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Lawmakers Battle on Census Question

By NOMAAN MERCHANT

WASHINGTON -- A measure gaining traction in Congress would require the 2010 Census to include a question about citizenship, a change that would cost millions of dollars and possibly derail a full count.

Two Republican senators, David Vitter of Louisiana and Bob Bennett of Utah, have offered an amendment to a spending bill that funds the Department of Commerce, which oversees the Census Bureau. The amendment would bar any funds from being used for the Census if it doesn't ask about a person's citizenship status. A similar measure has been introduced in the House.

If successful, the change would force the Census Bureau to reprint more than 425 million questionnaires, as it had already started printing the forms in order to have them ready for distribution in early 2010. It would require software revisions, new training materials and revised promotional campaigns. And it could fuel a boycott of the Census supported by some Latino leaders as a way to protest U.S. immigration policy.

Census statistics are used to determine the distribution of congressional seats and federal funds.

Mr. Vitter said he wants to prevent other states' numbers from being inflated by undocumented immigrants. "Certainly, Louisiana is directly impacted," Mr. Vitter said in an interview. "We lost a seat in 2000."

In the House, Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R., Utah) has co-sponsored similar legislation. Utah has argued it missed an additional House seat in 2000 because the Census Bureau doesn't count Mormon missionaries abroad, and Utah claimed 11,000 at the time.

A motion to force a Senate vote on the spending bill -- which in addition to Commerce funds the Justice Department and science programs for the year that began Oct. 1 -- failed Tuesday because of disagreements over amendments. It is expected to come up again for a vote this week.

An aide for Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D., Md.), the spending bill's floor manager, said it is unclear how much support there is for the citizenship amendment.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D., Nev.) criticized the Vitter amendment and a floor speech Mr. Vitter made on Wednesday. "His delusional rant...is a perfect example of why today's Republican Party has transformed itself into a fringe party that only seeks to pander to its increasingly radical base," Mr. Reid's spokesman, Jim Manley, said in a statement.

The Census Bureau has touted next year's survey as nonintrusive and, at just 10 questions, among the shortest in history. It collects more details -- including statistics on citizenship -- in a smaller, annual survey.

The bureau submitted its final questions to Congress in April 2008. Adding another question without proper vetting could damage the final data, the Commerce Department said in a statement. It would also make it impossible to deliver population numbers to determine House seats by next December's deadline, it said.

Some Latino leaders who have already called for a census boycott said they supported the Vitter amendment. Rev. Miguel Rivera, head of the National Coalition of Latino Clergy and Christian Leaders, said the measure could pressure Democrats to overhaul immigration policy sooner. "In some ways, Sen. Vitter's amendment is indirectly helping us achieve and accomplish our purpose," because it could pressure Democrats to overhaul immigration policy, Mr. Rivera said.

Another Latino leader, Arturo Vargas, who heads the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, disagreed with the boycott but said the Vitter amendment, even if it isn't enacted, would achieve the same result. "The more doubt you introduce into the debate, the more likely you are to scare people away from the census," he said.

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