Connecting the Dots: Understanding the Importance of Census Participation to Civic Engagement

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Introduction

Civic engagement is often seen as the key to empowerment for a community. While there is no one authoritative definition, civic engagement is generally seen as an activity or activities taken to make a difference and promote the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. In essence, civic engagement encompasses a broad ideal of individually contributing to a greater good that benefits both the individual and the community at large. In the Asian American community, what is often overlooked is how critical census participation is to effective civic engagement. This stems, in part, from a lack of knowledge about the census generally — that is, what it is, why it is important, what is at stake with respect to census participation, and, consequently, the inability to connect the importance of census participation to effective civic engagement. Once that connection is understood, we must focus on understanding the barriers to our communities' full participation and what can be done to eradicate these barriers. At the end of day, census participation should be seen as the backbone of civic engagement and, thus, should be included as an integral component of any comprehensive civic engagement campaign.

What is the Census?

The United States Constitution requires the federal government to count the number of people in the United States every ten years. This count is called the decennial census and the next scheduled

count will be 2010. The Census Bureau, which is a part of the United States Department of Commerce and is responsible for planning and conducting the decennial census, is tasked with counting everyone who resides in the United States as of Census Day, April 1, 2010, including children and immigrants, regardless of their legal status.

In past censuses, the Census Bureau sent out a short-form survey to 100% of the households and a long-form survey to a random sample of households (1 in 6). The short form asked the basic population questions, such as age, gender, race and Hispanic origin. The long form asked socioeconomic questions, such as educational attainment, language ability, income levels and so forth. While data from both the short and long forms are used for funding appropriations, Voting Rights Act requirements and other governmental and non-governmental reasons, the short form data is collected for the purpose of reapportionment and redistricting.

After the 2000 census, the Census Bureau replaced the long form of the decennial census with the American Community Survey (ACS), which asks similar questions to the long form and is intended to provide information on what a community looks like on a more up-to-date basis rather than relying on data collected every ten years. The ACS questionnaire asks questions such as name, sex, age, ethnic origin, race, language ability, educational attainment and household income. The ACS provides communities with critical economic, social, demographic, and housing information for all states, cities, counties, metropolitan areas and population groups of 65,000 people or more. Because it is designed to provide more up-to-date data, the ACS is sent out to a sample of households every month of every year and the Census Bureau provides ACS data on an annual basis. With the switch from long form to ACS, future censuses, starting with the 2010 Census, will only consist of the short form.

The Census Bureau also conducts various other surveys throughout the years, including the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the Economic Census, that help provide the data needed to understand the many communities that make up this country. The CPS is a monthly survey conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics and is the primary source of information on the labor force characteristics of the U.S. population. Estimates ob-

tained from the CPS include employment, unemployment, earnings, hours of work, and are available by a variety of demographic characteristics including age, sex, race, marital status, and educational attainment as well as by occupation, industry, and class of worker. Supplemental questions to produce estimates on a variety of topics including school enrollment, income, previous work experience, health, employee benefits, work schedules, and voting are also often added to the regular CPS questionnaire. The Economic Census provides official measures of output for industries and geographic areas, and serves as the cornerstone of the nation's economic statistics, providing key source data for the Gross Domestic Product and other indicators of economic performance.

Why is the Census important?

The importance of census data cannot be overstated; census data is critical for our society to function as it is used for many purposes by many entities. For example, information about age, Hispanic/Latino ethnicity, and race is used by the Department of Justice to combat discrimination; by the Department of Health and Human Services to support research on service delivery for children, minorities, and the elderly; and by the Department of Education to conduct studies, evaluations, and assessments of children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. This information is also used to reapportion political representation and in the redistricting process. Information about age, race, Hispanic origin, and language ability is used to determine election language assistance requirements under the Voting Rights Act. Income and housing responses are used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development to assess the need for housing assistance for elderly, handicapped, and low-income homeowners. Citizenship information is used by community-based organizations to assess the needs of their constituents. Employment information is used by communities to develop training programs, and by business and local governments to determine the need for new employment opportunities accordingly. Income information helps determine the needs of families and others and makes it possible to compare the economic levels of different areas, and how eco-

nomic levels for a community change over time. Voting data from the CPS in federal election years have been used to figure out where to canvass for get-out-the vote efforts or to determine which communities need more education and outreach efforts targeting them.

Many federal and state programs use census data to distribute funds for community development. In fact, according to The Brookings Institution, census data is used by federal agencies to determine the allocation of over $300 billion in federal funding. Education information is used to determine the number of public schools, education programs, and daycare services required in a community. Data on disability provides the means to allocate government funding for healthcare services and new hospitals in many communities. Military service information is used by the Department of Veterans Affairs to measure the needs of veterans and to evaluate veterans' programs dealing with education, employment, and health care.

Finally, it is particularly important that Asian Americans participate in the census because it is the richest source of data on Asian American communities, particularly for sub-ethnic communities (such as Chinese, Asian Indian and Hmong). In many data sets or surveys developed by private, academic and other governmental entities, Asian Americans often find themselves woefully underrepresented. Many data sets or surveys simply lump Asian Americans into the "Other" categories, thereby making it impossible to determine what the landscape looks like for Asian Americans on that particular topic, whether that topic be related to health care, educational dropout rates, or some other important social or political issue. Other times, Asian Americans are able to find aggregated data for the entire Asian American community but that data may not be particularly useful. Because the Asian American community is diverse, comprised of several dozen distinct ethnic groups, a multitude of cultures and languages, and widely varied experiences in the U.S., aggregated data may simply mask problems and concerns for particular sub-ethnic groups. For example, Asian Americans as a whole are often seen as wealthy and well educated, but disaggregated data for subgroups reveals a wide array of incomes, poverty rates, and levels of educational attainment — from those doing very well to those struggling on multiple fronts. The Census Bureau is one of the few entities that col-

lects and reports data at the disaggregated level of Asian American sub-ethnic groups. Therefore, it is even more critical for Asian Americans to participate in census surveys to ensure that the data captured by the Census Bureau is as thorough and accurate as possible.

What is at stake when we talk about Census participation?

If census data is used for so many purposes, from reapportionment and redistricting to allocation of federal, state and local funding, to recognizing trends and problems in communities, then the data must be accurate. An accurate count of Asian Americans will allow communities to track the well-being of children, families, and the elderly; determine where to locate new highways, schools, and hospitals; show a large corporation that a town has the workforce the company needs; evaluate programs such as welfare and workforce diversification; and monitor and publicize the results of programs. Unfortunately, there have been issues with accuracy of census counts, particularly for communities of color. Since 1940, the Census Bureau has attempted to measure its ability to accurately count the people in America whether it was through Demographic Analysis or the use of a separate coverage measurement survey. Duplicate responses lead to overcounts, while omissions, or missed persons, lead to undercount. Subtracting overcounts from undercounts results in a net undercount or overcount for each census.

For each decennial census from 1940 to 1980, the national net undercount went down, as did the net undercount for specific population subgroups. However, since 1940, there has always existed a differential undercount – that is, non-Hispanic whites had lower undercount rates than people of color, or, stated another way, people of color were missed by the census more often than non-Hispanic whites. The differential undercount was also reduced each decennial census since 1940.

The 1990 census was a watershed moment for the Census Bureau. It was the first census that was less accurate than the one previous. The differential undercounts were the highest the Census Bureau had ever recorded. We also learned from 1990 that it was not only African Americans who suffered significant differential under-

counts but also Latino Americans and Asian Americans.[i] Moreover, American Indians on reservations had the highest undercount of any groups in the 1990 census, with an undercount rate of over 12 percent (Hogan and Robinson 1993). The undercount of children was generally disproportionate. Children made up a quarter of the overall population in 1990, but accounted for slightly more than half of all persons missed by the Census Bureau. The undercount of children of color was even more disproportionate (Edmonston 2000).

In 2000, the Census Bureau worked to improve the accuracy of the count. Unfortunately, it was unclear how well the Census Bureau was able to count people because the Census Bureau did not have confidence in the detailed findings from their final coverage measurement, the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation (Revision II). The National Academy of Sciences' National Research Council did conclude with a fair amount of confidence that the net undercount and differential undercount by race/ethnicity were reduced from 1990. However, the panel also concluded that there continued to exist a differential undercount of racial minorities in the 2000 census (Committee on National Statistics 2004, 241).

In the Asian American community, accuracy in census counts remains a persistent issue. In the 2000 Census, Asian Americans were alleged to be slightly overcounted by the Census Bureau's findings, possibly because there was a relatively high rate of duplication for Asian Americans in college living away from home, which likely offset any undercount of other subgroups.

Still, other Asian American subgroups believe that they were vastly undercounted. This was particularly true for Southeast Asian communities. For example, many community leaders in Long Beach, California believed that the Cambodian population was undercounted in the 2000 census. As evidence, they cite the fact that local school enrollment data were considerably different than the data provided by the 2000 census. During the 1999-2000 school year, school enrollment data showed a population of Cambodian students that was nearly as large as the entire Cambodian population counted by the Census Bureau. Yet, the 2000 census data showed that the Cambodian school-age population accounted for less than half of all Cambodians in California. It is clear that the Census Bureau missed a

significant number of Cambodian children in the 2000 census, and, from this finding, we can extrapolate it is highly likely that the census missed a significant number of Cambodian adults in California, as well.

Impact on Civic Engagement

Because non-participation in census surveys can lead to potential undercounts, severe consequences to civic engagement will inevitably follow. Inaccurate census counts can create future problems for redistricting, addressing language barriers to voting, and enforcing voting rights. Additionally, undercounts would make other aspects of civic engagement work more difficult to undertake.

Undercounting communities will have a devastating impact on redistricting. Redistricting, the process by which census data is used to redraw the lines and boundaries of electoral districts within a state, affects districts at all levels of government – from local school boards, wards and city councils to state legislatures and the United States House of Representatives. The way that district lines are drawn also influences whether or not elected officials are responsive to the needs of their communities, such as securing funding for bilingual education classes or ensuring that Limited English Proficient individuals in the community have access to health care.

Asian American communities have not traditionally been actively involved in the redistricting process, except in certain areas where there is a sizeable population. This lack of participation has, in turn, resulted in underrepresentation in elected leadership positions. For example, despite being 12% of the population in Los Angeles as of the 1990 Census, there were no Asian Americans on the County Board of Supervisors during the 1990s because the Asian American communities were split apart into different districts (Vasquez 2001). Keeping Asian American voters with shared interests together in a district means that they have a significant voice in deciding who is elected to office, and whether their needs are being raised and represented. In 2001, the Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans for Fair Redistricting (CAPAFR) was formed to organize the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities statewide in Cali-

fornia for the first time in history to actively engage in the statewide Assembly redistricting process and create a statewide Assembly proposal. CAPAFR's advocacy resulted in the 2001 Assembly lines unifying seven key communities of interest, two of which resulted in the election of Asian American Assembly members (Assemblyman Mike Eng of the 49th Assembly District and Assemblyman Van Tran of the 68th Assembly District), including the first Vietnamese state legislator in the nation (Coalition of Asian Americans for Fair Redistricting 2001). The ability to make this progress begins with having quality census data. If Asian Americans are missed in the decennial count then they will not be represented in the redistricting process. If too many Asian Americans are missed, whole communities run greater risks of being split into different districts during the redistricting process, and thereby losing their political clout.

If Asian Americans are missed from the monthly American Community Survey (ACS), communities run the risk of not receiving the election language assistance they need — and are entitled to under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. During the 2006 reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, in recognition of the move from the long form to the ACS, Section 203 determinations were to be made every five years based on ACS data (Hamer, Parks and King 2006). Section 203 requires covered jurisdictions to provided language assistance during the electoral process, thereby removing the language barrier to voting for their covered language minorities. A jurisdiction is covered under Section 203 where the number of limited English proficient United States citizens of voting age in a single language group within the jurisdiction who are Asian American, Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native is more than 10,000, more than five percent of all voting-age citizens, or exceeds five percent of all reservation residents on an Indian reservation, and has an illiteracy rate higher than the national illiteracy rate.[ii] Once covered, the jurisdiction is obligated to provide "any registration or voting notices, forms, instructions, assistance, or other materials or information relating to the electoral process, including ballots" in the covered language as well as in English.[iii] Section 203 has been successful in increasing the civic engagement of Asian American citizens, with higher voter registration and turnout levels from each previous en-

actment or reauthorization period. Increases in voter registration and turnout can be directly linked to Section 203 compliance. For example, after entering into a Memorandum of Agreement with the Department of Justice, Harris County, Texas (Houston) saw the doubling of Vietnamese voter turnout which resulted in the first Vietnamese candidate in history to be elected to the Texas legislature, defeating the incumbent chair of the Appropriations Committee. The increased civic engagement of these groups has also led to increased political representation by candidates of choice. In recent years, almost 350 Asian Americans have been elected to office.[iv] If Asian American communities miss out on Section 203 coverage because of missed persons, then their ability to be civically engaged suffers.

Finally, without accurate voting data, the ability of civic engagement organizations to do their job effectively will be compromised. Information on reported voting and registration by various demographic and socioeconomic characteristics is collected for the nation in November of congressional and presidential election years through the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS). Combined with data from other census surveys, these data are important in determining what groups are in need of education and outreach efforts and are useful in detecting trends in voting patterns of particular communities. For those organizations that have a demographic analysis capacity, or for those that do not but who contract with those that do, census data can be used to develop a Get-Out-The-Vote strategy, including determining where canvassing and phone banking should occur. These data are critical to civic engagement by helping to shape and guide what any given civic engagement campaign should look like.

What barriers exist to Census participation for the Asian American community?

It is clear that we need to have every Asian American counted and it is equally clear that some are not. There are barriers to census participation that likely explain why some Asian Americans are being missed. The Asian American population in the United States is larger than it has ever been in our nation's history. From 1990 to 2004, the

Asian American population doubled in size, growing from seven million to 14 million. Of this rapidly growing segment of the population, about two-thirds are foreign-born, and more than a third of the Asian American population, nearly four million people, is considered limited English proficient (LEP). This combination of factors indicates that a significant sector of the population is at a substantial disadvantage — both linguistically and culturally — when it comes to participation in the census.

The Census Bureau's Asian American focus groups showed that many Asian Americans lacked awareness about the census and had not heard of the Census Bureau.[v] Indeed, many Asian Americans find the idea of the census not only confusing, but invasive and potentially threatening. Asian Americans — especially those who have recently emigrated from countries with oppressive governments — believe that the census is linked to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). The Census Bureau's Asian American focus groups also noted the lack of understanding about the purpose of the census and how the data is used. They also did not recognize any direct benefit to participating in the census to themselves and/or to the Asian American community. Lastly, respondents noted that English-language proficiency issues and the lack of availability of in-language materials functioned as barriers to census participation by Asian Americans.

While the ideal for a census is to achieve a complete count of all persons in the country, perfection in this context is impossible. The pragmatic reality is that the Census Bureau constantly strives to achieve the most accurate count possible and one that is better than previous counts. The 2010 Census will provide the Census Bureau with even more challenges in achieving an accurate count. The demographics of 2010 have changed drastically from 2000. Some communities, such as the Latino American and Asian American communities have experienced high growth rates. Additionally, recent natural disasters have displaced many people from their homes and have created a more complex — consequently, less traditional — sense of household for many people. The Census Bureau must be able to understand these communities and situations and the unique barriers to an accurate count that may exist for them.

The Census Bureau also has to account for the fact that people are reluctant to voluntarily provide personal information to the government in an age of identity theft and in the wake of immigration raids and other dragnets that post-9/11 policies have created. Combined with growing privacy concerns that have arisen from recent disclosures that the Census Bureau inappropriately shared information with government agencies, an increasing number of people, particularly minorities, are fearful of providing even the most basic information asked on the census. The Census Bureau must somehow overcome the many obstacles created by these factors in order to get an accurate count.

What can be done to break down barriers to Census participation?

It is important that we actively educate people about the importance of census surveys because the Census Bureau's Asian American focus groups indicated that very few had ever participated in any U.S. Census, even though most of the Asian American participants had been living in the United States during the 2000 Census. In fact, the majority of Asian American respondents reported never having received the census in the mail, nor were they visited by a census enumerator. For those who received the form but did not respond, some threw it away because they could not read English, others said they just were not interested, and a few said that at the time they were not yet citizens and thought that only U.S. citizens could participate. A number of participants mistakenly confused the census questionnaire with their annual evaluation form for their welfare assistance programs or with other telephone or mail surveys conducted by private businesses or government agencies. Thus there is a lot of confusion regarding what the census surveys are, what they do, and how one should correctly fill them out.

Based on the Census Bureau's Asian American focus groups, doing good and improving one's community was seen as an important benefit of the census. The Asian American respondents expressed their particular interest in a number of the benefits, including school funding, funding of other programs (such as police, firemen,

and national security), building new roads, determining the number of Congressional seats, planning for businesses, and providing public bilingual services. In fact, once participants were shown the census fact sheets and had an opportunity to discuss how the data is used and benefits the community, the majority expressed interest in participating in the 2010 Census.

There are many opportunities to engage Asian Americans in participating in census surveys. Some of the specific efforts suggested by the Census Bureau's Asian American focus groups to motivate more Asian Americans to participate in the census include: working closely with Asian churches and temples; setting up seminars or workshops at Asian American community centers or organizations; getting the message to parents through students at school and creating and sending a task force with bilingual census takers. They also suggested running in-language ad campaigns that emphasize the following messages: participating in the census does not require legal status and filling out your census form provides benefits to communities, including hiring more police, receiving more funding for schools, and building more roads to reduce traffic. Further, greater census participation can also allow communities to gain more political power. They also noted that the most effective outreach strategies to reach Asian ethnic communities utilize native-language media (e.g., television, newspapers, radio, billboards near or within the community) and flyers posted at Asian churches, temples, community centers, social service organizations and at major Asian grocery stores.

Conclusion

Understanding the importance of census participation to effective civic engagement is critical to optimizing civic engagement work. The primary key to overcoming these obstacles is to raise overall awareness of the census and why it is important for every person to participate in census counts, regardless of their citizenship or legal status. Unfortunately, even for community based organizations who are aware of the benefits of census data, working on census education and advocacy often takes a back seat to other pressing issues, such as citizenship and naturalization, immigration or get-out-the-vote

work. Having community groups understand that accurate census data is the backbone to all of their civic engagement efforts will help to create greater awareness of the importance of census data. If Asian American communities can work collectively to increase the accuracy of their communities' census counts, the effect on civic engagement efforts will be widespread and profound, the impacts of which could range from increased funding for programs, services, schools and infrastructure, to having more voting power, to electing more Asian American elected officials at local, state and national levels.

Notes

[i] The 1990 census provided the first measurements on the undercounts for Latino Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians and Alaska Natives. In the previous decennial censuses, the only coverage measurements made were for "black" and "non-black."

[ii] 42 U.S.C. § 1973aa-1a(b)(2). The Director of the Census Bureau makes these determinations, which are effective upon publication in the Federal Register. The Director's determinations are not subject to review in any court. 42 U.S.C. § 1973aa-1a(b)(4).

[iii] 42 U.S.C. § 1973aa-1a(c). Of course, when the covered language is oral or unwritten, then the covered jurisdiction is only required to furnish oral instructions, assistance, or other information relating to registration and voting. Id.

[iv] H.R. Rep. No. 109-478, at 9-10 (2006) at 19.

[v] The report on these focus groups, Ethnic and Racial Sub-Population Focus Group Research, Qualitative Research Conducted on Behalf of the U.S. Census Bureau, can be found at http://www.census.gov/procur/www/2010communications/final%20report%20-%20asian%20&%20arab-american.pdf. The report provides detailed findings from focus groups on the following populations: Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Filipino, Laotian, Chinese, Arab, Multi-Racial, and Caucasian.