

Commerce should oversee Census Bureau

by the San Diego Union-Tribune

Politicization of the national census has been alleged since our forefathers wrote it into the Constitution as the basis for apportioning states' representatives in Congress.

In the first enumeration in 1790, Northern states demanded that each slave count as three-fifths of a person, lest the South's population ensure its domination of the House of Representatives. The 14th Amendment to the Constitution overrode that abomination in 1868 following the abolition of slavery.

Today the flap concerns the 2010 census, with echoes of 1790.

Democratic African-American and Hispanic leaders object to Sen. Judd Gregg, R-New Hampshire, who is President Barack Obama's nominee to head the Commerce Department, which oversees the Census Bureau. The critics claim that a Republican who voted in 1995 to abolish the Commerce Department will severely undercount Democrat-leaning minority citizens.

In response, Obama directed that the bureau bypass the Commerce Department and report directly to White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel. But Emanuel was the tactician for the Democrats' 2006 victories, making his impartiality suspect. Federal law, furthermore, seems to embed the Census Bureau in the Commerce Department.

Partisan politics, of course, shouldn't matter. By law, conducting the decennial census as accurately as possible is a job for professionals. From data collected, they estimate thousands of characteristics of the U.S. population, down to every census tract. But estimates can be manipulated for partisan gain, depending on the method used, making the expertise and independence of the pros paramount.

That the president also appoints the director of the census suggests a logical compromise. Obama should appoint the census director, and the Census Bureau should stay in Gregg's Commerce Department, giving both parties representation on the census team.

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