Save the American Community Survey!

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When the U.S. Constitution became law in 1789, it made sense for the government to take a survey of its citizens only once a decade. The agrarian economy meant the population largely stayed put and grew at a much slower pace than it does today.

The purpose of the census, as outlined in the Constitution, is ostensibly to allot House of Representatives members. But it also provides an essential snapshot of the population. In modern society, however, the demographics of the country change far too rapidly to capture adequately in a decennial survey. That's why the Census Bureau also conducts an annual poll of a large sample of the population, known as the American Community Survey, to fill in the gaps in the data. Now, the House of Representatives is threatening to cut this essential product on the basis that it violates one's privacy.

Eliminating the ACS would be devastating to the economy. Just as political operators use polling data to guide the deployment of resources, governments and businesses use the data to decide how to invest on a much larger scale. A business involving transportation may need to measure a sample of commuters by distances and types of vehicles. A business involving construction may need to determine the sample of homeowners and renters by years of occupancy, and how they shifted over the last few years. Businesses of all sizes rely on its data to make investment decisions, meaning the United States recovers every penny invested in the survey in many times over in economic growth.

For example, the following map of rates of those without insurance by state would be impossible without ACS data:

We typically associate polling with politics, particularly this time of year, but electoral polls are the loss leaders and window dressing of a massive industry that helps businesses make efficient decisions. The same challenges face business polling as political polling: to get good data, you have to have faith that your sample is representative of the population. When polls report a margin of error, they are reporting the random error that occurs in when polling a sample from a representative population of voters. The Census

Bureau conducts the ACS each year to provide the government and business with an accurate description of the American population, so that it's possible to determine the nature of whatever population they are studying as closely as possible. As Robert Graves, the head of the Census, notes, "The ACS is our country's only source of small area estimates on social and demographic characteristics."

In the wake of the House vote, an ideologically diverse group of institutions have risen to the annual survey's defense. Support comes from researchers within the conservative think tanks like the America Enterprise Institute and libertarian think tanks like the Cato Institute. A report by the Brookings Institute, meanwhile, notes that the "The nation receives a very substantial return on its investment in ACS-related datasets." Even the Wall Street Journal's editorial board defended the ACS.

One of the primary arguments against the ACS is that the government should not collect such detailed data on citizens. This represents a stunning lack of understanding of how polls work. When the government and business use this data, they study the aggregated characteristics--e.g., how many commuters in given area drive for over 30 minutes, not whether a particular person commutes that long. Access to the raw data is heavily guarded.

It is politically opportunistic for lawmakers on the right to lash out against any sort of government program that mandates responses about even non-controversial aspects of a citizen's life. They fail to recognize that there is no better way for government to assist the private sector than to give it basic information about the country we want them to invest in.