

Letter to Congressman Sawyer

Congressman Thomas Sawyer
1414 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Sawyer:

Thank you for sending me the {Congressional Record} account of debate on H. Res. 508, containing the remarks of several Members regarding the use of statistical sampling methods in the 2000 Census. Despite obvious differences in perspective, the discussion is thoughtful and well-informed, the sole major exception being the incorrect statement by Mr. Miller of California that the Census Bureau plans to intentionally not count 10 percent of the population. The overall level of the discussion does credit to the House of Representatives.

I do wish to respond on behalf of the American Statistical Association to the remarks of Mr. Miller of Florida concerning the "hand-picked" nature of the scientific panels that have recommended consideration of statistical sampling methods. I refer specifically to the Blue Ribbon Panel of the American Statistical Association. The members of this panel are recognized by their peers as among the nation's leading experts on sampling large human populations. They are certainly not identified with any political interest.

The ASA Blue Ribbon Panel included Janet Norwood, who served three administrations as Commissioner of Labor Statistics from 1979 to 1991. On her retirement, the {New York Times} (December 31, 1991) spoke of her "near-legendary reputation for nonpartisanship." Dr. Norwood is a past president of ASA, as is Dr. Neter of the University of Georgia, another panel member. Like these, the other members of the panel have been repeatedly elected by their peers to posts of professional responsibility. For example, Dr. Rubin of Harvard University is currently chair of ASA's Section on Survey Research Methods, the statistical specialty directly relevant to the census proposals. I assure you that this panel was selected solely on the basis of their widely recognized scientific expertise. Their judgment that "sampling has the potential to increase the quality and accuracy of the count and to reduce costs" is authoritative.

Mr. Miller, in hearings before his committee, has indeed produced reputable academics who disagree with the findings of the ASA Blue Ribbon Panel and the several National Research Council panels which reported similar conclusions. Those whose names I have seen lack the expertise and experience in sampling that characterize the panel members. Statistics, like medicine, has specialties: one does not seek out a proctologist for heart bypass surgery.

I do wish to make it clear that the American Statistical Association takes no position on the political or constitutional issues surrounding the census. We also express no opinion on details of the specific proposals put forth by the Census Bureau for employing statistical sampling. As the nation's primary professional association of statisticians and users of statistics, we wish to make only two points in this continuing debate:

Estimation based on statistical sampling is a valid and widely-used scientific method. The general attacks on sampling that the census debate has called forth from some quarters are uninformed and unjustified.

The non-partisan professional status of government statistical offices is a national asset that should be carefully guarded. We depend on the statistical professionals in these offices for information widely used in both government and private sector decisions. Attacks on these offices as "politicized" damage public confidence in vital data.

Thank you for the opportunity to make these comments.

Sincerely yours,

David S. Moore
President, American Statistical Association