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The Census Games: Groups Gear Up to Be Counted

By Barbara Kiviat

The U.S. Census is gearing up for its once-a-decade tally of America's population. And so are thousands of groups with a vested interest in being fully counted — since the Census determines not just seats in the House of Representatives but also how some \$400 billion in annual federal funding gets divvied up, the way companies think about where to build factories and stores, and the shape of political and social discourse about issues like race, ethnicity and urban vs. rural America.

The Census won't actually mail out its 10-question form to every U.S. household until next March. But the job for cities, states and organizations representing every stripe of American society is to get as many people as possible to mail the form back, and that work is already happening. ([Read a bio of Tim Graves, Obama's pick as the Census chief.](#))

Brazilians in Boston are creating public-service announcements to run on Portuguese-language radio stations. The state of California is handing out maps of neighborhoods with low participation rates in the last Census so community groups can target where to knock on doors. Roman Catholic priests near the U.S.-Mexico border are readying picture books to more easily explain the process to people who don't read well or at all. The mayor of New Orleans is telling members of the Hurricane Katrina diaspora to use their old addresses — though that one isn't kosher. "The Census," says Melanie Campbell of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, "is all about financial resources and power."

To think about what's at stake — beyond \$3 billion in unemployment funds, \$4 billion worth of rural-electrification loans, \$6 billion in Head Start money and hundreds of billions of other federal dollars — consider the Burmese. Some 17,000 people living in the U.S. identified themselves as Burmese in the 2000 Census, but "we know that's not the right number," says Aung Naing, chairman of the Burmese Complete Count Committee, one of more than 10,000 such committees the Census helps form in order to bolster response rates. In Southern California alone, there are seven or eight Burmese Buddhist temples, he says. So since the fall, Naing has been traveling the country, explaining to Burmese groups that the Census counts everybody — citizen or not — and that the data collected aren't shared with other parts of the government, like immigration or taxing authorities (common fears that drive down response rates among many minority groups, including blacks and Hispanics).

Why does Naing, an engineer by day, care so much? "Data is crucial to decision-making," he says. "This is our chance for exposure." He tells stories about city agencies and companies — like the senior-citizen apartment complex down the road — that reach out to other ethnic communities but not to the Burmese, simply because they don't know they're there in any number. When the 2000 Census showed that

Indians were the fastest-growing Asian group in the U.S., marketers went berserk. Wells Fargo started sponsoring Bollywood concerts. MTV launched a channel just for South Asians. That's why municipalities make such an effort too. When companies make expansion plans — when they decide where to build their next store or where to open a satellite office — it can make a big difference whether your city has 100,000 potential shoppers and employees to offer, or just 95,000.

There is a long history of using the Census to push for better visibility in American political and economic life. Some of the first lobbying came from Eastern Europeans in the 19th century. But the perfection of identity politics in the 20th kicked the conversation to a whole new level — not that there hasn't been some trepidation along the way. Going into the 1970 Census, groups representing people with disabilities tried to keep a question about handicaps off the questionnaire, afraid it would foster stereotypes. Instead, the data that came back helped bolster support for federal programs to help such people, and by the 1980 Census, rights organizations were lobbying for more refined questions, to make it clear how many people were, say, blind vs. paraplegic, so that each group could get its own funding.

"In American society, there's a whole political logic of fairness proportionate to our numbers," says Kenneth Prewitt, a professor of public affairs at Columbia University and former director of the Census Bureau. "This is where that starts." A big score in that regard this year: for the first time the Census will put out a report on the number of people reporting to be in gay marriages.

This Census cycle also has its own batch of groups pushing for less counting, not more. A handful of Hispanic advocates are calling for illegal immigrants to boycott the Census, a threat meant as a bargaining chip to force more meaningful immigration reform. Other Hispanic groups are nonplussed by the tactic, considering how much federal funding is pegged to the count; the head of the National Association of Latino Elected Officials has called the move "well intended but misguided and ultimately irresponsible." (The Census doesn't ask whether a person is living in the U.S. legally, since the Constitution says to count people, not citizens.)

Then there is conservative Republican Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, who has announced she will be filling in only the number of people in her household and no other information since she doesn't trust the government to use it responsibly. (Technically, doing so would break a federal law.) In a nice twist, the state of Minnesota itself is rallying its residents to send in their forms, since shifting populations nationwide may mean the loss of a Minnesota seat in the House. The Minnesota Complete Count Committee will be in full force at the state fair this summer, handing out buttons and magnets, talking up the Census. "As a state, they are incredibly motivated to make sure everyone is counted," says Tim Olson, an assistant division chief who runs the Census's partnership program.

And in general, that tends to be the American attitude. For even though Census data can be put to ill purpose — in World War II they were used to figure out which neighborhoods had large Japanese populations, so that people could more easily be rounded up for internment camps — what tends to trump those concerns is our fascination with ourselves and desire to be represented.

Leading up to the 2000 count, before the Census included an option to check more than one race, the Bureau was flooded with letters from white women married to black men asking if they should check white or black for their children. They sent pictures and asked which parent the Census wanted their kids to deny. "They explicitly said it's about representation and respect, because no one thought there was going to be a special government program for children of mixed-race parents," says Prewitt, who was running the bureau at the time. "The Census is the picture we draw of ourselves."

And a lot of people want to make sure they're in it.

[See pictures of the civil-rights movement from Emmett Till to Barack Obama.](#)

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