



ILLUSTRATION BY
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"We have voted in our
feet to come here."

Anonymous refugee

CITIZENSHIP

For new citizens, voting is a precious gift

*They remember life under tyrants, and value the right
of every citizen to cast a vote and affect elections.*

BY GEDLU B. METAFERIA

For many refugees and immigrants, coming to America is a courageous exodus from human rights abuse, religious or political persecution, poverty, war, ethnic cleansing and torture. As one advocate of these new Americans has put it, "We have voted in our feet to come here."

And we have also longed to participate in a democracy, the kind of democracy we struggled for in our home countries. Our souls and bodies still remind us of our previous suffering: broken bones, paralyzed limbs, blindness, hearing loss and the traumas endured in the hands of the gendarmes of dictators and tyrants.

This is why new Americans voting for the first time do not take the privilege for granted. Within the Show-Me State, by conservative estimates, we have close to 18,000 naturalized citizens from 51 African countries, 75 percent of whom reside in St. Louis County

and the city of St. Louis. At least 12 percent of the St. Louis population is now foreign-born, with Hispanics, Bosnians and southeast Asians accounting for the largest share.

Immigrant citizens also understand the evolving virtues of the American experiment over more than 200 years. We pay close attention to American history.

On bread-and-butter issues, new Americans share the same concerns as all citizens. They are very much interested in jobs, health care and housing. U.S. foreign policy is another concern, particularly when it comes to their previous homelands. And they have honored traditions of family values.

New Americans are very much concerned about terrorism from two points of view. First, they want to live in peace and safety, just like the rest of their fellow Americans. They have taken an oath to defend this country. The U.S. military includes some 37,000 permanent residents as well as naturalized citizens.

Second, they want a balance between homeland security practices and civil liberties. They are

uneasy about some excessive provisions of the Patriot Act. Many immigrant citizens feel that the attacks of 9/11 bruised the great tradition of the United States as a land of immigrants.

The leadership in many communities of new Americans is trying to heal the pain, especially through

strong interfaith dialogue, resettlement agencies and civil rights organizations. In encouraging tolerance and respect with each other, the interfaith community in St. Louis has been a great positive force.

Earning United States citizenship requires understanding the history, government and traditions of civic participation of the United States democracy — and a fair understanding of the English language. The most difficult concept, in my opinion and the opinion many others, is the Electoral College.

There may not even be an exact word to translate the idea to other traditions. It reminds me of the difficulty I had translating "ferris wheel" into African languages for the 1904 World's Fair Centennial language demonstration. Yet the concept is important. Immigrants remember that the popular vote in the 2000 election was overridden by the electoral vote.

We have never before seen the level of interest in voting among new Americans as they are showing in this election. There are a lot of voter education efforts taking place in the communities, which have inspired many first-time new Americans to vote.

The new-American vote in St. Louis and the nation is a silent minority voting block unrecognized by pundits and pollsters. Many regard it as a tribute to democracy that their few votes, particularly in swing states, might make the difference in which candidate ends up the White House and becomes the person whose decisions affect not only America but the entire world.

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