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Lillian Rodríguez López
President
Hispanic Federation

Testimony before the New York City Council Committee on Government Operations on the Voting Rights Restoration Act

Good Afternoon:

My name is Lillian Rodríguez López, I am the President of the Hispanic Federation. On behalf of the Federation, I would like to thank Council Member Bill Perkins and the Government Operations Committee for recognizing the importance of this issue and for affording me and others the opportunity to express our views on allowing documented non-citizen residents to vote in New York City municipal elections.

The Hispanic Federation is a membership organization of 90 Latino health and human services agencies that serve more than 1,000,000 Latinos in the tri-state area. Within the work that we do, we are strongly engaged in educating Latinos and others on the importance of civic participation and voting rights. Over the past decade, Hispanic Federation has registered over 75,000 voters and encouraged hundreds of thousands of Latinos and others to make their voices heard on Election Day. We strongly believe that voting is one of the most effective ways for individuals to weigh in on the electoral and public policy choices impacting their local communities and nation.

It is within this context that the Federation strongly supports the Voting Rights Restoration Act (Introduction 628-2005), which allows documented non-citizen residents to vote in New York City municipal elections. Not only is this legislation imperative for the empowerment of our communities, it is vital for truly achieving political economic and social equality.

According to census figures, there are more than 1.3 million adult non-citizen immigrant residents of New York City who do not have the right to vote in local elections. Many of them come from all around the world in search of better opportunities and contribute greatly to the social, cultural and economic growth of local communities. Hispanics represent a large majority of this community. In fact, census figures show that Hispanics account for 37 percent of the total number of the City's adult non-citizen residents, many of which are law abiding residents who work in the City, pay their share of taxes, have their children attending public schools and serve in the U.S military.

It is disconcerting that Hispanic non-citizen residents and others are not able to voice their concerns regarding the laws that govern them and the public services for which

they use. According to official figures, New York State non-citizen residents contribute an estimated \$18.2 billion annually in New York State income taxes. Yet, they are not able to decide how it will be spent, nor do they have political representation. The gap between the electorate and the total population raises serious concerns regarding government accountability to residents who cannot vote, and the civic responsibilities that immigrants are expected to assume toward their communities.

Those who are against restoring voting rights for legal immigrants argue that “Non-citizens have not sworn a loyalty oath to the United States, and therefore can not be trusted to vote in the best interests of this country, as opposed to their own interests or those of their country of origin.”

The reality is that a majority of New York City’s documented immigrants have already planted their roots in their communities and assume all the other responsibilities of local citizenship. They already have an inherent interest in safe, clean streets, quality health care, employment opportunities, and a better education for their children, just like this city’s naturalized and home-born citizens.

For Hispanic documented residents, the need to participate in the electoral process is critical

- Hispanic documented immigrants account for 37 percent of the 1.3 million adult non-citizen residents who pay their share of taxes and contribute to the City’s economy. Yet do not have any direct means of participating in local government.
- Hispanic documented immigrants are more likely to send their children to public schools. It is estimated that Hispanic children of documented immigrant residents account for over 20 percent of the K-12 student population. Yet, they are not able to voice their concerns regarding the public services that affect their children.

History has shown that voting rights is a powerful instrument for acquiring economic, social and civil rights and for expanding democracy. Voting is a indispensable conduit for the defense of civil and human rights, equality of opportunities and the preservation of our democratic system. Rather than excluding such a significant portion of the city’s population from political participation, we should ensure that all New York City legal residents of voting age have the right to express their views and concerns through the electoral process.

Committee Members, New York City has an obligation to protect all its residents. The Voting Rights Restoration Act provides non-citizen residents with an opportunity to obtain social, economic and political equality. Many communities in the United States - not to mention more than twenty countries around the world - recognize this inherent right. We as a community strongly support this legislation and urge you to do the same.

