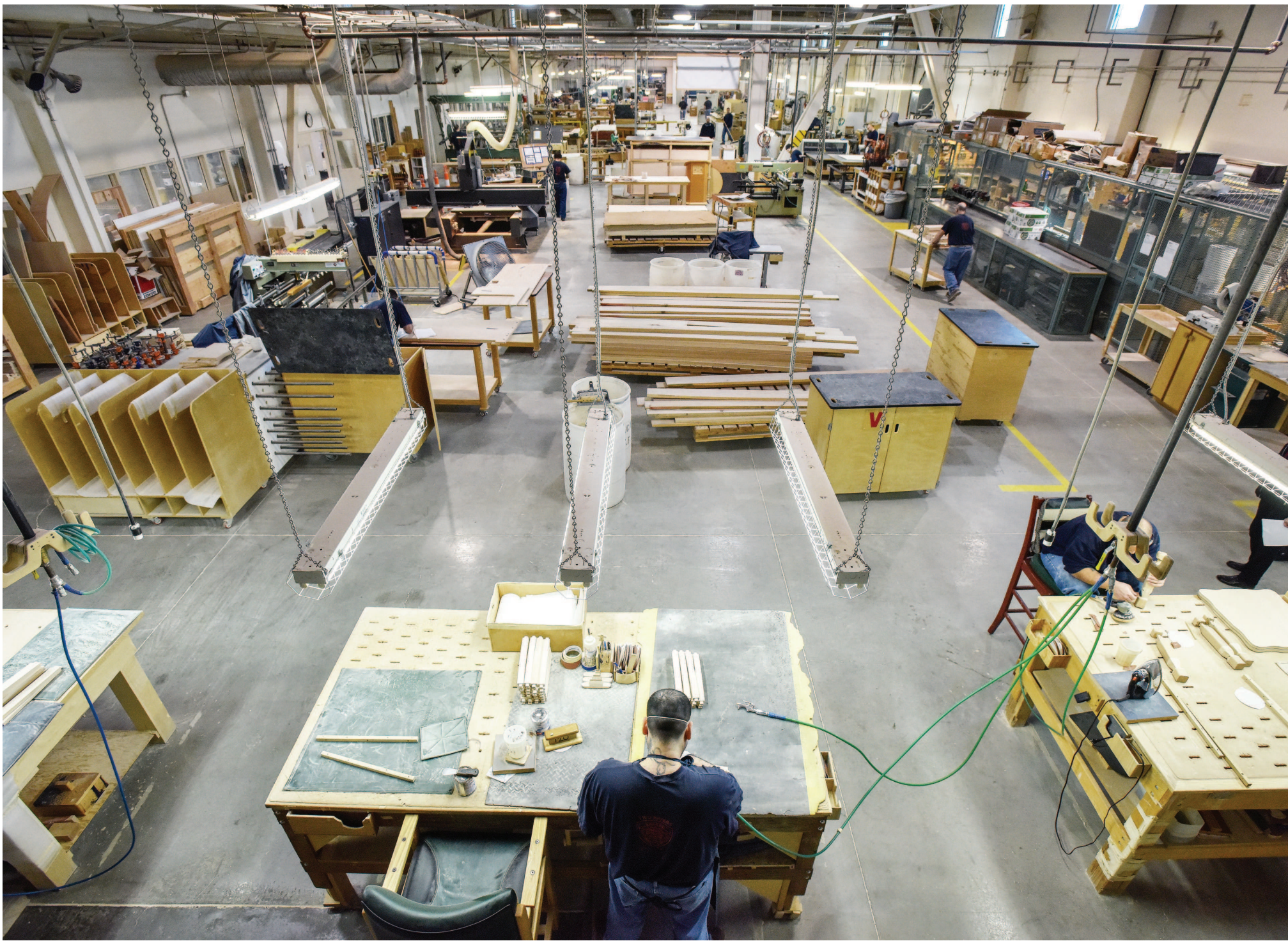


# Is it time to allow America's huge prison population to vote?



E.J. Harris/East Oregonian

Inmates make furniture in the wood shop at Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla.

## PRO: Allowing prisoners to vote would reform America's outdated prison policies

By Amani Sawari

**S**EATTLE — Since the U.S. was established, there has never been a time in history where all its citizens could vote.

At first, only property-owning white men 21 and over could vote.

In 1868 the right to vote was white men who were 21 and older.

It wasn't until 1870 that black men were allowed to vote. It took another 50 years before women could vote.

Native Americans were disenfranchised until less than 100 years ago. Today more than 6 million citizens are still disqualified from voting as a result of their incarceration.

This new suffrage movement has arisen because more and more Americans have come to realize our democracy is flawed due to these draconian practices that inconsistently restrict citizens' civil liberties.

Many other democratic nations including Canada, Israel, Germany, Norway, South Africa and Spain fully enfranchise their incarcerated population by allowing prisoners to vote.

Incarcerated citizens have intimate knowledge of the criminal justice system that prison officials, staff and outside citizens don't.

We fail to take advantage of their direct experience to shape policy when we do not take their vote into consideration.

Prisoners' desire, for example, to make our nation's corrections facilities safer, rehabilitative and more effective far outweigh that of other citizens because their lives depend on it.

We, as a nation, cheat ourselves of the opportunity to shape our system around what works for impacted populations when we do not incorporate their votes.

Currently there is no one held responsible for the deplorable, volatile conditions of our nation's overcrowded prisons. Prisoners having their voting rights restored would make politicians accountable to prisoners and the conditions of our nation's prisons.

Restoring prisoners' right to vote

could also reduce recidivism rates. Fifty-four percent — more than half of citizens impacted by incarceration — believe that voting would help them stay out of federal and state prisons and local jails after their internment.

Citizens participating in their society with a feeling of belonging because they are included in the development of law and public policy are less likely to commit crimes against it.

A main issue for citizens reintegrating from prison is their lack of knowledge in the many ways that society has changed by the time of their release. We can help make sure that incarcerated citizens stay informed about societal evolutions by incentivizing them to stay engaged with politics through the practice of voting.

Many incarcerated individuals lost their voting rights prior to ever practicing them. Only 37 percent of today's prison population said they voted before they were incarcerated.

Felony disenfranchisement is a symptom left behind from Jim Crow. The rights of formerly enslaved Africans were tweaked, trimmed and stripped throughout the Jim Crow era.

A country committed to the abolition of slavery also would need to be committed to dismantling all of those policies that were created to uphold slavery practices, including the exploitation of labor and stripping the voting rights of incarcerated populations.

With the era of mass incarceration ushered in by the failed war on drugs, it's essential that our government take a serious stance against decades of its dehumanization of prisoners because of overly punitive legislation. We can begin by restoring incarcerated citizens' voting rights.

Our nation is much too focused on punishment. The rehabilitative aspect of corrections departments along with rebuilding trust in government can be strengthened by fully enfranchising all of our nation's citizens — including those who are incarcerated.

Amani Sawari is a leading U.S. champion of prisoner's rights.

## CON: Jailed voters should be rehabilitated and freed before their voting rights are restored

By Merrill Matthews

**D**ALLAS — On April 24, Texas executed white supremacist John William "Bill" King. He was a murderer, but he also would have been a voter — if Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders had his way.

King was found guilty of the brutal 1998 murder of James Byrd Jr., a black man, by chaining Byrd to the back of a truck and dragging him to death. With his conviction and incarceration, King forfeited several of his rights and freedoms — including the right to vote.

But then King deprived James Byrd of all of his rights and freedoms, most importantly, the right to life.

Sanders says incarcerated felons like Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, and by extension King, should still be allowed to vote from their prison cells.

Had that been an option in Texas, King likely would have supported candidates proposing to lighten the penalties of those found guilty of hate crimes and murder.

Could voting felons change election outcomes? Maybe.

The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports there were 1.5 million prisoners in state and federal correctional facilities in 2016. That's a lot of people, and in close races the prison vote just might make the difference in who would win.

To be sure, most prisoners are in for much less heinous crimes than King's — and often relatively minor offenses.

Even so, the public has an interest in ensuring that serious and violent criminals are locked up and off the streets. Criminals, by contrast, have an interest in being out of prison. And people vote their interests.

Historically, convicted felons have lost the right to vote — sometimes permanently. But things are changing.

Both conservatives and liberals have been rethinking punishment and looking for ways to give ex-cons a second chance and reintegrate them into society.

The National Conference of State Legislatures reports that in 14 states and the District of Columbia, felons lose the right to vote while incarcer-

ated, but that right is automatically reinstated upon release from prison.

Twenty-two states reinstate the right to vote only after felons have completed their parole or probation time. And in 12 states, felons must take some additional steps, such as petitioning a governor's pardon, to have their voting rights restored.

Only two states, Maine and Sanders' home state of Vermont, allow felons to retain the right to vote from jail.

Defenders of jailhouse voting claim Vermont prisoners have always had the right to vote, and that hasn't caused any problems — though one might point out they keep electing Sanders.

But even if true, Vermont is a very rural state that ranks next to last in population and has the lowest crime rate among the states, according to the U.S. Crime Index.

Would Vermont's experience similarly apply to states with large urban centers and inner cities with high crime rates?

Sanders and others argue that limiting felons' voting rights is unjust.

For example, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's (D-N.Y.) chief of staff, Saikat Chakrabarti, recently tweeted, "What's the reason NOT to let incarcerated people vote? Shouldn't the people most affected by unjust laws have some say in electing people to change them?"

Was it an "unjust law" that put John William King behind bars? Are we to think he's the victim?

Several countries are also reconsidering their criminal punishment laws. Some are letting those convicted of minor or nonviolent crimes continue to vote while incarcerated. That's an issue worthy of public consideration and debate.

But it's appropriate and just for the state to restrict the rights of those who choose to deprive others of their rights, including the right to life.

James Byrd was never able to vote again, thanks to John William King. It is difficult to see why King and others guilty of similarly heinous crimes should retain their right to vote.

Merrill Matthews is a resident scholar with the Institute of Policy Innovation, a research-based public policy think tank.