

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading on the page.
3. Write a one-page reflection in your WN

## The U.S. Census: Why Our Numbers Matter

Source: Nancy Gibbs/*Time Magazine* 4.5.10

I still bear the mental scars of a question on a philosophy exam in college that left me whimpering at its wicked simplicity: "Could the number two change its properties?" I'd been raised to think numbers were as close to reliable as anything could be, so clean and clear and immune to argument. Some are odd, some round, some lucky, but three will always be one less than four.

This is the season when we are reminded that you can safely and reliably count just about anything other than people. Census comes from the Latin *censere*, which, tellingly, does not mean count so much as estimate, and 2,500 years ago in Rome, people were already squirrely about being estimated. The penalty for refusing to reveal how many people were in your household, how many slaves, how much livestock, was forfeiting it all and becoming a slave yourself. The Bible tells the story of God getting so mad at King David for ordering a census (granted, it was because Satan had talked him into it) that He sent a plague that killed 70,000 people in three days.

David's plague may have deterred census takers for many years, but when the Founding Fathers invented American democracy, they realized that if you are going to have government by the people, you need to know who and where they are. The founders stuck a Census requirement in the Constitution so that every 10 years, the young, stretchy country would recalculate which states got how many lawmakers. They worried that a state might try to inflate its population to increase its representation, so they cleverly arranged that the first Census would also be used to spread around the costs of the Revolution. In 1790, 650 federal marshals on horseback began going house to house. It cost \$45,000 and took a year and a half to count 3.9 million people.

Two hundred twenty years later, lawmakers are so unpopular, it's a wonder people fight over the means of getting more of them — except that nowadays about \$400 billion per year in federal aid follows the Census numbers, for everything from jobs to bridges to schools, so this really matters

Of course, there would be more money to spread around if it didn't cost so much to count us in the first place: about \$15 billion, according to some estimates. That includes \$338 million for ads in 28 languages, a Census-sponsored NASCAR entry, hiring Marie Osmond to do outreach on QVC, \$2.5 million for a Super Bowl ad and spots on Spanish radio and soap operas and Dora the Explorer. The ads are meant to boost the response rate, since any household that doesn't mail back its form gets visited by a Census worker, another pricey line item. In all, it will work out to about \$49 per person, which makes you wonder whether the government should have just sent an e-mail instead of a packet that looks like junk mail. (How about spending a little more money on design?) But the Census officials worried about privacy, so the increasingly irrelevant post office, whose volume dropped 13% last year, gets a spring boost.

Why would anyone not want to be counted? Illegal immigrants fear exposure, despite laws forbidding any court or agency from seeing the information; indiscreet Census workers can be fined up to \$250,000. Minnesota Representative Michele Bachmann warned that during World War II, Census data was shared with the FBI "at the request of President Roosevelt, and that's how the Japanese were rounded up ... I'm not saying that that's what the Administration is planning to do," she said, but nonetheless she vowed that she'll state how many people are in her household and nothing more. Since participation is mandatory, this puts her in danger of committing a misdemeanor and being subject to a \$5,000 fine.

Bachmann may think the Census is too intrusive; I just wish it were more so. As long as we're spending all this money to reach so many people, imagine what we could find out. Which do you favor, Leno or Letterman? Smooth or chunky? Faith or works? Liberty or equality? As it is, we had little to argue over in my house. This year's is one of the shortest forms in history, and it is aggressively uninteresting; our dry cleaners demand more information before they'll do home delivery. The trickiest part for us was to name what used to be known as the head of household, now designated "Person 1." My husband and younger daughter filled out the form together and decided that I would be Person 1.

It made me feel that I counted. But there was no way, surveying my household, that I could choose who would be Person 2 — unless, of course, the number two somehow could change its properties.