

# When more people vote, democracy wins



**Janet Johnson**

Guest Columnist

**By Janet Johnson**

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Voting is an essential part of democracy. That it even needs to be said is mind boggling, but that is where we are in America.

A bill was recently proposed in the United States House of Representatives, For the People Act, which contained a slew of reforms, among which was a

proposal that election day be a federal holiday. Sen. Mitch McConnell called it a “rewrite” of the rules of American politics for the benefit of the Democratic Party. Huh? People voting benefits one party?

That is not what the framers of the Constitution thought. “The time, places and manner of holding elections for senators and representatives, shall be prescribed in each state by the Legislature thereof; but Congress may at any time make or alter such regulations.” Article I, section 4, clause 1.

Despite this power, in the United States, there are no federal laws mandating that employees get time off to cast their ballots. When faced with the choice of taking unpaid time off of work to vote, and the

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prospect of standing in long lines to cast a ballot, almost half of all Americans choose not to vote, as seen in the 2016 presidential election. Some countries, including Belgium and Turkey, have compulsory voting laws, according to a November 2018 article on Business Insider.

Why is any of this controversial? Last November, here in Florida, 64 percent of voters overturned the state's constitutional voting ban on ex-felons. Amendment 4 automatically restores voting rights for people convicted of certain felonies after they have completed their sentences, including any probation or payment of restitution. Amendment 4 does not apply to those convicted of sexual offenses or murders. Before Amendment 4, the only way someone convicted of a felony in Florida could get his or her rights restored was to wait five to seven years and then apply to the governor for clemency. The average person waited up to 10 years just to get a response to his or her application, according to a November 2018 article in the Orlando Sentinel.

Both red and blue states have lifted barriers to the ballot for those who have served their time. 1.4 million Floridians will now be eligible to vote because of Amendment 4. These are our neighbors,

friends and relatives.

So why not make it easier to vote? State lawmakers across the country have either filed or pre-filed at least 230 bills expanding access to the ballot for millions, according to a recent article on Governing.com. In fact, laws aimed at increasing voter access have outpaced laws designed to make it tougher, and allegedly more secure, to vote. The For the People Act would put in place nationwide automatic voter registration, promote online voter registration, require same-day registration for federal elections, stop some voter purging and restore voting rights for ex-felons. Automatic voter registration, where voters have to opt out of registering to vote when they visit a DMV, has been enacted in 16 states and the District of Columbia, per Governing.com. Seventeen states and D.C. allow same-day registration.

Why shouldn't this appeal to all political parties? If politicians don't welcome expanding access to the ballot box, maybe they are not "for the people"?

***Janet Johnson is a criminal defense attorney in Jacksonville who practices in state and federal courts. White collar crimes, including fraud, embezzlement and tax evasion, are among her areas of expertise. She is rated AV Preeminent on attorney rating website Martindale-Hubbell and has been named to the American Institute of Criminal Law Attorneys' Top 10 Best Attorneys list. Johnson is also a legal analyst for CNN and HLN.***