

Why the fuss in Congress over census count?

By Bill Hobby

Congress is trying to decide how to count people in the year 2000. The issue is not so much who and how many people will be counted, as it is who and how many might not be counted.

The U.S. Constitution requires a census every 10 years so Congress can determine how many seats each state has in the House of Representatives. States have as many electoral votes as they have members of the U.S. Senate and House. The stakes are the composition of the House of Representatives for the next decade and, possibly, the outcome of presidential elections in 2004 and 2008.

The figures also affect the composition of state legislatures, city councils and county governing bodies, many of whom must redraw their district boundaries after each census. The figures are important to the democratic process.

In past censuses, the Census Bureau told the enumerator to go back to an address as many as seven times to get the basic information on the household. After the 1990 census, there was an outcry that the census cost too much - particularly because of these return visits. In response, the bureau developed new methods which include sampling of what is called "nonresponse followup," or NRFU. Every address will get a census form in the mail and reminders. The agency proposes to use sampling techniques to count the probable last 10 percent of people in each census tract, who fail to mail in a census form or respond to a census enumerator when one is dispatched to the dwelling.

Republicans say the new techniques are just "guessing" and are challenging the Clinton administration plans for the 2000 Census. Such rhetoric comes close to accusing the Democratic administration of the possibility of padding or faking the census counts during the sampling process.

What really is at stake here is a philosophical disagreement about the civic responsibility of the householder to fill out the form voluntarily. People should be proud to "stand up and be counted" so the argument goes. If they don't, well, so be it.

But it turns out that the Census Bureau and the state and local officials whose populations are differentially undercounted don't like that answer. Lots of people get lots of junk mail these days and aren't home at predictable times when a census-taker might call.

The bureau's new sampling procedures, successfully tested for the past three years, would solve the problem by spending more time and effort to train the enumerators to find and contact 90 percent of the households and then use statistical estimation to extrapolate to the 100 percent count. It is a well-known finding of survey research that trained interviewers can produce better information in a carefully constructed sample survey than would be produced from a complete count conducted by enumerators with less skill and training.

So the question comes down to whether it is fair to misallocate political representation and federal funds for a decade because people aren't home or don't get a census form. And what if those missed people and missed households are concentrated in particular regions and locations? The 1990 census evaluation results showed that the census disproportionately missed households and people in rapidly growing parts of the country like Florida, Texas and California, and in the central cities and remote rural areas of America. Could it be that the Republicans, political heavy hitters in these three Sun Belt states in particular, are barking up the wrong tree in opposing sampling?

Up to now the census has been a head count. Census takers have tried to eyeball every person, or at least every household head. That is increasingly hard to do. There are more people than ever who do not

want to see or talk to any government employee - census-taker or whomever. Many are homeless or illegal aliens.

The only way to get an accurate and efficient count is to use statistical sampling methods and trained interviewers to find and count these hard-to-count people. The uncounted may not vote, but they are there. If past censuses are any guide, there will be more of them in border states like Texas, California and Florida than in other states. Those states would gain congressional seats and electoral votes. Those states vote increasingly Republican.

So political and misunderstood is the issue that congressional Republicans embarrassed themselves by trying to mix up the 2000 census with floods in North Dakota. The Republicans, who would most benefit from a complete count, passed a disaster relief *bill* that would have prohibited the Census Bureau from sampling in 2000. President Clinton vetoed the *bill*.

A few weeks later Congress passed, and President Clinton signed, a *bill* that was still silly, but not quite so silly. That *bill* simply required the Census Bureau to report, not about the floods, but about what it plans to do in 2000, and the Bureau reported on July 14 that it plans to use sampling methods.

What is going on here? Why are some members of Congress getting involved in an arcane dispute about statistics? Stuff about probability and survey design that puts first-year statistics students to sleep?

The answer is simple. As former Census Director Barbara Bryant notes, census figures move money as well as votes. The numbers determine how much federal money states and cities get. So Congress will be talking about statistics for a few more months.

This article was published in the *Houston Chronicle* on Aug. 17, 1997.