

Opinion: Voting Rights Act still matters

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Next month the Supreme Court will consider a controversy over congressional redistricting in Texas that will highlight the importance of a crucial part of the 1965 Voting Rights Act: Section 5, which requires states and localities with a history of voting discrimination to “pre-clear” changes in their election practices with the Justice Department or a federal court. In 2009 the court declined to rule on the constitutionality of Section 5, but it could return to the issue. If they are in any doubt about the continued need for it, they should read a recent speech by Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr.

Holder did not confine his remarks to Section 5. He spoke more generally about contemporary threats to the voting rights of minorities, who decades ago took what Holder called “extraordinary risks, and willingly confronted hatred, bias and ignorance – as well as billy clubs and fire hoses, bullets and bombs” – to ensure the right of all Americans to vote. But he emphasized Section 5 and offered an example: In October, the Justice Department forced changes in a redistricting map in a Louisiana parish that had been approved without participation by African American officeholders and diminished the voting strength of blacks. Another example emerged Friday when the Justice Department used Section 5 to reject a new South Carolina law requiring voters to show photo ID at the polls, saying the law made it harder for minorities to vote.

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