“Coming to Our Census: How Social Statistics Underpin Our Democracy (and Republic)”: Author’s Response

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The upcoming 2020 Census will be the largest statistical effort ever undertaken by the United States. As I argued in the article (Sullivan, 2020b), both as a concept and as an institution the census is important to democracy. In a democracy, the people count, and the census is the way we count the people.

Readers of this issue of the *Harvard Data Science Review* are fortunate to have such a range of commentary on the census and the issues raised in the article. It is both instructive and humbling to read the comments from nine eminent analysts. They have worked in government and the academy, they profess different scholarly disciplines, and they bring experience from the United States and from other countries. Several of the commenters have been important influencers of my own career, and I have appreciated their insights over the years.

Margo Anderson beautifully presents the history behind the innovation that the census was to American governance. The census was constitutionally mandated to apportion of the House of Representatives and the Electoral College. Both Anderson and Dudley Poston explain more about the statistical mechanics of apportionment. Poston makes the helpful point that electoral equality (one person, one vote) is a different goal from representational equality (each elected official representing the same number of people). He notes that the political parties interested in manipulating the outcomes of apportionment might be getting bad advice about how to achieve their ends.

Besides apportionment, the census is now important to the allocation of federal program dollars. Reynolds Farley discusses fund allocation, how the census data are used in allocating federal funding to states and localities. Both Farley and Karen Kafadar update my figure of \$880 billion distributed using census data to note Reamer’s (2019) estimate of more than \$1.5 trillion that rides on census data.

The 2020 Census brings an *old* challenge, which is the undercount, and especially differential undercount. A differential undercount substantially affects both representational equality and equity in funding distributions. The 2020 Census also faces *new and different* challenges, in part because the technology environment has changed so radically and in part because recent immigration controversies have raised more suspicions about governmental motives. These twin issues provide distinct bases for mistrust of the census, the census takers, and the government. Several commenters have mentioned the trust issue, with Thomas Belin describing the census as a “crucible for trust in government.” Both Howard Hogan and Kafadar note that the trust issue may also extend to the users of census data. Ironically, measures such as differential privacy, which are designed to reassure the respondents about the security of their data, may end up leaving users wondering whether they can trust the data.

Ray Chambers and Dennis Trewin add a cross-national perspective on census-taking elsewhere, including light-touch censuses and register-like databases constructed by linking administrative data. President Trump’s executive order 13880, which directs the Census Bureau to link federal databases to develop geographically

based citizenship data, is an important step in the direction of what we might call the blended census/register (Sullivan, 2020a).

Finally, many of the commenters take the opportunity to comment on the significance of the integrity of individuals who work in statistical agencies. C. F. Citro offers a detailed timeline of the legal protections for federal statistics. Even so, she cites the example of the Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service to make the point that the federal agencies themselves are vulnerable.

Each of the respondents has commented helpfully on a part of the original article, and I appreciate their willingness to do so. Their varied contributions indicate how census issues intersect with larger issues facing the U.S. polity.

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