

**The House Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on the Constitution,
Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties**

Oversight of the Voting Rights Act: The Evolving Landscape of Voting Discrimination

Sec. Julián Castro

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Nadler, Chairman Cohen, Vice Chair Ross, Ranking Member Johnson, and Members of the Committee.

I'm honored to address this committee on the fundamental and timely issue of safeguarding the franchise.

My testimony this morning is a family affair in more ways than one. My brother, Joaquin, is your colleague, as he represents Texas' 20th Congressional District.

Joaquin and I grew up on the west side of San Antonio, Texas, a working class, predominantly Mexican-American neighborhood. We were raised by our mother, Rosie Castro, who was an outspoken activist in the Mexican American Civil Rights movement of the 1970s. She became an activist because she felt her community was being overlooked, and that the rights of Latinos like her were not being protected and advanced.

It's fitting that I join you today to discuss the Voting Rights Act because just under 50 years ago, my mother was compiling data and research on behalf of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund for a presentation on the exact same topic, that would be used in preparation for testimony to this very committee.

She and many other advocates believed that there had not been enough progress on voting rights for Latinos, and that the 1965 Voting Rights Act had left gaps that states and local communities were exploiting to disenfranchise and suppress voters. Unfortunately, five decades later, I am here for the same reason.

In my home state of Texas today there is an all out assault on the right to vote. For generations, Texas has been a testing ground for devious ways to restrict access to the polls. Since the Shelby decision in 2013, the state has cut more polling locations than any state in the nation. Texas enacted a strict voter ID law that permits firearm licenses to be used to vote, but prohibits the use of student IDs. And lawmakers have used things like voter registration deadlines, restricted voting hours, and limitations on early voting to chip away at the franchise of millions of people.

In fact, on the very day the 1965 Voting Rights Act was signed into law, President Lyndon B. Johnson sued his home state of Texas to block the poll tax, a policy Texas would be the last to

eliminate, but only through a ballot referendum passed by the voters in 1966. The 24th Amendment, which prohibited the poll tax, was ratified by the states in 1964. But Texas did not actually ratify the amendment until 2009.

Today, the legislature in my home state continues to debate a new round of voting bills that are defended by lawmakers with the same justification used to defend the poll tax. Under the guise of “voter integrity,” lawmakers have introduced legislation that would slash voting hours and the number of voting machines at polling locations, make it much more difficult to vote by mail, and would even allow partisan poll watchers to film voters as they cast a ballot.

And this is nothing new for Texas.

Just hours after the Supreme Court’s 2013 *Shelby* decision effectively eliminated the “preclearance” requirement of the Voting Rights Act for states like Texas, state leaders advanced a photo ID law that had been rejected by the Department of Justice just one year earlier. The new law, which is still in place today, swiftly disenfranchised 600,000 registered voters that didn’t have the requisite ID—a disproportionate number being Black or Latino.

The elimination of preclearance has allowed Texas to become the most difficult state to vote in in the nation, as well as one of the most gerrymandered. More than ever, we need stronger federal protections that restore and revitalize the voting rights of our citizens. We need an updated Voting Rights Act to make good on the promise of the 15th Amendment—that no citizen be denied the right to vote based on race.

Voting rights shouldn’t be a partisan issue. As recently as 2006, the Senate voted unanimously, and the House nearly unanimously, to renew every section of the Voting Rights Act—including the preclearance provision. Congress knew in each of the four times they reauthorized the VRA that we must protect the rights of voters and reaffirm the American principle of antidiscrimination.

They knew then this timeless truth: the right to vote shouldn’t depend on the color of one’s skin, how much money one has, or what state one lives in. It’s a right guaranteed to every eligible American citizen. It’s the cornerstone of our democracy. And it’s what the late Representative John Lewis—for whom the new Voting Rights Act is named—described in his final letter as “the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society.”

I urge you to pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Act.

Thank you.