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Head counting that counts

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NEXT April, the Census Bureau will take on the principal task for which it was created: To count each member of this nation. No small chore, considering that the number will approach one-quarter billion persons. The 21st decennial undertaking will be watched closely because the numbers will help determine where new markets might be sited, where federal dollars may flow, and a host of other conclusions that may be drawn by ascertaining the numbers and locations of people. But the results will be most closely scrutinized by politicians at all levels of government.

The Constitution states that seats in the House of Representatives shall be apportioned by an enumeration of the population, each state to have one representative, and subsequent others based upon the population. The first census in 1790 counted 3.9 million persons; thus, each of the 106 House members represented approximately 37,000 persons. In 1990, the 435 House members will represent approximately 575,000.

Because the nation's population continues to shift to the South and West, states in those areas will have increasing numbers of House seats: Texas is expected to gain three seats, Florida four, and California will likely gain six to give it a total of 51 seats, the largest in the nation and 12 percent of the entire House.

The Northeast, although growing at a very slow rate, will lose House seats: New York could lose three seats (it lost five after the 1980 count), Pennsylvania two, and Massachusetts one. Rhode Island will not be affected.

In these cases where change is anticipated, it means that boundary lines defining districts will have to be altered in order to accommodate changing representative numbers. This redistricting, according to one analyst, is "the guts of politics." Redistricting also takes place on the state and local levels, as Rhode Islanders found out to their dismay and expense after the last census.

Redistricting is normally done by state legislators, and if they are unable to come up with a plan, the courts can appoint a master to draw one. We went through such a debacle in 1982 when back-room politics was exposed in court cases that arose from challenges to the proposed General Assembly plan.

The most interesting case, and the most expensive for the state, was the redistricting of senatorial districts Two and Three on the East Side of Providence. Since Providence was to lose one of its districts because of population loss, the East Side was carved in such a manner as to place then-Sen. Richard Licht at a distinct disadvantage for re-election. In three subsequent court cases, culminating in U.S. District Court, the courts agreed that gerrymandering of districts had taken place. This caused postponement of the entire Senate election from November 1982 until June 1983.

Difficult to imagine, four years later, the city of Providence tried to rearrange a boundary line between Wards Nine and 11 to accommodate a councilman's change of address. Challenged by some affected voters, the city settled out of court, and a special election was held last year only for these two wards.

Both of these costly gerrymanders, one by the state and one by the city, should make all Rhode Islanders aware of the arrogance of power that can be used to manipulate population numbers to protect incumbents and parties in power. Even now, people in federal office are looking at population shifts around the country to see what impact these shifts will have on their positions. And some are very worried because of state population losses and potential loss of their jobs. In some states, political maneuvering is already taking place to protect these positions.

As census officials continue to gear up for the big push next year, and as we in Rhode Island will be waiting expectantly for the numbers to announce that we have hit the one million mark, it will be most important that we not lose sight of the reason for all the number crunching: Boundary lines for town, city, state and national positions will be rearranged according to population shifts.

Past experiences should make us aware that the process and the results of that redistricting should be carefully monitored.

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