

Continue voting rights fight?

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A small municipality in Austin, Texas will soon get its chance to convince the Supreme Court that parts of the Voting Rights Act are not only unconstitutional, but no longer needed. If the court agrees, a key section of the Act, which has been shown to reduce discriminatory voting practices, could be dismantled. While America has come far in the last forty plus years, voting irregularities still exist and we must urge the Court to rule in favor of the Act.

Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act requires states with a long history of flagrant discriminatory practices to clear any changes it makes to the electoral process with the U.S. Justice Department. Nine states, most of them southern, and several counties, cities and smaller political locales are covered under the Act. The small Austin municipality argues that the Act is unconstitutional because it infringes on state's rights and over extends federal power. Furthermore, they say the America that elected Barack Obama as president is dramatically different from the America that existed when the Act was passed in 1965, implying that the country has moved beyond its race issues.

We must not forget that it has not even been a decade since the 2000 Florida voting scandal, where African Americans and poor people were disenfranchised. Four years later, in Ohio, there was a similar debacle. In both instances, voters lost faith in the system and George W. Bush was victorious. In 2006, before renewing the Act, Congress held 22 hearings and determined there was enough evidence to support extending the law. The Voting Rights Act was passed to counter, and put an end to, state level practices, like poll taxes and literacy tests, used to prevent blacks from voting. While those specific barriers may no longer exist, voter discrimination and intimidation do.

We all long for a 'post racial' America but those of us who have been burned too many times are cautious. Let's wait another decade and continue to monitor voting practices before we begin dismantling the Act. America may have changed but she is far from perfect.