

## Top News

# Judge again finds discrimination in Texas' voter ID law

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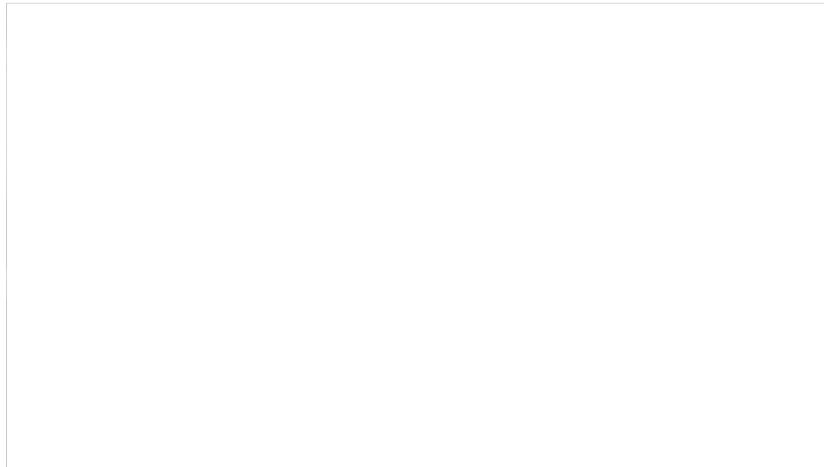
An election official checks a voter's photo identification at an early voting polling site in Austin, Texas in 2014. A judge has ruled for a second time that Texas' strict voter ID law was intentionally crafted to discriminate against minorities.

AUSTIN, Texas >> A judge today again ruled that Republican lawmakers deliberately designed a strict voter ID law to disadvantage minorities and effectively dampen their growing electoral power.

It amounted to the second finding of intentional discrimination in Texas election laws in as many months — a separate court in March ruled that Republicans racially gerrymandered several congressional districts when drawing voting maps in 2011, the same year the voter ID rules were passed.

Neither ruling has any immediate impact. But the decisions are significant because it raises the possibility of Texas being stripped of the right to unilaterally change its election laws without federal approval. Forcing Texas to once again seek federal permission — known as “preclearance” — has been a goal of Democrats and minority rights groups since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the requirement in 2013.

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The latest voter ID ruling by U.S. District Judge Nelva Gonzales Ramos of Corpus Christi comes more than two years after she likened the ballot-box rules in Texas, known as SB 14, to a “poll tax” meant to suppress minority voters. Today, she reaffirmed that conclusion after an appeals court asked her to go back and re-examine her findings.

The Texas law requires voters to show one of seven forms of identification at the ballot box. That list includes concealed handgun licenses — but not college student IDs — and Texas was forced under court order last year to weaken the law for the November elections.

“Proponents touted SB 14 as a remedy for voter fraud, consistent with efforts of other states. As previously demonstrated, the evidence shows a tenuous relationship between those rationales and the actual terms of the bill,” Gonzales Ramos wrote.

The state could once again appeal, which is what one of the top deputies of Republican Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton appeared to suggest would happen while testifying to lawmakers just as the ruling came down. Brantley Starr, a deputy first assistant attorney general, acknowledged that Texas could be dragged back under preclearance but noted there was little precedent.

“It’s possible. It’s our belief that you’d have to have multiple instances of discriminatory purpose,” he said.

Later today, Paxton spokesman Marc Rylander remarked, "We're disappointed and will seek review of this ruling at the appropriate time."

The Texas law was softened in August to allow people without a driver's license or other photo ID to sign an affidavit declaring that they have an impediment to obtaining required identification. Republican lawmakers, who have denied they adopted voting laws in 2011 with discriminatory purpose, are now trying to make that flexibility permanent under legislation that Gov. Greg Abbott could sign later this year.

Texas election officials, however, have acknowledged that hundreds of people were allowed to bypass the state's toughest-in-the-nation voter ID law and improperly cast ballots in the November presidential election by signing a sworn statement instead of showing a photo ID. A recent Associated Press analysis of roughly 13,500 affidavits submitted in Texas' largest counties found at least 500 instances in which voters were allowed to get around the law by signing an affidavit and never showing a photo ID — despite indicating that they possessed one.

In February, President Donald Trump's administration reversed the federal government's position on the Texas voter ID law, announcing that it would no longer continue challenging the rules as the U.S. Justice Department did under President Barack Obama.

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