

# Realizing the Fundamental Right to Vote: US Laws in Context

In the US, just [64% of voters](#) turned out in the last presidential election, while just 55% voted in the 2022 midterms. Laws shape how feasible it is to cast a ballot for those who want to vote. Among the OECD countries that have adopted at least two approaches to making it easier for registered voters to vote—such as postal voting, weekend elections, and paid time off for voting—turnout in parliamentary elections is substantially higher: 82%, on average, compared to 68% among countries with one or no approaches.

**Addressing the [practical barriers](#) to voting is achievable—and across many OECD countries, policymakers have taken important steps to address them. With few exceptions, the US lags behind.** To understand what all 38 OECD countries are doing to expand access to voting, Equal Futures constructed a database from original legislation in force as of October 2025<sup>1</sup>. When approaches varied subnationally, such as in the US, we captured the least protective provisions that determined access to voting. Drawing on this new data, this brief identifies effective approaches and measures how common they are across countries. At a time when voting rights are under attack, both in the US and elsewhere, it's not enough to defend the status quo - advancing an affirmative vision of how all eligible voters could more readily participate in elections is critical to the sustainability of democracy.

## How Do Citizens Register to Vote?

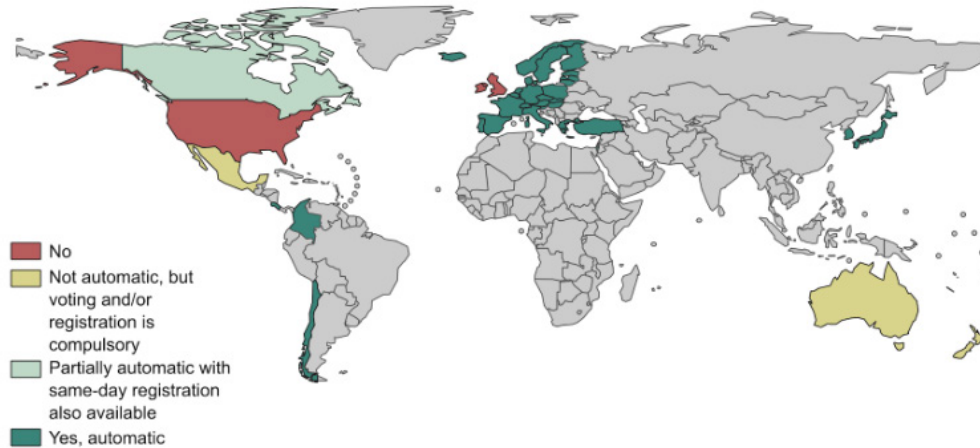
Among the 38 OECD countries, **82% have automatic registration processes**. In these countries, citizens are registered to vote without having to fill out any forms or even opt in. The government uses existing sources of information on citizens to construct the voter rolls. For example:

- In **Iceland**, the National Register, a continuously updated civil registry that includes basic information on all residents including citizenship and legal address, compiles the voter registry 38 days prior to election day. Individuals then have the opportunity to electronically verify they are on the electoral register and file complaints up to election day.
- Similarly, in **Costa Rica**, the Civil Registry is used to generate an electoral list 15 days prior to the election so that voters can access the list to verify their polling place.
- In **Colombia**, citizens must register for a citizenship card when they turn 18. These cards are then used to generate the electoral rolls.

<sup>1</sup> For more details on the coding process and methodology, please visit <https://www.equalfutures.org/topics/civil-and-political-rights/methods>

One country, **Canada**, has a partially automatic system that allows individuals to opt in while filing their taxes or on new citizenship applications. This covers voters in all provinces. Canadians can also register to vote at polling stations on election day. An additional 3 countries do not have automatic registration, but make it compulsory to either register to vote or vote.

### Is voter registration automatic in OECD countries?



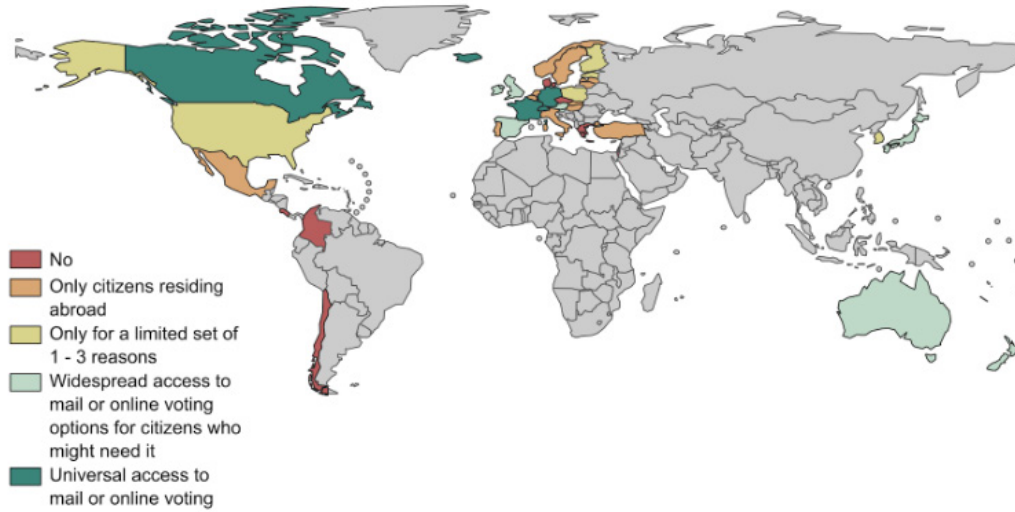
Aside from the US, Ireland and the United Kingdom are the only OECD countries without automatic registration, partially automatic registration, or compulsory registration/voting at a national level. Nevertheless, these countries take national-level approaches that make registration widely accessible. In both Ireland and the UK, registration can be done online, in person, or by mail, and applicants typically only need to provide their national insurance or public services number, equivalent to a Social Security Number in the US.

## Are Postal and Online Voting Options Available?

**Waiting in line for an hour or more is the most commonly cited barrier to voting among registered voters in the US.** The ability to cast a ballot without going in person to the polls has been shown to [increase voter turnout](#) and has benefits for a wide range of voters, including people with disabilities, voters with caregiving responsibilities, citizens living abroad, and people who have to travel on election day, whether for work or due to a family health emergency.

**A substantial majority of OECD countries—82%—permit postal voting in at least some circumstances.** This includes the US, though a recent executive order (being challenged in court as of this writing) would substantially curb the availability of mail-in voting. Five percent of countries also now provide for online voting for at least some voters. In Estonia, which allows online voting for all voters, [51% of voters](#) took advantage of that option in the last election.

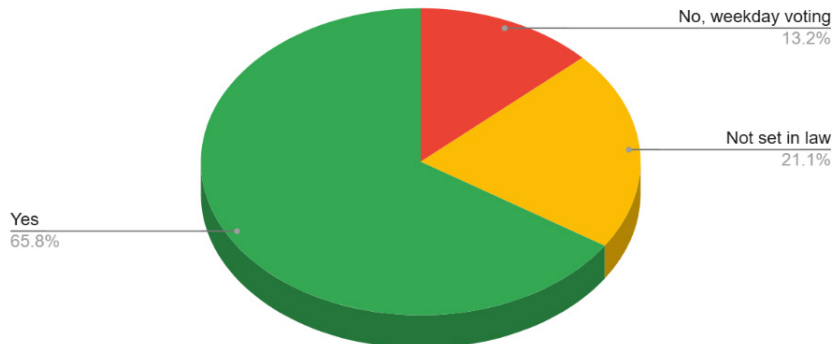
### Can voters vote by mail or online for legislative elections in OECD countries?



## What Day do Elections Take Place?

In the US, national elections have taken place on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November [since 1845](#)—a date that was selected to allow farmers to spend a full day traveling to their polling places without missing church on Sundays or market days on Wednesdays. Today, the ease of travel and practicalities of voting in the US have changed, but laws have not caught up. **Across the OECD, 66% of countries specify in law that elections will be held on a weekend day or on a public holiday.** The US is one of just 5 OECD countries that specifically establishes a weekday as election day.

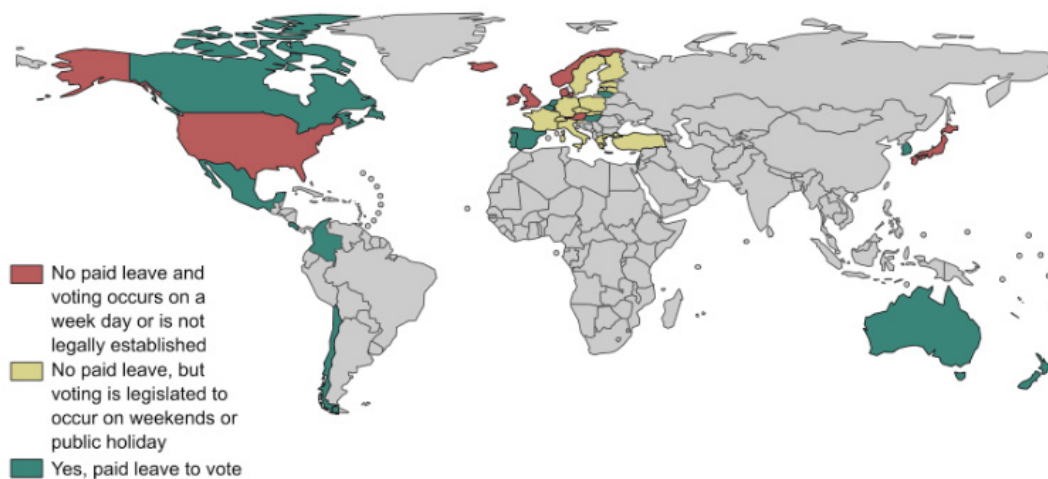
Does the law establish voting on a weekend or public holiday?



## Is Paid Time Off Available to Vote?

Even when countries hold their elections on weekends, many would-be voters are likely to have work conflicts. **In the US, around 30% of people work on weekends, as do 22% of workers across Europe.** These workers are more likely to be younger, be holding multiple jobs, and/or have lower educational attainment. Guaranteeing paid time off of work to vote is one important strategy for ensuring these workers can participate in elections. **Over a third of OECD countries guarantee paid time off to vote.** Among those that do not, a substantial majority schedule their elections for weekend or public holidays. **The US neither provides paid time off to vote at a national level nor schedules elections for a weekend or holiday.**

### Does legislation guarantee paid leave to vote in OECD countries?



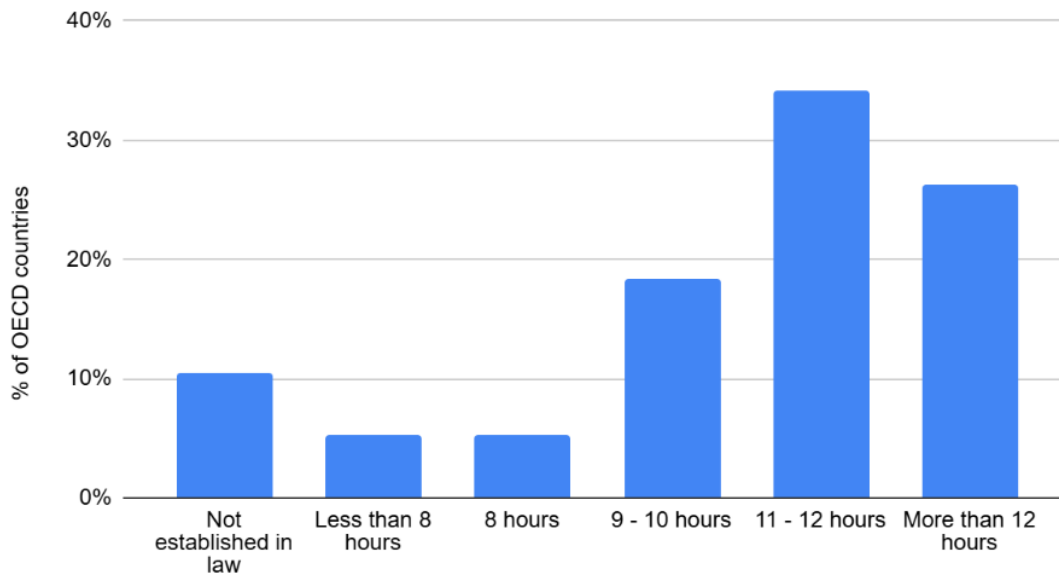
## Is Early In-Person Voting Available?

**Nearly half of OECD countries—47%—allow at least some citizens to vote in person early,** which can substantially reduce wait times at the polls and provide more flexibility to voters with work, caregiving, or health-related conflicts. **The US has no national-level guarantee.**

## What Hours are the Polls Open?

Ensuring that the polls are open before and after standard business hours is critical for facilitating wide access to the vote. **Half of OECD countries require polls to be open for at least 12 hours on election day.** The US has no federal standard for election hours.

For how many hours are polls legally open?



## Meeting the Needs of All Voters

While the strategies outlined earlier in this brief can help facilitate voting by many citizens and overcome common barriers, they can be especially critical to voters facing known barriers tied to work, care, health, or mobility. Some citizens may also need additional assistance or accommodations to realize their right to vote. Many OECD countries have taken important steps to better meet the needs of all voters.

### *Citizens with caregiving responsibilities*

Caregiving responsibilities may create barriers to going to the polls even when polls are open early and close late or polling is scheduled for a weekend. **Mail-in, online, and early voting options allow citizens with caregiving responsibilities to more easily balance care and civic duties. 47% of OECD countries allow these options for voters with caregiving responsibilities.** Three OECD countries also have specific provisions that allow dependent children to enter the voting booth if caregivers would otherwise be unable. In two OECD countries, caregivers or people living in the same household as persons with disabilities or serious health issues are allowed to vote through mobile polling that visits the home to collect the ballot of the person who cannot otherwise go to the polls.

### *Citizens who are pregnant or postpartum*

For pregnant voters who are due near election day, early voting as well as mail and online options can facilitate voting without fear of complications, labor, or exposing a newborn baby to illness at the polls on election day. **Over half of OECD countries (53%) have provisions that allow pregnant voters to exercise these options**, while two countries give pregnant voters priority in line.

An additional 11 countries have provisions for home voting or mobile polling that include voters who are unable to go to a polling place for serious reasons, health reasons, or who are incapacitated, which could include pregnancy or recent birth, particularly when there are complications. For example, in **Iceland**, voters can request at home polling up to two days before the election day in the case of “illness, disability or childbirth.”

### *Citizens who have experienced domestic violence*

For voters who have experienced domestic violence, maintaining safety while casting a ballot is critical. **Alongside provisions that keep addresses confidential, countries can support these voters by allowing early voting, voting by mail, and online voting. 47% of OECD countries have taken at least one of these approaches.** In addition to allowing all voters to vote early, **Denmark** also provides for polling stations to be established at shelters for victims of domestic violence.

### *Citizens with disabilities*

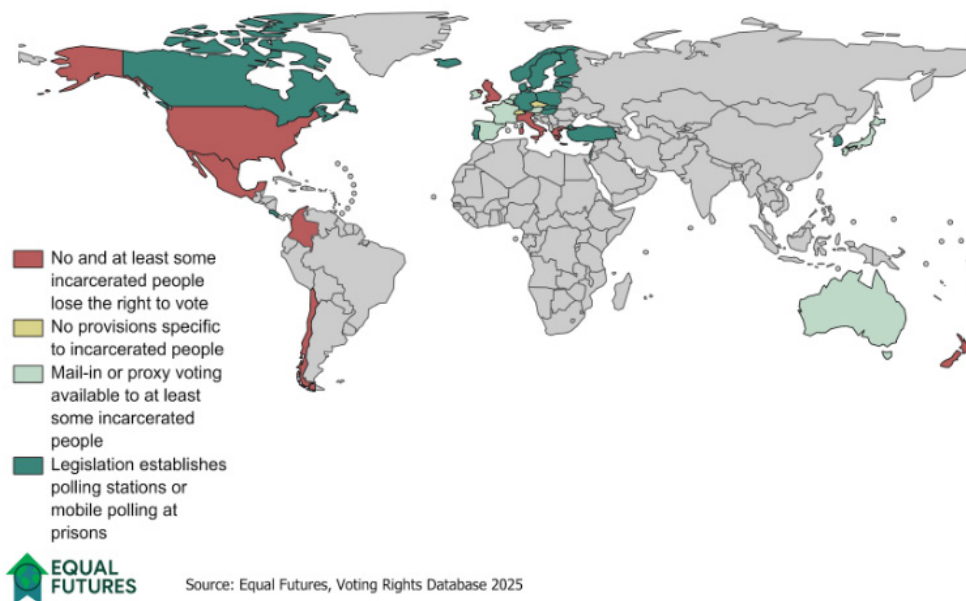
To ensure citizens with disabilities can fully exercise their right to vote, alongside making polling spaces and methods accessible, countries need to address the challenges that some persons with disabilities face in going to the polls. For example, alongside guaranteeing that polling locations are fully accessible, **countries can remove barriers to voting for citizens with mobility limitations by offering voting by mail, online voting, or mobile polling that goes to voters' homes. 71% of OECD countries have these provisions.** For persons with disabilities living in long-term care facilities, provisions that provide for on-site polling stations can further support exercising the right to vote. 34% of OECD countries take this approach. In a forthcoming brief, we will examine approaches to realizing the right to vote for voters with disabilities in detail.

### *Citizens who are or have been incarcerated*

Across the OECD, a third of countries have no laws allowing for any citizens to lose their fundamental right to vote during incarceration. Moreover, **71% of OECD countries protect against the long-term loss of voting rights for people who have been incarcerated. In addition, 71% of OECD countries take affirmative steps to ensure that people who are eligible to vote during their incarceration can do so.** 55% of OECD countries offer mobile polling at detention facilities, while 18% offer postal voting

specifically for incarcerated people and 5% permit proxy voting for people who are incarcerated. **The US has no national-level protections for the rights to vote of people who are currently incarcerated or have been incarcerated;** the US also has the highest incarceration rate in the world and disproportionately incarcerates Black Americans, a reflection of the structural racism that has long characterized the criminal justice system as a whole.

### Are there provisions that support incarcerated people to exercise their right to vote in OECD countries?



### Older citizens

Some older citizens may face a range of barriers in going to the polls, from difficulty arranging transportation to a polling station, mobility issues that limit ability to wait in line, and concerns about infectious disease risk from crowded polling stations. Older voters can benefit from provisions that allow them to vote early, vote by mail, or vote online. **32% of OECD countries have provisions in place that specifically allow older citizens or allow all citizens to use these alternative voting methods,** without having to attest to disability or health-related limitations. For older adults who live in assisted living communities or other aged care facilities, the ability to vote on-site can substantially lower barriers to voting. 32% of OECD countries provide for polling stations at these facilities.

### Citizens with religious beliefs that preclude voting on election day

Particularly in countries that establish polling on a weekend, when election day coincides with a holy day, religious duties can conflict with civic duties. **50% of OECD countries specifically support voting rights across religious beliefs** by allowing early, postal, or online voting for everyone or on the basis of religious beliefs.

### *Citizens who live in remote areas*

Distance to the polls can create a barrier to voting for individuals living in remote areas. **53% of OECD countries have specific provisions to address the needs of these voters** or allow everyone to vote early, online, or by mail.

### *Citizens who have experienced a major medical event*

Citizens who are recovering from a major medical event are likely to benefit from many of the provisions aimed at supporting voters with disabilities. For medical events that occur close to election day, however, they may also need specific provisions. **42% of OECD countries have provisions that establish polling at hospitals to support citizens who have recently experienced a major medical event.**

### *Citizens who have been displaced due to natural disasters*

For citizens who have been displaced due to natural disasters, it may not be feasible to return to their normal polling location on election day. **47% of OECD countries have provisions that allow for early, online, or mail voting for these voters.**

### *Citizens with work responsibilities*

Postal voting, online voting, and paid time off to vote all give workers the flexibility to vote at a time that is convenient for them, regardless of their work schedule. **63% of OECD countries facilitate voting by citizens with work responsibilities** by providing at least one of these options. Additional measures such as weekend voting, extended polling hours, and early voting may also help some, but perhaps not all, voters with work responsibilities.

## Removing the Practical Barriers—and Ensuring Democracy Delivers

Making sure that all eligible voters have the time and resources to register to vote and safely access the polls is foundational to encouraging broader participation in elections. Moreover, the wide adoption of many of the policies analyzed in this brief shows that they are feasible and straightforward. Over 4 in 5 OECD countries have automatic voter registration, while nearly as many (79%) guarantee by law that election day will take place on a weekend or a national public holiday and/or provide paid time off to vote. **Adopting these strategies at the national level in the US could make a substantial difference for supporting increased turnout and more equitable access to voting nationwide.**

**Voters are also more likely to turn out if they [believe](#) their government can meaningfully improve their lives and is genuinely committed to the public interest.**

In countries like the US, campaign finance laws that allow corporate entities to have an outsized impact on elections have been shown to [skew](#) politicians' focus away from the fundamental needs of everyday people. While [large voter turnout](#) can still shift the tide, across countries, adequate public financing for elections and removing barriers to *all* voters having an equal voice is an essential step toward more responsive governance. Giving voters something to show up for—through laws and policies that improve living and working conditions, access to education, and economic opportunity for all—is another. **Creating a democracy that delivers will require both. ■**

## Appendix: Removing Barriers to Voting Across the OECD

COUNTRY	DAY OF THE WEEK	TIME OFF TO VOTE	POLLING HOURS	POSTAL VOTING	EARLY IN-PERSON VOTING	ONLINE VOTING
Australia	Saturday	Yes, Paid	10 hours (8am - 6pm)	Residing abroad, distance to poll, disability, illness or hospitalization, caregiving responsibilities, safety concerns, religious beliefs, pregnancy or recent birth, work responsibilities, travel, imprisonment	Distance to poll, disability, illness or hospitalization, caregiving responsibilities, safety concerns, religious beliefs, pregnancy or recent birth, work responsibilities, travel	No
Austria	Not established in national law	No	Not established in national law	Likely to be unable to cast their vote on election day, including specifically for: Residing abroad, travel abroad, age, illness or hospitalization, physical disability, imprisonment	No	No
Belgium	Sunday	Yes, paid	5 hours (8am - 1pm)	Residing abroad	No	No
Canada	Monday	Yes, paid	12 hours (times vary by time zone)	All voters	All voters	No
Chile	Sunday	Yes, paid	10 hours (8am - 6pm)	No	No	No
Colombia	Sunday	Yes, paid	8 hours (8am - 4pm)	No	No	No
Costa Rica	Sunday	Yes, paid	12 hours (6am - 6pm)	No	No	No
Czechia	Friday & Saturday	No	14 hours (Fri: 2pm - 10pm Sat: 8am - 2pm)	No	No	No
Denmark	Not established in national law	No	11 or 12 hours (M-F: 8am - 8pm) (Weekends or on an island: 9am - 8pm)	No	All voters	No

COUNTRY	DAY OF THE WEEK	TIME OFF TO VOTE	POLLING HOURS	POSTAL VOTING	EARLY IN-PERSON VOTING	ONLINE VOTING
Estonia	Sunday	No	11 hours (9am - 8pm)	Residing or temporarily staying abroad	All voters	All voters
Finland	Sunday	No	11 hours (9am - 8pm)	Residing abroad, travel	All voters	No
France	Sunday	No	10 hours (8am - 6pm)	All voters	No	No
Germany	Sunday	No	10 hours (8am - 6pm)	All voters	All voters	No
Greece	Sunday	No, but special leave of absence was legally guaranteed for the 2023 parliamentary elections	12 hours (7am - 7pm)	No	No	No
Hungary	Sunday	Yes, paid	13 hours (6am - 7pm)	Residing abroad	No	No
Iceland	Not established in national law	No	At least 8 hours and at least half an hour since the last voter showed up	All voters	All voters	No
Ireland	Not established in national law	No	At least 12 hours between 8am - 1030pm	Work responsibilities, education responsibilities, illness or hospitalization, physical disability, imprisonment	Voters on islands	No
Israel	Tuesday	Yes, paid	15 hours (7am - 10pm)	No	No	No
Italy	Sunday	No	14 hours (8am - 10pm)	Residing abroad	No	No

COUNTRY	DAY OF THE WEEK	TIME OFF TO VOTE	POLLING HOURS	POSTAL VOTING	EARLY IN-PERSON VOTING	ONLINE VOTING
Japan	Not established in national law	No	13 hours (9am - 8pm)	Residing abroad, distance to poll, physical disability, pregnancy or recent birth, travel, illness or hospitalization, imprisonment, natural disasters	Distance to poll, physical disability, pregnancy or recent birth, travel, illness or hospitalization, imprisonment, natural disasters	No
Korea, Rep.	Wednesday	Yes, paid	12 hours (6am - 6pm)	Illness or hospitalization, physical disability, distance to poll	Anyone who cannot vote at a polling place on election day	No
Latvia	Saturday	Yes, unpaid	12 hours (8am - 8pm)	Residing abroad	All voters	No
Lithuania	Sunday	Yes, paid	13 hours (7am - 8pm)	Residing abroad if not possible to vote at consulate	Anyone who cannot vote at a polling place on election day	No
Luxembourg	Sunday	No	6 hours (8am - 2pm)	All voters	No	No
Mexico	Sunday	Yes, paid	10 hours (8am - 6pm)	Residing abroad	No	Residing abroad
Netherlands	Not established in national law	Yes, paid	13.5 hours (7:30am - 9pm)	Residing abroad	No	No
New Zealand	Saturday	Yes, paid	10 hours (9am - 7pm)	Residing abroad, illness or hospitalization, pregnancy or recent birth, infirmity, religious beliefs, travel, residing outside polling area	Illness or hospitalization, pregnancy or recent birth, infirmity, religious beliefs, travel, residing outside polling area	Residing abroad (legislation allows for more groups in the future)
Norway	Monday	No	Not established in national law	Residing abroad	All voters	No
Poland	Non-working day or public holiday	No	14 hours (7am - 9pm)	Disability, age	No	No

COUNTRY	DAY OF THE WEEK	TIME OFF TO VOTE	POLLING HOURS	POSTAL VOTING	EARLY IN-PERSON VOTING	ONLINE VOTING
Portugal	Sunday	Yes, paid	11 hours (8am - 7pm)	Residing abroad	Illness or hospitalization, travel	No
Slovak Republic	Saturday	No	15 hours (7am - 10pm)	Residing abroad	No	No
Slovenia	Sunday	No	12 hours (7am - 7pm)	Residing abroad, travel, disability, illness or hospitalization, imprisonment	Anyone who will be absent on polling day	No
Spain	Not established in national law	Yes, paid	11 hours (9am - 8pm)	Anyone who cannot appear on voting day	No	No
Sweden	Sunday	No	12 hours (8am - 8pm)	Residing abroad	All voters	No
Switzerland	Sunday	No	Not established in national law	All voters	All voters	In cantons and communes that permit electronic voting pilot schemes
Türkiye	Sunday	No	9 hours (8am - 5pm)	Residing abroad	No	Residing abroad
United Kingdom	Not established in national law	No	15 hours (7am - 10pm)	Disability, work responsibilities, education responsibilities, illness or hospitalization, travel	No	No
United States	Tuesday	Varies by state	Varies by state	Residing abroad, illness or hospitalization, disability	Varies by state	Varies by state