

Adding a Citizenship Question to the Census: What's at Stake

Efforts to add a citizenship question to the decennial census did not begin or end with the 2020 Census; these efforts have persisted for decades and continue today. The push is part of a broader strategy to manipulate who counts in our democracy by undercounting immigrant communities and communities of color. Even though the Supreme Court [blocked](#) the Trump administration's attempt to include the question in the 2020 Census, it did so on procedural (albeit statutory) grounds, not because the question itself was found to be unconstitutional. This means the door is open for renewed attempts to collect citizenship and/or immigration status data in the census, through executive action, legislation, or policy riders attached to funding bills

Why Is a Citizenship Question Harmful?

- **Suppresses Participation:** Decades of research show that asking about citizenship status causes fear and confusion, especially in immigrant communities and mixed-status households. Many families worry that their information could be misused for immigration enforcement or other government action. This chilling effect discourages people from responding, putting a complete and accurate count at risk.
- **Creates a Widespread and Costly Undercount:** When people do not respond, entire communities will be undercounted, including millions of U.S. citizens living with noncitizen family members. The Census Bureau itself warned in 2018 that adding a citizenship question could lead to an undercount of at least six million people nationwide. Such a significant undercount would reduce data accuracy for businesses, researchers, tribal and local governments, and anyone who relies on high-quality census data for planning and decision-making.
- **Distorts Representation and Drains Resources:** Census data determine how congressional seats are allocated, how state and local districts are drawn, and, as of 2021, how more than \$2.8 trillion in annual federal funding is distributed for schools, roads, hospitals, public safety, and more. An incomplete population count shifts political power and vital resources away from communities that already face undercounting, deepening inequality for the next decade.
- **Harms Everyone, Not Just Immigrants:** When communities are undercounted, everyone loses. Local governments rely on accurate data to plan emergency services, schools, and infrastructure. Businesses use census data to decide where to open stores and create jobs. Philanthropy and nonprofits use census data to understand where to focus their efforts. When the data are flawed, the impact ripples far beyond undercounted households, affecting entire towns, cities, and states.

Why Is a Citizenship Question Unnecessary?

- **Reliable and Sufficient Existing Data:** The Census Bureau already collects detailed and reliable citizenship information through the American Community Survey (ACS), which provides up-to-date demographic data each year. The ACS gives policymakers and communities the information they need without putting the accuracy of the full decennial count at risk.
- **Duplicative and Costly:** Adding a citizenship question to the census would duplicate existing data, waste resources, and create unnecessary operational challenges.

The Bottom Line

Adding a citizenship question would weaken the mandate of the census to count every person once and in the right place. Undermining the count skews power, drains resources, and silences entire communities for a decade or more. Our democracy depends on a census that is free from fear and political manipulation and where everybody counts. When every person is counted, every community has the chance to be seen, heard, and fully represented.