

A diverse group of people, including men, women, and children of various ethnicities, are gathered for a protest. They are holding numerous white signs with black text. The signs contain various demands and statements, such as 'FIX THE ECONOMY BY ADDRESSING INEQUITY', 'ESL CLASSES INCREASE', 'Livable wage JO NOT Handou', and 'TANZANIAN-AMERICAN AND WE VOTE!'. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

CITY OF SEATTLE
IMMIGRANT
VOTING
TASK FORCE REPORT

TANZANIAN-AMERICAN AND WE VOTE!

Livable wage JO NOT Handou

The Mayor's Office convened the Task Force to identify, analyze, and address the issues that affect civic and political participation by immigrant communities.



Message From Mayor Edward B. Murray

This year is the 50th anniversary of “Bloody Sunday,” a landmark moment in our nation’s history when Black civil rights leaders peacefully marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, only to be attacked by police and their dogs. The American public saw first-hand the struggle of Black Americans and their call for justice, compelling Congress and President Johnson to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As we release this Voting Rights report, there are still jurisdictions in our country today that are making it harder for Americans to exercise their constitutional right to vote.

Each year, thousands of immigrants arrive in Seattle with a dream—to make a better life for themselves and their families. Integral to that dream is one of our nation’s greatest privileges—the right to vote. It is a right that has only expanded through history to include women and people of color because of struggle and advocacy like the march in Selma. Today, Seattle’s immigrants continue that advocacy and I am proud to support their integration into our City because I believe that engaging immigrants in the civic life of our City is critical to the health of our democracy. This report represents an opportunity for Seattle to do what we do best—innovate and serve all of our residents.

This report contains recommendations from a Task Force of immigrants, refugees, advocates and attorneys who represent a diverse range of demographics. They came together to work diligently for over a year to research how the City of Seattle can improve upon the voting experience for immigrant voters.

Nearly one in five Seattle residents are foreign-born and we are home to one of the most diverse zip codes in the country. Our residents deserve to benefit from the full breadth of the democratic experience and the City of Seattle stands ready to support them in accessing this experience. The recommendations in this report may spark ideas for other jurisdictions to break down barriers for their new immigrant voters as well.

I want to thank the members of the Task Force for giving so generously of their time and talents to create this report. We will continue to work to support immigrants in voting and becoming an integral part of our City.

Sincerely,



Mayor Edward B. Murray



Photo, City of Seattle Mayor’s Office



Photo, City of Seattle Vote by Mail campaign

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Voting Task Force Members

CURRENT

Laura Flores Cantrell (Co-Chair)

Sharon Maeda (Co-Chair)

Diane Butler

Tania Santiago

Rich Stolz

Many Uch

Trang Tu

Dorothy Wong

Heather Villanueva

Arsalan Bukhari

Emilio Garza

Dana Laurent

David Perez

Hamdi Mohamed

PAST

Luis Fraga (Past Co-Chair)

Hilary Stern

Abdullahi Jama

Jasmine Marwaha

Alex Miller

Jaime Garcia

Ada Williams Prince

Maru Mora Villalpando

Executive Summary

The Immigrant Voting Rights Task Force (“the Task Force”) is pleased to present this report of recommendations to the Office of the Mayor of Seattle. The mayor’s office convened the Task Force over a year ago to identify, analyze, and address the issues that affect civic and political participation by immigrant communities. Even though Seattle’s foreign-born population has grown each year and is currently around 18 percent of the City of Seattle’s (City) population, including over 57,000 naturalized citizens,¹ members of immigrant communities do not participate in civic life at the same rates as other Seattleites.

Even though Seattle’s foreign-born population has grown each year and is currently around 18 percent, including over 57,000 naturalized citizens, members of immigrant communities do not participate in civic life at the same rates as other Seattleites.

The Task Force has identified many obstacles that keep immigrant communities from participating in Seattle’s civic and political life. They identified five general areas of concern and developed a series of practical recommendations that the mayor’s office can embrace to help address these barriers, which taken together can be implemented through a coordinated citywide Seattle Votes campaign with clear benchmarks and metrics associated with each of the following recommendations over the next three years. All of these recommendations assume compliance with federal, state, county and city laws, including but not limited to public gifts of funds.



Photo, Eino Sierpe, 2013

Both city and regional governments must adopt policies that address electoral participation and civic engagement in response to our new demographic reality.



The City of Seattle Task Force Report 2015

FINDINGS

1] Members of immigrant communities do not receive sufficient information about elections and voting.

There is not enough civics education targeting immigrant communities, and there is a tremendous need for targeted outreach regarding elections and policy issues that affect immigrant communities. Not enough information about civics, elections, and voting is translated into languages other than English.

2] The technology gap between immigrant communities and the rest of the City limits access to important information about elections and voting.

The information technology used by local governments is outdated and uses platforms that are not commonly used by immigrant communities. The technology gap prevents immigrant communities from accessing important information about elections, which negatively impacts their voting rates and civic participation.

3] More ballot drop boxes should be located in neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants.

The location of ballot drop boxes makes it difficult for members of immigrant communities to vote.

4] Immigrant communities face legal obstacles to civic and political participation.

The failure of comprehensive immigration reform and other electoral structural obstacles such as multi-member electoral districts prevent immigrants from full participation in civic and political activities.

5] Significant resources are needed to assist eligible immigrants who want to naturalize. The existing resources are not coordinated to enable as many people as possible to receive assistance.

There are not enough resources to help Seattle residents who want to become citizens complete the complex process and existing resources have not been effectively coordinated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve civic engagement of immigrant communities.

- Improve and expand data collection relating to electoral participation and language needs of immigrant communities.
- Develop and implement the Seattle Votes campaign, a comprehensive civic engagement strategy that includes funding for focused voter registration, civic education, multilingual training and information, and voter registration of young voters in coordination with the Seattle School District.

Address the language needs of new American voters.

- The City should partner with community-based organizations and King County Elections to provide information and assistance in non-English languages to immigrant voters, including languages not mandated by Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act.
- The City should develop translation standards for voting information produced for limited English proficient (LEP) voters, and adopt the translation industry's best practices for simplicity and reading level comprehension.
- The City should ensure that non-English voting information is available on its website. The non-English information should be both easy to find, and all of the links to non-English information should be optimized for access over multiple platforms (e.g., mobile phones).
- The City should establish a multilingual voter hotline to provide assistance to limited English proficient (LEP) voters.

Ensure that neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants have readily accessible ballot drop boxes.

- The City should ask King County Elections to place permanent ballot drop boxes in neighborhoods with large concentrations of immigrant voters.
- The City should encourage King County Elections to use permanent drop boxes rather than mobile election vans.

Advocate on behalf of immigrant communities.

- Local policy makers should actively support legislation on the local, state, and federal level designed to increase immigrant civic and political participation.
- The City should conduct outreach to immigrant ex-felons in order to educate them on the process of restoring their voting rights.
- The City should encourage the state legislature, and particularly Seattle's delegation to Olympia, to pass the Washington Voting Rights Act.
- The City should encourage Washington State's delegation to Congress to support comprehensive immigration reform legislation with a pathway to citizenship.

Develop and fund comprehensive civic education for new Americans.

- The City should increase funding for the New Citizen Program, and expand eligibility for program services up to 200% of the poverty level.

The Seattle Votes campaign should be a City of Seattle multilayered and branded public education campaign.



Photo, City of Seattle Vote by Mail campaign

The Seattle Votes Campaign

The Task Force envisions the City of Seattle launching a comprehensive Seattle Votes campaign to significantly increase civic engagement among immigrant, refugee, and communities of color in Seattle. Taking into consideration important shifts in our electoral processes in Seattle elections, particularly district elections, the Task Force recommends that the City use this opportunity to significantly strengthen the civic engagement of New Americans and immigrant communities in Seattle through the inter-related strategies drawn from the recommendations in this report.

The Seattle Votes campaign should be a City of Seattle multilayered and branded public education campaign with a goal of educating key communities about how to better engage in the political process through voter registration, voter participation, and advocacy. The campaign should be cohesive to include the above elements, and broadly speaking should include: direct and personal outreach to key communities through earned, paid, and new media; engagement and participation of City agencies, elected leaders, and stakeholders; as well as the participation and leadership of grassroots and community groups. Some specific recommendations for the Seattle Votes campaign are:

- Establish new requirements for City agencies to gather data on civic engagement (naturalization, voter registration, and voting rates) of specific populations: communities of color, immigrant communities, and LEP communities that comprise two and a half percent of the city's total population or a total of 5,000 residents, and gather this data by voter district. Data gathering efforts should also focus on other under-represented communities, such as re-enfranchised ex-felons, voters younger than 25 years of age, as well as low-income and homeless people.
- Enlist City agencies, like Seattle Department of Neighborhoods, to make regular communications to City residents about voter registration and voting in Seattle.
- Invest new resources and leverage existing matching fund dollars to support voter registration, voter engagement

and participation efforts. This includes language identification and translated civic education efforts by community-based organizations to reach LEP and other targeted populations. Funds should be used to test, implement and expand best practices,



like in-language ballot parties, in-language phone calls, community forums on civic participation and civics education, as well as electronic and in-person outreach to key populations.

- Enlist the support of other local public agencies, including King County Elections and Seattle Public Schools, as well as King County Metro, to support civic engagement activities and civic education in public forums and spaces.
- Advocate for the removal of barriers to civic participation described in this report, including increased data collection, translation of information, location and availability of drop boxes, and important policy changes.
- Use an earned, paid, and new media effort launched through ethnic media outlets that reach key populations in Seattle.

Changing Voter Demographics in the Seattle Area

Seattle’s changing demographics has produced a significant population of New American voters, many of whom have limited English proficiency.

Seattle’s demographics have undergone a profound transformation during recent decades. The Seattle area is now home to a sizable number of non-white immigrants from around the world, including significant numbers of people who have LEP. The growth of Seattle’s diverse communities emphasizes the importance of inclusive policies that address the distinct needs of all of its residents. Both city and regional governments must adopt policies that address electoral participation and civic engagement in response to our new demographic trends.²

The large number of languages spoken in the Seattle area highlights the need for the availability of information in many different languages. As the charts on pages 12 and 13 illustrate, there are a wide variety of languages spoken in the Seattle



area. For reasons explained in another section of the report, there isn’t enough data about the languages spoken by Seattle residents. Nevertheless, the information for King County provides a good understanding of the diversity of languages spoken in Seattle.

The term “New American” describes U.S. citizens and their children who acquired citizenship through naturalization. A voter is classified as having limited English proficiency (LEP) if she cannot communicate effectively in English.

Seattle’s ethnic and racial diversity, as well as the diversity of languages spoken, highlights the opportunity for focused civic engagement.

Voter demographics

Because there is no specific data for certain demographics of Seattle’s voters, we will look at King County data describing the characteristics of members of the immigrant community who are eligible to vote.³

Voting experts have coined the term “New American” to describe a U.S. citizen who acquired citizenship through naturalization as well as their children.⁴ A large percentage of King County’s non-white residents are New Americans who are eligible to vote. Many of King County’s voting age citizens are classified as having LEP, which means they are unable to communicate effectively in English and they have not developed fluency in English.

Voting experts measure the population of citizens of voting age (CVAP) in order to determine how many people that live

in a certain area should be voting, and compare this rate to the actual turnout in elections. King County voter data demonstrates that thirteen percent of the CVAP are naturalized citizens. The data also shows that LEP voters total 62,590 of the 222,280 CVAP who are language minorities.

National studies show that New Americans don't vote at the same rate as other citizens.

Studies show that New Americans do not vote at the same rate as other voters. While the studies identify many reasons for low participation rates, there is consensus about the steps that both government and non-government actors can take to engage and encourage New Americans to register and vote.

One such study published in 2011 by Demos identified the following principal barriers to New American voter participation:⁵

- **Length of residence in the U.S.** Longer-term residents register and vote at higher rates, because they have become more acculturated to the U.S. and are more familiar with the U.S. political system.
- **Language barriers** Language access to voting information mandated by Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act

plays a significant role in New American voter participation because it reduces barriers for LEP voters.

- **Discriminatory registration practices** New American voter participation is inhibited by election administrators who block New American voter registration, strict voter registration and identification laws, and inaccurate voter verification database-checks.
- **Country of origin** Many New Americans come from countries with different electoral or political practices, including more repressive political environments which may not permit open elections. Unfamiliarity with the U.S. voting system can inhibit participation.
- **Location of residence within the U.S.** New Americans who live in areas with established immigrant communities register and vote at higher rates than those who live in areas with higher proportions of immigrants who have arrived more recently to the United States.
- **Redistricting** Studies have found that living in a majority-minority district facilitates New American voting.

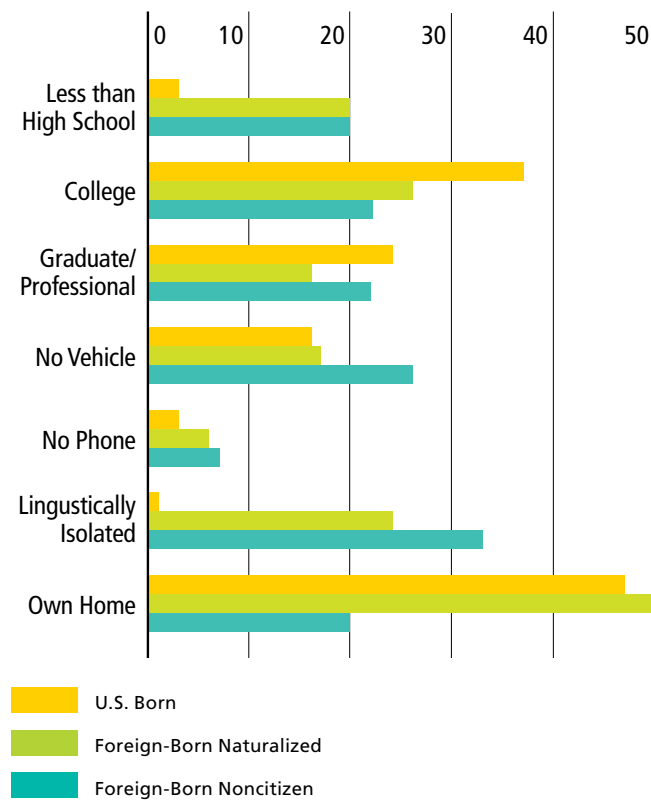
Addressing these barriers to registration and participation in elections can significantly increase New Americans' participation in civic and political activities.



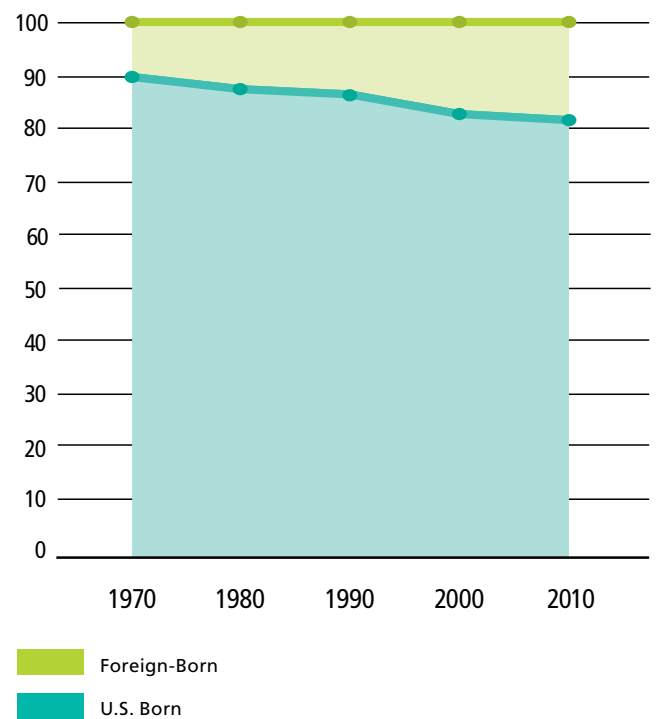
The Growth of Immigrant Communities in Seattle

Today, the Seattle area is experiencing a demographic transformation similar to the transformation taking place across the United States: Immigrant communities comprise the fastest growing demographic group.

Seattle Foreign-Born Snapshot



Percentage Change of U.S. Born and Foreign-Born Residents 1970-2010



184,015

Seattle's non-white population.



14%

of Seattle's population is Asian, the largest non-white group in Seattle.

Seattle is Increasingly Diverse

Comparison of U.S. Born Versus Naturalized Citizens in King County



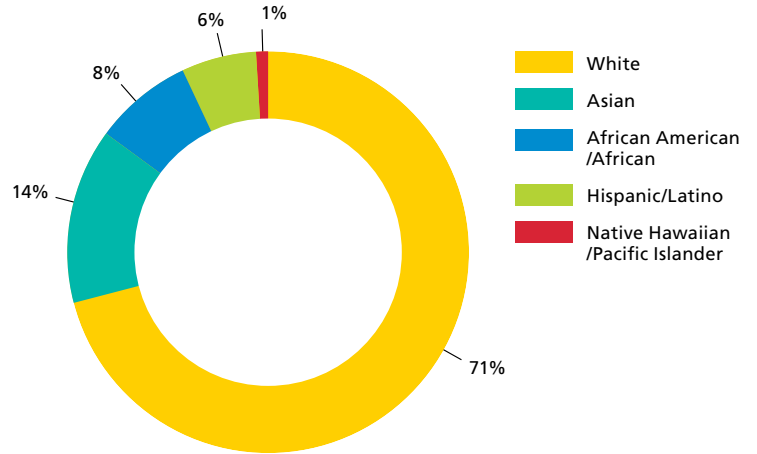
56%

of non-English language speakers in Seattle speak an Asian or Pacific Island language.

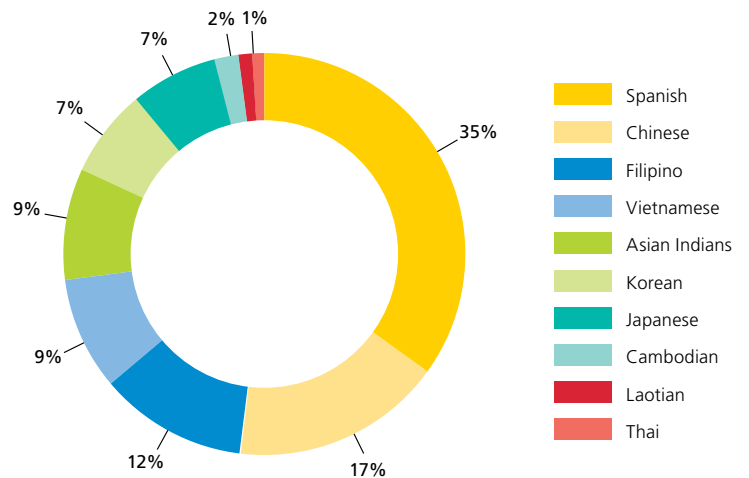
14%

of non-English language speakers in Seattle speak Spanish.

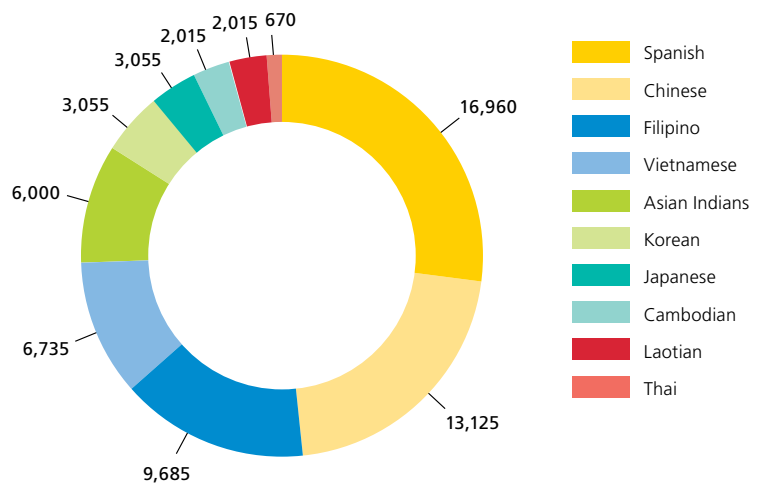
Seattle's Population by Racial Group



Non-English Speakers in King County



Population of LEP Citizens in King County by Language Group



The Task Force found that securing data such as the population of naturalized citizens, as well as data that groups New Americans by language community, citizens of voting age, and limited English proficiency, is difficult.



Seattle Needs More Civic Engagement and Voter Education

Low voter participation by New American voters can be improved by dedicating resources for focused civic engagement programs.

Electoral participation rates of New Americans lags behind other groups. In response, the City should dedicate the resources necessary to inform, encourage, and educate members of immigrant communities about how and why to vote and participate in Seattle's civic life. Implementing the Seattle Votes campaign will focus the necessary resources on targeted efforts to increase voter participation of all Seattle residents.

Seattle can spearhead creative and community-based solutions to increase voter participation and civic engagement of its residents. The Task Force identified several creative solutions that it recommends to City policy makers.

Seattle can spearhead creative and community-based solutions to increase voter participation and civic engagement of its residents. The Task Force identified several creative solutions that it recommends to City policy makers.

The City can encourage voter participation and educate residents about voting by facilitating "ballot parties," a method utilized by community-based organizations. A ballot party is an organized meeting of voters in a community, where voters come together to learn how to vote, where a discussion of the issues and candidates can be facilitated, and where the voters can ask questions about the process. It is an effective method because it allows hands-on learning in a practical setting.

The Task Force also researched strategies that can increase youth voter registration. The Task Force concluded that high schools in Seattle should play a greater role in registering youth voters as permitted by state law.⁶

Additionally, the City of Seattle should advocate for reform of state law to allow pre-registration of 16 and 17 year old voters when they are obtaining their driver's licenses, because this is one of the few interactions that voter registration officials will have to engage youth.

Policy makers need better data about New American voters.

There isn't enough information about New American voters. As a result, policy makers cannot create informed public policy to eliminate barriers that impede greater electoral participation and civic engagement. The Task Force was surprised to find that King County Elections does not use demographic data to target outreach efforts to LEP communities. The City, together with partners at King County and the State of Washington, should dedicate resources to collecting information about New American voters. Better information about New American voters will result in better policies that will increase voter participation and civic engagement.

The Task Force found that securing data such as the numbers of naturalized citizens, as well as data that groups New Americans by language community, citizens of voting age, and limited English proficiency, is difficult. However, the Task Force also found that it is not impossible to collect these data, either from existing programs (e.g., the U.S. Census) or from new programs developed by the City or King County.





Presently there is insufficient data about:

- The language needs of eligible voters living in Seattle.
- The literacy levels of eligible LEP voters in Seattle.
- The use of ballot drop boxes in their past and current locations.
- The number of eligible LEP voters.
- LEP voter turnout.

Improved data will help the City evaluate the success of the Seattle Votes campaign. The data will allow comparison over time to show the campaign's impact on New American voting and civic engagement.

Many language-minority citizens would also benefit from targeted outreach efforts in their native language. But

without the data needed to accurately measure the impacts of policies designed to increase New American voting and civic engagement patterns, there is no way to effectively measure success or improve efforts. The only way to assure that outreach efforts are appropriately targeted is to evaluate progress using reliable data.

» Recommendations

Short-Term (actions that can be implemented within one year):

- Improve and expand data collection and reporting to obtain information about:
 - The language needs of Seattle's voting age population.
 - The identity of New American voters eligible but not currently registered to vote.
- Implement the Seattle Votes campaign:
 - Use voting data about New Americans to conduct the Seattle Votes campaign's focused voter outreach and civic engagement plan, as well as to evaluate the performance of civic engagement strategies.
 - Dedicate resources to help organize ballot parties that enhance the civic education of New American voters.
 - Work with partners to support local efforts to eliminate barriers for disenfranchised ex-felons, homeless and other vulnerable people.
 - Set aside a percentage of matching fund dollars available through City departments to support voter registration, engagement and participation efforts.



Photo used with permission, ©2007 Arion Potts

Compliance with Section 203 of the Federal Voting Rights Act in King County

Under Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, state and local elections officials must provide voting information in languages other than English where there are more than 10,000 or over five percent of the total voting age citizens in a County who are members of a single minority language group, have depressed literacy rates, and do not speak English very well.

In King County, Section 203 requires voting information to be provided in Chinese and Vietnamese.

- Encourage and facilitate youth voter participation by supporting policies that pre-register 16 and 17 year olds.
- Include voter registration information with Seattle City Light and Seattle Public Utilities bills.
- Use robocall and phone technology to target populations who rely on oral traditions to communicate.

Medium-Term (actions that can be implemented within three years):

- Evaluate the Seattle Votes campaign and other civic engagement strategies using New American voter information.

Seattle should adopt legislation that expands the voting rights protection of language minority communities provided by Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act.

Local governments around the country have responded to the challenges facing language minorities and immigrant communities by enacting stronger local language access policies for election information. The City of Seattle should follow suit by adopting an ordinance that expands the availability of election information in a greater number of non-English languages.

The exemplary case of San Francisco’s LEP voter outreach and translation services can serve as a model for Seattle. The Language Access Ordinance (LAO) of the City/County of San Francisco goes beyond the requirements of Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act by providing for translation of information into languages not otherwise mandated by federal law.

Seattle should embrace a similar model. Specifically, Seattle should commit to providing translated information for “emerging language populations,” defined as those language minorities that comprise at least two and a half percent of the city’s total population or 5,000 city residents who speak a language other than English.

» Recommendations

Medium-Term (actions that can be implemented within three years):

- Adopt a City ordinance that lowers the threshold for providing translation of elections information for language minorities that comprise either two and a half percent of the City’s total population or 5,000 total City residents.



The Use of Plain Language on Ballots Increases Voting Accuracy

The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) was authorized by the Help America Vote Act of 2002 to provide technical support in the development of voting system guidelines.

The NIST found the use of “plain language” ballots improved voting accuracy, especially for voters with lower educational levels, and created guidelines for drafting a plain language ballot. The NIST also found that unclear voter instructions on a ballot leads to mistakes that invalidate ballots or intimidation that inhibits voting. Based on these findings, the NIST created guidelines for creating clear ballot instructions.

As a best practice for ballot design, the NIST has also advocated for the use of familiar and common words rather than technical and specialized words that voters are less likely to understand.

A “digital divide” exists between the technology resources New Americans use to access voting and elections information and the resources used by other Seattleites.



Improving Voting Infrastructure

The existing voting infrastructure to support elections hinders the full inclusion and participation of Seattle's immigrant communities. Simple reforms can increase the participation of all of Seattle's diverse communities.

Provide basic language access for LEP voters.

As indicated in the previous section, the Task Force found that there is insufficient information about elections and voting in languages other than English. Without information in their preferred languages, members of immigrant communities cannot inform themselves about elections, which hinders their meaningful and informed participation in politics. The City should work with partners at King County and the State of Washington to ensure that voter registration and election information is available in languages other than English, and that English language information is easy to understand.

King County's current level of compliance with Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act does not expand language access to voting information for languages other than Chinese and Vietnamese. Providing voting information in multiple languages will increase voting in immigrant communities by eliminating a major barrier to participation.

Understanding the issues at stake in an election is also an important issue that is affected by language. The sidebar on page 17 explains the findings of relevant studies conducted by National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) about ballot language.⁷ Voting and election information is often presented in confusing language or using obscure words. All voting and elections information should be written at an eighth grade reading comprehension level, which meets national standards for translation.

Provide basic education on voting and elections as well as assistance to New American and especially LEP voters.

Cultural differences about voting and the voting process vary widely within the immigrant community based on an

individual's experience in their country of origin as well as other socioeconomic factors. These differences present another challenge to increasing electoral participation of New American voters. This challenge is overcome through voter education. The Task Force found that there are many strategies that the City can adopt to increase voter education, including traditional public service announcements, the "ballot parties" discussed earlier, and a multilingual voter assistance hotline that would address individual voter questions. The City should provide the initiative and funding for the development of a wide range of programs, including broader election and voter registration educational activities for minority language groups as well as individualized technical support for its residents.

» Recommendations

Short-Term (actions that can be implemented within one year):

- Collect quality data about the language needs of eligible voters.
- Collect data on the average reading level of eligible LEP voters.

Medium-Term (actions that can be implemented within three years):

- Make voter pamphlets available in more languages.
- Commit to a goal of producing and providing basic in-language information to 90 percent of all eligible LEP voters.
- Perform aggressive outreach to meet the needs of the remaining 10 percent.
- Adopt a maximum reading level requirement for election and ballot language based on the findings for City-level statements printed in the voter's guide. Encourage candidates for local offices and ballot measure campaigns to adhere to this standard.
- Partner with community-based organizations to provide basic voting assistance to groups with high numbers of eligible LEP voters.

King County Drop Box Locations



The Use of Ballot Drop Boxes in King County Elections

In 2008, as part of the transition to all-mail elections, the King County Council approved a plan for regional/accessible voting centers and ballot drop boxes as a way to provide alternatives to mailing a ballot. King County Elections (KCE) administers the voting centers and drop boxes. In some cases KCE has provided a staffed van with limited hours rather than a 24-hour drop box.

The number and location of ballot drop-off locations has fluctuated since 2008. Currently there are no drop boxes located within the southeast Seattle's diverse neighborhoods.

- Produce information that provides opportunities for a common understanding of voting, including:
 - The basics of the voting process.
 - Overview of voters rights.
 - Information about how to get translated election materials and in-language assistance.
 - A multilingual voter hotline.

Long-Term (actions that will take longer than three years to be implemented):

- Ensure accountability to LEP voters by:
 - Conducting periodic reviews of the quality and content of translated information, eligible voter demographics, and language access.
 - Conducting field studies to identify problems and potential solutions.
 - Utilizing best practices for translation and translation review.
 - Conducting periodic review of data about the number of eligible LEP voters and voter turnout as a means to measure success and identify challenges.
 - Cooperating with other agencies to work towards effective language access through the use of consistent interpretation and translation standards at every level of government.

Bridge the digital divide between New American voters and the rest of Seattle.

A "digital divide" exists between the technology resources New Americans use to access voting and elections information and the resources used by other Seattleites. Existing elections are based on a voter's access to internet-dependent technology. People with access to these resources can browse for information about voting, register to vote online, and change a home address through the existing websites. However, according to Seattle's Department of Information Technology (DoIT), low-income Seattle residents, a demographic that includes communities of color and New Americans, often lack access to computers and/or internet connectivity.⁸ DoIT also found that because of cost this demographic was more likely to access the internet through other platforms such as mobile phones and tablets.

Existing resources are less accessible through platforms such as mobile devices and tablets. Election and voter information should be optimized for access across multiple platforms,



Photo, City of Seattle Mayor's Office

including mobile technology so that New American voters can have equitable access to elections information.

» Recommendations

Short-Term (actions that can be implemented within one year):

- Advocate with government partners, particularly King County Elections, to allow for voter registration using mobile platforms.
- Advocate with government partners, particularly King County Elections, to edit the design of the King County Elections website to make the site more user-friendly for immigrant communities.

Increase the number of permanent ballot drop boxes located in neighborhoods with high concentrations of New American voters.

There are too few ballot drop boxes to accept ballots in neighborhoods with large populations of New American voters. The number and location of drop boxes should be increased in order to facilitate collection of ballots and increase voter participation.

Drop off vans are problematic because they have limited hours, and do not have fixed locations. A permanent drop box is available 24 hours a day and its location is known to the community.

» Recommendations

Medium-Term (actions that can be implemented within three years):

- Work with partners at King County Elections to advocate for placement of a greater number of ballot drop boxes within Seattle, and ensure that the drop boxes are placed in neighborhoods with large concentrations of New American voters. Ensure that the criteria for placement of ballot drop boxes not be limited to geographic considerations and are not burdensome to people of color and immigrants, as well as low-income populations.
- Provide King County Elections with ballot drop box sites in every branch of the Seattle Public Library.
- Work with partners at King County Elections to advocate for decreased reliance on mobile elections vans with limited hours of availability as a substitute for ballot drop boxes that are always available.

The combination of a larger number of Seattle residents voting in state and national elections translates into greater political influence for issues that are of concern to all Seattleites.



Seattle's Immigrants Need Civics Education Programs

Dedicate resources to help naturalize eligible residents.

The Task Force finds that the City should take an active role in assisting eligible residents to naturalize. Naturalization is an important tool to increase civic engagement in immigrant communities as well as a means of improving the economic prospects of immigrant families. Research demonstrates that naturalization alone can boost the earnings of immigrants by eight to eleven percent.⁹ As the City examines how it may impact the trend of growing income inequality, it should not overlook naturalization.

Naturalization increases civic engagement and improves the economic prospects of immigrant families by boosting their earning power.

Immigrant residents are disproportionately concentrated in lower-wage jobs and industries in Seattle and surrounding communities. The combination of a larger number of Seattle residents voting in state and national elections translates into greater political influence for issues that are of concern to all Seattleites. The City should seize on the opportunity to increase its influence by increasing the number of Seattle residents who can vote.

The City-backed New Citizen Program (NCP) provides funding to 14 community-based organizations who provide free naturalization and related support for Seattle's low-income immigrants. Since the NCP was established in 1996 it has served nearly 16,000 immigrants. Today, the program serves about 1,600 people per year. Most services are tailored to the

specific needs of participants, including people who are elderly, illiterate in their home language, or who have very limited English skills. Between 2013 and 2014 the City of Seattle, the Seattle Housing Authority, and the Washington Department of Social and Health Services spent more than \$755,000.¹⁰

In the 2016 proposed budget, the Mayor proposed and the council adopted transferring the NCP into the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs. This is a promising development to ensure that Seattle's naturalization efforts will be aligned with other City priorities reflecting immigrant economic, workforce and political integration, as well as to support Seattle's newest citizens.

» Recommendations

Expand naturalization efforts to ensure that all eligible residents become naturalized and are able to vote.

Short-Term (actions that can be implemented within one year):

- Expand the number of residents receiving naturalization services by increasing funding for the New Citizen Program (NCP).
- Centralize coordination of the NCP within the City's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs to ensure effective coordination with other immigrant services and initiatives within the City of Seattle, resulting in enhanced advocacy and integration of these services.

Medium-Term (actions that can be implemented within three years):

- Expand eligibility for naturalization services to all Seattle residents up to 200 percent of the poverty line and higher on a sliding scale.

Granting noncitizen residents the ability to vote in municipal elections would expand the spectrum of voices and preferences, ideas and ideals.



Expanding the Franchise and Removing Legal Barriers to Voting

Ensure easy access and remove barriers to voting.

Purging voter registration rolls of “inactive” voters disproportionately disenfranchises New American voters. Preserving New Americans’ right to vote requires maintaining accurate national voter registration rolls. Washington State’s participation in the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) program is a positive step toward preventing voter disenfranchisement. ERIC’s purpose is to improve the accuracy of voter rolls and increase access to voter registration.¹¹ ERIC identifies errors in the voting rolls and submits reports to county auditors and election officials who address problematic registrations.¹² The City should encourage the use of services such as ERIC to protect Seattle residents from being disenfranchised due to bureaucratic errors.

Washington State’s participation in the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) program is a positive step toward preventing voter disenfranchisement.

At-large electoral districts tend to marginalize minority groups, including immigrant communities. The recent federal court decision against the City of Yakima illustrates how some at-large election systems operate as structural barriers to minority voters. When at-large elections operate to deny race and language minorities an equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice, those electoral systems should be changed. The City should support state legislation, such as the Washington Voting Rights Act, that facilitates challenges to at-large election systems.

Recent efforts in other states to disenfranchise voters through state level legislation that imposes unnecessary identification

requirements for voters, prohibits voting by citizens with criminal records, and imposes strict residency requirements, disproportionately affecting New American voters.¹²

Seattle must take a stand against restrictive voter registration laws and other policies restricting voting rights across the country by adopting policies that counter voter disenfranchisement. The City should encourage the adoption of expansive voting rights legislation at every level of government.

Explore how the City may expand the franchise to all residents.

In community dialogues the Task Force learned that there was significant interest in creating new mechanisms that would allow all Seattle residents the right to vote in municipal elections regardless of citizenship status. At this time we view this as an aspirational goal, but one fraught with significant legal administrative and political obstacles. Other municipalities have permitted non-citizen residents to vote for school boards, local candidates, and ballot measures. However, at this time the City is not in a position to permit non-citizen residents to vote in municipal elections even if they are long-time residents devoted to Seattle.

Non citizens are important stakeholders in Seattle, regardless of their legal ability to vote. For years many non citizens in Seattle lived and worked under temporary non-immigrant status for major companies, or have invested and started job-creating businesses. Others are married to U.S. citizens or have children attending school in Seattle. Some have sought asylum or refuge from countries where they faced persecution or other trauma. Many Seattleites reside here as permanent residents with “green cards,” while others lack clear documentation establishing a basis for residing in the United States.

Like citizen residents, non-citizen residents have a stake in the City’s governance. Granting non-citizen residents the ability to vote in municipal elections would expand the spectrum of

voices and preferences, ideas and ideals, heard by the public and City government, and offering non-citizen residents the unique opportunity for civic engagement by voting would undoubtedly enrich the fabric of our city.

Presently there are substantial legal obstacles to non-citizen voting. The Washington State Constitution restricts voting to state and county residents who are citizens of the United States:

All persons of the age of eighteen years or over **who are citizens of the United States** and who have lived in the state, county, and precinct thirty days immediately preceding the election at which they offer to vote, except those disqualified by Article VI, section 3 of this Constitution, shall be entitled to vote at all elections. (Wa. Const. art. VI, § 1)

According to the relevant statutes in the Revised Code of Washington, only citizens of the United States can register to vote.¹⁴ Regulations under the Washington Administrative Code echo the U.S. citizenship requirement for voter registration.¹⁵

Seattle Home Rule Charter. Assuming Seattle could overcome or circumvent the voter registration issue, Seattle's "Home Rule Charter," viewed within the confines of the state constitution, may afford some opportunity for non-citizen voting on a very limited basis. Seattle operates under a municipal charter.¹⁶ The Seattle City Charter adopted by Seattle voters as prescribed by the Washington State Constitution, embodies the fundamental principles of the City, defines the City's powers and duties, and provides for some rights of self-governance over actions not specifically prohibited by the State Constitution or state law.¹⁷ However, home rule charters are subject to and controlled by preemptions in the State Constitution and the general laws of the State.

The Washington State Constitution prohibits local government to alter the election process for certain offices: the prosecuting attorney, the county superintendent of schools, the judges of the superior court, and the justices of the peace.¹⁸ But the constitution remains silent on elections for school boards, local offices, and local ballot measures. Because of its home rule charter, Seattle is not expressly prohibited from permitting non-citizen voting on those local offices and issues.¹⁹ Nevertheless, assuming Seattle moved to adopt a measure for non-citizen voting, it could be subject to costly challenges based on the state constitution, statutes, and regulations.

Non-citizen Voting Experience in Other Cities. Few cities in the United States have implemented non-citizen voting.²⁰ Chicago has allowed all residents to vote on school board elections since 1988.²¹ New York City permitted non-citizen voting in school board elections until 2002 when the school boards were eliminated through recentralization.²² Cambridge

and Amherst, Massachusetts have passed legislation granting non-citizens voting rights in elections, but state enabling legislation is required for implementation and has not been forthcoming.²³ Six towns in Maryland have succeeded in permitting resident, non-citizen voting for local office: Takoma Park, Barnesville, Martin's Additions, Somerset, Garrett Park, and Chevy Chase.²⁴

Having a home rule charter can provide a legal basis for amending local regulations to give non-citizens the right to vote based on governance by home rule jurisdictions. However, this principle does not entirely negate the ability to challenge home rule charter rights. For example, in San Francisco and Portland, Maine, both charter cities, ballot propositions would have enfranchised non-citizens with the right to vote in local school board elections. Both propositions were narrowly defeated. In San Francisco, a constitutional challenge was threatened, though the defeat at the ballot box rendered the challenge moot.²⁵

Recommendations

Short-Term (actions that can be implemented within one year):

- Conduct outreach to ex-felons to educate them on the process of restoring their voting rights.
- Encourage the legislature to pass the Washington Voting Rights Act.
- Encourage the legislature to pass legislation that permits Election Day voter registration.
- Encourage the legislature to pass legislation that permits portable voter registration.
- Encourage the legislature to pass legislation or an administrative rule that permits pre-registration of sixteen and seventeen year olds when they apply for a Washington State driver's license.
- The Mayor and City of Seattle should not promote expansion of voting in municipal elections to non-citizen Seattle residents at this time.
- The City of Seattle should support comprehensive immigration reform that provides opportunities for non-citizen residents to become permanent residents of the United States through the federal immigration process and subsequently become U.S. citizens.
- The City of Seattle should expand the availability of high-quality citizenship preparation services for non-citizen residents of Seattle who are permanent residents of the United States through the federal immigration process.

Endnotes

- ¹ Source, U.S. Census Bureau, 2013 American Community Survey one-year estimate for Seattle. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_13_1YR_DP02&prodType=table.
- ² The Census estimates that 20.3% of the population of King County is foreign-born, as well as 17.5% of the population of Seattle. These percentages are substantially greater than the average of 13% for Washington State.
Source, U.S. Census Bureau, Quick Facts. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/53033.html> (King County), <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/5363000.html> (Seattle).
One of the revelations of the 2010 Census was the growth of non-whites in King County, an increase of 218,000 during the last decade.
Source, "Census: Hispanics are state's fastest-growing group," *Seattle Times*, February 23, 2011. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: http://seattletimes.com/html/localnews/2014312959_censusoverview24m.html.
King County continues to grow at a rapid rate, due to large numbers of domestic and international immigrants, totaling 37,000 new residents in 2013, 12,500 of whom came from outside of the U.S.
Source, "Census: King County booming, but some state counties dying off," *Seattle Times*, March 27, 2014. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: <http://blogs.seattletimes.com/fyi-guy/2014/03/27/census-king-county-booming-but-some-state-counties-dying-off/>.
- ³ Similar data are not readily available for the City of Seattle. However, the Task Force recommends in this report that the City and Census Bureau generate similar data at the city level.
- ⁴ Source, Rob Paral and Associates, "The New American Electorate: the Growing Political Power of Immigrants and Their Children," *Immigration Policy Center*, updated October 2010. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/New_American_Electorate_101410.pdf
The Immigration Policy Center calculated that the number of New American registered voters in the U.S. increased 101.5% from 7,428,861 in 1996 to 14,965,865 in 2008.
- ⁵ Source, Tova Andrea Wang and Youjin B. Kim, "From Citizenship to Voting: Improving Registration for New Americans," *Demos.org*, December 19, 2011, p. 3. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/fromcitizenshiptovoting_Demos.pdf
- ⁶ *Revised Code of Washington* (RCW) § 29A.08.260(2) provides in relevant part: "... The county auditor shall provide voter registration forms to city and town clerks, state offices, schools, fire stations, public libraries, and any other locations considered appropriate by the auditor or secretary of state for extending registration opportunities to all areas of the county. After the initial distribution of voter registration forms to a given location, a representative designated by the official in charge of that location shall notify the county auditor of the need for additional voter registration supplies."
- ⁷ The NIST wrote several reports concerning improvement of voting systems. The entire list of reports is available at NIST website at: <http://www.nist.gov/itl/vote/keyrole.cfm>
The two reports cited here are:
NISTIR 7556, "Report of Findings: Use of Language in Ballot Instructions." May 2009. National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) website. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: <http://www.nist.gov/itl/vote/upload/NISTIR-7556.pdf>.
NISTIR 7596, "Guidelines for Writing Clear Instructions and Messages for Voters and Poll Workers," May 2009. National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) website. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: <http://www.nist.gov/itl/vote/upload/032906PlainLanguageRpt-2.pdf>.
The best practices are summarized in Sharon J. Laskowski and Janice (Ginny) Redish, "Making Ballot Language Understandable to Voters." Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: https://www.usenix.org/legacy/event/evt06/tech/full_papers/laskowski/laskowski.pdf.
- ⁸ Source, City of Seattle Department of Information Technology, Community Technology Program, "Information Technology Access and Adoption in Seattle: Progress towards digital opportunity and equity," 2014 Report, pp. 5-6, 9, 17-19. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: <http://www.seattle.gov/community-technology/research-and-publications/technology-adoption-in-seattle->
- ⁹ Source, Manuel Pastor and Justin Scoggins, "Citizen Gain: The Economic Benefits of Naturalization for Immigrants and the Economy," Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, December 2012, p. 1. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: <http://csii.usc.edu/CitizenGain.html>.
- ¹⁰ Source, *New Citizens Program*, City of Seattle Human Services Department website. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: http://www.seattle.gov/humanservices/children_families/support/citizenship.htm
- ¹¹ Source, News Release "Washington upgrades voter registration program," Washington State Secretary of State website. Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: http://www.sos.wa.gov/office/osos_news.aspx?i=Mv37Lw33RLCOsaLsdDrW3w%3D%3D.
- ¹² For more information on ERIC, visit the organization's website: <http://www.ericstates.org>.
- ¹³ The Brennan Center for Justice compiled a summary of recent voter identification laws passed in other states during the last decade. "Summary of Voter ID Laws Passed." Accessed February 11, 2015.
Available at: <http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/analysis/State%20Photo%20ID%20Law%20Summary%2011.15%20Update.pdf>
- ¹⁴ Section 29A.08 of the *Revised Code of Washington* concerns voters and registration. "The minimum information required for voter registration requires the person to identify themselves as United States citizens." RCW 29A.08.010(1)(e). A basis for challenging a voter's registration exists if the challenged voter is not a citizen of the United States. RCW 29A.08.810(1)(e).
- ¹⁵ Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 434-324-005; WAC 434-324-026.
- ¹⁶ Seattle City Charter. Accessed Nov. 24, 2014.
Available at: <http://clerk.seattle.gov/~public/charter/charter.htm>.
- ¹⁷ The Preamble provides for the underlying principles of the Charter, including "to allow fair and equitable participation of all persons in the affairs of the City; to provide for transparency, accountability, and ethics in governance and civil service; to foster fiscal responsibility; to promote prosperity and to meet the broad needs for a healthy, growing City." Seattle City Charter, Preamble.
- ¹⁸ "Any home rule charter proposed as herein provided, may provide for such county officers as may be deemed necessary to carry out and perform all county functions as provided by charter or by general law, and for their compensation, but shall not affect the election of the prosecuting attorney, the county superintendent of schools, the judges of the superior court, and the justices of the peace, or the jurisdiction of the courts." Wa. Const. art. XI, § 4
- ¹⁹ Washington Courts have held, however, that municipal authorities cannot exercise powers except those expressly granted, or those necessarily implied from granted powers. If there is a doubt as to whether the power is granted, it must be denied. In those instances in which the matter is solely of local interest, home rule cities may act without a delegation from the legislature, express or implied. *Chemical Bank v. Washington Public Power Supply System*, 99 Wn.2d 772, 666 P.2d 329 (1983); *Pacific First Federal Sav. & Loan Ass'n v. Pierce County*, 27 Wn.2d 347, 353, 178 P.2d 351, 354 (1947). See also, *Trautman, Legislative Control of Municipal Corporations in Washington*, 38 Wash.L.Rev. 743, 772 (1963). Whether the right to vote in local elections is a matter of solely local interest has not been addressed by the Washington courts.
- ²⁰ See *generally*, Tara Kini, "Sharing the Vote: Noncitizen Voting Rights in Local School Board Elections," 93 Cal. L. Rev. 271, 285 (2005).
- ²¹ Ron Hayduk and Michele Wucker, "Immigrant Voting Rights Receive More Attention," *Migration Policy Institute*, Nov. 1, 2004. Accessed November 24, 2014.
Available at: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrant-voting-rights-receive-more-attention>.
- ²² See *generally*, Tara Kini, "Sharing the Vote: Noncitizen Voting Rights in Local School Board Elections," 93 Cal. L. Rev. 271, 285 (2005).
- ²³ Id.
- ²⁴ Id.
- ²⁵ See Peter Spiro, "Noncitizen Voting Makes Sense. Why Don't Liberals Agree?" *Bloomberg View*, June 19, 2013. Accessed November 24, 2014.
Available at: <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2013-06-19/noncitizen-voting-makes-sense-why-don-t-liberals-agree->, June 19, 2013. Accessed November 24, 2014.



City of Seattle Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs

PO Box 94745, Seattle, WA 98124

Phone: (206) 233-2759