

Ensuring accurate Census is feds' job, DeSantis says, so state is staying out of it

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As the entire nation anticipates a crucial U.S. Supreme Court decision on whether the 2020 Census will include a citizenship question, Gov. Ron DeSantis said definitively that the state will not help to make sure Floridians are accurately counted.

"The federal government does that. We don't have a role in it," he said as he got into an elevator shortly after a Thursday event in Sarasota. "They administer it, and they should administer it how they see fit."

DeSantis' comment outright rejects the idea raised by several Democratic lawmakers that he should create a Census Statewide Count Committee, as several other states have done, to ensure as many people are counted as possible. Already, Florida has scores of local Census committees dedicated to overcoming language barriers and befriending community leaders to encourage maximum participation.

DeSantis said any lawmakers with concerns "should talk to the Commerce Department in Washington."

But already, state players have weighed in about the citizenship question. State Attorney General Ashley Moody joined 16 states in March to file an amicus brief supporting the Trump administration. And DeSantis' own deputy general counsel, James Uthmeier, last week refused to answer questions before a Congressional committee about the "key role" he apparently played in the citizenship question while he served as an adviser to U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross.

Ross was responsible for adding the question to the survey, and President Donald Trump, DeSantis' close political ally, has said the Census would be "meaningless" without it.

State Sen. Janet Cruz, D-Tampa, noted that the Census results serve as the basis for Florida's state legislative redistricting scheduled for 2022, which DeSantis will oversee. She said his refusal to form the committee is a partisan play.

"It's all about redistricting," she said. "This is splitting right down party lines here and it shouldn't be that way ... there's so much at stake."

The Supreme Court may issue a decision on the citizenship question as early as Friday. The issue must be resolved by the end of the month to provide enough time for Census questionnaires to be printed. But new evidence recently unearthed in the hard drive of a deceased Republican strategist may play a major role, as the documents showed the question was a deliberate move to give the GOP an advantage in future elections through gerrymandering.

In Washington, the issue has become increasingly partisan, as Sen. Marco Rubio called Democrats' opposition to the citizenship question an "absurd freak out" on Twitter, adding that if non-citizens are counted toward the calculation of Congressional seats then it "dilutes the political representation of citizens and legal residents."

But political redistricting is only one piece of what hinges on Census population counts.

School districts, for instance, may lose millions of dollars in federal funds for high-poverty schools, called Title I, according to the Council for Great City Schools, which represents urban districts across the country.

Using the estimate from a federal district court that a citizenship question would undercount non-citizens by at least 5.8 percent, the council estimated that Miami-Dade County Schools, for example, would lose \$1.4 million in Title I funding each year. That loss would repeat itself every year for the next decade, until a new Census is conducted.

Yet schools are required, by law, to educate all children regardless of immigration status — which means the district would likely have to cut staff and find other ways to continue to support programs for low-income students who are invisible on the Census.

“The loss of these personnel would not just affect low-income students,” the council wrote in an amicus brief to the Supreme Court. “Because Miami-Dade operates many Title I schools with school-wide programs, all students in those schools would be negatively affected.”