

Congressional Testimony on  
The Federal Statistical System in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Role of the Census Bureau

Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress  
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The Honorable Kenneth Prewitt  
Columbia University

Secretary of Commerce Robert A. Mossbacher, 1991

*“... the choice of the adjustment method selected by the Census Bureau officials can make a difference in apportionment, and the political outcome of that choice can be known in advance. I am confident that political considerations played no role in the Census Bureau’s choice of an adjustment model for the 1990 census. I am deeply concerned, however, that adjustment would open the door to political tampering with the census in the future.”*

Chairman of the Republican National Committee Jim Nicholson, 1997

*“The Clinton Administration is implementing a radical new way of taking the next census that effectively will add nearly four and one-half million Democrats to the nation’s population. This is the political outcome of a controversial Executive decision to use a complex mathematical formula to estimate and “adjust” the 2000 census /.../.”*

Senator Richard C. Shelby, 2009

*“By overcounting here, undercounting there, [census] manipulation could take place for sole political gain.”*

I have no interest in rehashing the political debate over the use of sampling (to be technically correct, the statistical methodology of dual system estimation) but do draw your attention to the tone of these three quotations.

In 1991, the Secretary’s language was cautious; he was careful to say that political considerations *could* come into play, not that they had.

In 1997, the language is declarative. They *had* come into play.

In 2009, the language assumes political manipulation almost matter of fact.

Although the first quote here listed is dated 1991, the politicization of “sampling” was initiated more than a decade earlier, when the Census Bureau was taken to court by the City of Detroit, the City of New York, and New York State. This was census-taking by litigation, as the big city mayors and a state governor tried (unsuccessfully) to overrule the statistical and scientific judgment of the Census Bureau.

This three-decade long political mess was authored by both parties – perhaps a rare instance of bipartisanship.

It is seriously worrisome that in high political circles, and in the media, it is suggested that the nonpartisan, professionally managed, scientifically grounded Census Bureau can easily choose a data collection methodology that would favor one political party over another.

To state this worry in the simplest of terms:

The fundamental premise of our representative democracy – that it is fair – starts with the longest running applied science project in the nation’s history: counting the American people. An unfair census – counting population groups or geographical regions at less than or more than their share of the total population – biases all subsequent steps in our representative democracy.

The suggestion that the census would deliberately tamper with our democracy is a heavy charge.

Policy as well as democracy is at stake.

As currently practiced, the design, implementation and evaluation of public policy cannot take place without a robust federal statistical system. Hundreds of programs and laws rest on particular statistical products. The collection of federal statistics in health, crime, education, housing, and much more cannot take place without a robust decennial census.

If the decennial census is thought to be easily manipulated for political gain, it becomes just one more feature of partisan politics. It loses both its majesty and its practicality.

I have no argument with partisan politics; no argument with a strong contest to win elections; no argument with the politics of policy-making; and most emphatically, no argument with the role of statistical information in political debate.

But to pull *census-taking* into the world of partisan politics is to weaken it. A weakened census weakens our democracy; it weakens our policy process.

### There Is No Evidence of Political Manipulation?

The taking of the 2000 census was more scrutinized than any in history. As Director, I testified before Congress nearly two dozen times between late 1998 and mid 2000. There were numerous GAO investigations of census preparation and process. The IG was active. There were eight formal advisory committees, all with an interest the conduct of the census.

In addition, there was an eight-member Census Monitoring Board – unique in census history. This bipartisan Board, working with its own staff and \$3m budget, was specifically appointed to guard against “political” influence.

In the millions of words written about the 2000 census, many of them about statistical adjustment, political influence was often hinted out, but never documented.

To state this most emphatically. **No evidence has been presented that what is under the control of the Census Bureau itself – collecting, processing, and reporting statistical information – has been politically manipulated.**

As I concluded five years ago, after reflecting on my Directorship of the 2000 Census:

*Although the many-headed and seemingly endless scrutiny of the census occupied management time that might otherwise have focused on the job at hand, we welcomed its contribution to an open and transparent census. The unprecedented oversight was a consequence of the polarized partisan battles over census design, with its sub-text that the Census Bureau could have a partisan agenda. This charge was groundless and even silly. An agency said to have “failed” in 1990 was, a few years later, suspected of being so clever and competent that it could design a census able to shift seats from one party to another a number of years in the future. We could answer this accusation only by complete transparency.*

*In fact, neither the culture nor the competencies of the Census Bureau are suited to advancing a partisan agenda. The professional statistical community – inside and outside the government -- is the bureau’s peer community, and the bureau would not jeopardize its high standing among its peers for a short-term political purpose. Of even greater importance, the Census Bureau has the confidence of the American public — a confidence indispensable for public cooperation with its large complement of largely voluntary statistical surveys and studies (see note, end of chapter). To risk public trust and cooperation for a one-time political outcome would be an act of institutional suicide.*

*Even if its culture were to allow it, the bureau does not have the competence to pre-decide partisan outcomes. There is no expertise in the bureau on trends in voting behavior or in the fine art of drawing election lines. To deliberately influence partisan outcomes, the bureau would need to bring to bear such expertise as it decided on*

*methodologies several years in advance of when census results are going to be used for redistricting.*

*These factors notwithstanding, the concern that the Census Bureau could be subjected to partisan influence was in the air. Active cooperation with the oversight process was the only means available to the bureau to answer this concern. In the end, all the oversight processes, advisory groups, and public watchdogs failed to find partisan intention in the design or conduct of the census. Given the scope of the monitoring effort and the number of groups intent on finding partisan bias, that is powerful evidence that there simply was none to be found. (From Kenneth Prewitt, *Politics and Science in Census Taking* (Russell Sage Foundation & Population Reference Bureau):*

What was in the air in 2000 is in the air today. We are near the precipice where the refutable presumption is partisan bias.

### We Need to Get Rid of This Presumption?

It would be silly to claim that there are no politics associated with census-taking. I have joined with many scholars in documenting endless instances of political considerations surrounding the census, starting with the infamous three-fifths rule written into the Constitution in 1787 – a counting rule that rewarded slave-owning states with more than a dozen “extra” congressional seats and electoral college votes. This slave-bonus sent Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and other southerners go the White House.

But if the census itself is political in this broad sense, *census-taking* is a different matter. It must rest on the best scientific principles available. That of course must be true for the collection of all federal statistics. A recent Symposium to this effect was held at the National Academy of Sciences, and co-sponsored by the American Association of Political and Social Sciences. Among the speakers were all three of the Academy Presidents and the current Science Advisor to the President. It was repeatedly stressed that federal statistics are science in the first instance, and only then available for program and policy purposes.

I strongly believe that an institutional reform could help to establish the scientific integrity and independence of census-taking, and have urged that reform since I left the Census Bureau Directorship in 2001. Here I cite from a 2003 publication, titled *Politics and Science in Census Taking* (Russell Sage Foundation & Population Reference Bureau):

*A much needed reform could help further insulate the Director from the political battles of the moment. At present the Director has no fixed term, but serves at the pleasure of the President. Representative Carolyn B. Maloney, formerly senior Democrat on the House Census Oversight Subcommittee, has introduced a bill (H.R. 1571), which would set a five-year fixed term for the Director. If a fixed term were to start in a year ending in “7” or “2”, no President could dismiss the Director in mid-census – as I was when*

*President Bush came to office. This would signal that the Census Directorship is a scientific rather than political position, as is the case for the head of other statistical agencies such as the Census Bureau of Labor Statistics and also for the Director of the National Science Foundation and of the National Institutes of Health. These too are presidential appointments, but all with fixed terms. In fact, among all high level presidential appointees with scientific responsibilities, the Census Bureau Director is unique in not having a fixed term.*

*A more ambitious reform, and one that I urge, would be to make the Census Bureau an independent agency, reporting directly to the President. It might then have a prestigious and bi-partisan national board, similar to that of the National Science Foundation. This would insulate it from the sometimes short-sided partisan fights than can so easily capture congressional debate.*

These institutional reforms are not all that is needed, but I know of no better way to begin the long process of ridding our political discourse of the casual assumption that the Census Bureau could, and even would, be complicit in a political effort. It took three decades to dig this unfortunate hole; it may take three decades to dig ourselves out of it. The starting point, in my view, is to position the Census Bureau as a scientific agency, obviously subject to congressional oversight – just as is true of other independent agencies such as NSF and NIH, but one in which census-taking itself rests on rigorous scientific principles fixed on only one goal: provide the country with the best statistical products possible.