



The Women of Color Policy Network is dedicated to ending the invisibility and enhancing the life chances of women of color through policy research, advocacy, public education and mentoring a new generation of advocate-researchers.

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Intro 628 - Voting Restoration Act
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My name is Diana Salas, researcher for the Women of Color Policy Network, an organization dedicated to ending the invisibility of women of color in public policy through research, advocacy, education and mentoring a new generation of advocate-researchers. I am here in support of the Voting Restoration Act or Intro 628, a monumental bill that seeks to restore the right to vote to legal immigrants in municipal elections. I am one of the roughly 700,000 women that would be enfranchised if this bill passes.

I view this bill as a mechanism to ensure the right to participation in local decision-making. The argument has been made that in order to vote you must be a citizen. Yet, legal non-citizens work, pay taxes, go to school, and die in war, all the things that citizens do as well. I should not have to wait to directly participate in the local governing structures that affect my daily life as I apply for citizenship. Are there other ways to participate and have my voice heard? Yes, government has provided some avenues for this. Thousands of us volunteer in organizations, open up small businesses, attend public hearings, but that is not enough. We must continue to move progressively towards full participation. The reality is that I can attend all the public hearings I want but at the very end of the day, policy makers are not accountable to me. They prioritize who their base is, if I cannot vote you in, I cannot vote you out.

All residents of NYC should have some mechanism to hold government accountable. Government has the affirmative obligation, to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of all residents in NYC. Citizenship rights are intended to create a level of democratic participation and accountability. People have the right to participate in how decisions are made. Whether or not you choose to exercise that right is a matter of choice. However, government must engage and support the participation of all civil societies, including immigrant ones.

We have seen that women, African-Americans, 18 year olds, all of who were native born, had to push government for the right to full participation. As others have said or will say, our country has a history of enfranchising a privileged few. The fear of a new voter base is not new.

“DANGER Women’s Suffrage Would Double the Irresponsible Vote. It is MENACE to the Home, Men’s Employment and to All Business”.

This was a poster in the 1870’s and it sums up how women’s suffrage was viewed. I have heard the same thing regarding immigrant suffrage. People have told me that we cannot allow people who do not understand local government the right to vote, it would be irresponsible. However, there are



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thousands of immigrants like me, residents who grew up in the city, call it home, and are immersed in city politics and yet they are not allowed to participate directly. We are people who participate in get out the vote efforts even though we cannot pull that lever. We are part of community associations, neighborhoods and businesses. The federal backlog problems should not interfere with our daily right to participate.

If voting was really tied to citizenship, then it is a right that cannot be taken away from citizens, yet there are thousands of persons with felony convictions who have been striped of their right to vote. They have not been striped of citizenship, they have been stripped of their human right to have a say in policy.

The slogans and the sound bites are not new. The early struggles to gain this right have always posed the same stereotype, the mis-educated voter that will vote to harm us all. We cannot be hypocrites, and push the world to buy into democracy and not uphold those principles here. I do not believe that any native born person would like to a pay a poll tax, or take a test, just to vote. Nor would they appreciate the use of intimidation and violence. These were the things that past suffragists faced, let's not repeat history. Let's not be afraid to move forward. Every suffrage movement had to change public opinion. We are here to say that as residents of the city of New York, we want the opportunity to participate. We want the chance to become more involved in local government. We want to be a part of moving the city towards a brighter future for us all.

Thank you.