

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

CHRISTOPHER RUSH
Publisher

KATHRYN B. BROWN
Owner

WYATT HAUPT JR.
News Editor

Founded October 16, 1875

OUR VIEW

Keep politics out of the census

Every 10 years, as one decade transitions into the next, the U.S. government conducts a national census to count the number of people living in the country.

It’s mandated by the Constitution, and since 1790 has been the best large-scale way to account for who’s living where. It has also helped track demographic changes in the country, but that’s not part of the constitutional provision.

And that’s not to say it’s perfect. Despite radical changes in technology, we still go about the census in roughly the same way as our Founding Fathers did. Households fill out a short questionnaire accounting for everyone living there. The method leaves out the usual underrepresented people — homeless and transient people, or those fearful of checking in with the federal government.

But it’s an important count, because it dictates how federal money is allocated and how representatives are distributed. That’s why it’s been mandated since our country’s founding — to make sure we’ve got an accurate starting point for taxation and representation.

This year and next, millions of hours and billions of dollars will be spent making sure the count is as accurate as it can be. But there’s an effort afoot to rig what should be a non-political undertaking.

Where past leaders have seen a tool, President Donald Trump and his administration see a weapon.



Courtesy U.S. Census Bureau

The U.S. Census Bureau is preparing to begin the 2020 census, which may contain a question about citizenship.

Sure, other elected officials of all stripes have sought ways to skew the census results. Gerrymandering has become both an art and science as legislators redraw districts based on the numbers to secure power and diminish the ability of opponents to build support. They twist the straightforward count after it’s collected.

But the move by Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to add a question about citizenship to the census is an attempt to mess with the numbers before they’re even counted.

It’s been presented as an honest attempt to account for non-citizens in the interest of enforcing the Voting Rights Act, and a practice with a long history in the U.S.

On the second count, there’s some truth. In the 1800s and early 1900s the census inquired about the “naturalization” or citizenship of respondents. In recent years, that question has instead been asked in other surveys by the Census Bureau designed to track demographics and immigration.

But on the first count, that this is merely a curious government trying to use its power of inquiry to squash potential voter fraud, we’re doubtful. Especially because the data would shed no light on the Voting Rights Act.

It looks more like an attempt to limit responses from Hispanics and illegal immigrants. It surely would have that effect, regardless the intent.

By the government’s own estimates, as many as 6.5 million people would decline to participate — about 2 percent of the total population.

Representation, as dictated in the Constitution, is tied to population and not citizenship. And intentionally undercounting a specific group of people is an ugly tactic.

The failure of the administration to listen to experts on the topic — the nonpolitical Census Bureau — is also concerning. Ross has attempted to place the impetus for the decision on the Department of Justice, tasked with enforcing the Voting Rights Act. But records show it was he who requested the department send a letter to the Census Bureau asking to add the citizenship question.

The debate about whether the administration can add the question is now before the Supreme Court after a judge in a U.S. District Court ruled it illegal on multiple counts — from the fact that Ross missed the deadline to adjust the census to the fact that he didn’t attempt to use readily available data to address the Voting Rights Act. Skipping steps and ignoring rules are often a sign of either incompetence or malfeasance, and either way a blow to our confidence in the administration.

The Supreme Court will make its ruling. The census will be taken. And it will either be an honest attempt at a snapshot of people living in this country or a rigged count that leaves out a segment of the population.

Either way, its findings will resonate for the next decade and beyond.

YOUR VIEWS

Orcas an ironic ally for salmon recovery

That orcas should be allies in the effort to save salmon is the latest manifestation of our failure to manage predators in the Columbia River. For eons the Columbia had been the major producer of Chinook salmon. They were so readily available that the orcas off the West Coast became dependent upon them for their survival. These large salmon, for the most part, came from the upper reaches of the Columbia and Snake rivers.

Dams were constructed on the Snake River with fish being lost. Over the past 10 years the Columbia River Dart indicates there has been an average Chinook loss of 7% per year as the salmon moved from Ice Harbor Dam, through Lower Monument Dam, through Little Goose Dam and through Lower Granite Dam to the pool above. Though serious, it seems this loss would not warrant the expenditure of possibly billions to remove these dams.

The InterTribal Fish Commission conducted a study from 2010 to 2014 to assess the potential losses of spring Chinook in the area from the mouth of the Columbia to Bonneville Dam. Each year the losses steadily increased, from 20% the first year to 45% the final year of the study. During this time period the numbers of seals and sea lions increased markedly. Today that number has grown even faster. Genetic sampling showed that 68% of these tagged fish were destined for the upper reaches of the Columbia and Snake rivers.

Downstream smolts also suffered increased predation from increases in cormorant, tern and pelican populations.

The solution is as obvious today as it was in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time they did not allow seals and sea lions into the Columbia River. Yes, a few hundred were killed at a cost of a few thousand dollars. The state paid bounties and employed a seal hunter. The funding for this came from the fishermen and most of the bounty was paid to the fishermen.

I don’t know if you recognize the irony of the following scenario. Orcas, a threatened species, need Chinook salmon, some of whom are threatened because they are being eaten by seals and sea lions, which are being protected by the Endangered Species Act — a designation that should no longer apply because seals and sea lions have exceeded any need for protection from extinction.

Carlisle Harrison
Hermiston

OTHER VIEWS

The personal cost of the Trump-Russia probe

Special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation is over, but the reverberations of the Trump-Russia affair live on. One such after-effect is the reluctance of some important figures in the 2016 campaign to speak out, for fear of continued legal entanglements.

Take J.D. Gordon, who served as the Trump campaign’s director of national security. Never accused of any wrongdoing, he played a central role in one of the most controversial and least understood episodes of the Trump-Russia matter: the approval of the 2016 GOP platform at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland.

On July 18, 2016, *The Washington Post* published a story headlined “Trump campaign guts GOP’s anti-Russia stance on Ukraine.” Below a scandalously erroneous headline, the piece reported that the campaign, acting contrary to the views of “almost all Republican foreign policy leaders,” killed a proposal that the United States provide lethal aid to Ukraine in its struggle against Russia.

Why would the campaign do that? Democrats quickly accused Trump of watering down national security, of selling out Ukraine, to please Vladimir Putin.

It got worse. As a media frenzy built, Trump opponents cited the platform as Exhibit A in their case that the Trump campaign and Russia conspired to influence the 2016 election. As the tale went, the Russians helped Trump, he was in their debt, and he paid them back by supporting weakened U.S. policy toward Ukraine.

It was all entirely wrong. If anyone had bothered to look into the facts — almost no one did — they would have discovered that the original draft of

the GOP platform was quite strong on Russia and Ukraine. Not a word of it was removed. Then a single delegate proposed an amendment that would have added promises of tougher U.S. sanctions on Russia, greater military coordination with NATO, and the provision of “lethal defensive weapons” to Ukraine’s armed forces.

Gordon was the Trump staffer in the meeting as delegates considered the amendment. He did not object to the proposal of tougher sanctions, did not object to the proposal of greater military coordination with NATO, but changed the proposal to provide “lethal

defensive weapons” to a promise of “appropriate assistance to the armed forces of Ukraine.” (Gordon told investigators he changed part of the amendment because he felt it was not in line with candidate Trump’s position on Ukraine.)

The revised amendment was accepted, and the final platform was tougher on Russia and Ukraine than the original platform draft. It was not “gutted.” It was strengthened.

Nevertheless, the media and Democrats ran with the opposite story, and the “gutting” of the platform became part of the collusion narrative. And then the investigations started.

Gordon was called to testify before the Senate Intelligence Committee. He was called to testify before the House Intelligence Committee. He was called to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee. He was called to testify — three times — before Mueller.

Again: He was never accused of any wrongdoing. But each time, Gordon had to hire a lawyer. He won’t reveal precisely how big his legal bills were, but says they were in “five fig-

ures.” His communications business took a big hit.

One bright spot was that Gordon had a military pension to help him get along. He spent 20 years in the Navy, retiring with the rank of commander. He was a Pentagon spokesman during the last years of the George W. Bush administration.

Now the Mueller investigation is over, and the special counsel’s report finally, definitively destroys the “gutted the platform” narrative. The report says nothing about any quid pro quo with Russia, nothing about softening the platform in exchange for Russian help with the election, nothing about any of the anti-Trump theories that arose around the platform.

Now Gordon should be able to move on. But he cannot.

Recently, I invited Gordon to appear on my weekly podcast. I thought it would be interesting to have an in-depth discussion of the whole platform affair.

He declined. Although he has done some media appearances, Gordon was reluctant to have a long conversation.

And if Gordon were to speak at length now, Democratic staffers might pore over every word to see if they could find any inconsistency with his hours of testimony before the House, Senate and special counsel. And that could lead to even more questions. And bills.

So better to lie low. And that leaves everyone worse off. After an investigation cloaked in secrecy, the public needs to know more, not less, about what Mueller did. The people involved should be able to tell their stories without fear of being caught in still more investigation.

Byron York is chief political correspondent for *The Washington Examiner*.

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