together, Wilma Mankiller was in the final 30 on her own strengths. And she did not make it into the top 15. The truth of the matter is, this was never about Andrew Jackson first [and his legacy for Native Americans]. This was about a woman being honored on the money.

We weren't trying to pretend that there wasn't going to be some debate over Andrew Jackson's removal, but that was not what we set out [to do]. That wasn't the aim of the campaign. The aim of the campaign was not to vilify Andrew Jackson. We did in the process want to educate the public about why Andrew Jackson might not be someone we want to have in that place of honor anymore.

**Ortiz Howard:** It's about paying it forward, not a payback.

**Ades Stone:** We did decide, after we got a fairly strong current of opinion, that at least people should have that choice. We decided to add Wilma Mankiller into the final ballot. So there will be three candidates that come out of the primary, and then there will be Wilma Mankiller alongside them.

We never tried to pretend that there was a scientific method that we could apply to this. But we tried to apply the most rigorous evaluation system we could come up with. And you know, you could never satisfy everybody. There's no way to know that you haven't overlooked somebody.

**Is this campaign costing a lot of money? Have you invested some of your personal money into this?**

**Ortiz Howard:** This is not something that started this past month, but something I've been working towards for a couple of years. That was all underwritten by me. My retirement money is completely gone, and I intend to keep working until 109. This has all been [paid by] my day job. Any money I had, my credit cards—all of that I leveraged.

Susan decided to work overtime. Susan works 25 and a half hours or day. Is that what you are up to?

**Ades Stone:** Yeah, I have not earned a penny out of this, and as Barbara said, it's not just what we have done without having a salary. Barbara has had to turn away business so that she can do this. And so have I. Those costs

are costs we can't really quantify. But it has been a labor of love. There have been moments where I wanted a divorce...

[Ortiz Howard laughs]

... and didn't think I could on. But I really believed in it. And I believed it could really happen or I would have never given this much of my time to it.

**Barbara, on what scale of a personal investment have you made? Tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands?**

**Ortiz Howard:** Yeah, it's tens of thousands, multiple tens of thousands.

**Has it been difficult raising money?**

**Ades Stone:** I think if you can get people to do one thing when they come to your website, we want them to vote, first and foremost. Once they vote, I think it's hard to capture them to donate. Either that or we've made it look so easy that they don't think it takes anything to run this campaign.

**Do you have a fundraising goal? Or is there a level that you would like to hit?**

**Ortiz Howard:** Really, realistically, we need, like, half a million dollars to keep this going for a few more months. Teachers are asking us for lesson plans—do we have someone to send to their classroom? They want us to send paper ballots. I'm like, "I don't think we can do that!"

**You both seem to have put a lot on the line for this. What is it worth to you?**

**Ortiz Howard:** For me it's a grand honor to be able to have a dream come into such fruition that everyone can participate in and benefit from. It's so worth it. I've kind of questioned in my mind, like, "What are you getting out of this?" And what I'm getting out of it is that real success of having something that you believe in actually come about.

**Ades Stone:** I already feel that we have succeeded—that if we don't go another step here, you know, we have opened up this conversation. We have gotten people really excited about something. To me, we've already accomplished so much, and of course I want to see the end result of the bill. But it's really very fulfilling to be able to help raise awareness this way.