

# Geopolitics and Population Change in the United States:

## The Essential Function of the Census

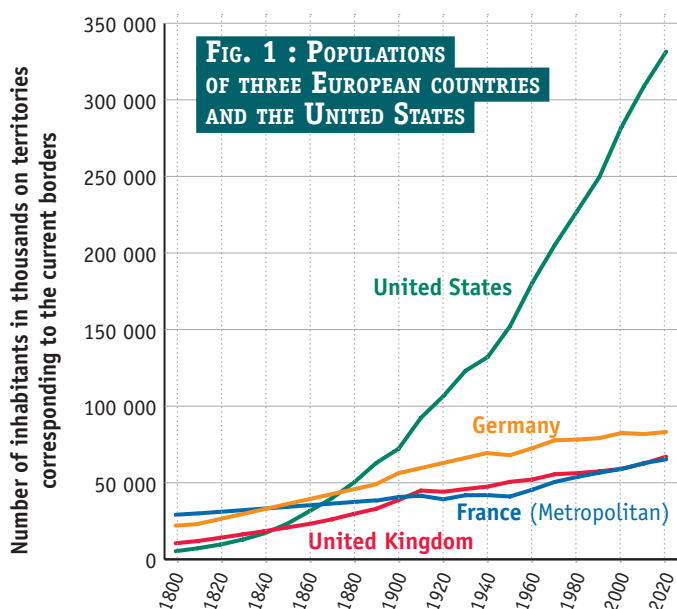
For more than two centuries, the United States has held a census every ten years, which raises two questions. What major role does it play in political life, highlighted again during the Trump presidency? Do the main results of the most recent one mean the end of the American demographic exceptionalism?

The United States has a very long history of population census taking. The requirement for a census was written in 1787 into Article 1, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution, stipulating that “representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states which may be included within the Union according to their respective numbers”.<sup>1</sup> The goal of the population counts is to find out how many people live in each state and in the country.

### Geography of federal funding dependent on census results

The 24th census in U.S. history was organized on April 1, 2020. On Census Day in 2020, the U.S. had a popula-

1. Baumle, Amanda K., Poston Jr., Dudley L., “Apportionment of the US House of Representatives in 2020 under Alternative Immigration-Based Scenarios”, *Population and Development Review*, 2019 45(2): 379-400 (citation on page 379).



tion of 331,449,281 people. The first population census conducted in 1790 yielded a total population of 3,929,214 people (see Figure 1). Thus, in just 230 years, the U.S. has experienced an 84-fold increase of its population, thanks to the rate of natural growth of the population combined with large and sustained arrivals of immigrants: in 2020, 14 percent of the U.S. population is foreign-born.<sup>2</sup>

Census operations are crucial to gather information on the population by age and sex, but also to collect data on a wide array of other socioeconomic characteristics such as race, education, employment, income, and housing. This helps communities plan for hospitals and schools, support school lunch programs, improve emergency services, build bridges, and inform businesses looking to add jobs and expand to new markets. Based on decennial census data as well as intercensal data, large sums of federal money – to the tune of one trillion U.S. dollars every year – go to the states, hospitals, fire departments, schools, roads, and other resources.

### Political weight of states in the lower house revised after each census

Most importantly, census results are also used for the apportionment of the seats of the House of Representatives (the lower Chamber). The House of Representatives has 435 seats. Every state automatically receives one House seat (this represents thus 50 House seats), leaving 385 seats to be distributed<sup>3</sup> among the states on the basis of the size of their populations<sup>4</sup> (each state receives two seats in the Senate, the upper Chamber, for a total of 100 U.S. Senators).

After a census, some states that have gained population in the ten years prior to the census may gain one House seat or more, while other states who lost population during the previous intercensal period may lose one House seat or more<sup>5</sup>. Census apportionment results are also used to determine the size of each state’s delegation to the Electoral College which elects the President (this is the sum of the state’s House seats and the two Senate seats).

2. Jackson, Richard, “The Vital Role of Immigration in an Aging America”, *The Shape of Things to Come*, Alexandria, VA: Global Aging Institute and The Concord Coalition, 2021.

3. However, the methods of apportionment have occasionally been contested; see Baumle, Amanda K., Poston Jr., Dudley L., *op. cit.*

4. This is an application of the « law of numbers » ; see Dumont, Gérard-François, *Démographie politique, Les lois de la géopolitique des populations*, Paris, Ellipses, 2007.

5. For the effects of the 2010 census, see Zaninetti, Jean-Marc, « La nouvelle géographie électorale des Etats-Unis », *Population & Avenir*, n° 704, September-October 2011.

**Person 1**

5. Please provide information for each person living here. If there is someone living here who pays the rent or owns this residence, start by listing him or her as Person 1. If the owner of the person who pays the rent does not live here, start by listing any adult living here as Person 1.

What is Person 1's name? Print name below.

First Name  MI

Last Name(s)

6. What is Person 1's sex? Mark  ONE box.

Male  Female

7. What is Person 1's age and what is Person 1's date of birth? For babies less than 1 year old, do not write the age in months. Write 0 as the age.

Age on April 1, 2020  years

Print numbers in boxes. Month  Day  Year of birth

→ NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 8 about Hispanic origin and Question 9 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.

8. Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano

Yes, Puerto Rican

Yes, Cuban

Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – Print, for example, Salvadorian, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.

9. What is Person 1's race? Mark  ONE or more boxes AND print origins.

White – Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.

Black or African Am. – Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc.

American Indian or Alaska Native – Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo, Blackfoot Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc.

Chinese  Vietnamese  Native Hawaiian

Filipino  Korean  Samoan

Asian Indian  Japanese  Chamorro

Other Asian – Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.

Other Pacific Islander – Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc.

Some other race – Print race or origin,

→ If more people were counted in Question 1 on the front page, continue with Person 2 on the next page.

To sum up, it is to a state's economic and political advantage to have all its residents counted in the census.

## A huge logistical operation

Recent decennial U.S. censuses have become huge and complex logistical operations, involving a myriad of census agents. In 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau hired about half a million temporary workers, such as census takers, census supervisors, address listers, office staff, and partnership specialists. Each census operation is also more expensive than the previous one. It is estimated that the 2020 census costed about 15.6 billion U.S. dollars, i.e., 107 U.S. dollars per household and 47 U.S. dollars per person.

Every person living in the United States and the five U.S. permanently inhabited territories (Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa) is required to respond to the census short questionnaire. Before the census date (the Census Day), each household in the U.S. and the five U.S. territories receives an invitation (usually in the form of a postcard with an identification code for the Internet census platform) to respond to a short questionnaire—online, by phone, or by mail. In April 2020, it was the first time that everyone in the U.S. and the five U.S. territories could respond to the census online.

The short census questionnaire contained nine questions, and each person residing in a household was required to answer these questions. Later, reminders were sent by mail if household's residents did not fill out the short questionnaire. In addition, census enumerators and supervisors visited households that either did not complete the short census form and/or did not have access to the Internet. In total, residents of households were counted

essentially through self-response and interviews by census takers. The last recourse was to exploit administrative documents (such as tax records) when respondents' information was missing.

After the main census operations, the U.S. Census Bureau organizes the American Community Survey (ACS), which is a large-scale annual survey capturing 1 in every 34 households in the U.S. 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico (the four other U.S. territories are not covered). The ACS comes with a much longer schedule of 24 questions on Housing and 44 Personal questions. Through the ACS, the U.S. Census Bureau knows more about ancestry, citizenship, educational attainment, jobs and occupations, income, language proficiency, migration, disability, and housing characteristics. Therefore, data gathered from the ACS help further determine how federal and state funds are distributed each year.

## President Trump and a controversy: should we add a question about nationality?

In a typical U.S. Census, not all residents who are enumerated are Americans. This poses a problem for some politicians whose programs intend to prioritize Americans, for instance under the motto of "America First." A controversy emerged when preparing for the 2020 census.<sup>6</sup> The Trump Administration wanted to add one question on citizenship to the short census schedule. This implied that all people living in the U.S. would have needed to answer whether they were citizens or not. The rationale for adding this question appeared to be essentially political. The Trump Administration claimed that these new data would enhance the *Voting Rights Act* on behalf of minority communities. But actually, this requirement is already met with the citizenship data obtained in the ACS.

The main danger of adding a citizenship question to the census short questionnaire is that it may compromise the quality of the data collected in the census. A question test run carried out in the state of Rhode Island confirmed the concerns of the U.S. Census Bureau officials and other social scientists that a citizenship question would cause some immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, not to fill out the short questionnaire for fear of being arrested and/or deported. Therefore, a citizenship question would have resulted in significant undercounts in the final census tally.<sup>7</sup>

In late June 2019, the U.S. Supreme Court rendered a judgment rejecting the motive offered by the Trump Administration to add the citizenship question, sending the case back to the lower courts. What followed was a lot of confusion. After the Supreme Court's decision, U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross announced that the U.S. Census Bureau had dropped the citizenship question. One day later, however, President Trump tweeted that the question was still on. But on July 11, 2019 President Trump announced that the citizenship question would not be asked in the 2020 census.

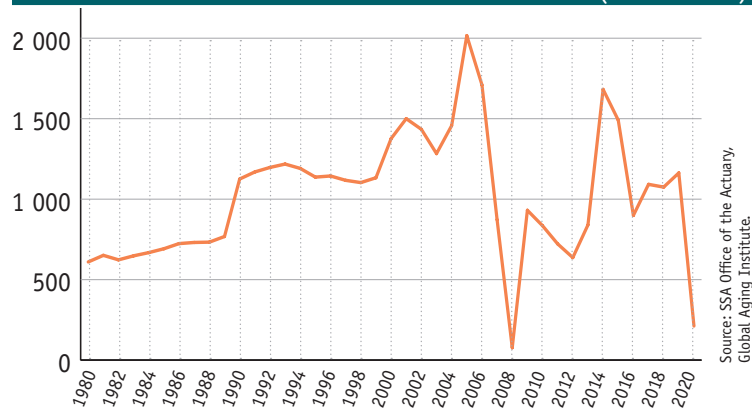
6. Poston Jr., Dudley L., May, John F., "Republicans gained by dropping citizenship question", *The Eagle*, July 24, 2019.

7. Baumle, Amanda K., Poston Jr., Dudley L., *op. cit.* Undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are estimated at more than 10 million people.

The second page of the 2020 Census questionnaire with questions 5 to 9, including those on race.

» This decision was actually the best possible outcome for the Republican Party. Two American scholars have modelled the impact of adding a citizenship question to the 2020 census<sup>8</sup>. Without a citizenship question, the census results would have yielded moderate changes of seats in the U.S. House—actually, only seven House seats were re-apportioned based on the 2020 census results.<sup>9</sup> However, things would have changed dramatically had a citizenship question been included on the census because many people, especially non-citizens, would not have filled out the census form and would not have been counted. Baumle and Poston concluded that the big states that would have lost the most if a citizenship question had been added to the 2020 census are Texas, Arizona, and Florida—all these states voted for Trump in 2016. These heavily Republican states would have lost seats and political power in the U.S. House of Representatives and the Electoral College, in addition to losing billions of U.S. dollars in yearly federal funding.

**FIG. 2: THE MIGRATORY BALANCE IN THE UNITED STATES (IN THOUSANDS)**



## » Slowing U.S. population growth

Demographics experts, local officials, and advocacy groups have raised concerns that a significant enumeration undercount might have occurred in the 2020 census, because the COVID-19 pandemic and politics got in the way. It had been established that recent U.S. censuses had been affected by a recurrent undercount of young children. However, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the controversy around the citizenship question, it appears that the 2020 census has been conducted rather carefully. The 2020 census undercount appears to have been modest<sup>10</sup>.

8. Based on potential census undercounts that such a question could trigger; Baumle, Armanda K., Poston Jr., Dudley L., *op. cit.* The impact of undercounts in census enumeration was estimated if either 100 percent or 50 percent of non-citizens would not respond to the 2020 Census.

9. The states of Colorado, Florida, Montana, North Carolina, and Oregon each gained one House seat, and Texas gained two House seats. On the contrary, the states of California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia all lost one House seat; see <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/data/apportionment/apportionment-2020-table01.pdf>, accessed on December 11, 2020.

10. The U.S. Census Bureau uses two primary tools to measure the accuracy of census enumeration, namely the Demographic Analysis (DA) program and the data of the Post-Enumeration Survey (PES) conducted in a sample of households across the nation approximately five months after the 2020 Census Day.

At this juncture, the 2020 census results demonstrate that the population increase in the U.S. has slowed down since the previous censuses of 2000 and 2010. The intercensal population growth between 2010 and 2020 has been only 7.4 percent overall<sup>11</sup>.

## » The end of the American exceptionalism?

For several decades, the U.S. has been a demographic outlier in the club of the more developed countries belonging to the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). At the time, U.S. fertility was higher than in the OECD countries, particularly those of Western Europe, although the U.S. expectancy of life at birth for both sexes was slightly lower than the OECD average. It was also projected that the U.S. population would experience a steady increase due to its relatively higher fertility levels and sustained inflows of immigrants. As a result, the U.S. would experience population aging much later than the other OECD countries. This period was dubbed the era of the American “demographic exceptionalism.”

It appears now that the country has reached the end of this period.<sup>12</sup> The Great Recession of 2008 has reduced fertility, essentially because fertility levels among the Hispanic population have dramatically decreased and reached the fertility levels of the other groups in the U.S.<sup>13</sup> In addition, U.S. mortality levels have sharply deteriorated because of the COVID-19 pandemic, as already mentioned, but also because of the epidemic of the “deaths of despair” (caused by the abuse of opioids, the consequences of alcoholism, and the increase of suicides). These deaths have occurred essentially among the U.S. White population without a college degree.<sup>14</sup>

To conclude, the future demographic prospects of the U.S. appear to be much less favorable than just a few decades ago. Not only has the country entered since 2008 a period of low and below replacement-level fertility, but the U.S. has also received less immigrants since the Trump Administration tried to curtail immigrants’ intakes<sup>15</sup>. Overall, the decline of U.S. fertility, the increase of mortality, and the decrease of immigration<sup>16</sup> portends a future demographic trajectory characterized by accelerated population aging along with possible labor shortages.<sup>17</sup> As a result, the future demographic trends in the U.S. will have a profound impact on the size and shape of the U.S. government, the dynamism of the economy, and even the place of the U.S. in the world<sup>18</sup>. 🍷

11. For the most recent key demographic indicators of the United States, see Sardon, Jean-Paul, « La population des continents et des États en 2021 : quels effets de la pandémie Covid-19 ? », *Population & Avenir*, n° 755, November-December 2021.

12. Jackson, Richard, “The End of U.S. Demographic Exceptionalism”, *Critical Issues*, n° 1, Alexandria, VA: Global Aging Institute (GAI) and The Terry Group, 2021.

13. Dumont, Gérard-François, « Les États-Unis : un « État-Monde » », *Population & Avenir*, n° 714, September-October 2013.

14. Case, Anne, Deaton, Angus, *Deaths of Despairs and the Future of Capitalism*, Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, GB: Princeton University Press, 2020.

15. For instance, with bans on visas for specific sending countries and the acceleration of the construction of the Wall on the border with Mexico.

16. See also Goussot, Michel, « L’immigration aux États-Unis : enjeux et perspectives », *Population & Avenir*, n° 740, November-December 2018.

17. Jackson, Richard, *op. cit.*

18. Jackson, Richard, *op. cit.*