THINK GLOBAL, VOTE LOCAL

ABSTRACT

Many local governments have recognized the importance of reaching out to their foreign-born population and have extended the right to vote to non-citizen residents. This article describes why Canada's diverse cities, especially Toronto, would benefit from expanding the franchise in this way.

RATNA OMIDVAR

Ratna Omidvar is the executive director of The Maytree Foundation, a private charitable foundation dedicated to combating systemic poverty and to building strong civic communities in Canada. Maytree supports the development of progressive social policies and acceleration of settlement of refugees and immigrants in large urban centres. A large portion of Maytree's work focuses on increasing the capacity of leaders and organizations to lead change and promote healthy civic communities.

Some say globalization has brought a new era of prosperity and wealth; others say it leads to inequality, lower environmental standards and undemocratic multinational institutions. Whatever your point of view, there is one thing we all can agree on – globalization is an unstoppable force changing every aspect of our lives.

As the world grows ever smaller, more and more people are living outside their countries of birth. In developed countries, where more than one in ten people are international migrants, most people live in cities (United Nations 2006). With this relocation comes the inevitable interaction with new communities; however, it is becoming easier to maintain both emotional and physical ties to your country of origin. Technological developments mean that you can grow up in New York and watch Indian television via satellite. Developments in transportation mean that you can live in Paris and make frequent trips to Morocco to visit family. Thanks to liberalized trade, you can live in London and have a thriving business in China. This is incredibly positive, but it is also challenging governments to think differently about migration and the meaning and practice of citizenship.

While both migration and citizenship policy will always be the purview of national governments, the lived reality of citizenship and migration is uniquely local. The actions of local governments on such issues as affordable housing, safe streets and access to social services are essential to ensuring that newcomers are welcomed. Local governments are more successful when they engage those people affected by their actions in their decision-making processes.

The emergence of city citizenship

While engagement in a community can take many forms, it is through the act of voting that most people are directly engaged in government. The right to vote is a core concept in democratic societies, and, as such, it represents who is included in and excluded from society. Recognizing the importance of engaging the foreign-born population, a growing number of cities are extending the right to vote to non-citizen residents. They are giving newcomers a voice in shaping the policies that directly affect them.

Countries in the European Union, for example, extend voting rights at the local level to other EU nationals. Some countries go further. For example, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Ireland and Sweden extend this right to foreign residents regardless of citizenship. In these countries, there is often a residency requirement in lieu of citizenship in order to vote at the local level. In Ireland, non-citizens acquire the right to vote in local elections if they are residents at the time the voters list is prepared, which is about nine months before the election. In some of these countries, acquiring citizenship is a difficult and lengthy process, and extending the franchise at the local level is seen as one way to engage a growing foreign-born population. As the Mayor of Dublin explained, non-citizen residents "like the idea of being asked for their vote. They feel a part of the city, and I think that's important….They feel they're not being dismissed" (*The Toronto Star* 2005).

In the United States, the call for non-resident voting is coming from the grassroots level. In New York, where it is estimated that 1 in 5 city residents is not a citizen, a coalition comprised of immigrant and faith-based groups, labour unions, civil and voting rights organizations and community based-organizations is advocating for voting rights for non-citizen residents in a campaign called IVote.[1] In the state of Massachusetts, city councils in both Amherst and Cambridge have called on the state to repeal legislation that prevents non-citizens from voting at the local level. In Takoma Park, Maryland, a 1991 non-binding referendum approved voting rights for non-citizen residents. By 2004, five other Maryland towns permitted non-citizens to vote (Hayduk and Wucker 2004). Similar initiatives are in various stages in Connecticut, New Jersey, Colorado, Wisconsin and North Carolina, as well as in three cities in California – Los Angeles, San Diego and San Bernardino (Hayduk and Wucker 2004).

On the other side of the globe, New Zealand is the only democracy in the world that allows all non-citizen residents to vote in both local and national elections after only one year of residency (Earnest 2003).

Canada and non-citizen voting

In Canada, non-citizens are effectively barred from voting at any level of government. This wasn't always the case. In fact, Canadian citizenship only came into existence in 1947. Until then, anyone who was born in Great Britain or part of the British Empire had the right to vote in Canadian elections (as long as they met the other requirements, such as age). Thanks to legislation that maintained voting rights for British subjects, non-citizens from 54 countries could vote in Nova Scotia's provincial elections until 2003. At the municipal level, non-citizens are barred from voting as a result of provincial legislation. But, there is evidence that non-citizen voting took place in Toronto as late as in 1988 (*The Toronto Star* 2006).

The exclusion of non-citizens might not be an important issue for some smaller Canadian cities (or even the City of Toronto in 1988), but the City of Toronto today is one of the most diverse cities in the world. With a population of 2.5 million, it receives approximately 50,000 newcomers each year. Almost half of all residents are foreign born.

In a paper prepared for Inclusive Cities Canada, Myer Siemiatycki (2006) explains that, at any given time, there are more than 200,000 people living in the City of Toronto who are not citizens and who are therefore excluded from local elections. These newcomers live, work and send their children to school in the city but cannot participate in city council or school board decisions. Denying these people the right to vote at the municipal level effectively silences their voices on issues that relate most closely to their everyday lives. Siemiatycki proposes that the City of Toronto extend the right to vote to all non-citizen residents. This change would:

- Signal belonging and participation for newcomers;
- Enhance accountability of municipal leaders because they would represent the people they serve;
- Encourage the political participation of newcomers early in the settlement process;
- Put issues that are important to newcomers and visible minorities on the political agenda at the municipal level;
- Invigorate and enhance a notion of city citizenship.

Despite its merits, this idea is not without its critics:

Doesn't this make citizenship meaningless?

Some say that extending the right to vote to non-citizen residents at the local level effectively makes national citizenship meaningless and makes it less attractive to newcomers. However, with the exception of New Zealand, no country has extended the right to vote nationally to non-citizens. In all other countries, voting at national levels is still reserved for citizens. In Canada, newcomers would still be attracted to citizenship because of its other benefits – most notable is access to a passport.

Shouldn't residents prove their loyalty first?

Others say that newcomers should be citizens first to prove their commitment to their host country by becoming citizens. The concern here is that foreign citizenship is somehow incompatible with local citizenship.

But there are two compelling counter arguments to this criticism. First, identities are not mutually exclusive. You can be both a Torontonian and Canadian. In fact, you can be a Torontonian, an Ontarian, a Canadian, and a foreign-national, all at the same time. Canadians already recognize this complexity by allowing dual citizenship. Second, extending the right to vote to non-citizens at the local level is not about being "Canadian." It is about being "Torontonian." Voting at the local level is about those issues that touch us most closely. Local voting is about schools, stop signs and potholes. These issues are distinct from those that we would discuss at the national level. In a city, the idea that you have to "prove" your commitment would suggest a residency requirement, not a citizenship one.

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Do newcomers know enough about the community to vote?

A knowledgeable electorate is important to any healthy democracy. This is why civic education is so important – but it is not a factor in eligibility for voting. This is likely because it would be impossible to develop a "test" that everyone would find appropriate. What questions would we ask people in order to be eligible to vote?

People who wish to make Toronto their home often wait months, even years, to go through the immigration process. According to the Citizenship and Immigration Canada Website, it takes 67 months for visa offices to complete 80% of their permanent resident cases. Many immigrants use this time to, among other things, talk to family or friends about life in Toronto, read English or French newspapers or learn about their community on the Internet. Civic education becomes important upon arrival. But civic education is not just a newcomer issue. Canadians (including those born in Canada) may not know much about the political process. In a survey commissioned by IRPP in March 2000, 11% of respondents couldn't name the Prime Minister, only 46% of respondents could name the Federal Minister of Finance and only 35% could identify the official opposition in the House of Commons (Howe 2001).

It could be argued that as Canadians and non-citizen residents, we know much more about our local communities than our national one. Imagine a poll asked, "Do you know when your garbage is collected?" or "Can you tell me where the closest school is located?" This knowledge is attained through residency. And it is this kind of intimate understanding of a community that can be harnessed into effective local political action.

Don't immigrants have more pressing issues to worry about?

Too many immigrants to Canada, despite the fact that they are highly skilled and educated, are underemployed or unemployed. We have been told that community efforts should be focused on addressing this important problem – to the exclusion of electoral issues. We have taken this criticism very seriously but have found it lacking because it effectively pits economic rights against democratic rights. Would you rather have the right to vote or enough money to live? Likely you would choose money because you need it to survive. But in a democratic society economic rights and democratic rights are not mutually exclusive. In fact, it is through involvement in the city's government and broader society that newcomers can help to influence policies to improve their situation.

Will giving non-citizen permanent residents the right to vote increase or decrease voter participation?

It is difficult to predict what percentage of non-citizen residents, if given the chance, would exercise their right to vote. Even if non-citizen voters don't vote as often as citizens, it is important to note that the right to vote is not denied to other groups with low turnout rates, groups like young people, tenants and the poor. On the contrary, we work to encourage the participation of the members of these groups in the democratic process because we understand that high voter turnout is a vital sign of a healthy democracy.

Research suggests that eventually immigrants vote at a rate similar to that of other Canadians in federal elections (White et al. 2006). The suggestion is that the longer immigrants are exposed to Canadian politics, the more likely they are to vote. Municipal voting would allow newcomers to begin to act like citizens right away, providing a training ground in political participation that would prepare them to participate in provincial and federal elections once they become citizens.

Would giving non-citizens the right to vote in local elections have a positive or negative impact on democracy?

Historically, when the right to vote is expanded to a new group, concerns about the impact on government are raised. For example, over 100 years ago it was though that allowing women to vote could lead to "inconsiderate and rash legislation" (Parkman 1897).

In Ontario, the voting system allows non-resident property owners to vote, while many other residents cannot. This means that a property owner can vote even if he or she does not live in the city, as long as he or she is a Canadian citizen. In effect, the current system privileges property ownership over residence in the local democratic process. Allowing permanent residents to vote would level the playing field between non-resident property owners and non-citizen residents. Ensuring that everyone who has made Toronto, for example, their permanent home will have the opportunity to express their voice through a vote will help to make local government more democratic and more accountable to all its residents.

The future of citizenship and globalization

Cities that have extended the right to vote to non-citizen residents have done so in an effort to respond to a growing foreign-born population, to recognize the contribution of non-citizen residents and to democratize the local electoral process. In an era of increasing complexity and fluid identities, non-citizen voting creates an opportunity to experience citizenship in a way that is firmly rooted in the notion of "place." In a way, cities have followed the lead of the environmental movement by asking us all to think globally but vote locally.

While the practice of non-citizen resident voting is being taken up in many cities around the world, Canadian cities are lagging behind. In a city like Toronto, this is clearly a missed opportunity – the city is weaker because it doesn't include all voices in its decision-making process. In the City of Toronto, it is imperative that all residents are included in the vision of the city and in the institutions that lead it.

But it is not only Toronto that stands to benefit. Many other cities in Canada have significant non-citizen populations. Provinces should revise their legislation in order to enable cities to define their own franchise. Given the opportunity, other Canadian cities with diverse populations would benefit from choosing to extend the right to vote to non-citizen residents. This would signal that all people who live in a city are welcome and responsible for the success of their new community.

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Note

[1] See <www.ivotenyc.org>.