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Column: Is it time to let noncitizens vote in local elections? Some Americans think that's just nutty

Immigrants who are not citizens may not currently cast ballots. Should we change that?
(Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times)

BY [NICHOLAS GOLDBERG](#) COLUMNIST

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Should noncitizens be allowed to vote?

That sounds a little crazy, doesn't it? Weren't we taught growing up that the right to vote belongs only to full-fledged, passport-eligible citizens of this country?

Nonetheless, the movement to expand immigrants' voting rights is gaining ground.

We pay taxes, immigrants say. We run businesses. We send kids to public schools, drive the roads, ride the subways and fight in America's wars. We are stakeholders in our communities and shouldn't be excluded from the decision-making process that affects us.

There's currently [a bill before the New York City Council](#) to let legal permanent residents vote in municipal elections — up to and including mayoral elections. Since 2018, San Francisco [has allowed](#) noncitizens to vote in school board elections, regardless of whether they're in the country legally or not. Chicago allows it for school council elections.

Here in Los Angeles, the L.A. Unified school board [authorized a study](#) more than a year ago on how to extend voting rights in school board elections to noncitizen parents, grandparents and caregivers. The study — which would presumably lead to a ballot measure — was delayed by the pandemic but will be revived as school reopens.

There's no question that noncitizen voting rights is a radical notion. It's understandably worrisome to those who believe citizenship matters.

And you don't have to be a xenophobe or a white nationalist or a Trump voter to feel that way.

A few years ago, then-Gov. Jerry Brown, whose liberal credentials are pretty impeccable, [vetoed a bill](#) passed by the California Legislature that would have allowed permanent legal residents to serve on juries, saying: “Jury service, like voting, is quintessentially a prerogative and responsibility of citizenship.”

Citizenship is a concept, a construct — but it’s a meaningful one. The idea is that there is a difference between merely living in the U.S. and being a full participant in its democratic self-government. Many people are stakeholders, but citizens are more like shareholders.

Becoming a citizen is a process (unless you’re born here, in which case it’s simple luck). At the end of it — after you’ve waited your time, lived in the U.S., taken a test, paid your fees, pledged your loyalty — you are rewarded for your formal commitment with both rights and responsibilities.

And there’s a value to waiting. The term “assimilation” is out of favor (perhaps because it implies that immigrants must check their differences at the door), but “incorporation” and “integration” are still important — learning the language, understanding the culture, making sure you buy into the rules and values laid out in the Constitution. Shared citizenship is a unifying force.

My mother, who came to America during World War II, went through this process, becoming a citizen seven years after she arrived.

Nevertheless, despite everything I’ve just said, I’ve come around to the idea that we should try noncitizen voting anyway, at least in a limited way on the most local level. The advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

After all, the United States was founded on the promise of “no taxation without representation” — yet [there are some 25 million people](#) living in the country, more than half of them legally, who are unable to participate in the elections that affect their lives and livelihoods. And yes, most of them pay taxes.

When a segment of the population is excluded from the political process, it can lead to discriminatory public policy and mistreatment.

Furthermore, noncitizen voting was widespread in the U.S. at the beginning of the nation’s history; it ended only in the 1920s. It is permitted [in 45 countries](#) around the world in local or regional elections, and in some cases, at the national level.

Noncitizen voting in federal elections was barred in 1996, but where it’s been allowed in the U.S. in recent years — in 11 towns in Maryland as well as San Francisco, two cities in Vermont

and a few other jurisdictions — the sky hasn't fallen. In many cases, it has led to greater political engagement and often to "improved outcomes," says Ron Hayduk, a political science professor at San Francisco State.

Hayduk argues that noncitizen voting on the local level can be seen as part of the process of becoming a citizen, rather than a substitute for it. It undoubtedly fosters a sense of belonging and investment in the community.

It's all well and good to tell immigrants to wait their turn to vote, but gaining citizenship is caught up in the U.S. immigration system, which is broken and irrational by all accounts, with no fix in sight.

In contrast, a limited experiment in noncitizen voting by the L.A. Unified School District makes sense. After all, the school board cited an estimate that 42% of Southern California's children have at least one parent who is not a citizen, without a voice in the district's leadership.

The expansion of the franchise should be narrow. It should be for school board elections only, and it could be restricted to legal permanent residents with children in the system. Let's try it and see what happens.

Noncitizen voting raises fundamental questions about our country. Who is an American? Who gets to set the rules? What does it mean to run a country "with the consent of the governed"? What are the costs if millions of stakeholders are excluded from decision-making?

This experiment would challenge our assumptions but perhaps make us stronger in the long run.



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