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My Turn: Will noncitizen voting affect democracy?

By Marta Ceroni

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The demonstrated noncitizen election organized by the Vermont Immigrant Voting Alliance on Town Meeting Day has sparked a discussion within the Burlington community. Should committed, legal permanent residents who are noncitizens be granted the privilege to participate in local democracy?

Opposition seems to rest primarily on ideological grounds. Voting, it is claimed, is the essential privilege of citizenship, with no distinction between local or federal elections. Many Americans and immigrants, though, argue for noncitizen voting rights in local elections based on concrete, practical reasons and fairness.

Applying for citizenship requires five years after permanent residency is granted. For work-related immigration, the path to citizenship can easily take 15 to 20 years. An immigrant's child might make it all the way through the Burlington school system before that parent can gain the right to vote. It is legitimate to expect that citizenship requires a long path and high commitment to the United States as a whole. Still, policy and budget decisions seem to have little to do with citizenship and to have more to do with civic duty. We do not believe it is legitimate to keep so many members of a community without a voice on local priorities for such a long period of time.

Decisions at the local level affect all members of a community equally. This is recognized in many European countries. In Ireland, noncitizens have voted locally for 40 years. In Scandinavian countries, all foreign residents of three years or more can vote.

We understand that reasons of principle lead many to oppose the idea of noncitizen local voting. Yet, principles change over time reflecting improved understanding of the notion of democracy. Women, African-Americans, and Native Americans were excluded from the democratic process for reasons of principle. Today, nothing in the U.S. Constitution prevents noncitizen voting at the local level, and many states, including Vermont, have allowed noncitizens to vote in the past. Already citizens and immigrants work together with city councils in the United States and in Canada to envision and shape communities. Several cities in the United States (such as Takoma Park, Md., or Amherst, Mass.) extend voting rights to noncitizens. There, a demonstrated commitment is usually required before voting rights are granted: for example, New York City is proposing that non-citizens live in the city for at least six months.

Immigrants play important roles in local communities: educators, entrepreneurs, social and healthcare workers. They rightly see themselves as vital threads of the social and economic fabric. They contribute to their local community just as much as their American neighbors do, and like them, require reliable infrastructure, safety and educational opportunities for their children. Economies can benefit from such legal immigrants, who typically provide more taxes and use fewer services (National Immigration Law Center, 2006). In the face of the current U.S.- and Vermont-wide shortage of skilled workers, foreign workers are a valid alternative to outsourcing or moving entire industries overseas. Foreign workers are often highly educated at the expense of their country of origin, pay the same taxes as citizens, frequently without becoming eligible to receive the services they pay for, like social

security and Medicaid.

Vermont has set high examples in the past. We believe the next conversation on how to make democracy stronger, participatory and legitimate should be about legal immigrants and local elections. The people of Burlington will ultimately decide whether they want their immigrant neighbors, teachers and caregivers to have a say in the decisions that affect them and the community they are part of.

Marta Ceroni of Burlington is the coordinator of the Vermont Immigrant Voting Alliance).