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BY JASON VILLALBA | APR 11, 2021

Texas election legislation would prevent my Grandma Villalba from voting

Thanks to drive-through voting, my family has helped my grandmother continue to vote into her 90s.

With her twisted fingers shaking delicately as she grasped the pen, my 90-year-old grandmother signed her name to the ballot, voting for her grandson, Jason Villalba, to be the next mayor of Dallas. She can't walk more than a few feet at a time these days, but from the comfort of my air-conditioned car two years ago, Grandma Villalba proudly voted for me.

The cracked smile on her weathered visage filled my heart with a joy that I had never felt as an elected official. As a three-term member of the Texas House, I had won elections. However, never before had I experienced the honor of watching my own dear grandmother vote for me.

My grandmother, like so many other elderly people in Texas, relies on absentee voting, drive-through voting, early voting and other alternative means to cast her ballot. Grandma would leap for joy if she could get in line to vote at a polling center on Election Day like other Texans. But because of her physical limitations, it's just not possible any longer.

Texas Senate Bill 7 would eliminate some of the conveniences that allow people who struggle with traditional polling places to vote, such as drive-through voting, 24-hour polling places and official reminders for people to apply for absentee ballots. The bill makes a ham-handed attempt to solve a problem that hardly exists.

Verifiable voter fraud in Texas is almost non-existent. In the last two election cycles, when millions of votes were cast, there were almost no claims, indictments, or violations of Texas election laws. Where credible violations of election laws were found, in no instance would such violations have affected the outcome of the election. Based on the filed cases, the data and the facts, election fraud is simply not a problem in Texas.



The proponents of these new voting laws say they are intended to protect the integrity of our election systems. As a former Republican elected official, I can look you straight in the eye and tell you that that claim is nonsense. I expect the bills mostly appeal to a tiny fraction of Republican voters who vote in the Republican Party Primary.

Grandma Villalba was born in deep West Texas to Mexican farmers. She worked two jobs, went to night school to earn her certification to become a medical care provider, supported an alcoholic and sometimes absentee husband, and raised 10 children to become productive members of Texas: policemen, firefighters, truck drivers, airplane mechanics, members of the armed forces, and various other professions. She paid her taxes, never broke the law, and did the best she could to provide for her family.

My abuelita deserves to exercise her right to vote.

My father and I began planning for the big day about a week in advance because grandma cannot always get along without assistance. Pops and I coordinated when we would arrive, how we would get grandma to the car, who would help us, where we would drive-through vote, and how we would get her home safely.

On election day everything went perfectly. With the help of my father, my mother, one of my uncles, my two daughters, and the amazing poll workers in Oak Cliff, Grandma Villalba voted. It was a special day for me and I am forever grateful for all of the many people that made that day possible.

Not everyone has my grandmother's support system. If drive-through voting is shut down or if extended voting hours are limited, as the proposed legislation would mandate, thousands of Texans, including my grandmother, will never have the opportunity to vote.

Likewise, if absentee voting is made so difficult or so complicated that some cannot comprehend the new protocols, the result will be that voting-eligible American citizens like my grandmother, who happen to be elderly, disabled, non-English speaking or poor, will not have the opportunity to vote in Texas.

Our democracy is built upon the bedrock belief that voting is a fundamental right. Division and disenfranchisement are the tools of a bygone and ugly era of American history. True Texans stand for representative democracy and inclusion.

Grandma Villalba has the right to vote for the person of her choosing. I am prayerful that her fellow citizens defend that right. There is no other just alternative.

Jason Villalba is chairman of the Texas Hispanic Policy Foundation and formerly represented Dallas in the Texas House. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.