

LWVUS Volunteer Lobby Corps on Capitol Hill discussing proposed “citizenship question” on upcoming 2020 US Census

As we all know, the U.S. Constitution mandates the “enumeration” of the US population through a census every ten years. The results determine apportionment of congressional seats for the House of Representatives across the states, and are used to draw district lines for those seats within states, as well as appropriations for major categories of the federal budget. Therefore, encouraging full cooperation of households is critical for thorough and accurate data. However, the current administration has proposed a new question on the citizenship status of people counted in the census, which, in the current political climate, may cause some immigrant, non-citizen and “mixed” households to feel intimidated, leading to potentially significant under-counts in many areas.

Chris Carson wrote a memo to Congress on the issue (<https://www.lwv.org/league-sends-memo-us-house-census-citizenship-question>) and the LWVUS Volunteer Lobby Corps fanned out to discuss it with the U.S. House of Representatives in October and the Senate in November. The LWVUS is also supporting court challenges to the question which are currently being heard in federal courts.

Lobby Corps members heard the full range of opinions in Congress. From those who agree with the League that the proposed new question should be removed (at least before it can be tested “end to end”, along with any necessary mitigation strategies), the picture that emerged is a multi-pronged approach, with the court cases currently on the fore-front of everyone's mind. Call it Plan A.

Plan A: The courts remove the question. If not (e.g., if SCOTUS says "Not our job! Political branches need to sort it out!") then we must be ready for Plan B.

Plan B: Congress forces removal of the question or de-funds it. The last appropriations bill before the end of the year could become a vehicle to remove the question. They could try to remove discretion to add any question that has NOT been through "end to end testing." Even some Republicans are concerned their states might risk losing a Congressional seat or funding if there is an undercount.

However, our allies in Congress stress they are walking a very fine line. They want the census fully funded for thoroughness and accuracy. They could try to de-fund the citizenship question, but without a majority in the Senate, that's pretty close to impossible. One office stressed they were trying to "avoid paranoid messaging" that would discourage people from participating fully in the census.

Plan C: They have already started preparing for a robust "mitigation strategy" in case the question does stay in. That will require demanding extra funding for the census because of inclusion of the question - for all the necessary Public Relations, outreach and education about people's legal responsibilities (to cooperate with the census) and rights (for confidentiality of their data).