

States in Focus: Texas



Due to the Texas Secretary of State's office declining to provide 2016 polling place information for the state, our sample was limited to only counties that make this information publicly available on their web sites. Our survey includes 134 of the state's 254 counties

For six counties that we couldn't find 2012 data for, we benchmarked closures to the 2014 off-year elections. Those counties are Carson, El Paso, Fort Bend, Hood, Kinney, and Sherman.

Only 53 percent of Texas counties were included in the overall survey due to lack of available data.

Almost half of all Texas counties in our sample closed polling places *since Shelby*, resulting in 403 fewer voting locations for the 2016 election than in past years. These closures come as the state's voter ID law has become a leading example of voting discrimination since *Shelby* and include reductions in counties like Medina, Caldwell, and Galveston—each with established records of discrimination and recent violations of the Voting Rights Act. Because our sample of counties in Texas is limited to only 134 of the state's 254 counties, this number represents a fraction of potential polling place closures throughout the state.

Galveston County is an example of how **voters of color are especially at risk** of being disenfranchised without Section 5.

In many instances, the reductions are a result of a state-wide shift toward consolidating voting in vote centers, instead of relying on traditional neighborhood polling places. With vote centers, counties reduce the number of polling places but allow voters to cast ballots at any of the remaining voting locations in the county. As of the 2016 presidential primary, 39 counties in Texas had converted from neighborhood polling sites to vote centers.³⁶

While this move to vote centers can have real benefits for the county and voters, in those counties where there is a history of racial discrimination against voters, the

fact that these changes can be made without federal oversight is troubling.

These closures come as the state has become a leading example of voting discrimination since *Shelby*. Within hours of the *Shelby* decision, the state announced that its photo ID law—which had previously been blocked under Section 5 as discriminatory—would take effect immediately.³⁷ The state continued to press for the law, which would disenfranchise 600,000 registered and a million eligible Texas voters according to LDF, until four federal courts all concluded it discriminates against Black and Latino voters.³⁸

Texas counties hold five of the top ten spots in the country for the greatest reductions in polling places, with Williamson closing 35, Nueces closing 29, McLennan closing 27, Brazoria closing 24, and Fort Bend closing 18 voting locations.

In terms of closure percentages, Texas counties are also leaders, with Fisher (60 percent), Medina (54 percent), Aransas (50 percent), Coke (50 percent), Irion (50 percent), Coryell (47 percent), and McLennan (46 percent) counties all in the top ten for greatest proportion of polling place closures.

Counties in Focus: Galveston County, Texas

Galveston County, where 16 percent of polling places have closed, is an example of how voters of color are at risk of being disenfranchised without Section 5. The county was one of the many to convert to vote centers that resulted in the elimination of seven polling places, but Galveston's record of voting discrimination should put

such changes under heightened scrutiny. Within months of the *Shelby* decision, the county announced that it would bring back a plan that the Department of Justice previously rejected during pre-clearance for eliminating opportunities for Black and Latino voters to elect Justices of the Peace and Constables. Despite growth in both the Latino and Black communities, the county eliminated half of the districts for these offices over the objections of local advocates.³⁹ In 2015, the Galveston City Council attempted to switch several of its seats from districts, which allows for more minority representation, to at-large elections,⁴⁰ but local advocates beat back the change.