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The United States Decennial Census: Problems, Possibilities, and Prospects

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Abstract: The 1990 U.S. Decennial Census of Population and Housing encountered major problems including rising costs, lower public cooperation, a politically sensitive undercount adjustment issue, increased litigation, and the perception of increasing politicalization of the census. In light of these problems, many researchers and policymakers are calling for alternatives to the current decennial census procedures and raising questions about the need for a decennial census of the type the United States has had in the past.

This article highlights some of the major problems facing the U.S. Census Bureau and reviews some of the proposals that have been put forth to improve the decennial census. The review leads to my prognosis that there will not be any fundamental change in the census methodology for the next U.S. decennial census. This conclusion is largely based on the assumption that the Census Bureau will not be able to identify a single alternative that is clearly better than the methodology used in 1990, that is technically feasible, and that will be quickly accepted by political and public stakeholders in the time frame available.

1. Introduction

During the past few years a number of respected individuals ranging from professional demographers to journalists and politicians have expressed concern about the results and the methods used in the 1990 United States Census of Population and Housing (hereafter referred to as the census). While some of the controversial issues surrounding the U.S. census have also been witnessed in other developed countries (Butz 1984), the focus in this article is on the U.S. census.

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Observers differ on the extent and severity of problems associated with the 1990 census, but there is broad agreement that it was probably the most contentious census in our nation's history if measured by litigation and negative media coverage. The problems encountered in conducting the 1990 census have led some observers to question the fundamental approach of the Census Bureau. The U.S. General Accounting Office (1991a) concluded, "Escalating costs and the apparently increased undercount of the 1990 census suggest that the current census methodology may have reached the limits of its effectiveness in enumerating an increasingly diverse, dynamic and elusive population." Some observers are calling for changes in census methodology, but there is no consensus on what specific changes should be

introduced (U.S. General Accounting Office 1991b). The public dialogue regarding the execution of the next census is frequently confused because the current methodology is often not fully understood, and differences between alternative approaches are often indistinct (Bailar n.d.). Furthermore, discussions of alternative approaches are confounded because they are part of a larger dialogue about the future information and data needs of the United States (Wallman 1988; Bonnen 1983; U.S. General Accounting Office 1988a; U.S. General Accounting Office 1988b; Wallman, Boardman, Hill, Sacks, and Tortora 1988).

This article reviews the many uses of census data and the stakeholders associated with such uses. Several of the major problems that accompanied the 1990 Decennial Census are discussed and the major modifications to census methodology under consideration at the Census Bureau are briefly examined. Finally, a prognosis for the next U.S. Decennial Census is offered and some of the key issues shaping that conclusion are discussed.

2. Why Do We Need a Census?

There is little if any serious debate about the need for a census. The debate focuses on which of the alternatives is the best approach and on the costs and benefits of possible census methods.

As changes to census methodology are discussed, it is important to keep in mind the uses of census data. Most of the uses identified below require data that only the decennial census can provide: data for small geographic areas or small groups within our population. Furthermore, the census provides data that are consistent across the country in terms of timing, definition, and method of collection.

The many uses of census data produce a number of different stakeholder groups, including various agencies within the federal government, state and local governments, the business community, the research community, and various minority groups. These stakeholders will play an important role in determining the methodology used in the next census.

There is a number of ways to classify uses of census data. Five such categories are listed below, roughly in order of importance:

1. requirements of reapportionment and redistricting,
2. distribution of public funds,
3. public planning,
4. private sector use, and
5. scholarly research.

While legal requirements to produce some of these data are tenuous or nonexistent, public expectations provide strong pressures to continue producing the same, if not more, information from the next census. According to former Census Bureau director John Keane (1985, p. 341) "In recent decades, the call for more and better Census Bureau data is louder and more frequent."

2.1. Reapportionment and redistricting

The Constitution calls for a census every ten years to apportion the seats in Congress. Clearly, the census must be sufficient to provide the data for this task. However, all that is needed for reapportionment is a total population figure for each state.

In addition to reapportionment, a series of court decisions in the 1960s tied census data to the redistricting process (see Parker 1989). Redistricting requires population figures for very small areas, census blocks or election precincts. Another court decision in 1983 (*Karcher v. Dagget*, 462 U.S. 725; 1983) requires that Congressional districts be as equal in population size as possible. This decision provides legal impetus to

retain as much geographic detail as possible in the census because such detailed data will make it easier to construct districts with equal populations.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 requires data on the voting age population of whites and minorities for small areas such as census blocks and election precincts. This is another legal barrier for reducing the level of geographic detail of data collected by the census.

2.2. *Distribution of public funds*

Census data are widely used as a basis for distributing federal and state funds by means of statistical formulas. A study by Frank (1988) found 109 programs and 27 grants at the federal level that are affected by decennial census data. A study by the U.S. Census Bureau (1986) documents the legislative requirements for almost every item on the decennial census.

The use of statistical formulas to distribute public funds has grown rapidly in the past several decades as government leaders sought a more objective way to match resources and need. Census data are a fundamental part of this process. Elected officials and a large share of the public would be distraught if the census failed to produce the data needed to perform this function.

2.3. *Public planning*

Public agencies at every level of government use census data for planning. The use of census data by public agencies is linked to decisions about the need for new facilities, the best location for such facilities, and methods to target recipients of certain services (see National Research Council 1991). It is widely believed that use of census data contributes to better planning which improves the efficiency of these agencies thereby saving taxpayers' money.

There is seldom a legislative or legal requirement for the Census Bureau to produce the data needed for these activities, although much of the data may be required for other purposes for which there is legal or legislative protection. Consequently, some of the data needed for these functions may be more vulnerable to cuts than data mandated by law. Nonetheless, officials at every level of government have a stake in preserving the census data used for planning purposes.

2.4. *Business sector uses*

The business sector has come to depend on census data to perform a wide variety of functions such as site selection, locating potential customers, and calibrating proprietary statistical models. "Statistics are the heavenly bodies of economics" stated *Time* magazine reporter Daniel Benjamin (1988), and census data are a central component of the federal statistical system (see Wallman 1988).

Over the last two decades a data vendor industry has developed which depends heavily on data from the decennial census (Starr and Corson 1987; Rowland 1991). A large and growing number of American firms use data produced by such data vendors. While much of the data used by the private sector is required for public programs, the production and dissemination of these data specifically for use by the private sector is not a high government priority. Nonetheless, the business community is a powerful constituency which has a stake in maintaining, if not expanding, data from the census.

2.5. *Scholarly research*

Census data are heavily relied on by a broad range of social science researchers because the census provides a rich source of information to address many of the questions and issues that interest social scientists.

Rowland's (1991) study of Federal Depository Libraries, found that 82% of the estimated 168,000 people who access these libraries each week were academics.

However, there is no legal requirement to produce the data used by this group. Scholarly use of census data probably has a low government priority relative to other uses.

Nonetheless, the research community represents another interest group that can influence decisions when it is mobilized. For example, operating through professional associations and umbrella groups such as the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics (COPAFS) and the Council of Social Science Associations (COSSA) scholarly researchers were able to exert pressure to restore certain questions on the decennial census that the Office of Management and Budget had planned to eliminate in 1987.

3. Problems: Costs, Quality and Perceptions

Several major problems were experienced in conducting the 1990 decennial census. Furthermore, the costs of conducting the census increased significantly between 1980 and 1990. However, as Anderson (1988) reminds us, problems and controversies surrounding the census are not new. It is also the case that many of these problems were anticipated by the Census Bureau and the professional demographic community (see National Academy of Sciences 1988).

In part, the census has become more problematic because of the Census Bureau's openness in sharing findings from past research and evaluation on the census. The census has also become more contentious because of legal and legislative decisions in the past few decades that now link census results to political power and the distribution of public funds more than they did in the past.

Many of the problems that plagued the 1990 decennial census are likely to become more difficult in the future. For example, public cooperation is not likely to improve in the near future. However, use of a less imposing questionnaire and better promotional activity may help mitigate some of the expected decline in public cooperation. Nor is there likely to be an improvement in the availability of workers for the low-paying temporary census jobs.

We may have seen a foreshadowing of the difficulties the Census Bureau will face during the 1990s when the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) challenged the plans for the 1990 census in 1987. OMB asked the Bureau to cut several questions, move questions from the 100% questionnaire to the sample form, and reduce the sample size. All of these measures would have reduced respondent burden and cut costs. All of these are areas that will undoubtedly be re-examined for the next census.

Several of the most problematic areas regarding the 1990 census are reviewed below.

3.1. Increasing costs

The increasing cost of the census is probably the single factor most responsible for the growing interest in re-examining the way the census is conducted. There has been a steady increase in the costs of the decennial census since at least 1950 (see Table 1), but the steepest escalation has occurred since 1970. In 1970 the total cost (in 1990 dollars) was $698.1 million. In 1980 it was $1,585.1 million (in 1990 dollars), and in 1990 it was about $2.6 billion. The change between 1970 and 1990 amounts to almost a fourfold increase in real dollars and indicates that there

Table 1. Costs of the decennial census 1950 through 1990

	Costs in millions		Per capita costs in 1990 dollars
	Current dollars	1990 dollars	
1950	67.7	344.5	2.26
1960	128.0	523.5	2.89
1970	221.6	698.1	3.41
1980	1,068.8	1,585.1	7.00
1990	2,600.0	2,600.0	10.45

Source: Data prior to 1990 are from the U.S. General Accounting Office (1982, p. 5). Figures from this source were provided in 1980 dollars. The author converted them to 1990 dollars using the Consumer Price Index.
The 1990 figure is from the Census Bureau.

may be as much as a 50% increase in real dollars for the next census. The U.S. General Accounting Office states (1990, p. 1) "If the Bureau uses the 1990 methodology for the 2000 census, the Bureau's 21st century planning staff estimates that the 2000 census could cost $4.8 billion (in current dollars)."

Part of this increase is due to a growing population, but the cost per household also has risen steadily over the past few decades. When inflation and the increasing population size is factored in, the costs go from $2.26 per capita in the 1950 Census to $7.00 per capita in 1980 (both expressed in 1990 dollars) (see Anderson 1988). The final cost of the 1990 census is about $10.45 per capita (expressed in 1990 dollars).

During a period of record high deficits and cuts in many government programs, it is increasingly difficult to justify the costs of data collection. The escalating costs of the decennial census is a prime factor behind the efforts to find less costly ways to gather this information or reduce the amount of information collected.

One reason for increased costs was *lower levels of public cooperation.* The mail response rate for the 1990 census was five percentage points below what the Bureau expected and ten percentage points below the rate for 1980. The low response rate required the Census Bureau to ask Congress for a supplemental appropriation in the range of $170 million to complete the census. According to some Census Bureau researchers, Fay, Bates, and Moore (1991, p. 231), "The lower than expected mail response to the 1990 Decennial Census increased costs and has been cited by some observers as cause to rethink the entire census design for 2000."

Preliminary research by Kulka, Holt, and Carter (1991, p. 180) indicates that "Nonreceipt of the census form is a major factor in nonresponse ... " However, it is widely believed that the lower response rate was not only a specific rejection of the census, but a broader reaction to the recent proliferation of junk-mail, general alienation from government, and increased time pressures. Others mention the increased time pressures and decreased trust of government as factors related to nonresponse in the 1990 census. The decline in response rates for most surveys has been noted by other researchers (see Goyder and Leiper 1985). Some critics have pointed to the innocuous envelope that the census questionnaire came in and the onerous questionnaire design as factors contributing to the low response rate.

Another reason for the high cost of the 1990 census was *staffing difficulties.* The Census Bureau had to hire nearly 300,000 temporary workers during the peak census-taking period. These are typically low-paying jobs with no potential for advancement and no benefits. In order to fill all the positions, the Census Bureau had to interview four to five times as many people as they needed and in some localities they had to raise the pay rate to attract workers.

Table 2. Net undercount estimates of the 1980 and 1990 censuses derived from demographic analysis

Group	Size of net undercount in millions		Percent of group undercounted	
	1980	1990	1980	1990
Total	3.17	4.68	1.4	1.9
Males	2.68	3.48	2.4	2.8
Females	0.50	1.20	0.4	0.9
Blacks	1.67	1.84	5.9	5.7
Nonblacks	1.50	2.85	0.7	1.3

Source: 1990 data are from Robinson, Ahmed, Das Gupta, and Woodrow (1991). 1980 data are from Fay, Passell, and Robinson (1988).

3.2. *Quality of the 1990 census*

The most widely noted measure of quality in census data is the net undercount rate. While final analysis is not yet complete, preliminary data strongly suggest that the completeness of the 1990 census will be lower than in 1980, despite the increased expenditures. Table 2 shows the undercount estimates derived from demographic analysis. There was a significantly higher undercount of the total population in 1990 than in 1980.

It is important to keep in mind that the net undercount rate is the result of undercounts and overcounts. When both types of errors are examined, it appears that the coverage errors in the 1990 census may be even higher than indicated by the undercount results. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office (1991, p. 2) "despite problems with direct comparability of data, the 1990 census appears to have had at least 50 percent more errors than it had in 1980."

The potential use of a statistical adjustment for known undercounts has met several barriers. It is not completely clear whether the language of the Constitution prohibits use of sampling or statistical adjustment in the census data used for reapportionment. One dimension of this issue appears to have been settled by a recent judicial decision. In 1987, the City of New York and numerous other plaintiffs initiated a lawsuit which would have required the Census Bureau to adjust 1990 Census data for any undercount (*The City of New York et al. v. United States Department of Commerce et al.*, 88-Civ.-3474). In April of 1990, as part of a hearing pertaining to that suit, Judge McLaughlin ruled that statistical adjustment does not violate the constitutional language.

One of the arguments for using statistical adjustment is that it will improve accuracy. It might also lower costs. Right now, the merits of using statistical adjustment to produce final census numbers are being hotly debated in demographic and political circles. On July 15, 1991, the Secretary of Commerce issued his decision not to adjust the 1990 census. It is noteworthy that this decision was contrary to the judgment of the Census Bureau advisory staff that voted seven to two in favor of an adjustment. Inevitably, the decision on undercount adjustment will be made by the courts.

In all fairness, there are positive aspects of the 1990 census that have not been fully recognized. First, the TIGER system, a computerized map of the entire country, has made an enormous improvement in the ability to match census data to geographic locations. The Census Bureau was able to produce the maps needed for taking the census and has produced a series of maps for data users. In addition, the Census Bureau has made TIGER files available to the public so that those who have mapping software can create their own maps. There have been a few problems in specific areas but, given the magnitude of the task, the development of the TIGER system has widely been seen as a success and a big improvement in the quality

of maps available from the Census Bureau. The benefits of this effort will be seen over the course of the 1990s and in the preparation for the next census.

Secondly, the automation of the census-taking process has dramatically increased the speed with which data are released. It is important to recognize that the lag between collection and dissemination affects the usefulness of the data. The information in the census reflects conditions on April 1, 1990 (or in some cases during calendar year 1989). Over time these conditions change and the longer it takes to obtain data after they are collected, the less likely the data to reflect current conditions.

The technical innovations of the 1990 census (widespread use of computers and computerized mapping) that distinguish the 1990 census from previous censuses may parallel the 1950s when the Census Bureau introduced the UNIVAC computer and the FOSDIC process for computerizing questionnaire data. The fruits of the UNIVAC/FOSDIC innovations were seen in subsequent censuses. Perhaps the technical innovations of the 1990 census will reduce costs and improve performance of future censuses far more than we anticipate.

3.3. *Changing perceptions of the Census Bureau*

Perceptions of the census and the Census Bureau are important. Perceptions dictate the willingness of the public to cooperate with the census and the degree of support the Census Bureau receives in the professional community and in political circles. With regard to the 1990 census, the Bureau had to grapple with two negative perceptions.

First, the mistakes involved in the census (missed people, missed apartment buildings, wrong telephone numbers, people unable to return their questionnaires, etc.) seem significantly higher in 1990 than in 1980. However, it is difficult to tell whether more problems actually occurred or simply that the problems received more media attention. The public perception of a multitude of problems associated with the 1990 census was shaped by the extensive press coverage given these problems (probably because problems make better news stories than successes), but that is part of the reality with which the Census Bureau must deal. While the public's memory of these problems will undoubtedly fade by the year 2000, there may be some residual effect that could lower levels of public cooperation in the future.

Secondly, during the 1980s there was a growing concern among many demographers and statisticians that the Census Bureau was not as immune from partisan political concerns as it once had been.

There were a number of events during the 1980s which gave rise to this concern. A few examples are provided here. The fact that the decision on undercount adjustment was made by the Secretary of Commerce rather than the Census Bureau Director is taken as a reflection of increased politicalization of the census. The fact that the Secretary did not follow the advice of the Census Bureau highlights these concerns.

Earlier in the 1980s, partisan political overtones related to an undercount adjustment were also alleged. In 1987, officials in the Reagan administration decided not to pursue research that would allow potential adjustment for undercounts. This was seen by some as politically motivated. The Office of Management and Budget intervention in 1987 regarding sample size and questionnaire content was also seen as involvement motivated more by political than scientific concerns.

The fact that the first person President Bush nominated to direct the Census Bureau during his administration was primarily

linked to the census through political redistricting was disturbing to many professional demographers. This stands in stark contrast to the Carter administration which showed no political bias in its appointment of the director of the Census Bureau. These events are a concern to a number of demographers and statisticians because they undermine the perception of the Census Bureau as a politically independent statistical agency. If the trend continues during the 1990s, it may diminish the enthusiasm with which the statistical community supports Census Bureau activities.

4. Possibilities

The range of suggestions on census reform runs from use of satellite photographs to elimination of the census altogether. However, the range of realistic alternatives is much narrower.

The Bureau has established a planning process which involves three committees (Technical, Policy, and Public Advisory) and a research and development framework which will focus on six alternatives. These committees are scheduled to complete their work by 1995.

Six "full census design alternatives", (see, U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991) have been identified by the Census Bureau as a starting point for census planning. These six alternatives are reviewed below:

1. A 1990-type census with enhancements based on the 1990 experience. Under this scenario, the methodology used in the next census would be very much like the methods used in the last one.
2. Minimum census which would collect only data needed to satisfy Constitutional requirements. This is sometimes referred to as a "post-card" census because all information gathered for an individual could be put on a postcard. Other data traditionally collected by the decennial census would be placed on demographic surveys or generated from other data systems.
3. Use of administrative records with no direct enumeration of the population. This approach would tap data in other government files such as those in the Social Security Administration, the Internal Revenue Service and various welfare agencies to obtain key information about individuals. An administrative records census would provide minimum data with other data generated from demographic surveys or other data systems.
4. Sample-based census with attempts to measure only a subset of the population identified through statistical sampling. In this approach there would be no attempt to contact everyone in the country.
5. A multimode census which would use several types of data collection methods tailored to different lifestyles. For example, under this approach part of the population might be enumerated using a traditional census method, part using administrative records, and part using a sample-based census.
6. Rolling sample census would involve a continuous measurement of samples of the population cumulated to full enumeration over a given period. Under this method, only a segment of the population would be approached each year. Over a longer period, say ten years, everyone would have been included in the sample.

The Bureau indicates that this is not an exhaustive list of options which will be examined during the next few years. Each full design alternative has many components to be tested. Aside from the full

design alternatives, there are many important questions about issues such as expanded use of new technology, undercount adjustment, improvement of a master address list, and questionnaire simplification.

5. Census Prospects: Fundamental Reform or Incremental Changes?

The major question looming before the Census Bureau is whether the census in the year 2000 will involve major structural changes from the past few censuses or simply small incremental modifications. Of course, it should be recognized that what one person sees as an incremental change might be seen by someone else as a fundamental reform.

The most likely prospect for the next census will be an approach similar to that used in 1990. No fundamentally new approach will be implemented. This conclusion is based on the fact that a major shift in census methodology would require a combination of unlikely events. A single preferred alternative would have to be agreed upon in the next few years by the Census Bureau. The Bureau would have to convince the majority, if not all, of the stakeholders that the new methodology would save money without sacrificing data content or quality. The new methodology would have to be accepted quickly by Congress, the White House, the Office of Management and Budget, and the public to allow adequate time for implementation. None of these events is highly probable.

Let me discuss some of these factors in more detail. The census is an enormous undertaking that requires a long and involved planning period (See Bounpane 1985). Consequently, making major changes to the next census must be done very early in the decade. In order to make a major change in the census methodology, all of the components and all of the full design alternatives must be evaluated sufficiently to derive a single recommended approach that is clearly superior.

Given the number of alternatives that are under consideration and the short time available for experimentation and study, it will be impossible to identify a single alternative that is technically feasible and clearly superior to the others.

Two recent issues involving the Census Bureau shape this view. Any consideration of the prospects for major alterations in the census-taking process for the year 2000 must include an assessment of the undercount adjustment issue that has plagued the Census Bureau for at least 20 years. Relative to the kinds of changes being considered for the next census, whether or not to make a statistical adjustment for those undercounted in the census is a relatively minor matter. Despite roughly two decades of research and untold hours of public and political input, there is no consensus on this issue. If it is so difficult to reach a consensus on whether or not to make an adjustment for the undercount, it is unlikely that agreement can be reached regarding major changes in census methodology.

The second item involves the Bureau's planning for the 1990 census. As the Bureau plans for the next census, it has to anticipate some of the broad societal parameters that will shape the census-taking process. In this context the gap between the Census Bureau's estimate of what the mail out-mail back return rate would be for the 1990 census and what really happened is striking. The Bureau estimated that 70% of the respondents would mail back their questionnaires, but only about 65% actually did. The mail-back rate dropped from 75% in 1980 to 65% in 1990.

This is important because many of the alternatives to current methodology being

considered by the Bureau would require assumptions about the context of the census in the society half a decade into the future. Anyone trying to plan the next census should be wary of new methods that depended heavily on estimates of this type.

Another reason for skepticism about fundamental census reform is related to the Census Bureau as an institution. The Bureau has an image of a conservative risk-aversive institution. In many ways this image has served the bureau well. This image provides the Bureau's data with a degree of credibility not always present with other government agencies, not to mention private groups.

Upper ranks of the Census Bureau staff are filled with people who have been at the Bureau for 10, 20, or 30 years. Some observers maintain that there is a Census Bureau culture. When most of the key managers receive their management training at the Bureau, there is likely to be a certain perspective built into the planning process.

The high retention rate at the Bureau has benefits and costs. The high rate of staff retention provides solid expertise based on experience. It would be diffiult to be in the position of planning the next census without staff who had participated in the last one. Nonetheless, there is some truth to the notion that working at the Bureau for long periods sometimes leads to a view which does not fully appreciate some legitimate alternatives. This is probably inevitable in any organization. Furthermore, the staff who have been part of the decision-making teams for past censuses may have a psychological investment in those methods. This may be a minor factor but it is one that will tilt the decision toward a repeat of the 1990 methodology. On the other hand, my view on this issue is tempered by the fact that seven of nine people on the Census Bureau staff who advised the Director on undercount adjustment opted for adjustment.

One might say that the innovative ideas for the next census will come from outside the Bureau, especially from those in our nation's universities. When government agencies have a serious problem, they often turn to experts in our nation's universities and research centers for assistance.

There are two very different messages regarding outside advice to the Bureau. Those outside the Bureau often indicate that such activities can prove fruitless because the Census Bureau personnel already had their minds made up or were too rigid in their consideration of options. On the other hand, outside advisors have often been criticized as not understanding or appreciating the magnitude and complexity of the operational side of the census. Both of these perspectives have a degree of legitimacy. For these reasons, advice from those outside the Bureau is not likely to be particularly helpful in developing a new census methodology.

There is another reason for concluding that Census Bureau outsiders will not be particularly helpful in a fundamental revision of census methodology. The careers of many professional demographers hinge on analyzing data from the Census Bureau. It would be hard for these researchers to recommend changes in the census methodology that would decrease the geographic or subject matter detail from the census. This same argument applies to the business sector. A whole industry has developed around repackaging and interpreting census data. Some of the design alternatives under consideration would dramatically reduce the data available from the decennial census. Can members of this group be expected to provide objective input into planning the next census?

It is widely believed that the census has become increasingly politicized during the past decade. Changes in the census approach

must be both technically feasible and politically acceptable. Achieving political and public acceptability may be as difficult as solving the many technical problems surrounding a fundamentally new approach.

If the Bureau were to propose a fundamentally new method for taking the next census, what is the likelihood that the Bureau could get the political powers to devote the attention it would take to quickly approve (or disapprove) such a proposed change? A fundamental redesign of the census would have to obtain political approval (White House and Congressional approval) early in the process, but getting the attention of politicians during the census planning process has been all but impossible. Top officials have problems more compelling than determining the appropriate methodology for a census that is five to seven years in the future.

Grappling with census issues does not provide many benefits for most politicians. Furthermore, the individual elected officials and partisan political power may change during the time from census planning to implementation. A plan that is approved by an administration or a Congress early in the decade may be opposed by a new administration or Congress late in the decade.

Aside from the political stamp of approval, numerous public stakeholders will be interested in census reform. Most Americans have a basic understanding of the current census methodology. However, some of the new approaches being discussed would be much less clear to the public and, therefore, probably less acceptable.

A major change in census methodology is a delicate issue which would require the endorsement of all the major stakeholders. If any proposed new method were strongly opposed by Congress, the demographic/statistical community, the business sector, minorities, or another stakeholder group, it would be difficult to implement. Failure to reach consensus on a new methodology would undoubtedly lead to a repetition of the 1990 methodology with minor enhancements.

Despite my skepticism regarding changes in the next census, the attention being given to census methodology at this point in time is useful. It will help us focus on what we want from our national statistical system and it will develop a set of research questions that will guide development of census-taking alternatives for the 21st century.

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