



Mayor Pro Tem Vivian Burke presents gifts to U.S. Reps. Mel Watt and Richard Burr. Burr and Watt took part in a town hall meeting during a community forum Saturday.

Photo by T. Kevin Walker

Watt, Burr spar during forum

By T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

It was billed as a town hall meeting featuring two local congressmen, but it ended up being a debate, after a few verbal jabs led to a round of political sparring.

U.S. Reps. Mel Watt and Richard Burr hashed out their varying political ideologies to a captive crowd at Winston-Salem State University's Anderson Center Saturday morning.

Burr, a Winston-Salem Republican, and Watt, a Charlotte Democrat, sat on a stage in the auditorium with only a small, wooden coffee table separating them. But when it came to a number of current, hot button issues, the coffee table might have well been the Atlantic Ocean.

"I don't want to turn this into a debate between Richard and myself, but I just think (Burr) is wrong," said Watt after his colleague disagreed with him on the effect an undercount would have on North Carolina in the 2000 census.

Watt has taken an active role in the so-called "census fairness" issue. At a City Hall news confer-

ence here less than two weeks earlier, Watt stressed the importance of citizens, especially minorities, cooperating with the Bureau of the Census as they launch the first count of the 21st century.

Watt again hammered away at the topic Saturday, telling the audience that the 1990 census missed nearly 130,000 people in North Carolina. Watt said the undercount cost the state \$68.3 million—money the federal government would have doled out in education, transportation, community development and Medicaid funding if the census had accurately gauged North Carolina's population.

But Burr said in many cases census figures do not, necessarily, lead to more funding and better services for states. He said the last census missed less than 2 percent of America's population.

"I wish I could tell you a more accurate count would mean better health care, (but) it really doesn't," Burr said.

Congressional Republicans and Democrats have been debating whether or not to use statistical sampling to conduct the 2000 cen-

sus. Currently the head-count method is used. Statistical sampling involves estimating the population of areas where residents have avoided all other efforts of census counters.

The U.S. Supreme Court greatly limited the use of statistical sampling in the 2000 census, but some Democrats are hoping that the method can still be used as a last measure to count those who have continually dodged other census measures.

Democrats say statistical sampling would eliminate census undercounts. Republicans say that the method would turn the census into a "guessing game" and that it would not benefit most towns and cities.

"To allow statistical sampling is very beneficial only to the larger cities," Burr said.

Watt, though, stood by his claims that undercounts rob the state of millions in federal money. The census has never been completely successful by going door-to-door or by mailing out questionnaires, Watt said.

See Burr on A9

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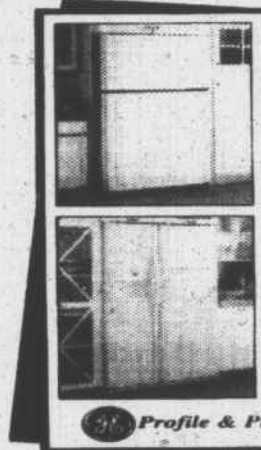


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