

A Matter of Representation

Pranisha Gorty

Abstract

The topic of this paper regards non-citizens' voting practices for school board elections and referendums in the United States. Analyzing a number of articles, books, and reports in addition to conducting interviews by numerous scholars, the paper focuses on the arguments these thinkers are making in their works. A study of the town of Monroe in New Jersey will be conducted, providing a personal example of the issue. This paper will discuss examples of how non-citizen enfranchisement is present in other jurisdictions, as well as counter-arguments against non-citizens' voting rights. The paper conclusively highlights and argues that non-immigrants should be allowed to vote at a local level, as it would benefit the community, especially children, granting them greater educational opportunities and representation.

Introduction

The American dream is something that we have all heard of. The idea that everyone has equal opportunity is something that should be a given, but it unfortunately is not. Representation is a matter the US has been fighting for since the start of the country's history. There are still many issues in the US that go against the original intent of the founding fathers. A core principle of American democracy is representation, and the right of the people to have equal opportunity for success. Many children of non-citizen parents are currently not being represented in their school districts, due to the fact that their parents cannot vote on their behalf. One can see that children of these non-citizens, in a way, are not given the same opportunities as the rest, as votes and decisions on their behalf are not included. A non-citizen is someone who doesn't yet hold a citizenship status. A non-immigrant is a more specific type of non-citizen, for example, a Visa holder or this paper will answer the question, as to what kind of benefits will come out of non-citizens being able to vote for school board elections and referendums. Based on the analysis conducted for this paper using secondary literature, news reports, and government data, it is concluded that to ensure representation of children who are citizens, that their non-citizens should be permitted to vote locally.

Background

The quality of every child's education is very important, and, therefore, should be protected by all means. However, in order for this to be completely true, some things need to change. In most jurisdictions in the US, non-citizens are not permitted to vote in school board elections and school referendums. The United States is also a country founded by immigrants, and thriving with immigrants. Due to this, many parents of school-going children are unable to vote on their behalf. It is unfair for the future of a child's education to be dependent on their parent's legal status. These parents are paying their taxes to the school, and care for their child's future. It is only fair that these non-citizens are given the opportunity to vote in school board elections, so that the voices of their children can be heard and they can receive a fair and well-quality education.

The idea of non-citizens has been present in multiple jurisdictions in the United States, in states like Vermont, Maryland, Massachusetts, California, New York, and Illinois¹. Recently, San Francisco has established the policy of allowing all non-citizens, including illegal immigrants, to vote in school board elections if they have a child under the age of 19. The initiative to establish

¹ Zachary Roth, *Georgia Recorder* March 14. "Noncitizens Allowed to Vote in Some Local Elections, Spurring Backlash from GOP." *Georgia Recorder*, 14 Mar. 2023

this policy, set forth by Proposition N, was backed by the Immigrant Parent Voting (IVR) Collaborative, which was an organization that works to advocate for more than 34% of non-citizens in San Francisco. This organization, working for civil rights since 1969 in San Francisco. As people became aware of the fact that non-citizen parents should be able to advocate for their child's education, the IVR Collaborative began to push for this to happen, and the idea became a law. Non-citizen voting was initially not meant to be permanent, and was supposed to expire in November 2022, but the San Francisco supervisors made this law permanent.² Chicago has established a similar policy, in which non-citizen parents are permitted to partake in local school council elections (LSC). These councils were created to more accurately represent the population of the town, comprising six parents on the council, along with two community representatives, two teachers, and a principal. The LSCs (Local School Council) don't require parents to hold citizenship status in order to participate or vote. Instead, they must simply live within the town and have a school-going child.³ As seen, non-citizen voting at a local is a realistic, and effective idea that has been accomplished in several other jurisdictions, and should be considered in all states.

In addition to the fact that this has been established in other jurisdictions, it is important to acknowledge the difficult process that is becoming a US citizen. People can be living in the country for decades, simply on a visa, waiting to receive a green card. This is why it is important to not only provide suffrage to permanent residents, who may hold green cards or be naturalized, but also to non-immigrants, such as visa holders who may be in the country for years, who pay income taxes that are allotted to public entities including schools.

Case Study of School Elections in Monroe Township

The township of Monroe established a referendum in 2018 to build a new middle school due to overpopulation. Makin discusses in her article, "School officials said overcrowded and aging facilities in the district, which serves nearly 7,000 students in eight schools, have worsened since referendums were rejected in 2018 and 2019."⁴ Only citizens are able to participate in referendums. In addition, 67% of the town are people over 67, who, for the most part, do not have school-going children, but many are allowed to vote.⁵ Due to this, the referendum did not pass, and I and many others had to experience our 7th grade in a trailer. This continued to be the case for the next two referendums, which did not pass, due to the huge population of senior citizens, overpowering the vote of parents with school-going children. The referendum failed by a vote of 4,346 not in favor to 3,723 in favor of the new construction – Monroe's 3rd attempt to help ease the overcrowding.

An example of the impact that non-citizen voting can have on school board elections can be seen in Monroe Township, New Jersey. Monroe has had a problem with overcrowding in the school district, and as a result, they offered a referendum to be passed to build a new middle school, which failed. Another referendum was put out in 2023, and the "\$104 million referendum failed by a 4,346-to-3,723 margin. It was the school district's third attempt to address

²Glover, Julian. "Non-Citizen Voting Rights Gain Traction as Immigrants Vote in SF Unified School Board Recall." *ABC7 San Francisco*, 12 Feb. 2022,

³Shah Paru Radha et al. "The Politics and Policy Implications of Latino Representation in Education." *Rice University* 2006.

⁴Makin, Cheryl. "Monroe Voters Refuse a Third Time to Pay for Schools Improvement Project." *Courier News*, 15 Mar. 2023

⁵U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts: *Monroe Township, Middlesex County, New Jersey*

overcrowding.”⁶ These referendums failed because of the large population of immigrant/non-citizen parents who were unable to vote. Specifically, 6.58% of the town are non-citizens, and 14.68% of the town are citizens that weren’t born in the US.⁷ In addition, 87.9% of immigrant families have children that are US born, meaning that a majority of these children in Monroe are also US born. It is therefore unfair that a town like Monroe does not give non-citizens the right to vote in school board elections, since the vote affects many members of the town.

Monroe also has a large population of senior citizens, nearing 40%, which is twice as great as the amount of non-citizens. The fact that many of these non-citizens are allowed to have a say in the outcome of these school board elections, many of whom don't have school-going children, and that actual parents of children aren't allowed to vote is just unjust. Senior citizens also have an incentive to vote against such school improvements, since it would require an increase in local taxes, and given the fact that senior citizens don't have a steady flow of income, since most are retired, they aren't generally willing to pay more in taxes. In addition, Monroe does not get the same amount of state aid as other towns would due to equalization aid. Since Monroe's population comprises more than 20% senior citizens, they only get \$11 million dollars in aid with \$0 in equalization aid, while other New Jersey towns in the area, such as East Brunswick, have \$39 million in state aid, including \$27 million in equalization. North Brunswick, another neighboring town, receives \$49 million dollars in state aid, \$37 million of which is equalization aid⁸. Because of the low level of aid, more weight falls on the taxpayer, giving senior citizens more of a reason to vote against improvements. It is unfair that an issue like overcrowding, which is actively impacting the children's education as many of the middle schoolers had to be placed in trailers to learn due to lack of space, is not being taken action due to lack of this opportunity.

Literature Review

As the country continues to grow and attract more people, issues like the need for non-immigrant voting has begun to gain attention as well. There is a great deal of recent literature on this topic. These works explore ideas behind voting, immigration, certain trends amongst immigrants and non-citizens, and arguments for non-citizen suffrage as well. A dissertation written by Michael David Nicholans in 2021 titled *Immigrants' Identities and Host-Country Participation: The Role of Linked Fate* details the idea of linked fate, as stated by Nicholans, is “a sense that their life chances are tied to those of others”. This idea relates to the sense in which non-citizens, who are all new to a country, share the same issue of not being equally represented in school board elections and referendums. Nicholans also explores how linked fate can lead to an increase in political participation⁹. Since a group of people are concerned with a certain issue, and are thereby connected by that issue, they will feel like their voice matters, and have a better chance of making change since they know they aren't alone.

⁶ Makin, Cheryl. “Monroe Voters Refuse a Third Time to Pay for Schools Improvement Project.” *Courier News*, 15 Mar. 2023

⁷ Bureau, U.S Census. “Monroe Demographics.” *Point2*, 2021,

⁸ *Fiscal Year 2024 K-12 State School Aid, District Details Excluding Debt Service Aid New Jersey Department Of Education, Office of School Finance, 2023*

⁹ Nicholans Michael David. “*Immigrants' Identities and Host-Country Participation : The Role of Linked Fate.*” *University of California San Diego University of California San Diego* 2018.

A positive correlation between non-citizens and voting was also seen in Ray Achintya's article from 2022, "The Impact of Non-Citizen Population in Regional Differences in Non-Voting in the USA." Achintya argues that the more non-citizens there are in an area, the more the citizens in that area will vote. The author starts by analyzing the results of the 2020 election, finding a larger voter turnout in the Northeast than South. This shows how the presence of non-citizens, since there tends to be more in the Northeast, generates more participation in elections. The author uses statistics from the US Census Bureau to back up their argument. This writing is also very recent, emphasizing how in the current state of our country, non-citizens have a positive impact on political participation. There have also been several works speaking positively about giving non-citizens the right to participate in school board elections. One of which is Jennifer Butwin's 2018 piece, *Putting Students First: Why Noncitizen Parents Should Be Allowed to Vote in School Board Elections*. Butwin argues that non-citizens should be given this right so that their children can also receive the best education possible. Butwin's argument goes to show the importance of recognizing this issue, and also the right that needs to be provided. Overall Butwin's interpretation on the topic is a useful model to establish the idea of how allowing non-citizens to vote in school referendums would be supported. This recent literature demonstrates an increase in interest in this topic.

However, there have been some exceptions to seeing recent works on non-citizens enfranchisement. *Sharing the Vote: Noncitizen Voting Rights in Local School Board Elections* by Tara Kini, written in 2005, discusses ideas similar to Butwin. Kini once again discusses how the idea of non-citizens voting in school elections would be a significant step to make, as it gives opportunities for their children to receive the same educational benefits, allow for more civic engagement, and actually provide more of an incentive to naturalize, so that they can gain this power on a state and federal level. It is interesting to see how a piece reflects similar ideas to one published nearly 15 years later. Other authors have sought to normalize the idea of non-citizens voting. From the 2015 "Voting Rights for Non-Citizens: Treasure or Fool's Gold?", Avigail Eisenberg writes about how in Belgium, this idea brought many political issues, dividing the country politically and bringing increased support for anti-immigration ideas. In many situations, migrants were not given the opportunity to access education, health, and housing resources in order to garner more support for the right wing. In Spain however, integration was a topic more frequently discussed. There has been controversy in Spain as well, with concerns over wanting to protect the unique language and culture, but they have adopted an idea in which they permit enfranchisement for assimilated non-citizens. Eisenberg's work serves to show how ideologies in different countries can significantly affect the outcome of such a movement, but also proves how this movement is not unique to the United States, and is one that is taking place worldwide. It confirms the validity of the movement to achieve non-citizen suffrage in school and local elections, given the fact that it is being accepted in other countries as well.

On the other hand, R Ali and Quan D highlight some potential flaws in their 2021 piece "Educational Place Simultaneity and Civic Participation in Asian America." The author ultimately argues that since Asian immigrants often have a foreign education, they have low rates of civic participation. This is due to the fact that they may not have been as educated or experienced with American government and politics. It is important to consider the education status of immigrants, especially Asian immigrants, since a large population of non-immigrants in the US are Asian. However, since it is shown that they do tend to participate less frequently given a foreign education, more can be done to encourage activity. It is, however, important to consider these conclusions, as a recent work was published discussing the low rates of Asian-American

participation, a large group of immigrants living in America¹⁰. It is overall very interesting to see how most of the works containing ideas related to non-citizens and voting have only been in recent years. The 1998 book titled *Citizens As Legislators : Direct Democracy in the United States* by Shaun Bowler did not once mention something relating to non-citizens suffrage, demonstrating how this is a relatively newly researched idea. Given the fact that the dissertation is from 1998, ideas have progressed since then, and the idea that only citizens can participate in democracy is quite outdated.

Pro

The American school system is based on their students and their needs. It is important that each and every one of the children in school is equally represented and given the same opportunity to receive the best quality education they possibly can. Political participation amongst non-immigrants will also increase with the presence of immigrants, due to linked fate. Non-immigrant parents work tirelessly to support their children and the rest of their family, pay their taxes, and face discrimination, all while trying to make it in a new country. Providing the right to non-immigrants to vote in school board elections as well as referendums will give them a chance to have their voices heard, so that their children can enjoy an equal and fair education. This suffrage will ultimately benefit society, as it serves for better representation and more parent involvement.

The benefits of non-citizen suffrage is evident across many states, so it is a valid idea and has support from government officials in major cities. This idea is currently present in multiple jurisdictions in states like Maryland, California, Vermont, New York, and Washington D.C.¹¹ The fact that this law is present in other jurisdictions shows that this policy is feasible and realistic. San Francisco has accomplished allowing non-citizens to participate in school board elections recently. In 2016, the city passed a ballot that permitted non-citizens over the age of 18, with children under the age of 19, to vote in school board elections. This passage was widely supported by officials in the city, as Hillary Ronen on the Board of Supervisors stated how she felt the legislation was a “no-brainer”, and that parents of children should be involved with their education. Additionally, Supervisor Sandra Lee Fewer stated that, “As a parent myself and a former member of the SF Board of Education it is critical that the voices of all parents are at the table, particularly those that have historically been denied a voice in the process.”¹² As presented, there were many positive reviews from city officials themselves, who supported the passage of this bill. A mother of three students in the San Francisco schools mentioned, “I wasn’t aware that my voice and involvement could affect and influence the quality and success of my children’s schooling.” Given the mother’s testimony it is evident that the change of policy in San Francisco improved the lives of the residents of San Francisco. In another example, the board member Olivia Zheng stated, “If we leave out those families in terms of who has a say in school districts, it’s a big gap in terms of whose students’ needs are we meeting and the decisions that are being made at the school board level.” Once again, the importance of giving non-citizens the right to vote is being highlighted, as Zheng mentions how without it, an overwhelming number of students will be left out. Including the parents of a town who are non-immigrants prove how non-citizen suffrage benefits the town, as it allows for the residents of the town to express their opinions on the education of the students, and for all the students to receive the same quality of education as reflected in San Francisco.

¹⁰ Ali R and D Quan. “Educational Place Simultaneity and Civic Participation in Asian America.” April 2021

¹¹ Noncitizens Allowed to Vote in Some Local Elections, Spurring backlash from GOP

¹² Non-Citizens, Illegal Immigrants Now May Register to Vote in San Francisco School Board Elections.



The Chicago LSCs are not only a great example of this idea being set up successfully, but have also provided many benefits. Due to the fact that non-citizen can participate, these parents now “have direct access to knowledge of the governing body that makes decisions regarding school budgets and improvement plans.”¹³ Since non-citizens are given this new opportunity, they are also presented with new information, which can help them get more involved and understand the town better. It is unfair to withhold information from parents concerning their child’s schooling. The Chicago LSC’s provide a strong potential template for policy change. Additionally, with the idea of symbolic responsiveness, having someone in a position that may resemble a certain group of people may want to solve or help with problems that will affect that group of people. Along these lines, Latino school officials in Chicago’s LSC’s conducted many surveys and interviews to try to understand how many Latino parents were actually involved in their child’s school. Although 25% of Latino parents interviewed claimed they were not involved in the child’s schooling or LSC’ policies in any way, the efforts from the schools to try to contact the parents increased their involvement by 65%. This work also state¹⁴ that, “. . . Latino parents become more involved in school activities and participate more in governance when they see themselves represented in the local council or on the teaching staff.” As illustrated, the effects of having non-citizens vote in the Chicago LSC allowed for the Latino parents to become more involved in the schools. This is due to the fact that they were given a privilege they weren’t able to access initially, but due to this change, they themselves are more interested in participating. More participation can benefit the town in many ways. More participation from all the residents not only results in various opinions from many different people, allowing for a more well-rounded and accurate consensus of what the town actually wants, but it shows that the non-citizens are not taking this privilege with nothing in return. In addition to contributing to the town in a number of ways like paying taxes, they are also getting involved in the issues concerning their town, which is a responsible action of a town resident.

Along the lines of participation, non-immigrants have shown to be motivated to be more politically active when they share a common struggle with others. The concept of linked fate is that people perceive their future to be connected with others who share a common goal or struggle. The concept first arose in the situation of African-Americans fighting for civil rights. This situation is relevant to the case of non-citizens voting in school elections, given that they all share the struggle of being residents and parents of a town in which their voices aren’t heard. Due to the fact that they share this common struggle, with the idea of linked fate, these non-citizens could perceive their future to be connected, and therefore would be more motivated to fight for this privilege. Michael David Nicholson states in his piece, “Immigrants’ Identities and Host-Country Participation : The Role of Linked Fate.”, “Immigrants perceiving shared interests may be particularly susceptible to mobilization within their social networks. Put simply, individuals perceiving shared interests may be less likely to expect disagreement or conflict among members of their group, leading them to discuss their political ideas and views more readily than others in group settings . . . Simply put, as perceptions of shared interest intensify, individuals may discuss politics with other group members more readily and learn about

¹³ Shah Paru Radha et al. *“The Politics and Policy Implications of Latino Representation in Education.”* Rice University 2006.

¹⁴ Nicholson Michael David. *“Immigrants’ Identities and Host-Country Participation : The Role of Linked Fate.”* University of California San Diego University of California San Diego 2018.

opportunities for participation.”¹⁵ As quoted, the idea of linked fate allows for more political conversation. When this group of non-citizens all share this struggle, they also will feel like there would be less disagreement within their group, allowing them to discuss more broad ideas. The unification of these groups of people with the struggle show how these people are committed to the issues, and aren’t looking for a free ride. With more conversation comes more opportunities to get involved with the community, which is in the interest of the non-citizens, but will also provide a benefit to the broader community. All in all, it will only better our community, given the fact that 88% of immigrant children are US born themselves, and don’t deserve to have their education affected due to the status of their parents citizenship.

Con

Although the idea of representation is what is being discussed here, there has also been a controversy as to whether non-citizens should be allowed to receive the privilege of participation in school board elections. It is an ongoing argument from many people that non-citizens shouldn’t be allowed to vote in school board elections or referendums, due to the fact that voting is something that should be associated with citizenship, and expanding this gives away that privilege. As mentioned by Harmeet Dhillon, a member of the Republican National Committee, “The reason I voted against it is that I think the right to vote is something that goes along with citizenship -- and should be.” Although this seems to be a perception of many, it isn’t fair to say that voting should only be associated with citizenship in the case of school board elections. What’s more important is that voting plays a significant role in our democracy, and it is the foundation of the idea to have a country run by the needs of the people. Considering that the start of the country was built on the idea of “No taxation without representation,” it is unfair to say the privilege doesn’t belong to the non-immigrants living in towns for years, as they too pay their taxes. Representation is a key tenant of American democracy.

Another concern is the fact that allowing non-citizens to vote in school board elections and referendums gives them less of an incentive to want to stay in the country to become citizens. This is, in fact, not true. As stated by Jennifer Butwin in her article, “Putting Students First: Why Noncitizen Parents Should Be Allowed to Vote in School Board Elections,” “there is no basis to conclude that citizenship applications would decrease if noncitizens were allowed to vote in school board elections.”¹⁶As mentioned, there is no evidence that shows that by giving this privilege, there are fewer applications for citizenship. In fact, voting is not the entire basis of citizenship. There are many other reasons for a non-citizen to want to become a citizen, such as security and comfort, living in a country that is tougher to survive and thrive in as a non-citizen. It is not logical to assume that granting a privilege to non-citizens will make them less motivated to continue to stay committed to the country to earn citizenship. In fact, this could help increase citizenship rates, due to the fact that allowing certain non-citizens to vote on a small scale will provide them with an insight into what being a citizen is like, and will provide them with more of an incentive to apply. Additionally, allowing them to vote also gives non-citizens more opportunities to get involved and contribute to the country, which will help them gain more knowledge about the country and its political system, ultimately improving their chances of receiving citizenship. It isn’t fair to prevent people of a privilege that will be better for all of society, due to a hypothetical situation that may or may not happen. Helping our non-citizens is

¹⁵ Nicholson Michael David. “Immigrants’ Identities and Host-Country Participation : The Role of Linked Fate.” University of California San Diego University of California San Diego 2018.

¹⁶ Butwin, Jennifer. *Putting Students First: Why Noncitizen Parents Should Be Allowed to Vote in School Board Elections* - Fordham University, 2018

a great way to help shape the future of our country, since it all starts with the education of America's future.

Conclusion

As the country grows and shifts over time, new issues arise that need revisiting. From the beginning of American history, Americans were concerned with representation, and even coined the phrase "no taxation without representation." We see the issue of representation arise again with debates about whether non-citizens should be allowed to participate in local elections. Non-citizens should be able to vote in school board elections and referendums, due to the fact that many of these people have children going to schools. The primary concern at hand is to give the future of America the best education they can possibly receive. This is in the hands of the people. If this issue can gain more attention across the country, it will definitely have a huge impact, given the fact that it has already been established in several jurisdictions in the United States, and other countries. Ultimately, the non-immigrants of the United States have been hard-working and loyal, and deserve the opportunity to give their children a better life, because at the end of the day, everyone is just trying to achieve the American dream.

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