

# Census Question Controversy

*Compelling Question: How can one question on the U.S. Census impact so many people?*

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	3-5	45–60 Minutes	Reading: R1, R6 Writing: W1, W5 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL4
8	HS		



## Web Related Connections

### Lessons

[What Should be Done about DACA?](#)

[The First Amendment and Our Freedoms](#)

### Other Resources

[Myths and Facts about Immigrants and Immigration \(en Español\)](#)

[Immigration and Refugee Rights](#)

[The Census Bureau Must Preserve the Backbone of Our Democracy](#)

## Key Words

(See ADL's [Education Glossary Terms](#).)

alienate  
apportion  
citizenship  
compound  
congressional district  
controversy  
decennial  
deter  
Electoral College  
immigrants  
legitimate  
non-respondents  
population  
representation  
sanctuary city  
sued  
undercount  
undocumented  
vigorous  
violations  
Voting Rights Act  
wary

## LESSON OVERVIEW

*Updated June 28, 2019*

In March 2018, the U.S. Census Bureau released the questions for the upcoming 2020 Census. The data collected by the Census every ten years determines the number of seats each state has in the U.S. House of Representatives based on its share of the population. It is also used to distribute billions of dollars in federal funds to local communities. One of the new (and controversial) 2020 Census questions is about citizenship. All U.S. households will be asked: "Is this person a citizen of the United States?"

This question was requested by the Justice Department, who says they need better data on the voting age population to help enforce the Voting Rights Act. Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, who oversees the Census, granted the Justice Department's request. This has caused a great deal of controversy. Critics of the citizenship question argue that there are other ways to get the information and they believe this change will discourage non-citizens and even legal immigrants from participating. They say that would result in undercounting, which could shift the balance of power in the House of Representatives and lead to inadequate representation in Congress and reduced funding for those who need it most. Across the country, state attorneys general, civil rights groups and others challenged the citizenship question in court.

In June 2019, the Supreme Court blocked the citizenship question from being added to the 2020 census, saying that the justification the Trump administration offered for adding the question seemed "contrived" and not genuine. The decision sent the issue back to a lower court, leaving open the possibility that the Trump administration could try to provide a more acceptable justification. However, even if they are able to come up with something acceptable to the courts, it appears unlikely they will be able to move quickly enough to meet imminent census printing deadlines.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about the U.S. Census, to understand and reflect upon the controversy over the citizenship question and to express their own point of view on the topic by writing a persuasive letter.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand what the U.S. Census is and its purpose.
- Students will develop questions for a potential School Census in order to gain insight into the kinds of questions that will get the most response and those questions that may suppress participation.

- Students will reflect on the current controversy about the citizenship question on the Census and write a persuasive letter to express their opinion.

## MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- The 2020 Census is in big trouble. Here's why video (2018, 5 mins., Vox, [www.facebook.com/Vox/videos/865587586962178/](http://www.facebook.com/Vox/videos/865587586962178/))
- "Ensure Everyone is Counted" (U.S. News & World Report, January 30, 2018, [www.usnews.com/opinion/oped/articles/2018-01-30/dont-ask-about-citizenship-on-the-2020-census](http://www.usnews.com/opinion/oped/articles/2018-01-30/dont-ask-about-citizenship-on-the-2020-census), one copy for half the students)
- "There is nothing wrong with a census question about citizenship" (*The Times*, March 30, 2018, [www.timesonline.com/opinion/20180330/marc-a-thiessen-there-is-nothing-wrong-with-census-question-about-citizenship](http://www.timesonline.com/opinion/20180330/marc-a-thiessen-there-is-nothing-wrong-with-census-question-about-citizenship), one copy for half the students)
- [2020 Census Question Controversy](#) (for teacher)
- [Persuasive Letter Organizer](#) (one copy for each student)

## PROCEDURES



### What is the Census?

1. Ask students: *What is a census?* Explain to students that a census is an official count of a population of people.
2. Provide some or all of the following background information:
  - The founders of our country wrote in the U.S. Constitution (Article I, Section 2) a plan to empower the people over their new government. The plan was to count every person living in the newly created United States and to use that count to determine representation in Congress. Since 1790, there has been a Census conducted every ten years. The U.S. Census is supposed to count everyone who lives in the United States, whether or not they are citizens. It is based on actual counts of people living in the U.S. including citizens, non-citizen legal residents, non-citizen long-term visitors and undocumented immigrants.
  - The data collected by the decennial census determines the number of representatives each state sends to the U.S. House of Representatives, based on its share of the population. It is also used to establish the number of votes each state gets in the Electoral College and to distribute federal funds to local communities for social programs like Medicaid, Head Start and the National School Lunch Program.
  - Over the years, there have been numerous controversies over the Census, typically about what and how information is collected. A few examples of Census controversies include: whether enslaved people would be counted; how, during World War II, information was given to the U.S. Secret Service about the whereabouts of Japanese-Americans; how women were not allowed to be designated "heads of household," and disagreements about undercounting.

### Create a School Census

1. Ask students: *If we created a census for our school, what kinds of information would we want to collect?*
2. Engage students in a brief discussion about this and then divide them into small groups of 4–5 students each. Explain that in their groups, they should imagine that they create a census for the school in order to learn more about the student population as a whole—who they are (including what identity groups represent the school) and what their student population needs. Tell students that, similar to the U.S. Census, this census will determine how much money gets distributed to our school (based on the number of students who complete the census) and it will also determine what courses and clubs are offered based on student interest. You might share some of the kinds of identity questions that are asked in the U.S. Census such as: What is this person's race? What is this person's age? What is this person's sex?

3. Give small groups 10 minutes to brainstorm potential questions, with the goal of a final list of 8–10 questions that they want to include in the census. Have students assign a reporter for each group. When they have their final lists, ask each group’s reporter to read aloud their questions as you record them on the board/smart board. If a question is repeated, put a check mark next to the question but don’t record it more than once.
4. When all the questions are compiled, have students look at the list and ask: *Are there any questions on here that you think might make people uncomfortable or scared to complete the census? What are they?*  
As students identify questions that may cause fear or discomfort, ask why. If they don’t identify any questions that may be challenging, ask: *Are there any questions you could ask that may cause students to not want to complete the census?* You may suggest questions that many students may not want to share (i.e., not include in the census) such as their family structure, how much money their family earns, religion, immigration status, sexual orientation.
5. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
  - Why do you think certain questions may cause students fear, embarrassment or discomfort?
  - What might happen if some or many students do not complete the census?
  - What would be the impact on our school if not all of the students are counted?
  - What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing a census in your school?
  - Based on what you know, how does this relate to the U.S. Census and possible undercounting?

### Information Sharing

1. Ask students: *Have you heard anything about the recent controversy about the U.S. Census that is going to be conducted in 2020? What is the controversy about?*
2. Share some or all of the information on the [2020 Census Question Controversy](#) and/or view this 5-minute video, [The 2020 Census is in big trouble. Here's why.](#)
3. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
  - What did you learn that you didn’t know before?
  - What did you already know about the Census and the latest controversy?
  - What are your thoughts so far about the information you learned?
  - In your own words, how would you describe the different points of view on adding a citizenship question to the Census?

### Reading Activity

1. Explain to students that as a class, they will read two opinion essays, one that supports the citizenship question and one that disagrees with the question; half the students will read each of the articles. Distribute Article 1 to half the class and Article 2 to the other half of class.
  - Article 1: Ensure Everyone is Counted
  - Article 2: There is nothing wrong with a census question about citizenship
 Give students 10–15 minutes to read silently.
2. Have students talk with a partner who read a different article than the one they read. Instruct them to talk with their partner and share the point of view of their article’s author and one argument that the author uses to reflect their opinion. Students can also share whether they agree or disagree with the article’s point of view.
3. Reconvene the class and engage students in a class discussion by asking the following questions:
  - What more did you learn by reading the article?
  - What arguments were used by each of the opinion writers?

- Did you find their arguments convincing? Why or why not?
- What strategies did the writer use to express their point of view in the essay you read?
- Did you change your position after reading the article? Explain.



### Writing Activity

As a culmination to the lesson, have students write a persuasive letter to their representative in Congress, the Commerce Department or a letter to the editor of their school or community paper. If they don't know who their representative is, they can use [Find Your Representative](#). They should gather all of the information they learned so far and do their own additional research if time permits. They should then write a letter with their thoughts about the recent addition of the citizenship question on the U.S. Census. Have students use the [Persuasive Letter Organizer](#) to help them outline their letters. This can be done in class or as a homework assignment, having students engage in the process of revising, editing and rewriting.

### Closing

Have students read the first few sentences of their letter or read aloud how they responded in the first box of their Persuasive Letter Organizer: "State your opinion/position about the addition of a citizenship question on the 2020 U.S. Census."

### ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- ["Addition of citizenship question to census could lower participation"](#) (Newsela, March 30, 2018; adapted for 5 reading levels)
- ["At Least Twelve States to Sue Trump Administration Over Census Citizenship Question"](#) (*The New York Times*, March 27, 2018)
- ["The 2020 Census Questions Every U.S Household Will Be Asked, Annotated"](#) (NPR, March 29, 2018)
- ["The citizenship question on the 2020 census, explained"](#) (Vox, March 28, 2018)
- ["The Debate Over a New Citizenship Question Isn't the First Census Fight. Here's Why the Count Is Controversial"](#) (*Time*, March 27, 2017)
- ["Trump Justice Department Pushes for Citizenship Question on Census, Alarming Experts"](#) (Pro Publica, December 29, 2017)
- [What is the Census?](#) (United States Census Bureau)
- ["What to know about the citizenship question the Census Bureau is planning to ask in 2020"](#) (Pew Research Center, March 30, 2018)
- ["Why adding a citizenship question to the census launched a political firestorm"](#) (*The Washington Post*, March 27, 2018)
- ["Supreme Court stops Trump's census citizenship question—for now"](#) (Vox, June 27, 2019)
- ["'Contrived' and 'a distraction': Supreme Court issues sever rebuke to Wilbur Ross and Trump administration"](#) (*The Washington Post*, June 27, 2019)

## Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
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Writing
W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
W5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
Speaking & Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

## 2020 Census Question Controversy

- In March 2018, the U.S. Census Bureau released the questions for the upcoming 2020 count, which includes a question about citizenship. All U.S. households will be asked: “Is this person a citizen of the United States?” (The question is asking whether the person has official status as a citizen of the United States.) This question was requested by the Justice Department, who says they need better data on the voting age population to help enforce the Voting Rights Act. Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, who oversees the Census, granted the Justice Department’s request.
- Census forms sent to the general public haven't included a citizenship question since 1950.
- Critics of the citizenship question argue that there are other ways to get the information and they believe this change will discourage non-citizens and even legal immigrants from participating. They say that would result in undercounting, which could shift the balance of power in the House of Representatives and lead to inadequate representation in Congress and reduced funding for those who need it most. They fear that when undocumented immigrants or people in immigrant families receive the Census in the mail, the citizenship question will deter them from completing and returning it and that will result in reduced response rates and inaccurate population data, especially in certain communities. Further, immigrant rights groups are very concerned because those communities are already fearful and losing trust in government officials, due to the current administration’s crackdown on immigration.
- Those in favor of adding the citizenship question say it is a common-sense question and they need the data to enforce the Voting Rights Act. Secretary Ross said he considered the concerns about undercounting, but he didn’t see enough evidence that the question would decrease response rates. He said, “For the approximately 90% of the population who are citizens, this question is no additional imposition.”
- Across the country, state attorneys general, civil rights groups and others challenged the citizenship question in court, include the States of California and New York. They argue that the change will cause fewer Americans to be counted and violate the Constitution.
- On March 6, 2019, California’s State Attorney General Xavier Becerra and his coalition secured a victory in their lawsuit, when the district court ruled that the citizenship question was unconstitutional and unlawful. That ruling blocked the Trump Administration from including the question on the grounds that it violated the Constitution and the Administrative Procedure Act and would likely lead to a greater undercount of the actual population.
- New evidence was obtained that inferred Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross’ motivation for adding the citizenship question was for the purpose of excluding non-citizens from the population count for congressional appointment.
- In June 2019, the Supreme Court blocked the citizenship question from being added to the 2020 census, saying that the justification the Trump administration offered for adding the question seemed “contrived” and not genuine. The decision sent the issue back to a lower court, leaving open the possibility that the Trump administration could try to provide a more acceptable justification. However, even if they are able to come up with something acceptable to the courts, it appears unlikely they will be able to move quickly enough to meet imminent census printing deadlines.

## Persuasive Letter Organizer

**Directions:** Use this organizer to outline your persuasive letter before writing.

**State your opinion/position about the addition of a citizenship question on the 2020 U.S. Census.**

**Provide background information about the issue.**

**List at least three (3) main reasons that would convince someone of your position (use examples, statistics, quotes, etc.).**

**Indicate what those who have a different point of view might say.**

**Indicate what you might say in response.**