Who Counts? The Politics of Census-Taking in Contemporary America
by Margo J. Anderson and Stephen E. Fienberg.
Paperback edition updated to cover the 2000 census.

As part of the grand compromise between the small and large states, James Madison and the other framers of the U.S. Constitution tied representation in the House of Representatives to the population in each state. To count the population, the Constitution mandated that a population census be conducted in 1790 and every 10 years thereafter. This innovative plan affirmed the idea of popular democracy and allowed political power to flow with the growth of the nation's population. Indeed, periodic censuses have arguably been an essential ingredient in maintaining the stability and flexibility of American democracy over the last two centuries.

Censuses have, however, been the source of almost continuous political controversy. Disputes have arisen over how to count the population, the accuracy of the census, and the alternative methods used to allocate congressional representation to the states. Census data have also been at the center of political debates on the conditions of African Americans in slavery and freedom in the 19th century, and on the assimilation of new immigrants in the 20th century. These issues, and much more, are explored in Who Counts? The Politics of Census-Taking in Contemporary America, an exceptional book by Margo J. Anderson and Stephen E. Fienberg.

The major substantive focus of Who Counts? is the political controversy over the undercount—the inability of the census to count everyone. George Washington speculated about the 1790 census's undercount, but it took until the 1950s for researchers to develop methods to estimate the undercount. The undercount was transformed from a statistical issue into a political issue in the 1970s, as an increasing portion of federal funds ("revenue sharing") was allocated on the basis of census data. Equally important, the enforcement of civil rights laws and understanding of racial and ethnic disparities depend on the availability and quality of census data.

Anderson and Fienberg thoroughly document the political debates surrounding the estimated undercounts in the 1970, 1980 and 1990 censuses, and clearly explain the alternative methods of measuring the undercount and potential measures of adjustment. There are two basic methods of estimating the undercount: “Demographic Analysis” compares the census numbers with those projected given birth and death registrations, immigration statistics, and other administrative records; and “Dual Systems Estimation” tries to match individuals the census found to people found in special post-census surveys. The development and elaboration of these methods is a fascinating story that reveals how demographers and statisticians have used relatively simple ideas to develop powerful analytical tools to evaluate the completeness of census enumerations.

The 2001 paperback edition is slightly updated from the 1999 hardback edition to include a few observations on the 2000 census count, but primarily focuses on the censuses through 1990. The last few chapters describe the plans for the 2000 census, including the proposed changes in the measurement of race and ethnicity. Even without the coverage of the 2000 census, this volume is surely the definitive reference work on the politics of the census undercount.

Compared with the complexity of the statistical issues, the political issues of the undercount are straightforward and a zero-sum game. Middle-class areas with more accurate counts gain, politically and economically. Poorly enumerated areas, especially inner cities with minority concentrations, lose. So, Republicans generally favor the status quo—no adjustment for the undercount—while Democrats favor compensating for the undercount. The politics of the census are almost never debated in terms of the raw political interests, however. Each side produces statistical "experts" who claim that their recommendations are more scientific and unbiased.

Although Anderson and Fienberg endeavor to present a comprehensive picture of the technical and political issues, their conclusions clearly favor "adjustment." In the preface, Fienberg acknowledges his role as an expert witness in
various court cases over the adjustment of census data. Although the current system is fundamentally flawed, the statistical problems belie any simple solution.

A completely accurate enumeration of the population is impossible, especially in a nation with porous borders and a populace that is skeptical of government monitoring. Over the last few decades, the official estimate of the census undercount has been in the range of 2 to 3 percent, with slight improvement from census to census. Although the undercount is a problem, it is truly remarkable that the census can count 97 to 98 percent of the population. The early results from the 2000 census suggest, however, that the traditional methods of estimating the census undercount (demographic analysis, in particular) are no longer working. Although no one knows for sure why, it seems that higher-than-expected undocumented immigration, increased multi-home ownership (which may contribute to an overcount of whites), and an unusually comprehensive census enumeration impair estimates of the undercount and, thus, of the "true" population.

Uncertainty about the size of the total population notwithstanding, we do know that blacks, Latinos, and young men are most likely to be undercounted. And although the undercount was lower for all groups in 2000, the difference in coverage between blacks and others appears to have widened. The debate over the adjustment of census figures is both technical and political. Adjustments would have to be made for geographical areas (cities and counties), and at this level it is much more difficult to accurately estimate the undercount. Statisticians differ on the technical merits of such adjustments. Anderson and Fienberg are sanguine that the political controversy can be resolved based on a consensus of statistical expertise. Other experts argue that there is too much ambiguity in the proposed solutions to allow for a nonpolitical resolution.

One of the early names applied to statistical demography was "political arithmetic." That label seems particularly appropriate here. Politicians expect statisticians to produce perfect numbers, but science is better suited to measuring and minimizing errors than to completely eliminating them. It is perfectly appropriate to allocate "uncertainty" in census counts to redress the glaring inequities in American society, but this is more of a statement of values than the logic of demographic science. If public confidence in the social sciences is to be bolstered, the central ideas of social statistics—including uncertainty—must be communicated in a transparent fashion so that citizens can better understand the uses and limits of demographic data for decision making. Would that we had another James Madison to help us through this evolution of "political arithmetic" in contemporary America. (See 2000 Census Director Kenneth Prewitt's essay on his experiences, page 71.)