

SECTION II: THE BACKGROUND OF REDISTRICTING

Chapter Five | The Census

Yesterday: America's decennial census finds its origins in the founding of our nation. The founding fathers wanted to unify the thirteen original states under one federal government, but problems arose because each state differed greatly in terms of geographic size, population, wealth, and slavery policies. The founders faced a dilemma: how could they make sure that each state had a voice in the running of the nation, without giving any one state too much power?

The founders devised a solution by creating a bicameral federal legislature — that is, a federal legislature with two separate bodies: the Senate and the House of Representatives. Each state would have equal representation in the Senate, but representation in the House of Representatives would be based on each state's population. This compromise allowed the thirteen states to be joined as the “United States” of America.

Because representation in the House of Representatives was based on each state's population, there had to be some way to count the population in each state. The Census was created to be a national count of (theoretically) every person in the country every ten years. This Census is required by Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution.

The nation's egregious history of slavery figures importantly in the early Census counts. When the U.S. Constitution was drafted, representatives of the Southern states wanted slaves to be counted as part of the population for purposes of the Census. If the slaves were counted, then these states would have greater representation in the U.S. House of Rep

representatives. Delegates from the non-slave states opposed this increased representation among the slave states because they wanted to keep their political power. Another compromise was reached, accommodating the institution of slavery. Slaves would be counted in the Census, but instead of being considered “whole” persons, each slave would be counted as three-fifths of a person (60 percent). This compromise was also written into Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution. After the Civil War, black people in America were counted as whole persons in the Census.

Today: The Census count is important because money and political power are distributed based on the Census numbers. Both congressional representation and approximately \$200 billion in federal funds are allocated based on the Census data.

In theory, the Census counts all people in the United States, but practical constraints and human limitations prevent every person from being counted. The “undercount” is the term used for those persons who are not counted. Minorities are disproportionately affected by the undercount, in part because they have a greater incidence of homelessness, incarceration, transience, poverty, and distrust of government. Examples of the disproportionate nature of the undercount include the following:

- Blacks are twice as likely as whites to be missed by the census count.
- In 1990, the black undercount was 4.5 percent, whereas the white undercount was 1.6 percent.
- In 1990, the undercount missed one of every ten black males.
- In 1990, the undercount missed 7 percent of black children.

In practical terms, this undercount means that minorities and minority interests are given fewer federal funds and less

political power than those who are counted accurately.

Modern statistical methods have been used to “correct” the Census numbers to reflect a more accurate count. Generally, the major political parties’ official positions on the use of “corrected” census data coincide with their self-interests. Republicans oppose using the “corrected” Census numbers for redistricting because undercounted minorities usually do not vote Republican, whereas Democrats favor using the “corrected” Census numbers because undercounted minorities usually vote Democratic.

The Census Bureau decided not to release the “corrected” 2000 Census numbers to the public in time for state and local legislative redistricting. The Bush Administration did not urge the Bureau to do so.

What You Can Do:

1. Obtain Census Data that Affects You: This information is available at www.census.gov.
2. Find Out Information for Drawing Majority-Minority Districts: If you are interested in having a majority-minority district drawn, you need to know certain Census information (see appendix A). How many people live in the relevant jurisdiction? What is the ideal number of people for each district? This number equals the total population in your jurisdiction divided by the number of districts (see chapter four). How many members of your minority group live in the jurisdiction? Is this number large enough to support a majority-minority district for any of the elected offices? Remember, there are many different types of districts, including congressional districts, school board districts, city council districts, and county commission districts. A minor

ity group might not have the numbers to support a majority-minority district at the statewide level, but it just might at the county or city level.

3. Inform Your Elected Officials: Let your elected officials know about this information and, more importantly, let them know that you know it! They will probably take your concerns more seriously if they know that you are checking up on them. You can do this at redistricting hearings (see chapter one).

4. Respond to the Next Census: When the Census is next taken in 2010, make sure that you—and make sure that your family, friends, and neighbors respond. There is strength in numbers, and you want to make sure that the Census data accurately reflect the number of people in your community.