

The US Census Citizenship Question: Explained



The government plans to add a question to the 2020 national census asking if individuals are US citizens – and the supreme court appears to be leaning in favor of approval. But what does this question really mean?

Recently, Donald Trump’s administration proposed adding a question to the 2020 US census which would ask: “Is this person a citizen of the United States?” Respondents would have five options, indicating that they were born in the US, born in a US territory, born abroad to US citizen parents, naturalized as a citizen, or not a citizen.

The US commerce department, which oversees the census, says it decided to add the question at the request of the justice department, which argued it was necessary to help enforce the Voting Rights Act. The law offers protections for minority voters, so the department argues that in order to administer it effectively, it needs to know how many eligible voters live where.

However, the real motive behind this question remains unclear. Documents have emerged showing that the commerce secretary, Wilbur Ross, discussed the citizenship question before getting any request from the DoJ, pushed staffers to get the question added, and discussed getting justice to make the request. Donald Trump weighed in with an argument that contradicted his administration’s stated rationale: “The American people deserve to know who is in this Country,” he said on Twitter. “Yesterday, the Supreme Court took up the Census Citizenship question, a really big deal. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!”

Three lower courts, in New York, California and Maryland, have ruled against the plan. Two of the judges said that asking about citizenship would be unconstitutional, violating the provision that says the census must fully enumerate people living in the United States. Most supreme court justices appeared to be leaning toward approving the question during arguments in April. The court seemed to be divided along ideological lines, with the five conservative justices showing skepticism about the challenge to the question, while the four liberal justices grilled the Trump administration lawyers.

To learn more about the citizenship questions and the 2020 census, [click here](#) to read an article in The Atlantic by Garrett Epps, Professor of constitutional law at the University of Baltimore.