



# Immigrant Voting *and the* Movement for Inclusion *in* San Francisco

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# Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of the fight to win immigrant voting legislation in San Francisco, a law also known as “noncitizen voting,” and the effects noncitizen voting has had on immigrant empowerment in the city at large.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of 10 months, a team of researchers conducted a series of interviews and focus groups with 72 community members and key stakeholders who provided valuable insights into the city’s immigrant voting program, including the way the program affected immigrants in San Francisco, the barriers they face in exercising their voting rights, best practices community organizations have used to try to overcome those barriers, and a series of recommendations. The research team also drew upon available information from the public record, including census and election data, government and policy reports, news reports, and scholarly work. We elaborate on our methods and sources below, and we provide the names of interviewees at the end of this report. We begin by summarizing key findings of our research.

## Support for Immigrant Voting Rights

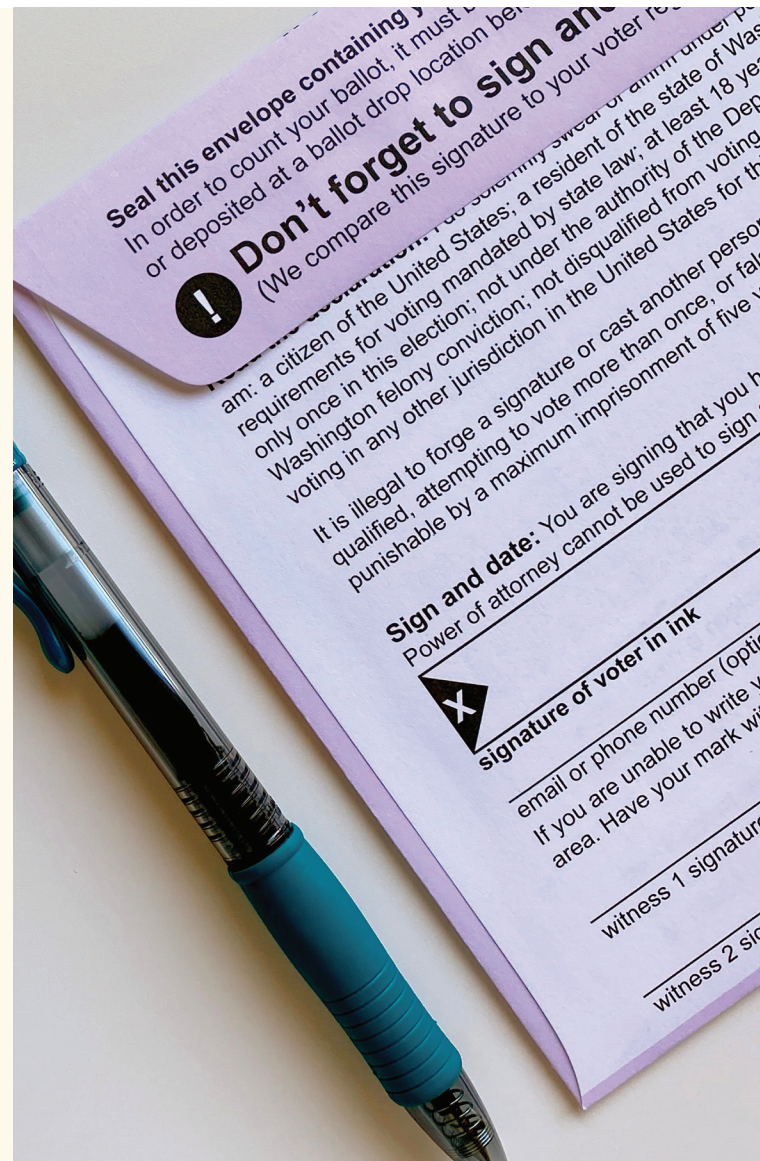
People in all groups we spoke with – parents, staff at community-based organizations, government officials and academics – reported that they were excited to learn about immigrant voting rights. Interviewees saw noncitizen voting as a means to affirm immigrant voices, to affect decisions on the school board that can improve learning conditions for their children, to empower immigrants, and to advance racial justice and their inclusion on equitable terms.

## Trump and the Threat of Federal Immigration Enforcement

The passage of San Francisco’s ballot measure coincided with the election of Donald Trump in 2016, posing particular challenges to implementing the new law. Since voter registration data is not confidential, immigrants feared detention or complications in obtaining citizenship if they registered to vote, which contributed to relatively low levels of immigrant voter registration and participation

## Language Barriers

Language barriers posed challenges for immigrants to exercise their right to vote, despite San Francisco’s Language Access Ordinance.



<sup>1</sup> In this report, we use several terms interchangeably – “immigrant voting,” “noncitizen voting,” “resident voting,” “local citizenship,” and “alien suffrage” – because they essentially mean the same thing: enfranchising or restoring voting rights to residents of a jurisdiction who are currently excluded from the electorate because they are not U.S. citizens. We distinguish between foreign-born immigrants who are noncitizens and foreign-born immigrants who have naturalized and become U.S. citizens conceptually and empirically where data permits.

## **Lack of Knowledge & Time Constraints**

Many immigrant parents reported that they did not know they had gained new voting rights, despite notices from the School District and information on the Department of Elections' website.

## **Prior Experiences with Disenfranchisement**

Immigrants from countries where voting was not allowed, or was penalized, were less likely to participate.

## **“Power, Not Panic”**

A group of community-based organizations formed the Immigrant Parent Voting Collaborative (IPVC) and conducted extensive voter education and outreach that engaged tens of thousands of immigrant caregivers in other forms of participation in the school system. Advocates see this broader school-based engagement as a form of “success” beyond registration and voting numbers. Advocates also built collaboration and solidarity within and across groups (Latinx, AAPI, African, Arab, African American), which augmented their ongoing base-building efforts and supported collaboration on other issues of common concern that seek to empower immigrants.

## **Legal Challenges and Other Opposition**

California faces unique challenges in advancing immigrant voting, as a court case contesting San Francisco's law could threaten the right of immigrants to vote in San Francisco and in other municipalities across the state that seek similar laws. Some advocates also worry that the push for immigrant voting rights could provoke harsh responses by anti-immigrant groups, such as endangering immigrant friendly legislation and ongoing efforts to protect immigrants and advance immigrant rights.

## **The Future of Immigrant Voting**

California also presents unique opportunities on the road ahead, given its dense network of immigrant advocacy organizations and millions of immigrant families in the state. To address these challenges and opportunities, Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) and IPVC convened 75 immigrant voting stakeholders from around California in March 2023 to strengthen the movement for immigrant voting going forward. Since the convening, advocates across the state have met regularly to strategize about future campaigns and ways to overcome legal and implementation challenges.

## **Recommendations for San Francisco and Other Jurisdictions**

Advocates, caregivers, government staff, and elected officials we interviewed made the following recommendations to improve San Francisco's immigrant voting program. These recommendations also apply to other cities considering an immigrant voting law or campaign:

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**Center immigrants and immigrant-serving organizations in pursuing immigrant voting rights**

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**Coordinate a critical mass of stakeholders across sectors and communities**

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**Fund community-based organizations to conduct voter education and outreach, alongside government agencies, to strengthen multicultural democracy**

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**Develop effective communication and media strategies in multiple languages accessible to community members, implemented by a broad range of government agencies, civic groups, and media outlets**

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**Develop better protections for immigrants to register and vote with greater confidence in their security, particularly for the undocumented and those from mixed status families**