

Census sampling makes sense

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When Shreveport demographer Elliott Stonecipher visited this newspaper this summer, he repeated a warning that he and John Baker, a professor of constitutional law at LSU, have been sounding in and out of Louisiana.

It's this: The short form used by the Census Bureau doesn't ask for citizenship status. If immigrants, documented or otherwise, are included, the populations of California, Texas, Arizona and other states with large numbers of immigrants will be artificially inflated. So states, including Louisiana, will have a proportionately smaller part of the nation's population.

And, Stonecipher and Baker say, Louisiana could actually lose one of its seven U.S. House seats

when districts are reapportioned after the 2010 census.

Now there's a move afoot — or in the e-mail inbox, at least — to petition Louisiana Attorney General Buddy Caldwell to sue the federal government to force them to put a citizenship question on the census short form.

While the Stonecipher-Baker scenario has drawn some well-aimed shots for overstating the impact of illegal immigration, we believe that the nation's congressional districts should not be redrawn based on a count that includes those who are not here legally. Count them to determine their numbers, count them for humanitarian reasons, but don't base the way the country is governed based on their numbers.

In the weeks since Stonecipher

spoke at *The Advertiser*, he has spoken to groups around the state, including a meeting at Lafayette's City Club. U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-Metairie, has proposed an amendment that would block census funding unless the short form, the one that every household is supposed to receive, includes a question about citizenship.

Vitter may be on sound political ground here. Constitutionally, his amendment poses some problems — not least that the Constitution requires a census every 10 years and doesn't say anything about amendments. As a practical matter, the amendment assumes that undocumented immigrants would answer such a citizenship question truthfully.

The strange part of the story

is that there has long been a way to make the census more accurate and count immigrants and other undercounted populations. But Republicans have opposed it for decades. It's mathematical sampling.

Most conservatives have insisted that the Constitution requires an actual head count. Liberals traditionally support sampling, sometimes for an equally self-serving reason: Members of often-undercounted populations tend to vote Democratic.

But the immigration controversy surrounding the next census may be the opportunity to reach a consensus in favor of sampling and to decide once and for all who should be included in the national head count.