

Texas and the segregation that never ended

One of Simone de Beauvoir's most famous quotes says that "A political, economic, or religious crisis is enough for women's rights to be questioned." It is now 35 years since the philosopher's death and the phrase is still valid. Simone does not mention black people, LGBTs, immigrants, and people in social vulnerability, but all of these people also need to "remain vigilant throughout their lives."

Brazil has just seen an attempt to pass the Distritão, a bill that made it difficult to renew the Legislative Houses, composed mostly of white men from political oligarchies. If it is no longer possible to create laws forbidding women and black people to vote, making it harder for them to do so has become increasingly common. Brazil managed to prevent the Distritão from being passed. Texas was not able to stop its electoral reform.

The new law passed, which is basically election reform, is the revision of the same law that the Republicans have already been trying to pass for over six months. SB1, as passed, is extremely similar to SB7, which was not passed in May of this year.

To understand, we first need to talk about how the voting process works in Texas. For starters, there is no regulated campaign time. Former President Donald Trump filed his re-election papers on his first day as president of the United States, which already qualified him to campaign for his second term, even though the election wasn't until four years later. After going through the preliminary process, where each party decides who will be its candidate in the election, we have the "second round" of elections, where people vote for any candidate from any party.

Unlike Brazil, which has two rounds with only one voting day, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., the voting process in Texas and other states is prolonged. Each state has its own particularities, but in Texas it is possible both to vote in advance at an electoral college and to vote by mail. In the last election, early voting began 20 days before the official voting day. This voting method shows its positive results: in the last election early voting votes alone accounted for more votes than all the votes in the State of Texas in the 2016 election: 8% more votes, not counting in-person votes on election day. With Texas being the second largest Electoral College in the United States, this is very relevant. Because it means that people are going to vote and are willing to debate what project of country they want to help build.

The last election in the United States took place on November 3, 2020. It was a Tuesday, a working day, where workers are at their jobs, students are in class, families are taking care of their children. Voting in the United States is on paper, which makes the line less agile. It is normal for people to stand in line for more than two hours to get to vote. Early voting and voting by mail has reduced this time, made it easier for people with heavy work routines and long hours of service. And we know who usually occupies these precarious jobs: the black population and immigrants.

One of the facilities in the voting process that are no longer allowed is the drive-thru voting, which made it simple for people to vote by going from one place to another. In Harris County alone almost 130,000 people voted this way. A survey by the Texas Civil Rights Project showed that half of the voters who used drive-thru voting were black, Hispanic, or Asian. Another convenience in the voting process was that the polls were open 24 hours a day. With much mobilization they managed to keep the polls open from 6 am until 10 pm. Sunday, a day of high attendance, because black churches hold events to promote voting, the polls would only be open after 1pm. The

significant mobilization of the black and immigrant movement managed to prevent this setback and direct attack on the most marginalized population. The same research by the Texas Civil Rights Project showed that those who benefited from the early morning polls were black, Hispanic, and Asian voters.

The form of voting that is growing the most in the United States is vote by mail. Each state has its specific rules, and Texas' was already one of the strictest. While in places like New York all voters receive absentee ballots at home, as an incentive to vote, in Texas you have to justify why you are voting this way, making the process slower. With the new law the procedure for requesting a absentee ballot has become even more bureaucratic. People over 65 used to receive a absentee ballot without having to request it, since it is a way to make it easier for them to vote. This, too, is now forbidden. There is a strong campaign that this form of voting facilitates fraud in the vote count, a campaign stirred up mainly by Trump and his followers. No fraud has ever been proven.

Being a traditionally Republican state, there have been more than a few cases of election inspectors not cooperating with the proper procedure of voting in polls that were predicted to have a majority Democratic vote. One of the main allegations of alleged fraud in the 2020 election by Trump was that Democratic inspectors would be corrupting the votes. Nothing was proven. So the law was changed, expanding the participation of inspectors, which might seem like an advance. But the law is extremely intimidating, gives an excessive amount of power to the chief inspector of the electoral colleges, and causes a climate of fear in the spaces. People with reading difficulties are helped at voting time, with some inspector reading the ballot. If another inspector considers that he has influenced the vote, this can be reversed into imprisonment or a payment of up to four thousand dollars in punishment. Public officials who mistakenly send out an early voting ballot can get up to 180 days in jail. In the end, this

only served one purpose: to discourage qualified inspectors from working in elections, for fear of being arrested for minor mistakes or even political provocation.

A monthly check that those registered to vote are actually Texas residents also went into effect. It is normal, even here in Brazil, for your polling place to remain the same for years, even if you move. In Texas this is now prohibited. If you don't confirm every month that you are a resident of Texas, you lose your right to vote in the state. But the verification is extremely flawed, and can disenfranchise people with the same name for a mere bureaucratic mistake.

One of the main fights was over erasures and possible errors in the absentee ballot. Voters only receive one ballot, and it is normal that they make some mistakes. The initial proposal was to increase the rigidity with possible errors, making it almost impossible to vote in these situations. The amendment fell.

The fight over expanding the law is likely to continue, and has been going on for some time. As recently as early 2019 the then Texas Secretary of State, Republican David Whitley, released a list of one hundred thousand voters he believed were not American citizens, in an obvious attack on the immigrant population. The list proved to be almost entirely wrong. Whitley was eventually fired, but soon after reinstated to a high-paying position in the office of Republican Governor Greg Abbott, the mastermind behind the bill.

The Texas case is not the first. Since the outcome of the last election Republicans have introduced very similar bills that act to, in effect, restrict minority voting rights. The Brennan Center for Justice institute has done a survey that shows that at least 250 bills, in 43 states, have been introduced as of February of this year with the intention of purging voting rights.

One of the most emblematic cases is Georgia. The state, traditionally Republican, had a Democratic victory in the last elections. The response from Republican lawmakers came quickly: an even more radical change in election laws. The number of polling places was reduced, the sending of absentee ballots by mail was prohibited by law, it became even more bureaucratic to register to vote, and the distribution of water and food in the lines was prohibited. And a fine of up to twenty-five thousand dollars was stipulated for anyone breaking this law. It is common for organizations to do this to encourage people to stay in line and vote, since voting usually takes several hours.

Voting is not capable, by itself, of solving all the problems of politically underrepresented populations. But political campaigns are capable of generating social mobilization, uniting people to the same project, strengthening unions, anti-racist, feminist actions, etc. And they are even capable of electing candidates who are a megaphone for these struggles. While it is true that one swallow alone does not make a summer, we have today in the United States a bunch of senators, congressmen and councilmen committed to the anti-capitalist struggle. And they manage, sometimes, to push the Democratic Party to take on certain struggles on the left. The Texas state legislators managed, using devices created by the bourgeoisie itself, to prevent an even greater regression. Slavery is over, but new underground railroads are still necessary.

Mobilization needs to increase. The organized actions of the Republican Party are a response to the mobilization of indignant youth across America. Never before have so many young people declared themselves socialists. Parties like the DSA keep growing, building avowedly socialist campaigns and lifting the bricks of another model of society. As Sojourner Truth, black abolitionist activist for women's suffrage and civil rights for black people said, "If it's not a fit place

for women, it's unfit for men to be there."