

I'm an Elections Monitor. The United States Isn't Like Other Countries.

Many other countries make it easy for incarcerated people to vote.

By Aubrey Menarndt

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As the Democratic candidates debate whether current and former prisoners should be allowed to vote, it's worth recalling that many other countries make it easy for incarcerated people to do it.

I've represented the United States throughout the world as an international elections monitor, visiting polling stations, talking to elections officials and helping international teams assess whether elections are free and fair.

The United States is an outlier. Its suppression of voting rights for more than [6.1 million](#) people with current or former felony convictions violates human rights and weakens our democracy.

I wish our lawmakers who wrongly approve of this could see what I've seen — especially [the Florida Republicans who just passed a bill](#) undercutting a constitutional amendment restoring the franchise for people with former felony convictions.

In Europe, prisoners' voting rights are protected by the European Convention on Human Rights. [Twenty-six](#) European countries at least partially protect their incarcerated citizens' right to vote during their prison terms. Eighteen countries grant prisoners the vote regardless of their offense.

In 2005, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Britain's blanket ban on voting by prisoners was a violation of human rights, and two years ago Britain started allowing a small number of inmates to cast ballots.

In 2002, the Canadian Supreme Court also protected its prisoners' right to vote. South Africa has repeatedly reaffirmed the voting rights of its felons, and in 2010, Kenya guaranteed the same.

In democracies the world over, being incarcerated does not strip someone of citizenship and the voting rights that come with it. Instead, while people are being punished for their crimes, they are encouraged to take their duties as citizens in a democracy seriously.

In North Macedonia, the day before elections are held for the general public, polling stations are set up inside the country's 13 prisons, and inmates voluntarily line up to vote in turn. Ballots are brought from each prisoner's home voting district so that they can vote in their proper municipality. Ahead of the country's recent referendum, election administrators even created a program to renew expired voting documents for incarcerated people.

In Ukraine's presidential elections last month, prisons held voter-education programs so that inmates could learn about each of the candidates' policy platforms.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where citizens live with the trauma of ethnic cleansing, prisoners can vote unless their crimes pertain to the Bosnian War of the early 1990s. Those who have been convicted of unrelated crimes cast their ballots in prison polling stations. But as in North Macedonia, their votes count in the district of their permanent residence.

Portugal's prisoners have the right to vote unless they have been convicted of a crime that targets the state or democratic order, like terrorism or political violence (Germany and Norway have similar rules). Portuguese prisoners can exercise their voting rights by requesting and then remitting their ballot by mail. In Ireland and Lithuania, prisoners also vote by mail.

In election assessments, observers do not merely look for stuffed ballot boxes or irregularities in vote counting — we try to understand whether a country is doing its best to make sure that all of its citizens who want to are able to cast a vote. Seeing other countries' election processes through American eyes has given me insight into our country's failure at making the election process as accessible as possible and the politicization of what in other places are routine features of election administration. In my travels, I've never seen an election held on a weekday or federal holiday — other countries know that workers need time off to vote. I've also never seen a significant line in a non-American polling station — the number of polling stations needed are calculated based on population and are allocated accordingly.

I've seen election officials go to great lengths to collect a single vote. In the Republic of Georgia, I once watched a team of election administrators build a makeshift bridge over a stream to reach the remote farm home of an elderly homebound voter.

In the United States, only Vermont and Maine allow prisoners to vote. [Twelve American states](#) still block former felons from ever voting again, even once they have completed their prison sentence and are no longer on probation or parole. This type of total [restriction](#) exists in very few democracies worldwide. Armenia and Chile have similar laws, and Belgium disenfranchises felons whose sentence was longer than seven years. The United Nations [has said](#) that the American policy is discriminatory and violates international law.

The United States' restriction of felons' voting rights is especially problematic given the country's disproportionate incarceration of black people, especially black men.

The [Prison Policy Institute](#) calculates that the United States' prison system costs taxpayers \$182 billion annually — that's larger than the [G.D.P.](#) of 134 countries. Prisoners, who have an inside view into these oftentimes opaque systems, should be voting on the laws and elected officials who govern their existence.

This disagreement over felon voting rights gets to the heart of what we believe to be the purpose of prison. Do we, like Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, who was running for president, believe that prison is simply meant to be a punishment that includes the restriction of rights? Or do we want our prisons to be places for rehabilitation where those who have violated our laws can learn to be good citizens once more?

Prison should be rehabilitating, re-educating and providing prisoners with the skills they need to reintegrate into society upon their release. Engaging in civic duties such as voting should be model behavior we teach in prisons and encourage in our citizens.

For the United States to continue to be a democratic leader in the world, we must reaffirm our commitment to the right to vote for all our citizens and expand our voting rights in line with the standards set by our fellow democracies.

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