INTRODUCTION
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Every day, from the morning paper to the evening news, Americans are served a steady diet of statistics. We are given the latest figures for consumer prices and the unemployment rate, lagging and leading economic indicators, reading scores, and life expectancies, not to mention data on crime, divorce, and the money supply. Most of these numbers are official in the sense that they are produced by government in what are generally presumed to be impersonal and objective bureaucracies. Of course, in some countries, where the regimes are distrusted, official numbers are also routinely disbelieved. But where the statistical collecting and reporting agencies enjoy a reputation for professionalism (as they generally do in our society), their findings are commonly presented—and accepted—as neutral observations, like a weatherman's report on temperature and atmospheric pressure.

This view, we all know, is too simple. Official statistics do not merely hold a mirror to reality. They reflect presuppositions and theories about the nature of society. They are products of social, political, and economic interests that are often in conflict with each other. And they are sensitive to methodological decisions made by complex organizations with limited resources. Moreover, official numbers, especially those that appear in series, often do not reflect all these factors instantaneously: They echo their past as the surface of a landscape reflects its underlying geology.
THE POLITICS OF NUMBERS

Official statistics have always been subject to these influences, but more is now at stake. In the United States, an increased share of federal money is distributed to states and localities according to various statistical formulae and criteria. The making of economic policy as well as private economic decisions hinges on fluctuations in key indicators. Standards for affirmative action in employment and school desegregation depend on official data on ethnic and racial composition. Several states now limit their budgets to a fixed share of projected state income, and a proposed "balanced budget" constitutional amendment would do the same for the federal government, in effect incorporating the inexact science of economic measurement and forecasting into the Constitution.

Official statistics directly affect the everyday lives of millions of Americans. They trigger cost-of-living adjustments of many wages and Social Security payments. They determine who qualifies as poor enough for food stamps, public housing programs, and welfare benefits. They are used to set the rates at which Medicare pays hospitals and to regulate businesses large and small.

It is no wonder, then, that America has become a nation of statistics watchers—from the congressmen concerned about redistricting to the elderly couples on Social Security worried about rising costs; from the bankers following changes in the money supply to the farmers watching the figures on cost-price "parity" for their crops. So well institutionalized are statistics such as the unemployment rate, the money supply, and various price indices that the date and even the hour of their release are regular events in the political and economic calendar, setting off debates on the performance of government policy and influencing both stock markets and elections.

But official statistics also affect society in subtler ways. By the questions asked (and not asked), categories employed, statistical methods used, and tabulations published, the statistical systems change images, perceptions, aspirations. The Census Bureau's methods of classifying and measuring the size of population groups determine how many citizens will be counted as "Hispanic" or "Native American." These decisions direct the flow of various federally mandated "premiums," and they in turn spur various allegiances and antagonisms throughout the population. Such numbers shape society as they measure it.

The absence of numbers may also be telling. For years after World War II Lebanon did not hold an official census, out of fear that a count of the torn country's Christians and Muslims might upset their fragile, negotiated sharing of power (which broke down anyway). Saudi Arabia's census has never been officially released, probably because of the Saudis' worry that publishing an exact count (showing their own popu-
lation to be smaller than many supposed] might encourage enemies to invade the country or promote subversion. In Britain a few years ago, Scotland Yard created a furor when, for the first time, it broke down its statistics on crime according to race. Some Britons objected that the mere publication of the data was inflammatory.

Statistics are lenses through which we form images of our society. During the early decades of the Republic, Americans saw the rapid growth in population and industry that the census recorded as a confirmation, for all the world to see, of the success of the American experiment. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner announced his famous conclusion about the closing of the American frontier on the basis of an observation in the report of the 1890 census.

Today, our national self-perceptions are regularly confirmed or challenged by statistics on such fundamental matters as the condition of the nuclear family [allegedly still eroding], reading and literacy, the (slight) reversal of rural-to-urban migration, and our industrial productivity and military strength relative to other countries. Whether the meanings that politicians or pundits read into the data are reasonable or fanciful, the numbers provide a basis for popular and specialized discussion. Even when the numbers misrepresent reality, they coordinate our misperceptions of it.

The process is thus recursive. Winston Churchill observed that first we shape our buildings and then they shape us. The same may be said of statistics.

Lest there be any confusion, we should emphasize that to say official statistics are entangled in politics and social life is not to say that they are “politicized” in the sense of being corrupt. In some circumstances, they may indeed be corrupt, but that is not our point. Far from it: in the United States, institutional safeguards for the most part shield the statistical agencies from meddling by politicians and interest groups. These safeguards are a political fact in their own right and a foundation essential for public trust in the numbers. Our point, rather, is that political judgments are implicit in the choice of what to measure, how to measure it, how often to measure it, and how to present and interpret the results. These choices become embedded in the statistical systems of the modern state and the information they routinely produce. The forces that shape those systems and their consequences for politics and society are the subject of this book.

Overview of the Book

Just as the collection of statistics is an act of selection, so is the production of a collection about statistics. We have not tried to cover
all the kinds of statistics that governments gather or even the full range of analytical problems raised by the interplay of statistics and politics. In designing this collaborative project, we have brought together authors from different fields—economics, history, politics, sociology, and planning—to write on topics that we thought would be interesting in their own right and of broad intellectual reach. Our aim was not to contribute to statistical policy or methodology but to open up a field that scarcely exists—the political economy and sociology of statistics. We hoped the collection would be suggestive, without pretending that it might be definitive.

In the second part of this introductory section, one of us (Starr) attempts to outline the analytical problems and approaches in this area of inquiry and to review not only what we publish here but also some of the relevant literature in history and the social sciences. This is an effort to sort out the analytical issues in the sociology of statistics and to put them in intellectual context and perspective.

A central tenet of this book, as we have already indicated, is that statistics cannot be constructed on purely technical grounds alone but require choices that ultimately turn on considerations of purpose and policy. The point is well illustrated by the three chapters in Part I, The Politics of Economic Measurement. In the first, Raymond Vernon first looks at the competing views of statistics held by professional government statisticians, political leaders and policymakers, and academic social scientists. He then considers three cases—comparative figures on economic growth, productivity, and military expenditures—that illustrate the policy choices that inevitably must be made in constructing statistical information. Christopher Jencks examines the choices in the measurement of income, and asks why official statistics of family income in the United States in the 1970s continued to be reported in a highly misleading fashion when the deficiencies were well known. Mark Perlman examines the development of the national income accounts and finds that the policy interests of Keynesian economists were critical in shaping the structure of the accounts in the United States.

In the United States as well as Western Europe, the census has been the subject of particularly open and strenuous political conflict in the last decade. Part II, The Politics of Population Measurement, begins with a chapter by Margo Conk on the historical roots of the controversies that erupted over the 1980 U.S. census. William Petersen takes a broad look at the history and nature of disputes over the definition and measurement of ethnicity, and Nathan Keyfitz examines the political and social aspects of the inexact art of population forecasting.

The constitutional mandate for a census grew primarily out of the need to apportion seats in the House of Representatives and the Elec-
toral College. The functions of government statistics have since expanded, but they continue to be tied closely to the demands of democratic government. Part III, *Statistics and Democratic Politics*, deals with those connections. Kenneth Prewitt puts the problems in the context of democratic theory and argues that, despite its limitations, the nation's number system has become vital to pursuing two essential goals of a democratic polity: accountability and the representation of diverse interests. Steven Kelman takes up similar themes in providing an explanation for an apparent conundrum: why the federal government in the nineteenth century produced elaborate statistics at a time when theories of minimal government prevailed. Why did Americans make an exception of statistical inquiries, some of which involved intrusive questions by government about private activities? Kelman rejects an explanation offered by microeconomic theory, which emphasizes the use of government to overcome problems of market failure, and cites historical evidence to argue that statistics were sought for their use in informing political debate, confirming national identity, and securing group recognition. In the final chapter in Part III, Abigail Thernstrom offers a somewhat darker view of the use of statistics. She also focuses on an issue relevant to democratic practice—the assurance of minority representation—and suggests that statistical tests have served as a form of camouflage for changing political objectives in the enforcement of voting rights over the past two decades.

Among their many functions, statistics also mediate the resolution of conflict. In Part IV, *Statistics and American Federalism*, three chapters deal with the interplay of statistics and the various levels of government in the United States. Richard Nathan analyzes the "politics of printouts": the use of statistical formulae to distribute federal aid and the resulting political burden imposed on the statistics and statistical agencies. Judith de Neufville looks at the effect on local statistical practice of changing federal policy, particularly the shift from categorical programs to revenue-sharing and block grants, which create different demands for data. She emphasizes the difficulties of local governments in coping with statistical needs, in part because of local "dependency in statistical production" and federal cutbacks, but also because of the distinctive problems of statistical politics and policymaking at the local level. Looking in the opposite direction—that is, from center to periphery—Judith Gruber and Janet Weiss identify problems in national statistics that derive, in part, from the fragmentation of power among the states and localities. They argue that the effort to create a Common Core of Data for national education statistics failed because of the difficulties of overcoming the dispersed authority for schooling in the federal system and because of a lack of political consensus about how to
measure education. The discouraging result is a public statistical system with limited relevance to the vital problems of public policy.

New technological and political developments are greatly altering the mode of statistical production and distribution. In Part V, The New Political Economy of Statistics, Joseph W. Duncan looks at the implications of new computer technology and the changing costs and methods of producing, analyzing, and disseminating data. He defends the increasing role of private industry, which the Reagan administration now encourages as a means of cutting back federal statistical commitments. In the final chapter of the volume, Paul Starr and Ross Corson provide an analysis of the rise of the private statistical services industry and its relation to government. They take a critical view of the privatization of public data, suggesting that it threatens some democratic political values of fundamental importance.

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