

Editor in chief: Laura Cadiz
Editorial Editors: Bret Jacobson, Laura Lucas
Newsroom: (541) 346-5511
Room 300, Erb Memorial Union
P.O. Box 3159, Eugene, OR 97403
E-mail: ode@oregon.uoregon.edu

Perspectives

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A Question of Privacy

There's no way of getting around the census. It comes every decade, on the dot, and it helps decide representation in Congress. But the census should be limited to less personal questions because the queries are unnecessary and an invasion of privacy that shouldn't be tolerated.



Bret Jacobson

The government is not guaranteed any more information than a head count but currently asks much more intrusive questions. Such questions as when a person leaves for work, when they're at home most often and even a resident's phone number are not necessary for deciding how many members of the House of Representatives each state receives. While census officials say that every question on the questionnaire is used by some governmental agency — while magically being kept private, mind you — there are no constitutionally enumerated tidbits of private information to which the government is entitled simply for its convenience.

Besides the fact that there is no legal requirement for more information on census counts, there is the practical fact that the information obtained and sifted through becomes statistically less important with every passing year. While House members can be delegated accurately enough throughout a 10 year period, any statistical use of more probing census information that proponents argue in favor of become worthless by the second half of the decade.

There is a plausible concern that personal census information can easily be used inappropriately, despite assurances to the contrary. There is no serious way that privacy can be practically insured after given on a census. The Clinton administration has already been accused of illegally obtaining Internal Revenue Service files on its political enemies, so there's no reason to believe other citizens won't have their privacy violated.

If the government can say now that questions as to the times a citizen is home can make governing easier, what's to say that Big Brother's shoe won't want in the bedroom door, asking about the sexual habits of Americans. They could argue that health departments could use that information effectively.

There is no reason that the government needs the kind of invasive information they currently seek through the census, even if it makes governing slightly less convenient. The rights and dignity of American citizens is too important to be given away to an intrusive government.

Bret Jacobson is editorial editor for the Oregon Daily Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald. He can be reached via e-mail at bjacobso@gladstone.uoregon.edu.

It seems that some questions have come up about this year's census. The marketing campaign, to be sure, has blitzed your way. Ads proclaiming the value of filling out Census 2000 are all over TV with feel-good messages of federal tax dollars sure to come our way if only we fill out the census.

And most of us are ready to tell the government how many people live in our house and what their names and ethnicity are, which is the gist of the form most people get.

But the longer form of the census, which only goes out to one in every six Oregon households, has some very detailed questions. Questions about income, time you leave for work and how much rent or mortgage you pays.

While other government agencies, notably the IRS, know a lot about us, it seems some people think the census shouldn't ask such prying questions.

After all, it just counts heads, right? Wrong. Those head counts determine lots of federal funding, and the detailed information — which may seem weird to answer — actually serves a good purpose. Knowing what time you leave for work is to establish traffic patterns, for instance. And the information shared cannot be used by any government agency other than the Census Bureau. The bureau addresses the concern for privacy on its Web site. "To balance concerns about the intrusiveness of the decennial census, the many requirements placed on federal agencies, and the needs of state, local and tribal governments to manage programs, only those subjects that had specific federal legislative justification were recommended for Census 2000," according to the agency.

And, "Every question in Census 2000 is required by law to manage or evaluate federal programs or is needed to meet legal requirements stemming from U.S. court decisions such as the Voting Act. ... Federal dollars supporting schools, employment services, housing assistance, highway construction, hospital services, programs for the elderly, and more are distributed based on census data." Higher income neighborhoods would be earmarked for fewer housing assistance dollars. And if more 9-5 people were living in one area of a city, maybe a new highway on-ramp is needed in the area. This is what the census, in all its glorious detail, tells us.

All in all, about \$182 million dollars will be distributed annually based on formulas using Census 2000 data.

And that's money we shouldn't mind answering a few questions for.

Laura Lucas is an editorial editor for the Emerald. Her views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper. She can be reached via e-mail at llucas@gladstone.uoregon.edu.



Giovanni Salimena Emerald

Power of government should be returned to people

In the commentary piece signed by University President Dave Frohnmayer (ODE March 29), the president offers his support for shared governance at the University. Students, faculty and staff have been advocating for a role in decision-making at this University in a variety of forms for a long time — whether it was in opposition to the president's unilateral endorsement of the Riverfront Research Park, his rejection of the PRIDE Hall proposal brought to him by students last winter or his refusal to support the rights of farmworkers in our community by endorsing the PCUN-led boycott of NORPAC foods. Neither students, faculty nor staff oppose shared governance; rather, the conflict is over what exactly is meant by the ideals of democracy or shared governance within our University.

Given the baggage associated with the term "democracy," it seems appropriate to return to the Greek origins of the word. Demos means "the people." In Greece, it was the body politic, that is, the individuals who could participate in decision making. Kratia

COMMENTARY

Wylie Chen & Mitra Anoushiravani

is the second half of the word, meaning "rule by" or "power." In English, then, democracy means "power of the people." In practice, it implies participation and a certain level of control over decision-making by the people who are directly affected by those decisions.

The shared governance process in place at the University is far from democratic. The people who are affected by University decisions — students, faculty, staff and citizens of the state of Oregon — must rely on the sole decision-making power of the president. A more democratic system would have all members of the University community participating in decision-making

roles at the University. Students are currently excluded from the most important decisions at the University, including where our money goes, and the social and environmental standards by which the University conducts itself.

The president mentions, correctly, that state law grants him power to govern the University. He does have the ability to divest himself of that decision-making control, and he has done so in several instances. For example, he plays no role in decisions around animal testing at the University. It is in the interests of the entire University community that we all share a greater role in decision-making and that the University become a more democratic institution.

In early March, students voted in ASUO elections for the University to join the Workers Rights Consortium, a monitoring group that prioritizes worker empowerment and public disclosure of workplace conditions. In the absence of democratic decision-making in other venues at the University, the results of this election become even more meaningful.

The ASUO elections reinforced the students interest in taking a participatory role in larger issues of social justice, and we are hopeful for the prospects of shared governance at our University. Working together, we believe we can find solutions that empower the entire University community with a true shared governance system by which all members of the University community will have access to the decisions that affect all of us.

Wylie Chen and Mitra Anoushiravani are the president and vice president of the ASUO. Their views do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

CORRECTION

The story "Local comedians will take a stand" (ODE Pulse March 30), gave incorrect information about the performance. Eugene's fifth annual Laff-Off is happening Sunday. The correct phone number for reservations is 683-4368.

The Emerald regrets this error.