

Redefining Citizenship

09/16/2015 11:16 am ET | Updated Sep 16, 2015

- Steven Choi Executive Director of the New York Immigration Coalition, a pan-immigrant statewide umbrella group representing 200 member organizations.

Who are we, as a nation? On the eve of Constitution Day and Citizenship Day, this question looms over us larger than ever. The GOP presidential race has dragged down the debate on a myriad of national issues into a contest of scaremongering and hate directed against immigrants - at the same time, the mass movement of refugees seeking shelter and safety from countries like Syria has brought Europe to its own inflection point.

On this Constitution and Citizenship Day, organizations like the [New York Immigration Coalition](#) and many others around the country are asking ourselves who we are. As a nation, we believe that the answer has never been more clear: **America is a nation of immigrants, and we honor and celebrate the newcomers who have helped build American society.**

We are playing our own small part in laying this foundation. For one week, beginning September 17th, the NYIC is partnering with our New York allies to launch "[Empowering New Americans Week](#)" - a week of free citizenship clinics and voter registration opportunities in New York to help immigrants naturalize and register to vote.

But our work should not stop there. We have the opportunity to redefine the notion of 'citizenship' for the 21st century. We at the NYIC believe in the concept of "**active citizenship**" - **that citizenship is not just a specific legal status or a static identity, nor its privileges confined to the act of voting.** In our increasingly interconnected and rapid-fire world, "active citizenship" should be an ongoing process of everyday engagement within numerous civic arenas, and, when broadly defined, reveals the many roles that immigrants already do and can play in the civic and political landscape of this country.

As fathers and mothers and legal guardians of school-age youth, immigrants advocate for [better language access in schools](#) and in [medical facilities](#) - changes that have improved the effectiveness and responsiveness of these critical institutions. As members of the community, [immigrants](#)

volunteer and take leadership roles in public institutions like libraries, parks, and clinics, and contribute their time and resources at community centers, at food pantries, in emergency relief, and after-school programs - improving our society for all Americans, immigrant and native-born alike.

Regardless of citizenship status, immigrants can and should play a vital role in local, state and national decision-making - joining neighborhood block associations, speaking up in community board meetings, commenting on and proposing local development opportunities, and advocating for meaningful legislation with their state and national representatives. As business owners and as employees, immigrants are active in local business associations, chambers of commerce, wage rights campaigns and unions, and other avenues that bolster a thriving and sustainable economy. We are proud to say that we know and engage thousands of immigrants in these forms of “active citizenship” that have improved local and regional communities, and, in turn - American society as a whole.

Yet, on this Constitution and Citizenship Day, we should also take a moment to ask - what can our nation do to welcome and encourage this “active citizenship” that has enriched the lives of so many Americans?

We can continue to broaden avenues of civic engagement for immigrants, by expanding participatory budgeting processes and introducing “local voting” mechanisms that engage local residents to provide important feedback to their city representatives. We can break down the barriers to citizenship by lowering naturalization fees and supporting naturalization drives, empowering more immigrant residents to engage in a wider range of civic activities. We can ensure that important spaces of decision-making are implemented with language access concerns in mind. In doing so, we pave the way for immigrants to continue making vital contributions towards this country’s future.

On this Constitution and Citizenship Day, let us rise above the anti-immigrant vitriol of the current presidential race, and be inspired by the civic contributions of immigrants to America from all over the world. Let us begin by redefining citizenship, elevating it from a static identity to the ‘active citizenship’ that many immigrants can and do practice. By doing so, we can ensure that America’s ‘active citizens,’ whether immigrant or native-born, can continue to thrive as members of a healthy democracy and help build a prosperous, inclusive nation. And isn’t that what we are all about?

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