

Opinion

OUR VIEW

Is that a census form or a political thing?

The U.S. census has been in the news a lot lately, what with President Trump's now-abandoned effort to add a question about U.S. citizenship to the 2020 survey.

The actual census documents are being printed right now, which would have made it difficult and expensive to add a new question about citizenship, but people across the nation already have been receiving documents in the mail that look like official surveys from the Census Bureau.

What's going on? The sad reality is that for many years, both Republicans and Democrats have been guilty of what we see as a very



unscrupulous process called "fundraising under the guise of research," or FRUGing, for short.

The premise is quite simple. Send out an official-looking envelope that appears to come from the Census Bureau or some other government agency. The one that is showing up in Rochester of late is marked "Congressional Census," and carries the warning "Official Document. Do Not Destroy."

Inside is a "survey" that is

really just a thinly disguised piece of political propaganda that asks a series of leading questions designed to praise one party's agenda and accomplishments while raising fears about what the other party is doing or might do.

Recipients are told to fill out their survey and return it immediately, along with a check to cover "processing fees."

The document currently in wide circulation nationwide has caused some members of Congress to appeal directly to the U.S. Postal Service, arguing that by appearing to be from the Census Bureau, this fundraiser/survey violates the federal Deceptive Mail Prevention and Enforcement Act.

While it's relatively easy for astute, politically savvy people to identify and discard such a scam — and yes, we see it as a scam — these mailings target people who may be more vulnerable to manipulation and who have a record of supporting one political party.

Specifically, the survey we've seen has targeted the elderly, who might not even be able to read the big-type warnings about deadlines and mandatory processing fees.

While this might be an effective fundraising strategy, it's also slimy.

Now, if people want to make a donation to a political party,

that's fine. And if these "surveys" convince people that it's important to financially support one party or the other, that's fine, too.

But people need to know that they're reading and responding to a political advertisement, not the U.S. Census. They need to know that they're giving money to a political party, not paying for their census results to be tabulated.

So spread the word. Make sure that aging parents and grandparents recognize these documents for what they are — and make sure they understand that the best use of this "official document" might be to shred it and use it as worm bedding.

Drug price gouging: An American story

To be American is a wonderful thing most of the time. There are moments, however, when it is downright humiliating.

Can you imagine a more pitiful scene than a busload of Americans traveling 815 miles from Minneapolis to a Walmart in London, Ontario, Canada, to buy insulin at a 10th — a 10th! — of the price charged in the United States?

Dollar-wise, the difference is not modest. In the U.S., one vial of insulin costs around \$300. In Canada, it's \$30.

From 2012 to 2016, drugmakers nearly doubled the U.S. price of a medication that was invented almost a century ago. Type 1 diabetics saw their yearly insulin costs soar from about \$2,900 to about \$5,700. Deb Souther, a woman making the trip, said that even with



FROMA HARROP

insulin she's been paying \$700 a month for this essential medicine.

We're not talking about a take-it-or-leave-it product. These are not lawn chairs or T-shirts, which, in any case, are manufactured by numerous companies competing for your consumer dollar. We are talking about insulin, a lifesaving drug for diabetics produced by three companies.

We're talking about lives. Diabetics who've been cutting back on their

prescribed insulin because they couldn't afford it have been dying as a result. One was Alec Smith, who, after aging out of his mother's health insurance plan when he was 26, rationed his insulin, assuming he could survive until he saved money to buy what he needed. He was found dead in his apartment.

We might ask how the pharmaceutical industry gets away with extorting Americans with its your-money-or-your-life demands. The answer is that other countries negotiate with the drugmakers to set reasonable prices. Republicans in Washington, on the other hand, have served the American public to them on a silver platter.

The American government is not allowed to negotiate, with one notable exception. The

Department of Veterans Affairs obtains deep discounts on drugs through direct negotiation. By contrast, the Republicans' Medicare drug benefit of 2003 specifically bans the U.S. government from bargaining on prices for medications.

If Medicare Part D, the drug benefit, were to pay prescription prices similar to what the VA pays, Medicare would enjoy a savings of about 44 percent on the top 50 oral drugs, according to an analysis published in JAMA Internal Medicine. In dollar terms, the savings in 2016 would be more than \$14 billion.

When President Trump campaigned in 2016, he vowed to have the government negotiate on Medicare drug price. After the election, the promise vanished.

Right before the

2018 midterms, Trump suggested a modest plan whereby Medicare Part B — the part covering drugs administered by doctors and hospitals — would use an International Pricing Index as a benchmark for setting prices. With a presidential election looming, Trump seems to be reviving that kind of talk again.

Of course, this is just more pre-election trickery. Even so, some Republicans expressed alarm at the very idea, calling it government "price controls." They apparently prefer that drug companies control the prices.

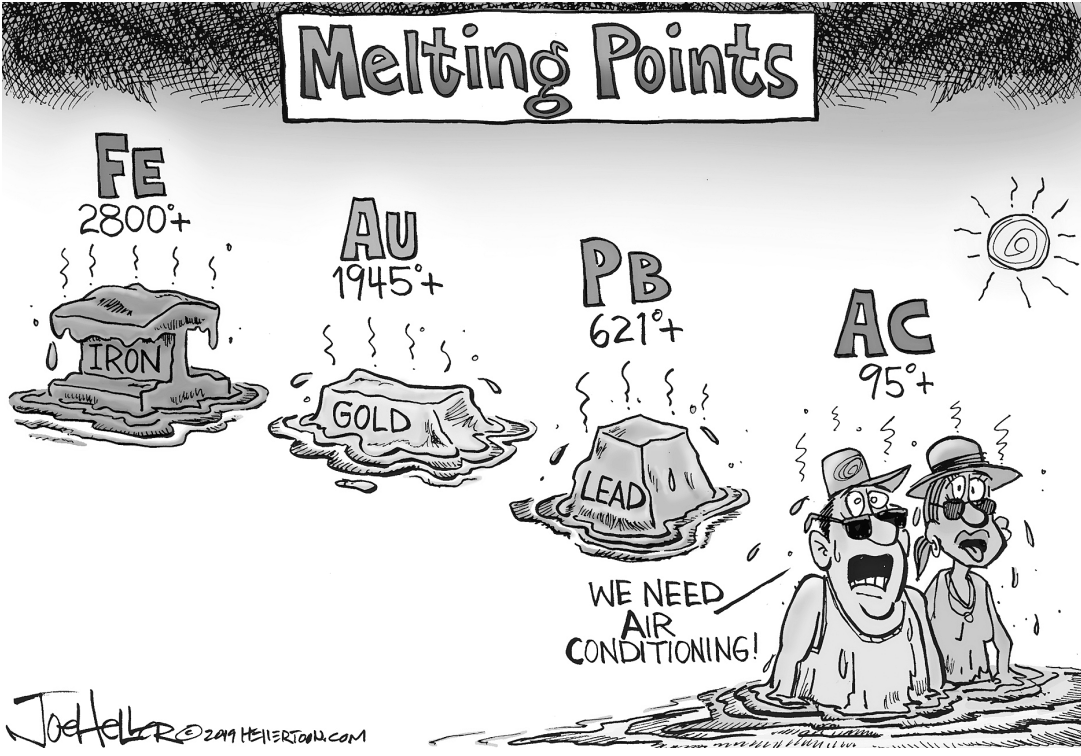
Trump's secretary of health and human services happens to be Alex Azar, a former Eli Lilly executive. Lilly's Humalog pen is seen as one of the villains in insulin price gouging. Azar has diverted

blame to socialism. "The American senior and the American patient have been too long been asked to overpay for drugs to subsidize the socialist systems of Europe," Azar charged.

And who's been asking — no, forcing — the American people to pay so much? The drug industry and its (mostly) Republican enforcers.

Americans lining up at a Canadian Walmart prescription drug counter to buy lifesaving drugs at a 10th the U.S. price must have been a pathetic sight. Only a change in Washington, starting with the White House, will end the outrage.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CONGRESSMAN SHOULD LOOK OUT FOR CONSTITUENTS

Honestly, when I asked Congressman Hagedorn at his town hall whether he'd support allowing Medicare to negotiate prescription drug prices, I don't know exactly what I was expecting, but I sure didn't expect the answer I actually got.

I'd heard that AARP had done an analysis and determined that Medicare could have saved \$14.4 billion in 2017 alone if it were buying drugs at the same prices the Veterans Administration had negotiated. Also, that other countries negotiate with drug companies and end up paying one-third to one-half the prices we pay for the exact same drugs. But, unlike the VA, Medicare isn't allowed to negotiate.

Congressman Hagedorn's answer was basically a no. That we'd never want to kill innovation. That drug companies

needed to recoup development costs. That other countries can pay less because they negotiate with drug companies. But they are piggybacking off of us. And at one point he said, "But let's not try to make the whole world have to pay exorbitant prices and go broke."

So it's OK for us to pay exorbitant prices and go broke?

The huge hikes in prices of long-established drugs are manifestations of price gouging, not drug companies recouping development costs and taking reasonable profits.

Our congressman should care more about his constituents. Drug companies and other countries have demonstrated ample ability to look after themselves.

Diane Hanson, Rochester

CHOOSE YOUR WORDS CAREFULLY

I was really pleased to see our local news outlets cover Rep. Jim Hagedorn's Olmsted County Town Hall.

I was at the town hall, and these events are so important for that positive, respectful exchange of ideas so that we know our voice is being represented in Washington.

As I was watching one local news station's report, I was disheartened to hear the anchor say about our congressman, "you either love him or hate him."

In southern Minnesota, we believe in Minnesota Nice. I didn't agree with our

former congressman, Tim Walz, most of the time, but I never hated him.

We should all choose our words wisely so that we can have productive, respectful talks on the issues. We don't need to make things personal and we don't need to promote hate.

We live in a wonderful community and a great state. We have diverse ideas and backgrounds. We move our community forward when we treat each other with charity and kindness.

Christine Green, Austin

Trump is right about one thing: Citizenship is important

BY MICHAEL MCGOUGH

In backing down from his plan to include a question about U.S. citizenship on next year's census form, President Donald Trump on Thursday gave credence to the claims of critics that his administration had an ulterior — and partisan — motive in pressing for inclusion of the question.

During rambling remarks in the Rose Garden, the president let a very big cat out of the bag by suggesting that data about how many citizens and noncitizens there are — which he ordered his administration to collect "by other means" — could help states that "may want to draw state and local legislative districts based upon the voter-eligible population."

That, of course, isn't the reason the administration cited for wanting to include a citizenship question: It had claimed that it needed data about citizenship in order to enforce the Voting Rights Act. Last month the Supreme Court said dryly that the voting-rights rationale was "contrived."

But using citizenship data for redistricting would serve what critics long have argued was the administration's overriding objective: to help Republicans and hurt Democrats.

One way a citizenship question could accomplish that objective would be to frighten undocumented immigrants so that they wouldn't participate in the census, fearing that responding to the citizenship question would tip off immigration enforcement. That could result in an undercount in areas with large numbers of non-citizens — areas that are more likely to be represented by Democrats.

But the GOP would also be helped by the idea floated by Trump on Thursday: drawing district lines

on the basis of the "voter-eligible population."

In a 2016 case from Texas, the Supreme Court ruled that states don't violate the Constitution or the principle of "one person, one vote" when they use total population — including children and noncitizens who aren't eligible to vote — as the basis for legislative redistricting. But the court left for another day the opposite question of whether a state could choose to count eligible voters only in drawing lines.

Doing so would be a bad idea. The Los Angeles Times noted in 2015 that if California were to draw district lines to reflect only eligible voters, "power would shift away from areas heavily populated by noncitizens, many of them Latino. Some districts would expand as a result, making it harder for state legislators to address individual constituents' problems and for residents to sway those legislators." But those same trends would help the Republican Party.

Trump's remarks provide vindication for critics who portrayed the quest for a citizenship question as an attempt to gain partisan advantage. But Trump also said something his critics should agree with: that U.S. citizenship is "a very important thing."

Granted, he made that observation as part of a snide diatribe against "far-left Democrats" who "are determined to conceal the number of illegal aliens in our midst." But his underlying point was correct.

U.S. citizenship is important; it's not just a "piece of paper." It represents full inclusion in this society and is something immigrants should be encouraged to aspire to.

Michael McGough is a writer for the Los Angeles Times.

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