

***Toronto Star - **Time to rethink right to vote in civic elections*
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What principles should underlie the right to vote in municipal elections? Appropriately, this has become a significant discussion point in Toronto's current civic election campaign.

In recent days, Mayor David Miller has advocated extending the municipal franchise to non-citizen landed immigrants in the City of Toronto. The immediate response from Premier Dalton McGuinty was unsupportive, contending that the right to vote "comes with citizenship."

McGuinty's view may well reflect most people's first thoughts on the proposition. We have long been conditioned to regard the right to vote as a privilege to be earned after the acquisition of national citizenship. Some fear we would dilute the value of citizenship by allowing non-citizens to vote.

Ironically, this logic invokes formal citizenship as a rationale for denying many in our midst the practice of actual political participation.

There are compelling reasons to reconsider these assumptions. This is particularly pressing in our major immigrant-receiving jurisdictions of Ontario and Toronto.

In a recent study, titled /The Municipal Franchise and Social Inclusion in Toronto/, I outlined five main reasons for extending the municipal franchise to non-citizen permanent residents -

Under current rules, there are now more than 200,000 landed immigrants in the city who cannot vote. Most are ineligible because they have not yet fulfilled the three-year residency requirement for citizenship. Others are awaiting approval of their naturalization applications after fulfilling the three-year period. Unless we change our laws, Toronto will be a place where elections exclude large sectors of society.

Newcomers contribute to our city in many ways, including through property taxes. Whether homeowners or tenants, by virtue of living permanently in the city, newcomers finance local government. Yet they are denied any say in the vote that will determine how these taxes are spent.

An increasing number of other countries have now extended the right to vote in municipal elections to all non-citizen, permanent residents. A recent survey found 26 countries now do so, including Ireland, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Chile, Barbados, New Zealand, and the United States. In the U.S., states determine voter eligibility and several states have

given non-citizens voting rights in town council and school district elections.

There is then a growing recognition of the value of "civic citizenship," that living, working, and paying taxes in a place should confer the right to shape government policy. It is odd for Canada, one of the world's great immigrant-receiving countries, to be behind the curve in embracing this.

It makes most sense to extend the vote at the municipal level. This is where newcomers are most directly impacted by government policy and services. It's where they live, where their children attend school, where a host of services from transit to policing and planning shape their daily lives.

Perhaps most important, extending the vote will deepen democracy in Toronto and Ontario. Voter turnout has long been notoriously poor in municipal elections. Now it is sliding badly at the provincial level.

There are many reasons for this democratic deficit and disengagement. But it cannot help that we put newcomers on hold for more than three years before they are eligible to vote. The wait can take even longer, depending on when the next election occurs after an immigrant's naturalization.

Political participation is not a spectator sport. The habit grows with its practice. As a society, we need to be more proactive and creative in promoting voter participation.

Two recent government initiatives can help in this regard. The Ontario government has established a Citizens Assembly to review and recommend changes to our electoral system.

It would be best for Ontario politicians not to rule out particular reforms until this body has deliberated and reported. Moreover, the new City of Toronto Act appears to give City Council the authority to revise its own election rules.

The act calls on the city's powers to be interpreted broadly. It authorizes the city to adopt measures it "considers necessary or desirable for the public." And, importantly, the act defines Toronto as a corporation "composed of the inhabitants of its geographic area."

Note the word "inhabitants," not citizens. It's time for all inhabitants of Toronto to have their voices heard.