The Case for Restoring Immigrant Voting Rights in the United States

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ABSTRACT Should voting rights be tied to citizenship? Over 20 million noncitizens pay taxes, own businesses and homes, send their children to schools, and make countless economic, social, and cultural contributions every day. Yet they cannot vote to select politicians who make policy that affects their daily lives. Today, noncitizens currently vote legally in local elections in 22 cities and towns in Maryland, Vermont, California, and Washington, DC. These practices have their roots in another little-known fact: noncitizens voted in 40 states at some point in time from the Founding until 1926. Noncitizens voted not only in local elections but also in state and federal elections, and they could hold office such as alderman. "Alien suffrage" was seen as a means to facilitate immigrant incorporation and citizenship, which it did in practice. This article examines the politics and practices of immigrant voting in the US, chronicling the rise and fall—and reemergence—of immigrant voting rights. It explores arguments for and against noncitizen voting, reviews evidence about its impact on policy and American political development, and considers its implications for immigration policy and democratic practice. Debate about immigrant voting rights can be viewed as a microcosm of broader debate about immigration, citizenship, and democracy reflected in scholarship and political conflict embroiling the nation, which holds valuable lessons for scholars and policy makers today. I argue, in a country where "no taxation without representation" was a rallying cry for revolution, such a proposition might not be so outlandish upon further scrutiny.

The acquisition of political rights—including voting rights—has been a vital tool for disempowered groups in American history to achieve economic, social, and civil rights. Because legislative bodies confer rights and make public policy, it is critical for all members of a polity to possess the capacity to select representatives. Otherwise, those without the vote are at risk of discrimination and bias because policy makers more easily can ignore their interests. The experiences of marginalized groups in the United States (i.e., African Americans, women, and young people) amply demonstrate that discriminatory public policies and private practices in employment, housing, education, health care, welfare, and criminal justice are inevitable by-products of political exclusion.

Previously excluded groups gained access to the franchise principally through political struggle. Ultimately, excluded groups needed the support of other sectors in society to win political rights. Agitation by the property-less encouraged propertied men to extend the franchise to the former by 1856; the Abolitionist Movement and Reconstruction culminated in the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 that enfranchised Black men; the Women's Suffrage Movement led men to enact the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, which gave women the right to vote; the creative and militant nonviolent protests and urban rebellions by

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African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s drove a largely white Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which bans discriminatory voting laws and practices; and protests by younger adults during the 1960s led older adults to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 with the passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment in 1971.

However, these changes did not produce suffrage for all. Today, approximately 22 million adults are excluded from the franchise—namely, immigrants who are not US citizens (Batalova 2025). Approximately 47.8 million immigrants live in the United States (i.e., "foreign-born" persons).[1] Of these individuals, 24.5 million have become US citizens, leaving about 22 million as noncitizens—almost half of whom are legal permanent residents who are eligible to become citizens or those who possess temporary legal status (permission to reside and work); the remaining half (13.7 million) are undocumented (Shenasi Azari et al. 2024). In some states and cities, immigrants comprise as much as 25% to 33% of the total population or more. Why not extend voting rights to noncitizens too?

Although the idea of allowing noncitizens to vote legally may sound odd or outlandish, it was not always so—nor need it be. In considering noncitizen voting rights, advocates advance the following normative, legal, historical, and empirical arguments:

1. It is rational. There are strong moral and practical reasons to restore immigrant voting—including notions of equal rights and treatment such as the current period of resurgent nativism—as well as mutual benefits that accrue to all community members.
2. It is legal. The US Constitution does not preclude noncitizen voting, and state courts and the US Supreme Court have upheld voting by noncitizens.[2] Historically, Congress and 40 states enacted laws allowing noncitizens to vote between 1776 and 1926 (Keyssar 2009).
3. It is feasible. Although "alien suffrage" was rolled back during periods of nativism, immigrant voting rights have been restored in 22 localities during the past several decades. Globally, 45 countries on almost every continent have extended voting rights to noncitizens in local, regional, and even national elections (Finn 2020; Pedroza 2019).

This article makes the case for immigrant voting rights by elaborating on these three arguments. I contend that the rise and fall—and reemergence—of immigrant voting rights in the United States can be viewed as a microcosm of broader debate about immigration, citizenship, and democracy that is embroiling the nation, and which holds valuable lessons for scholars and policy makers considering these issues (Brennan Center for Justice 2025; Hasen 2018; Wong 2017).

To do so, I use a combination of normative, interpretive, and empirical methods that draw on a broad range of primary and secondary sources, including academic studies, government and policy reports, census and election data, public opinion polls, public testimony, and news articles. The following analysis is based on interviews and participant observation with various stakeholders, including immigrant community organizations, noncitizen voting-rights advocates and opponents, elected officials, and elections officials in more than 12 cities in Maryland, New York, California, Vermont, Massachusetts, Maine, and Illinois during the past two decades.[3]

Although the idea of allowing noncitizens to vote legally may sound odd or outlandish, it was not always so—nor need it be. In considering noncitizen voting rights, advocates advance several normative, legal, historical, and empirical arguments.

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CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRACY

Conceptions of citizenship based on locality and political identity first emerged in Athenian and Roman city-states, as well as in early European city-states during the Renaissance period. These conceptions later were transformed to nationally based as nation-states formed and superseded local polities as the world's dominant political unit.

Notions of citizenship and political equality emerged in Greek city-states, where the view that people become citizens through *participating* politically, which provided the foundation of republican democracy (Joppke 2010; Pocock 1995). Roman city-states developed *legal status* as the basis of citizenship, in which "citizens" were "free to act by law, free to ask and expect the law's protection, a citizen of such and such a legal community, of such and such a legal standing in that community" (Pocock 1995, 37). Roman law in particular laid the foundation for Western conceptions and practice, such as reflected in John Locke's social contract in which the state protects people in exchange for citizens' retaining rights and obligations to follow laws.

With the rise of modern nation-states following the French and American Revolutions, however, national citizenship

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increasingly emphasized forms of sovereignty and exclusion. Tying citizenship to national citizenship created systems of "social closure" (Brubaker 2009) by shaping boundaries about what and *who* it includes and excludes (Schuck 2008). Conceptions of citizenship as binary (i.e., citizen versus noncitizen) and grounded in formal legal standing formed the gateway to rights, benefits, and obligations, which has continued to provide the basis of contemporary law and practice, including the link between citizenship and voting rights (Bauböck 2005; Benhabib 2004; Pedroza 2019).

Yet, the notion that voting rights flow exclusively from citizenship has been contested both theoretically and in practice. Some scholars emphasize normative considerations in the debate about whether noncitizens should have voting rights, contending that residence should serve as the basis for voting by advancing a human rights framework (Carens 2002; Owen 2006; Owen 2017), whereas others point to fragmented governmental systems and historical precedent (Altman, Huertas-Hernández, and Sánchez 2023; Hayduk 2006). Examples abound, including the European Union (EU) that created a form of "multilevel citizenship" with a supranational government that runs counter to notions of a single state-based citizenship: any EU member who moves to another EU country can vote in that member state's elections (Maas 2013; Pedroza 2019).

Similarly, in the United States, federal, state, and local governments create separate legal ties that can provide different rights and legal status to immigrants (Cohen and Kinney 2013). Whereas the federal government currently seeks to detain and deport millions of noncitizens, many states provide a broad range of state-based rights and services to immigrants, including protections from federal immigration enforcement, access to drivers' licenses, health care, in-state tuition, language and legal assistance, local voting rights, and more (de Graauw 2016). These governmental variations have the effect of essentially creating radically different forms of "state citizenship" (Colbern and Ramakrishnan 2020) and "local citizenship" (Hayduk and Coll 2018).

Nevertheless, having legal status or citizenship does not guarantee "substantive" inclusion in the liberal tradition, in which sharp inequalities in social, economic, and civil rights can exist alongside formal legal status and nationality. When substantive rights are distributed unequally and differentially—whether because of exploitative economic systems, racial orders, or patriarchy—formal legal citizenship cannot guarantee that people will be valued and treated equally in social, economic, and civil realms of life (Marshall 1965).

Smith (1997, 2003) provided a powerful corrective to the secular democratic liberalist view of citizenship in American history and contemporary life advanced by many mainstream political scientists who posit citizenship in terms of egalitarian and universalistic ideals such as those embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Whereas such egalitarian ideals have served many social movements that sought to advance transformative change throughout US history (e.g., abolitionist, suffragette, labor, civil rights, feminist, and LGBTQIA movements), Smith (2003) showed how alternative conceptions of America's racial, ethnic, gender, and religious identity also have been central in American political thought, culture, and practice. Smith's extensive research demonstrated how America has instead consisted of contending "multiple traditions" that include the depiction of America as a white Christian settler colony that perpetuated exclusions and repression along racial, ethnic, gender, and religious lines. Contemporary right-wing movements have tapped into these exclusionary "multiple traditions," manifesting in forms of nativism and xenophobia, and thereby advancing exclusionary political and racial projects (Smith and King 2024).

Debate about the nature of citizenship and democracy is as much about how we choose leaders as it is about defining who is included in the group that is doing the choosing. Who comprises the "we" in "we the people"? This debate has characterized American political development since slavery triggered protracted debates during the time of the Constitutional Convention (Horne 2014; Shklar 1991). Ultimately, Smith (1997) argues, substantive citizenship and equality require altering current unequal power imbalances by challenging exclusionary systems and institutions to create true democracy. The history of alien suffrage sheds light on the stakes and rewards involved in political conflict over voting rights and immigration policy that embroiled the nation then and now.

THE RISE AND FALL OF ALIEN SUFFRAGE IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Although historians and political scientists have long acknowledged the significant place of immigrants in American political history, the role of alien suffrage has not been well appreciated. Most scholars do not acknowledge or account for the fact that immigrants who were not yet US citizens could legally vote in 40 states at some point in time between 1776 and 1926. Noncitizens voted not only in local elections—which is what occurs today in local elections in California, Maryland, Washington, DC, and Vermont—but also in state and federal elections. In addition, noncitizens could hold office. Moreover, noncitizen immigrants voted in numbers and affected electoral dynamics and policy.

Alien suffrage initially emerged during the American Revolution in 11 of the 13 original states when voting rights were tied to race, gender, and property rather than to citizenship (i.e., only white male property owners could vote) (Williamson 2019). In short order, alien suffrage became viewed not as a substitute for citizenship but instead as a means to foster citizenship and immigrant integration—that is, as a way to integrate "Americans in waiting" (Motomura 2006). Moreover, as the nation expanded westward, the practice of noncitizen suffrage spread with it and did just that.

However, noncitizen voting was not all positive. When the US Congress created new territories from land it acquired through the displacement and genocide of Native Americans (e.g., Northwest Ordinance, § 9; July 13, 1787), it promised white European immigrants access to land and voting rights to encourage settlement of the Midwest and Western parts of the United States, which fostered forms of colonial settlerism. Alien suffrage also was used by dominant political factions to block or delay the enfranchisement of African Americans and women for partisan advantage (Egge 2018). In these ways, alien suffrage could serve exclusionary and inegalitarian outcomes (Keyssar 2009).

It was not without its critics. The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 were passed by Federalists partly in response to fears that French migrants would "infect" Americans with radical ideas (Hale 2003). The War of 1812 reversed the spread of noncitizen suffrage due to the specter of "foreign enemies" (Raskin 1992). Southern states viewed immigrants as a threat because the majority of them were hostile to slavery. Southern states restricted the

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franchise to white citizens and the Confederate Constitution would have excluded voting to anyone not born in the United States.

Nevertheless, as the US economy expanded, alien suffrage spread. Businesses backed it to incentivize migration to new states, and politicians supported it to capitalize on the votes of immigrants already present (Egge 2020). By the 1870s and 1880s, noncitizen suffrage reached its zenith when more than 20 states allowed it (Keyssar 2009). State courts upheld noncitizen voting laws and the US Supreme Court affirmed it in *Minor* v. *Happersett* (1874) (Kini 2005). The decision about who holds the franchise remains with states and localities.

As the number of immigrants increased, noncitizens voted in substantial numbers, affecting political dynamics and election outcomes. During the nineteenth century, immigrants comprised 10% to 25% of the total voting population in many states and locales, and noncitizens comprised significant portions of the foreign-born. As such, they factored into considerations by political parties and candidates on issues such as slavery, temperance, labor rights, and economic regulation. Immigrants participated in Anti-Slavery, Labor, Populist, Reform, and Socialist movements (Egge 2018, 2020). Because of their organizational and electoral clout, immigrants were courted by politicians of all stripes, helping to propel Democratic, Republican, Populist, and Socialist candidates to power (Hayduk, Garcia-Castañon, and Bhaumik 2024). In these ways, noncitizen suffrage played a role in facilitating immigrant political incorporation for millions of Europeans (Gerstle and Mollenkopf 2001).

Yet, because increased immigration occurred during a period of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and political conflict (Montgomery 1987), anti-immigrant sentiment increased and led to the elimination of noncitizen suffrage (Keyssar 2009). Nativist groups worked in tandem with political elites not only to eliminate alien suffrage by 1926 but also to impose other restrictive electoral laws, such as poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, residency requirements, and burdensome voter-registration procedures—all of which combined to disenfranchise millions of poor, low-income, urban, and immigrant groups. Voter participation decreased from an average of 70% to 80% of the voting-age population between 1840 to 1900 to 49% by 1924 (Piven and Cloward 2000).

Resembling political rhetoric employed today to denigrate and criminalize immigrants, political elites and civic organizations alleged that immigrants were committing "rampant voter fraud" enabled by "party machines" to justify the enactment of such voting restrictions. Moreover, like today, what often passed as "evidence" of fraud was highly suspect (Allen and Allen 1981; Argersinger 1985).

Restrictive electoral changes were accompanied by restrictive immigration policies that sharply limited the entry of non–Western Europeans, beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 through the 1924 National Origins Act (Tichenor 2002). These exclusionary immigration laws shaped the subsequent ethnic and racial composition of the United States, buttressing forms of white supremacy well into the twentieth century. Taken together, for decades, these electoral and immigration reforms limited more democratic possibilities for American political development.

This complex and fraught history has implications for contemporary debate about immigration, citizenship, and democracy. When it behooved economic and political elites to encourage European immigration that supplied cheap labor and populated new states, they readily conferred suffrage before citizenship. In so doing, alien suffrage facilitated voter participation, citizenship, and progress for millions of Western European immigrants. However, when "other" types of immigrants arrived (i.e., Chinese and Southern and Eastern Europeans), nativist fears flared and made immigrants into enemies, leading to their disenfranchisement and exclusion, which peaked during the nationalist fervor of World War I. In these ways, we can understand how political conflict over immigrants and voting rights shaped the nature and practice of citizenship and democracy in America.

THE REVIVAL OF IMMIGRANT VOTING RIGHTS

Immigrant voting rights, however, are not merely a relic of the distant past. The Civil Rights Movement ushered in a revival of immigrant voting, first in New York City in 1968[4] and later during the Sanctuary Movements during the 1990s in Maryland and beyond. As of October 2025, 22 jurisdictions allowed immigrants to vote in local elections: 16 municipalities in Maryland[5]; three in Vermont (i.e., Montpelier, Winooski, and Burlington); two in California (i.e., San Francisco and Oakland); and Washington, DC (Ballotpedia 2025; Finn 2024). An additional 14 jurisdictions have considered restoring immigrant voting rights, including five localities in Massachusetts; five in California; and one each in Maine, Illinois, Connecticut, and New Jersey (Hayduk, Dias, and Marti 2023).[6]

Some jurisdictions provide voting rights to all residents, including both documented and undocumented immigrants (i.e., Maryland, San Francisco, and Washington, DC), whereas others enfranchise only lawful permanent residents and those who have work permits (i.e., New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Maine). Some jurisdictions empower immigrants to vote only in school board elections (i.e., San Francisco and Oakland), whereas others empower immigrants to vote for all local offices, from city council member to mayor (i.e., Vermont, New York, Washington, DC, and Massachusetts). Some laws have been enacted via ballot proposals (i.e., San Francisco and Vermont), whereas others have been enacted by legislative processes (i.e., Maryland, New York, and Washington, DC).

In general, advocates promoted these reforms as a means to acknowledge immigrant residents as legitimate stakeholders, to affirm their voices in public affairs, and to advance their equitable inclusion. As such, these reforms created participatory forms of "local citizenship" (Hayduk and Coll 2018).

To win these reforms, immigrant voting-rights advocates advance several normative and empirical arguments. They note that noncitizens are counted for districting purposes, affecting the apportionment of seats in the House of Representatives. Furthermore, because Electoral College votes for president are allocated based on representation in Congress—and because government budget allocations are calculated using the total number of residents (not merely citizens)—noncitizens are recognized as legitimate stakeholders in federal law and long-standing practice (Levitt 2019).[7] At state and local levels, immigrants comprise a greater share of the population: more than 10% of the voting-age population in Texas, Florida, and New York and more than 20% in California. At the local level, immigrants may comprise 25% or more of the total population (Moslimani and Passel 2024).[8]

Advocates argue that this level of political exclusion contributes to the marginalization of immigrants. Although they are highly heterogeneous, as a group, immigrants rank at the bottom of the social and economic order (Card and Raphael 2013).

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Although immigrants work more hours than most US citizens; pay billions of dollars in taxes to federal, state, and local governments; and contribute economically, socially, and culturally in countless ways, an alarming number of immigrants and their families score low on indicators of well-being, including income, education, health, and housing (Waters and Pineau 2015). One in four low-income children is the child of an immigrant, and one in four low-wage workers is foreign-born. Undocumented immigrant families are more likely to lack health insurance, have poor health, and be "food insecure" than native-born families. Latinos, the largest pan-ethnic group of immigrants, experience challenging conditions and have poor outcomes compared with other pan-ethnic groups; Mexicans, the largest group of Latinos in the United States, face the biggest obstacles. Advocates contend that such deleterious circumstances are the inevitable by-product of immigrant political exclusion, reflecting the dynamics embodied in the age-old maxim of politics: If you don't have the vote, you can be easily ignored (Piven Cloward 2000).

Moreover, advocates argue, excluding such a significant portion of the population from political participation undermines the legitimacy of our laws and policies, thereby posing a challenge to the democratic ideals of inclusion and equality (Bennett and Resnick 1990; Hacker, Mettler, and Pinderhughes 2005).

Immigrant advocates point out that even as the number of elected representatives from diverse immigrant backgrounds has increased, it lags far behind that of dominant groups. Although gerrymandering, racial-bloc voting, and single-member districts contribute to this "representation gap," the lack of voting rights for immigrants surely is a factor. The cumulative lack of political power—from fewer votes to fewer representatives—is correlated with underrepresentation in government and biased public-policy outcomes (Mollenkopf and Pastor 2016; Ramakrishnan 2006; Wong 2008). Today, noncitizens are experiencing unprecedented assaults on their status and safety in ways that rival previous periods of nativism.

Ultimately, advocates ask: What do these conditions mean for such basic democratic principles as "government rests on the consent of the governed," "no taxation without representation," and "one person, one vote"? Advocates contend that immigrant political exclusion approximates the level of disenfranchisement associated with past practices that excluded poor people, African Americans, women, and young people from voting. As such, immigrant political exclusion challenges the ideals of a modern democracy, cutting to the heart of American political practice.

Immigrant voting-rights advocates argue that noncitizens are de facto members of their communities and participate in myriad significant ways that make them legitimate stakeholders in public affairs. Noncitizens are subject to all of the laws; work in every sector of the economy; own businesses; send their children to school; contribute billions of dollars in taxes each year to federal, state, and local governments; serve in the military; and even die defending this country. Yet, they cannot vote on issues crucial to the quality of their daily lives, undermining the legitimacy of our laws and policies.[9] Arming immigrants with the vote, advocates believe, would give them greater means to defend themselves and advance their equitable inclusion.

IMMIGRANT VOTING IN PRACTICE

Immigrant voting-rights campaigns and practices appear differently in each context. In some cases, broad coalitions among diverse ethnic and racial groups engage in a consultative process involving grassroots approaches to engage community members. These campaigns gain support of elected and other key local officials in the drafting of legislation or legal research and provide support for administering and implementing new voting rules, as well as by generating coverage by local media including "ethnic media" (e.g., New York, San Francisco, and Washington, DC). In other contexts, campaigns are composed of a small group of stakeholders or are led by elected officials.

Similarly, differing results are shaped by several factors, including the relative strength or weakness of community-based support and the organized opposition to immigrant voting rights, particularly in the case of ballot measures. Regional and national political contexts can significantly affect outcomes, including regarding implementation, voter turnout, and policy change.

Moreover, the "success" of local immigrant voting efforts might not be judged by advocates solely by whether they achieve the goal of establishing local voting rights or by traditional measures of the number of noncitizens who register and vote. In some cases, studies show, noncitizens vote on a par with their citizen neighbors and have contributed to the election of more diverse representatives, increased funding for education, and other policy outcomes (e.g., New York City and Maryland) (Hayduk 2006; Reynoso 2003). In other cases (e.g., San Francisco), voter turnout by noncitizens has been low or achieved minimal policy change (Finn 2024; Hayduk, Dias, and Marti 2023).

Advocates often measure "success" beyond voter turnout, such as the degree to which campaigns advance base building, engage community members in self-defense and organizing, and expand coalitions with other social groups—all of which can increase capacity to achieve related community goals. Immigrant voting-rights campaigns can educate both community members and elected officials about immigrant concerns and provide support for other pro-immigrant policies and community benefits, including language access, school and neighborhood improvement, legal services, and police reform. Mobilization can build immigrant leadership, civic skills, and community capacity to win greater government responsiveness and improvements in the implementation of policies (i.e., housing, education, and labor) that affect immigrant communities (de Graauw 2016). In other words, immigrant voting-rights campaigns can contribute to robust forms of "citizenship" and "empowerment."

However, increased federal immigration enforcement during the first and second Trump administrations is correlated with lower turnout by noncitizens in most jurisdictions. Indeed, few currently advocate for expanding noncitizen voting rights; neither do advocates vocally urge noncitizens to exercise their voting rights where they exist due to increased efforts by the federal government to detain and deport immigrants. This is unlike several years ago, when New York City, Washington, DC, and several towns in Vermont and Maryland enacted laws that expanded voting rights to noncitizens residents in local elections and when turnout was higher (Finn 2024). The danger of noncitizens registering and voting now—even if it is legal to do so—could lead to their being targeted by immigration enforcement because registration records are public. The threat of being separated from family members is simply too great. Instead, immigrant advocates have sought to maintain other protections and rights, including sanctuary policy; workplace protections; and access to housing, health care, education, and language assistance. Similar

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mixed outcomes have been observed in studies of immigrant voting programs in other parts of the world (e.g., Sweden, Switzerland, and Latin America) (Escobar 2017; Ferwerda, Finseraas, and Bergh 2020; Kayran and Nadler 2024; Slotwinski, Stutzer, and Bevelander 2023; Vernby 2013).

Ultimately, advocates seek to make the case that immigrant enfranchisement and political equality benefits everyone. The following four examples illustrate concrete immigrant voting programs.

NEW YORK, MARYLAND, SAN FRANCISCO, AND WASHINGTON, DC

During the 1980s in New York City, many school districts were characterized by overcrowding, out-of-date books, crumbling facilities, lack of language access and cultural competency, and few after-school programs—all combining to produce poor educational conditions for many students. In the Washington Heights section of northern Manhattan, more than 80% of the 25,000 students attending elementary and intermediate schools in District 6 were Dominican, with students' reading scores ranking near the lowest (Reynoso 2003). Groups such as the Community Association of Progressive Dominicans demanded bilingual education and programs for recently arrived immigrant families.

In 1986, community advocates waged a voter-registration drive that brought in 10,000 parent voters—most of them Dominican noncitizens—who turned out in record numbers in the community school board elections that allowed noncitizen parents to vote. This political mobilization led to the election of advocates for immigrants to the local community school board, including the first Dominican ever elected in the United States, Guillermo Linares, who became the president of the school board (Linares 1989). As a result, Dominicans made concrete gains, including increased funding, after-school programs, the appointment of a Dominican principal to head one of the community high schools, and construction of additional public schools (Reynoso 2003).

Their mobilization, replicated by other racial and ethnic minority groups in other neighborhoods, led to the election of a greater number and proportion of people of color on the school boards, which in turn fueled greater political support to improve the quality of schools and education in other districts. Over time, representation of Blacks, Latinos, and eventually Asian Americans —as well as elected representatives on community school boards —increased and matched or surpassed the voting-age population for those groups (Richie 1997). Greater community representation and political mobilization led the city to devote more funds to schools in Washington Heights and in other neighborhoods.

Ultimately, it was not only Dominicans who benefited. All community residents—including older-stock Irish, Italian, Jewish, Puerto Rican, and Black families who lived there—benefited from improved educational opportunities. Moreover, it was not only residents in Washington Heights who benefited: similar voter-mobilization efforts yielded school budgets that increased in other districts in New York City, producing improvements in student outcomes. Such community political mobilization also had spillover effects, such as advocacy for affordable housing that led to a city-financed program launched in the 1980s to build and rehabilitate hundreds of thousands of low- and moderate-income housing units (Soffer 2012).

Similar immigrant mobilization and benefits were evident in Takoma Park, Maryland, during the 1990s and 2000s. Although, on average, noncitizens tend to vote at lower rates than US citizens, they voted at rates comparable to their citizen neighbors in some Takoma Park districts during that period. In the 1997 elections, for example, noncitizen immigrants cast even more votes than registered citizen voters in three of Takoma's six wards: in Ward 6, 38% to 22%, respectively; in Ward 5, 21% to 18%, respectively; and in Ward 3, 31% to 29%, respectively. As in other elections, various factors affect voter turnout including the level of competition in a race, the appeal of candidates, the presence or absence of salient issues, and media coverage, as well as national and state contexts. In 2001 and 2003, however, immigrants voted at lower rates in all six wards, partly due to greater anti-immigrant sentiment and greater immigration enforcement measures that manifested after September 11, 2001 (Hayduk 2006, 87–96).

In San Francisco, noncitizens have voted at relatively low levels in school board elections since it became legal in 2018, largely due to fear.[10] Although immigrant parents expressed excitement when they learned about San Francisco's new noncitizen voting-rights law, many refrained from registering and voting when they heard that doing so could jeopardize their efforts to gain legal status and naturalization. Moreover, registering to vote could potentially make them subject to targeting by federal immigration enforcement for detention and deportation. Nevertheless, immigrant parents have engaged energetically in other forms of participation to positively affect their children's education. In some years, as many as 60,000 immigrants participated in meetings at school sites, on education committees, at public hearings, and in related community and public venues, yielding important gains (Hayduk, Dias, and Marti 2023).

In Washington, DC, a coalition of immigrant, labor, and civil rights organizations convened in 2023 to "advocate for a shared platform of policy and budget priorities that directly benefit the DC immigrant community….Rather than work on campaigns in isolation, we aim to highlight the interconnectedness of our struggles and combine our efforts to build a more equitable future together" (Migrant Solidarity Mutual Aid Network 2023). This platform, called the "Immigrant Justice Platform," sought enactment of five interrelated pieces of legislation: (1) support recently arrived migrants by creating a resettlement program; (2) provide ID and driver's-license access to immigrant communities; and enact bills for (3) domestic-worker rights; (4) street-vendor protections; and (5) local voting rights. The coalition also sought to register noncitizen voters to participate in elections in 2024. All of these goals were achieved in 2023–2024.

OPPONENTS AND THE QUEST FOR UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE

Moving in the opposite direction, opponents of immigrant voting rights have sought to block or roll back immigrant suffrage, employing similar strategies and ideology as in the historical period. Since 2017, a network of conservative groups with ties to the Republican Party have made unfounded allegations of rampant voter fraud by noncitizens to justify state ballot initiatives that would ban noncitizen voting. They also have promoted a host of related voter-suppression laws (e.g., requiring voter ID; restricting absentee voting, vote by mail, and early voting; and purging voter registration rolls). These groups include the Heritage Foundation, Public Interest Legal Foundation, Citizen Voters, Inc., American Civil Rights Union, True the Vote, Honest Elections Project, American Project, and other actors with ties to the Trump administration (Gardner and Crites 2019; Hajnal, Lajevardi, and

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Nielson 2017; Hayduk and Pahnke 2024). These groups and Republican leaders also have sought to enact bills that require proof of citizenship to vote—which studies have indicated would disenfranchise many citizens who do not have or cannot readily access needed documents—and to outlaw noncitizen voting entirely (Brennan 2024). National and state GOP officials and conservative groups have filed lawsuits to overturn local immigrant voting laws, winning in court in New York but losing in courts in Vermont, California, and Washington, DC (Ballotpedia 2025).

Opponents of noncitizen voting rights argue that it dilutes the concept of citizenship and undermines citizens' voting power (Ketcham 2022). Citizens, opponents argue, are the rightful wielders of the vote, and the value of citizenship should not be weakened by broadening the scope of who can vote. Opponents believe that if immigrants want to vote, they simply should become citizens (Renshon 2009). These efforts are linked ideologically and institutionally to related efforts to limit immigration, citizenship, and voting rights more broadly (Hayduk and Panke 2024).

In response, immigrant advocates point out that most noncitizens are legally or procedurally blocked from naturalization and thereby from obtaining citizenship and voting rights. Technically, immigrants who obtain legal permanent residency (i.e., green cards) can apply for citizenship after five years. However, the path to legal permanent residency can take seven to 10 years or more for many immigrants. Moreover, immigrants face daunting obstacles in the process, including expensive application fees, lack of access to the English and civics classes needed to prepare for the naturalization examination, and application backlogs.

Unlike earlier times when European immigrants were widely able to access citizenship, millions of immigrants today are not eligible to become US citizens because the pathways to citizenship are restricted to certain categories of individuals (e.g., family members, asylum seekers, and military personnel) (Gelatt 2019). It is not only the 13 million undocumented immigrants who cannot obtain citizenship but also the 10 million documented immigrants who possess any one of the almost 24 types of legal visas (e.g., long-term work visas and student visas) who are not eligible to become US citizens.

Political and partisan conflict about who is included and excluded in the American polity—and on what terms—is evident in ideologically driven debate over a broad range of related issues, including whether anyone born in the United States is a citizen (i.e., birthright citizenship), whether the US Census Bureau should count noncitizens, whether noncitizens should be eligible for public benefits, and whether to conduct mass detention and deportation efforts of the undocumented. At a time when population projections predict that the United States will become a "majority minority" country in the next two decades (Frey 2018), contemporary public debate about immigration and voting cuts to the heart of questions about the nature of citizenship, equality, and democracy in America.

Immigrant voting-rights advocates argue that restoring noncitizen voting would extend the visibility and voices of immigrants, which in turn could make government more representative, responsive, and accountable. Securing immigrant voting rights could help to reverse inequities and racial profiling as well as increase access to naturalization opportunities.

Rather than diminishing citizenship, immigrant advocates argue that noncitizen voting enriches citizenship and democracy by encouraging immigrants to participate in the political life of their community in ways that benefit all members of society. Advocates maintain that all community members have shared interests in ensuring access to safe streets, good schools, health care, good jobs, and affordable housing. Studies show that increased civic engagement is correlated with greater individual and societal outcomes, including a stronger sense of community belonging, better health outcomes, and lower crime rates, among other social indicators (Levine 2008; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009).

CONCLUSION

Historic and contemporary political conflict over immigrant voting rights can be viewed as a microcosm of larger contests over immigration, citizenship, and democratic practice. Although the history of alien suffrage has largely been eviscerated from national memory, making it appear as odd or outlandish to many Americans today, contemporary advocates are rediscovering this history and taking action to advance reforms to advance immigrant inclusion and equitable democratic practice (Colbern and Ramakrishnan 2020).

Yet, opponents of noncitizen voting echo objections that are eerily reminiscent of earlier nativist periods, and they are waging campaigns to roll back a broad range of immigrant rights and protections well beyond noncitizen voting (Castellan and Walter 2025). Conflict about immigrant voting rights resembles contests over related political issues, such as whether the US Census Bureau should count noncitizens and whether they should be eligible for public benefits. Moreover, similar to debates about other electoral reforms—from voter-identification laws and gerrymandering to early voting and vote-by-mail programs, variously characterized as "voter suppression" or efforts to expand voter participation—contemporary discussion about immigrant voting is highly contentious and partisan. Political battles over citizenship and the vote reflect awareness of a key axiom of politics: regulating immigration, citizenship, and the franchise can affect electoral outcomes, the balance of political power, and the direction of public policy.

The debate about noncitizen voting reflects a tension regarding differing conceptions of US political identity, between an inclusive model of citizenship and democracy and a more restrictive view of political membership and voting. At a time when population projections predict that the United States will become a majority minority country in the next two decades, such contemporary public debate cuts to the heart of questions about who is an American and what are the governing principles of the United States.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. I use the terms "immigrant" and "noncitizen" interchangeably. Whenever possible, I distinguish between foreign-born immigrants who are "documented" versus "undocumented," as well as immigrants who have been naturalized and become US citizens, conceptually and empirically. I also use the terms "immigrant voting," "noncitizen voting," and "alien suffrage" interchangeably.
2. *Minor* v. *Happersett*, 88 U.S. 162, 177 (1874). In 1996, however, noncitizens were barred from voting in federal elections (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, *Pub. L.* No. 104-208, 110 Stat. 3009–546, 1996). See also Raskin 1992.
3. This article draws on my previous studies (Hayduk 2006, 2025; Hayduk and Coll 2018; Hayduk, Dias, and Marti 2023; Hayduk, Garcia-Castañon, and Bhaumik 2024; Hayduk and Pahnke 2024).
4. Any parent of a child, regardless of citizenship status, could vote in New York City's community school board elections from 1968 until 2002, when the school boards were eliminated by the consolidation of the education system into the Department of Education under mayoral control.
5. The Maryland towns are Barnesville, Brentwood, Cheverly, Chevy Chase Section 3, Colmar Manor, Edmonston, Frederick, Garrett Park, Glen Echo, Greenbelt, Hyattsville, Martin's Additions, Mount Rainier, Riverdale Park, Somerset, and Takoma Park. Maryland's constitution allows localities to alter their city charters with respect to elections without state approval (unlike most other states), which contributes to Maryland having the highest number of jurisdictions that allow noncitizen voting.
6. The localities in Massachusetts are Amherst, Cambridge, Brookline, and Newton. The localities in California are San Jose, Santa Ana, Pasadena, Richmond, and Los Angeles. Portland, Maine; Chicago; and the State of Connecticut have considered allowing noncitizens to vote. New York City's law was overturned by state courts in 2025.
7. House bills have sought to exclude noncitizens from congressional apportionment counts, such as H.R. 7109, 118th Congress (2024).
8. In New York, 22% of the voting-age population is immigrants; in Los Angeles, it is 33%.
9. Whereas immigration reform has been stymied at the federal level (except for increased enforcement), advocates have focused their efforts at the state and local levels to expand rights and services, winning access to driver's licenses, legal services, translation assistance, labor rights, health care, living wages, and voting rights (Colbern and Ramakrishnan 2020; de Graauw 2016; Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan 2015; Varsanyi et al. 2012).
10. In 2020, 36 noncitizens registered and 31 voted; in 2022, 328 noncitizens registered and 235 voted; in 2022, 83 noncitizens registered and 32 voted (Hayduk, Dias, and Marti 2023).

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