



Expanding Voting Rights in New York City: New Yorkers and Non-Citizen Voting

Research Brief

Issued May 2011
Centro RB2011-01

By Carlos Vargas-Ramos

Carlos Vargas-Ramos is a Research Associate at CENTRO where he works on the impact of migration on Puerto Rican political behavior, political attitudes and orientations. A political scientist by training, Carlos is co-editor, along with Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, of Blessing La Política: The Latino Religious Experience and Political Engagement in the United States published by Praeger in 2012. He is also working on a book manuscript Abroad and At Home: Puerto Rican Political Engagement in the Caribbean and in the United States and editing an anthology on race Puerto Ricans and Race.

Expanding voting rights in New York City

The majority of New Yorkers support voting rights for New York City residents who are in the country legally but are not U.S. citizens. Recent data from a representative sample of New York City residents show that half of the respondents would favor allowing legal New York residents who are not U.S. citizens to vote in local New York City elections.

The survey was conducted by researchers from Baruch College's Survey Research Unit, who randomly selected a sample of 1207 adults in New York City for telephone interviews between April 26 and May 9, 2011. The margin of error for the total sample is estimated to be ± 2.8 percent.

These findings provide critical information on a policy question that has taken shape as a bill in the New York City Council. The bill (Intro 410) would extend voting rights for municipal elections to immigrants who reside in New York City and are duly authorized by the appropriate federal authorities to reside in the United States. It was introduced by Councilmember Daniel Dromm, chair of the Council's committee on immigration, in November 2010, and co-sponsored by 19 other councilmembers. The bill was referred to the Governmental Operations Committee, which oversees the election operations in the city.

The question of non-citizen voting rights at local elections is neither novel nor new. In fact, as recently as eight years ago, non-citizen parents of children in New York City schools were eligible to vote in school board elections. But in the current political climate, one that exhibits virulent anti-immigrant rhetoric and where benefits and entitlements for non-citizens residents have been steadily curtailed over the past two decades, such positions might face strong opposition throughout the country. New York City, however, a point of entry for immigrants to the United States appears willing to level the political playing field in this regard.

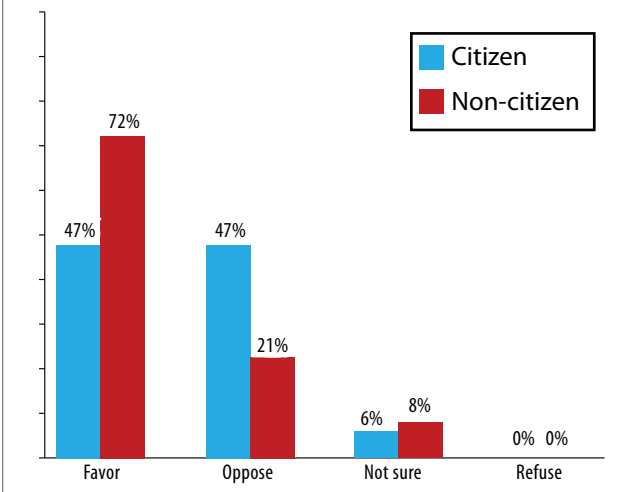
Findings

Respondents were asked "The New York City Council introduced legislation last year that would allow immigrants who have lived legally in New York for five years to vote in local New York City elections. Would you favor or oppose allowing legal New York residents, who are not U.S. citizens, to vote in local New York City elections?"

Fifty percent of New Yorkers support extending voting rights to non-citizen residents in municipal elections in the city. Forty-three percent are opposed to this extension of voting rights. Six percent of respondents are unsure.

While support for such a measure garnered the approval of 50 percent of respondents, support was

Table 1: Support for Non-Citizen Voting by Citizenship



not evenly distributed throughout the population. Non-citizens are the biggest supporters of extending municipal voting rights for people such as themselves, with more than 70 percent of such respondents favoring the extension of voting rights (see Table 1). Citizens were evenly divided between supporting and opposing such a change.

The foreign-born are consequently more likely to favor extending voting rights to non-citizens than are people born in the United States (see Table 2). Three-fifths of those born in a foreign country favor non-citizen voting. However, half the native-born population opposes such extension of voting rights. Those born in Puerto Rico are evenly divided in support and opposition, at 43 percent. However, there is a greater proportion of Puerto Ricans (14 percent) not sure of whether to support such measure, compared with 6 percent among all respondents.

Table 2: Support for Non-Citizen Voting by Place of Birth

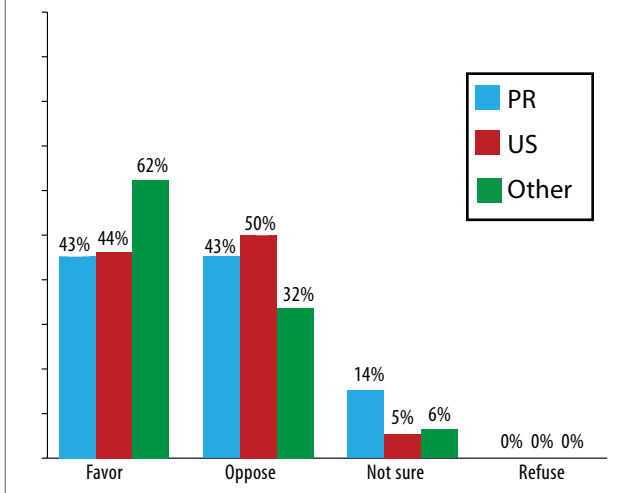
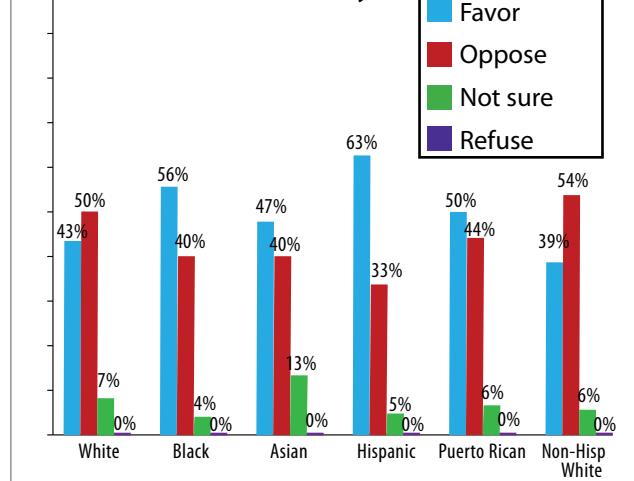


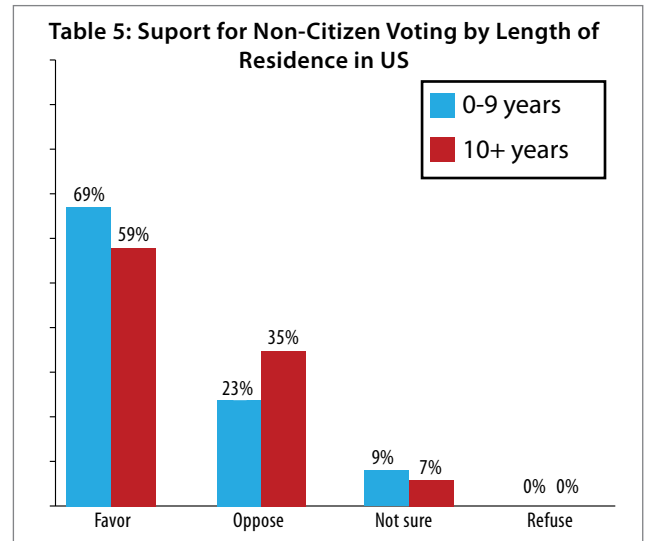
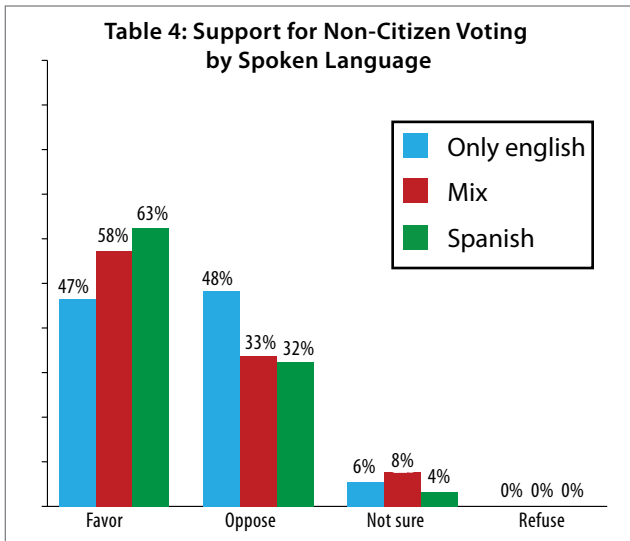
Table 3: Support for Non-Citizen Voting by Race and Ethnicity



Hispanics are the largest segment of supporters of non-citizen voting in New York City. Three-fifths of Latinos support such voting rights extension (see Table 3). A majority of black New Yorkers (56 percent) also supports extending voting rights to non-citizens. A plurality of Asians (47 percent) is also supportive of non-citizen voting, but a majority of white New Yorkers opposes allowing non-citizen voting. Indeed, 54 percent of non-Hispanic whites oppose non-citizen voting. (Hispanics can be of any race.)

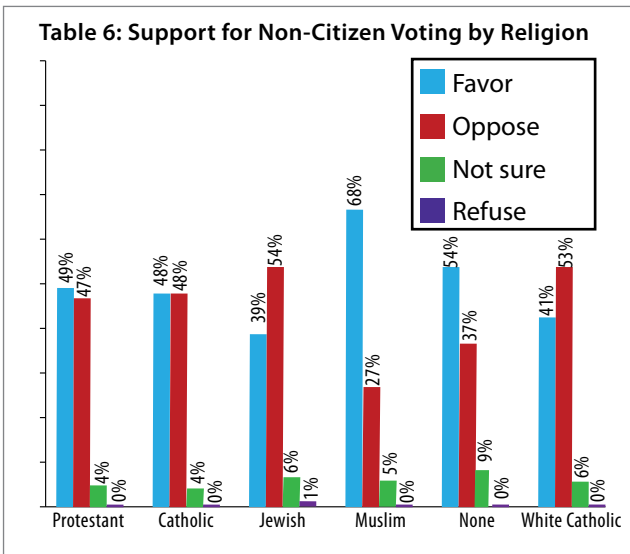
Among Puerto Ricans, U.S. citizens by birth or statute and the largest Hispanic group in the City, the majority favors extending voting rights in New York City to non-citizen immigrants. The proportion, however, is lower than among other Hispanic groups. More Spanish-speakers (63 percent) support non-citizen voting than respondents who only speak English (47 percent). Speakers of other languages in addition to English are also supportive of extending voting rights to legal residents in the city (see Table 4).

It seems, however, that support for non-citizen rights erodes the longer an immigrant has lived in the United States (see Table 6). While the majority of immigrants does support non-citizen voting, those who have lived in the U.S. for less than 10 years are more likely to support non-citizen voting than those with longer residence.



Religious diversity also shapes opinions on voting rights. Two-thirds of Muslims support extending the right to non-citizen residents of the city (see Table 6). In contrast, Jews and white Catholics —the so-called white ethnics— firmly oppose extending such rights. A clear majority of both do not support this policy option. A majority of those without a religion (54 percent) favor this policy option, while large pluralities of Protestants and Catholics do as well.

Conclusion



New Yorkers favor extending voting rights to a segment of the population that has remained at the margin of the electoral process: resident immigrants who are not citizens of the United States. This expansion of democratic rights is not a departure from historical practice. Early on in U.S. history immigrants who were not yet U.S. citizens were able to partake in the pre-eminent democratic activity — voting.

The opinions of these New Yorkers indicate widespread support for reinstating these rights. However, support is strongest among immigrants themselves as well as those New Yorkers who belong to social groups that had to struggle to assert their democratic rights; namely, blacks and Hispanics (e.g., Puerto Ricans). Among descendents of European migrants there appears to be consistent opposition to extending these voting rights to non-citizen city residents.

Permission granted to reproduce for personal and educational use only. Commercial copying, hiring, lending is prohibited.

The Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro De Estudios Puertorriqueños) at Hunter College, City University of New York, is the only university-based research institute in the United States solely devoted to the interdisciplinary study of the Puerto Rican experience in diaspora. It is the oldest and largest Latino research and archival institution in the Northeast, and boasts the world's only repository of archival and library materials dedicated exclusively to the Puerto Rican migration. Since its inception in 1973, Centro also has developed notable ties to academic, advocacy, and community-based constituencies, enabling it to document and respond to critical cultural and social conditions within the stateside community. This report is part of a series designed to provide up-to-date information on demographic changes in our communities.

Permission granted to reproduce for personal and educational use only. Commercial copying, hiring, lending is prohibited.

The Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro De Estudios Puertorriqueños) at Hunter College, City University of New York, is the only university-based research institute in the United States solely devoted to the interdisciplinary study of the Puerto Rican experience in diaspora. It is the oldest and largest Latino research and archival institution in the Northeast, and boasts the world's only repository of archival and library materials dedicated exclusively to the Puerto Rican migration. Since its inception in 1973, Centro also has developed notable ties to academic, advocacy, and community-based constituencies, enabling it to document and respond to critical cultural and social conditions within the stateside community. This report is part of a series designed to provide up-to-date information on demographic changes in our communities.