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The Landscape: Making Oregon Count in 2020

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Making Oregon Count in 2020

by Mac Cunningham



Photo: Make Oregon Count 2020 Symposium

In our increasingly polarized national environment, the census remains one of the few tasks that all United States residents share in common. The results of the census will have implications for the decade to come.

What is the Census? And Why Does the Census Matter?

Mandated by Article I of the United States Constitution, the census is the largest peacetime mobilization in the country.¹ Conducted at the start of each new decade, the census is an effort by the government to count every resident in the United States at the location where each person usually lives. While this once-a-decade survey might seem labor intensive, the results of the census impact every resident in the United States.

The original reason for the census as determined by the founders of the federal government was to allocate seats in the House of Representatives and by extension the Electoral College.² Since then, the census' role and importance have greatly expanded.³ Results from the census impact policy-making and shape the future of the United States in six major areas: apportionment, redistricting, distribution of federal funds, planning, emergency response, and the population base for federal surveys.

Why Does the Census Matter to Oregon?

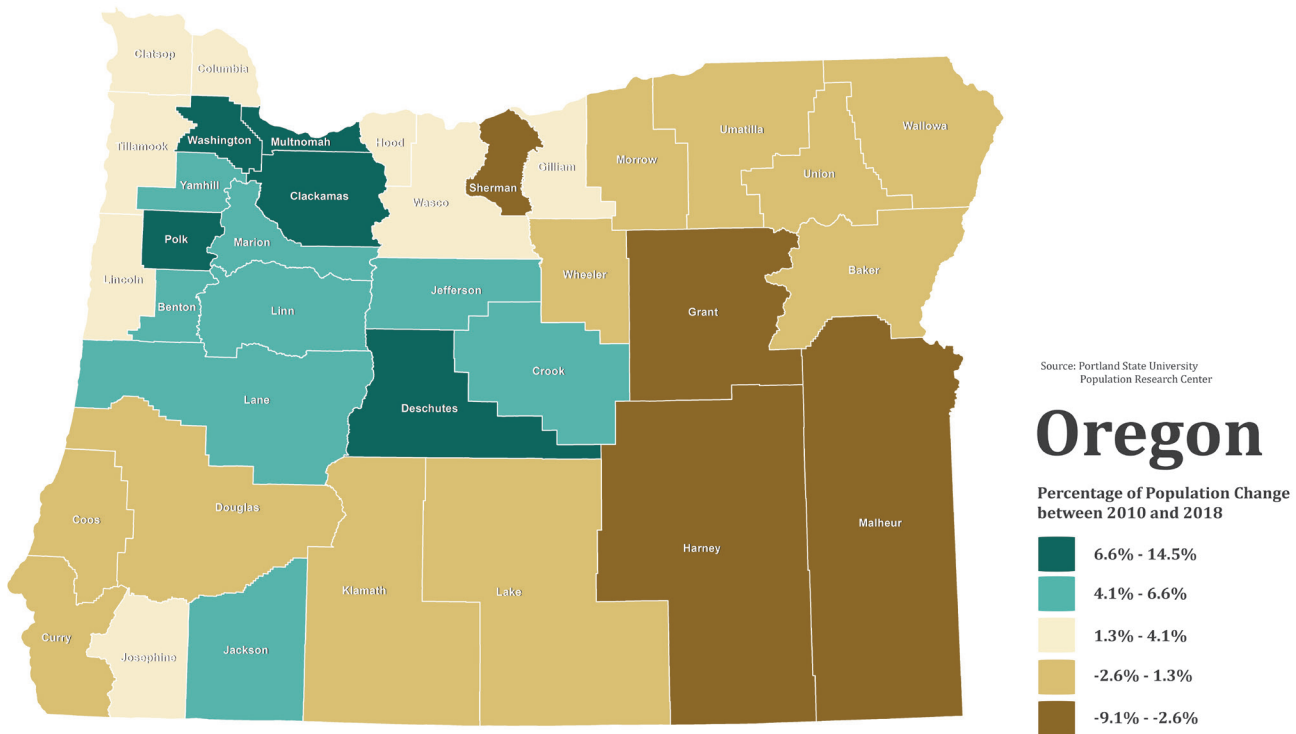
The 2020 census is particularly important because, during the 2010 census, Oregon missed out on gaining an additional House seat by 40,000 people.⁴ However, through a complete 2020 count, Oregon stands to gain that additional seat, thereby amplifying

1. United States Census Bureau, "US Census Bureau Celebrates Role in US Constitution," news release no. CB19-CN.09, September 17, 2019, www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2019/census-constitution.html.

2. "Why We Conduct the Decennial Census," US Census Bureau (website), last modified April 16, 2020, www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/about/why.html.

3. To learn more about the history of the census, see this webpage: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/2020-census/about.html>.

4. Jeff Mapes, "Oregon Looks More Likely to Win 6th Congressional Seat Following 2020 Census." *Oregon Public Broadcasting*, December 31, 2019, www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-congressional-seat-addition-2020-census-results-estimates/.



Map by: Xi Wei

ing Oregonian's voice on the national stage.⁵

Additionally, the census helps to determine the allocation of more than \$1.5 trillion in federal funds to states and local governments, nonprofits, businesses, and households across the nation. In fiscal year 2017, Oregon received more than \$19 billion in federal funding guided by census data. This equates to roughly \$4,600 per Oregonian in 2017.⁶ For each person who is left uncoun- ted, Oregon stands to lose vital federal funding. That means less funding for many key safety net programs such as the National School Lunch Program, Medicaid, highway planning and construction, Pell Grants, Section 8 Housing, and more.

Census data also helps to determine how local communities develop over the next decade. The census helps planners determine the need for major public sector

investments such as new roads, hospitals, schools and more.⁷ Plus, businesses rely on census data to decide where to invest and open new stores, which, in turn, create jobs.⁸

Oregonians have now been hearing about “the big one” (the Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake) for nearly five years. How well communities weather this event will depend, in part, on the census. Emergency responders depend on census data to determine where help will be needed and how much.⁹

Lastly, the census is used as the population base for major federal surveys. If the census does not accurately reflect the US population, it will skew the results and methodology of federal surveys for years to come.

5. Ibid.

6. Andrew Reamer, "Counting for Dollars 2020: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds" George Washington Institute of Public Policy, posted April 29, 2020, <https://gwipp.gwu.edu/counting-dollars-2020-role-decennial-census-geographic-distribution-federal-funds>.

7. Ibid.

8. Jim Tankersley and Emily Baumgaertner, “Here's Why an Accurate Census Count Is So Important.” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2018/03/27/us/politics/census-citizenship-question.html.

9. Mark Mather and Paola Scommegna, “Why Is the US Census So Important?” Population Reference Bureau (website), September 17, 2019, www.prb.org/importance-of-us-census/.