

13.2 Non-citizen voting in US history

Non-citizen voting played an important role in migrant incorporation in the 19th century. Today, its significance has largely been forgotten although some scholars have called for a renewal of this lost tradition in the USA.

The early years of the American republic were of great significance to the themes of Chapter 12 in many ways. By 1790, the US Congress had adopted a naturalization statute enabling free white persons to become US citizens after two years of residency. However, one of the two principal parties feared that immigrant voters would help their opponents and therefore increased the residency requirement and authorized deportation of dangerous aliens (Zolberg, 2006: 90-98). But, with the return to power of the Jeffersonians, due to the help of the Irish vote in particular, the US Congress in 1802 created a 5-year residency period for adult white males to become eligible for naturalization. After two years of residency in the USA, aliens could declare their intent to become US citizens. In 1824, the US Congress changed the filing date for the declaration of intent to two years prior to naturalization (Motomura, 2006: 116).

The declaration of intent to naturalize constituted a prerequisite for naturalization in the USA from 1795 until 1952. Non-citizens who made such declarations enjoyed a privileged status compared to other non-citizens. Between 1776 and 1926, at least 40 US federal states and territories authorized some form of non-citizen voting, including voting in state-wide and US national elections. Indeed, the 1928 national elections marked the first time that aliens did not vote (Andrès, 2007: 68).

In the US federal system, the federal states determine who is eligible to vote subject to limitations promulgated by the federal government. In 1848, the constitution of the new state of Wisconsin accorded the right to vote to non-citizens having declared their intent to become a US citizen. The state government of Wisconsin thereby hoped to make the state more attractive to European settlers. Under the Homestead Act of 1862, non-citizens who had made the declaration became eligible for grants of land (Motomura, 2006: 9). Generally, such intending citizens shared the benefits and responsibilities of US citizens.

Until the 1920s, thus, non-citizen voting in the USA was quite common. The rise in anti-immigrant sentiments and anti-alien political movements by the late nineteenth century began to erode that status quo. The nationalism and xenophobia of the World War I period and its aftermath largely marked the demise of non-citizen voting in the USA, although it still is authorized in some states and municipalities. In recent years, a number of US scholars have advocated a revival of non-citizen voting as a remedy to the disenfranchisement of the many millions of non-citizens living in the USA (Motomura, 2006).

References:

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