

RACE REMIXED

For Many Latinos, Racial Identity Is More Culture Than Color



“Believe me, I am not a confused person. I know who I am, but I don't necessarily fit the categories well,” said Erica Lubliner, a medical school graduate of Mexican and Jewish heritage. Credit...Monica Almeida/The New York Times

By [Mireya Navarro](#)

- Jan. 13, 2012

Every decade, the Census Bureau spends billions of dollars and deploys hundreds of thousands of workers to get an accurate portrait of the American population. Among the questions on the [census form](#) is one about race, with 15 choices, including “some other race.”

More than 18 million Latinos checked this “other” box in the 2010 census, up from 14.9 million in 2000. It was an indicator of the sharp disconnect between how Latinos view themselves and how the government wants to count them. Many Latinos argue that the country’s race categories — indeed, the government’s very conception of identity — do not fit them.

The main reason for the split is that the census categorizes people by race, which typically refers to a set of common physical traits. But Latinos, as a group in this

country, tend to identify themselves more by their ethnicity, meaning a shared set of cultural traits, like language or customs.

So when they encounter the census, they see one question that asks them whether they identify themselves as having Hispanic ethnic origins and many answer it as their main identifier. But then there is another question, asking them about their race, because, as the census guide notes, “people of Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin may be of any race,” and more than a third of Latinos check “other.”

This argument over identity has gained momentum with the growth of the Latino population, which in 2010 stood at more than 50 million. Census Bureau officials have acknowledged that the questionnaire has a problem, and say they are wrestling with how to get more Latinos to pick a race. In 2010, they tested different wording in questions and last year they held focus groups, with a report on the research scheduled to be released by this summer.

Some experts say officials are right to go back to the drawing table. “Whenever you have people who can’t find themselves in the question, it’s a bad question,” said Mary C. Waters, a sociology professor at Harvard who specializes in the challenges of measuring race and ethnicity.

The problem is more than academic — the census data on race serves many purposes, including determining the makeup of voting districts, and monitoring discriminatory practices in hiring and racial disparities in education and health. When respondents do not choose a race, the Census Bureau assigns them one, based on factors like the racial makeup of their neighborhood, inevitably leading to a less accurate count.



Peter Cedeño, a lawyer, believes Latinos are their own race defined by a set of shared challenges, like language and immigration status. Credit... Béatrice de Géa for The New York Times

Latinos, who make up close to 20 percent of the American population, generally hold a fundamentally different view of race. Many Latinos say they are too racially mixed to settle on one of the government-sanctioned standard races — white, black, American Indian, Alaska native, native Hawaiian, and a collection of Asian and Pacific Island backgrounds.

Some regard white or black as separate demographic groups from Latino. Still others say Latinos are already the equivalent of another race in this country, defined by a shared set of challenges.

“The issues within the Latino community — language, immigration status — do not take into account race,” said Peter L. Cedeño, 43, a lawyer and native New Yorker born to Dominican immigrants. “We share the same hurdles.”

At a time when many multiracial Americans are proudly asserting their mixed-race identity, many Latinos, an overwhelmingly blended population with Indian, European, African and other roots, are sidestepping or ignoring questions of race.

Erica Lubliner, who has fair skin and green eyes — legacies of her Jewish father and her Mexican mother — said she was so “conflicted” about the race question on the census form that she left it blank.

Ms. Lubliner, a recent graduate of the medical school at the University of California, Los Angeles, in her mid-30s, was only 9 when her father died, and she grew up steeped in the language and culture of her mother. She said she has never identified with “the dominant culture of white.” She believes her mother is a mix of white and Indian. “Believe me, I am not a confused person,” she said. “I know who I am, but I don’t necessarily fit the categories well.”

Alejandro Farias, 23, from Brownsville, Tex., a supervisor for a freight company, sees himself simply as Latino. His ancestors came from the United States, Mexico and Portugal. When pressed, he checked “some other race.”

“Race to me gets very confusing because we have so many people from so many races that make up our genealogical tree,” he said.

Image



Fiordaliza Rodriguez, a lawyer, says that she identifies as white, but that there is no question she is seen as different from the white majority in the United States. Credit... Béatrice de Géa for The New York Times

Yet race matters. How Latinos identify themselves — and how the census counts them — affects the political clout of Latinos and other minority groups. Some studies have found that African-Latinos tend to be significantly more supportive of government-sponsored health care and much less supportive of the death penalty than Latinos who identify as white, a rift that is also found in the broader white and black populations.

This racial effect “weakens the political effectiveness of Latinos as a group,” said Gary M. Segura, a political science professor at Stanford who has conducted some of the research.

A majority of Latinos identify themselves as white. Among them is Fiordaliza A. Rodriguez, 40, a New York lawyer who says she considers herself white because “I am light-skinned” and that is how she is viewed in her native Dominican Republic.

But she says there is no question that she is seen as different from the white majority in this country. Ms. Rodriguez recalled an occasion in a courtroom when a white lawyer assumed she was the court interpreter. She surmised the confusion had to do with ethnic stereotyping, “no matter how well you’re dressed.”

Some of the latest research, however, shows that many Latinos — like Irish and Italian immigrants before them — drop the Latino label to call themselves simply “white.”

A [study](#) published last year in the Journal of Labor Economics found that the parents of more than a quarter of third-generation children with Mexican ancestry do not identify their children as Latino on census forms.

Most of this ethnic attrition occurs among the offspring of parents or grandparents married to non-Mexicans, usually non-Hispanic whites. These Latinos tend to have high education, high earnings and high levels of English fluency. That means that many successful Latinos are no longer present in statistics tracking Latino economic and social progress across generations, hence many studies showing little or no progress for third-generation Mexican immigrants, said Stephen J. Trejo, an economist at the University of Texas at Austin and co-author of the study.

And a [more recent study](#) by University of Southern California researchers found that more than two million people, or 6 percent of those who claimed any type of Latin American ancestry on census surveys, did not ultimately identify as Latino or Hispanic. The trend was more prevalent among those of mixed parentage, who spoke only English and who identified as white, black or Asian when asked their race.

James Paine, whose father is half Mexican-American, said it never occurred to him to claim a Latino identity. Mr. Paine, 25, the owner of a real estate investment management company in La Jolla, Calif., spent summers with his Mexican-American aunt and attends his father's big family reunions every year (his mother is white of Irish and French descent). But he says he does not speak Spanish or live in a Latino neighborhood.

Video :

Being Garifuna

3:41

When it comes to being counted in the census, the Garifunas, who are part African, part Caribbean and part Central American, say they don't fit into any box.

"If the question is 'What's your heritage?' I'd say Irish-Mexican," he said. "But the question is 'What are you?' and the answer is I'm white."

On the other side of the spectrum are black Latinos, who say they feel the sting of racism much the same as other blacks. A sense of racial pride has been emerging among many black Latinos who are now coming together in conferences and organizations.

Miriam Jimenez Roman, 60, a scholar on race and ethnicity in New York, says that issues like racial profiling of indigenous-looking and dark-skinned Latinos led her to appear in a 30-second [public service announcement](#) before the 2010 census encouraging Latinos of African descent to "check both: Latino and black." "When you sit on the subway, you just see a black person, and that's really what determines the treatment," she said. The 2010 census showed 1.2 million Latinos who identified as black, or 2.5 percent of the Hispanic population.

Over the decades, the Census Bureau has repeatedly altered how it asks the race question, and on the 2010 form, it added a sentence spelling out that “Hispanic origins are not races.” The change helped steer 5 percent more Latinos away from “some other race,” with the vast majority of those choosing the white category.

Still, critics of the census questionnaire say the government must move on from racial distinctions based on 18th-century binary thinking and adapt to Americans’ sense of self.

But Latino political leaders say the risk in changing the questions could create confusion and lead some Latinos not to mark their ethnicity, shrinking the overall Hispanic numbers.

Ultimately, said Angelo Falcon, president of the [National Institute for Latino Policy](#) and chairman of the Census Advisory Committee on the Hispanic Population, this is not just a tussle over identity, it is a political battle, too.

“It comes down to what yields the largest numbers for which group,” he said.

Race Remixed: Articles in this series are exploring the growing number of mixed-race Americans. Previous articles in the series: nytimes.com/raceremixed