

Will You Stand Up And Be Counted?

Census Data Could Have Far-Reaching Impacts Across Rural America



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It's short, easy to fill out and totally confidential. But if you are like me, the U.S. Census form arrived with a stack of other mail and it took awhile to find it in my stack. Answering the ten questions and sending it back in the postage-paid envelope was easy, but I still didn't make the "Census Day" deadline of April 1. Nonetheless, completed responses like mine are slowly coming in – just over half of the 120 million Census questionnaires that were mailed to households last month have already been returned.

This is just the 23rd time the country has undertaken the constitutionally mandated population count, a process dating back to 1790. Census officials have launched a major media campaign to encourage signup, describing the effort as "the only civic event that includes every person in the country" and certainly impacts every citizen in a variety of ways.

The Census is the basis for America's representative democracy, ensuring that Congress is fairly reapportioned every 10 years between the states. Census counts are also used to redraw state and local legislative boundaries so that political representation is fairly distributed across their changing populations, explains Census Bureau Director Robert Groves. The effort is also a costly one.

"Here is something every family can do to help their government save money, and get an accurate Census at the same time. Mailing back your census form when it arrives will contribute to saving hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars," Groves added. If the Census Bureau does not receive a form by the end of the month, census workers will begin visiting the households in order to get the information. Filling out the form is required by law.

"It costs the government just 42 cents for a postage paid envelope when a household mails back the form," said Groves. "It costs \$57 to send a census taker door-to-door to follow up with each household that fails to respond." The Census Bureau estimates that if every household completed and mailed back their census form, taxpayers could reduce the cost of taking the census by \$1.5 billion.

At the present response rate, the Census Bureau still projects that it will have to send census takers to an estimated 48 million households that do not respond by mail. Following up door-to-door to count households from May to July will require hiring about 650,000 census workers.

Rural areas respond

A handful of Rural Midwestern states are leading the nation in response rates and for good reason. Not only is it required by law, but it can be a helpful way to get more money for local communities. Census data help determine how more than \$400 billion in federal funds are distributed to tribal, state and local governments every year – including funding for schools, roads, health care and other critical programs. The Census Bureau posted a map that is up-

dated daily and shows by jurisdiction the percentage of people who have returned their forms. The purpose is twofold: to highlight areas with low response rates that need more work and to foster a sense of competition among communities. As of April 6, the top ten states, ranked by percentage of completed census forms, were: Wisconsin (72 percent), Iowa (70 percent), North Dakota (69 percent), Minnesota (69 percent), Indiana (68 percent), South Dakota (67 percent), Nebraska (67 percent), Kansas (65 percent), Missouri (64 percent) and Illinois (64 percent). To view the map and see how your state compares, go to: <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/take10map/>

It's not a question of whether some of these states will gain a new U.S. Representative. North Dakota and South Dakota only have one each and have not seen significant gains in population. But the final tally may determine whether or not seats are lost in other parts of the country. Based on current projections, Iowa is expected to lose a congressional district, along with Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Where are the likely gainers? The projections primarily show a transition from Rust Belt to Sun Belt. Texas, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina, Utah and Washington are all expected to increase congressional representation.

Stakes are high

Census data are used to apportion congressional seats, based on population so that there is roughly the same number of residents in each of the 435 congressional districts. Redrawing the districts won't start in earnest until Census figures are finalized at the end of this year. In most states, that process will be up to the governors and state legislatures. Little wonder then, that a record number of campaign donations are already flowing into state campaigns, trying to influence the balance of power.

Voters in 37 states will elect governors this fall, the highest number of gubernatorial races ever in one year. In the state legislatures, there will be about 7,000 races this year.

Democrats and Republicans, labor unions, corporations and thousands of other interest groups, are planning to pour millions of dollars into November's state legislative and gubernatorial races. But both parties are focusing on about 100 key races in 16 states that could tip the balance of power in statehouses and ultimately, give state lawmakers their shot at redrawing congressional districts. Then the "real" fun will begin, as majorities in any given state try to draw district lines in a way that will favor the election odds for their own political party.

During the last round of redistricting, the fight was especially brutal in Texas. At one point, Democratic lawmakers fled across state lines to avoid voting on a Republican-drawn congressional map. The map ultimately was put in place and helped shift the state's congressional delegation from majority Democrat to majority Republican. Δ

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