by Doug Israel
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Rallying behind a plea of "No Taxation Without Representation" a group New Yorkers gathered in front of the main post office on Tax Day to push for what they see as the latest voting rights movement in this nation - the right of non-citizens to vote.

"I truly believe that if people are paying taxes they should be allowed to vote," Candy Mojica, a Harlem resident and graduate student at the Hunter College School of Social Work , said at the rally.

New York City Councilmember Bill Perkins agrees. That is why he is the prime sponsor of Intro 628 , introduced in the City Council on April 20th, which would allow legal non-citizens, with six months or longer of New York City residency, to vote in all municipal elections, including the one for mayor.

The Vocal Proponents

Advocates of the proposal argue that the estimated 1.3 million immigrants living in New York City, close to 20 percent of the population, deserve to be represented locally in government if they are expected to pay taxes and live with the decisions of elected officials. This population is larger than the entire borough of the Bronx and 11 of the states in the U.S. It is estimated that non-citizen immigrants pay $18.2 billion in New York State taxes alone, yet they have no representation in government.

"The greatest movements we've had in this country have been to remove arbitrary barriers to voting, whether the civil rights movement , the suffragettes , or the move to allow 18-year-olds to vote ," Perkins says. Allowing non-citizens to vote, he says, is just another extension of democracy.

Under the bill the city would also be required to issue new municipal voter registration forms in an expanded array of languages (Spanish, Traditional and Simplified Chinese, Korean, Bangla, Arabic, Russian, Haitian Creole, French and Urdu).

The Silent Opposition

While there is not a highly visible movement of those protesting efforts to expand suffrage to non-citizens, it is clear that many New Yorkers object. A passerby at the April 15th rally, for example, said "it is reasonable for people to be citizens in order to vote. There is something to be said for the commitment you make to your country."

"Voting is an awesome and essential piece of citizenship" argues Stanley Renshon, professor of political science at the City of New York Graduate Center ; it should not be given away to those who are not integrated into the community and the country. "It is the badge of inclusion." If legal residents could vote without being citizens, there would be less incentive to apply for citizenship, and this would "weaken the bonds that tie us together as Americans."

To become a naturalized U.S. citizen , a person has to be a permanent and legal resident for at least five years and they must be able to speak, read, and write in English. In addition, they must also demonstrate an understanding of U.S. history and government. This knowledge of the political system, the shared culture and history of America and a sense of belonging to their communities, opponents argue, is key to extending the right to vote to individuals. Permanent and legal status and passage of the citizenship test ensures that people at least reach a minimal threshold in these areas.

"The premise of voting is that the voter be informed and acclimated to our political culture," Renshon said. " It takes time to develop this familiarity."

Part of Larger Movement

Non-citizen voting laws have been passed on the municipal level in Amherst, Newton and Cambridge, Massachusetts
. However, as state law currently prohibits non-citizens from voting in local elections, bills have been introduced into the Massachusetts legislature to change this regulation.

Already a number of municipalities in Maryland allow non-citizen voting in local elections, including Takoma Park, Barnesville, Martin's Additions, Somerset and Chevy Chase. In Chicago non-citizens can vote in school-board elections if they have a child in the public school system. Indeed, this was true in New York City too, until school boards were dismantled here in

2002.

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