

WA Supreme Court is clear: Fix discriminatory election systems

June 29, 2023 at 2:02 pm



Ballots are sorted at King County Elections headquarters in Renton last November. (Erika Schultz / The Seattle Times, 2022)

By [The Seattle Times editorial board](#)

The Washington Supreme Court's rejection of a challenge to the state's Voting Rights Act of 2018 should send a loud message to counties and cities across the state: compliance with the act is non-negotiable.

The court recently rejected a lawsuit involving Franklin County and its use of an at-large voting system to elect its county commissioners. Franklin County hasn't elected a Latino candidate to its three-member board of commissioners in 20 years, despite 34% of eligible voters and 52% of the county's total population being Latino.

The Washington Voting Rights Act was created to provide assurances to voters of color that they will have equal and fair opportunities to elect candidates of their choice. It

offers counties and cities the chance to correct their systems before they are hit with a court order forcing them to.

Like the majority of Washington's cities and counties, Franklin County for years has had a hybrid voting system — the primary was held by districts but the general election was at-large. In 2020, Latino voters challenged the county's system in state court under the premise that at-large elections can stifle the voting power of a large swath of the electorate. Both parties settled the lawsuit and the county agreed to create districts for the primary and general, a remedy prescribed by the voting law.

But a county resident challenged the law and thus the settlement. James Gimenez claimed the law runs afoul of the U.S. Constitution. Rightly, Washington's Supreme Court disagreed.

The state's role is to protect the sanctity of the vote for all, and encourage voter participation. It has done just that with vote-by-mail and with the Voting Rights Act.

There have been unofficial challenges to mail-in voting, mainly during the 2020 voting cycle, and now officially to the Voting Rights Act.

Under the 2018 law, counties and cities can voluntarily switch from at-large systems to districts and avoid costly litigation, which will surely come. Those who haven't should look to Franklin County and act before any future litigation.

Local taxpayers deserve it, but more importantly, so do its voters.

The Seattle Times editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Melissa Davis, Alex Fryer, Claudia Rowe, David Volodzko, Carlton Winfrey and William K. Blethen (emeritus).