

# Q & A on Citizenship and Voting

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## **Why don't all immigrants become citizens?**

Most immigrants that come to America intend to become citizens. What has changed in recent years is that the naturalization process has become increasingly cumbersome, the application backlog has increased to about five years, and the cost of naturalization has skyrocketed. The average time it takes to obtain citizenship is nearly ten years.

## **Can non-citizens vote on anything?**

Non-citizens currently vote in local school board elections in Chicago (and several other cities) if they have a child in the public schools. Over the past decade, non-citizen voting campaigns have been launched in at least a dozen states, including California, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine, North Carolina, Colorado, Texas, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

## **Arguments AGAINST non-citizen voting rights**

1. People should become citizens first if they want to vote. Otherwise, they might not have an incentive to become citizens. Why would people become citizens if they could already vote?
2. Non-citizens are more loyal to their native country than they are to the United States.
3. Non-citizens have not lived here long enough and do not know enough about American society to make good decisions.

## **What happens in other countries?**

Non-citizens vote in at least some level of elections in more than 35 countries around the world, including Israel, Ireland, Japan, Chile, Colombia, Spain, Switzerland, New Zealand, and the Netherlands. Europe began granting non-citizen voting rights in the 1960s because the growing number of immigrant workers prompted nations to think about ways to help mobile populations become part of their new communities.

## **Why did citizen voting rights change through history?**

During the period when this country was growing through westward expansion, non-citizen voting spread with the growing need for new labor. Many new states and territories used voting as an incentive to attract immigrant settlers. The general practice was to require residency from six months to one year before voting rights were granted. Non-citizens began losing their right to vote after the Civil War, when it was feared that they would vote to abolish slavery.

Western territories were often forced to disenfranchise their non-citizen populations in order to gain statehood, as southern states felt that non-citizens were too likely to oppose slavery.

In addition, the powerful in both political parties worried that new immigrants would support social movements (the labor movement, for example) and new political parties. They came up with many ways of excluding people from the vote: poll taxes, literacy tests, felony disenfranchisement, and the elimination of non-citizen voting.

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