News



Immigrants wait outside the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles in this Aug. 15, 2012, file photo. California is suing the Trump administration over its decision to add a question about citizenship to the 2020 U.S. census. In announcing the lawsuit on March 27, 2018, California Attorney General Xavier Becerra says adding such a question is a reckless decision that would violate the U.S. Constitution and cause a population undercount. (AP/Damian Dovarganes)

Jack Jenkins

View Author Profile

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — March 29, 2018
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Citing both moral imperatives and concerns about accuracy, religious groups are speaking out against a new citizenship question slated to be included in the 2020 U.S. census.

The U.S. Department of Commerce, which oversees the census, announced Monday (March 26) it would accept a request made in December by the Department of Justice to include a question about citizenship status — something that hasn't been on the mandatory survey since 1950. In a statement, officials at Commerce argue the change is an attempt to enforce the Voting Rights Act.

"Citizenship questions have also been included on prior decennial censuses," the statement reads in part. "Between 1820 and 1950, almost every decennial census asked a question on citizenship in some form."

However, several religious organizations — many of them progressive-leaning or representing minority faiths — see the decision as potentially doing more harm than good to the census, which is used to determine the allocation of federal funds and the number of seats each state has in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Tony Suarez, executive vice president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference and member of President Trump's unofficial evangelical advisory board, appeared to criticize the census question indirectly on Wednesday, arguing it evokes fear in immigrants because Congress has yet to pass immigration reform legislation.

"The bottom line is we need to know who resides within our borders," Suarez said. "The census plays an important role in our way of life and government. Congress' embarrassing 30-year streak of futility on the issue of immigration reform has led us to the point where a question regarding citizenship strikes instant fear in immigrant communities and visions of mass deportations. Congress must fix our broken immigration system, which in turn will bring people out of the shadows, allow a proper census and more importantly allow families to live the American dream without fear."

Liberal religious organizations and denominations were more forceful in expressing their displeasure.

Barbara Weinstein, director of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, issued a statement railing against the decision, referring to the "Jewish responsibility to support the engagement of all people."

"We strongly condemn the Department of Commerce's decision to include a question about citizenship on the 2020 Census," Weinstein, whose denomination is the largest Jewish one in the U.S., said. "At a time when America's immigrant communities feel increasingly threatened, the effects of this decision are not hard to foresee: Census response rates from immigrant communities will be suppressed, undermining the Census's integrity overall."

The Rev. John Dorhauer, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ, said in an email the new citizenship question "is a not so subtle attempt to disenfranchise vulnerable communities and diminish their capacity to affect their political future." The Rev. Jennifer Butler, CEO of the progressive faith-based organization Faith in Public Life, derided the decision as a "discriminatory change." Catholic nun Sr. Simone Campbell, head of Catholic social justice lobby NETWORK, invoked the Christian belief that all people are created in God's image, saying in a statement that "implementing a question designed to suppress respondents is evidence of the Republican desire to control who matters in our country."

One of the most forceful critiques came from the Council on American-Islamic Relations, whose news release described the question as part of the Trump administration's "white supremacist agenda" designed to "drag our nation back to the false 'white paradise' of the 1950s."

Advertisement

The criticisms echoed a letter sent to Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross on Jan. 10 by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights — a coalition that includes several faith groups. It asked him to reject the Department of Justice's "untimely and unnecessary" request for a citizenship question on the census, saying doing so would "destroy any chance for an accurate count, discard years of careful research, and increase costs significantly."

Signatories included an array of faith-based groups, such as the General Board of Church and Society for the United Methodist Church, Sikh Coalition, Franciscan Action Network, PICO California, Friends Committee on National Legislation (Quakers), National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Bread for the World, Church World Service and Interfaith Worker Justice, among others.

Other faith groups, such as the National Association of Evangelicals, National Council of Churches, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops did not immediately issue statements or respond to requests for comment.

The faith-based criticisms add to the outcry of several political leaders. At least 12 states plan to sue the Trump administration over the change, arguing it violates the Constitution and fewer people will participate.

The White House redirected requests for comment to officials at the Department of Commerce, who did not immediately respond.