



APPORTIONMENT 101

FOR STUDENTS

What You Need to Know—and Why It's Important



YOUR STATE'S PLACE IN CONGRESS

Every 10 years, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts the decennial census to determine the number of people living in the United States. The census is conducted in years ending in zero and the most recent happened in 2020.

Population counts from the decennial census determine how many seats each state gets in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Fun Fact

After the first census in 1790, each member of the House of Representatives represented about 34,000 people. Today, each congressional district averages 700,000 people.

This process, called apportionment, is one of the most important uses of census results because it impacts the number of representatives the people of your state elect to work on their behalf in Congress. Census population counts used for apportionment include the number of people who live in each state, plus overseas military and federal civilian employees and their families living with them who can be counted in their home state.



IT'S IN THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution requires that a census of the population be taken every 10 years to distribute, or divide up, seats in Congress.



HOW IT WORKS

There are 435 seats in the House of Representatives, as currently set by law. One seat is given to each of the 50 states, per the Constitution. A math formula is then used to distribute the remaining 385 seats. The formula calculates values based on each state's total population and the number of potential seats each state could receive. Those values are ranked to determine how many additional seats each state receives.

Fun Fact

The math formula, also known as the “Method of Equal Proportions,” has been used since 1940 to distribute House of Representatives seats among the states.

Did You Know?

The populations of the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Island Areas are excluded from the apportionment calculation because they do not have any voting seats in the House of Representatives.



THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

To win a presidential election, a candidate needs at least 270 votes from the Electoral College, which is composed of 538 people—535 appointed by the states and three by the District of Columbia.

Did You Know?

The Electoral College is required by the U.S. Constitution to elect a president every 4 years.

The number of electoral votes a state gets is based on its congressional representation. States receive an electoral vote for each of its two senators plus one for each of its seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. Its number of seats is based on the census.



REDRAWING BOUNDARIES

The Census Bureau provides states with the local area population counts that they need to redraw or redistrict their congressional and other legislative boundaries. This helps keep districts equally proportioned within each state based on population changes.