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5 on 45

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

AKEE: I'm Randy Akee, I'm a fellow in the Economic Studies Division of Brookings Institution, and I'm talking to you today about the change in the North Dakota voting requirements that has recently come about from a U.S. Supreme Court decision. The change in the voting law requires voters to present state or other ID that contains a street address in order to vote. And this is particularly problematic for people who live on American Indian reservations in North Dakota, most of whom are American Indian of course. Typically these individuals tend to have P.O. boxes instead of street addresses. As a result in this change in the voting requirement law could disenfranchise thousands of potential voters. And in North Dakota, there are approximately 27,000 American Indians eligible to vote, obviously not all of them live on reservations, but a sizable proportion do, and it's large enough that it could sway some very close elections in this upcoming midterm election.

For instance in 2012 when Senator Heitkamp won her race for Senate, she won it by only a margin of about 3,000 votes. And so one can imagine in this particular case coming up. The vote in the state is potentially a pivotal one amongst American Indians. Primarily because American Indians tend to vote Democratic. And one might ask, why is it that there aren't any street addresses on reservation in the first place? Well for that, you have to go back in history to understand. What reservations were originally intended to do? They weren't meant to be homesteads, they were meant to be prisons. The U.S. pushed American Indians onto reserved pieces of land, which we call reservations, in an effort to confine the population, and there's no need for addresses in a prison obviously. They were originally administered for instance by the U.S. Department of War, which we now call the Department of Defense. And these reservation lands were patrolled by

soldiers, so they were in effect, prisons, there were no need for street addresses. And that's persisted to some extent to the current time. And you should also sort of understand that American Indians didn't actually get the right to vote until 1924. So it's been less than a century that they've been allowed to participate in the voting process. And that's why this particular turn of events of disenfranchising Native Americans on reservations is so distasteful. It's a return to earlier policies and practices that used to exist. Maybe just not nearly as explicit as it used to be, but is still having potentially the same impact on the same populations. And one can imagine potentially this spilling over into other states or jurisdictions where political motivations toward.

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