

The Census: Counting On It.
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In antiquity, our numbers grew enough to give rise to towns and cities, kingdoms, and empires. Rulers needed to know how many and what kind of people lived in their realms. The first city-state, Sumeria (4000 BC) located on today's Iraq and Iran border, had agriculture heavily dependent on irrigation systems. Because the Tigris and Euphrates rivers were too unreliable to feed the growing population, irrigation canals were built, systems depending on human labor. Rulers and priests needed accurate counts of how many laborers they could suborn for this work. Thus the first census was born.

The ancient Chinese had the same problem: need for labor for irrigation canals and for such projects as the Great Wall. Officials carried out counts of how many people there were, how many could be drafted for large projects, and how many landowners could be squeezed for taxes needed to support these efforts. The census was also used to assess how many young men could provide military service.

Any well-run empire depended on accurate data. The Romans, always efficient managers, used census counts to assess how many and what kind of subjects they ruled over; how many had property, farmed land, could serve in the military, and could provide slave labor or army service. A familiar Christmas story recounts a Roman census in Judea, for which everyone was required to return to their native village or town for the count. That is where Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary were traveling when Jesus was born.

A most famous survey in English history took place after William the Conqueror (a Norman Duke), became England's king in 1066. In 1068, he presided over an extensive survey of the nobility, how much land and wealth they commanded, how many townspeople and rich merchants there were, and other information that could establish tax revenues. This survey was called The Domesday Book, a title that gave us the notion of the inevitability of death and taxes. Any lying or deception was punished by death, and land ownership disputes were decided without appeal.

Upon the birth of the United States, the Constitution stated that a census be taken every ten years. The first such census was taken in 1790, under Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, with 22 more federal censuses since then. The Department of Commerce carries this responsibility. In between the official censuses, the Bureau estimates numbers based on surveys and statistical models, specifically targeting cities, the American Community Survey

The census process has grown from simple to exceedingly complex, just as our society has evolved from primarily farms and villages to complex cities. We expect much more of our government to provide a more even playing field than a purely capitalistic model could do. Since the time of President Theodore Roosevelt, the government can be said to be Capitalism's partner, filling in where purely monetary considerations cannot.

We have a public education system intended to provide us with literate voters and responsible citizens. Social Security was established to keep our elders from penury. Public health and welfare systems support many who otherwise would suffer; the National Park system protects our national heritage from exploitation and ruin. For all of these systems to work, the government needs accurate statistics to assess how much money is needed and where it is best spent. Congress must determine the spending.

One of the most important findings of the official census is current population count determining numbers of representatives in the House of Representatives. Congressional seats are gained or lost as populations move or grow. A system of congressional districting that has emerged over many years, Gerrymandering, has come from political parties creating bizarre shapes to districts that deprive the opposing party from a fair vote. Both parties have engaged in this dishonest practice over the years, but now the Supreme Court may finally attempt ruling on more equitable criteria for district borders. A census year makes this process essential.

A good census can provide the funding needed to support the institutions that we most value. It is not Doomsday; it is Democracy at work.

681 words

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