

The New Census Question about Ancestry: What Did It Tell Us?

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In addition to specific inquiries about race and Spanish origin, the censuses of 1980 and 1990 included an open-ended question about ancestry, which replaced the question about parents' place of birth that had been used since 1870. This paper examines findings from the new ancestry question from the perspective of measuring ethnicity. The question adds little information about Hispanics, racial minorities, or recent immigrants, who can be identified readily on the basis of other census inquiries. The ancestry question allows us to characterize the descendants of European immigrants, but because of ethnic intermarriage, the numerous generations that separate present respondents from their forebears, and the apparent unimportance of ancestry to many whites of European origin, responses appear quite inconsistent. In regard to these groups, we may now be in an era of optional ethnicity, in which no simple census question will distinguish those who identify strongly with a specific European group from those who report symbolic or imagined ethnicity.

Recognizing the diverse origins of our population, Thomas Jefferson proposed a nativity question for the nation's second census (Wright and Hunt 1900, p. 19), but Congress did not add such an inquiry until 1850. The European influx of the mid-nineteenth century produced a large second-generation population, so a question about parents' country of birth was added in 1870 and was asked in the next 10 censuses.

Events in the 1960s and 1970s led to the eventual deletion of the question about parents' birthplace. First, the fraction of the population with a foreign-born parent, which had peaked at 24% in 1920, fell to 12% in 1970 (Hutchinson 1956, Table 2; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1973a, Table 192). If this question had been asked in 1980, it would have produced information for less than 10% of the population.

Second, the civil rights movement, especially the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as amended in 1972 (Thernstrom 1987), made it imperative for Hispanics to be enumerated fully at the lowest level of census geography. The Census Bureau historically has made special efforts to measure the heterogeneous Spanish-origin population, but techniques involving Spanish language and Spanish surnames identified only a fraction of that group (Fernandez 1975). A specific question about Spanish origin was added to the sample for the 1970 census at the last minute (Choldin 1986), but this question was satisfactory neither to Hispanic groups nor to Census Bureau officials.

In the early 1970s, the Bureau experimented with a single question that would accomplish three goals: obviate the query about parents' birthplace, identify Hispanics, and provide ethnic information for the remainder of the population. Similar efforts to measure ethnicity were undertaken for the National Opinion Research Center's General Social

Survey, but they involved several questions, more than could be used in the highly constrained decennial census (Greeley 1974; Smith 1980). In 1980 the Census Bureau asked, "What is this person's ancestry?" In 1990 this question was revised slightly to read, "What is this person's ancestry or ethnicity?" Respondents could write any term they wished, but those who consulted the instructions were told that they should print the ancestry group with which they identified, that they could report multiple origins, and that they should not report a religion. The appendix contains the ancestry questions used in 1980 and 1990, along with the instructions for respondents. This innovative question replaced the inquiry about parents' birthplace, but Hispanic groups were successful in retaining the Spanish-origin question because they believed that a special question would enhance the count.

This investigation has two purposes. First, and most important, it assesses the nature and the quality of the ancestry data gathered in 1980. Second, findings from the Census Bureau's question are related to contemporary theories of ethnicity and to the results of three major new studies of the topic (Alba 1990; Lieberman and Waters 1988; Waters 1990).

The New Ancestry Question: Who Answered in 1980?

In both 1980 and 1990, all persons answered a race question by filling in one of 15 circles or writing in a term for their race. They responded to a question about Spanish origin by filling in one circle indicating that they were not Spanish, or by identifying themselves as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or other Spanish/Hispanic. Then approximately 19% of respondents in 1980 and 16% in 1990 were asked their ancestry.

What were the results? Because this was an open-ended question, responses had to be entered manually on the computer, a procedure necessitating rules and codes. Before the 1980 enumeration, the Census Bureau developed a list of 468 terms which included most nations, many languages, some indigenous peoples and the names of geographic areas such as Scandinavia and western Europe, but no religions. Names that appeared on the race question (e.g., Chinese and Filipino) and the Spanish-origin question also were codable responses for the ancestry question.

The primary coding rules were as follows:

1. Ordinarily the first two reported ancestries were coded in the order reported, permitting an analyst to distinguish, for instance, Italian-Germans from German-Italians.
2. If a person reported "American" alone that response was coded, but if it was reported in conjunction with another term, such as Irish-American, it was not coded.
3. Responses regarding religion were not coded, but persons reporting another term and a religion, such as Russian-Jewish, received a code for their ancestry.
4. On the basis of pretests, 17 commonly reported triple ancestries such as "English-German-Irish" received unique codes in 1980. For these people, it is impossible to ascertain the order of reporting. Thus, when common ancestries such as Irish, German, and English were reported in combination with other designated ancestries, the third ancestry was coded; thereby the count for that ancestry was augmented. This procedure was not repeated in 1990.

5. Ancestry was not attributed to persons who left the question blank. The ancestry question was distinguished in this way because an allocation process eliminated nonresponses to most other questions.

Approximately one-half of those who received the sample questionnaire in 1980 listed one codable ancestry, whereas just under one-third wrote two or more ethnicities. About

10% left the question blank; 6% wrote "American" alone; and fewer than 1% gave religious or other uncodable replies.

A large proportion of the population can be classified into a small number of ancestries: English and German were the most common, followed by Irish, Afro-American, and American. Table 1, which lists the ancestries reported by 1 million or more persons, shows that the five most common ancestries include 56% of the population, and that the 20 most common account for 91% of those who answered. Only 181 of the 467 ancestries included as many as 5,000 persons. As Table 1 suggests, ancestry differs in an important manner from all other census items: people have only one age and one educational attainment, but about one-third of the population reported multiple ancestries (Lieberson and Waters 1988, Chap. 1).

Determinants of Ancestry Reporting

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the measurement of ethnicity was

Table 1. Ancestries Reported in 1980 by 1 Million or More Persons
(Numbers in Thousands)

	First	Second	Multiple ^a	Total	Percentage of Total Population
English	36,140	9,146	4,167	49,453	21.9%
German	32,345	11,953	4,516	48,814	21.5
Irish	19,486	15,414	5,360	40,260	17.8
Afro-American	20,805	160	—	20,965	9.3
American	13,299	—	—	13,299	5.9
French	7,198	3,992	1,631	12,821	5.7
Italian	9,877	2,453	233	12,563	5.5
Scottish	5,589	2,608	1,754	9,951	4.4
Polish	6,123	1,975	—	8,098	3.6
Mexican	7,470	313	—	7,783	3.4
American Indian	3,398	2,469	803	6,670	2.9
Dutch	3,322	2,509	401	6,232	2.8
Swedish	2,581	1,505	182	4,268	1.9
Norwegian	2,233	1,103	—	3,336	1.5
Russian	2,040	634	—	2,674	1.2
Spanish	1,781	448	—	2,229	1.0
Hungarian	1,205	559	—	1,764	0.8
Welsh	796	745	21	1,562	0.7
Danish	937	566	—	1,503	0.7
Puerto Rican	1,310	74	—	1,384	0.6
Czech	861	426	—	1,287	0.6
Portuguese	833	184	—	1,017	0.5

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1982b.

^a These persons are classified into one of 17 triple-coded ancestries. The order of the reports was not ascertained.

Note: These totals are from the One Percent Sample File, and thus they differ slightly from the published figures based on the 19.3% sample. For example, the count of English in the 19.3% sample was 49,598,000. For details, see U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1983: Table 2.

not viewed as problematic. Ancestry was equated with national origins, so a question asking for the country of birth of the respondent or the respondent's parents was accepted as a valid measure of ancestry. Well into this century, descendants of the first great wave of immigrants to the United States had foreign-born parents, and for several decades after World War II, the "birthplace of parents" question revealed the ethnicity of those whose fathers or mothers had arrived in the second great wave.

More recently, analysts have recognized the difficulty of measuring ethnicity. Lieberman and Santi (1985) demonstrated that country of birth failed to match reported ancestry in many cases; for example, a person born in Switzerland might think of herself as German, Swiss, or Italian, and a person claiming French ancestry might have been born in one of several Francophone countries. More important, as time passed, many Americans who knew about their family origins faced the option of selecting among several ethnicities, or perhaps of rejecting them all by identifying themselves as Americans.

Most census inquiries depend on factual knowledge about the timing of events, such as age, or about amounts, such as income. The ancestry question is more complicated in that it depends to a large degree on factual knowledge about the history of one's family, but also requires many people to make a decision about identification: Which one or two of several possible ethnicities does a person report? Undoubtedly, some individuals identify very strongly with a particular ancestry, and will do so regardless of clues on the census form or contemporary political events. Many others, however, may not identify strongly, so their answers may depend on ephemeral events. Not answering the question is another possibility; in 1980, 11% wrote nothing in the space for reporting ancestry. Unfortunately there is no way to distinguish those who were puzzled by the question from those who could not select an ancestry.

Whether or not a person responded to the ancestry question, I believe, depended on both cognitive and social psychological factors. Those who had arrived recently in the United States and those whose parents were first-generation immigrants knew that they had an origin which distinguished them from most residents. Those who were well educated learned much about our nation's history, the fluctuations in immigration policy, and the frequent racial and ethnic conflicts. In brief, education brings an awareness that Americans have foreign "roots," which leads individuals to respond to the ancestry question.

On the social psychological side, there are cities and regions in which ethnic issues have been, and still may be, an important cause for division in social life. Perhaps those places have a history of conflict about who would become mayor or which ethnic group would control the school board; full-fledged or vestigial ethnic neighborhoods may exist. In such places, people may be labeled by their ethnicity; this process may heighten their awareness and may lead them to respond to the census question (see Alba 1990, pp. 21-25 for a discussion of psychological factors). Marriage may be a consciousness-raising event in regard to ethnicity (Waters 1990, pp. 102-10) because parents are often aware of (and concerned about) the ethnicity of their children's spouses. It is also likely that religious practice influences the reporting of ethnicity, because many churches, synagogues and mosques were founded by specific immigrant groups and retain some elements of their origin.

It is challenging to develop a model which will allow us to determine how social psychological factors and knowledge of one's background lead a person to answer the census question. Also, significantly, the census gathers no information about religion. Even so, we can explore correlates of ancestry reporting systematically with a focus on the determinants of ancestry reporting.

Table 2 presents log-linear models describing the independent effects of variables that influence reporting. The first model treats the log of odds of reporting at least one codable ancestry. (To avoid the reporting of children's ancestry by parents, the analysis is restricted

Table 2. Effects Parameters for Logit Models that Treat Odds of Responding to the Ancestry Question in 1980

	Reporting Codable Ancestry	Reporting Two or More Ancestries	Reporting "American"
Sample Size	162,351	136,491	145,188
Percentage Reporting	94.6%	33.5%	6.0%
Odds of Reporting	17.52:1	.50:1	.064:1
Effects Parameters			
Intercept	2.6272	- 3.1520	- 5.4936
Age			
18-24	.0656	.2724	.2031
25-34	-.0285*	.1379	.1523
35-44	.0412*	.0572	.0304*
45-54	.0405*	-.0305*	-.1033
55-64	-.0228*	-.1302	-.1717
65 +	-.0960	-.3068	-.1108
Place of Birth			
United States	-.1435	-.1302	.9058
Elsewhere	.1435	.1302	-.9058
Educational Attainment			
<9 years	-.2686	-.5276	.6249
9-11 years	-.2402	-.0576	.4299
12 years	-.0597	-.0592	.0410
13-15 years	.1959	.2114	-.4044
16 or more years	.3726	.3146	-.6914
Marital Status			
Married, Spouse Present	.1631	-.0755	.0429
Other	-.1631	.0755	-.0429
Race			
White	-.1666	1.5347	.9433
Black	-.0321*	-1.9154	-.0965*
Asian, Native American, and others	.1987	.3807	-.8468
Spanish Origin			
Not Spanish	-.1786	.5093	.8570
Spanish	.1786	-.5093	-.8570
Region of Residence			
Northeast	.2096	-.1824	-.3881
Midwest	.0706	.0964	-.1240
South	-.3439	-.1602	.6745
West	.0637	.2462	-.1624
Likelihood ratio chi-square	2784.1	3444.2	1684.4
Probability of chi-square	.0001	.0001	.0001
Degrees of freedom	2862	2862	2862

* Effects coefficient is *not* significantly different from 0 at .025 level. All other coefficients are significant.

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1982b.

to persons age 18 and over.) Independent variables include the respondent's age, place of birth, education, marital status, race, Spanish origin, (from the Spanish origin question), and region of residence. These are main effects models, which do not treat possible interactions. Effects parameters show the net consequences of membership in a specific category of an independent variable; positive coefficients show that people in that category are more likely to report, whereas negative coefficients are a sign that reporting is dampened.

When we examine coefficients in the first column, we find that age had no strong net effects on reporting at least one ancestry, but that persons born abroad—that is, first-generation immigrants—were more likely to respond than those born in the United States. The net effect of schooling was strong and in the anticipated direction. Consider, for example, two groups of native-born white men aged 45 to 54 who live in the south. If one group had college educations, their odds of reporting ethnicity were 10 to 1, implying a nonresponse rate of about 9%. For a similar group who finished only grammar school, the odds of reporting were only 5.5 to 1, implying a nonresponse rate of 15%.¹ Clearly, educational attainment increased the reporting, presumably by making people aware of their own and the nation's ethnic history.

Marital status had a large independent effect: persons with spouses were most likely to report ancestry. White respondents were less likely to report, whereas Asians and Native Americans² were highly likely to state an ancestry. That is, net of immigration status, age and education, Asians and Native Americans responded to the question with unusual frequency. Region also had a strong net effect. Let us consider two groups of native-born men aged 50 who were high school graduates. In the northeast, ethnicity is a common social marker; there, the odds of reporting were 12.1 to 1. In the south, where ethnicity may be a much less important marker than race, the odds of reporting were much lower,³ only 7 to 1 (Alba and Chamblin 1983, p. 245). The waves of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe went to the northeast and the midwest, but generally not to the south (Allen and Turner 1988). As a consequence, the ethnic diversity of the white population is still less in the south than elsewhere.

What determined whether a second ancestry was reported? Age, we believe, was strongly influential because younger persons were more likely than older ones to have parents from differing ethnic groups. Age, however, also serves as a proxy for number of generations in the United States. That is, the 1980 census did not distinguish second-generation natives from third and subsequent generations, but a substantial fraction of those over age 64 had a foreign-born parent.⁴ As a result, they reported one specific ancestry. Educational attainment also should be linked strongly to multiple reporting because a college education typically leads to a greater understanding of the complexity of ethnicity in this nation. Because the line between black and white is drawn so clearly, it seems likely that few of those who claimed black as their race would report multiple ancestries. Similarly, those who identified themselves as Hispanics on the Spanish-origin question probably did not give complex terms for their ancestry.

The middle column of Table 2 shows the odds of reporting a second codable ancestry for persons who gave one codable response. Many of the net effects are consistent with the expectations. Younger individuals were most likely to report multiple ancestries, undoubtedly as a consequence of the sharp increases over time in ethnically mixed marriages (Alba 1990, pp. 11-15; Lieberman and Waters 1988). Those with a junior high school education or less were extremely unlikely to report multiple ancestries, whereas college graduates did so most frequently. Net of other factors, stating black as one's race or Hispanic as one's origin substantially decreased the reporting of multiple ancestries. Of the 23 million blacks who answered the ancestry inquiry in 1980, only one-half million went on to report several terms.

The net effects of region may seem surprising. Ethnicity, I assume, is least salient in the south, so the effect of living in that region was a reduction in the propensity to state a second ancestry. In the northeast, however, where ethnicity may be most salient, multiple ancestries also were reported infrequently. Because of the importance of ethnicity in that region, it seems probable that individuals identified with a specific group rather than with multiple groups. In addition, the northeast led the nation in the proportion of persons with one or both parents born abroad, because many of those who had immigrated between 1880 and 1924 settled in that region.⁵

Six percent of those who answered the ancestry question wrote the single term "American". I believe that this response would occur least frequently among the older population and most commonly among the young because of differences in the number of generations separating respondents from their ancestors who came to the colonies or the states. I expect that persons born in this country will be much more likely to report "American" than those born abroad. Educational attainment, for reasons already described, should be related strongly and inversely to the reporting of American as one's ancestry. Colloquial use of the term, as in "red-blooded American," seems to exclude minority groups, so we expect that blacks and Hispanics would be distinctive for their rare use of this term.

The third column of coefficients in Table 3 presents information about the determinants of writing "American" among those who gave at least one codable response. Older persons were least likely to do so, presumably because they had closer contacts with foreign countries of origin. Persons born outside the United States, those who did not identify themselves as white on the race question, and those who claimed a Spanish origin, also were unlikely to write "American." Educational attainment had the anticipated strong consequence of making people aware of their ancestors' foreign roots, so the reporting of "American" decreased sharply as years spent in school increased. Among the regions, the south was unusual in that the net effect of living there was an increase in reporting "American." Indeed, the individuals who were most prone to write "American" were young native whites living in the south who had dropped out of high school. About 19% of this group said their ancestry was "American," compared to the overall rate of only 6% (also see Lieberman 1988).

Does The Ancestry Question Provide New Information about Racial Minorities and the Spanish-Origin Population?

One of the potential advantages of the new question on ancestry was the emergence of additional information about the identities of racial minorities and Hispanics. Did these groups leave the ancestry question blank, perhaps thinking that they had already indicated their social identity? The answer is no: members of racial minorities—except blacks and Hispanics—were more likely to answer the question than whites or non-Hispanics; the overwhelming majority gave a single answer.

The question, however, provided little new information about their identity. Only a small fraction gave an answer about ancestry that differed from their response to the question about race or Spanish-origin. Among those who were black by race, for example, approximately 80% said they were Afro-American by ancestry; another 15% either wrote "American" or failed to give a codable ancestry. Among blacks, the most common response other than "Afro-American" was "English," which was given much more frequently than

any African, Caribbean, or Latin American origin. Thus the ancestry question in 1980 was of little assistance in describing the ethnic diversity of the black population.

More than nine-tenths of those who were Asian by race reported an Asian ancestry, almost always similar or identical to their race, with two exceptions. Approximately one-sixth of those who said they were Asian Indians by race reported a European ancestry, and 11% of the one-quarter million who called themselves Vietnamese by race selected Chinese as their ancestry. The latter response reflects the migration of Chinese to French Indo-China earlier in this century (Farley 1990, Table 1.6).

The ancestry question led to a complication in the count of American Indians. On the basis of the race question, this population numbered approximately 1.4 million in 1980, but another 4.6 million persons reported white as their race and then wrote "American Indian" or the name of a specific tribe as their first or second ancestry (Snipp 1989, Chap. 2). Thus the ancestry count of American Indians was more than four times the race count. This situation reveals an interesting dimension of identification for those with American Indian forebears. Persons who listed themselves as white by race but Indian by ancestry were relatively prosperous compared to the smaller but economically disadvantaged group who identified themselves as American Indian by race (Snipp 1989, p. 57).

The Quality of Ancestry Data: Are Gross Counts Consistent?

This investigation describes the first use of the innovative ancestry question. After examining responses, a user ordinarily assesses their quality by evaluating the consistency and the accuracy of reporting, but such an approach is hardly feasible with this question. For many respondents, stating an ancestry meant selecting one of several ethnicities; thus the answers could not be judged in the same way as answers to census questions about military service or hours worked in the last week.

Three indicators are considered here because they provide information about the quality of ancestry data:

1. If the same ancestry question is asked in independent but closely spaced samples, are the gross counts of the groups similar?
2. If the same people are asked a similar ancestry question at different times, do they give consistent replies?
3. Do ancestry reports agree with other social and demographic indicators of a respondent's ethnicity?

The 1980 ancestry question was asked of 59,000 households in the November 1979 Current Population Survey (CPS) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1982a) and of 26,000 households in the April 1986 National Content Test (NCT), a pretest for the 1990 census. Similar procedures were used, including the coding of two ancestries for all respondents and the unique coding of 17 triple ancestries. Changes were made, however, in the coding of Spanish as an ancestry between 1979 and 1980 and in that of Czech, Slovakian, and Czechoslovakian ancestries for 1986. In addition, data were gathered in 1979 by interviewers, whereas the information for 1980 and 1986 comes primarily from individuals who filled out questionnaires in their homes.

Table 3 shows the ancestries reported by 1 million persons or more at any of these dates and their representation in the population. This table displays a puzzling pattern of consistencies and discrepancies. The Italian population was estimated at about 12 to 13 million at each date, and the counts of Swiss and Austrians varied within narrow ranges, but for many other ethnicities the counts differed greatly. The estimate of 50 million English in

Table 3. Ancestries Reported by 1 Million or More Persons in 1979, 1980, or 1986

	Number Reporting in Millions			Percentage of Total Population		
	1979	1980	1986	1979	1980	1986
English	40.0	49.6	37.1	18.5	21.9	15.4
German	51.6	49.2	57.2	23.8	21.7	23.7
Irish	43.8	40.2	42.9	20.2	17.7	17.8
Afro-American	16.2	20.2	14.0	7.5	8.9	5.8
American	13.2	13.3	10.9	6.1	5.9	4.5
French	14.0	12.9	10.0	6.5	5.7	4.2
Italian	11.8	12.2	13.3	5.4	5.4	5.5
Scottish	14.2	10.0	12.0	6.6	4.4	5.0
Polish	8.4	9.1	9.5	3.9	3.6	3.9
Mexican	6.7	7.8	5.9	3.1	3.4	2.4
American Indian	9.9	6.7	4.6	4.6	3.0	1.9
Dutch	8.1	6.3	6.5	3.7	2.8	2.7
Swedish	4.9	4.3	5.4	2.2	1.9	2.2
Norwegian	4.1	3.3	4.6	1.9	1.5	1.9
Russian	3.5	2.7	2.8	1.6	1.2	1.2
Spanish ^a	3.7	2.2	1.1	1.7	1.0	0.4
Hungarian	1.6	1.8	1.4	0.7	0.8	0.6
Welsh	2.6	1.7	2.5	1.2	0.7	1.0
Danish	1.7	1.5	1.9	0.8	0.7	0.8
Puerto Rican	1.3	1.4	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.2
Czech ^a	1.7	1.3	2.6	0.8	0.6	1.1
Portuguese	0.9	1.0	1.1	0.4	0.5	0.5
Swiss	1.2	1.0	1.1	0.6	0.4	0.5
Austrian	1.1	1.0	1.0	0.5	0.4	0.4
French Canadian	1.1	0.8	2.1	0.5	0.3	0.4
Filipino	0.8	0.7	1.0	0.4	0.3	0.4
Ukrainian	0.5	0.8	1.0	0.2	0.3	0.4

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1982b and 1987.

^a Coding of Spanish changed between 1979 and 1980. Coding of Czech/Slovak/Czechoslovakian changed between 1980 and 1986.

1980 was 25% greater than the CPS count obtained only five months previously. The number of persons claiming American Indian ancestry fell by one-third between 1979 and 1980 and then decreased another one-third between 1980 and 1986. During the 1980s, the number of Germans rose by 15%, Norwegians by 40%, while the French-Canadian population more than doubled. No international immigration would have accounted for such dramatic changes.

Most of these shifts are far outside the range of sampling variation. The 1979 estimate of 40 million English had a standard error of 363,000, whereas the census count of 49.6 million had a standard error of only 14,000. Even for small groups, standard errors were slight. The 1979 CPS estimate of 525,000 Ukrainians had a standard error of 48,000, but the standard error for the 1980 census count of 730,000 Ukrainians was only 2,000.

A design effect accounted for some of the differences between 1979 and 1980, especially for the English. The ancestry question on the 1980 enumeration schedule

followed immediately the question about whether a language other than English was spoken in the home. The majority of respondents—89%—said they spoke only English, and another 9% said they spoke English very well or well. Respondents thus were reminded that they were English speakers; undoubtedly this occurrence led some respondents who were unsure about the meaning of the ancestry question or about their own origin, to write “English.” In 1990 the language question was separated from the ancestry inquiry.

The 1986 NCT differed in important ways from both the census and the CPS. In particular, there was no follow-up of those who did not return their questionnaires. Thus the nonresponse rate for ancestry was 16% or much greater than the 10% census rate. This difference may account for the relatively small estimates of several groups, especially Afro-Americans and Puerto Ricans, but it cannot explain the rapid increase in the Scottish, Swedish, or Norwegian populations.

These results imply that ancestry data should be used judiciously in estimating the size of groups because the counts of major ethnic groups including French, Mexican, English, and Russian, changed by 25% to 30% within short intervals. A further disaggregation leads to a somewhat more optimistic conclusion, but also points out limitations of the question. We compared data from the November 1979 CPS and from the 1980 census, distinguishing those who reported a single ancestry from those who reported it in combination with others. We tested the hypothesis that the two estimates were drawn from a population that had identical percentages in specific ancestry groups (Farley 1990, Table 2.2; McKenney, Farley and Levin 1983, Table 7).

In 23 of the 50 comparisons involving those who reported only one ancestry, we accepted the hypothesis that the 1979 and the 1980 samples came from a population with a common parameter. Not surprisingly, this included many groups whose numbers were augmented by recent immigration including Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, Cubans, Dominicans, Greeks, Colombians, and Koreans. We expected recent immigrants from these groups to consistently state a specific term for their ethnicity. The respondents who did so, however, also represented old-stock ethnic groups: Germans, Irish, French, Dutch, Danes, Swedes, and Austrians.

Among the multiple-reported ancestries, we found no significant difference between the 1979 and the 1980 samples for 21 of the 50 largest groups. Interestingly, the groups making similar reports were members of racial minorities, persons of Hispanic ancestries, and those white groups whose numbers were augmented by post-World War II immigration: Hungarians, Yugoslavians, Lebanese, and Iranians. None of the old-stock European groups appeared on this list of consistently reported multiple ancestries.

What conclusions should be drawn? Many members of racial minorities and Hispanics repeat their identities when responding to the ancestry question. This consistency of reporting reflects social values that clearly delineate racial groups and persons of Spanish origin.

The open-ended census question cannot measure the intensity of identification. Among descendants of western European immigrants, some may identify strongly and consistently with a single specific origin. Despite the numerous generations that have elapsed since their ancestors came to America, the 1979 and 1980 samples suggest a consistency in the counts of those who provided the single term French, Dutch, German, or Irish. Perhaps there is a “hard core” of respondents who identify themselves very faithfully; “unmeltable ethnics” is the term used by Novak (1972). Those who reported one western European ancestry, however, along with a second or third origin, may be much less consistent in their identity and more willing to shift. Finally, the 1980 census provides strong evidence that the order of questions has a major effect: findings from that census suggest that several million people may have been so unsure of either their ancestry or the meaning of the question that they responded to the specific cue which reminded them that they were English speakers. As

mentioned earlier, English was by far the most common ancestry reported by blacks, other than Afro-American. The 1990 census will reveal a smaller English population than that of 1980, solely because of a change in the order of questions.

The Ancestry Question: Are Respondents Consistent when Asked the Same Question More Than Once?

If you ask the same person repeatedly about his or her ancestry, does that person give the same response each time? In some groups, especially those who identify themselves as blacks or Puerto Ricans, responses are consistent, but there is less consistency among the descendants of western European groups.

The most extensive study of this issue was conducted in the early 1970s and used an approach slightly different from that of the decennial census. Persons interviewed from 1971 to 1973 in the March CPS were presented with a flash card and were asked to select their origin or descent. The list included seven European ancestries, five Hispanic, "Negro," and the options "other" or "don't know." Because households periodically rotated into and out of the CPS sample, about one-half of those who were asked the question in 1971 appeared in the sample again the next year. For analytic purposes, data from two comparisons—1971 with 1972 and 1972 with 1973—were pooled and are shown in Table 4. These data refer only to persons matched at two points; thus, inflating the sample does not yield estimates of the national population (Johnson 1974, pp. 14-18). Note that the individuals whose origins are reported are matched, but that the actual respondent may have changed; for example, a husband may be a respondent one year and his wife the next year.

In this comparison, counts of groups in the later year were generally similar to those of the earlier year with the exception of substantial increases in "don't know" and "not reported." As a consequence, net difference rates (shown in Table 4) are low. This rate is an index of the degree of difference between the second count of a group and the first, expressed as a percentage of the total matched sample. In a sample of 50,000, if 5,000 persons were identified as Lithuanians in the first interview and if 15,000 were so identified in the second, the net difference rate would be -20, meaning that the first count misclassified 20% (10,000 out of 50,000) with regard to being Lithuanian. The net difference rates (shown in Table 4) exceeded .5% only for the "don't know" and the "not reported" responses.

The index of inconsistency measures the consistency of reporting for the same individuals. Suppose that a sample of 50,000 identifies 5,000 Ukrainians. When respondents are interviewed one year later, again there is a count of 5,000 Ukrainians. If the same 5,000 persons claimed they were Ukrainians at both dates, the index of inconsistency would reach its minimum value of 0, suggesting complete consistency. At the opposite extreme, it would be possible for the count to remain at 5,000 Ukrainians but no one identified as Ukrainian at the first date might be identified as such at the second. In this case, the index of inconsistency would approach its maximum value of 100.

In Table 4, we find that the index of inconsistency was low for Negroes and Puerto Ricans, and for the combined group of Spanish origins (less than 10), but was rather high for the older-stock European groups: 44 for French, 46 for Irish, and 52 for the merged English-Scotch-Welsh category. Italians were unusually consistent (their index rivaled the low indexes observed for Mexicans and Cubans), but Russians, who arrived in this country at the same time as Italians, were less consistent. (For an analysis of the distinctive reporting among Italians, see Alba 1990, Chap. 2).

The right-hand columns in Table 4 report the outflow from a category from one year to

Table 4. Counts of Ethnicities from 1971-73 Test of Consistency of Reporting, Net Difference Rate, Index of Inconsistency, and Flow Rates

Ethnicities	Population Counts (000)		Net Difference Rate	Index of Inconsistency	Outflow from Earlier Year		Inflow to Later Year
	Earlier Year	Later Year			Year	Year	
Cuban	369	357	.01	15	16%		13%
Central and South American	263	216	.05	37	43		30
English, Scottish, Welsh	14,876	14,714	.16	52	45		45
French	2,361	2,393	-.03	44	42		43
German	13,163	12,657	.49	39	35		33
Irish	8,272	8,021	.24	46	43		42
Italian	5,553	5,498	.05	14	13		12
Mexican	2,485	2,513	-.03	12	12		13
Negro	10,544	10,625	-.08	7	6		7
Other Spanish	628	571	.06	60	62		58
Polish	3,006	2,982	.02	24	23		23
Puerto Rican	613	626	-.01	8	7		9
Russian	1,425	1,368	.06	41	42		39
Other Ethnicities	32,990	32,525	.45	55	38		37
Don't know	3,937	4,480	-.53	71	66		70
Not reported	2,896	3,834	-.91	86	80		85
Total	103,381	103,381					
Total Spanish groups	4,358	4,283	.07	10	11		9

Source: Johnson 1974.

the next and show the influx from the previous year. In the first row, we find that 16% of those identified as Cubans in 1971 or 1972 placed themselves in another category 12 months later. Thirteen percent of those identified as Cuban in the later year had reported a different ethnicity one year previously.

Negroes and Puerto Ricans again distinguished themselves from other groups with regard to consistency; this finding implies that they have little ambiguity about their identity. When the Spanish groups were combined (see last row in Table 4), we also find little outflow or inflow. For many of the European groups, on the other hand, the flows were large, a sign of inconsistent reporting. More than 40% of those who claimed that their origin was English, French, Irish, or Russian in one year reported a different ancestry or stated "don't know" the next. This finding suggests that ethnic origin was not a prominent component of identification. Two-thirds of those who did not know their origin in the earlier year gave a specific answer the next, and 80% of those who did not report in the first year did so the next. These figures suggest that probing may elicit answers from many who hesitate when faced with this question.⁶

Do Answers to the Ancestry Question Match Demographic Characteristics?

For many census variables, an individual's response may be checked against independent records from other statistical agencies to verify its accuracy, but this step is impossible in the ancestry question because of its more subjective nature. Perhaps the best one can do is to determine whether a given response agrees with the birthplace of parents or forebears or with languages that once were or currently are spoken in the respondent's family.

Two sources may be used to assess this aspect of the ancestry inquiry. In November 1979, the CPS asked about the respondent's birthplace, birthplace of parents, mother tongue and whether a language other than English was currently spoken at home (Levin and Farley 1982; McKenney, Farley, and Levin 1983; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1982a). Thus, within a generous margin of error, we can determine which languages and nations were appropriate for reported ancestries.

We considered those 52 ancestries which were reported (singly or with another) by 100,000 persons or more in 1979, and we found a clear pattern. One group of ancestries included those whose immigration increased after the change in federal law in 1968; this group included Asian Indians, Chinese, Colombians, Cubans, Dominicans, Filipinos, Iranians, Jamaicans, Koreans, and Vietnamese. One-half to two-thirds of persons claiming these ancestries were born abroad, and four-fifths of their parents were natives of the countries associated with the reported ancestries. The majority of these people currently spoke a language that matched their ancestry; an even greater proportion reported that their parents did so. In social psychological terms, they had obvious markers to remind them of their origin.

The second group included the apparent descendants of persons who arrived in this country between 1880 and World War I; these respondents, of southern and eastern European descent, claimed ancestries such as Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Rumanian, or Ukrainian. Between 5% and 10% of these persons were born in an appropriate country; one-quarter to one-third had a parent born in such a country, and a similar percentage had a mother tongue congruent with their ancestry. These are the oldest survivors of the second great wave of immigration and their children—a group that is aging rapidly and will disappear in the next two decades.

The third group included those who reported an ancestry associated with the immigration of the pre-Civil War era: Dutch, French, German, Irish, Norwegian, or Scottish. Very few were born in a foreign country, had parents born outside the United States, or spoke a language appropriate for their claimed ancestry. Only 1% of the Dutch, for example, were born in Holland; only 3% had parents born there, and only 3% said that Dutch was their mother tongue. Few demographic characteristics gave direct clues about the ancestry of these old stock groups.

After 1980, a content reinterview study determined the quality of responses gathered in that census, and thereby provided another source for investigating ancestry reporting. A sample of 13,800 households who received the long-form census questionnaire was selected, and interviews were conducted with 88% of that sample. Rather than repeating the open-ended ancestry question, the interviewers asked respondents about the birthplace of their parents, their grandparents and previous generations on both sides of the family. If a person said that the United States was the country of birth of all ancestors, he or she was asked about the origins of the first ancestors who came to this country.

Findings are shown in Table 5. The upper panel presents data for first- and second-generation residents, showing the percentage whose ancestry agreed with their own birthplace or that of their parents. The column titled "No Match" indicates the percentage of each group reporting no country of birth consistent with their ancestry. This category includes those who did not know their ancestors' origins. The lower panel refers to third and subsequent generations.

A dramatic generational difference is evident. Among 90% of the first- and second-generation residents, the parents or grandparents were born in a country consistent with these respondents' ancestries. There were two exceptions: about one-half of the French and one-third of the English reported having no ancestors born in appropriate countries.

Among third and subsequent generations, fewer than one-half of the respondents reported a country of origin that was appropriate for their ancestry. The majority of third- and later-generation respondents in this sample claimed that all of their ancestors were born in the United States and that they did not know the specific country of origin of their forebears who first entered the colonies or the United States. The proportion was surprisingly large for persons of western European ancestries. About 65% of those who reported English or French for their ancestry knew of no forebears from these countries; among the Irish and the Scots, the proportion was about 45%. This Census Bureau study, however, served a variety of purposes and was not addressed directly to the question of ancestry. Other investigations that focused directly on ethnicity and asked more probing questions found that higher proportions of respondents could specify a European country of origin (Alba 1990, pp. 16-17; Smith 1980).

Conclusion

Fifteen years ago, the two parties in the debate about ethnicity in the United States were those who foresaw the inevitable disappearance of ethnicity as we all became Americans and those who thought that ethnicity had never waned (Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Greeley 1974; Novak 1972). In the ensuing years, ethnic research has flourished; we have witnessed major breakthroughs in our knowledge of the measurement of ethnicity, its meaning, and actual ethnic differences, both in the past and at present. The historical experience was analyzed in one array of studies, including Lieberman's (1980) investigation of the national scene at the turn of the century, Hirschman's (1983) thorough explorations of the 1930s and 1940s, and numerous studies of specific cities (Morawska 1985; Perlman 1988; Reider 1985; Steinberg 1981; Zunz 1982). The 1980 census question fostered two

Table 5. Correspondence of Ancestry Reported in 1980 with Birthplaces of Parents or Ancestors Reported in Content Reinterview Study

Ancestries Reported on Census	Total	Reported Ancestry Matches Birthplace of							No Match	Sample Size
		Both Parents	Mother Only	*Father Only	Both Sides	Mother's Side Only	Father's Side Only			
Total sample	100%	54%	11%	17%	1%	3%	4%	10%	4,252	
English	100	16	12	16	5	10	9	32	306	
French	100	7	10	4	7	11	11	50	123	
German	100	33	12	23	3	5	9	15	436	
Irish	100	36	18	16	2	8	8	12	241	
Italian	100	69	6	20	<1	<1	1	2	551	
Polish	100	54	12	19	2	2	2	9	284	
Russian	100	59	10	19	1	3	3	5	112	
Scottish	100	29	16	18	1	8	10	18	102	
Other ancestries	100	66	10	16	<1	<1	<1	6	2,097	

Ancestries Reported on Census	Total	Reported Ancestry Matches Birthplace of				No Match	Sample Size
		Both Sides	Mother's Side Only	Father's Side Only			
Total sample	100%	15%	11%	19%	55%	17,403	
English	100	9	10	19	62	3,478	
French	100	4	11	18	67	677	
German	100	26	14	29	31	3,113	
Irish	100	17	15	25	43	1,903	
Italian	100	34	15	42	9	597	
Norwegian	100	29	27	35	9	228	
Polish	100	32	21	32	15	440	
Scottish	100	7	15	29	49	487	
Swedish	100	14	31	38	17	201	
Other ancestries	100	11	5	7	77	6,279	

extensive investigations: Allen and Turner's (1988) analysis of geographic distributions and Lieberman and Waters' (1986, 1988) studies of social characteristics. In addition, Waters (1990) and Alba (1990) investigated thoroughly how and why whites report or fail to report ancestry.

On the basis of these studies and this analysis of census data, we may draw several conclusions about ethnicity. For members of racial minorities and for Hispanics, the ancestry question added little new information. Most members of these groups are identified by skin color, epicanthic folds, or language, so there is no ambiguity about who they are. For whites of European origin, however, ethnicity is now largely a matter of choice, and they are in an era of voluntary ethnicity. At the turn of this century, many whites or their parents had been born in Europe. Languages other than English were commonly spoken; ethnic residential segregation was moderately high (Lieberman 1963, Chap. 3); and the ethnic groups differed greatly in economic status. Immigration came to an end in 1924, and ethnic intermarriage increased so rapidly after World War II that by the 1970s only one marriage of whites in four involved a bride and a groom of the same ancestry (Alba 1990, p. 12). Suburbanization emptied ethnic neighborhoods and the census of 1980 found that ethnic white residential segregation was minimal compared to racial or Hispanic residential segregation (Alba 1990, Chap. 7; Farley and Allen 1987, Table 5.9).

This assimilation process did not lead the majority of whites to identify themselves as Americans. Rather, ancestry has become an optional component of one's self-identification, termed "symbolic" by Gans (1979) and "imagined" by Yinger (1976). Results from the 1980 census demonstrate unambiguously that ancestry—unlike race or Spanish origin—had little relation to how many years one spent in school, what job one obtained, how much one earned, where one lived, or even whom one married (Farley 1990; Lieberman and Waters 1988). As a result, most whites seldom gain or lose from reporting a specific ancestry. For some, ethnic identity continues to be an important aspect of their self-conception, but for others it is trivial or unknown.

A simple open-ended census question about ancestry will fail to distinguish those who identify strongly with a group from those who are casually reporting something they have learned about their family's history. A study of ethnicity should distinguish factual information about the origins of ancestors from the specific identity that a person selects, a task far too complex for a census questionnaire. As the generations pass and as ethnic intermarriage continues, accurate knowledge of ancestors who came to America and their distinctive cultures inevitably will diminish. Yet it does not follow that the reporting of ancestry by whites will similarly disappear. The continued strife over racial issues and the substantial immigration from Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East will reinforce one of the country's fundamental ideologies, namely, that all of us—except Native Americans—migrated here and that our forebears contributed to the "melting pot."

Appendix

Ancestry Questions in Censuses

- A. Ancestry Question for 1980 (19.3% Sample)
 14. What is this person's ancestry? If uncertain about how to report ancestry, see instruction guide. (For example: Afro-Amer., English, French, German, Honduran, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Jamaican, Korean, Lebanese, Mexican, Nigerian, Polish, Ukrainian, Venezuelan, etc.)
- B. Instructions for 1980 Ancestry Question
 14. Print the ancestry group with which the person *identifies*. Ancestry (or origin or descent) may be viewed as the nationality group, the lineage, or the country in which the person or the person's parents or ancestors were born before their arrival in the United States. Persons who are of more

than one origin and who cannot identify with a single group should print their multiple ancestry (for example, German-Irish).

C. Ancestry Question for 1990 (16% Sample)

13. What is this person's ancestry or ethnic origin? (For example: German, Italian, Afro-Amer., Croatian, Cape Verdean, Dominican, Ecuadoran, Haitian, Cajun, French Canadian, Jamaican, Korean, Lebanese, Mexican, Nigerian, Irish, Polish, Slovak, Taiwanese, Thai, Ukrainian, etc.)

13. Print the ancestry group. Ancestry refers to the person's ethnic origin or descent, "roots," or heritage. Ancestry also may refer to the country of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States. All persons, regardless of citizenship status, should answer this question.

Persons who have more than one origin and cannot identify with a single group may report two ancestry groups (for example, German-Irish).

Be specific. For example, print whether West Indian, Asian Indian, or American Indian. West Indian includes persons whose ancestors came from Jamaica, Trinidad, Haiti, etc. Distinguish Cape Verdean from Portuguese; French Canadian from Canadian; and Dominican Republic from Dominica Island.

A religious group should not be reported as a person's ancestry.

Notes

¹ This discussion assumes that the men were married with spouse present, and were not of Spanish origin.

² Native Americans include those who identified themselves as American Indians, Aleuts, or Eskimos.

³ This statement assumes that the men were married with spouse present, were not of Spanish origin, and were white.

⁴ On the basis of the 1970 census question about parents' birthplaces, it appears that 21% of the 1980 population aged 65 and over had a foreign-born parent. Among those aged 25 to 34 in 1980, perhaps as few as 6% were of foreign or mixed parentage (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1973b, Table 1).

⁵ In 1970 the percentages of population with at least one foreign-born parent, by region, were northeast, 20%; midwest, 11%; south, 4%; west, 14% (U. S. Bureau of the Census 1973b, Table 1)

⁶ The Census Bureau's analysis of data quality following the 1980 enumeration did not repeat the ancestry question, but the 1986 National Content Test included it. The question was asked again two months later in reinterviews with the occupants of approximately 12,000 households. Afro-Americans, Mexicans, and Italians had low indexes of inconsistency and low outflow rates, meaning that much more than a majority of people who originally reported one of these ethnicities repeated it in the reinterview. Indexes of inconsistency were relatively low for Poles, Norwegians, and Swedes, but even among these, about one-quarter of those who gave one term reported something else when reinterviewed two months later. Consistency of reporting was much less among the descendants of those whose ancestors arrived before the Civil War. There was little consistency in the reporting of American because 86% of those who originally gave this term reported a different ancestry at reinterview.

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