What Is the Census and Why Do We Use It?

Lesson Overview

Many students do not understand the importance of the U.S. Census and why it is taken. This lesson will help students understand the importance of the Census historically and the importance of its contemporary use.

Lesson Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to

- define what the Census does,
- identify where it is found in the U.S. Constitution,
- explain why the Founders included it in the Constitution,
- trace the major changes to the Census over the last hundred years, and
- compare and contrast the importance of the Census to the Founders and to us today.

Materials Needed

- Student Handout 1: Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution
- Student Handout 2: Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Section 2
- Student Handout 3: Timeline for the 2020 Census
Before the Lesson

Review the U.S. Census Bureau’s website at https://www.census.gov/. The Census Bureau has some fascinating information that would allow teachers to tailor this lesson to the individual interests and abilities of their students. It would be helpful to also look at articles provided or written by the Committee on the Budget of the House of Representatives at https://budget.house.gov/.

Procedure

1. **Beginning the lesson.** Conduct a brainstorming activity with students. Ask them to respond to two questions: (1) What is the Census? and (2) In what government document might you find it referenced? This activity should only take a minute or two. Based on the students’ responses, provide them with the appropriate responses to the questions and include Student Handouts 1 and 2 in order to solidify students’ understanding of the constitutional origins of the U.S. Census.

2. **What does the Census actually do? How and why?** Begin a class discussion based on what the Census actually does when it counts people. This can be aided by such questions as the following:

   a. What can that data be used for?
   b. How are people counted?
   c. What formula for the population can be used?
   Ask other questions depending on the students’ conversations or questions.
Procedure (continued)

3. **Changes in the census.** Ask students whether they believe the Census has changed since its inception. If they believe it has, ask them how it has changed. If they believe it has not changed, ask them to explain why. For this segment the teacher might place students into groups of four or five students. Have each group work on the following questions:

   a. Has the Census changed in its focus since its inception?
   b. How has the Census changed over the last hundred years?
   c. How has the focus of the Census changed since the Founders have incorporated it into the Constitution?

   This is a wonderful opportunity for the class to do research if that works within the class's timeline. Each group should share their responses with the class.

4. **Concluding the lesson.** Keeping students in the same groups, provide each group with Students Handout 3: Timeline for the 2020 Census. Ask each group to read through the timeline, and ask them to answer and discuss the following questions:

   a. How has this timeline changed since it was created? Students should answer the question taking into account Census efforts in their state, if they are aware of them, and the Census nationwide.
   b. What may happen as a result of these changes?

   The groups share a summary of their discussions or in a manner indicated by the teacher.
Lesson Plan

Student Handout 1
Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution

The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members chosen every second Year by the People of the several States, and the Electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

No Person shall be a Representative who shall not have attained to the Age of twenty five Years, and been seven Years a Citizen of the United States, and who shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State in which he shall be chosen.

Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.]*

The actual Enumeration shall be made within three Years after the first Meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they shall by Law direct. The Number of Representatives shall not exceed one for every thirty Thousand, but each State shall have at Least one Representative; and until such enumeration shall be made, the State of New Hampshire shall be entitled to choose three, Massachusetts eight, Rhode–Island and Providence Plantations one, Connecticut five, New–York six, New Jersey four, Pennsylvania eight, Delaware one, Maryland six, Virginia ten, North Carolina five, South Carolina five, and Georgia three.

When vacancies happen in the Representation from any State, the Executive Authority thereof shall issue Writs of Election to fill such Vacancies.

The House of Representatives shall choose their Speaker and other Officers; and shall have the sole Power of Impeachment.

* Changed by Section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment
Student Handout 2
Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Section 2

Representatives shall be apportioned among the several States according to their respective numbers, counting the whole number of persons in each State, excluding Indians not taxed. But when the right to vote at any election for the choice of electors for President and Vice-President of the United States, Representatives in Congress, the Executive and Judicial officers of a State, or the members of the Legislature thereof, is denied to any of the male inhabitants of such State, being twenty-one years of age,* and citizens of the United States, or in any way abridged, except for participation in rebellion, or other crime, the basis of representation therein shall be reduced in the proportion which the number of such male citizens shall bear to the whole number of male citizens twenty-one years of age in such State.

* Changed by Section 1 of the Twenty-sixth Amendment
Student Handout 3
Timeline for the 2020 Census

Counting every person living in the United States is a massive undertaking, and efforts begin years in advance. Here’s a look at some of the key dates along the way:

2019

January–September: The Census Bureau opens more than 200 area census offices across the country. These offices support and manage the census takers who work all over the country to conduct the census.

August–October: Census takers visit areas that have experienced a lot of change and growth to ensure that the Census Bureau’s address list is up to date. This process is called address canvassing, and it helps to ensure that everyone receives an invitation to participate in the census.

2020

January 21: The U.S. Census Bureau starts counting the population in remote Alaska. The count officially begins in the rural Alaskan village of Toksook Bay.

March 12–20: Households begin receiving official Census Bureau mail with detailed information on how to respond to the 2020 Census online, by phone, or by mail.

March 30–April 1: The Census Bureau counts people who are experiencing homelessness over these three days. As part of this process, the Census Bureau counts people in shelters, at soup kitchens and mobile food vans, on the streets, and at nonsheltered, outdoor locations, such as tent encampments.

April 1: Census Day is observed nationwide. By this date, every home will have received an invitation to participate in the 2020 Census. Once the invitation arrives, recipients are urged to respond for their home in one of three ways: (1) online, (2) by phone, or (3) by mail. Residents are asked to tell the Census Bureau where they live as of April 1, 2020.

April: Census takers begin visiting college students who live on campus, people living in senior centers, and others who live among large groups of people. Census takers also begin conducting quality-check interviews to help ensure an accurate count.

May–July: Census takers begin visiting homes that have not responded to the 2020 Census to help ensure that everyone is counted.

December: The Census Bureau delivers apportionment counts to the president and Congress as required by law.

2021

March 31: The Census Bureau sends redistricting counts to states by this date. This information is used to redraw legislative districts based on population changes.