Tribes and the 2020 Census

2020 Census May Not Ask about Enrollment

The voices of tribal leaders are being heard on the issue of whether the 2020 Census should contain a question on tribal enrollment. At the most recent consultations between tribes and top Census Bureau staff, Bureau Director John Thompson said clearly that it is now unlikely that the 2020 Census questionnaire would include a question on whether a person is enrolled in a tribal government or Alaska Native entity.

A tribal consultation was held on the Pala reservation in southern California on November 4th. The last consultation in the series took place last Friday, November 19th on the Gila River reservation in Arizona. The Census Bureau message on this issue was the same at both sessions.

Director Thompson pointed out that shortly prior to the 2010 Census tribal representatives urged the Census Bureau to ask such a question. However, it was too late to include it in that decennial. When planning for the 2020 Census started, the Bureau began testing the possibility of including such a question in the upcoming enumeration. The agency has been testing possible language for such a question for a number of months.

The head of the Bureau went on to say that, unlike the message it heard prior to the last Census, this time around "we've heard a very different message."

Many tribal leaders and major inter-tribal organizations, including the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), have vigorously opposed the Census Bureau's idea of collecting enrollment information through a census based on self-identification.

This tribal opposition was reinforced by a letter from the lobbying arm of the tribal leader's organization in Arizona, Inter Tribal Council of Arizona (ITCA). The letter was hand delivered to Census representatives at last Friday's consultation. In it the Arizona tribal leaders stated flatly: "The determination of enrolled membership or citizenship is a power of a sovereign government and is not a matter of self-identification."

At the Gila River consultation Director Thompson said: "At this point it looks like we will not be including tribal enrollment on the 2020 Census as a question." The same message was repeated by Nicholas Jones, the Bureau's Director of Race and Ethnic Research and Outreach.

Although the position of the Bureau's leaders seems clear at this point, a final decision on the tribal enrollment question will not be made until next April. At that point the Administration will have to submit to Congress a list of topics to be included in the
2020 decennial census. Congress then has the ability to weigh in on what should or shouldn't be included on that list.

In the meantime, the Census Bureau will submit its recommendations to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on what should be on that list. OMB and the Executive Office of the President will make the final call on what goes to Capitol Hill.

**The Census Bureau and the New Administration**

Under President Obama federal agencies made an unusual effort to be tribally friendly. The Census Bureau has made extensive efforts to involve tribes, including during the series of 18 tribal consultations on the 2020 Census that just ended. The Census Bureau Director personally participated in most of these all day sessions, conducted at different locations around the country. Top staff from the various units within the Bureau also participated.

The new Administration may see a change in the Director's position, but perhaps not immediately. Under legislation approved in 2012, the Bureau's Director is nominated by the President and must be confirmed by the Senate. Once confirmed, he or she serves a fixed five-year term. Director Thompson's term expires in 2017.

The more immediate question is what will happen to the Bureau's budget. In order to prepare for the upcoming decennial, the Census Bureau needs ramped up funding. The Appropriations Committees in both houses have cut the FY 2017 budget for the Bureau substantially below the amount the President requested.

The current "continuing resolution" that is funding the Bureau and nearly all other federal agencies expires on December 7th. The new leaders for the next Congress have agreed to seek an extension of that continuing resolution until next March 31st. In the meantime the Census Bureau will need money over and above what it received last Fiscal Year to continue preparations for the 2020 Census. Whether it will get the needed funding remains to be seen.

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