

Voting Rights Act

# Garza pushes to end federal supervision

AUSTIN (AP) — Secretary of State Tony Garza, arguing that Texas is a leader in making it easy for people to vote, Thursday said the time has come for the state to be freed from some provisions of the federal Voting Rights Act.

Garza said Texas should be exempt from requirements that it first obtain U.S. Justice Department approval of every election law change.

Washington thinks we should keep putting up with such bureaucratic micromanagement like we have for the past 20 years, it can guess again. They're wrong. We don't need it," Garza said.

The Voting Rights Act is an essential ingredient if we are ever to obtain true justice and democracy."

GARY BLEDSOE

TEXAS PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE

Opposition to the idea was voiced by groups representing minorities.

The Voting Rights Act is an essential ingredient if we are ever to obtain true justice and democracy," said Bledsoe, Texas president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Congress passed the act in 1965 to, in the words of a federal court ruling, "banish the blight of racial discrimination in voting."

Garza said he isn't talking about the part of the act guaranteeing citizens — regardless of race — the right to vote. That section applies in all 50 states.

Garza said, he wants relief from the part of the law called Section 5. It requires prior Justice Department approval of election law changes made in Southern states and Alaska, plus some counties and townships in seven more states.

Today, Texas is one of the most progressive states in the nation of making it easy for all citizens to register and vote — heck, astronauts can now vote from space —

and yet the federal government continues to operate in a time-warp, subjecting Texas to burdensome supervision that's based on an outdated presumption of discrimination," Garza said.

"It's time to take Texas out from this specific provision," he said.

Both the NAACP and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund said the Voting Rights Act should remain in force.

The law "is basically a way of monitoring states to ensure they do not violate the voting rights of minorities," said MALDEF's Al Kauffman. "As long as Texas proposes fair changes in voting, the Justice Department will not object."

NAACP president Bledsoe said intimidation of black and Hispanic voters still occurs across the state, and racial gerrymandering "continues at all levels" of electoral politics.

"The Voting Rights Act is needed to at least provide an avenue for minorities to challenge these actions in effective and efficient ways," Bledsoe said. "If there are problems with the law, the answer is not to throw the baby out with the bath water."

The "preclearance" requirement has delayed numerous actions approved by the Texas Legislature, Garza said. That included state takeover of a financially troubled school district, creation of new county courts and management of scarce water resources, he said.

Garza, a Republican appointed by Gov. George W. Bush to be the state's chief elections officer, emphasized his commitment to the voting law's main purpose — making certain every citizen has a vote.

"The act ... had a profound impact on the political landscape of America, serving to markedly increase the voice of minorities in the political process," he said in a letter to Texas congressmen.

He noted that Texas makes it easy to register to vote; has a lengthy early voting period for casting "no excuses" absentee ballots; and even conducts early voting in places such as shopping malls.

However, Garza said, requiring prior federal approval of Texas election laws has outlived its purpose and is an insult to the Texas Legislature.

"It really is an affront to the integrity of the legislative process in Texas," he said.

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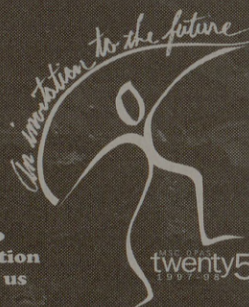


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