

Title: Refracted Selves

What is your race? Everyone has a way to describe themselves. The government sees a version of that self through the census. Official racial categories reflect both current cultural norms and far-reaching histories of enslavement, indigenous peoples, nomadism, and varying immigration patterns including those influenced by colonialism and war. That means, depending on when you were born and which country you live in, a different version of you appears on the census.

For “statistical purposes”, where would you fit in the 2020 U.S. census (Figure 1) and the 2021 England census (Figure 2)? To understand the differences, we need to look at the history of race data collection.

“Race” has been collected in some capacity in the U.S. since the first decennial census in 1790, the year after George Washington became the first president. In the published tallies, people were categorized as follows: “free white”, “all other free peoples”; and “slaves”. The middle category included Native Americans (the 2020 census term is “American Indian”) who were subject to U.S. tax. A hundred years later, slavery had ended and the first federal immigration laws were enacted including the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Consequently, the 1890 census had a new set of categories: “white”, “black”, “Chinese”, “Japanese” or “Indian” (i.e., Native American) along with (very offensive) multiracial categories. (The wretched fixation of calculating the proportional breakdown for a multiracial individual eventually carried over to the enumeration of censuses administered in Indian reservations.) From 1930, however, no multiracial categories were used; everyone was assigned to a single race.

There was a regime shift in 1960 where, for the first time, households received their forms by mail. This is a fun fact, but, more consequentially, it meant that, for the first time, people *filled out the form themselves*. Previously, an enumerator completed the form during their household visit giving them considerable power to judge and shape responses.

Filling out a form yourself means you can self-identify your race. In 1960, the categories were: “White”, “Negro”, “American Indian”, “Japanese”, “Chinese”, “Filipino”, “Hawaiian”, “Part Hawaiian”, “Aleut”, “Eskimo”, with an option to provide an alternate response. “Filipino” was added in 1920 because, for a period of time, the Philippines was a U.S. colony; and, the final four categories were added because Alaska and Hawaii were admitted as states in 1958.

However, this is the last census before the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 which changed U.S. immigration patterns considerably. From 1970 onwards, immigration patterns combined with a grassroots push for better describing Hispanic communities resulted in the dual questions on race and ethnicity we see in Figure 1.

This story is different in England where the Office of National Statistics is responsible for the census. (The United Kingdom has three different authorities designing and administering the four country-level censuses.)

Compare Figure 1 with Figure 2 which show the analogous portions of the most recent censuses for the U.S. and England, respectively. The categories are very different. England has a different set of groups under “White” and it does not include those of “Arab descent” as it does in the U.S. Furthermore, the selected ethnicities listed reflect immigration patterns from former British colonies and multiracial individuals have their own section.

As Thompson wrote in 2015, the 1991 census was the first time a question about ethnic origin was asked. In the previous few censuses, questions about birth country (and later parents’ birth countries) were asked as crude proxies for race because it was thought to be “offensive” to ask directly about skin color. Some minority groups were also worried about how the information would be used, given the debates about immigration.

Eventually, in part to combat issues related to discrimination, a “race” question was finally added in 1991 after working with the public to determine the categories.

The story is different again in France. Race is not included on their census because, as Simon wrote in 2015, it was deemed to go against Article 1 of their constitution which includes (per translation), “...equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion.”

Currently, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is revising the federal guidelines for race and ethnicity data collection. Originally written in 1977 and updated only once since then in 1997, the guidelines—Statistical Policy Directive No. 15—are used throughout the federal government, including by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The original 1977 directive specifically stated that race and ethnicity “classifications should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature.” Multiracial individuals were to choose, “[t]he category which most closely reflects the individual’s recognition in his community.” The 1997 update issued guidelines to allow people to choose multiple race categories, which was implemented starting in 2000.

This update also added that the classifications were “social-political constructs.” In the explanation of the changes published in the *Federal Register* (Vol. 62, No. 210, 1997), OMB noted that they “do *not* establish criteria or qualifications (such as blood quantum levels)” and “do *not* tell an individual who he or she is, or specify how an individual should classify himself or herself” (*italics in original document*).

In the current revision discussions, one proposal is to create a separate category for people of Middle Eastern and Northern African (MENA) descent instead of including them within the category “White.” Another debate focuses on possibly folding the question on Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin into the race question, given evidence that respondents find the separate questions confusing.

Since the 1970s, the categories for race and ethnicity have been shaped with the input of the public. The goal is for this iterative and collaborative process to better align how respondents see themselves with how the government sees them.

Further Reading

Federal Register 62(210). 1997.

Office of National Statistics. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/>.

OMB Interagency Technical Working Group on Race and Ethnicity Standards.
<https://spd15revision.gov/>.

Simon, P., Piché, V., and Gagnon, A.A., eds. (2015). *Social Statistics and Ethnic Diversity: Cross-National Perspectives in Classifications and Identity Politics*; Chapter 4, P. Simon on France; Chapter 7, D. Thompson on Great Britain. New York, NY: Springer.

U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/>.

<p>→ NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 6 about Hispanic origin and Question 7 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.</p> <p>6. Is this person of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Puerto Rican</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Cuban</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – Print, for example, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc. ↴</p> <div></div> <p>7. What is this person's race?</p> <p>Mark <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> one or more boxes AND print origins.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> White – Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc. ↴</p> <div></div> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Black or African Am. – Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc. ↴</p> <div></div> <p><input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaska Native – Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc. ↴</p> <div></div> <table><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> Chinese</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian</td></tr><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> Filipino</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> Korean</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> Samoan</td></tr><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> Japanese</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> Chamorro</td></tr><tr><td><input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian – Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc. ↴</td><td><input type="checkbox"/> Other Pacific Islander – Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc. ↴</td><td></td></tr></table> <div></div> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Some other race – Print race or origin. ↴</p> <div></div>	<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese	<input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian	<input type="checkbox"/> Filipino	<input type="checkbox"/> Korean	<input type="checkbox"/> Samoan	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian	<input type="checkbox"/> Japanese	<input type="checkbox"/> Chamorro	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian – Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc. ↴	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Pacific Islander – Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc. ↴		<p>15 What is your ethnic group?</p> <p>→ Choose one section from A to E, then tick one box to best describe your ethnic group or background</p> <p>A White</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Irish</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Gypsy or Irish Traveller</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Roma</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Any other White background, write in</p> <div></div> <p>B Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> White and Black Caribbean</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> White and Black African</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> White and Asian</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Any other Mixed or Multiple background, write in</p> <div></div> <div></div> <p>C Asian or Asian British</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Indian</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Pakistani</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Bangladeshi</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Chinese</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Any other Asian background, write in</p> <div></div> <p>D Black, Black British, Caribbean or African</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Caribbean</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> African background, write in below</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Any other Black, Black British or Caribbean background, write in</p> <div></div> <p>E Other ethnic group</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Arab</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Any other ethnic group, write in</p> <div></div>
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Figure 1. Extracts from the 2020 U.S. census. Source: U.S. Census Bureau.	Figure 2. Extract from the 2021 England census. Questions about birth country, passports held, and national identity were also asked. Source: Office of National Statistics.												