



Sal LaMattina, left, and Michael Ross, whose similar backgrounds inform their opposing stances on a proposal to let noncitizens vote in city elections. (Bill Greene/Globe Staff)

LETTING NONCITIZENS VOTE

Descendants debate

As City Council takes up the issue, family histories fuel disagreement

By Matt Viser, Globe Staff | April 12, 2007

Szmulek Rozental sailed into New York Harbor April 10, 1948, a 16-year-old who had survived the horrors of a German concentration camp. Over the course of his new life in America, he would change his name to Steve Ross, learn English, and raise a family in Newton, imbuing his children with the gratitude he felt for a country that welcomed him when so much of the world had been hostile.

"I grew up hearing every day of my life that I should be grateful to be an American," one of those children, Councilor Michael P. Ross of District 8, said yesterday.

As the City Council took up a controversial proposal yesterday to grant noncitizens the right to vote in Boston elections, Ross is one of the measure's leading proponents, drawing on the deeply held beliefs of his immigrant father.

But another city councilor who comes from immigrant stock, Salvatore LaMattina of District 1, is just as fiercely opposing the measure, citing his own family experiences.

LaMattina's grandfather, Silvestro "Sonny" DeRuosi, came from Naples and led a life in America not unlike that of Steve Ross and millions of other immigrants. He moved to East Boston in the early 1920s, toiling as a factory worker at General Electric and as a waiter at several Italian restaurants to support a wife and 11 children.

According to a story that became a refrain of LaMattina's childhood, DeRuosi labored for his citizenship so that he could vote, expressly for James Michael Curley, the long-serving mayor of Boston.

The message DeRuosi passed on: Citizenship and voting go together, as fundamental pieces of American life and identity.

"To him, voting was sacred," LaMattina says now.

Shaped by a wide range of immigrant tales in their own family histories, councilors come to the immigrant voting measure with widely diverging stances. The debate reflects the deeper questions surrounding immigration issues in Boston, where waves of new immigrants are reshaping the city.

With one in four Boston residents foreign-born, immigrants are increasingly a factor in city life, but two-thirds of these residents cannot vote because they are not citizens, a fact that some say unfairly prohibits them from fully participating.

"We have to recognize that the time to do this has come," said Felix Arroyo, the City Council's first Hispanic member, who sponsored the measure.

It would allow legal immigrants who are not US citizens to vote in municipal elections as long as they sign a form indicating they are legal residents of Boston and "in good faith intend to become" US citizens. "It is the right thing to do."

Arroyo was born in Puerto Rico and is a US citizen.

Many on the council are descended from immigrants; about half of the 13 members come from Irish backgrounds, with ancestors who immigrated to Boston. Those councilors did not speak during yesterday's hearing, but privately several said they oppose allowing noncitizens to vote because they feel it would devalue the work previous immigrants went through to become citizens.

Councilor Sam Yoon, the council's first Asian-American, supports Arroyo's measure. His parents left Korea for the United States in 1970, hoping for a better education for their children. They eventually settled in Lebanon, Pa., and did their best to become part of the community while still speaking Korean at home and dining on native dishes of kimchi and bi bim bap. Yoon and his parents became citizens, but it took nearly 10 years.

"As an immigrant, you always fight the sense that you don't belong here," Sam Yoon said in an interview yesterday.

"I ran for this office in part to represent a community that has the same sort of feeling, that we don't belong."

In response to Arroyo's measure, LaMattina sponsored a separate measure yesterday aimed at encouraging citizenship with services such as city-sponsored English classes.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who has been generally supportive of immigration rights issues, has not yet decided whether to support allowing immigrants to vote in city elections, which would need the approval of the Legislature.

"One thing that we should be addressing more than that is to get these immigrants to be citizens first," Menino said in a recent interview. "That's a real issue."

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