

EDITORIAL

Voting Rights, Human Rights

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The United States has the worst record in the democratic world when it comes to stripping convicted felons of the right to vote. Of the nearly five million people who were barred from participating in the last presidential election, for example, most, if not all, would have been free to vote if they had been citizens of any one of dozens of other nations. Many of those nations cherish the franchise so deeply that they let inmates vote from their prison cells.

Courts outside this country are actually expanding the rights of prison inmates to cast ballots, on the theory that the right to vote is a basic human right that should be abridged only after careful deliberation and under the rarest circumstances. That message was underscored last week in a strong ruling by the European Court of Human Rights, which has jurisdiction in the nations that are parties to the European Convention, a rights charter drafted more than a half-century ago.

The European court overturned a British law that banned all convicted prison inmates from voting. The British law, however, is far less onerous than laws in the United States, which imprisons people at five times the rate of Britain and disenfranchises millions, many of them permanently.

The European court recognized that nations have the right to limit voting in some cases, but it condemned blanket prohibitions as unacceptable. This ruling includes a clear warning to the dozen other European Convention countries that prohibit voting for convicted prisoners or have no provisions for allowing inmates to participate in elections. Laws that deny citizens access to the polls should be employed only after painstaking deliberation - if at all - and never in a fashion that bars an entire class of people from the polls.

This issue deserves a full hearing in the United States, which shows less regard for the rights of prisoners and ex-offenders than just about any of its peers.