

After the count is over, it's time to reapportion the House

In a few weeks the more than 100 million households in the country will be receiving an invitation from the U. S. Census Bureau to tell something about themselves. And it is important that all respond to this invitation because it means federal money to be distributed for improvements to your state and local community, based upon the numbers counted

By now most have heard about the forthcoming 22nd decennial census, and if you haven't, then the \$180 million being spent to advertise the April 1 census is not fulfilling its task. And if you don't respond, in 1990 35 percent of households didn't, then one of the nearly 300,000 temporary workers hired by the Census Bureau will try to track you down, either by telephone or by knocking on your door. But that is expensive, so the Census hopes you will save them money and respond by mail.

What happens after the numbers are in? Well, it takes time to process the number of 275 million people distributed over 3.6 million square miles of this country as well as those Americans scattered all over the world in jobs, the military and in other permanent locations. The Census has nine months to complete this task because by the end of the year they must give these numbers to the President.

Within one week of the opening of Congress in January 2001, the President, using the method of reapportionment determined by the Congress, notifies the Clerk of the

House of Representatives of the census count for every state and its number of Representatives. Within 15 days, the House, through its Clerk, then notifies the Governor of each state of the number of Representatives that it can send to Congress. So, approximately one year from now, the distribution of the 435 seats among the states will be made.

But the process does not end here. Now the states have to redraw or redistrict the boundary lines for their representative districts. In Rhode Island that is District 1 in the eastern part of the state and District 2 in the west, with the determining factor essentially being equal numbers in both. All cities and towns in the state are completely included in either Districts 1 or 2, with the exception of Providence which is subdivided into an east and west portion in order to get these equal numbers. With a projected population of just under one million, this means that each of our two Representatives will speak for approximately 500,000 persons.

When this country was formed there were 65 members of the House of Representatives, but when the first census was taken in 1790, ours being the first country ever to constitutionally mandate a census,

the resulting count of 3.9 million persons resulted in an increase to 106 House members. Every House member then represented approximately 37,000 persons.

With an increasing population the number of House members also increased. Thus, in 1910 when population reached 92 million and in the fol-

lowing year it was determined that there should be our current number of 435 members, each member represented about 211,000 persons. The number of House members has not changed since 1911, but with a projected population of 275 million this year, this means that each member should speak for 632,000 people.

The process of redistricting for state and local representation for various offices must also take place as a result of the new census numbers. In Rhode Island the 100 Representative and 50 Senatorial districts must be redrawn, often with contentious results. After the 1980 Census the redistricting of Senatorial districts was challenged: the result was three court cases; a ruling against the state which cost \$2.5 million; and a later special Senate election.

At the local level there were also problems after the 1980 census. In a court case

the town of Johnston was forced to redraw its five council districts, pay court costs and have an at-large election. And in Providence, when a councilperson changed his residence to another district and the accommodating council changed the boundary line in order that he still be in his district, the out of court settlement forced the city to return to the original boundary as well as pay court costs.

This federal, state and local redistricting process will begin after April 1, 2001, one year after the census, when the state will receive its census gathered numbers. The redistricting process will take place in time for Congressional elections on November 5, 2002, and the returned and new members of the House of Representatives will take their seats in Congress in January 2003, almost three years after the census of 1990 is taken.

It happens just once every ten years and the subsequent process to use the numbers to determine from where our federal, state and local government representatives will come is a lengthy and complicated one, one that may be subject to litigation. But this process is one that ensures that all people are represented in our democracy. And the more than \$5 billion to gather the numbers, more than ever before, is a worthy expenditure of time, effort and money.

Chester E. Smolski is a retired professor of geography at Rhode Island College. He writes regularly for this newspaper. ■

Commentary

Chester E. Smolski