



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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2020 Census: What’s at Stake for States | OAS Episode 60

Gene: Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

So, every 10 years the United States takes a Census to collect information on the country’s population. That process will next take place in 2020. To help us understand the purpose of the Census and what is at stake for states, we have as our guest today Wendy Underhill, who is the director of the National Conference of State Legislatures Elections and Redistricting Program.

Wendy thanks for sharing your expertise and talking with us today about this very important topic.

Wendy: Gene, you’ve got to know that there’s nothing I’d rather talk about than the Census and that’s not that interesting to most people, so I’m glad you’re asking about it.

Time Marker (TM): 0:59

Gene: So first, Wendy, explain to us the purpose of the United States Government taking a Census every 10 years. Why is it done?

Wendy: Well, it’s actually done because the U.S. Constitution calls for it. It’s in Article 1, so right up at the tippy-top of the Constitution it asks for what it calls an “actual enumeration” of everybody in the United States. So that phrase “actual enumeration” is sort of parallel to do a Census.

But, of course, the reason they wanted to do that wasn’t just for the fun of that activity; it was to provide information to policymakers. And at this point in history, you know, the year is 2019, looking at 2020, it’s used by policymakers, it’s used by business people, and it’s used in political ways which I bet we’re going to talk about too.

So it sets the groundwork for a huge amount of decision making in our nation and, with decision making, goes economic power and to some extent political power as well.

TM: 1:54

Gene: So, talk to us about the logistics of the 2020 Census. When does it actually start and how long will it last?

Wendy: Well, it is a spectacular event, well, series of events let's call it. The very first people who will be enumerated, using that word from the Constitution, are in rural Alaska, and that starts in January of 2020, and they start there early because apparently it's easier to get around to talk to individuals when the ground is frozen.

But for the rest of us in the lower 48 and in Hawaii, the Census day is April 1, 2020. Now, you can't possibly ask everybody to take action on the exact same day, so responses will be gathered for several months thereafter. But April 1, 2020 is the day and that's less than a year from now.

Time Marker (TM): 02:40

Gene: How long will it take? Will it last the entire year?

Wendy: Not quite, but it will go for many months. The outcome, the data will be released December 31, 2020 in regard to population for the states and therefore in regard to who will have what seats in the U.S. House. And then the rest of the data that's used in a more granular level is released sometime in the Spring of 2021.

So the data is collected in 2020 and produced in 2021, and then the Census Bureau does all kinds of reports with this, which can support all kinds of efforts after that.

TM: 03:15

Gene: Are there any changes to the Census compared to the 2010 form? Are they taking advantage of technology this year?

Wendy: I kind of like the fact that the Census in a sense has stayed somewhat the same throughout these many, many decades; I believe we're at the 24th Census now. So there are some parallels Census after Census: How many people live here? That's clearly the number one question that gets answered.

But each year it's done ... each cycle, I should say, it's done just a little bit differently. And this 2020 Census will be the first one where the Bureau is asking people to respond online and they're calling it "self-responding." And so there's an online platform for it. And I will say people have been asking about the security of that. That's been a huge issue for the Census to be sure that this is a well-constructed, secure system. So people will have that opportunity. That's new.

They also will have the opportunity to do it on paper if that's what they prefer. They can do it on the phone with someone assisting them, and they can also ... if they don't respond in one of those ways, there will be people who go around the nation knocking on doors and asking for the answers to the questions, and those Census takers will have handheld devices that will definitely be putting that information in directly over the Internet.

So yeah, it's becoming more of a technological effort all the time.

And I don't know whether people are interested in this or not, but there's also a question about confidentiality and I will say that the information is held confidential for 72 years, and the Census is spending a certain amount of time with mathematicians working this out so that that data really will be protected. So that's something of a change between now and last time.

TM: 04:52

Gene: And what about the number of questions? I know there's been some controversy about whether the Census will ask a citizenship question this year. What's the status of that and in terms of how many questions people will be asked to answer?

Wendy: They'll be asked 10 or 12 questions in total, so it's not a lengthy survey. And the question, as you suggest, that has gotten all the attention is whether there will be a citizenship question on the Census for everybody to respond to this time around. That's been asked for by the Department of Commerce that runs the Census Bureau, and people have opinions on both sides: it's either going to depress participation, or it's going to give states and others new information that they need to run their programs well.

But there are only nine people in the nation whose opinion matters at this point, and those are the Supreme Court justices. There has been a challenge to the inclusion of that question about citizenship and by June 30, the expectation is that the justices will have ruled on this and either the question will be in or the question will be out. And then the printing will start for paper forms.

TM: 05:52

Gene: We've talked a lot about what the effect is going to be on states. What's at stake for states in this?

Wendy: Well, there are kind of two big categories and one is political and the other is economic. And Gene, I'm going to go with the economic first because it's not always as intuitive.

So the federal government does a lot of redistribution of funding to the state level. \$800 billion is distributed in federal funds to states every year, and that is usually distributed through formulas that are based on Census data. So if you have more people counted, then more money comes flowing to you from these federal programs.

So there's a pretty strong incentive for states to want to have a complete count because federal money comes along with counting those new people.

The political side I think people are a little more familiar with and that's that the population count determines how many seats in the U.S. House each state will get, and there are always some winners and some losers on that every time there's a new Census. And this is not that any states are losing population, but it's a zero-sum gain. So it's a question of: Are you gaining population as quickly as some of the other states? So that's one political piece.

But the other, for your audience I think, is probably the most pertinent, is that the districts from which those U.S. Congress people and state legislators will run are determined by the Census

data. So the idea is every ten years these electoral districts are rebalanced to reflect equal population amongst those districts, and so there's a big effort of redistricting takes place as soon as that Census data is out, and that's going to be going on in every state in the nation. And I think that's where sometimes the most newsworthy part of the Census is around the redistricting, even though the economic impact is so significant as well.

TM: 07:46

Gene: Yes, with \$800 billion at stake, I believe that's what you said ... What should state legislatures be doing this year to prepare for the 2020 Census?

Wendy: Well, the interesting thing about this is, of course, the Census is a federal program, so states can choose to do nothing. It will be run with federal dollars. But many states are taking the position that they'd like to have a complete count, not miss anybody. Nobody is trying to count people twice, of course, but to count everybody including the hard-to-count people, so that those federal dollars can be accurately distributed to them.

So, to do that, what can a state do? There are two main things. They can create a complete count committee and put some funding in it, and that helps get the message out to local communities and even to grassroots organizations that the Census is so important to what will happen in the next ten years in the area.

And they can also work with the Census Bureau to be sure that the address lists that the Census has going into the Census are as accurate as possible. A lot of cleanup on address lists has been happening for the last couple of years, but there's still an opportunity to help make sure that the Census is going to the right doors or sending information to the right people.

I guess what I'd say is that this year, unlike ten years ago, it seems as though there's more interest on the part of states in doing these active roles, not just leaving it to the federal government to do it.

TM: 09:08

Gene: Can you give us some examples of what states have done this year to help prepare for the Census?

Wendy: Oh, absolutely. There are a number of states that have these complete count committees and they've created state-specific handouts for the local and grassroots organizations to use. They've put dollar numbers on that. They are sending grants out to those local and grassroots organizations. They're determining what's the right message for different parts of the state, because the message that works in one community might not be the same as in another community.

They're doing radio and TV and social media campaigns to try to let all of the people in the nation know that not only are you required to do this by law, it's a good citizen activity or resident activity to ensure that complete count.

So the efforts are all in the outreach area. I'm seeing some states using more technology to see who actually has responded and therefore where to put their outreach efforts beyond that. Those tend to be in what are called the "hard-to-count populations."

Maybe I should take a moment since I've used that phrase twice to say hard-to-count populations are those who maybe don't have a permanent address. They of course could be homeless, people who live in rural areas where they might have a P.O. box, but not a mailing address, and babies. For some reason children under 5 are the most undercounted in the nation, so that's kind of a surprise, or it was a surprise to me at least.

TM:10:33

Gene: You mentioned redistricting earlier. Can you tell us a little bit about the timeline on that, when the Census numbers take effect, and what elections people would actually see perhaps new districts drawn?

Wendy: Oh sure. So the Census data comes out to the states absolutely no later than April 20, '21. Some states will get it as early as January 20, '21. So with that data, the minute that data drops, the states get busy with combining that with other existing data; many states use political data as well and other kinds of data sources.

They get this great big dataset together and then they go about seeing: What does that mean geographically? They look at who's living where and they use software and intuition and negotiation to come up with a new division of their electoral districts.

And some states, especially those that have their state elections in 2021 ... there are four states that have odd-year elections ... they need to do this super-fast so the candidates can put in their filing papers in the right districts. So they'll get it done within just a matter of a very few months. Other states can take a year or so to accomplish their new maps. But the start of redistricting is the minute that Census data drops.

TM: 11:51

Gene: OK. So for state legislatures, what resources does NCSL have for them to help meet the requirements of the Census?

Wendy: Well, we've got a couple of things I want to mention. One is that we have created talking points and the concept with our talking points is that they could work for a legislator anywhere in the nation. If they were going to a town hall meeting and they thought they might get asked a question, they could print this out, carry it with them and have answers to the most frequently asked questions.

And, by the way, one of the most frequently asked questions is: Will my data be secure? And the answer is: It will be kept confidential.

And so besides those talking points we've also created a sort-of one-stop-shop for everything related to legislation, appropriations and efforts to create these complete count committees

that we've been talking about. So that's if anybody were to google NCSL Census, they would get right to that page and they can, in fact, get the talking points right from there.

But, Gene, you know us well enough to know that we also have people, and that would be me and my colleague Christi Zamarripa who are working on this topic. So sometimes it's just plain easier to pick up the phone and call 303-364-7700 and say, "I want to talk to somebody about the Census." And we will help any of our constituents and many other people as well directly.

TM: 13:05

Gene: Any final thoughts? Anything we haven't asked you about that you think is important for state legislators and legislative staff to know about?

Wendy: Well, I would say that if they are going to take action on the Census outreach question that we've been talking about, now is the time to do it. I know many legislatures are coming up on their closing dates, so it will soon be too late, but it is 2019 in which states that want to do something to support a complete count in their state have to take that action at the legislative level.

There are executive orders. There are other ways to do it. But this is coming right up. It's almost like an election—there's an actual deadline for this. So now is the time for Census outreach.

Gene: We've been talking with Wendy Underhill, who is the Director of the National Conference of State Legislatures Elections and Redistricting Program. Wendy, thanks for sharing your expertise with us today.

Wendy: Oh, you are so welcome. Happy to talk about this anytime.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of "Our American States." We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.