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OPINION

Defending Voting Rights across the Nation

A commitment to equality and opportunity

BY MARC H. MORIAL

A federal court this month dealt a blow to Texas' efforts to disenfranchise voters of color.

Texas' draconian 2011 voter identification law has now been struck down for the fifth time. Among the attorneys representing the plaintiffs, Texas State Conference of NAACP Branches and the Mexican American Legislative Caucus of the Texas House of Representatives, are the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, who have worked tirelessly to defend voting rights across the nation.

The U. S. District Court for



the Southern District of Texas determined the law intentionally discriminates against black and Latino voters. The determination raises the possibility that Texas voting procedures could be placed under federal supervision, as it was from the 1965 passage of the Voting Rights Act until the Supreme Court's disastrous 2013 gutting of the Act with its Shelby v. Holder decision.

The court found that when the Texas legislature considered the bill, the lawmakers were aware that only two people, out of 20 million votes cast in the previous decade, had been convicted of in-person voter fraud. Other, more common forms of voter fraud were not addressed by the bill.

The law was easily the most restrictive in the nation with respect to permitted identification.

A Texas state handgun license — which may be legally obtained by some non-U.S. citizens — is a permissible form of identification under the law, while a federal or state government ID, nor a student ID, are not.

The recent ruling was the second time Judge Nelva Gonzales Ramos had ruled on the law. At the 2014 trial, experts testified to Texas shameful history of suppressing minority voters, from reconstruction up to the present day. Between 1895 and 1944, Texas permitted all-white primary elections. From 1905 to 1970, Texas voters were prohibited from taking people with them to the polls to assist them in reading and interpreting the ballot. Between 1902 and 1966, Texas required a poll tax.

And even though the Voting Rights Act of 1965 put Texas' voting procedures under federal preclearance, Texas continued

discriminatory practices. When the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1971, Waller County — home to historically black Prairie View A&M University — prohibited students from voting unless they or their families owned property in the county. A court struck down the requirement in 1979, but Waller County continued attempting to enforce the law as recently as 2003.

Waller County violated the preclearance requirement during Barack Obama's 2008 campaign for President, improperly rejecting voter registrations and placing limits on the number of new registrations. The witnesses also noted that in every redistricting cycle since 1970, Texas has been found to have violated the Voting Rights Act with racially gerrymandered districts.

"Minorities continue to have to overcome fear and intimidation when they vote," Judge Ra-

mos wrote in her 2014 decision. "Reverend Johnson testified that there are still Anglos at the polls who demand that minority voters identify themselves, telling them that if they have ever gone to jail, they will go to prison if they vote. Additionally, there are poll watchers who dress in law enforcement-style clothing for an intimidating effect."

While we join other civil rights groups in celebrating the court's decision, Texas persistence in continuing its long history of racial discrimination against voters is disheartening. We call on Texas' leadership to heed the blindingly clear message that voter suppression is unacceptable in 21st Century America, and move forward with a commitment to equality and opportunity.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Congrats, Graduates! Here's Your Diploma and Debt

It doesn't have to be this way

BY CHUCK COLLINS

It's that time of year again. Flowers are flowering, spring is springing, and across the country college graduates are graduating with their newly awarded degrees held high.

Also high is the mountain of student debt most of these recent graduates are taking on. All told, 44 million Americans now owe student debt — including 7 in 10 graduating seniors last year, who owe an average of \$37,000.

If you're not one of those tens of millions of people, you might've missed how out of control student debt has become. Total student debt is approaching \$1.4 trillion, surpassing auto loans and credit card debt.

Between job searches and



apartment hunting, post-graduate life is already stressful — and student debt makes it worse. The average monthly payment for borrowers in their 20s is \$351.

If you're making minimum wage, that's 48 hours of work for your loans alone — never mind shelter and food. No wonder more than 4 in 10 have either

stopped making payments or fallen behind.

There is nothing positive about student debt.

Many indebted graduates begin their work lives with damaged credit histories and greater economic vulnerability. They're less able to start a business or work in public service. And they delay starting families and buying houses, which makes them less wealthy in the long run.

The only winners are the predatory loan servicing agencies.

One reason for the explosion of student debt is that states and the federal government have drastically cut education spending, forcing students and parents to pick up the costs. Public college spending is still \$10 billion below pre-recession levels.

To make things worse, Trump's secretary of education, billionaire Betsy DeVos, is reversing protections put in place by the Obama administration to protect student loan borrowers by regulating loan servicing companies and capping interest rates at 16 percent (at a time when bank loan rates are below 6 percent).

It shouldn't be this way. And it doesn't have to be.

Ask the millions of people who attended college between 1945 and 1975 and graduated with little or no debt. Millions of baby boomers paid tuition at the great flagship universities of this land just by working summer jobs. That wasn't on a different planet

— it was mere decades ago.

Some places are experimenting with new models. At the city level, San Francisco has taken the lead by creating a free tuition program for anyone who's lived in the city for at least a year, regardless of income. It's funded by a voter-approved tax on properties worth over \$5 million.

At the national level, Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Pramila Jayapal recently introduced the College for All Act, a plan Sanders got into the Democratic platform last summer. It would eliminate tuition and fees at public universities for those with incomes under \$125,000 — all paid for by a small sales tax on Wall

Street trades.

These ideas could mean a brighter future for students to come. But what about for those already crushed by debt?

For them, there's a silver lining. When you owe \$50,000, the bank owns you. But when the bank's trying to bleed you for \$1.4 trillion, you own the bank.

It's time for the 44 million student debt households to flex our muscles and demand change.

Chuck Collins is a senior scholar at the Institute for Policy Studies and a co-editor of *Inequality.org*. He's the author of the recent book *Born on Third Base*. Distributed by OtherWords.org.

Letter to the Editor

Not My Priorities

Republicans are against increasing the minimum wage, the working class, the middle class, women, funding K-16 education; social security, seniors, blacks, Hispanics, Muslims, universal health care, voter rights, endangered species, renewable energy, and global warming. In addition,

they call the media "the enemy of the people."

Republicans are pro gun, torture, more nuclear weapons, big oil, cigarette manufacturers, all corporations, Russia, non-taxed foreign bank accounts, the top one-percent, building a border wall of over 1,000 miles, and billionaires.

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