

## **Should Non-Citizens Be Allowed to Vote?**

In a democratic society, voting is one of the most fundamental and emblematic features of a citizen. It has always been an enfranchisement associated with individuals who have become part of the community through legal channels. Nonetheless, there remains a persistent dispute regarding whether non-citizens, and especially legal permanent residents, should have the right to vote in local, state, or even federal elections. This question has surfaced numerous times over the years and is addressed in the PDF lecture, “The Debate Over Non-Citizen Voting: A Primer,” by Stanley A Renshon. The paper describes both supporting and opposing arguments to the proposal. Supporters concern themselves with issues of fairness, democracy, and social inclusion—while opposition argues that granting voting rights to non-citizens diminishes the value of citizenship, erodes national identity, and seeks to politicize immigration. In this paper, I intend to present the arguments, defend their logic, and analyze the consequences of granting voting rights to non-citizens.

### **Summary of Opposing Viewpoints**

The primary question is whether legal non-citizens ought to have the opportunity to vote prior to naturalization. Advocates of non-citizen voting champion inclusion and equity for immigrants who already engage in tax-paying employment and community service. Contributors to the reading, such as Stanley Renshon, vehemently oppose these arguments, contending that non-citizen voting undermines the value of citizenship and erodes the foundations of American democracy.

In support of non-citizen voting, advocacy groups and progressive scholars like Ron Hayduk and Louis DeSipio argue that it is essential to assimilate immigrants into the country’s civic framework. They highlight historical precedents, like the 19th century voting rights for immigrants, and point out that non-citizens fulfill tax obligations and raise families, thus shouldering the same responsibilities as citizens.

They claim that barring them from participation in voting is undemocratic and strips them of their rights. Some proposals even advocate granting votes to non-citizens for a temporary limit (for instance, five years), after which they would have to naturalize or lose their voting rights. Others contend that regular voting could replace the citizenship test as a requirement for the attainment of citizenship, encouraging active participation in democracy instead of rote memorization of American civics.

Renshon, on the other hand, offers a thorough critique of these proposals. He argues that these kinds of proposals are not only about fairness; they tend to be politically driven attempts to establish an unwavering progressive voting demographic. He raises concerns that bypassing the naturalization process diminishes the worth of citizenship, undermines the emotional and psychological bond that immigrants have with the nation, and places crucial decision-making authority in the hands of people cut off from the history, language, and political culture of the nation. He also points out the potentially tremendous demographic and political consequences, arguing that millions of adult non-citizens could become eligible voters dramatically transforming the political landscape in regions with large immigrant populations.

### **Evaluation and Analysis of the Arguments**

Both sides of the debate present thoughtful ideas, but some are clearer, better justified, and more logically sound than others. For those advocating for voting rights for non-citizens, their arguments rest on moral slogans like “justice,” “fairness,” “democracy,” and other emotive ideals. While these are commendable concepts, as Renshon argues, they are usually invoked bare of any pragmatic consequences. To illustrate, the rationale that voting should be awarded as a privilege for paying taxes neglects the estoppel principle to taxation—countless government services such as public education, infrastructure, and emergency services are provided to them. Moreover, military service, which provides a voluntary and often expedited route to citizenship, decouples from the right to vote.

One of the strongest critiques Renshon presents is the decline of the naturalization process. The ability to vote for non-citizens without having to demonstrate knowledge of the English language, American history, or civics fundamentally contradicts the assimilative and educational purpose of naturalization.

Becoming a citizen entails more than just meeting a set criteria; It is intended to cultivate a commitment to the ideals and systems of the country. Framing the bestowing of citizenship as a rote administrative task runs the risk of cultivating an uninformed electorate unqualified to responsibly exercise their political engagement

Renshon also disputes the idea that allowing people the opportunity to vote will promote engagement. Examples from places such as Takoma Park, Maryland, where non-citizens are granted the right to participate in local elections, demonstrate extremely low turnout rates. There are even cases where only ten non-citizen voters participated in elections during fully funded outreach campaigns. This stands in stark contrast to the assumption that non-citizens will be empowered or mobilize to participate in the electoral process purely as a result of being granted the suffrage. Moreover, if a small number of non-citizens are willing to participate in the election process, the question arises whether the threatened risks to democratic integrity are worth the mere symbolic gesture.

On the other hand, DeSipio and de la Garza's proposal to permit non-citizen voting in the five years preceding naturalization is rather more problematic. Although it attempts to reach some form of compromise—making it easier to incentivize the pursuit of citizenship—it simultaneously poses severe logistical burdens on election officials. The maintenance of separate voter registries, eligibility assessments, and fraud prevention within already overstressed electoral frameworks would impose additional strain.

Renshon draws attention to another pressing issue that concerns the possible political consequences of granting the vote to millions of non-citizens. As he points out, non-citizens constitute a significant proportion of the population in states such as California, New York, and Texas. In some of these cities, non-citizens comprise over 50% of the adult population. Even a modest increase in voter participation from this demographic has the potential to fundamentally reshape voting patterns at the municipal, state, and even federal levels. This poses reasonable challenges in the context of democratic representation: is it justifiable for people without legal commitment to the nation to have the power to shape policy through voting that they influence?

Moreover, the unearned optimism of some progressives that non-citizen voters will permanently establish a political majority is deeply concerning. While political power is often sought and pursued legally, crafting voting policies to garner support for one political philosophy erodes the foundational principle of democratic impartiality. Policy development concerning the suffrage should be non-partisan normative-neutral, prioritizing equity and consensus instead of self-serving political calculations.

Perhaps the most controversial argument in favor of non-citizen voting is the belief that it would facilitate civic participation. Supporters of the stance posit that it will boost the willingness of immigrants to engage in other community activities. In opposition, Renshon argues there are numerous avenues for non-citizens to participate civically through community-based organizations, town hall meetings, political campaigns, and advocacy coalitions. Voting is far from the most effective means of incentivizing civic education.

Ultimately, Renshon analyzes the symbolic implications of voting. In a nation that values *E Pluribus Unum* (out of many one), citizenship acts as a uniting tie. If voting is decoupled from citizenship, that tie weakens. In Renshon's words, the difference between citizen and non-citizen is not an exclusionary distinction but rather foundational to national identity. The United States, while arguably generous in its pathways to citizenship, is within reason expecting an immigrant to have to first go through the process of naturalization to vote.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of non-citizen voting encapsulates broader disputes around identity, access, and citizenship. While the intent of incorporating immigrants into the democratic fold is sympathetic, underserving arguments for non-citizen voting often rest on idealistic frameworks. Renshon's critique is powerful not only because he employs rational arguments, but also because he considers the implications of weakening citizenship.

Voting is a civic duty that conveys something deeper; it ought to be restricted to individuals who have proven their allegiance to the nation's ideals and institutions. Support for integration of immigrants can take many forms, but granting the vote far too early is not one of them. Rather, the focus should be on removing barriers to naturalization, teaching language and civic courses, and motivating immigrants to claim full membership in national life.

Democracy is best served when all members of society are elevated to the existing standards, as opposed to lowering the threshold for participation. Non-citizens should be motivated to acquire citizenship—not just to cast a vote, but to fully engage in the American endeavor. Any proposal that weakens this process undermines immigrants, citizens, and the nation as a whole.