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## The final 2000 Census state response rates: myths and realities

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### Abstract

The decennial United States Census of Population determines not only political representation, but also how more than \$185 billion of federal funds are allocated. Hence, there is intense interest in who responds, or does not respond, to Census queries. Both the popular media and the Bureau of the Census officials have developed a set of informal hypotheses which speak to who responds. Nine such hypotheses are identified and tested. For example, it is alleged that the elderly do not respond to the Census as often as others. Also, it is asserted that Republican politicians and talk show hosts diminished 2000 Census participation. No evidence is found to support these propositions. Empirical support is found for the media/Census view of the world in only two of nine cases and partial support in one. In two cases, the evidence neither supports nor rejects the hypotheses. In two cases, the evidence partially rejects the hypothesis, and in two cases, more strongly rejects the hypotheses. The results are sufficiently strong that they should inspire increased caution in media reporting and in the statements of Bureau of the Census officials.

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Approximately 281.4 million individuals, living in approximately 188 million households, were residents of the United States on 1 April 2000 (U.S. Census, 2000). “Approximately” is the appropriate adverb, since the precise number, or at least the official estimated number, can never be known with precision because not all residents were contacted by the Bureau of the Census, some neglected to respond to the Bureau’s contact, and others did not wish to be contacted and counted. Still others may have been counted more than once. Nonetheless, the

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official Census enumeration of the nation's population is the basis for determining the size of each state's congressional representation, as well as for the slicing and distribution of a federal pie that exceeded \$185 billion in 2000 (Schmitt, 2001). The stakes are large. The Mayor of Detroit estimated each additional Detroiter identified by the Census was worth \$3,000 annually to his city (Christian, 2000).<sup>1</sup>

In addition to its desire to sponsor an accurate and efficient enumeration of residents of the United States, the Bureau of the Census has a budgetary interest in both the ease and the completeness of the Census. The most common way the Bureau gathers information for the decennial Census is by means of forms mailed to each identifiable American household. For the 2000 Census, approximately 42 million forms were mailed and the Bureau estimates each completed form mailed to, and returned by, a household costs it an average of \$3, whereas that cost rises to about \$35 per household when it is necessary to send a live person to do the enumeration (SmartMoney, 2000).

Worried that fewer American households had been returning U.S. Census forms, the Bureau placed strong emphasis in the 2000 Census upon increasing response rates, particularly among members of minority groups. Census forms were printed in six different languages, including Chinese, Korean, and Tagalog. In September 2000, the Bureau announced that the response rate had increased from the 65% of the 1990 Census to 67% (Cohn, 2000). Bureau Director Kenneth Prewitt expressed great pleasure, though it meant that roughly one-third of all American households did not, or could not, respond to an official Census inquiry. Even so, in February 2002, the Census proclaimed that the "net undercount" of residents (the difference between people who were missed and those who were double counted) had declined from 1.6% of the population in 1990 to a range between 0.96 and 1.4% in 2000 (Kulish, 2001).

Census Director Prewitt attributed the improved 2000 Census performance to a variety of factors, but singled out higher response rates among minority individuals. For example, the Census believes the net undercount of African Americans declined from 4.99% in 1990 to a range between 1.60 and 2.73% in 2000 (VandeHei & Kulish, 2001). Simultaneously, a variety of individuals reiterated a set of informal hypotheses purporting to explain why some individuals respond and others do not. As but one example, Census officials expressed their belief that "an outcry against the long form led by some Republican leaders and radio talk show hosts" might diminish Census responses (Cohn, 2000). In fact, several of these casual hypotheses are not supported by a more detailed analysis of the data.

This study examines the final U.S. Census response rates for the 50 states and the District of Columbia and seeks to explain those response rates (which varied from a low of 56% of all households in Alaska to a high of 76% in Iowa) by means of conventional socioeconomic variables. The focus is upon testing a set of popular, informal hypotheses put forward primarily by the media, but sometimes by the Census Bureau itself, that purport to explain why some classes of individuals respond frequently to the Census, but others do not. As we shall see, several of these hypotheses have no basis in fact, despite their popularity. Seemingly apparent explanatory relationships between variables often disappear when multivariate analysis is utilized. For example, the higher response rates of registered voters melt away when control variables such as income, educational status, and age are taken into account.

## 1. Previous work

Individuals may not return a Census form because they: (1) are elusive and cannot be contacted; (2) forget the form and neglect to return it; or (3) they choose not to return the form.<sup>2</sup> Many reasons are cited by the Bureau, researchers, and media for non-responses by households to the Census. Perhaps the most prominent general hypothesis concerns a long-term tendency for “declining civic or political participation, whether measured at the individual or aggregate level” (see Couper, Singer, & Kulka, 1998, for an excellent summary of the research in this area). This results in alienation and disengagement; the “Bowling Alone” phenomenon (Putnam, 1995a,b) is a much-cited manifestation. We examine 11 popular generalizations and hypotheses with respect to civic engagement and Census participation:

- (1) *Minority households are more alienated, less engaged in a civic sense, and hence less likely to respond.* Formal empirical evidence supporting this hypothesis has been generated by Abramson (1983), Goyder and Leiper (1985), Bennett and Bennett (1986), Fein (1989, 1990), West and Fein (1990), Herring, House, and Mero (1991), Robinson, Ahmed, Das Gupta, and Woodrow (1993), Hogan (1993), Couper et al. (1998). Popular media renditions of this notion are legion and have become an article of faith. Recent versions include Baker (2000), Broder (2000), Cohn (2000), McMahan (2000), Davis (2001), Schmitt (2001), Valbrun (2001), VandeHei and Kulish (2001).
- (2) *Immigrant households are less likely to respond.* Fein (1989) provided early empirical support for this hypothesis based upon the 1980 Census. Baker (2000), Christian (2000), and Cohn (2000) provide popular expositions of this thesis.
- (3) *Lower income households are less likely to respond.* This was Riche’s (1990b) interpretation of earlier censuses and Fein’s (1989) conclusion for the 1990 Census. Iversen, Furstenberg, and Belzer (1999) used a field survey to explore this phenomenon for the 1990 Census. Presser, Singer, and Van Hoewyk’s (2000) survey data suggested household income is negatively related to residents’ willingness to provide extensive Census data. Popular proponents of this hypothesis include Baker (2000) and Broder (2000).
- (4) *Households dominated by elderly individuals are less likely to respond.* Variations of this thesis have been suggested by Fein (1989) and in the popular press by Riche (1987), Baker (2000), and Walcyk (2000). However, the work of Robinson et al. (1993) dealing with the 1990 Census indicates the very young and very old are less likely to be undercounted than those aged 25 to 64. This suggests a higher (not lower) propensity to respond to the Census.
- (5) *Households dominated by elderly individuals are less likely to respond.* Variations of this thesis have been suggested by Fein (1989) and in the popular press by Riche (1987), Baker (2000), and Walcyk (2000). However, the work of Robinson et al. (1993) dealing with the 1990 Census indicates the very young and very old are less likely to be undercounted than those aged 25 to 64. This suggests a higher (not lower) propensity to respond to the Census.
- (6) *Heads of households who have less education are less likely to respond.* Presser et al. (2000) have generated survey data suggesting the lower the educational level of house-

holds, the less likely they are to provide extensive Census data. An earlier review of previous censuses by Riche (1987) reached the same conclusion, as did Fein (1989) for the 1980 Census. Mainstream media versions of this are found in Riche (1987) and Copeland (2000).

- (7) *Those who do not register to vote are less likely to respond.* Riche (1990a) generalized this result from previous censuses. Copeland (2000) provides media endorsement for this view.
- (8) *Those who listen to Republican political leaders or have Republican leanings are less likely to respond.* There has been no formal testing of this proposition; however, Broder (2000), Cohn (2000), and El Nasser (2000) have asserted it is true.
- (9) *Renters are less likely to respond than homeowners.* Fein (1989) and West and Fein (1990) reported highly mobile, less rooted households have lower Census participation rates, and Hogan (1993) provided strong empirical evidence for this notion in his study of the 1990 Census. Baker (2000) and Schmitt (2001) have advanced this hypothesis in the popular press.
- (10) *Significant regional differences in Census responses persist.* Fein's (1989) study of the 1980 Census suggested important regional differences in Census participation rates exist, a finding supported by Hogan (1993). Riche (1987) has given visibility to this idea in the popular press. Copeland (2000) examined this hypothesis in *USA Today* by means of a short case study of Prinsburg, Minnesota, where an astonishing 91% of households responded to the 2000 Census.

## 2. Testing the media and Census hypotheses

The states of the union plus the District of Columbia are the functional units of analysis in this study. Census data describing individual persons ordinarily are preferable, but will not be available for several years. Utilizing state data does have the advantage of enabling one to attribute a variety of socioeconomic characteristics to the representative resident that otherwise would not be known about specific individuals.

The response rate ( $R_i$ ) of state “ $i$ ” is assumed to be a function of a vector of socioeconomic variables classified as follows:

$$R_i = f(\text{Ethnicity, Education, Voting Behavior, Income, Demographics})$$

These variables, and their expected signs, based upon previous research and the conventional wisdom of the media, are described below.

### 2.1. Ethnicity variables

To represent ethnicity, we relied upon a multiple category dummy variable, where “White” is the excluded category. Hence, all coefficients are interpreted as deviations from what is true for a state that has an average percent of White citizens.

### *2.1.1. Percent Asian*

Percent of state's population classified as Asian or Asian American, 1998. The conventional wisdom is that the sign on this variable will be negative, that is, that Asians and Asian Americans will respond less often to Census requests because they are less ingrained in their communities, have less civic involvement, and perhaps harbor some suspicion of the Census.

### *2.1.2. Percent Black*

Percent of state's population classified as Black, 1998. Popular wisdom suggests a negative sign.

### *2.1.3. Percent American Indian*

Percent of state's population classified as American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, or Asian and Pacific Islanders, 1998. Media and Bureau of the Census discussions predict a negative sign.

### *2.1.4. Percent Hispanic*

Percent of state's population classified as Hispanic, 1998. Again, a negative sign is the prediction.

### *2.1.5. Percent immigrant*

Percent of a state's population classified as a recent immigrant, 1996. Media discussions suggest a negative sign.

## *2.2. Education variable*

### *2.2.1. Percent college education*

Percent of state's population having earned at least a bachelor's degree, 1998. The expected sign is positive, based upon the notion that more highly educated residents have greater civic involvement and are more familiar with the Census.

## *2.3. Voting behavior variables*

### *2.3.1. Registered voters*

Percent of state's voting age population registered to vote, 1996. The media predicts a positive sign on the grounds that those who register to vote have greater civic involvement and are more likely to cooperate with the Census.

### *2.3.2. Democratic presidential vote*

Percent of votes received by President Clinton, 1996. If the media and Census officials are correct, and some residents listen to Republican elected officials and talk show supporters and subsequently decline to participate in the Census, then this variable likely will have a positive sign.

## 2.4. *Income variable*

### 2.4.1. *Income*

Average personal income per individual, 1998. A positive sign is expected. The higher a state's average income, the more prosperous are the residents of that state, the greater their investment in the body politic, and the more likely they are to respond to the Census.

## 2.5. *Demographic variables*

### 2.5.1. *Region*

A state's location in one of four regions in the United States (Northeast, South, West, Midwest). We use a multiple category dummy variable, where "Midwest" is the excluded category. Hence, all coefficients are interpreted as deviations from what is true for an average midwestern state. Media speculations suggest a positive sign for the Northeast Region and negative signs for the South and West regions. It is not clear whether these speculations reflect geographical cultural bias, the origins of national media reporters, or other factors.

### 2.5.2. *Elderly*

Percent of a state's population aged 65 or older, 1998. A negative sign is suggested, based upon notion that elderly are more difficult to reach or less likely to be motivated to respond.

### 2.5.3. *Homeowner*

Percent of a state's households owning a home, 1998. Homeowners are thought to be more invested in society, less mobile than renters, and hence more likely to participate in the Census. Hence, a positive sign is expected.

*Hypothesis 1* Minority households are more alienated, less engaged in a civic sense, and hence less likely to respond.

As the negative estimated coefficients in Table 1 indicate, states with high concentrations of Asian Americans, African Americans, and American Indians have lower Census response rates. However, this is not true for states with heavy concentrations of Hispanic Americans, as that coefficient is positive. The reduced participation of American Indians is particularly large. A 1% increase in the percent of American Indians in a state is associated with a 0.34% decrease in the state's Census response. Thus, a state such as Montana, which has an American Indian population of about 10%, would be expected to have a Census response rate about 3% lower than the typical state.

Thus, the results are mixed. For three of the four minority resident categories, a state's Census response rate diminishes as the proportion of these individuals in the population increases. For Hispanics, however, the estimated coefficient actually is positive, though small and statistically insignificant.

These results have relevance to arguments over the alleged "undercounting" of minority citizens and whether statistical sampling techniques should be used to overcome such undercounting as may exist. [See Anderson and Fienberg, 1999 for arguments in support of sampling and Glaeser, 2001 for arguments that it cannot be done satisfactorily.] The results provide a bit

Table 1  
Determinants of state Census responses

Variable	Coefficient	Absolute value of the <i>t</i> statistics
Constant	51.68	3.23***
Percent Asian	−0.102	1.50*
Percent Black	−0.150	2.34***
Percent Hispanic	0.027	0.31
Percent American Indian, Pacific Asian Islanders (excluded category is White)	−0.342	2.01**
Percent recent immigrant	−0.896	0.18
Percent registered voters	−0.101	0.95
Percent voting for President Clinton	−0.106	1.28*
Average per capita income	0.0005	1.84*
Percent with Bachelor's Degree	0.272	1.82*
Percent 65 years or older	0.389	1.41*
Percent homeowners	0.071	0.61
Northeast region dummy	−8.56	5.81***
South region dummy	−5.93	3.94***
West region dummy (excluded category is Midwest)	−5.31	3.28***
Absolute values of the <i>t</i> statistics are reported		$R^2 = .763, F = 7.50^{***}$

*Dependent variable:* percent responding to Census in the 50 states plus the District of Columbia ( $N = 51$ ).

\* Statistically significant at the .10 level (all one-tailed tests).

\*\* Statistically significant at the .05 level (all one-tailed tests).

\*\*\* Statistically significant at the .01 level (all one-tailed tests).

of grist for both sides (though perhaps more for those who allege undercounting), but do not support the broad brush assertions made by the popular media concerning minority resident Census participation. It may be true that Hispanics in many states respond to the Census less often than non-minority Americans; however, it is not their ethnicity and culture per se that are at work, but other factors such as income, education, and geographic location. This is an instance where a bivariate relationship is deceptive and disappears in an appropriate multivariate analysis. Hence, our judgment is this hypothesis is only partially supported.

*Hypothesis 2* Immigrant households are less likely to respond.

As Table 1 indicates, states with a high proportion of recent immigrants have lower response rates, but this coefficient was not statistically significant (one-tailed test, as are all tests reported here). Hence, we mark this popular hypothesis as neither supported nor rejected.

*Hypothesis 3* Lower income households are less likely to respond.

Table 1 reveals that states with higher per capita personal incomes are more likely to have higher response rates, and the result is statistically significant. This popular hypothesis is supported.

*Hypothesis 4* Households with many elderly individuals are less likely to respond.

In contrast to the conventional media wisdom, states with elderly populations have higher response rates (holding other things constant) and this result is statistically significant. Thus, this hypothesis is rejected.

*Hypothesis 5* Heads of households who have less education are less likely to respond.

The evidence in Table 1 supports this notion. States with college degreed populations have statistically significant higher response rates and therefore this hypothesis is supported.

*Hypothesis 6* Those who do not register to vote are less likely to respond.

The evidence in Table 1 fails to support this proposition. Indeed, the sign on the coefficient is negative rather than positive, though not statistically significant. Therefore, it is appropriate to classify this hypothesis as partially rejected.

*Hypothesis 7* Those who listen to Republican political leaders or talk show hosts are less likely to respond.

It is difficult to know who does or does not listen to any political leader or talk show host. A proxy measure of this, however, is the percent of individuals in a state who voted for the Democratic presidential candidate, Bill Clinton, in 1996. Plausibly, those who voted for Bill Clinton were less likely to listen to GOP leaders or to be persuaded by conservative talk show hosts. Contrary to media speculations, however, states voting more heavily for Bill Clinton tended to have lower Census response rates (again, holding other things constant). This result is barely statistically significant at the .10 level. Hence, this hypothesis is rejected.

*Hypothesis 8* Renters are less likely to respond than homeowners.

There is weak, though not statistically significant evidence, in favor of this hypothesis. Hence, we neither support nor reject this hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 9* Significant regional differences in Census responses exist.

The results presented in Table 1 confirm such differences, though not in the precise manner media representatives have suggested. Even after controlling for several aspects of ethnicity, education, civic involvement, income, and homeowner status, important regional differences in states' Census responses exist. Relative to the Midwest Census region (which contains states ranging from Ohio and Michigan in the east to Kansas and North Dakota in the west), states in the Northeast had response rates fully 8.56% lower than those states in the Midwest region. Response rates were 5.93% lower in the South region and 5.31% lower in the West. These results all are statistically significant at the .01 level.

What is there about the populations of the states in the Midwest Census region (states ranging from Pennsylvania in the east through Illinois and Wisconsin to the Dakotas to the west) that makes them more likely to have high response rates, even after many socioeconomic control variables are considered? This is not immediately obvious. Nonetheless, one possible explanation focuses on the fact that significant proportions of the populations of these states came to the United States from northern European countries such as Germany, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden where higher levels of government involvement in daily life are more common and where obedience to governmental activity often is a cultural norm. A Swedish immigrant to the United States, for example, is accustomed to a welfare state environment and to circumstances in which citizens supply numerous pieces of data to the national government. Or, consider German immigrants, who heavily populate the Midwest region. These individuals came from a political system in which all citizens long have been required to register at the local police station and further to notify the government if they change their addresses. Further,

Table 2

Test of the hypothesis	Result
Evidence supports	2
Evidence partially supports	2
Evidence to accept or reject	2
Evidence partially reject	2
Evidence reject	2

the heavily Protestant (often Lutheran) character of Americans of Scandinavian and German ancestry may encourage a “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s” view of government, first enunciated by Martin Luther, that advises that good governments and their wise leaders are ordained by the Almighty.

The gap between the Census responses of states in the Northeast and Midwest regions is too large to ignore, all the more so because so many other factors have been held constant in the analysis. This result is robust and consistent across regression specifications. Clearly, this is a topic worthy of additional research. This hypothesis is considered partially rejected because media speculations about regional Census participation are rather wide of the mark.

### 3. Final observations

Conventional media wisdom relative to which residents respond to the Census and why they respond is only partially supported by state level evidence. On occasion, the opinions of Bureau of the Census officials merit the same judgment. As Table 2 summarizes, these views are given strong support in two of nine test cases and partial support in one. In two cases, the evidence is not sufficiently strong either to support or reject these views of the world. In two cases, the media/Census view is partially rejected and in two cases, completely rejected.

These tests of the wisdom of the popular media, whose coverage in many cases reflects the views of Bureau of the Census officials they cover, do not settle any of the issues involved, given the state level nature of the evidence and the perennial measurement and definitional difficulties connected to the Census. Nonetheless, the results are sufficiently different from oft-stated major media reports that they should inspire increased caution in their reporting. Relationships that seem “obvious” to a Census official or a time-constrained reporter concerning, say, the Census participation of minority citizens, the elderly, or those with Republican leanings, in fact may be neither obvious nor true. At the end of the day, there is no substitute for detailed empirical analysis of the facts. This paper represents a step in that direction.

### Notes

1. Separate from this is the issue whether the Bureau should use statistical sampling techniques to adjust its basic, raw count of the population. In October 2001, the Bureau

declined to do so. The financial and political implications were large. The City of Los Angeles, for example, might have gained an additional \$325 to \$375 million annually if sampling had been used (Schmitt, 2001).

2. A significant literature has arisen exploring the conditions under which individuals refuse to participate in the Census. A recent survey of this work is found in Presser et al. (2000).

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