

Amanda Garces – Montpelier resident
Testimony – Charters (Non-citizen Voting)
5-2-2019

Madam Chair and distinguished committee members,

Thank you for allowing me to testify in support of the charter change for Non-citizen voting an act relating to approval of an amendment to the charter change of the City of Montpelier regarding non-citizen voting in City elections

As an immigrant, there is nothing more beautiful than deciding and choosing the community where you are going to live, raise your children (if you decide to raise some) work, and stay put. For many of us, eventually, there is a day when you realize that the place where you live feels like home regardless of the nationality on your passport. It only because you are creating lasting relationships with your community.

For me, planting roots in this community means that I am committed to supporting the schools that my children attend, as well as supporting local initiatives that enhance the quality of life for ALL Montpelier residents. Our family pays taxes, contribute to the local economy by going to restaurants, shopping locally, and working in town.

I am fortunate to be part of a thriving Latino community in Vermont, we have potlucks, parties, play dates with our children, dance together, relax together and contribute to the Vermont economy together in a variety of ways and we are also part of a bigger community of immigrants who make Montpelier thrive. To give one example, my daughter's class enjoys the richness of five languages, five different cultures, five families contributing our city.

I know community members and friends who are not U.S citizens who have been here for a lot longer than I have, contributing in the same way and involved in local initiatives. Therefore, I am urging you to support this charter change and allow non-citizens to vote in our local elections.

As an immigrant rights activist I have been around many people who have championed similar bills in other states and the benefits are beautiful, if only to give our community members a sense of pride and an acknowledgement of their contributions.

The question in people's mind is always, why can't they become citizens? Well, the immigration process is not as simple as people imagine. A variety of reasons can prevent someone from becoming a citizen:

- Not all countries have dual citizenship
- Immigration processes are expensive
- English proficiency is needed if you are under a certain age
- There is a long backlog of citizenship applications now more than 700,000 applicants are waiting patiently to become citizens.
- People have to wait three to five years after you have your permanent resident to become a citizen.
- Some people just don't want to

I know because I know people and family members who fit one or more than one than those challenges.

Cities that have instituted this practice have seen an amazing benefit and including our communities should not give us fear. I have witnessed how this initiative was built from the ground up in Montpelier and witness the courage of the community members getting signatures to get this in the ballot. Many are my friends and I support them and hope that you do too because they contribute in the same way but without the representation

I have read some of the concerns people have. Such as:

This will create a separate list of people without documents. I know that I would have wanted to include undocumented people in this initiative but they are not included so that concern is not valid. This bill is for documented people who already have documentation and who already are part of the system.

For the record I wanted to include an article from think progress. It's an old article but the answers are relevant.

I urge you to pass this charter change and allow us to have a community that is inclusive.

<https://thinkprogress.org/why-you-have-nothing-to-fear-from-non-citizen-voting-302eeb43d1cd/>

Why is non-citizen voting important? After the 1990 census, Takoma Park went about redistricting its wards to reflect the new population numbers. The wards were drawn to include equal numbers of residents, but, as Raskin, who sat on the commission, noticed, some wards had twice the number of voters. The reason: some wards had high numbers of non-citizen voters. As a result, voters in wards without many non-citizen residents found their vote worth half as much as those elsewhere. Ignoring non-citizens when drawing the boundary lines in an attempt to circumvent this problem is prohibited by the Supreme Court. As a result, the commission proposed a city-wide referendum to allow non-citizens to vote in local elections, which passed in February 1992.

Non-citizens can only vote in local elections. Perhaps the most important part of non-citizen voting is that non-citizens are only allowed to vote in local elections. There are valid reasons to want federal elections, which have a big impact on our nation's foreign policy, decided only by American citizens. But, as Leventhal explained to ThinkProgress, "If you live in a town, you're interested in getting your garbage picked up and your property taxes." In other words, parochial matters like city services and local taxes impact both citizen and non-citizen residents alike.

There is a long history of non-citizen voting in the United States. Non-citizen voting may feel weird. It shouldn't. For most of American history, non-citizens were

[permitted](#) to vote in 22 states and federal territories. It wasn't until the 1920s that, amidst anti-immigrant hysteria, lawmakers began to bar non-citizens from voting.

What impact has non-citizen voting had on local policies? “Very little,” according to Leventhal. He noted that critics of the proposal argued in 1991 that if Takoma Park legalized non-citizen voting, the city would soon become a “welfare magnet” where non-citizens would supposedly vote for massive new benefits that would attract more non-citizens, creating a cycle. But in the past 20 years, Leventhal notes, non-citizen voting has “had virtually no effect on the policies of the cities.” Raskin agreed: “it hasn't been a transforming event in the life of the city.”

Does it cost a lot? No. Because non-citizens can only vote in local Takoma Park elections which take place in odd-numbered years, there's no need to print separate ballots. Non-citizens register and vote on the same ballot as everyone else, rendering the cost trivial.

Will it lead to non-citizens fraudulently voting in federal elections? No. Like New York City, Takoma Park elections are held in odd-numbered years and don't coincide with state or national elections.

Would it work in a city the size of New York? Non-citizens make up more than [one-third](#) of New York's population, meaning a massive chunk of the city's taxpayers are currently disenfranchised. Raskin doubts that New York's experience would be much different from Takoma Park's, for a few reasons. First, the non-citizen population tends to be fairly transient. Second, they tend to be disproportionately poor, a contributing factor in their low turnout rates in other municipalities.

How do non-citizens feel about the initiative? Like citizen voters, turnout among non-citizens is abysmally low. For example, in [2009](#), 436 non-citizens were registered to vote in Takoma Park, but just 32 cast a ballot. That's even lower than the already-low turnout rate of 16 percent among citizens of Takoma Park. On the other hand, Raskin notes that those non-citizens who do cast a ballot are very grateful for the opportunity. Many are foreign businesspeople, or diplomatic personnel, or employees at the World Bank. “It makes them feel like they're part of the community,” Raskin said, noting that local citizens also want to embrace foreigners in the area because “there's a neighborly dimension to this.”

Many other countries allow non-citizens to vote. At least [20 countries](#) give non-citizens the right to vote. They include a broad range of nations, from Denmark to Chile to New Zealand.