

THE TAKE

SHOULD LONG-TERM RESIDENTS BE ALLOWED TO VOTE?

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Currently, only Canadian citizens are allowed to vote in municipal elections.

A variety of academics, activists and local politicians — including Toronto Mayor David Miller — are in favour of giving long-term residents the right to vote in municipal elections, even if they aren't citizens. A forum this week at Toronto City Hall examined the issue.

Municipal elections already differ from federal and provincial ballots in that you need not be a resident to vote. Property or business owners who live in another municipality can vote both where they live and where they own property. But not everyone accepts the idea of allowing non-citizens to vote for city councillors.



Prof. Myer Siemiatycki, left, and Councillor Michael Walker.

FOR

Prof. Myer Siemiatycki of Ryerson University argues that the sheer number of non-citizens in Toronto raises a powerful argument.

"We know that in the last election 250,000 names were dropped off the list because they were not citizens of Canada, despite the fact they lived in Toronto, they paid taxes here . . . This amounts to one in seven adults," Siemiatycki says.

"In an age of globalization and very dynamic global mobility, we need to rethink the basis of citizenship rights.

"We need to acknowledge that especially at the municipal level, where you want people to feel they belong to the society that they have now joined, what is gained by preventing people from expressing a voice and a vote?

"I would say is what's lost is, you've got a huge kind of pool of people who are basically told they don't belong, they don't matter, they have no voice.

"These immigrants and newcomers pay property taxes, live here, and still they're denied the right to vote for the formality of not undergoing a

naturalization process that has very little to do with their belonging to the city.

"They do belong here. Once they've been here for a certain period of time — I'm comfortable in the range of six months to a year — isn't it a good thing to say to these people: 'You belong here, we value your view of the urban community that you now call home'?"

AGAINST

Toronto Councillor Michael Walker (Ward 22, St. Paul's)

"Citizenship has to have responsibilities and rewards. The key one is the right to exercise the franchise. Only a citizen can do that."

Voting is almost the only right denied to non-citizens, Walker argues.

"Why bother becoming a citizen? When you're legally landed you've got all the rights: Access to health care; the right to due process under the law; the right to legal representation if you can't afford it — all those basic rights that any human being should have.

"But the right to exercise the franchise has to come with citizenship."

Advocates of giving non-citizens a

municipal vote point out that they pay taxes and argue they should have a say in electing the politicians who spend the money.

"People who aren't citizens pay taxes — and plenty of taxes — to the federal and provincial government, too," Walker says. That shouldn't give them the right to vote at the senior level, and it's not a good argument for municipal votes, he says.

He rejects the argument that municipal governments are different because they deal generally with local services rather than matters of national or international scope.

Activist municipal governments like Toronto's have continually broadened their reach, he argues, by precedent or by statute — such as the City of Toronto Act, which broadened the city's powers.

WHAT'S NEXT

Only the Ontario government has the power to grant voting rights to non-citizens.

Miller says he's pushing for it. "There is a coalition formed of residents from all backgrounds that are working very hard . . . If people speak up, we'll be able to get that changed."