

Ian Haney López

*Race on the 2010 census:  
Hispanics & the shrinking white majority*

At our country's founding, we made race the constitutional test for those capable of self-government. Our nation's organic document allocated congressional seats among the states in proportion to "the whole Number of free Persons . . . excluding Indians not taxed [and] three fifths of all other Persons."<sup>1</sup> The Constitution then commanded that a census divine those racial numbers every ten years. From its first enumeration in 1790, the decennial census formed part of the process by which the racial state elaborated itself and society, race and democracy.

In the two centuries plus since, every census has tabulated the number of "white" persons in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The original Constitution clearly envi-

sioned a polity comprised of whites – they would be, as the Census Bureau put it in 1852, "the governing race."<sup>3</sup> And whites have remained politically, economically, and socially dominant, notwithstanding the Reconstruction amendments that ended the explicit allocation of political representation along racial lines. The modern census shows that by almost every relevant sociological measure, whites continue to occupy the superior position in American society.

But a demographic revolution is underway, partly as a result of a long history of U.S. expansion, colonial incursions, and gunboat diplomacy throughout the Western Hemisphere. Latin Americans for several decades have composed the largest immigrant group

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1 U.S. Const., art. I, § 2, cl. 3.

2 Melissa Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 28, 44. The 1850 and 1860 censuses constitute partial exceptions: "white" did not appear on the census schedule, but enumerators were instructed "in all cases where a person is white [to] leave the space blank."

3 Quoted in Clara E. Rodríguez, *Changing Race: Latinos, the Census, and the History of Ethnicity in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 76.

in the United States, and this trend will continue, if not accelerate. Not even closing the border would significantly disrupt this development. Domestic births currently outpace immigration as the primary source of Latino population growth, with births to Hispanic mothers outnumbering all other deliveries combined in bellwether California. The U.S. Latino population increased 58 percent between 1990 and 2000, and this group, the largest minority in the country, now accounts for more than one of every eight Americans.<sup>4</sup> The Census Bureau conservatively estimates that by 2020 Latinos will number 17 percent of the country.

What, then, of the white population in 2020? The Census Bureau projects that whites will still constitute a comfortable majority at 79 percent. But it gets this figure only by including 'Hispanic whites,' those Latinos who identify as racially white on the census. Without those Latino millions, the Bureau estimates that in the next fifteen years whites will fall to just sixty-four of every hundred Americans.<sup>5</sup>

So there it is: if Latinos are not counted as white, then whites within a few years will barely comprise three-fifths of all Americans, and not too long after that, probably before 2050, a numerical minority.

4 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *The Hispanic Population: Census 2000 Brief* (May 2001), 2.

5 The population projections are taken from U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Projections Program, Population Division, *Projections of the Resident Population by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Nativity: Middle Series, 2016 to 2020* <<http://www.census.gov/population/projections/nation/summary/np-t5-3.tx>> (accessed January 13, 2000), and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports: Population Projections of the United States by Age, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1995 to 2050* (1996), 13.

This tectonic shift heralds more than a mere decline in relative numbers. The increasingly nonwhite population brings real pressure to bear on the advantages previously reserved for whites. Observe electoral politics, where the major parties increasingly see their futures bound up in attracting Hispanic votes. Or consider cultural politics and Sam Huntington's most recent screed decrying the threat ostensibly posed by Latino immigrants to our alleged "core Anglo-Protestant culture."<sup>6</sup> And then there are the structural concerns, like the distribution of wealth and economic power; access to employment, government benefits, and health care; and patterns of residential and school segregation. Swelling Latino numbers make each of these potential flash points of conflict, with even greater strife looming in the future as an increasingly brown workforce shoulders the burden of supporting a predominantly white retired class.

One thing is clear: the declining percentage of whites in America imperils continued white dominance. This may sound like good news to those otherwise dedicated to ending racial hierarchy. But for those comfortable with the status quo, and for those who recognize that change often brings conflict, there's cause to worry. The "governing race" is in jeopardy – depending, partly, on how Latinos are counted.

During the nineteenth century, most whites regarded Latin Americans as mongrels debased by their mixture of Spanish and Native American (and sometimes African and Asian) blood. The perception that Hispanics were racially inferior buttressed and was in turn encouraged by Manifest Destiny,

6 Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

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the Monroe Doctrine, and U.S. expansion into Latin America. Yet paradoxically, conquest and colonialism also led the United States to categorize Latinos officially as white. When the United States annexed Mexico's northern half in the mid-1800s, and again when it claimed sovereignty over Puerto Rico at century's end, Congress preferred to grant citizenship to supposed inferiors rather than to transform the United States into an explicitly imperial power ruling over subjugated peoples. The net effect was an official presumption that Latin Americans were white, combined with state policies and popular beliefs that treated them as racial failures.

Prior to 1930, census takers followed the official presumption of whiteness, counting Latin Americans as white.<sup>7</sup> But the early twentieth century saw increasing antagonism toward the foreign-born, just as immigration from Mexico surged. In 1924, Congress instituted administrative changes to curtail Mexican migration, effectively creating the modern border patrol. Legal Mexican immigration that had previously averaged almost sixty thousand persons a year dropped to three thousand in 1931. In this xenophobic context, the Census Bureau in 1930 classified Mexicans as a distinct non-white race. This classification helped legitimize federal and state expulsion campaigns between 1931 and 1935 that forced

7 On the census and Hispanics, see generally Rodríguez, *Changing Race*; Sharon M. Lee, "Racial Classifications in the U.S. Census, 1890–1990," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16 (1) (1993): 75–94, esp. 75, 78; Jorge Chapa, "Hispanic/Latino Ethnicity and Identifiers," in Margo J. Anderson, ed., *Encyclopedia of the U.S. Census* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2000); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790–1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970–1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States* (September 2002), table 1.

almost half a million Mexican residents – nationals and U.S. citizens alike – south across the border.

Intense lobbying by Mexican Americans and the Mexican government, as well as the executive branch's desire to secure alliances in the face of impending war in Europe, led the Census Bureau to reverse course in 1940. For the next thirty years, census takers classified Mexican Americans and, after 1950, Puerto Ricans as white, unless they appeared to be "definitely . . . Negro, Indian, or some other race." Even so, the census continued to collect data on Mexican Americans as a distinct population. In 1940, the Bureau counted persons who reported Spanish as their mother tongue; in 1950, it began disaggregating "white persons of Spanish surname."<sup>8</sup> Also in 1950, it began collecting data on persons who identified Puerto Rico as their birthplace.

Under pressure from Latino groups, President Nixon in 1970 ordered that the census include a national question about Hispanic ethnicity. Because millions of questionnaires had already been printed without this item, the Bureau included it only on the long form, asking the 5 percent who received this more detailed questionnaire to choose whether their "origin or descent" was Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish. The 1980 census was the first to ask all persons whether they were of "Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent." In doing so, it formally adopted the practice of conceptualizing Hispanics in ethnic terms, separating this item from the question about race.

Coincidentally, in 1980 the Bureau for the first time shifted from having census takers make racial determinations to asking respondents to classify them-

8 Rodríguez, *Changing Race*, 102.

selves. The combination of self-reporting plus the new Hispanic ethnicity item produced a startling result: the numbers in the “other race” category, a fixture of every census since 1910, virtually exploded, increasing tenfold. In 1980, more than 7.5 million persons listed themselves under the “other race” designation – and they were almost all Latinos.

The Census Bureau, studying these numbers, concluded that the difference between ethnicity and race confused Hispanics. In another 1980 innovation, the Bureau attempted to distance itself from racial categorization by eliding explicit references to race, asking obliquely “Is this person \_\_\_?” and providing options like “white” and “black” before ending with “Other – specify.” Reversing course, in 1990 the Bureau made sure those considering “other” got that it meant race. Under “Race” neatly printed in boldface, the census worked “race” into the “other” option *four* times: “If other race, print race” the form commanded, with an arrow to a blank box, under which the form repeated for emphasis, “Other race (print race).”

Not only did the “other race” figure not decline, it increased – and by a lot. The number of racial others jumped by 45 percent between 1980 and 1990, making that category the second-fastest-growing racial group in the country. Again Latinos drove the increase: 97.5 percent of those choosing “other race” identified as Hispanics, while the proportion of Latinos opting for the “other race” designation rose to 43 percent. But the Bureau refused to be defeated. In both 1980 and 1990, the Hispanic question was the seventh item on the short form, well after the race question at number four. Perhaps the order and lack of propinquity proved just too confounding. In 2000, the Bureau put the Hispanic query immediately before the

race question and upped the number of references to race in the latter item by yet one more. The proportion of Latinos choosing the “other race” category finally declined – but only from 43 to 42.2 percent. Again, Latinos represented 97 percent of that category.

The census uses the “other race” category as a reserve, a catchall for outliers. It does not treat those who identify as “other” as a distinct group, but instead disaggregates them by imputing their numbers to the remaining races following a complicated formula. This approach worked well when “other” actually functioned as a residual category, but since 1980, “other” has become a Latino phenomenon. Virtually all persons choosing “other” are Hispanic, and this group now constitutes 6 percent of the nation’s population. More than one in twenty Americans is a Latino who describes him or herself as racially “other” on the census.

It is not likely that the large number of Hispanics choosing “other” are rebelling against race altogether. Admittedly, data from 1990 show that many Hispanics in fact left the race item blank – but this still came to only about 4.5 percent of Latino respondents, a far smaller group than that which identifies as “other.” No, it’s emphatically the case that consistently almost half of all U.S. Latinos believe they’re members of a race that’s not white, black, Native American, Asian, or Pacific Islander – the principal choices on the census. But if so, what race are they? And how should the census treat this group?

**L**atinos may be divided into three racial camps.<sup>9</sup> First, there are black Hispanics, who identify as Latino ethnically

9 This discussion draws on census data analysis from John R. Logan, *How Race Counts for Hispanic Americans* (Albany, N.Y.: Lewis Mum-

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and as black racially. This group, steady at just under 3 percent of the Latino population since 1980, numbers almost a million in the United States. Next come white Hispanics, who grew from 9 million in 1980 to just shy of 18 million in 2000. This doubling did not, however, keep pace with the growth of the Latino population as a whole; the proportion of Latinos claiming to be white has steadily declined, from 64 percent in 1980, to 54 percent in 1990, to just fewer than 50 percent in 2000.

Then there are Latino Hispanics, who identify as Hispanic on the ethnicity question and as “other” on the race item, most often writing in “Latino,” “Hispanic,” or a national origin term. This population has steadily gained among all Latinos, from 34 percent in 1980, to 44 percent in 1990, to 47 percent in 2000 – just shy of the number who identify as white Hispanics. It’s these nearly seventeen million respondents, Hispanics who claim Latino not only as an ethnicity but also as a race, who cause the Census Bureau so much consternation.

Latino Hispanics actively consider themselves a race. And their numbers may be much greater than the “other” category indicates. The census numbers imply that slightly fewer Latinos think they’re racially distinct than consider themselves white. But a major survey, using more intensive questioning, strongly suggests that in fact a significant majority of Latinos believe they’re a race, while only one in five identifies as white and a much smaller number claim to be black.<sup>10</sup>

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ford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, University at Albany), July 14, 2003.

10 Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002 *National Survey of Latinos*, Summa-

Black, white, and Latino are not the only racial identities embraced by Hispanics, but they are the principal ones (in the 2000 census, 1.2 percent identified as American Indian, and 0.3 percent as Asian). These primary racial identities correspond to important differences among Hispanics, for example in nativity and language. Racial differences among Hispanics also shape life chances as measured by income, employment, poverty, and segregation. Along all four measures, a gradient traces the positions of Hispanics, with white and black marking the extremes, and Latino Hispanics consistently in between. For instance, in 2000 the unemployment rate rose from 8 percent for white Hispanics, to 9.5 percent for Latino Hispanics, to 12.3 percent for black Hispanics – which exceeded the black unemployment rate of 11 percent. Similarly, the proportion of persons living below the poverty level rose from less than a quarter of white Hispanics to nearly a third of black Hispanics – again exceeding the rate for non-Hispanic blacks. One demographer argues that racial dissimilarities among Latinos may be so great that “there are now better reasons to classify black Hispanics as black than as Hispanic.”<sup>11</sup>

With so many Latinos thinking of themselves as a race, and yet with race dividing Hispanics so powerfully, how should the census count Latinos? Kenneth Prewitt has suggested one solution:

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*ry of Findings* (December 2002), 31. “What race do you consider yourself to be?” Posing this and a series of follow-up questions to nearly three thousand Latinos, this survey found that 56 percent of Hispanics consider themselves racially Latino, while only 20 percent accept a white racial identity.

11 Logan, *How Race Counts for Hispanic Americans*, 10.



First, combine the race and ethnicity questions in a format that allows respondents to select more than one option. Second, follow up the race and ethnicity item with a question encouraging respondents to specify their ancestry, nationality, ethnic origin, and/or tribal affiliation.<sup>12</sup>

The modern census collects personal data for two principal reasons: to track the changing lives of our country's residents and to facilitate effective governance. For the latter, an accurate census plays various roles. But chief among these governmental functions is amassing the statistics necessary to enforce and measure the efficacy of civil rights laws.

These fundamental purposes provide a basis against which to judge proposed changes to how the census counts races. Measured this way, Prewitt's suggestion promises a dramatic improvement. Those Latinos who think of themselves in separate ethnic and racial terms – as white or black Hispanics – could indicate this by marking multiple categories. Their sense that Hispanic constitutes an ethnicity would be preserved, while they could also identify racially as they wish. At the same time, racial Latinos who under the current bifurcated census system identify as racially “other” could mark “Hispanic” alone to signal that this constitutes both their ethnic and racial identity.

In terms of sociological accuracy, creating a taxonomy in which virtually all Latinos can locate themselves racially would constitute a major advance. No longer would the census disregard the 6 percent of Americans who consider themselves racially Latino.<sup>13</sup> Moreover,

12 See Kenneth Prewitt in this issue of *Dædalus*.

13 In 1996 the Census Bureau studied the effect of combining the race and ethnicity items

comparability should remain high for all racial groups (save, of course, for the “other race” and the new Latino race categories), since the choose-one-or-more option ensures that race and ethnicity will remain complements rather than become mutually exclusive. Thus, no one would be forced to choose between, for instance, identifying as Hispanic or white. Finally and importantly, because race and ethnicity are already effectively fungible under antidiscrimination law, combining these questions on the census would not have a deleterious effect on civil rights enforcement.

But perhaps the real promise of Prewitt's proposal lies in joining the race and ethnicity item with a subsequent question on nationality, ancestry, ethnic origin, and/or tribal affiliation.

Despite its various drawbacks, the census short form actually gathers racial and ethnic data in a manner that allows a more sophisticated parsing of Latinos than of other groups. Hispanics under the current system can be disaggregated along lines of race and national origin, providing insight into significant differences within that group. As we've seen, Hispanic lives differ dramatically in ways that correspond to whether individuals identify as racially white, black, or Latino. Similarly, national origin drives profound sociological differences among Latinos; the census shows, for example, that 36 percent of Dominicans but only half that proportion of Cubans

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while simultaneously allowing respondents to pick more than one identity. One result was that the number of Hispanics identifying as white fell to 13.7 percent; another was that the number choosing “other race” plummeted to 0.4 percent. Charles Hirschman, Richard Alba, and Reynolds Farley, “The Meaning and Measurement of Race in the US Census: Glimpses into the Future,” *Demography* 37 (2000): 381, 389.

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live below the poverty line in the United States. In this intragroup diversity, Latinos are entirely typical. No racial group is internally homogenous; whites, blacks, Native Americans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders all vary along internal fault lines.

Race is comprised by various forms of social differentiation, including nationality, ancestry, ethnic origin, tribal affiliation, and, I would add, color. In turn, these overlapping forms of identity establish internal differences and, often, hierarchies within racial groups. Yet the census captures such variation poorly with respect to Latinos, with still less accuracy for Asians and Native Americans, and not at all for whites and blacks. The most egregious omission is color, a crucial component in shaping how race is experienced. Without a question on color, the census can hardly hope to measure, even remotely, the full impact of race on American lives.

The census should move toward greater refinement in collecting racial data by following Prewitt's suggestion and asking each person not only a race and ethnicity question, but also a follow-up on national origin, ethnic background, ancestry, and/or tribal affiliation. And it should also have a question on color. I do not mean one whose answer would require a literal skin color test, such as a melanin count. Color here means somatic details that translate in racially significant ways – hair color and texture, facial features, skin tone, and so on. Few studies have tracked the influence of color on intragroup differences among minorities, and no study that I know of examines color among whites. Yet existing studies confirm a remarkably consistent and pernicious dynamic: light color correlates to privilege, dark to disadvantage.

Were the census to track socioeconomic position, education, homeowner-

ship, and so forth in terms of race supplemented by color, the results would be truly eye-opening. Indeed, they would almost surely force not only a major reconsideration of what we mean by racism in the United States, but also an overhaul of civil rights laws, which, as they stand, ineffectively respond to color discrimination.<sup>14</sup> And measuring color wouldn't be all that difficult to do. A census color item could elicit self-descriptions (“Would you describe your skin color and features as very dark, dark, medium, light, or very light?”), or it could rely on interviewer evaluations of the sort developed in psychology studies. Whether in terms of sociological insight or effective civil rights laws, gathering data on not only race but also color would greatly improve current practices.

But let's be clear: the census isn't going to gather data on color anytime soon. Indeed, it's much more likely to bow to pressure in the other direction and eliminate questions on race entirely. George Will recently insisted that “because Hispanics have supplanted blacks as America's largest minority, it is time to remove the race question from the census form. This would . . . fuel the wholesome revolt against the racial and ethnic spoils system that depends on racial and ethnic categorizations.”<sup>15</sup> Which should remind us: the census remains just as much a weapon in struggles over race now as in 1790 or 1930. Technical arguments about census reform should not blind us to this larger reality.

14 See generally Taunya Banks, “Colorism: A Darker Shade of Pale,” *UCLA Law Review* 47 (2000): 1705–1746; Trina Jones, “Shades of Brown: The Law of Skin Color,” *Duke Law Journal* 49 (2000): 1487–1557.

15 George F. Will, “Race, Now an Anachronism,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 5, 2003.

No one believes that today's census officials crudely calculate the best way to bend their power in the service of racial supremacy. Just the opposite, many census technocrats embrace the census's civil rights role and would fight to preserve it. Nevertheless, racial politics will inform, directly and indirectly, the academic discussions, intense lobbying, administrative wrangling, and executive and congressional politicking that will ultimately shape the 2010 census. And so we return to where this essay began, for surely a looming question behind the maneuvering is this: will Latinos and other minorities soon swamp the white race?

One response is to obfuscate any demographic change. Nathan Glazer's recent proposal to end the collection of racial data regarding all groups but blacks can certainly be read in this light. With only blacks counted, and that population steady at about 12 percent, whites would implicitly remain the overwhelming majority. "Underlying the proposal [is] an ideological or political position," Glazer admits, "that it is necessary and desirable to recognize and encourage the ongoing assimilation of the many strands that make up the American people."<sup>16</sup> Does he not mean, on some level, that ceasing to count non-black minorities is desirable because it would superficially fold them into and thus perpetuate a majority that is implicitly white?

Glazer does not make this argument, instead defending his proposal by pointing to the census's symbolic role: "The census contains a message to the American people, and like any message it educates to some end: It tells them that the government thinks the most important

thing about them is their race and ethnicity."<sup>17</sup> A census without these items presumably would convey Glazer's preferred message that the government thinks race and ethnicity unimportant. It's certainly true that the census implicitly communicates a state-sanctioned understanding of race, and that reformers should weigh the symbolic aspects of racial data collection. But largely eliminating race from the census, as Glazer proposes, would hamstring the government's ability to measure life chances or enforce civil rights laws – that is, would defeat the modern census's central purposes. Communicating a preferred racial message can hardly justify this result. Does Glazer really think we should overthrow racial counting and all that it achieves in both telling us about and improving life in the United States, because it suggests to Americans that race matters?

But Glazer also adduces another argument: the "irrationality" of the census categories. "Are there really so many races in Asia that each country should consist of a single and different race, compared to simply 'white' for all of Europe and the Middle East?" he asks.<sup>18</sup> By irrational does Glazer mean incoherent? If so, what else would one expect of a set of ideas and practices formed over centuries through the clash of competing social forces? The different treatment the census accords the Asian and white races doesn't represent some intellectual failing among census bureaucrats or, as Glazer later implies, the wily machinations of self-interested minorities. It reflects instead changes in U.S. racial ideology during the first half of the twentieth century, when newly closed borders and the exigencies of the Great

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16 Nathan Glazer, "Do We Need the Census Race Question?" *Public Interest* (Fall 2002): 21, 23.

17 *Ibid.*, 22.

18 *Ibid.*, 23.



Depression and World War II separated for whites but not for others the previously conjoined notions of race and nation, resulting in the monolithic white identity we're familiar with today.<sup>19</sup>

"The concept of race," the Census Bureau explained in defining that term in 1950, "is derived from that which is commonly accepted by the general public."<sup>20</sup> The census has always relied on culturally rooted concepts in measuring the impress of race – and after 1950, even the Bureau recognized this to be so. Glazer mistakes an increasingly commonplace insight for a compelling critique: that race is socially constructed does not amount to an argument that it should be jettisoned. The census has no choice but to rely on incoherent categories if it hopes to measure race in the United States – not because Bureau technocrats are incapable of designing commensurate categories, but because race arises out of (fundamentally irrational) social practices.

Glazer's arguments, taken at face value, are quite weak. He would be far more convincing if he opposed the census's use of race by forthrightly addressing its principal justifications, explaining directly why he thinks it no longer important to document race's social impact, or why he believes the census should no longer concern itself with assisting in or measuring the efficacy of civil rights laws. But despite their inanity, the sorts of arguments Glazer makes are

19 See Mathew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

20 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of the Population: 1950, Population Characteristics of the Population* (1953), vol. 2, pt. 1, 35.

increasingly popular. I suspect calls for eliminating race from the census gain traction not on their merits but because they resonate with an emergent racial ideology – color blindness.

Invoking the early civil rights movement's formal antiracism, color blindness calls for a principled refusal to recognize race in public life. This ideology espouses a deep commitment to ending racial hierarchy, but in fact wages war not so much against white dominance as against the idea that white dominance persists. By rejecting all race-conscious government action, even that designed to end subordination, color blindness prevents the state from addressing structural racial inequality. Moreover, by eschewing all talk of race, color blindness forecloses debate regarding racism's continuing vitality. Color blindness protects racial supremacy from both political intervention and social critique.

Despite this, or rather because of it, color blindness is rapidly gaining as the most powerful way of (not) seeing race in America. Let's be clear, then, about its political and racial valences: color blindness is powerfully conservative, by which I mean that as a current practice (rather than as a distant ideal) it conserves the racial status quo. And in this, it takes on a racial cast, inasmuch as preserving the present works best for those currently racially dominant. In short, whatever its antiracist pretensions, color blindness primarily serves the political and racial interests of whites.

It should come as no surprise that color blindness and concern over the Hispanic presence sometimes merge, as Ward Connerly recently demonstrated. Connerly, the prime backer of the voter initiative that ended affirmative action in California, recently campaigned for what he termed the Racial Privacy Initia-

tive, which would have prohibited California from collecting racial data. He vociferously promoted the initiative, which lost, as a step toward color blindness. But in a less guarded moment, he also admitted that he intended through the initiative to prevent Latinos from claiming the status of racial minorities. "In California," Connerly explained to a *Washington Post* reporter, "those of Mexican descent will soon be a majority. . . . They want to see affirmative action policies remain so they can take advantage of them. They want to claim minority status when, in fact, they will soon be a majority in California. They want to hide behind the term 'Latino' and 'people of color,' but most of them check the white box [on the census form] anyway."<sup>21</sup>

At the precise historical moment when race has become a tool for undoing racism and when, in addition, the nonwhite population seems finally poised to surpass the white group, color blindness has emerged as a new racial ideology. Its adherents wield it mainly to forestall any recognition of, or response to, racism's deep and continuing legacy. In the context of Latino demographics and racial counting, however, its partisans see in color blindness a means of obscuring the rapidly approaching shift from a white-majority to a white-minority country.

Calls for a nostrum in which the census abandons racial categories should be regarded with strong suspicion. Certainly not everyone who argues that the census should abandon race proceeds from a commitment to freezing current hierarchies. But even among those who do not espouse color blindness, opposing the census's use of race entails an implicit disregard for the role race plays in

21 Quoted in Darryl Fears, "California Activist Seeks End to Identification by Race," *The Washington Post*, July 5, 2003, A1.

skewing life chances, and for the utility of civil rights laws in ameliorating racism. So long as racism strongly persists in the United States, race deserves a central place on the census.

Some opponents of racial counting, including Glazer, urge the Census Bureau to replace race with another concept, for instance ancestry or ethnicity.<sup>22</sup> Such alternatives necessarily operate not as full proxies for but in tension with race, and would produce distorted census data. What does ancestry mean for blacks in the United States, for instance, when they have been stripped of family and ancestral history? How do whites conceive of ethnicity, when identities like Irish and Italian returned to vogue only recently in response to black gains during the civil rights movement? The census asks people to identify themselves. If we want to know about race, then the census must pose its questions in terms that respondents will recognize easily as racial. Technocrats and somatologists may entertain themselves with new or substitute constructs, but the census can only gather data effectively if it uses a broadly intelligible vocabulary. To gather racial data, the census must ask directly about race – there is no other way.

Our country faces dramatic racial change on two fronts, one demographic and the other ideological. The increasing Latino numbers and the spreading politics of color blindness make it difficult to discern the racial future. Nevertheless,

22 Glazer, "Do We Need the Census Race Question?" 23. See also David Hollinger in this issue of *Dædalus*, as well as American Anthropological Association, "American Anthropological Association Response to OMB Directive 15: Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting" (September 1997), <[www.aaanet.org/gvt/ombdraft.htm](http://www.aaanet.org/gvt/ombdraft.htm)>.

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two things are clear. First, we're in a moment of dramatic racial flux. Race will surely look profoundly different in 2050, and maybe even as soon as 2020.

Second, the census will have a central role in this racial revolution. Partly and importantly, as racial ideas evolve over the next decades, the census will help us track whether racial inequality diminishes or increases. But the census will do more than measure society; over the next decades, it will directly foster racial change. How the census counts race in 2010 will shape conceptions of race in 2020 and so on into the future, making the census itself an important battleground. The racial questions asked by the census reflect triumphs and defeats in this society's long engagement with racism – sometimes in battles fought immediately over the census and its racial data collection. Debates about the 2010 census must forthrightly engage the larger racial dynamics in which the census, for good or ill, remains deeply embedded.