

Testimony of Alejandro Rangel-Lopez
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Before the House Judiciary Committee
Kansas State House of Representatives

Hearing on SB172: Concerning New Penalties for Protests Near Gas and Oil Pipelines

March 17th, 2021

Chairman Patton, Vice Chairman Ralph, and Esteemed Members of the Committee:

Thank y'all so much for the opportunity to testify before this committee today regarding the passage of SB172 establishing new penalties for protests near gas and oil pipelines. In my short time on this green Earth of ours, I have had the opportunity to participate in free speech demonstrations in my hometown of Dodge City as well as KU where I am now attending to attain bachelor's degrees in Public Administration and Political Science. I know we may not see eye-to-eye on a lot of issues that I hold near and dear to my heart and that I have participated in demonstrations for but, I can assure you that both you and I agree on the importance of the First Amendment in maintaining the fragile balance keeping our republic afloat. It is the legality of peaceful protests that maintains order in this country and most of the time, prevents folks from resorting to violent means.

Vice Chairman Ralph and I know each other because he is my representative and in pre-COVID times, I was fortunate enough to have conversations with him on issues such as voting rights and poverty in Kansas. However for the other committee members, I would like to add some relevant background information on who I am and why I am with y'all here virtually on this fine Wednesday afternoon. I was born and raised in Dodge City, by my parents Martin & Lucia who work at National Beef and Cargill, respectively. They immigrated to the United States from Mexico in the mid-1990s, straight to Kansas, and straight to work. In Mexico, it ain't uncommon to hear about a group of student protestors go missing and mysteriously show up dead a couple months later after government officials (whom they demonstrated against) denied any culpability. That's why whenever I tell them, "Hey, I'm going to a protest today for x reason", they get extremely worried and continuously call and text me during the demonstration to make sure I'm alright. To make sure that I don't wind up missing and God forbid, dead.

After more than two decades of living in the U.S., they still worry about that sort of stuff. Luckily for me, I know that we have a right to free speech, and we're protected from rogue officials by the courts as well as system of checks and balances. But with SB172, I'm worried that we're beginning the slippery slope towards a "Mexico scenario".

To say the least, the First Amendment, and its guarantees of protections for free speech and free assembly, are necessary components of our democracy; of accountability. Kansans have a track record of standing by our Constitution and of pushing for righteousness even when it wasn't politically expedient yet to do so. We stood at the forefront of the movement against slavery, in the movement towards women's suffrage, and again in the 50s and 60s in pursuing Civil Rights. Peaceful protests and civil disobedience are the bedrock of our state and allow us to continue to strive towards a better tomorrow.

Without protest and civil disobedience, the march towards equality would have been much longer and more arduous or would have never occurred at all. Pick any issue area and you'll see that popular movements had been key to garnering attention and support for governmental action. I know that these two cornerstones of our republic are often seen as liberal tools of agitation however, I do want to note and recall the many issues conservatives hold close have also been pushed forward by their use.

In closing, I want to urge you to vote against SB172 and remember that above all political goals, the defense and preservation of our Constitution and the ideals conveyed within it come first. While this bill may prove beneficial for you in the short-term, there is also a strong potential that tactics used within it may also be cited as rationale to penalize demonstrations *you* may hold dear to your heart.

Thank you all for your time and I hope you take my testimony into consideration in your decision.