

Washington Monitor

New President May Have Significant Ability to Shape Census Policy

Lost in the discussions and debates on the economy, the Iraq War, and Barack Obama's celebrity status are some of the smaller federal issues that the winning presidential candidate will have a significant ability to influence when he takes office in January. One of the most significant of these will be the 2010 decennial census. Planning for the census is well under way, of course, but significant decisions remain to be made that are of great importance to both the allocation of federal resources and political redistricting.

The biggest decisions to be made will be those dealing with using sampling as part of the census count. Census Bureau experts estimated that the 1990 census included a net undercounting of 1.6 percent of the American population (approximately 4 million people). The 2000 census had an overall undercount of 1.2 percent (representing 3.4 million Americans). In 2001, then-Commerce Secretary Don Evans, who was appointed by President Bush, rejected the use of sampling methodologies to reflect the individuals missed in the undercount. This critical decision could very well have been different if Al Gore had won the 2000 election.

This is because most Democrats favor census sampling, while most Republicans are opposed. The majority of individuals missed in census undercounts live in urban environments – areas that are generally more likely to vote Democratic on Election Day. If these inner-city areas had their population counts boosted for census purposes, it would potentially strengthen their representation in Congress and state legislatures.

The sampling question is also critical for purposes of allocating federal dollars. Many government programs allocate funds based on official population numbers. If sampling occurred, states with heavy urban populations would stand to receive additional federal dollars. Rural states, conversely, would generally see a decline in some of their federal funding streams.

For these reasons, the sampling decisions will be critical. They will likely come in 2011 – once the initial counts are completed. The Administration we elect in November will still be in office then and will play a critical role in determining whether the final numbers are adjusted based on sampling – and if so, how. The primary argument for sampling is that it more accurately reflects the true population numbers of all American communities, while the primary argument against is that the Constitution calls for a strict count of individuals in the census process, and that sampling is inaccurate.

The Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in January 1999 that sampling cannot be used to impact the apportionment of House seats among the states, but it left open the questions of each individual state's redistricting process and also the federal funding decisions mentioned above. Additional cases are certainly possible in the next few years, but at this time it appears likely that either Barack Obama or John McCain will play a key role in sampling decisions. Neither candidate has commented this year on the 2010 census.

HEA Reauthorization Completed

On July 31, the House and Senate finally completed work on a massive reauthorization of the federal Higher Education Act (HEA) – the bill passed with

overwhelming bipartisan agreement just hours before Congress adjourned for its August recess.

Reaction to the legislation has been mixed – some of the major university associations took no position on the final bill at all, while student groups generally applauded changes made to the Pell Grant program and efforts at reducing textbook costs. The most commonly expressed sentiment from those involved in the process was one of relief – perhaps owing to the fact that reauthorization was five-years overdue.

The Association of American Universities (AAU) was careful to praise changes that will allow for better student access – and while they did commend Congress for language that will “preserve accreditation as a rigorous, non-governmental peer-review process and that precludes the federal government from regulating, thereby setting, accreditation standards,” their statement also noted that the “complex bill includes dozens of new reporting and regulatory requirements that will create costly new administrative and personnel burdens on colleges and universities.” This reaction was typical of the response from the higher education community.

Ultimately, it will probably be months or years before we know the true impact of the legislation. No doubt proponents and opponents of the bill are already thinking about what they'd like to change in the next reauthorization – whenever that eventually occurs! ■

John Wertman
jwertman@aag.org

ADVERTISE IN THE AAG NEWSLETTER

The AAG Council has authorized the acceptance of advertisements for publication in the AAG Newsletter. All ads must meet AAG ethical standards and relate to the discipline or profession of geography. For more information on advertising in the Newsletter, please visit www.aag.org/ads.