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Lawmakers split over whether to count illegal immigrants in Census

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WASHINGTON - The approach of next year's national population survey is rekindling a longstanding debate over whether to count undocumented immigrants.

Inland Southern California's congressional delegation is divided on the issue, which holds huge fiscal and political implications for California.

The question re-emerged early last month in the Senate, where Sens. Davis Vitter, R-La, and Robert Bennett, R-Utah, offered a measure requiring people responding to the 2010 census to state whether they are American citizens. Their aim: to ensure illegal immigrants are not included in the data that governs the apportionment of congressional districts and the distribution of federal funding.

The amendment was defeated, but the idea found some supporters in both chambers of Congress.

"The law is the law and illegal immigrants should not be counted in the U.S. census because they are not U.S. citizens or legal residents," said Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Corona.

Such sentiments have raised concerns among some pro-immigrant and Hispanic advocacy groups that are bracing for similar attempts in the House or Senate as the census draws closer.

"We saw this as a definite effort to suppress the Latino count," said Rosalind Gold, senior director of policy, research and advocacy for the National Association of Latino Elected Officials. "We really have to be vigilant because we're concerned that this issue is not going to go away."

Under the Constitution, the 435 seats in the House of Representatives are reapportioned each 10 years by "counting the whole number of persons in each state." Thus, excluding illegal immigrants from the census would be a violation, Gold said.

Beyond that, the data is used to refine the formulas used by the federal government for distributing billions of dollars annually for items such as education, transportation and health care assistance, she noted.

"Census data is what's used to determine how we're going to make critical decisions about planning public services: Where do we put roads? Where do we put schools? Where do we put hospitals?" Gold said. "All of that gets determined by census data."

Inland views vary

Seeking to counter the Vitter-Bennett measure and any similar legislation forthcoming in the House, Rep. Joe Baca introduced his own bill that would reinforce the language in the Constitution and eliminate the use of any census questions pertaining to citizenship or immigration status.

Anything short of a full count of people in California would deny the cash-strapped state much-needed federal funding, said Baca, D-Rialto. Already, California is facing a budget gap in excess of \$20 billion. Whether or not undocumented immigrants are counted, "the cost and the burden will still be on the states to provide public services," he said.

Rep. Jerry Lewis, R-Redlands, also favors the inclusion of illegal immigrants in the process, according to his spokesman, Jim Specht.

"Congressman Lewis believes if we don't count people in the census, we wouldn't know who they are, where they are and how to deal with them," Specht said. Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Vista, supports the inclusion of the undocumented for the purposes of apportioning representatives to states, yet he believes they should be left out of redistricting, the process that determines the boundaries of congressional districts, Issa spokesman Frederick Hill said.

That way, federal funding levels would reflect the total number of people in each state, but congressional representation within each state would be divided up based on the population of legal residents.

The Southern California-based Latino Elected Officials Association would oppose that idea, Gold said.

"Our nation has consistently counted people, even if they did not have the right to vote," she said, pointing to children and women who were not allowed to vote before suffrage.

"The idea behind a complete census count is to provide representation that is fair to everybody who is living here."

Political implications

Recent studies show population growth in California has slowed significantly, especially compared to other states.

Thus, without the inclusion of all residents in the count, the Golden State could lose a measure of political clout over the next decade, Gold said.

"If we don't have a full count in California, we could indeed lose a congressional seat," she said. "It could be more, but we think there is a serious concern about California losing at least one."

Meanwhile, states with fewer undocumented immigrants would stand to gain seats.

Still, Calvert said counting people who are in the country illegally outweighs the potential benefit to California if they are included.

"While certain state representation may be disproportionately impacted by not counting illegal immigrants, such as Texas, Florida, New York and California, we cannot undermine the rule of law by giving illegal immigrants an undeserved status through the census," Calvert said.

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