

A census is the procedure of systematically enumerating, and acquiring and recording information about the members of a given population. From the beginning of civilization (towns and cities), governments have needed periodic counts of how many people lived under their rule. They needed these figures to know how many people they could feed and water, how many they could tax, and how many able-bodied men they had to dig irrigation channels and to defend the community when under attack.

How seriously rulers took this process could be seen in part in the great murals over the city gates of Babylon: illustrations of decapitations of people who failed to pay their taxes. (Comparable pictures can be found independently in Aztec Mexico: decapitation for non-payment of taxes.)

The census taken every decade since the origin of the United States is mandated by Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution, The data collected by the census determines the number of representatives each state has in the U.S. Congress (a process called apportionment) and is also used to distribute billions in federal funds to local communities.

Today's census in all developed countries, particularly those with representative governments, are far more detailed than in antiquity. Governments want to know if the population has grown or declined, how wealth is distributed among the classes, how many homeless and undocumented people live there, the number of children needing education from kindergarten through high school, the general health and birth and death rates of the population, and many more issues to help the government govern.

We in the general public cooperate by answering census surveys taken by visiting census takers or more today on line. Special effort is done personally by census-takers to assemble data from the homeless and from fearful populations, many undocumented, who have fled autocratic countries.

I recall that when teaching Iranian military students being trained here, the students were very suspicious of the surveys requested by the sociologists trying to understand the backgrounds of these students so that our instruction could be more focused. Their experience in Iran was that the government asks questions that will only hurt them: taxation, military recruitment, and population numbers, with no questions about bettering their lives.

The 2020 census has been taken, the first in a century that was hampered by a pandemic, but also by deliberate sabotage by President Trump, who asked Republicans to cut back funding and cut short the census collecting process. Because the census determines how many representatives each state may have in Congress, there is concern over population numbers and the nature of those voters. Conservative states have seen their populations decline, and urban populations are growing---particularly by non-white and young voters.

Today's flawed census has finished and announcements made. A number of populous states (New York and California) seem to have lost a seat each due to slow growth or population decline. The sunbelt states, hitherto conservative and Republican, have increased, gaining Texas one or two more seats in Congress. This should make Republicans happy, but it does not, because that growth appears to bring in multiracial and young newcomers who will vote Democrat.

But I have another take on this information: the decline in our population (and that of other modernized countries) can be an opportunity, not a misfortune. We have for too long regarded population increase as a good thing. It means economic growth: more workers, more demand for goods and services, more taxes coming in, and more young people to defend us in the military.

Autocratic countries particularly fear population decline because it makes them less able to project force. It is fascinating how fearful dictatorships are that their women have joined their sisters around the world in reducing the birthrate. Russia, for example, has lost half of its population since the beginning of World War II. Putin and his fellow dictators want to reverse women's rights so that they return to their traditional role: producing and rearing children. The women, so far, are not obliging them.

Next time, we will explore the benefits of population decline.

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Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of "How Do You Know That? Contact her at [Lfarhat102@aol.com](mailto:Lfarhat102@aol.com) or [www.globalthink.net](http://www.globalthink.net).