

New Brunswick

# Some immigrants should get to vote in civic elections, group says

Multicultural council president calls for voting rights for people with permanent status

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The New Brunswick Multicultural Council is leading the campaign to allow permanent residents to vote in municipal elections. (Andrew Vaughan / Canadian Press)

A growing chorus of New Brunswickers is calling for giving some voting rights to immigrants who have obtained permanent resident status.

The New Brunswick Multicultural Council is leading the campaign to allow permanent residents to vote in municipal elections.

Moncef Lakouas, the council's president, said he's talked to municipal leaders and to many other citizens across the province and has found enthusiasm for the change.

"It's not just permanent residents calling for this," said Lakouas. "Many New Brunswickers, including elected officials, are saying, let's do this."

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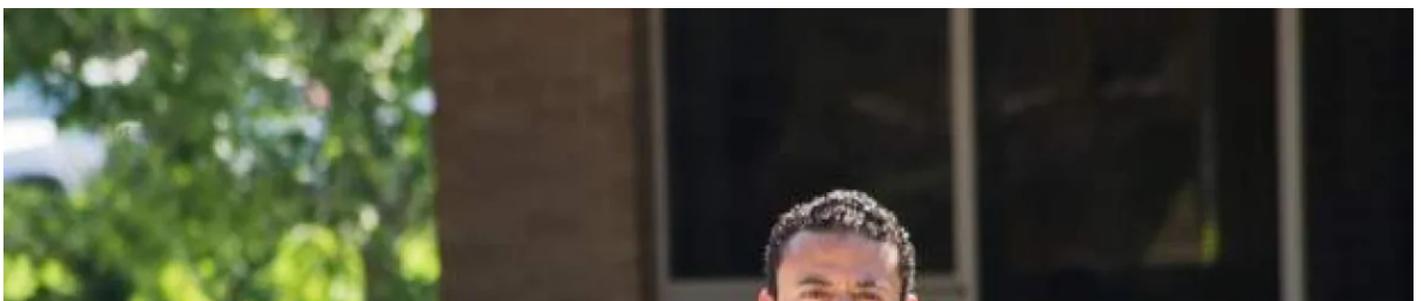
Permanent residents have many of the responsibilities and rights citizens enjoy, such as paying taxes and access to some social programs, but voting rights are not extended until citizenship is obtained.

Som Somaditya Das, a permanent resident living in Saint John, said permanent residents contribute so much to their communities, it only makes sense to extend voting rights.

"We are living here," said Das.

"We are paying taxes. We are contributing to the growth and development of the economy of this region. We are contributing to the cultural landscape, to the social landscape. But we do not have any avenue so that our voice is heard, at least politically."

But Lakouas said permanent residents can begin to contribute to the community politically before citizenship.





Moncef Lakouas, the council's president, said he's talked to municipal leaders, and many other citizens who support extending voting rights to permanent residents. (Submitted by Moncef Lakouas)

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The council is focusing on an extension of voting rights in local elections, rather than provincial or federal ones, because of how direct the involvement of municipal governments are in newcomers' lives.

Das said allowing permanent residents to vote could help increase diversity in municipal governments.

"We have different perspectives of people coming from different parts of the world," said Das.

"They are different in their cultural background in their ethnic background. So we may not recognize their needs or the necessities in their lives unless we have a diverse representation in the government."

The ball is now in the province's court, as municipalities fall under provincial jurisdiction, so any change to voting rights would have to come from the province.

CBC News has reached out to the Department of Local Government and Local Governance Reform but has not heard back.

Lakouas said this is an opportunity for the province to lead the way.

"This is something that has not happened in Canada," said Lakouas.

"We could lead first on it. We don't have to wait for somebody else to do it and then learn from the process. We can lead the way and lead also all the marketing and the economic benefits that will come from it."

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*With files from Information Morning Saint John*

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