

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Trump Justice Department Pushes for Citizenship Question on Census
Administration says the reason for the controversial move is to protect civil rights

by Justin Elliott
ProPublica

The Justice Department is pushing for a question on citizenship to be added to the 2020 census, a move that observers say could depress participation by immigrants who fear that the government could use the information against them. That, in turn, could have potentially large ripple effects for everything the once-a-decade census

2020 count. Questions are usually carefully field-tested, a process that can take years. “This is a recipe for sabotaging the census,” said Arturo Vargas, a member of the National Advisory Committee of the Census and the executive director of NALEO Educational Fund, a Latino advocacy group. “When you start adding last-minute questions that are not tested — how will the public understand the question?

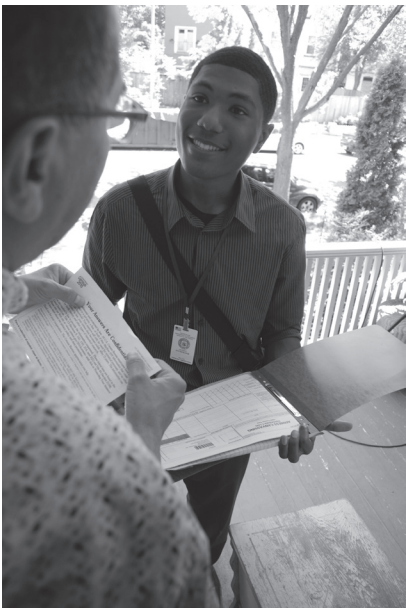
tion to the census. Adding to the concerns about the 2020 count, Politico reported last month that the administration may appoint to a top job at the bureau a Republican redistricting expert who wrote a book called “Redistricting and Representation: Why Competitive Elections Are Bad for America.” The Census Bureau’s population count determines how the 435 U.S. House seats are distributed.

Political Climate Already Taking Effect

A recent Census Bureau presentation shows that the political climate is already having an effect on responsiveness to the bureau’s American Community Survey, which asks a more extensive list of questions, including on citizenship status, to about one in 38 households in the country per year.

In one case, census interviewers reported, a respondent “walked out and left interviewer alone in home during citizenship questions.”

“Three years ago, [it] was so much easier to get respondents compared to now because of the government changes ... and trust factors. ... Three years ago I didn’t have problems with the immigra-



A 2010 Census enumerator speaks to a resident standing in a doorway.

“People are not going to come out to be counted because they’re going to be fearful the information would be used for negative purposes

determines — from how congressional seats are distributed around the country to where hundreds of billions of federal dollars are spent. The DOJ made the request in a previously unreported letter, dated Dec. 12 and obtained by ProPublica, from DOJ official Arthur Gary to the top official at the Census Bureau, which is part of the Commerce Department.

The letter argues that the DOJ needs better citizenship data to better enforce the Voting Rights Act “and its important protections against racial discrimination in voting.”

A Census Bureau spokesperson confirmed the agency received the letter and said the “request will go through the well-established process that any potential question would go through.”

The DOJ declined to comment and the White House did not respond to a request for comment.

A Recipe for Sabotaging the Census

Observers said they feared adding a citizenship question would not only lower response rates, but also make the census more expensive and throw a wrench into the system with just two years to go before the

How much will it suppress response rates?”

The 2010 census included a handful of questions covering age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, household relationship and owner/renter status — but not citizenship.

“People are not going to come out to be counted because they’re going to be fearful the information would be used for negative purposes,” said Steve Jost, a former top bureau official during the 2010 census. “This line about enforcing voting rights is a new and scary twist.”

He noted that since the first census in 1790, the goal has been to count everyone in the country, not just citizens.

There have been rumblings since the beginning of the year that the Trump administration wanted to add a citizenship ques-

tion policies. They say they’re also more willing to support policies that help White people, like efforts to address discrimination against Whites.

It goes without saying that in a country where racial educational, employment and wealth disparities persist, greater attention to bias against whites (and less to bias against racial minorities) would only exacerbate social inequality.

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Belief

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ings.

White people who support a racial hierarchy, on the other hand, respond relatively favorably to other White people who claim to be victims of anti-white bias — and say they’d be more willing to help those Whites out.

They also might respond by trying to minimize opportunities for other racial groups.

For example, when White people think they’re being discriminated against, my collaborators and I found they’re less inclined to support affirmative ac-



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