

Nomination of Robert M. Groves  
To Be Director of the Census, Department of Commerce  
Chairman Joe Lieberman  
May 15, 2009

The nomination of Robert M. Groves to be Director of the Census at the Department of Commerce comes at a critical time for the Census Bureau. With less than a year before the nation's decennial census takes place, the Bureau is in need of technically skilled and forward-looking leadership to guide it through a thicket of problems that threaten to undermine the 2010 census and therefore the Bureau's core functions.

Mr. Groves appears to be an inspired choice for this position. First and foremost he is a scientist, with extensive expertise in statistics, social research, and survey methodology. He also has experience in the administration of large scale surveys. But secondly, he is deeply committed to modernizing the business of government surveys, and recruiting and training the next generation of statisticians at an agency where almost half the staff will be eligible for retirement within one year.

Since the 1970s, Mr. Groves has been a professor in the Sociology Department at the University of Michigan. From 1990-1992, he was associate director at the Census Bureau, returning to Ann Arbor except for a four year appointment at the University of Maryland. He has advised a number of large sample surveys including for Neilson Media Research, and consulted on advanced survey design with almost all federal statistical agencies, including the Census Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Agriculture Department, and the National Science Foundation.

He is an innovator of the cutting edge survey methodology that unites statistical, social science, and management sciences to improve the accuracy of measurement. He has studied alternative ways of measuring the U.S. population, how the alternatives affect survey conclusions, and how best to measure different subjects. A variety of professional publications and associations have published and awarded his work over the past 25 years.

So, clearly, Mr. Groves has the scientific background and credentials to guide the Census Bureau during this critical time. But he is more than a good scientist. His experience with federal agencies and with managing large-scale surveys has provided him with a clear-eyed view of the administrative challenges facing any large organization and the need to plan for the future.

The Bureau, unfortunately, faces no shortage of challenges. Most immediately, it is looking at both technological and sociological hurdles to conducting a credible 2010 decennial census. The growing population of immigrant, non-English speaking citizens and the high mobility of the American population make a survey of every citizen extremely difficult. Add to this the Government Accountability Office findings over the decade that the Bureau does not have the capacity to generate reliable cost estimates for the decennial census and it is obvious

why the agency continues to come to Congress seeking additional funds to perform its basic functions.

For the last eight years, Mr. Groves has directed the University of Michigan Survey Research Center - the largest academic survey research organization in the world, with a staff of over 1,000 when large studies are conducted. He has articulated his interest in bringing in the next generation of technical leaders and collaborating with federal statistical agencies to avert a future crisis in technical talent. And he said in his interview with Committee staff that he believes “management leadership makes a difference.” These, I think, are qualifications much needed at the Census Bureau today.

Mr. Groves is also committed to the modernization of the Bureau. The basic structure of the federal statistical system was developed in an earlier era, and the world of statistical design and data collection has far outstripped it. The federal government should be leading the effort to adopt new data collection tools and approaches, rather than struggling to keep up, and I believe Mr. Groves has the passion and the skill to ensure that this is the case.

Finally, let me say a word about the Census Bureau’s independence and the controversial issue of statistical sampling. The Census Bureau must be a scientific organization, operating independent of political influences. The credibility of federal statistical information depends upon that and is key to maintaining a fair and open democracy. Statistical sampling may be a valuable survey method, but the law says that the decennial census shall not use it – especially for congressional reapportionment. I think Mr. Groves understands the law. Plans for the decennial census have been underway for years, and Mr. Groves is on the record stating that, if confirmed, he has no intention of applying statistical sampling to the 2010 census. That said, the director of the Census must be free to speak openly if he is to uphold and strengthen the scientific gravitas of the Bureau. I am confident Mr. Groves adheres to these principles.

If confirmed as Census Bureau director, Mr. Groves will have no shortage of problems to address, including making sure the 2010 census is on track to capture all American citizens, modernizing the agency, training and recruiting new staff, data security, and data privacy, to name just a few. I am pleased that the President has nominated someone with as distinguished a background in statistics and large-scale surveys as Mr. Groves and I wish him luck as his nomination proceeds.

