

The 2020 Census and Political Representation in California

October 11, 2018

Eric McGhee, Sarah Bohn, and Tess Thorman

Supported with funding from the California Community Foundation, the California Endowment, the California Health Care Foundation, and Silicon Valley Community Foundation



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The census plays a key role in political representation

- Every ten years, the census determines:
 - Congressional reapportionment
 - Political redistricting
- An inaccurate census count could undermine both
 - Concerns about funding, method, and response rates
- Consequences could be particularly bad for California
 - Three in four residents are considered “hard to count,” including children, young men, Latinos, African Americans, and renters

Outline

- Population growth and reapportionment
- Impact of an undercount on reapportionment
- Impact of an undercount on redistricting
- Conclusions and recommendations

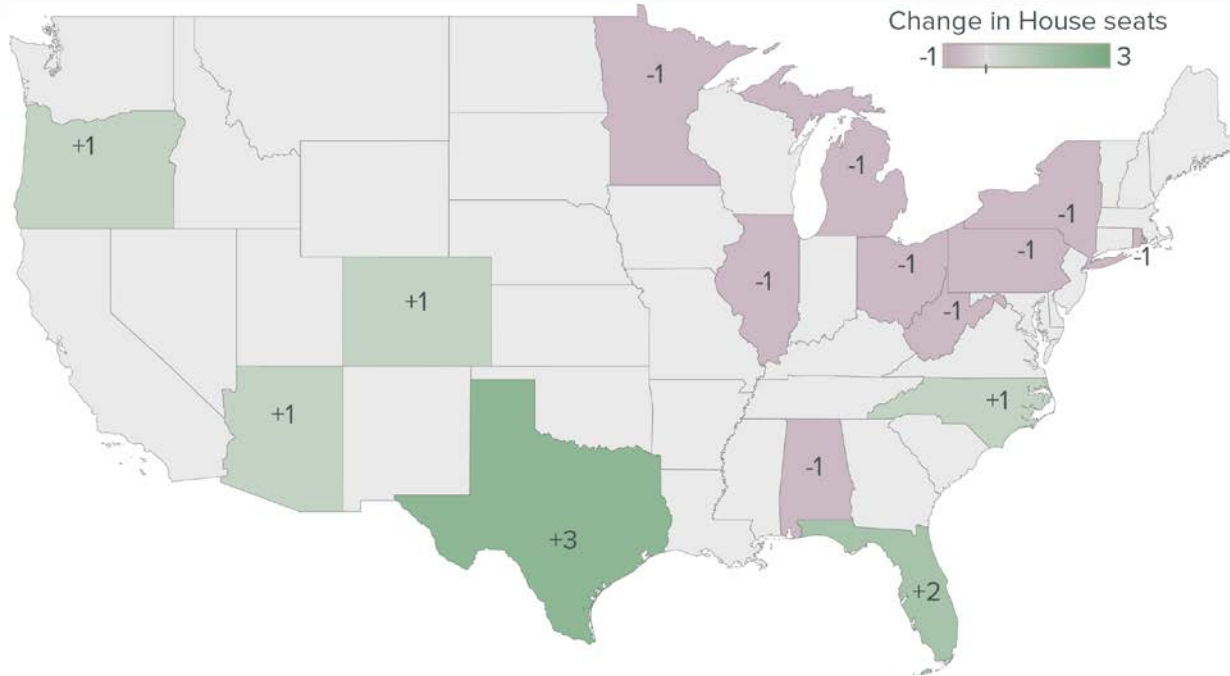
The census is used to reallocate US House seats

- *Reapportionment*: assigning the 435 seats in the House of Representatives to states
 - State populations are fed into a fixed formula
- Key factor: population growth relative to other states
 - Growth alone is not enough
 - Threshold effects make results less predictable

California is projected to keep 53 House seats in 2020

- California population: 40.6 million people in 2020
 - Up 8.9% from 2010
 - Slowest growth rate in state history
 - Growth rate slightly higher than the rest of the nation
- California is on track to keep its 53 House seats
 - Margin for 53rd seat is 600,000
 - Unlikely to lose a seat with an accurate count

An accurate census would affect seats in other states—but not California



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There are two likely sources of an undercount

- Low accuracy
 - Limited funding may prevent strong outreach
 - Switch to online form without appropriate follow-up
 - Result: historically undercounted groups are undercounted again
- Immigration-related
 - Aggressive federal enforcement of immigration laws
 - Citizenship question
 - Result: low response among immigrant communities

Modeling undercount effects: low accuracy

- Low accuracy
 - Use undercounts from 1990 Census (a “bad” census)
 - Assume same groups will be undercounted at the same rates

Group A in 1990 \longrightarrow Undercounted by 5%

Group A's projected 2020 population \times 0.95

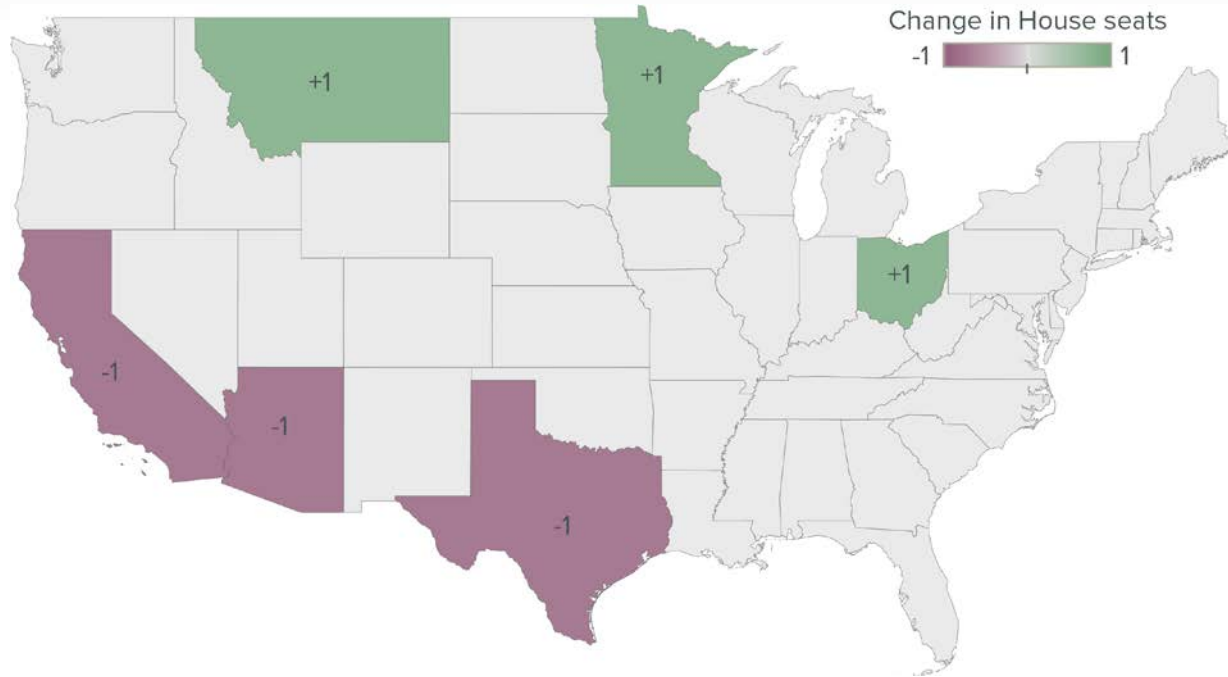
Modeling undercount effects: immigration-related

- Immigration-related
 - Research suggests undercounts between 10% and 50%
 - 10% provides conservative lower bound
 - Undercount anyone in a household with at least one undocumented resident

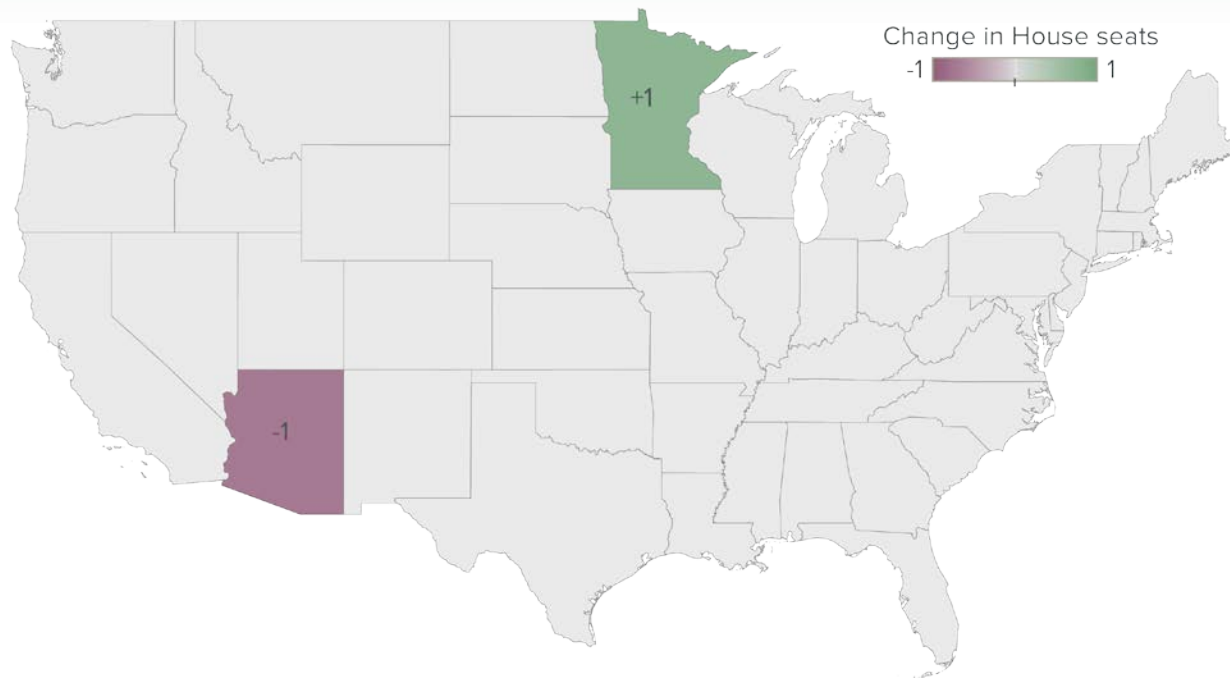
Undocumented households
in projected 2020 population $\times 0.9$

- Our primary undercount scenario combines low-accuracy and immigration-related simulations

A poorly conducted census with low immigrant response could cost California a House seat



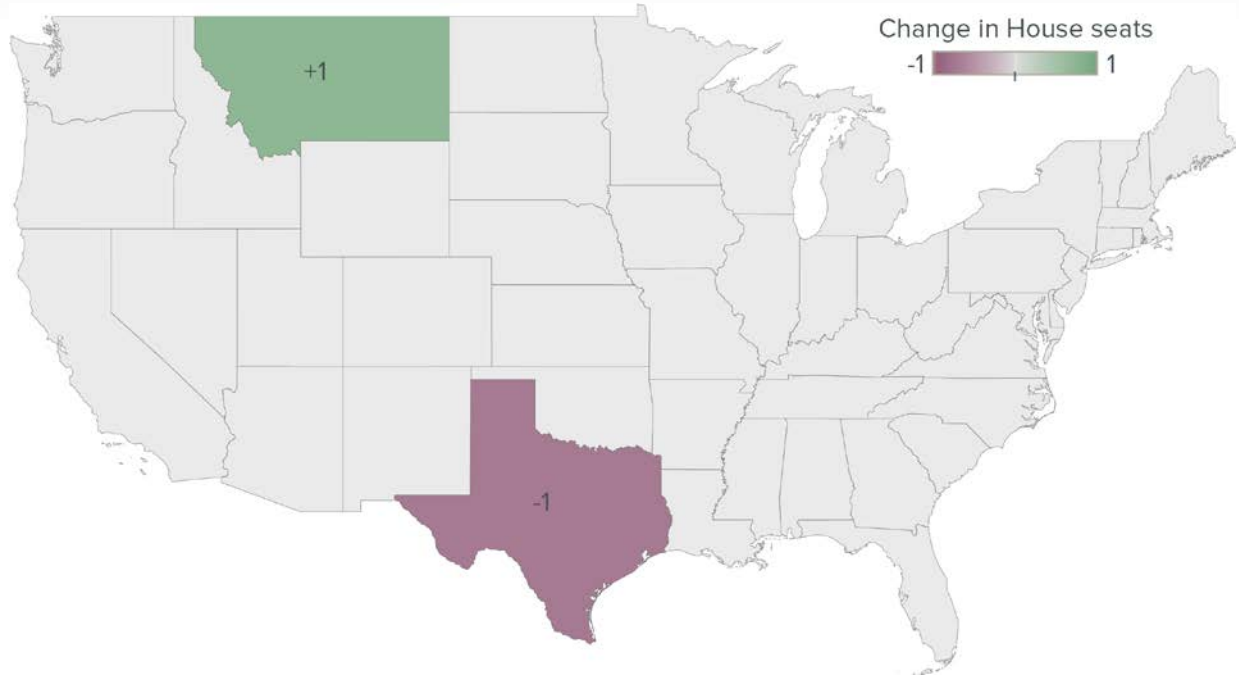
By itself, a poorly conducted census probably would not cost California a House seat



But a poorly conducted census might cost California a seat under certain conditions

- California might lose a seat if historically undercounted groups are:
 - Undercounted 5% worse than in 1990
 - Undercounted 3% worse for every undercounted group and 3% better for every *overcounted* group
 - Undercounted by 1% in California, but not in other states

By itself, low response rates among immigrants probably would not cost California a seat



But an immigration-related undercount might cost California a seat under certain conditions

- California might lose a seat if:
 - Undocumented households are undercounted by 19%
 - Undocumented households are undercounted by 13% in California but not other states
 - *Noncitizen* households are undercounted by 8%
 - *Latinos and Asians/Pacific Islanders* are undercounted by 4%

A better count in California could make a big difference

- The state budget includes \$90.3 million for census outreach
- If California...
 - improves combined undercount by 1%: no seat loss
 - improves combined undercount by 5%: one-seat gain
 - improves low-accuracy undercount by 3%: one-seat gain

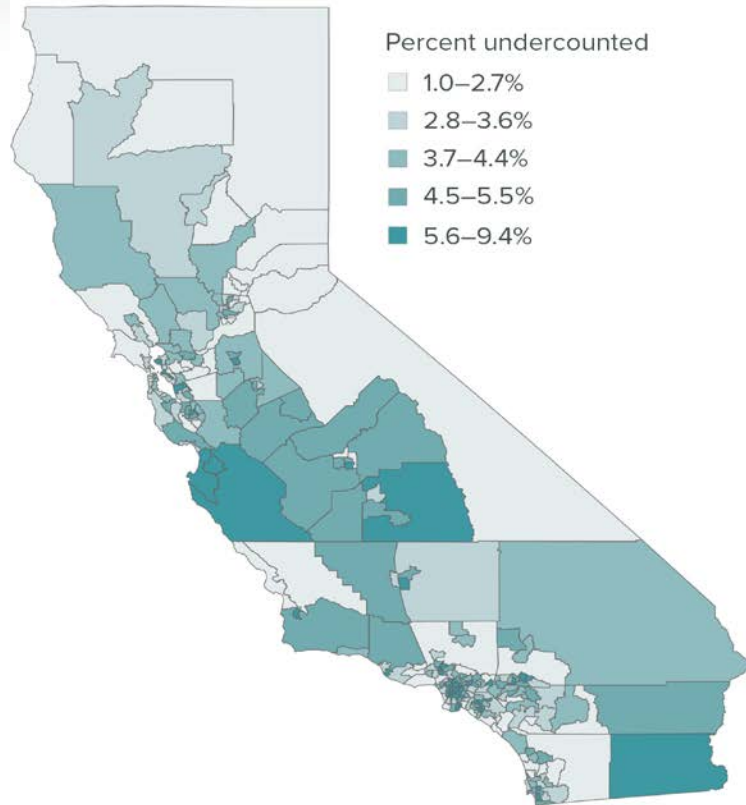
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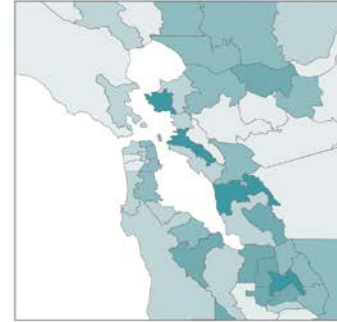
The census affects political boundaries within the state

- *Redistricting*: drawing district lines within the state
 - Congressional districts → almost exactly equal population
 - State legislative and other districts → close to equal population
- District lines cannot be predicted exactly—too many options
 - Areas of state that have grown more will get more representation
 - An inaccurate census could distort that representation

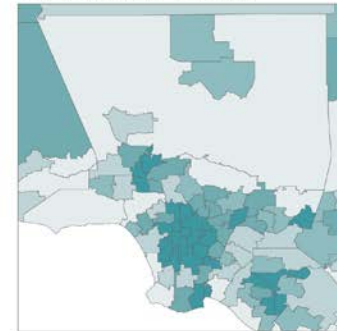
Combined undercount would divert representation away from low-income communities of color



San Francisco Bay Area



Los Angeles County



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Conclusions

- The 2020 Census faces many political and practical challenges
- If the census fails to reach historically undercounted groups and immigrant communities:
 - California could lose a House seat
 - Political representation would shift away from poorer areas with larger communities of color
- California could lose a seat in many alternative scenarios too
 - All would have to be relatively serious

Recommendations

- Watch for problems using Department of Finance estimates
- California might be able to use other data for redistricting
 - A separate census
 - Adjusted US Census numbers using undercount estimates
 - Legal status is ambiguous
- Leading up to the census, strong outreach efforts could make a big difference
 - Some scenarios even have California gaining a seat

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Notes on the use of these slides

These slides were created to accompany a presentation. They do not include full documentation of sources, data samples, methods, and interpretations. To avoid misinterpretations, please contact:

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Thank you for your interest in this work.