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Harness survey data, don't limit it

By KURT METZGER

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There is only one way for the federal government to plan for the future demands upon the Social Security system, the National School Lunch Program and the Low Income Energy Assistance Program. There's only one way for businesses to understand their customer bases and plan for growth. There's only one way for the Department of Education to allocate grants to support local schools.

That way is paved with reliable demographic information.

That's the value of the annual American Community Survey, a detailed questionnaire that is conducted annually by the Census Bureau. The **American Community Survey**, or ACS, has replaced what used to be the long version of the census form, and it collects data on everything from household income, to education levels, race and mortgage debt. It's what the Census Bureau calls "the nation's statistical portrait."

But recently, the Republican National Committee passed a resolution condemning the ACS, calling it "a dangerous invasion of privacy," and "overreaching and intimidating," while accusing the Census Bureau of behaving "exactly as a scam artist would, asking very personal questions." The party is demanding that the bureau either scrap the American Community Survey or make participation voluntary. Invoking the Fourth Amendment's protection

against unreasonable searches, the party is endorsing H.R. 3131, which would limit the scope of the census questionnaire. Introduced by U.S. Rep. Ted Poe, R-Texas, the bill has attracted 34 co-sponsors, including U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn.

I'm perplexed by the attack on the ACS, particularly in light of the fact that all data collected are aggregated so that no single person's information is ever shared publicly by the Census Bureau. There is no evidence that the information has been misused or that anyone's privacy has been violated. At the same time, the valuable information gleaned from the ACS makes it possible for businesses to identify demographic and market trends at a local level. And without the data, it will be much more difficult for cities like Detroit to demonstrate a growing market to retailers from outside the region.

How can we tell our story without the data to back it up?

Due to pressure from the political right, the bureau used a shortened questionnaire during the 2010 Census along with the catchy slogan, "10 Questions, 10 Minutes." The easier, streamlined form may be one reason for the surprisingly strong census participation this year. In December, we should start receiving state population counts and find out which states will gain or lose congressional seats. By April 1, 2011 we will receive population counts

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for every block in the country and the process of redistricting will begin at the federal, state and local levels.

But, because of the shortened form, the demographic information will be limited to age, gender, race/ethnicity, household structure and housing tenure. The rest of America's "statistical portrait" will have to be filled in by the ACS. Better decisions require better information — that's the mantra of Data Driven Detroit, the foundation-supported non-profit that I founded in 2009. When everyone has access to the same complete, reliable information, everyone wins. The legislation ignores the realities of governing an ever-changing and increasingly diverse America. The ACS is our family portrait, and our way of telling our government what we need — from public transportation to medical care. The only way we can hold our government accountable to our needs is by being counted, and sharing the most comprehensive data about who we are. Only then will we be able to make decisions that lift all of our boats together.

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