News



Demonstrators gather outside the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington April 23, 2019, following oral arguments on a citizenship question for the census. (CNS/Reuters/Shannon Stapleton)



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Of all the political issues facing the United States, the one for which an inverse relationship exists between the amount of attention it receives in comparison to the enormity of the consequences it portends is the census. While Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell wrestled over impeachment, Australia became an inferno and we almost slipped into a war with Iran, you will be forgiven for having missed a news item in The Hill about the Department of Homeland Security sharing information with the Census Bureau.

Last summer, the Supreme Court ruled that the Trump administration had not provided an adequate rationale for including a citizenship question on the census. The court in a mostly unanimous decision — all the justices agreed with the result but for different reasons — essentially accused the administration of lying:

> *Administrative law, after all, is meant to ensure that agencies offer genuine justifications for important decisions, reasons that can be scrutinized by courts and the interested public. Accepting contrived reasons would defeat the purpose of the enterprise. If judicial review is to be more than an empty ritual, it must demand something better than the explanation offered for the action taken in this case.*

Color me skeptical about accepting at face value DHS' promise that the information it will be turning over will be used only "for statistical purposes and Census statistical products only."

Of all the truly horrible things that Republicans have done, pre-Trump and Trump acolytes alike, one of the ugliest is their efforts to suppress the vote. Long before Trump became the nominee, the Koch brothers were pouring money into efforts to suppress the vote. Republicans continue to demonstrate deep concern about "voter fraud" even though there is no demonstrable evidence such a thing is rampant, and they dovetail that concern with anti-immigrant paranoia. The census only comes once every 10 years and so we should expect every dirty trick in the book to come from the party once known as the party of Lincoln.

The people they aim to disenfranchise are, of course, the poor and the marginalized, so our Catholic values in the area of social justice are present in spades. And, not only our values. Smack in the middle of the fight are real, live, breathing Catholics.

Newsweek's Shane Croucher this week looked at how the census is likely to affect future politics. It is clear that Texas could pick up as many as three congressional seats and Florida might pick up two. For each congressional state, they would also pick up an additional vote in the Electoral College.

Croucher cites a professor who notes that both states have tended to vote Republican so the new census should help the GOP but I have my doubts. Trump thumped Hillary Clinton in 2016 by nine points, but Republican Sen. Ted Cruz only won reelection two years later by 2.5% in his race against then-Rep. Beto O'Rourke. Some of that is attributed to the quality of the campaigns, but a lot of it has to do with the fact that nine Latinos are settling in Texas for every one white person, according to a study by the Public Religion Research Institute. Latinos are overwhelmingly Catholic and overwhelmingly Democratic.

When reading Croucher's article I was reminded of a conversation I had in 2011 with a bishop from Texas shortly after the last census numbers had come out. "It looks to me like Texas could turn blue in 20 years," I remarked. The bishop replied, "Ten." We will see who is right in November.

Trump won Florida by only 112,911 votes out of more than 9 million cast, or 1.2%. Most worrisome about the Sunshine State is the fact that Florida Republicans also flipped a Senate seat and retained the governorship in 2018. Still, the Puerto Rican population in Orange and Osceola counties in central Florida expanded by 12.5 percent according to last year's census estimate, and both counties straddle the all-important I-4 corridor where elections get decided in Florida. Unlike other Latino immigrants, Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens so they can register to vote as soon as they arrive. You can bet Democrats in Florida will be running ads next autumn featuring one of Trump's many insults directed at the island.

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In addition to demographic shifts, efforts to enact nonpartisan redistricting will affect the way congressional seats are apportioned between the parties, even though

there will not be any effect on the Electoral College which is winner-take-all in every state except Maine and Nebraska. Currently, only eight states have independent commissions charged with redrawing the maps: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Michigan, Montana and Washington. On that list, only California is likely to lose a seat after this year's census.

Redistricting may not affect the presidential contests anytime soon, but it could have a profound affect in forcing politicians away from the extremes. Currently, if you are lucky enough to be an incumbent in a district that was drawn to guarantee your party holds it, your only worry is being unseated in a primary. Primaries tend to be decided by a party's base, and the base tends to be those who are most arch on particularly divisive issues. As more and more states let voters pick their representatives rather than letting the representatives pick the voters, groups like the Susan B. Anthony List and Emily's List might lose some of their clout. We can only hope. Blessings on groups like the Brennan Center which work on achieving nonpartisan redistricting reform.

In 2010, the GOP swept the elections and captured control of Congress. Just as importantly, they gained 680 seats in state legislatures, where congressional districts are redrawn. Control of 21 legislative chambers flipped, with one more, Oregon's House of Representatives, shifting from Democratic control to a tie. Republicans emerged with 12 new trifectas — control both legislative chambers and the governorship, and so exercising complete control over the redistricting process — while the Democrats lost five of their trifectas.

What will happen next year? Obviously, a great deal rides on the November election. But a great deal also rides on having an accurate census. Whatever happens, the results will be with us for 10 long years. It is an issue that can't be ignored.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: *Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest. Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.*

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