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Why There Is Still a Controversy About Adjusting the Census

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I will be brief. There is still a controversy over adjusting the census because the statistical adjustment of the census did not work in 1990, nor did it work in 2000. The adjustment process, in both theory and practice, is complicated and flawed. The chance of it working in future censuses without major changes is small. Anderson and Fienberg continue to twist language and report partial results in order to confuse the debate. For instance, even though, as Anderson and Fienberg argue, the computer coding error by itself may not have shifted a congressional seat in 1990, the computer coding error *along with the other errors* associated with the 1990 adjustment *would have shifted a seat.* They ignore the other errors associated with the 1990 PES. Considering the computer error in isolation is meaningless. Furthermore, they also gloss over that the computer coding error would have added roughly one million nonexistent people to the census—this is a problem regardless of the distribution of congressional seats.

Relying on the statistical adjustment to fix all the ills of the census is not wise. The feeling I got from Census Bureau officials when I was on Capitol Hill was that they thought the statistical adjustment would clean up all of the errors associated with the headcount. Thus, the predominant attitude was that it was not critical for the headcount to be as accurate as possible since the adjustment would sweep through, cleaning up all errors. The headcount, and not the adjustment, should be the focal point for census accuracy. Ironically, a census with an adjustment ultimately leads to a less accurate headcount simply because the post-census adjustment becomes a crutch. Combine that with the adjustment's adding as many errors as it takes out and it becomes fairly obvious why the adjustment process is flawed.

Worse still, there is not a single standard statistical adjustment model. As documented earlier in this debate, the Census Bureau faces dozens (Hundreds? Thousands?) of decisions about the nature of the statistical model used to make population adjustments. Each of these decisions can affect the results. If Census 2010 incorporates a statistical adjustment, I predict there will be a battle royal in Congress over what the adjustment ought to look like. Look for congressional hearings with hot topics such as: why the regression-smoothing model is more appropriate that the method that uses iterative proportion fitting; or why the statistical model with 356 post-strata is more appropriate than the model with 712; etc. Questions with political implications will be answered politically.

How then do we make the census better? I think the accuracy of the census ultimately depends on the involvement of local constituencies. Rather than a centralized census "trickling down" from Washington to the rest of the country, the process ought to "bubble up" from bottom to top. Localities have to understand the importance of the census and do what they can to increase the accuracy of the count. The federal government and the Census Bureau need to maximize the involvement of local constituencies in census taking, rather than responding to complaints about the accuracy of the results after the census is over.

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