

Editorial: How can Texas claim to be righteous and embrace injustice?

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A politician can go far waving the God flag in Texas. We're proud of being upright, devout and Christlike.



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Except when we aren't.

A panel of federal judges detailed our state's collective shame March 10, when it ruled some of Texas' 36 congressional districts violate either the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution or the U.S. Voting Rights Act. This was the second time in eight months the federal courts determined Texas discriminates to dilute the voting power of racial minorities, thus denying them fair representation in our legislative system.

How embarrassing.

This month, a federal panel ruled 2-1 the Texas Legislature intentionally discriminated on the basis of race when it redrew districting maps in 2011. At issue are Congressional Districts 23, which strings from San Antonio to El Paso; 27, in the Corpus Christi area; and 35, in Central Texas. Republicans Will Hurd and Blake Farenthold represent districts 23 and 27

respectively; Democrat Lloyd Doggett holds the 35th's seat.

Dilute opportunity

Justices Xavier Rodriguez and Orlando Garcia determined state lawmakers practiced racial discrimination when they drew congressional districts. For example, the “decision to place Nueces County Hispanic voters in an Anglo district (#23) had the effect and was intended to dilute their opportunity to elect their candidate of choice,” they wrote. “Meanwhile, race predominated” in drawing District 35 in order to “minimize the number of Democrat districts in the plan overall.”

Justice Jerry Smith dissented. To read the 166-page ruling, [click here](#).

If the court's ruling makes you feel like you're in an echo chamber, that's because you are.

Last summer, the conservative U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled Texas' voter ID law—broadly considered the strictest in the nation—violates the federal Voting Rights Act. The law stipulated the types of identification a voter may show in order to vote. Texas' list of acceptable identification documents was the shortest in the nation.

Common denominator

The common denominator of these rulings is an overt attempt to suppress voting by racial minorities, particularly African-Americans and Latinos.

What's so embarrassing is the hypocrisy of it all. Texas prides itself on being one of the most religious—and down here, that pretty much means Christian—states in the nation. Our politicians often campaign, at least in part, on their devout faith. We make ourselves feel good by reminding ourselves, and others, of how much we love Jesus and how strictly we follow the Ten Commandments.

And yet, collectively, we lead the nation in suppressing the vote of racial and ethnic minorities. That action contradicts everything Jesus and the prophets said about how to treat our neighbors. When overtly religious people—and in our case, an entire culture—treat others dreadfully, not to mention illegally, we give Jesus a black eye.

Lead the charge

By the way, congressional gerrymandering is a bipartisan failure. In the case of Texas, Republicans are in charge, but Democrats often go along with the charade in order to create safe districts for their members. Gerrymandering is one of the primary reasons voters in the general election often face such poor choices. The system ensures only the most extreme candidates emerge from the primaries.

Baptists—who claim the gospel is good news for all people—should lead the charge for reform. We must champion fair, representative districts, as well as equal opportunity for all citizens to cast their ballots.

Too often, Christians, particularly evangelicals, yield to temptation and narrow their range of responsibility for others to evangelism and possibly benevolence. But if we fail to address the systemic evils that repress others and deny them justice, we (a) fail to follow the teachings of Jesus and (b) undermine the gospel.

After all, we can't expect to invite others to heaven if we give them hell on earth.

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