The New Race Question
How the Census Counts Multiracial Individuals

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The 2000 census was the first in U.S. history to offer respondents the option of identifying themselves as belonging to more than one race. This multiracial option was considered a necessary adaptation to the demographic and cultural changes that the United States has been experiencing. The civil rights lobby, which resisted this change, has by and large been fighting a rearguard action. Yet at the same time, the provenance of the multiracial option was an unlikely alliance between multiracial advocates and conservative Republicans, two groups whose understandings of race in contemporary American society seem, in spite of their obvious differences, equally shortsighted. Not surprisingly, the multiracial option poses daunting challenges that should give us all pause.

The multiracial option draws attention to the fundamentally political nature of the census generally and its racial and ethnic categories specifically. These are not issues that we Americans are eager to confront. Nor will they just disappear from public discourse, since the multiracial option reflects an ongoing collision between the powerful and still evolving forces of identity politics and the authoritative and enduring needs of the administrative state. Up to now, awareness of this dynamic has been confined to elites. Once out of the bottle, however, this genie threatens to erode public confidence in and support for racial and ethnic statistics.

In this sense, conservatives who supported the multiracial option as the wedge that would bring down the entire edifice of “counting by race” might be proved correct. Yet regardless of the wisdom of race-conscious policies, race consciousness antedates them and will not soon disappear. In any event, we Americans, however regretfully, continue to have but one way of talking about social and economic disadvantage—in terms of race. Until we have some alternative categories for addressing such issues, we need to be careful about what we wish for.
The Politics of the Multiracial Option

The process by which the multiracial option came to be implemented illustrates the fundamentally political nature of the census. More specifically, it demonstrates how a small number of political novices were able to get the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in a Democratic administration to rule against the clear wishes of civil rights organizations.

In censuses before 2000, respondents were not supposed to check more than one racial category. If they did identify as belonging to more than one race (as about 0.5 percent did on the 1990 census), their answers were recoded for one race (OMB 1997, 36897). In recent years a growing number of multiracial individuals and parents of mixed-race children opposed this one-race restriction—on the grounds that it forced individuals, in particular children, to deny parts of their racial heritage, thereby adversely affecting their self-esteem, psychological well-being, and sense of pride in family (Graham 1994; Perlmann 1997; Williams 2000). In the early 1990s, in response to such criticism, the OMB began exploring the implications of a move to a new census item that would allow individuals to identify themselves as members of more than one race (Skerry 1996).

Those implications turned out to be ambiguous. On the one hand, extensive test surveys demonstrated that an extremely small segment of Americans—fewer than 2 percent—identified as “multiracial” when offered the explicit opportunity (OMB 1997, 36903). Yet those surveys also revealed significant impacts of a multiracial question on specific groups. A multiracial option reduced the number of people identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native and as Asian or Pacific Islander. At the same time, there was little impact on the numbers reporting their ancestry as white or black (OMB 1997, 36907).

The response to these findings was striking and somewhat surprising. Many American Indian tribal governments expressed concern about a multiracial question (Edmonston et al. 1996, 39). Some Hispanic leaders also raised objections. The most vocal and sustained disagreement, however, was voiced by African American leaders and organizations, who, to judge by the test results, had the least to lose from the proposed change. Whatever the results showed now, these leaders argued, a multiracial question would eventually reduce the numbers of those identifying as black and, more to the point, would potentially blur the categories upon which hard-won antidiscrimination and affirmative action programs are based. Long-time allies of these leaders, including civil rights enforcement agencies of the federal government, also argued against any change in the existing racial classification scheme (Linda Matthews, “More Than Identity Rides on a New Racial Category,” New York Times, July 6, 1996; Nobles 2000, 129–45).

In the face of such opposition, the OMB decided in the fall of 1997
against the creation of a new, separate multiracial category or question on the 2000 census. Instead, the agency opted for a compromise that would permit individuals to check off more than one of the existing racial categories listed on the census form—a compromise that has come to be known as the multiracial option (Stephen Holmes, “People Can Claim More Than One Race on Federal Forms,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1997). The crucial decision about how such multiracial responses would be tabulated was postponed until later.

If the OMB’s decision to implement the multiracial option demonstrates anything, it is that the federal statistical system is not as institutionally conservative as has been widely suggested (Starr 1987, 52–55). On the contrary, instead of clinging to established procedures for the sake of data continuity, the system appears quite capable of responding to outside pressures by changing its policies dramatically and abruptly. This was the case during the 1990s, when policy makers were clearly prepared to adjust the census statistically to make up for persistent minority undercounts, and again in 1997, when they ruled in favor of the multiracial option (Skerry 2000, 121–77).

This decision also highlights the federal statistical system’s responsiveness to a genuinely grassroots but politically inexperienced and marginal constituency. Indeed, in July 1996, at the peak of the battle for a multiracial question on the census, multiracial advocates were able to turn out only two hundred people for their Multiracial Solidarity March on Washington (Nobles 2000, 143). Even in a political system such as ours, in which determined minorities often get their way, the success of the multiracial movement is stunning.

Moreover, as Joel Perlmann has observed, multiracial advocates are motivated “more [by] recognition of multiraciality than [by] any specific political or economic advantage for multiracials. The advocates do not want to deny a part of their own or their children’s origins.” Unlike those pushing for census adjustment as a remedy for minority undercounts, multiracial advocates are driven not so much by group interests as by personal identity concerns (Perlmann 1997, 10; Williams 2000). This makes their achievement all the more remarkable—and worrisome.

To be sure, the multiracial movement received a boost from conservative Republicans in Congress, who see multiracialism as a way to weaken or undermine what House Speaker Newt Gingrich called “artificial” racial and ethnic categories (Barbara Vobejda, “Hill Reassured on Racial Check-off Plan for Census,” *Washington Post*, July 26, 1997). Yet one should not exaggerate the importance of such conservative support. After all, it was President Bill Clinton’s OMB that opted for the multiracial option. The Clinton administration could conceivably have rebuffed the multiracial advocates in the name of civil rights—a position strongly urged by the civil rights lobby, to whom the administration was clearly attentive.
Blatant and Brazen

The responsiveness of the OMB to the multiracial movement is an apparently benign example of how politics shapes the racial and ethnic categories used by the census. Indeed, this case is so benign—an instance of the little guy winning—that few would regard it as politics at work. By contrast, there are much more blatant examples of political pressure being brought to bear on the census. One of the most vivid is the Hispanic-origin question, added to the census questionnaire in 1970. A clear victory for Hispanics, this was also one of the Nixon administration’s more brazen intrusions upon the prerogatives of the Census Bureau.

The episode even involved a bit of drama. The finalized questionnaires for the 1970 census were already at the printers when a member of the U.S. Interagency Committee on Mexican-American Affairs demanded that a specific Hispanic-origin question be included. The same White House that had recently inaugurated Hispanic Heritage Week was quick to respond (Petersen 1997, 120–21). Over the opposition of Census Bureau officials, who argued against inclusion of an untested question so late in the process, Nixon ordered the secretary of commerce and the census director to add the question. But the short form was already in production, so the Hispanic question was hastily added to the long form (Choldin 1986). As a former bureau official, Conrad Taeuber, recalls, “The order came down that we were to ask a direct question, have the people identify themselves as Hispanics... The 5-percent schedule had barely started at the printers when we pulled it back and threw in the question which hadn’t been tested in the field—under orders” (Taeuber n.d., 9).

In 1980 the Hispanic-origin question was moved onto the census short form (the form mailed to every household). In 1978, when these changes were announced, demographers and statisticians denounced them as “political.” The headline on the front page of the New York Times declared, “Census Questions on Race Assailed As Political by Population Experts” (Robert Reinhold, New York Times, May 14, 1978). Our memory of such matters is short, however. Now deemed integral to the census, the separate Hispanic-origin question is no longer understood to be the result of lobbying efforts, much less the machinations of the Nixon White House. On the contrary, proposals to eliminate the question, or merely to amend it, are today denounced as “political” intrusions on the scientific prerogatives of Census Bureau professionals.

From Low Politics to High Politics

Countless such episodes are well known to census specialists, if not to the general public (Skerry 2000, 9–79). The experts universally acknowledge
that the census is enmeshed in politics; but they also claim that social science has important and distinct contributions to make to the census. This perspective was evident in the debate over statistical adjustment that raged for much of the 1990s, when statisticians and demographers insisted that their expertise equipped them to transcend politics by providing scientific solutions to the persistent problem of minority undercounts. In essence, experts argue that though the census is indeed impacted by politics, the areas with which they themselves deal are immune.

My own view is that politics pervades even the scientific dimensions of the census. When it comes to the census, no meaningful distinction can be drawn between "the scientific" and "the political." To the fundamentally political questions that inevitably confront the census, whether minority undercounts or the multiracial option, science has no definitive answers. As Melissa Nobles puts it, "Census bureaus are not innocent bystanders in the arena of politics; census data are never merely demographic data" (Nobles 2000, x). In true technocratic fashion, however, social scientists tend to believe that they are equipped to deal with the means, while leaving the actual ends in the hands of politicians. Yet in politics, as in life, it is seldom possible to separate ends from means. Moreover, the ends typically shape the means, and vice versa (Skerry 2000, 101–20).

This perspective applies a fortiori to census efforts to collect racial and ethnic data. The history of these efforts reveals that the census is political not only in the low, self-interested sense but also in a higher, much loftier sense.

The census is not just a nose count—which could be accomplished by adding up administrative data from birth records, death certificates, and the like. Rather, a census is an effort to situate the population in three dimensions: geographical, temporal, and social. None of these dimensions has any natural units. All are calibrated according to certain conventions derived from and agreed on through politics.

One such calibration is the boundary that the census must draw around the nation. The Census Bureau must decide, for example, whether Americans living abroad, including diplomats or military personnel, are to be included in the census and, if so, where they are to be situated geographically (Zitter 1988; Hollmann 1988). Then, too, the census is necessarily a snapshot in time, and the bureau has to decide when its snapshot is best taken (Habermann 1995). Again, there is no scientific answer to this question, and different decisions impact varied interests differently. Finally, there are the social boundaries that the census must draw. Many of these—between men and women, for example, or among age categories—are taken for granted and barely noted. More visible and controversial have been the boundaries between ethnic and especially racial groups (Petersen 1987).

Thus the essential, defining characteristic of any census is the drawing
of boundaries. Understood in this light, the census is an inherently political exercise, in the Aristotelian sense of the proper ordering and maintenance of the diverse parts that make up the whole. Whereas Plato sought to unify the polis by eliminating the categories and distinctions that he saw pulling it apart (such as those between men and women, family and polis, young and old, private and public), Aristotle took such competing and partial claims of justice as inevitable and regarded the statesman’s role as responding to and balancing those claims. In that task, the creation of categories and the drawing of boundaries were fundamental.

Yet Aristotle also understood that these activities of the statesman are fraught with difficulty. Precisely because nature provides no definitive guide, boundaries and categories are invariably subject to challenge. The political theorist Arlene Saxonhouse explains that “because we ourselves, as a composite of a multiplicity of characteristics, vary along so many dimensions, the political regime is forced to establish boundaries and select criteria to define the order of its polity, but always those boundaries are subject to dispute and to counterclaims” (Saxonhouse 1992, 227). Aristotle would not be surprised to see the modern census engulfed by political contention.

Neither would the framers of the United States Constitution, who grasped as fully as anyone the inherently political nature of the census. This is not to say that the framers abandoned the census to sheer power politics. Rather, as was their wont, they embedded it in a structure that would balance one set of political interests against another. Thus, in Article I, section 2, of the Constitution, they made the census the basis for apportioning among the states both representatives and direct taxes—the former causing states to maximize their population totals, the latter to minimize them.

To be sure, such direct taxes were rarely levied on the states and were eventually obviated by income taxes levied on individuals. That does not change the framers’ understanding of the census as an explicitly political tool that was part carrot and part stick. Rather than keeping politics at bay, the framers relied on politics—not science—as the mechanism by which an impartial result would be achieved.

**An Instrument of State Authority**

Politics inheres in the census in yet another way. As is evident, the census is inextricably bound up with the administrative needs of the contemporary welfare state. Census data are critical in the determination and distribution of myriad governmental benefits, from income supports to minority voting districts. In the scramble for these benefits, politics comes to be seen as the articulation and satisfaction of needs rather than the pursuit of the power
needed to amass the resources to meet those needs. In other words, we tend to overlook that the census is an instrument of state authority for the purpose of political rule. As James Scott reminds us, however, in Seeing Like a State, "The categories used by state agents are not merely meant to make their environment legible; they are an authoritative tune to which most of the population must dance" (Scott 1998, 83).

This aspect of census taking is less apparent in the modern era than it was in antiquity. In classical Rome, the census was the official list of the Roman people, compiled for purposes of military service and taxation. It was maintained by the censors, two magistrates who wielded enormous authority; if for any reason both censors indicated their official disapproval of a citizen's conduct, the censured individual could be removed from his tribe and consequently lose the right to vote. This specific authority is clearly cognate with our term "censorship," though the connection with the census is almost never made today.

This authoritative, even coercive aspect of the census is particularly difficult for Americans to grasp. It is no accident that we invariably overlook the framers' conception of the census as a mechanism to levy taxes as well as to apportion representation. We prefer to focus on that aspect of the census that ministers to our needs and aspirations. Thus, in a pathbreaking essay on the sociology of official statistics, Paul Starr likens modern statistical systems to laws and constitutions—sets of agreed-upon, impersonal rules that restrain power and enlarge liberty (Starr 1987, 57). Similarly, former census director Kenneth Prewitt contrasts the contemporary U.S. census favorably with its ancient antecedents:

Our census is different from those historical censuses. Our census is the very first census, in recorded history, which is used to bring power back to the people, not to take something away from the people. . . . The historic reasons for a census were . . . military conscription or taxation. That is, what could you take from the people? Whereas, our census is about allocating power back to the people and now allocating resources, as we just said—federal moneys—back to the people. (Prewitt 2000, 4)

Both Starr and Prewitt are certainly correct to emphasize the role of our census in bolstering American liberties. But their neglect of the census's concurrent reliance on the authority, power, and ultimately coercion of the state is telling.

A Virtual Regime Principle

When race is involved, Americans have an even more difficult time recognizing the census as an instrument of state authority. After all, the preferred means of categorizing individuals racially or ethnically on the census is
self-identification, which is premised on "respect for individual dignity" (OMB 1995, 44692) and on the principle that the federal government "does not tell an individual who he or she is, or specify how an individual should classify himself or herself" (OMB 1997, 36874).

Whatever one's opinion of the merits of the multiracial option, it undeniably jibes with the letter and spirit of self-identification undergirding today's census. There are many methodological and practical reasons for relying on self-identification, but in the American context, self-identification of race and ethnicity is sustained by more than convenience to bureaucrats or social scientists. It accords with strongly held beliefs in individual choice and liberty. Most Americans feel uneasy when a person is assigned to a racial or ethnic category by the government. To the extent that we regard such categories as legitimate, we tend to think that the individual should decide where he or she belongs. As an OMB official once put it to me, "We don't classify individuals around here!" (quoted in Skerry 2000, 46).

One reason Americans dislike the idea of a government agency assigning individuals to racial or ethnic categories is the nation's past failures to apply its individualistic values to various racial minorities. Slavery, Jim Crow laws, the mistreatment of Indians, and the wartime internment of Japanese civilians are just the first examples that come to mind. Because of this historical gap between our values and our deeds, self-identification of race and ethnicity has now emerged as a virtual regime principle (Mann 1979, 86–96).

Further entwining self-identification with individualism are evolving American conceptions of race and ethnicity. The OMB accepts the received academic wisdom that race and ethnicity are not biological categories but social constructs. Yet before the ink was dry on its 1978 regulations, race and ethnicity were being transformed by the wider culture. The historian David Hollinger suggests that, under the influence of multiculturalism, ethnicity has subtly shifted its meaning from a social concept denoting affiliation to one or more groups to a psychological concept denoting identity (Hollinger 1995, 6–7). Similarly, a report on the census published by the National Academy of Sciences emphasizes "the increasing recognition that race and ethnicity are subjective, personal characteristics" (Edmonston et al. 1996, 18). Thus the social historian Stephan Thernstrom notes with concern that ethnicity in the census has become "a matter of choice, a state of mind rather than a matter for genealogists to determine: 'It doesn't matter if you don't think I look Chinese. I feel Chinese; ergo I am Chinese'" (Thernstrom 1992, 97).

Yet however powerfully embedded the idea of choosing one's own race and ethnicity may be in our individualistic political culture, the realities of public policy eventually intrude and require that the government
impose order. Self-identification results in such a profusion of facially incorrect or merely idiosyncratic responses (and nonresponses) that sooner or later federal bureaucrats must violate their commitment to self-identification and force the data into usable categories—namely, those established by the OMB in 1978 (OMB 1978, 19269). In spite of its own declared aversion to doing so, our liberal regime has no choice but to exercise authority in this realm. From the policy maker’s perspective, the plain fact is that racial and ethnic identity are too important to be left completely to the preferences of individuals.

The specific challenges facing the Census Bureau here are enormous. As race and ethnicity have become more subjective and psychological categories, they have also become more imprecise and volatile. At the same time, they are more critical than ever to public policy. The more the census tries to count identities, the more difficult it finds its task. These changes go to the heart of the bureau’s traditional view of its mission. As Stanley Lieberson has noted, there is “a general disposition of censuses to avoid asking attitudinal questions or other ‘subjective’ questions” (Lieberson 1993, 32). This is why the Census Bureau has long described itself as “the fact-finder for the nation.” Precisely because the uses to which these numbers are put are so controversial and politically explosive, the bureau must cling ever more tightly to its mantle of objectivity. As it wades into increasingly subjective, attitudinal phenomena, this self-conscious mission becomes imperiled.

Torn between the regime principle of self-identification and the bureaucratic requirements of the contemporary administrative state, the OMB and the Census Bureau have up to now maneuvered quite successfully. But their clear exercise of governmental authority in a realm viewed as private is a delicate balancing act that most Americans, if fully apprised, would regard with uneasiness, even outrage. It is no accident that OMB officials typically avoid using the word “race” when discussing their classification scheme, opting for the seemingly neutral term “population group” (OMB 1997). There should be no doubt that these agencies are negotiating a political minefield of misapprehension and distrust—among minorities and the general public alike—of the government’s ability to deal fairly with racial and ethnic matters.

Of course, government officials understand the tension between the vagaries of personal identity and the demands of bureaucratic rationality. And they know that to resolve this tension, authority must be exercised. They are also acutely aware, however, of the need to act with discretion. At the OMB, standing as it does at the center of a decentralized statistical system within which myriad federal agencies jealously guard their prerogatives, officials are ever at pains not to appear to overstep their institutional prerogatives.
This balancing act is hardly an isolated example. On the contrary, it is typical of how authority more generally is wielded in the contemporary American administrative state. In what some have called "the new American political system," substantive policy goals are pursued less through conventional political and legislative means than through arcane legal and administrative channels that leave many ordinary Americans feeling bewildered and excluded (King 1990). This regime has emerged for a variety of technical and political reasons, but as Theodore Lowi observes, at its center is liberalism's aversion to acknowledging the authority and power that the contemporary state does—and must—exercise (Lowi 1979).

Implications for Multiracialism

According to a National Academy of Sciences study, "If self-identification is taken as a basic principle, there are no grounds for recoding a multirace person to a single race" (Edmonston et al. 1996, 38). Yet this is precisely what federal executive agencies have required in the aftermath of the 2000 census. Thus, to implement the Voting Rights Act, the Justice Department has issued a guidance for reducing multiple-race responses to the 2000 census to the original mutually exclusive, single-race categories established in 1978 by OMB Directive 15 (U.S. Department of Justice 2001). This violation of the self-identification principle does not appear to have provoked much criticism from multiracial advocates, though one wonders how long the silence will last.

Of still greater concern is the public scrutiny that will eventually be focused on the tabulation of these multiple-race responses. The census has long relied on various tabulation methods to make sense of idiosyncratic, inconsistent, and incorrect responses (and nonresponses) to its conventional questions (Skerry 2000, 51–79). Moreover, though the choices involved in these tabulations were always "political," in the sense that they affected outcomes for various groups and interests, they occurred behind a veil of administrative discretion and went largely unexamined. Now such tabulations will increasingly be politicized. Alternatively, one could say that these procedures will be increasingly democratized. Either way, they will come under much greater scrutiny than ever before. Alluding to the old adage about politics resembling sausage making, the demographer Josh Goldstein cautions, "We're going to be looking at more and more of the sausage."

As with sausages, the result will not be pretty. There may now be a consensus among intellectual and policy elites that race and ethnicity are socially constructed, but this perspective has only just begun to penetrate the public mind. When it becomes apparent that race and ethnicity are also politically constructed, such data will appear all the more arbitrary and artificial. Public disaffection with them can only grow.
Of course, this is fine with conservatives who have supported multiracialism as a means of undermining the entire post-civil-rights regime of affirmative action and group rights—in the words of the commentator James K. Glassman, the multiracial agenda means “the beginning of the end for the whole delicate and ridiculous architecture of race-counting” (“Is America Finally Going Color-Blind?” *Washington Post*, June 3, 1997). From this perspective, census questions about race and ethnicity are one of the ways in which the state has been propping up distinctions that would otherwise long since have melted away. The prescription is clear. Citizens should feel no obligation to answer racial and ethnic questions, along with other “invasive” items, on the census. So declared conservative activists and Republican politicians while the Census Bureau was conducting its 2000 enumeration (D’Vera Cohn, “Census Too Nosy? Don’t Answer Invasive Questions, GOP Suggests,” *Washington Post*, March 30.).

Like the multiracialists preoccupied with issues of personal identity, these conservatives are so caught up in their own wishful scenario that they fail to see the larger implications of the multiracial agenda. Public disaffection with race-conscious policies is as great as it has ever been, and this disaffection has now spread to the collection of racial and ethnic data on the census. Yet however understandable, even justified, these negative reactions may be, it is simply not the case that the elimination of racial and ethnic data will have the effect of eliminating race consciousness in the broader society. It is encouraging to see an increasing number of Americans come to feel that their racial identity is a matter of individual choice. The fact remains, however, that for many more Americans, racial identity (whether their own or that of other groups) is not merely subjective and malleable. Thus it is all the more curious—and troubling—to see the federal statistical system respond with such exquisite sensitivity to a small group of activists whose demands are hardly representative or typical.

This is not a brief for either side of the debate over race-conscious policies. To be sure, our efforts to count racial and ethnic groups are highly imperfect and becoming more so. The need for such data is not about to disappear, however. For better or worse, race is the only way we have of talking about social and economic disadvantage in the United States today (Skerry 1999). Precisely for this reason, racial and ethnic data will continue to be crucial, not only for the governmental and nongovernmental entities that implement race-based policies but also for those who would criticize or even condemn such policies.

Because of the multiracial option, contemporary public policy is now at a precarious juncture. Perhaps the most revealing indication of this is the degree to which the multiracial option has put minority leaders on the defensive. Of greatest concern should be the response of African Americans. As Joel Perlmann and Mary Waters emphasize in the introduction to this
volume, African Americans are the minority group with the sharpest boundary and the least out-marriage. They have also been the loudest opponents of the multiracial option. In an era when blacks are already struggling with the demographic and political competition of immigrants and other minorities, especially Hispanics, the multiracial option can only exacerbate their defensiveness. Because political and policy outcomes involving census data are highly unpredictable, the multiracial option will only add to the anxiety felt by black civil rights organizations. Regardless of one’s position on multiracialism, it is important to recognize that for African Americans this is a highly volatile and emotional issue.

Multiracialism may well be the silver bullet that finishes off the affirmative action regime. If so, however, this outcome will not bring the nation to a state of colorblind innocence. Moreover, what began as understandable assertions of American individualism against the prerogatives of the administratve state—on the part of either multiracialists or their conservative supporters—will end up contributing to confusion and cynicism among the general populace and to anxiety and defensiveness among minorities. Especially in the short and medium terms, multiracialism will do more harm than good.

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