



Conservatives for Ignorance

The House GOP's principled—and destructive—war on the long-form census.

By [Matthew Yglesias](#) | Posted Friday, May 25, 2012, at 1:30 PM ET

Does the government have the right to ask you when you leave for work in the morning? How long it takes you to get home? Whether you have a flush toilet? The answers to these questions are at the heart of an unexpected controversy about a government program most non-wonks have no idea even exists. To supplement the main decennial census, the Census Bureau conducts the annual American Community Survey. The objections to the ACS are a fascinating window on the radicalized post-2008 version Republican Party, a party that's gone beyond skepticism about the merits of particular government programs to a generalized belief that even the most useful public sector undertakings are an infringement of basic rights.

The census itself is, of course, mandated by the Constitution and used to do things like draw congressional districts. Since the Constitution calls for an "actual enumeration" (and because using statistical sampling instead would add voters to Democratic jurisdictions, and thus is a political nonstarter), the Census Bureau attempts to count every single American one by one.

That's a painstaking and expensive process that limits the amount of information that can feasibly be collected. So since 1850, the bureau has, in one way or another, conducted a separate, related, longer survey that includes more questions and gives the government more detailed information. The ACS, which as of 2005 [replaced the old long-form census](#), is a questionnaire sent to a random sample of the American population. Combined with some follow-up interviews, the ACS allows the government to paint a statistical portrait of American life. Thanks to the ACS, curious journalists can offer facts on a wide variety of subjects. Many Americans, for example, are concerned about the English-language acquisition of immigrant families and might be interested to learn that while [only 55 percent of U.S. residents who speak Spanish at home say they know English](#), fully 77 percent of the under-18 population in such households speak English. Younger generations, in other words, are learning English, just as the children of immigrants always have.

Unfortunately for the data junkies among us, the House of Representatives voted earlier this month in favor of a proposal from Florida Republican Daniel Webster to eliminate the survey, which he says wastes money and ["tramples on personal privacy"](#) by threatening nonrespondents with a fine.

The threat of a fine, as it happens, is nearly essential to doing the ACS. You could conduct the survey without the threat of a fine, but it would be more expensive since you'd need to put more legwork into making sure you get an accurate sample. Either you trample on human freedom by threatening nonrespondents with a fine, or you stamp on the face of liberty by reaching into their pockets for more tax dollars to fund the survey.

What makes this something other than a standard “Republicans Dislike Government Program” dog-bites-man story is the strong pushback Webster and his allies have gotten from unexpected sources. The ACS, you see, is an invaluable source of data for policy analysts of all ideological stripes, for state and local governments, and for private businesses. The very conservative *Wall Street Journal* editorial page noted the ACS’s importance for both business and public policy and [accused the GOP](#) of trying to “kill data that helps economic growth” in a move they said “does something that feeds the otherwise false narrative of political extremism.” Target [made a video in partnership with the Census Bureau lauding the ACS](#), and Andrew Biggs of the conservative American Enterprise Institute [explained in congressional testimony](#) that the fine-grained data in the ACS let him “better control for the different skills of public and private sector employees” in some of his reports arguing that government workers should be paid less.

These conservative defenders of the ACS are quite right. Accurate information, posted on the Internet in conveniently accessible form, is the ultimate “public good”: hugely valuable to society, but underproduced by the private sector. Private firms produce information, of course, but are incentivized to do so on a proprietary basis—restricting access in pursuit of maximum profits. The public interest is well-served when information circulates as widely as possible, which makes it an ideal service to be performed by the state. Rapid advances in computers and related technology have made informational public goods much more valuable than ever before, so the production of credible data is one of the best investments the government can make.

But ACS fans on the right don’t have much to say in reply to the Cato Institute’s Andrew Coulson, who argues that [merely being beneficial is no justification for a government program](#). Denouncing defenders of useful programs as “ ‘useful’ idiots” he posits that the ACS “probably shouldn’t exist at all” with or without the fines.

That cramped ideology would, if taken broadly, have devastating social and economic consequences for the United States of America. But where Coulson is right and the *Journal* wrong is that this form of extreme economic libertarianism is right in line with the rest of currently prevailing conservative orthodoxy. Speaking to the *New York Times*, Rep. Webster [denounced](#) the ACS as a program “that intrudes on people’s lives, just like the Environmental Protection Agency or bank regulators.” I might have said that just like the EPA or bank regulators, the ACS is the kind of program that believers in the benefits of free market capitalism should like. Hayek [wanted to regulate pollution](#) and Adam Smith [supported bank regulation](#), but it is true that these things, like being surveyed about your commuting habits, intrude on people’s lives. And the Republican Party has turned sharply against all three.

The only real difference is that when it comes to regulating pollution and banks, there are major business interests prepared to back the stand against useful programs. House Republicans seem, however, to be deadly serious about their ideological commitments and not just playing make-believe. If America’s lucky, their counterparts in the Senate will prove a bit more cynical and will reject the effort to kill the ACS. If not, we’ll all in a small way be made a little bit poorer.