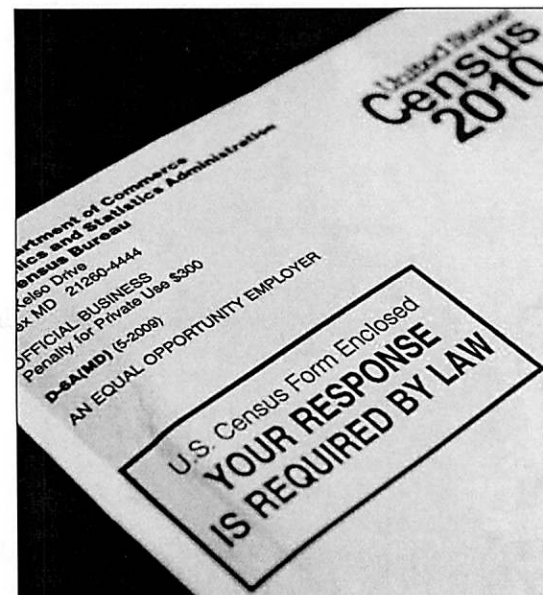


Census Controversy

Should undocumented immigrants be counted?

Now under way, the 2010 census has sparked bitter partisanship. Some conservative Republicans, for example, have criticized the census as an unconstitutional intrusion on privacy; others warn that census participation is important for maintaining GOP power, since the count is used to apportion congressional seats and allocate federal money to cities and states. Liberal Democrats have been more supportive of census procedures, which for the first time will count same-sex couples. To raise response rates, the Census Bureau sent every household the same brief 10-question form and dropped use of the “long form” — a lengthy questionnaire seeking data on housing, transportation, education and income. The long form has been replaced by a separate, ongoing monthly survey that will provide timelier data, but from a smaller sample of households. Researchers generally hail the change but say it will cause some problems, at least initially.



Despite controversy over this year's count, U.S. households returned census forms at the same 72 percent rate as in 2000. Census data determine the number of seats in congressional districts and how nearly \$5 trillion in federal funds will be distributed to states and localities over the coming decade.

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At Issue:

Should the census ask questions about race?



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For nearly 170 years, the Census Bureau's mission in asking about race was clear: define and then distinguish who was “white” from who was “non-white, and especially from who was “black.”

Today, the dismantling of formal racial segregation, the enforcement of civil rights legislation and significant increases in immigration to the United States have all introduced new purposes for racial categorization in census taking. Asking people to categorize themselves by race provides important data about our country's growing diversity and serves to support the nation's civil rights laws — especially the Voting Rights Act. Indeed, census data on race are used in a range of public policies, many of which are designed to counteract entrenched material disadvantage among minorities.

In my view, these are purposes worthy of the continued inclusion of the race question in U.S. census taking. The issue has been contentious mostly because it is impossible to disassociate the history of racial thought and politics that have fundamentally shaped census-taking from the start. For most of its history, census-taking supported a politics of racial segregation and subordination.

For example, the 1840 and 1850 censuses were directly intertwined with debates about slavery. Data from the largely discredited 1840 census purportedly disclosed higher rates of insanity among free blacks, thereby “proving” that freedom drove free black people crazy. The 1850 census first introduced the category “mulatto,” at the behest of a Southern physician, in order to gather data about the presumed deleterious effects of “racial mixture.” Post-Civil War censuses continued to include the “mulatto” category, reflecting the enduring preoccupation with “racial mixing.”

Twentieth-century racial and ethnic census categorization remained intertwined with the century's core political and social issues: racial segregation and immigration.

In regard to segregation, categories and instructions for the censuses from 1930 to 1950 largely mirrored the racial status quo in politics and law. Southern laws defined persons with any trace of “Negro blood” as legally “Negro” and subject to all of the political, economic and social disabilities such designation conferred. Southern law treated other “non-white” persons similarly. Census categories and definitions followed suit, essentially bringing the logic of racial segregation into national census taking itself.

Thus, for most of American history the census wasn't used for edifying reasons. But today it supports the political and social policies that seek to guarantee civil rights and equality.



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Americans are uncomfortable with the Census Bureau demand that everyone identify their “race” on the 2010 Census. Despite the bureau's insidious commercials urging Americans to return the form so their communities can get their “fair share” of government largesse (earmarks writ large), the constitutional reason for the census is to reapportion congressional representation. The race question invades our privacy and is part of a continuing effort to divide Americans by race and enable official discrimination.

Some justify this because the census has historically asked for racial information. That information was required prior to the Civil War because black Americans who were slaves were counted as only three-fifths of a person in reapportionment. So why must we check the race box in this day and age? Two reasons: 1) to facilitate racially gerrymandered congressional districts, a pernicious practice that segregates voters by race; and 2) to discriminate in the provision of government benefits based on race.

For Americans who chafed at the race question and either left it blank or wrote in “American,” a census worker may visit their homes to get them to change their answer. If they don't, the census will impute the person's race based on what he looks like or where he lives — an offensive example of stereotyping and racial profiling in a society where so many of us are of mixed race and ancestry. Small wonder the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights recommended that this question be made voluntary — a recommendation the Census Bureau ignored.

The options given for answering the race question also reflect political correctness and half-baked, liberal social-policy theories that have nothing to do with biology and genetics. Although the question asks for your race, it gives you choices like “Japanese” that are nationalities, not racial categories. “Race” is a very imprecise term that scientists disagree about. Moreover, many people have no idea what their apparent racial background is for more than a few generations.

Classifying and subdividing Americans on the basis of race is repugnant. *E pluribus unum* — “out of many, one” — is both our motto and our objective. It is one we should strive for every day, and the census' continued preoccupation with race is detrimental to the great progress we've made as a nation toward achieving that goal.