



# LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE PORTLAND AREA

PO Box 863  
Augusta, ME 04332-0863

(207) 622-0256  
lwvme@gwi.net

**August 13, 2018**

---

Good evening, Mayor Strimling and councilors.

My name is Barbara Kaufman. I'm a resident of Freeport, but I am speaking tonight as the Co-President of the Portland Area League of Women Voters. Founded in 1920, the League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major political policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

The League of Women Voters is a consensus-based membership organization that takes no position on any issue without first conducting a full and thorough analysis leading to member understanding and agreement. Without having the time for our membership to fully consider the merits of non-citizen voting and its impact on our democratic practices, we are unable to take a position either for or against this charter amendment.

That said, we would like to make a few points to provide additional context:

First, a note on history. Americans often celebrate our history of expanding of the franchise to people who were initially denied the vote – non-property owners, African-Americans, women, native Americans, 18-year-olds, etc. However, this process has not been without setbacks. In the years between the passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment and the Civil Rights Act, Jim Crow laws took away voting rights from millions of black men and women. During the same period in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, intense anti-immigrant sentiment led state and city governments to roll back laws that had previously allowed non-citizen residents to vote. In the years after the Civil War, 12 states explicitly enfranchised immigrant aliens who had declared their intention to become naturalized but had not yet been made citizens. According to political scientist Ron Hayduk, voting by non-citizens was “widely practiced and not extraordinarily controversial” in this period. However, all these laws were eventually repealed, and in the same period, nationwide voter participation fell from about 80 percent to below 50 percent by the 1920s. Turnout has never come close to recovering.

Second, we recognize that voting is one of the most dearly-held rights of citizenship. League volunteers register new citizens at naturalization ceremonies – more than 1,000

---

new citizens since 2016 – and we recognize that for many new citizens, voting for the first time is an important milestone of becoming American. For many people, voting and citizenship are inextricable.

One the other hand, a central provision of representative democracy is that those effected by decisions should have a role in making those decisions. Non-citizen residents of Portland use city services, pay city taxes, send their children to Portland schools, and they are asking to be able to influence the decisions that affect them. Recognizing this value, noncitizens vote in twelve jurisdictions in the United states (San Francisco, 10 towns in Maryland, and in local school council elections in Chicago). Another four towns in Massachusetts have passed local laws but await state enabling legislation to implement.

Third, as an organization founded by leaders for women’s suffrage, we recognize a historical irony in this moment. Men had to vote to extend the right to vote to women, and citizens would have to vote for their non-citizen neighbors to join them in voting for municipal elections. This history leads us to take very seriously any group that believes they should be able to vote and acknowledge the privilege we have to speak and choose on behalf of those without that power. We urge the council to take your responsibility in this regard very seriously.

I will conclude by saying the League welcomes this debate about the meaning of citizenship and democracy. We urge all involved to speak and act with respect for one another, and be mindful, when we disagree, to not increase the environment of hostility and danger our immigrant neighbors all too often must contend with.

Thank you.