



[Donate](#)

**ADVOCACYNET 356**  
**Monday November 16, 2020**

## Every Day Is Election Day

### Iain Guest heads for Pennsylvania and finds that democracy works

The rest of the world hates to be lectured by Americans about democracy, so I decided to offer my services to the Democrats of Pennsylvania during the recent election to see how it worked.

The short answer was slowly. I made around 900 calls leading up to the election, but talked to less than a hundred humans. I then spent election day in the cold outside a polling station in Philadelphia, waiting for voters who did not arrive because they had already voted.

But that was fine. I was ready for some boredom after months of high anxiety, and happy to be one droplet in a mighty wave of almost 19,000 out-of-staters who made calls for the Democrats in Pennsylvania. Who cared if only 200 voters turned up at our polling station when almost 500 had already voted?

We should take time to reflect on the lessons from this election as President-elect Biden prepares to restore democracy to the forefront of American foreign policy. Whether this is credible will depend largely on how the election is viewed abroad. American lectures work best when Americans practice what they preach.

It hasn't always worked out well. I can remember running a poll for the CSCE during municipal elections in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica in November 2000. Our station overlooked the site of the worst massacre in Europe since World War 2 and our ballot counters were all Bosnian Serbs because Muslims had been expelled or killed. The counters had probably taken part in the killing, but right now they were listening open-mouthed to lurid reports on the radio about hanging chads in Florida. One asked: Could democracy in America really be this crazy?

It was galling to be mocked by perpetrators of genocide. But that is the price you pay for what Viktor Orban, the deeply undemocratic Prime Minister of Hungary, has called "moral imperialism."

American diplomacy can make a compelling case for democracy after this election. It was, first and foremost, an act of courage. If you voted by mail you risked losing your ballot. If you voted in person you risked losing your life. The fact that over 160 million Americans appear to have taken the risk - the largest turnout since 1908 - is astounding.

Many of those who answered my calls were elderly and at high risk from the COVID-19 virus. Several were coping with cancer. For these brave people, voting was a rebuke to a pandemic that has forced us all to cower in our basements. It meant rejoining the human race for a day.

This was also a vote for human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not mention democracy, but it does affirm the right to participate in one's government. That right is in turn protected by other more familiar rights like assembly, education, speech and freedom from violence. Human rights have been tossed aside by the Trump Administration. This election is an argument for restoring them to American foreign policy - and not just piece-meal, as in the past, but in their entirety.

Then there is racism. Democracies are measured by their ability to protect minorities, and for me this campaign began on May 25 with the shocking murder of George Floyd. The last six months have seen Americans confront their troubled racial history with unflinching vigor and imagination. The election of a multiracial woman as Vice-President, and the elevation of a record number of women of color to the US House of Representatives, will surely help. Yes, the rest of the world really does view America as a melting pot, and yes we admire it.

Finally, there is the spectacle of an American President determined to intimidate voters, curb voting and de-legitimize the result. This is straight out of the playbook of Orbán, Lukashenko, Putin and other authoritarians masquerading as democrats, but the main casualty is likely to be Trump's own tarnished legacy. In fact, history will probably thank him for stiffening the resolve of voters. Trump as the savior of democracy? That is sweetly ironic.

Of course, this does not mean plain sailing ahead. Liberal democracy will struggle to deal with an increasingly fragmented world. It may take years for the United Nations, which has offered a safety net during times of crisis, to recover from Trump's contempt and COVID-19.

Core principles of human rights will also face new tests. This is starkly illustrated by the pandemic, which pits the rights of individuals against the health of society as a whole. The US is not handling this well.

And if the pandemic is chilling, climate change will be a nightmare. The will of the people is sure to be tested by floods, fires, droughts, diminished food supplies, mass migration, pollution, and the loss of species. Making it harder, Americans will be asked to make sacrifices for future generations, as yet unborn. The pandemic suggests that will be a tough sell.

This work begins now. Indeed, it leads to one final takeaway from the recent election - we cannot wait until the next one rolls around. Every day should be election day in America.

***[Iain Guest](#) is Executive Director of The Advocacy Project and a British national.***