

Noncitizens in nation's capital may get to vote

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WASHINGTON - For months, the revolutionaries plotted strategy and lobbied local politicians here with the age-old plea, "No taxation without representation!" Last month, some of the unlikely insurgents - Ethiopian-born restaurateurs, travel agents and real estate developers in business suits - declared that victory finally seemed within reach.

Five City Council members announced their support for a bill that would let thousands of immigrants vote in local elections here, placing the nation's capital among a handful of cities in the forefront of efforts to offer voting rights to noncitizens.

"It will happen," said Tamrat Medhin, a civic activist from Ethiopia who lives here. "Don't you believe that if people are working in the community and paying taxes, don't you agree that they deserve the opportunity to vote?"

Calling for "democracy for all," immigrants are increasingly pressing for the right to vote in municipal elections. In Washington, the proposed bill, introduced in July, would let permanent residents vote for the mayor and members of the school board and City Council.

In San Francisco, voters will decide in November whether to let noncitizens - including illegal immigrants - vote in school board elections. Efforts to expand the franchise to noncitizens are also bubbling up in New York, Connecticut and elsewhere.

Fierce opposition to proposals

Several cities, including Chicago, and towns like Takoma Park, Md., already let noncitizens vote in municipal or school elections.

But in most cities, voting remains a right reserved for citizens, and the prospects for the initiatives in Washington and San Francisco remain uncertain. The proposals have inspired fierce opposition from critics who say the laws would undermine the value of American citizenship and raise security concerns in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Washington's mayor, Anthony Williams, has expressed his support for extending voting rights to permanent residents but has yet to garner a majority of supporters on the 13-member City Council. In San Francisco, critics have questioned whether the law would violate the state's constitution.

Supporters of letting noncitizens vote note the United States has a history of letting noncitizens vote. Twenty-two states and federal territories at times let noncitizens vote - even as blacks and women were barred from voting - in the 1800s and 1900s.