



NEWS RELEASE

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Census Bureau Proposed Combined Race and Ethnicity Question Offers Best Option for Improving Data on Latinos

Approach offers promise for collecting more accurate data on Hispanic origin and race, but some questions still remain

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund today released a [policy brief](#) outlining support for the U.S. Census Bureau utilizing a new approach to the collection of race and ethnicity data in Census 2020.

As part of its effort to increase the reliability and response rates to census questionnaires, the Census Bureau continuously examines the format and wording of the Hispanic origin and race questions. Through these examinations, the Bureau has recognized a growing mismatch between the specific categories set forth in the race question and the ways in which many Latinos express their racial and ethnic background.

In the 2010 Census, the questionnaire reflected a “two separate question” approach to obtaining responses on Hispanic origin and race. The questionnaire first asked individuals to indicate whether or not they were of Hispanic origin, followed by a separate question asking respondents to indicate their race ([illustrated on figure 1 of page 2](#)).

The separate question approach used in the 2010 Census resulted in many issues unique to Latino respondents, including the following:

- **Latinos are likely to select “some other race” in a separate question format:** The Bureau consistently found that Latinos account for nearly all of the people who do not report themselves as belonging to any of the listed race categories. More than 43 percent of Latinos chose “Some other race” or did not answer the separate race question on the 2010 decennial Census
- **“Some other race” issue continues to grow:** Between 2000 and 2010, the population that reported being of “some other race” grew by one-quarter. By 2010, six percent of all decennial Census respondents – 19.1 million people – identified themselves as “Some other race,” and 97 percent of those 19.1 million individuals were Latino.
- **Ethnic/national origin and race are intertwined for many Latinos:** Of those who chose “Some other race” and wrote in the race with which they identified, an overwhelming majority indicated they were “Mexican,” “Hispanic,” “Latin American,”

or “Puerto Rican,” which suggests they did not identify with the specific racial groups set forth in the separate race question.

- **Data consistency and accuracy threatened as a result of question format:** Because the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) race categories do not include “Some other race,” the Bureau implements a procedure to assign an OMB-approved race to those checking “Some other race” in response to the Census question.

For the past decade, the U.S. Census Bureau has conducted extensive testing through the 2010 Alternate Questionnaire Assessment (AQE) and the 2015 National Content Test (NCT) to address many of these issues. The Census Bureau’s research appears to demonstrate that a single combined question on race and ethnicity, accompanied by detailed checkboxes, best addresses the foregoing issues.

NALEO Educational Fund agrees with the Bureau’s careful assessment on the benefits of this approach (illustrated in figure 2 of page 5) for a number of reasons, including:

- **Nonresponses and “Some other race” responses decline dramatically with combined question:** Extensive testing has repeatedly shown dramatically lower nonresponse and “Some other race” response rates to a combined question rather than to separate questions.
- **Benefits found for Latinos, regardless of the medium or language used for responses:** AQE and NCT testing confirmed that a combined question resulted in lower nonresponse rates regardless of whether the questionnaire was filled out online or via paper form, or whether respondents used English or Spanish-language questionnaires.
- **Latinos are more comfortable reporting Latino ethnicity via combined approach:** Latino respondents were more likely overall to report a Latino ethnicity in response to a combined question than to the separate questions race and Hispanic origin question format.
- **Positive effects of the new approach confirmed by focus groups with Latinos:** Focused interviews with individuals supported the Bureau’s contention that combined question formats are a better approach to eliciting how Latinos define themselves.
- **High rewards, low risk for question change in Census 2020:** Results indicate that the adoption of a combined question format will not result in the loss of any necessary data, including data on Latinos who identify with more than one major race or ethnic group. For example, the Census Bureau found that there was no difference in the rates of Latinos who indicated Afro-Latino identity whether they were responding to separate or combined questions. The design proposed by the Bureau also shows promise for collecting more accurate and nuanced data on Latinos who identify with more than one Hispanic national origin or sub-group.

While NALEO Educational Fund is confident that a single question about race and ethnicity can obtain optimally detailed and accurate responses from Latinos, we recognize that outstanding issues remain to be addressed by the Census Bureau and other government agencies responsible for federal data collection. These issues relate to the manner in which the Bureau presents and tabulates the data derived from the combined question; the comparability of these data to historical data derived from the two separate questions approach; and the fact that the combined

question still includes a “some other race, ethnicity, or origin” category, which raised continuing issues with regard to the comparability of Census data and the OMB race and ethnicity standards. While research suggests that the number of respondents who choose the “some other race, ethnicity, or origin” category will decrease significantly with the combined question approach, the Bureau should closely examine the characteristics of respondents who chose this category to inform its future data compilation efforts.

The re-design of the Census questions on Hispanic origin and race will only produce more accurate data if Latinos participate in Census 2020 and fill out their questionnaires in an informed manner. It will be critical that the Census Bureau conduct and help coordinate robust outreach during Census 2020 to ensure that Latinos understand what is likely to be a new design for the collection of Hispanic origin and race data.

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About NALEO Educational Fund

NALEO Educational Fund is the nation's leading non-partisan, non-profit organization that facilitates the full participation of Latinos in the American political process, from citizenship to public service.