

The Benefits of Dual Citizenship

By Michele Wucker | March 8, 2006

A tempest in a teapot has been brewing over the more than 150 nations—a number that is rising—that allow their citizens to hold passports of more than one country. Opponents of dual citizenship argue that it is dangerous for America because it can lead to conflicting dual loyalties.

This overblown fear is based on two misconceptions: first, that immigrants' efforts to improve their homelands represent misplaced loyalties that are bad for the United States, and second, that immigrants' ties to their countries of birth are something new.

In reality, dual citizenship benefits America by helping to promote U.S. ideals and values around the globe. It promotes U.S. understanding of and connections to the world, to our own benefit politically and economically, and removes practical obstacles to naturalization.

Loyalty to another government certainly can be dangerous, especially in times of war. During World War II, some U.S. states were within their rights to ban meetings of the German-American Bund, a political group that portrayed itself as an American arm of Hitler's Third Reich and promoted ethnic hatred. Yet this was the exception that proves the rule. In reality, citizens of hostile foreign governments are far more likely to oppose than to support the despots who rule their homelands. Throughout history—with the exception of the Iron Curtain nations during the Cold War—governments generally have been thrilled when their opponents flee into exile. Because those who leave a land are most likely to be displeased with its existing government, until recently the fiercest opponents of dual citizenship and absentee voting have been unpopular ruling governments that feared the paper votes of citizens who already voted with their feet.

Emigrés often have other reasons for wanting to vote in their homelands that have nothing to do with emotion but everything to do with practical issues—especially if they have left behind family they care about and want to visit and support financially. In many countries, you must be a citizen to own land, work legally, or participate materially in certain kinds of business.

Jesús Galvis, a Hackensack, New Jersey City Councilman, ran for a newly created seat in Colombia's Senate in 1988, because he felt that it was important that Colombians abroad to have a say in policies that affected them, like the excessive time and cost for renewing passports and delays in getting packages through customs.

Extending America's Reach

Two times over the past year, thousands of Iraqis traveled hundreds of miles to polling stations set up across America so that they could vote in their homeland for the first time, showing that U.S. troops had not died in vain. Theirs were the voices of those who have been exposed first-hand to American ideals and the workings, however imperfect, of the nation that still sends out a beacon of freedom and hope.

This should not be the least bit alarming. Did we worry when Americans donated massively to tsunami relief? Is it wrong for immigrants in America to want to create a better future for those still in their homelands, even though it's okay for the U.S. government to send troops in name of the same pur-



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pose? It's a lot cheaper to promote democracy through the ballot box and the phone call or package sent home from America than by using planes and tanks.

The Benefits

Throughout history, U.S. immigrants' involvement has long been essential to economic and political progress in their homelands. These ties also benefit the United States by creating connections that promote American goods and political leadership abroad. In an increasingly interconnected world, it is in America's best interests that newly minted and native born citizens alike be knowledgeable about and involved in the world.

Political loyalty is far different from nostalgia and the desire to make things better in the land of one's birth, two emotions that we should not discourage. There is clear historical precedent that affection for—and even service to—one's homeland is not incompatible with being American. Born a Frenchman, Héctor St. John de Crèvecoeur established a new life as a farmer in America, where he posed and answered more eloquently than has anyone else since: "What, then, is the American, this new man?" His love of America was unquestioned,

yet he gave up his American citizenship to serve as French consul in New York in 1783, a year after the publication of his classic account. Even after he returned to France permanently in 1785, he was known above all as an ambassador of American ideals.

Dual citizenship does not weaken U.S. loyalty; to the contrary, it strengthens immigrants' feeling that they are welcome by reassuring them that they will not be punished for loving their homeland any more than a child should be spanked for loving his or her mother. What kind of country would want to make citizens out of those who do not care about the fate of the land of their birth?

The old saw that a man should no more have two countries than two wives is based on a false metaphor. The better comparison is between two different kinds of loyalties, to parent and spouse: an individual is bound to one by nature, and to the other by choice. One can love both equally strongly, but in different ways.

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