

Non-Citizen Voting

by Susan Reefer
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When the idea of extending voting rights to non-citizens resurfaced earlier this month, it was met with equal parts enthusiasm and skepticism. The idea itself is nothing new; in Gotham Gazette last August, Michael Huang [wrote](#) about the New York City Charter Commission's intention to ask for local voting rights for green-card holders who live in the city.

It is now the subject of legislation in the New York City Council. There is recent precedent for this; non-citizens were able to vote in school board elections and serve on school boards until they were abolished in 2002. The new proposals would allow legal immigrants who are eligible for citizenship to vote in all local New York City elections.

Whatever the outcome of this latest effort to extend voting rights in New York City, it raises interesting questions. There are approximately one million legal immigrants in New York City who would be eligible to become new voters if the legislation passed.

That's more than one-fifth of the total voting age population in New York City. Already, political groups, community organizations, and labor unions are lining up on either side of the issue, anticipating additional votes for (or against) their candidates and causes. But while it is clear that this would represent a change in the New York political landscape, it is less easy to identify what that change would look like.

Voting Rights versus Voting Behavior

Extending voting rights to a new segment of the voting age population doesn't give us any reason to assume that population will vote in any particular pattern. Non-citizens would be eligible to vote, but so are millions of U.S. citizens, less than half of whom typically turn out to vote on Election Day.

Voting behavior can be difficult to predict, but that doesn't stop candidates and campaigns from trying. Making accurate estimates of who will be voting is a crucial element in any campaign strategy, because it allows candidates to target limited resources to those voters who are going to make their voices heard.

Non-citizens would truly change the political landscape not in becoming eligible to vote, but in actually voting, consistently and in large numbers.

But in order to vote, you have to be not only eligible, but registered.

Voting Registration versus Voting Behavior

Voter registration procedures have undergone some changes in recent years, with the advent of the so-called "Motor Voter" law, intended to make it easier for people, particularly young people, to become registered voters. But making voter registration easier or more convenient doesn't necessarily make it more likely that new registrants will become new voters.

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In spite of that fact, the race to register new voters remains a battleground by the two major political parties. It may be true to say that party loyalty has declined in recent years, but party registration, or party enrollment, is still the single most powerful voting cue in American political life today.

New York has long been dominated by Democratic party politics, a fact which is unlikely to change, no matter how many newly eligible voters there are. But it would also be impossible to categorically classify the political leanings of one million people. And at least on a national level, there are indications that immigrants are more likely than the nation as a whole to lean Republican. Even if New York's one million non-citizen voters didn't break along the same party lines as the national population, it would create the potential for greater partisan diversity in a city that is diverse in every way except its party politics.

Whatever the results of the newest effort to grant voting rights to non-citizens, it will increase attention paid to the concerns of legal immigrants, at least while the possibility exists that they might have a vote in the next election.

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