



Dan Webster, census taker?

By Bill Thompson

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Central Florida U.S. Rep. Daniel Webster in recent days has been taking heavy criticism for a push to end a key demographic survey that proponents say is an indispensable tool for tracking the nation's economic social and economic tides.

The Orlando Republican tacked an amendment onto the Commerce Department's annual budget bill ending the American Community Survey, or ACS — a 28-page questionnaire submitted annually by the U.S. Census Bureau to some 3 million randomly chosen American homes.

The survey in its present form has been in use since 2005. But the roots of some of its questions, and the nature of the information sought, stretches back to at least 1850, according to the Census Bureau.

Webster's measure would have eliminated funding for the ACS, saving, according to the congressman, \$2.4 billion over the next decade.

It passed 232-190 along party lines, with four Democrats supporting Webster and 10 of his fellow Republicans dissenting.

A vote on the overall budget bill also killed the nation's economic census, which every five years gathers information from millions of businesses.

Since then critics on the left and right have assailed the House's decision, suggesting that dropping the ACS would be a public disservice.

During last week's floor debate, Webster characterized the ACS as “intrusive” and “unconstitutional.”

“As a citizen who has normal expectations about what is private and what is not private, I share that criticism,” Webster said.

He highlighted some queries that ask respondents to describe their emotional state, detail their daily commute to work, or report if they need help dressing themselves.

Such questions, especially since a failure to answer could land the respondent a fine of up to \$5,000, “hardly fit the scope of what was intended or required by the Constitution,” Webster argued.

“Given the nation's current fiscal situation, it is entirely appropriate to eliminate the survey as a taxpayer-funded activity of the U.S. government,” he added.

Webster acknowledged that continuing the ACS would not “bankrupt” the country, but he added, “It is the very picture of what is wrong in (Washington) D.C.”

On Friday, after the legislation passed the House, Robert Groves, director of the Census Bureau, declared in an Internet post that the cuts would shutter access to information vital to understanding the national economy and undermine the agency's efforts to more efficiently gather the data comprising the county's “statistical cornerstones.”

Groves also pointed out that ending mandatory participation in the ACS would cost taxpayers at least \$64 million more to attain in the next national census the same “precision” of the survey's yearly estimates.

“This bill thus devastates the nation's statistical information about the status of the economy and the larger society,” Groves said.

“Modern societies need current, detailed social and economic statistics. The U.S. is losing them.”

In an editorial on Monday, The New York Times ripped Webster's amendment as “know-nothingness at a new level.”

The newspaper also noted that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce opposed a similar move last year.

Yet liberals weren't the only ones denouncing Webster's legislation. The Wall Street Journal editorialized on Saturday that the ACS “provides some of the most accurate, objective and granular data about the economy and the American people, in something approaching real time.”

“The House action is like blaming the bathroom scale for your recent weight gain,” the newspaper observed. “As for privacy, anyone not living in a Unabomber shack won't be much inconvenienced by making this civic contribution. . . . Republicans do themselves no favors by targeting a useful government purpose.”

Bloomberg's Businessweek magazine reported in its online edition last week that economists from three leading conservative think tanks — the Cato Institute, the

American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation — all supported the efforts of the Commerce Department to measure economic and demographic trends.

“Those agencies are essential,” Phillip Swagel, an economist and American Enterprise scholar, told Businessweek. “The data they provide really tell us what's going on in the economy. This shouldn't be a political issue.”

There are also policy issues attached to the data uncovered by the ACS. For example, the Brookings Institute, a Washington think tank, issued a report in 2010 noting that the ACS-gathered information tracked by federal agencies helped decide how the government divvied up more than \$400 billion for programs like Medicaid, roads, housing and education.

In fiscal year 2008, the period considered by Brookings' analysts, Marion County ranked among the 200 biggest recipients among U.S. counties, deriving \$193 million in federal aid from the programs reliant on ACS reporting.

Webster's current district reaped more than \$800 million that year, once the portions of Lake and Orange counties are added to Marion's total.

Andrew Reamer, author of the Brookings study, told The Atlantic Monthly's website on Friday that ending the ACS “would cause massive disruptions in the federal government, because you've got all these programs that are statutorily required to distribute these funds based on certain criteria, and those criteria assume that data is there.”

The legislation is expected to die in the Democratic-led Senate.

On Monday, despite the criticism, Webster stood by his opposition to the ACS. “The amendment speaks for itself and is another example of government overreach into the privacy of hard-working taxpayers,” he said in an emailed statement.

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