

Justice Department will send a watchdog to monitor San Juan County's election

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The U.S. Justice Department will send a watchdog to San Juan County on Tuesday to monitor polls in the rural southeast corner of Utah as it holds its first election under new boundaries meant to realign political influence there to those in the majority population: American Indians.

The announcement comes after months of tensions leading up to Election Day in the county, including [accusations that the clerk's office has purposely ignored](#) the court-ordered redistricting, that hundreds of residents have received incorrect ballots and that a Navajo and Democratic candidate [wasn't qualified to run for an open commission seat](#). Those issues have previously prompted the ACLU of Utah and the state elections office, too, to pledge to send their own staff there to observe. The county's administrator, Kelly Pehrson, said Monday that he welcomed the oversight.

"San Juan County elections have been monitored by the DOJ for decades," he said in a statement. "They have never found anything wrong with how San Juan County elections are administered."

A federal judge ordered in December that the county conduct a special election under redrawn boundaries that give Navajos, who tend to affiliate as Democrats, a significant majority of voters in two of three commission districts and three of five school board seats. The decision was meant to reverse the historic political domination by whites there where the population is slightly more than half Native American.

[But it has worried Republicans](#), who for three decades have been the dominant political party in the county and are now looking at potentially losing their hold over it.

Wendy Black, a GOP candidate who lost her bid at convention to run for the commission seat in District 2, for instance, filed a complaint against Navajo Willie Grayeyes, who is running for the same spot and won the Democratic nomination. She claimed he didn't live in Utah and therefore couldn't run.

County officials, most of whom are Republican, then booted Grayeyes from the ballot, saying they, too, couldn't find his home within the Utah portion of the Navajo reservation. But a federal judge ordered them to put his name back on in August, saying the county clerk [likely backdated evidence in the case](#). [With Grayeyes' name on the ballot](#), San Juan County faces the possibility that its commission will feature two Navajo Democrats— both prominent backers of the former Bears Ears National Monument there that President Donald Trump slashed into two smaller designations last year.

A group of Navajo plaintiffs lost a bid to reopen the redistricting case this summer after saying many on the reservation didn't receive ballots or got incorrect ones. The judge said the county was working to implement the order but that it would take time. Tuesday's election will serve as the test of that.

San Juan County is one of 35 jurisdictions spread over 19 states where the Justice Department will send monitors from its Civil Rights Division for Election Day. Those staff members will be available by telephone to receive complaints and can be reached at 1-800-253-3931. They will be gathering information, according to a news release, on whether voters are subjected to different qualifications or procedures based on "race, color or membership in a language minority group." They will also be watching for violations of language provisions — which in San Juan include providing Navajo translations of the ballot.

"Voting rights are constitutional rights, and they're part of what it means to be an American," Attorney General Jeff Sessions said in a statement. "The Department of Justice has been entrusted with an indispensable role in securing these rights for the people of this nation."