



# POLIDATA Political Data Analysis

DATABASE DEVELOPMENT, ANALYSIS AND PUBLICATION;  
POLITICAL AND CENSUS DATA; LITIGATION SUPPORT

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## OP-ED, RESPONSE TO EDITORIAL

### THE CASE AGAINST CENSUS SAMPLING, Clark Bensen,,

Presumably, the positive motivation for the Clinton Administration's sampling initiative is to address the problem of the net differential undercount (NDU). It has been estimated that the value for this census shortcoming in 1990 was 1.6%. The National Academy of Sciences has estimated that well more than half of the NDU was attributable to either bad address lists or incorrectly filled-out forms. This first problem has already been a subject of congressional action to improve the address lists. The second problem benefits mostly from the numerous outreach programs coordinated with the Bureau of the Census with interested groups across the nation.

The Clinton proposal to use sampling as an integrated element of the 2000 Census presents new problems and opponents have several grounds for objection: principle, process, practice, participation, and ,of course, politics.

*Principle.* The Framers of the Constitution knew that a temptation to inflate the number of inhabitants in a state for representation would be too great without a check. Not only did they require an "actual Enumeration", they also linked taxation and representation through the census count, a feature which was lost to history with the legalization of the income tax this century.

*Process.* During the discussion for adjustment of the 1990 Census, there was debate that the methodology for adjustment was one wherein "reasonable persons" could disagree. It was untested and subject to implementation problems. In fact, the original NDU was estimated to be 2.1%, and only revised downward a year later when an error was discovered in one of the multiple formulae used by the Bureau for the adjustment estimates. In 1990 it was an inadvertent error but in 2000 it could be a deliberate intrusion into the process by the politically motivated.

*Practice.* The 1995 Test Census was the Bureau's chance to test their methodology in the field. The results were not encouraging. For a typical small census block of approximately 100 persons, the Test Census indicated that the persons which would have been counted in an "actual Enumeration" could have been as few as 72 or as many

as 128. This was “just a test” and presumably would be somewhat less in the 2000 Census. However, this 28% error range (at a 95% confidence level) would not assist those redistricting practitioners who must live with the zero-tolerance population deviation edict of the courts. The census block is the building block for the entire census and even if the error range at higher levels of geography is smaller as a percentage, the entire aggregation is suspect as it was based upon the flawed data at the block level. It is also important to remember that the formula whereby Congressional seats are apportioned amongst the states is subject to very small differentials of population between any pair of states.

*Participation.* The census is not a survey for the simple reason that the political stakes are too high to produce a count which is not designed to be accurate at every level of geography. Interest groups understand this and are already working on the outreach programs which will assure the highest degree of participation by the American people in this uniquely national event in April 2000. If everyone believes the census will be statistically adjusted, why bother to participate? Why maximize efforts towards outreach when sampling will solidify your base for you?

*Politics.* Of course there is a political element involved and, in general, most Republicans are against the Clinton proposal and most Democrats are in favor. However, the political spin is, in reality, more geographic than partisan. It is presumed that the minority and urban areas, the base of the Democrats, will gain in population and the boundaries of these urban districts will shrink by the added population. The newly added persons (base Democrats) will then be placed in districts which will encroach on the suburban districts. To the extent which these suburban areas are Republican, the addition of more solidly Democrat voters is cause for any Republican member to be concerned. This impact is felt even more strongly at the local and legislative level where the number of persons per district is so much smaller than the average 575,000 for Congressional Districts.

*Summary.* Implementation of the Clinton initiative for sampling might deliver more realistic *estimates* of the total population in the nation. We all want to know how many Americans live here but we need to know where they live, and to fulfill the constitutional purpose of apportionment, and its concomitant of redistricting, this means we need to know in which census block they live, and with the *highest* degree of accuracy. The Bureau of the Census has enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for professionalism for generations. It has been the Bureau which has educated us on sampling error and the limitations of sampling. Let's not do to the Bureau of the Census what was done to the Bureau of Federal Investigation.

