



Hispanic Complete Count Committee of the Capital Region

Be Counted...it's your voice! / Hágase Contar...Es su Voz!

By Dr. José E. Cruz, Committee Member

Census Politics: Fear and Representation

On January 29th, the National Latino Congreso convened at the Camino Real Hotel in El Paso to discuss, among other topics, what Latinos should do about the upcoming 2010 Census. The debate that took place included the now familiar objection to Latino participation in the count, namely that the U.S. government cannot be trusted and therefore, Latinos, particularly undocumented immigrants, should not heed the census call. For Latino immigrants, opponents of participation claim, the risk of participation is deportation or worse.

This argument, whose basis is simply fear, is not shared by all opponents of participation. Some claim that a boycott is the best way to force the federal government to pay attention to the needs of Latinos. In their view, by refusing to be counted, Latinos will bring urgent immigration issues to the fore. Others propose that it is inconsistent to criticize the federal government for immigration abuses while at the same time cooperating with that same government to produce a complete census count. The logic of this argument is that one tainted federal policy invalidates all federal policies. Both positions assume that something—that is, attention, representation, and clout—can come out of nothing.

It is hard to tell just how influential these views are. Does anyone really believe that the best way to get attention by the federal government is to stay invisible and silent? It is one thing for registered voters to boycott an election as a way of expressing their political frustration. Electoral abstention can force politicians to pay attention because they know beforehand how many voters are supposed to participate. With population numbers it is different because if they are not known no one can tell the extent to which a group may be missing. In that case, on what basis can anyone assess the significance of non-participation? The monistic view of the federal government implicit in the argument that one bad policy invalidates all others betrays a profound level

of ignorance about the nature of our political system and the workings of our institutions of governance. Who in his or her right mind would reject a vaccine against the swine flu because it was provided by the same government that neglected the victims of Hurricane Katrina? Would it make sense to attack the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services because it is part of the same government that gave us FEMA?

This leaves us with the objection that trumps all others: Fear; nothing works like fear. Does it matter that the census count has never been used to round up undocumented immigrants, to put them in jail, or send them back to their home countries? Does it matter to know that the Census Bureau takes concerns with privacy, confidentiality, and data security very seriously? How many times do we need to say that breaches along those lines have never occurred? Hopefully, the more we emphasize that being counted is not only important but also safe, the more likely it is that we will break down the wall of fear that some insist in shoring up. Fear can only give us political underrepresentation. An undercount will aggravate our lack of visibility. Silent majorities are not effective and a silent minority is irrelevant. On the other hand, a complete census count will help us increase our political influence and clout. And there's nothing to fear about that.



Contact us with any questions. / Contactenos con cualquier pregunta:

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