

TOP MESSAGES FROM A FUNDER BRIEFING ON ADDING A CITIZENSHIP QUESTION TO THE 2020 CENSUS

On March 29, the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation and 20 other philanthropy serving organizations hosted an emergency briefing for funders about the addition of a citizenship question to the 2020 census. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross decided to add the question on March 26, and the question, as it is asked on the American Community Survey (the equivalent of the census long form), was sent to Congress on the day of the briefing. Congress does not need to take any action to accept the question, but it can take action to remove it.

Citizenship Question from American Community Survey to be asked on the 2020 Census

8 Is this person a citizen of the United States?

Yes, born in the United States → *SKIP to question 10a*

Yes, born in Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Northern Marianas

Yes, born abroad of U.S. citizen parent or parents

Yes, U.S. citizen by naturalization – *Print year of naturalization*

No, not a U.S. citizen

There were roughly 330 funders participating in the video conference. The briefing was moderated by Gary Bass, Executive Director of the Bauman Foundation. The three speakers were: Vanita Gupta, President & CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights; Arturo Vargas, Executive Director of NALEO Educational Fund; and John Yang, President & Executive Director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC. There were four questions about the citizenship question addressed: (1) why was it added to the census; (2) what are the implications; (3) what are census advocates doing; and (4) what can funders do.

Here is a summary of the key messages from the briefing:

- ***We need to fight adding the citizenship question to the 2020 census.*** There has been excellent news media coverage, numerous editorials opposing the addition of the question, high energy from nonprofits around the country, and Members of Congress and state and local officials are speaking out against the addition of the question. This is a clarion call to philanthropy to protect democracy and join in. As a *New York Times* editorial on this subject concluded: "...trifling with the census, which is required by the Constitution and is a fundamental building block of American democracy, represents a serious breach of trust."
- ***The rationale for adding the citizenship question is "completely without merit."*** It will not lead to greater enforcement of the Voting Rights Act, the core justification by the Commerce Department for adding the question. Instead, it will depress turnout, increase undercounts, and make the census more costly and less accurate. Moreover, the data already collected in the American Community Survey meets VRA enforcement needs, and has done so since the VRA was enacted in 1965.
- ***Boycotting the census or the citizenship question is not the answer.*** First, responding to the census is mandated by law, and no one should advocate against responding. While the Census Bureau is not an enforcement agency, there are penalties for not completing the census or knowingly providing false information. Second, it will solve nothing. The Census Bureau would likely impute the missing data anyway. Having inaccurate data will hurt our communities and potentially leave us in the dark about how best to use limited resources. Third, as mentioned above, we need to fight this. As has been made clear by some defending this question, not being counted is an even more direct way to take away from the voice of vulnerable communities.

- ***We will need to double down on getting “trusted voices” to encourage people to fill out the census.*** Getting people of color and other undercounted households to fill out the census was challenging before the addition of the citizenship question. Regardless of whether the question is removed or not, it will be that much harder going forward. We know there will be fear among immigrants and families living with immigrants that will need to be addressed.
- ***The census and civic engagement are interconnected and need to be acknowledged as such.*** Funders should consider the census as part of a four-year arc in which two major elections, naturalization campaigns, and the census will be deployed – and then redistricting will take place. The data from the census also is critical to understand the composition of the community and what those needs might be. Funders can engage on a nonpartisan basis in linking these activities.
- ***Funders are in this together.*** Regardless of whether you are an issue-based, place-based, or national funder, we all have a stake in the census and in getting the citizenship question removed. An inaccurate census has significant impact on our grantees, our mission, and the way we operate. If we don’t address the issues now, we’ll pay for it for the next decade.
- ***Funding is needed to fight the addition of the citizenship question.*** Working with the core census stakeholder groups, a plan and budget will be developed. Funders will need to amass resources for legal action, communications strategies including outreach to ethnic media, research, and advocacy.
- ***Funders need to coordinate and align our funding.*** There is a mechanism to do that through the existing census funder collaborative, which started in 2016. That collaborative has a plan of action, has identified groups and projects to fund, and has a pooled fund that local, state and national funders can put money into. For more information, contact Gary Bass (gbass@baumanfoundation.org or (202) 328-2040) at the Bauman Foundation.
- ***Beyond funding there are things funders can do.*** While many funders cannot lobby, there are many other ways funders can act. Here are four examples: (1) Ask local elected leaders on a bipartisan basis to call for the removal of the citizenship question; (2) Monitor the legal battles and, where appropriate, engage; (3) There will likely be opportunities where the government seeks public comment on the citizenship question and we should encourage as many comments as possible; and (4) Look for opportunities to align with strategies being developed by The Leadership Conference, NALEO, AAJC and their allies. In addition, funders and our board members are respected leaders in our communities, and can use our voice to express concerns on this issue.
- ***From crisis to opportunity.*** Now that the census is national news, we have an opportunity to bring new voices to the table – mayors, business leaders, and others – that will help us promote a fair and accurate census. Funders can play a key role in turning this crisis into an opportunity.
- ***It is a marathon, not a sprint.*** This is a long term fight, not a short one – ensure that the energy that is being felt now is stoked and continued. Let’s acknowledge and adjust our plans and funding accordingly. Our goal is clear: a fair and accurate census in 2020.