

# AN ALIEN NOTION?

## Should non-citizens have the right to vote in local elections?

*The privilege to vote in any state is not given by the Federal Constitution, or by any of its amendments. It is not a privilege springing from citizenship of the United States. . . . [It] is within the jurisdiction of the state itself, to be exercised as the state may direct, and upon such terms as to it may seem proper. . . .*

*-- Decision in Pope v. Williams (1904)*

Most Americans view the right to vote as a privilege of citizenship. But must you be an American citizen to vote? The answer isn't clear-cut. Historically, non-citizens voted in many American colonies, and several state constitutions recognized this as a right. Anti-immigrant sentiments ended non-citizen voting rights in the 1820s and 1830s, but in some areas—especially newly-admitted Midwestern states—immigrants continued to vote in local and state elections as late as the 1920s. And the tide may be turning once again. In 1991, Takoma Park, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, passed an ordinance allowing non-citizens to



*Courtesy of Corbis*

vote in local elections. Now, in cities such as New York, Houston, San Francisco and the District of Columbia, community groups and immigrant advocates are lobbying to extend voting rights to legal aliens.

Those favoring non-citizen voting rights argue that since legal aliens pay taxes and enroll their children in public schools, they deserve a voice in the political process. But opponents argue that extending voting rights to non-citizens would dilute the essence of American citizenship. A better solution, they say, would be to shorten the lengthy process for becoming an American citizen.

## Should non-citizens have the right to vote in local elections?

### YES

- Just like citizens, non-citizens pay taxes, send their children to public schools, and serve in the military, so they deserve to vote, too.
- Residents may want to become citizens, but the process takes a long time; their voices deserve to be heard in the meantime.
- When voting about property taxes, school board membership, or other local matters, everyone tends to vote in his or her own interests.

### NO

- Just because aliens may reside in a community doesn't mean that they have, or should have, the same stake in it that citizens do.
- Extending voting rights to people who lack the time or inclination to become U.S. citizens will undermine what it means to be an American.
- Non-citizens would unfavorably tip the political balance in a community because they would tend to vote for their own interests.