

BALLOTS WANTED

NYC Immigrants Aspire to Make Their Voices Heard

BY EUGENE SWEENEY AND CARLOS MACIAS

Lu Liu, a 30-year-old Chinese immigrant living in New York City, was granted her unconditional Permanent Resident Card (the coveted “green card” that permits her to remain in the United States indefinitely) in late 2004 after living in the United States for almost seven years. She has a Social Security card, a driver’s license and a license to practice her chosen profession as a manicurist. She files a 1040 tax form. Yet she cannot choose the political representatives whose decisions directly affect her life. “It’s not right,” she says. “I can pay taxes to them like everyone else, but I can’t vote for them?”

Liu’s objections to current policy sound familiar: “No taxation without representation” has been a central idea in American politics since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This is in essence the argument used by New York City and State legislators for trying to pass new laws that would allow non-citizens to vote in local elections.

New York City Council mem-

ber Bill Perkins is currently working on a bill that would grant non-citizens the right to vote in municipal elections. As *Dollars & Sense* was going to press, Folea Fadahunsi, a Perkins aide, said that Perkins and his legal team were working on drafting legislation for introduction later this year.

At the state level, in May 2004, Senator Martin Dilan (D) submitted to the New York State legislature a bill granting the right to vote in local elections to alien residents who have earned permanent legal status in this country. Though several other Democrats have signed on as co-sponsors, a year later, Senator Dilan’s bill is still pending. A similar bill also has been raised in the State Assembly by Assembly member Vito J. Lopez (D), but has yet to move forward.

The State Senate bill reasons: “In order to ensure that all persons who permanently and legally reside in our state have a voice and a stake in the decisions made by the political process, it is necessary and proper to extend the right to

vote in elections for offices and issues which affect them.”

In New York City alone, census data indicates that one million immigrants would become eligible to vote if the bill is passed: one-fifth of the city’s current voting population. Elected officials who accomplish this change could radically alter the face of city and state politics and possibly gain a new sector of grateful supporters. The issue will likely play a central role in New York City’s mayoral race next year, predicts Ron Hayduk, a professor of political science at Borough of Manhattan Community College and an authority on citizenship and voting rights. “Candidates will try to use it to gain more support from minorities,” he claims. Democratic contenders, such as Fernando Ferrer, are already on the record supporting non-citizen voting, while Mayor Michael Bloomberg has not clearly declared himself on the issue. “Unfortunately, if you set your position against this issue, you will be called ‘anti-immigrant,’” says

Stanley Renshon, a professor of political science at Lehman College, who supports non-citizen voting for school boards, but not for other offices. "This slogan will be used like a hammer and you will be hit with this over and over again."

The U.S. Constitution does not require that one be a citizen in order to vote in state and municipal elections. That decision was left to local and state governments. Among the states that allowed it, non-citizens amounted to about half of those states' voters for the first 150 years of the nation's history. It was not until after World War I that a national anti-immigrant attitude swept through American society and denied non-citizens the right they had previously possessed, Hayduk recounts. This was a result of a swell in patriotism and a parallel, generalized mistrust of immigrants. According to Hayduk, many native-born Americans began to see immigrants as a threat to their position of power.

Atypically, New York State began requiring citizenship as a qualification for voting as far back as 1804, though scholars argue to this day over whether the law means voters must be citizens of New York or of the United States. In any case, non-citizen residents of New York City whose children attended public schools were permitted to vote for, and serve on, school boards from 1969 until the boards were abolished in 2002 when Mayor Bloomberg restructured the school system.

Those opposed to enfranchising non-citizens regard voting

as a privilege, not a right. "I believe that the right to vote is a sacred principle reserved for citizens," says Renshon. Because the right to vote distinguishes citizens from non-citizens, Renshon regards it as a "gold standard" attributed only to people who were born here or who have earned the privilege to vote through the naturalization process. Offering voting privileges to non-citizens, he says "would discourage legal residents from applying for citizenship." Furthermore, he adds, "A new legal resident with one or two years in the country cannot make an informed decision when it comes to voting. People need time to get acquainted with the customs, culture, language and all sorts of new standards."

However, those advocating non-citizen voting, at least in local elections, point out how long and arduous the process of becoming a citizen is — it can take up to a decade. In addition, the process has gotten more bureaucratic in recent years. ("It's a privilege worth waiting for," counters Renshon.) Supporters argue that since non-citizen green card holders may pay taxes and even serve in the military, they should have a voice in local affairs, as the proposed bill states. Renshon still is not convinced. "There are several ways for non-citizens to participate in democracy," he reasons. "They can write to local and federal officials, they can demonstrate in any rally, they can promote and lobby their proposals and projects in Congress."

Hayduk sees things differently. "The United States of America is a nation of immigrants," he says, "and denying the right to vote to those people who live, work and contribute daily to the greatness of our country is going against the principles on which this nation was founded."

In other areas of the country, lawmakers are showing they agree. In Chicago, Takoma Park, MD and Cambridge, MA, non-citizens may vote in local elections, according to the Immigrant Voting Project, a New York-based resource network dedicated to promoting discussion of resident voting. And legislative efforts are underway in California, Connecticut, Maine, Minnesota, North Carolina, Texas, Washington, DC and Wisconsin. The year-old New York Coalition to Expand Voting Rights is supporting the bills in both the City Council and the state legislatures.

Senator Dilan states, "This issue is a very important part of the election process," and promises to continue to push to make it a top priority for the State Senate. But unless it is approved, residents like Lu Liu will continue to have no say in even the most local branches of their government.

From Hayduk's point of view, that would be a terrible irony. "Today our nation is expanding democracy all around the globe," he says. "Here at home, a project like non-citizen voting could be the best example of really expanding democracy for all." D&S