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“The Proper Data”: Numerical Information and Mathematical Governance from the Revolution
to the Constitution

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Numerical information played a pivotal role in the making, breaking, and reconstituting of American government. Congressional debates, correspondence, state constitutions, and overlooked population censuses reveal how American leaders increasingly tied governance and political legitimacy to proportionality. Yet the absence of reliable data, not simply the lack of authority over the states, undermined the national government's credibility. Viewing these developments within broader transatlantic debates over political arithmetic and statecraft reveals the distinctiveness of the American experience. The dearth of numbers, not their abundance, increased the value of quantitative data. This did not stop officials from using the few numbers they possessed, including in calculations related to slavery. Surviving population returns and tax requisitions show that the three-fifths ratio was not only conceived before the Constitution but also put into legislative operation. The Constitution emerged from this informational weakness. It mandated a regular federal census and created a government empowered to obtain the data it required. Enumeration did not end political conflict as disputes over the use of population figures continued with the first federal census. Yet the new framework ensured that the federal government would regularly gather and govern through quantified data, underscoring the numerical and informational origins of the Constitution.