



*The Harold Hodgkinson Lecture*  
*2022*

**Census 2020, Racial Demographic Trends,  
and Narratives of Interpretation**

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## **Introduction**

THE HODGKINSON LECTURE was established by the Kettering Foundation in 2017 to recognize the many contributions of Harold “Bud” Hodgkinson to education, our nation’s democracy, and Kettering’s mission to make democracy work as it should. To recognize his contributions to the foundation, we created the lecture as a way of paying tribute to one of our country’s most insightful, witty, and perceptive scholars.

Hodgkinson was a rigorous and prolific scholar and a lifelong advocate for advancing education for everyone. When he died in 2016, his wife, Virginia Hodgkinson, wrote in the *Washington Post*, “He wanted educators and employers to realize that this increasingly diverse population, by race and nationality, necessitated structural changes throughout our education institutions and the workplace.” Hodgkinson held numerous leadership positions on higher education and foundation boards.

The fourth Hodgkinson Lecture was delivered on June 15, 2022 by Dr. Dowell Myers, a specialist in urban growth and societal change, with expertise as a planner and urban demographer. Appearing here is an edited version of Dr. Myers’s talk and highlights of the ensuing discussion. A brief biography of the speaker appears at the end of the document.

**John Dedrick:** Good morning, everybody. On behalf of the Kettering Foundation, our president, Sharon Davies, all my colleagues and our associates, it's an honor to introduce Dr. Dowell Myers, who is the director of the Population Dynamics Research Group in the Price School of Public Policy at the University of Southern California, where he is also a professor. His experience and his work underscore a line in his bio: Dr. Myers is "a champion of future-oriented research that helps inform better decisions today."

We've asked him today to focus some of his remarks on issues that have been front and center in the 2020 census. These include the challenges of conducting the count in the context of the pandemic restrictions, social activism, and movements on racial equity and heightened partisan conflict over who and how to count America.

The trends in changing racial demographics and the competing narratives about these changes can be used to contribute to or counter narratives focused on the nation's divisiveness and polarization.

These are things that Dr. Myers will address. He'll offer his comments, and then we'll have time for discussion and questions. Dr. Myers, thank you for joining the foundation staff and our associates today.

**Dowell Myers:** I'm deeply honored to be invited to give this lecture. I've really put more effort into it because of the audience I know is here. And I'm strongly looking forward to the discussion afterwards. I hope to take away some lessons to share with my research team.

I just will say that, in my background, I'm interdisciplinary. I'm a demographer of long standing, but I'm also an urban planner. And urban planners have on-the-ground experience dealing with citizens. We're at the very nexus between private property and government regulation. Planning theory is a rich topic area within planning. I've taught that in the past also. But I have a people-oriented demographic foundation, which, along with planning, is future-oriented.

And I have one more advantage. Coming from California, I've seen a lot of these things already happen here. California was really a big battleground over immigration and racial change back in the 1990s. It's like *déjà vu* all over again in many ways. I've gone to Washington to try to talk to people about it. But they don't want to take any lessons from California. They're going to make the same mistakes.

So let me see if I can share my presentation slides. I was given a broad mandate here to cover three topics. First, I just want to acknowledge my collaborators in the research I'm going to be referring to. Richard Alba, Karen Trapenberg Frick, Hyojung Lee, and Morris Levy all shared in different pieces that I'll be drawing upon. Citations to their work appear in Notes at the end of the presentation.

There are three broad questions, today, as suggested to me by Derek Barker. I very much appreciate my interactions with him in reaching out to help me craft my presentation for you.

First, what are the key trends or some key trends in racial demographics? Then, what were the major challenges in conducting the 2020 census, which has broad implications? And then, what are the key narratives that have emerged in public discourse about all this? This has been very much politicized for the last five years or more. So that's all tangled together here. And we're going to try to walk through it one step at a time, but I'll begin with a broad overview.

## **Fundamentals about the Census**

I want to start with some simple but, I think, fundamental and profound issues of importance about the decennial census. Let us not forget, the decennial census is a cornerstone of our democracy. This is how we apportion political power in America. That means that the census is politicized. People battle over undercounts and the like. They've been doing that my whole professional career. And it's getting more intense each decade, I would say.

The decennial census is also the cornerstone of the nation's demographic data system. The Census Bureau has a very elaborate set of additional surveys and other activities, and they're all benchmarked to the decennial count once a decade. From there, the bureau conducts annual updates from that benchmark. So the census really is very important, both politically and statistically. We reapportion and redistrict once a decade. What happens in the census now is going to shape us for a decade ahead.

One thing that is so remarkable in the census is that the measurement techniques keep evolving and have always been at the forefront of technology. The first computing machine in 1890 to tabulate mass data records was developed for the census. It's really been pushing the frontiers every decade since. And change seems to be happening more quickly from decade to decade now.

The complication is that neither the measuring sticks nor society can be held constant from decade to decade, so we're trying to look at changes over time. But the measuring sticks are changing and the reality is changing. Nonetheless, the once-a-decade decennial checkup is a welcome opportunity to reassess who we are as the American people and how we've changed. So these are the four fundamentals, I think, that are just inescapable. And they're intertwined with what I'm going to be talking about next.

## **Racial Changes Are a Priority Topic**

Extra attention is given to race in the census. These are among the first data that are released from each decade's count. Many people may not realize how the data are released in waves. The Census Bureau doesn't just dump all the data on one day, thankfully, because it takes time to digest so many facts.

The first data released are just the total population counts for each state, and they're required by December 31st of the census year (the target date for the count is April 1). After that, about four months later, we receive the data on racial makeup of the population for every location within states, down to small neighborhoods. These are part of the redistricting file and are necessary for redistricting within states (drawing the geographic areas used for political representation). After that we wait another six months for the next wave of more detailed data.

Right now, we're in the waiting period. All we have is race. We're waiting for more. What other data are there? Well, there are age groups, which are really crucial for the number of school kids and retirees, plus data on gender, households, household living arrangements, household formation, and home ownership. That's all part of the data that are coming in this next wave.

In the meantime, understandably, people focus heavily on either total population growth or race, and many people think the census is entirely about race because that's all we have in this early stage of release. This leads to some distortions because at the same time as we're becoming more diverse, we are aging inexorably—all of us and all of our families. That is a big factor that interacts with race. We don't have information about that interaction yet from the recent census, although we have estimates from other sources.

I'd like to point out that the news media are anxious to report news from the census. And the news they have, at this point, is really only total population growth and the changing racial makeup of the total population: who's growing, who's not growing, and how the racial mix is changing.

### ***Major Changes in Racial Measurement***

Any kind of abrupt changes that show up in the data will be seized upon by the press as news. But because we're changing the measuring sticks, as I mentioned earlier, sometimes those changes are due to the measurement as much as they are to the reality. The Census Bureau made a major change in the 2000 census where we allowed people to check "all categories that apply," when describing their race. This was in response to the rising numbers of mixed-race people, and allowed them to select racial identities

accrued through both their parents or earlier ancestors. As a result, racial summaries of the population are much more complex now. Both the measuring sticks and the reality have expanded. Race is not just a series of separate categories, nor is it a simple binary of White or “Other.” It never really was a simple binary. But the public often sees it that way: White or non-White. But really, there are five major race groups, all of which can be combined with each other on that census form and also combined with Hispanic origin in a separate question on the form. So that makes race a very complex mosaic to report. Data users can address different aspects of this racial change and tell different stories.

I’m going to first share a look at some racial trends without going into the changing categories. Then, we’ll talk about the changes. Let’s start with Exhibit 1, published with Morris Levy a few years ago.

Exhibit 1.

**Comparison of Exclusive and Inclusive Racial Tabulations**

	Alternate Classifications				
	Convenient Exclusive			Inclusive Identity	
	Number	Share of Total Population		Number	Share of Total Population
NH Whites alone	198,354	61.7%		All Whites	255,682 79.6%
NH Blacks alone	39,782	12.4%		All Blacks	46,126 14.4%
NH AIANs alone	2,359	0.7%		All AIANs	6,618 2.1%
NH Asians alone	16,978	5.3%		All Asians	20,534 6.4%
NH NHPIs alone	549	0.2%		All NHPIs	1,486 0.5%
NH multiple races	6,593	2.1%		—	
All Hispanics	56,754	17.7%		All Hispanics	56,754 17.7%
Sum	321,369	100.0%		Sum	387,200 120.5%
Total Pop.	321,369				

Numbers are in 1,000s

“**Convenient Exclusive**” categories: People who chose only a single racial or ethnic category

“**Inclusive Identity**” categories: People who chose more than one racial or ethnic category

“**NH**”: Non-Hispanic

“**Alone**”: Single race not in combination

“**All**”: Inclusive-defined categories containing members selecting this group alone or in combination with other groups

“**AIAN**”: American Indian and Alaska Native

“**NHPI**”: Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander

SOURCE: Dowell Myers and Morris Levy, “Racial Population Projections and Reactions to Alternative News Accounts of Growing Diversity,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* (2018).

This table shows that, at present, there are really two different ways to classify the racial data from the census. One alternative we call the “exclusive and convenient” way. It’s exclusive because each person is allowed one box and one box only. Even though we allowed everybody to check multiple boxes, if desired, we then sort them back into single boxes just for tabulation convenience, with all mixed-race people in a miscellaneous category of “multiple races.” This solution is convenient because we can track the trends from the past when we only had single choices, which all sum to a total of 100 percent, and which often appeals because it’s an easier and familiar story to tell.

However, Latinos—or Hispanics as the Census Bureau calls them—are also included in this racial tabulation but with their numbers maximized in the exclusive alternative count. Everybody who’s Hispanic is pulled out of the race categories and put in the Hispanic category in this exclusive tabulation (even though Latinos might also be Black or White or American Indian). So this Hispanic category is maximized in size, while the others are consequently reduced. NH here means non-Hispanic. And the term “alone” means single race. Some 198 million people checked off “White alone” and “non-Hispanic,” as shown in the top line here. So that’s the exclusive formatting of census results. And it adds up to 100 percent, which is very convenient if you want to divide people up in a pie chart.

But that’s not how people live their lives. Many people have dual identities or multiple identities. A more inclusive approach is to count people in all the categories in which they said they belonged. So if you said you were White and American Indian, well then we will count you twice, once as White and once as American Indian.

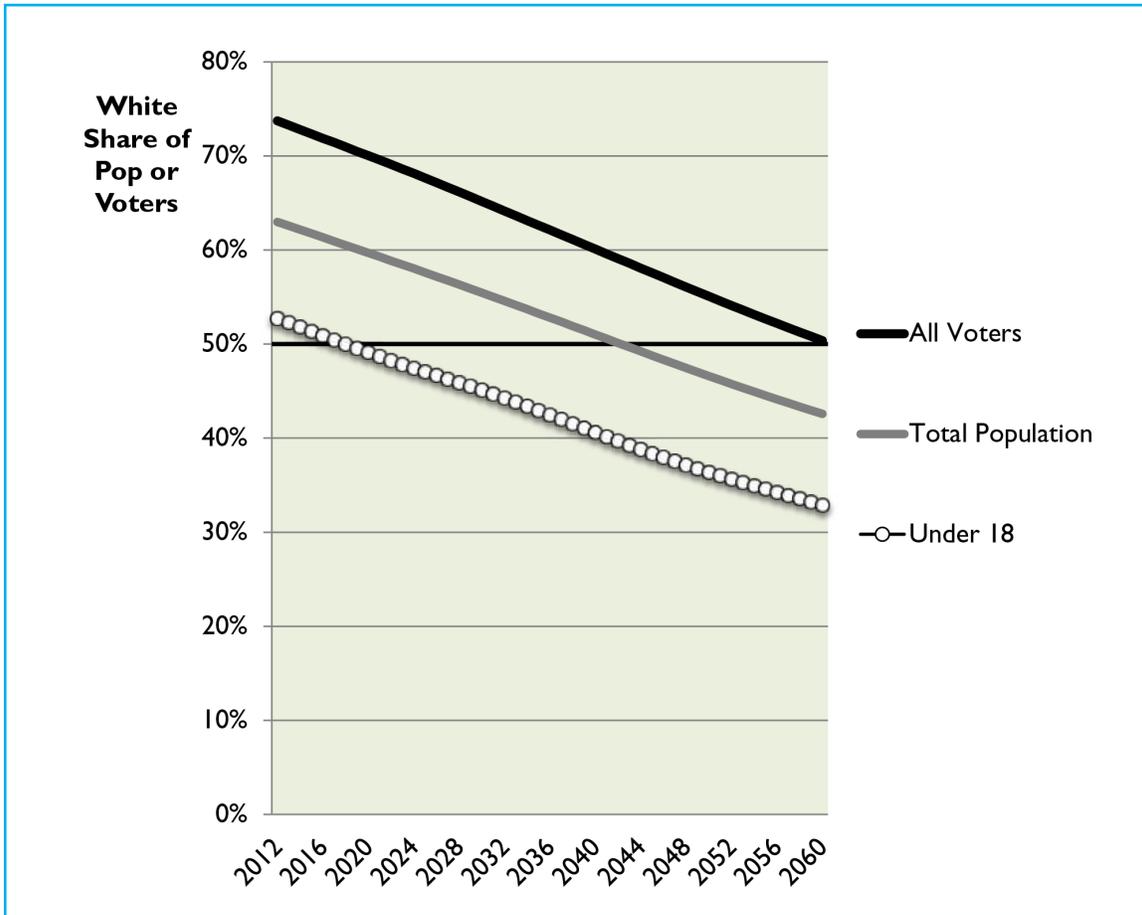
And that double counting leads to a total, which in the case of Exhibit 1 is 120 percent of the total. But it’s including all the people and all their identities. For American Indians, that makes a pretty big deal, because if that race is restricted to just non-Hispanic American Indian alone—that’s American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) in the table—you’d have some 2.3 million. That would be 0.7 percent of the total. But when you count them in all their variations, those who are also Hispanic or those who are also White or African American, you get triple the number. If you’re representing American Indians, you might tend to prefer a bigger number and wish to include those who are also in combination with other races or Hispanic origin. So that makes a big difference for them and less of a difference for Whites, who are the largest group.

There are two different ways to look at it. I maintain there is not one meaning of race or one approach. And that we really should maintain multiple approaches for different purposes. If you think of it that way, then you don’t have to choose which format to use for setting the racial categories. You just need to know that one format is good for one thing, and the other’s good for other types of analyses.

**Racial Trends Over the Decades**

What we are looking at next is a time trend showing the declining White share of the population. It's an exhibit prepared from a projection of racial numbers from the Census Bureau.

Exhibit 2.  
**Declining White Share of Population, Children, and Voters**



SOURCE: Dowell Myers, "Mutual Benefits and Equity Amid Racial Diversity: A Generational Strategy for Growing a Broader Base of Support for Social Equity," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 35, no. 3 (2015): 369-375.

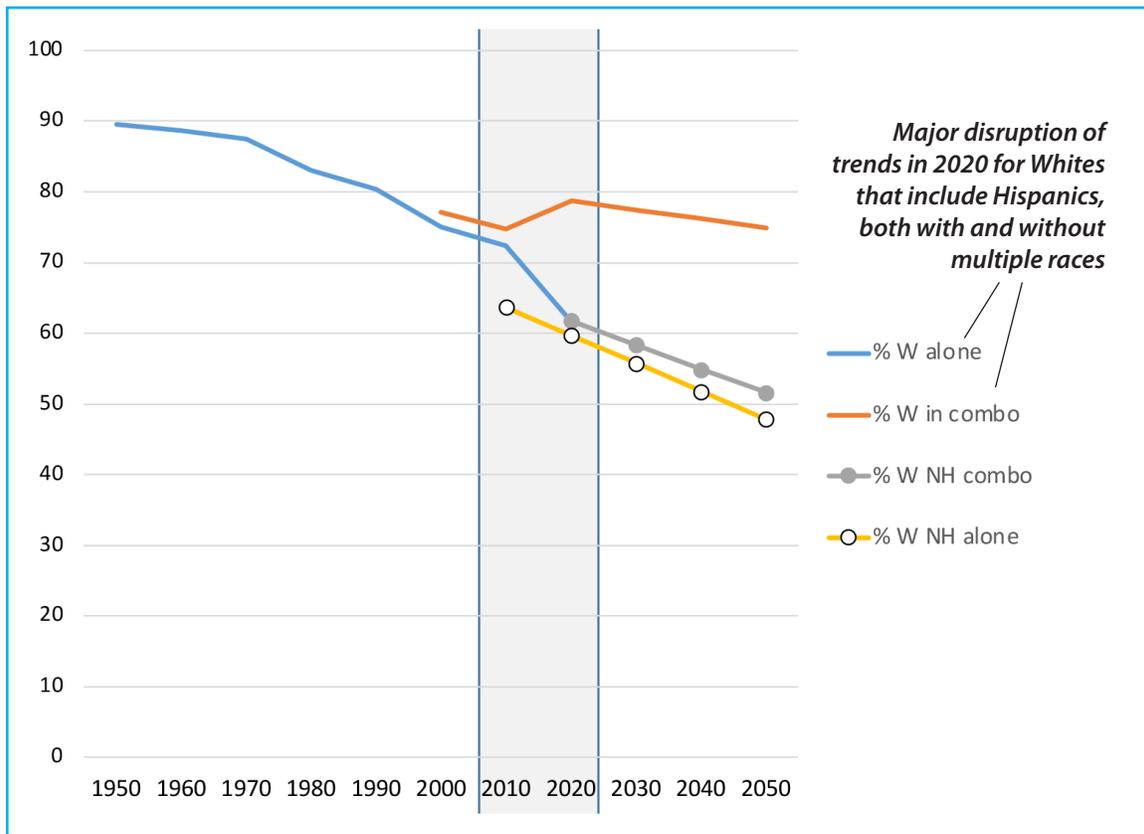
I added some value to the data. The Census Bureau just gives the projected population by age and race. The White population (defined as non-Hispanic and White alone) will fall below 50 percent of the total in the year 2043 in these Census Bureau projections; White kids were expected to have already fallen below 50 percent before 2020.

White voters, by my calculations (using separate data from the Current Population Survey on rates of voting participation collected after the 2012 election), won't fall below

50 percent until 2060. Really, the voters are the most important players in the political system. Why are White voters slower to cross over into the minority? That's because people who are older vote much more. They vote twice as much as people ages 18 to 24 do. So, in terms of demographic changes, under-18 people don't count as voters. At 18 to 24, they count half as much as older people, who count a lot. Because of their much higher rates of participation at the polls, voters are weighted toward the older population and older racial mix. Of course, voting can bob up and down between elections, but I applied the voting rates from a single presidential election (2012) and held them constant while allowing the number of people in different races and age groups to change in the future projections. That produces a nice straight line. It's steady and smooth because it's a projection; there's no change in measuring sticks of either racial categories or voting rates.

If you take actual data and try to piece them together, which I did for purposes of this lecture using the newest data, you get a lot of aberration, as shown in Exhibit 3.

Exhibit 3.  
**A Century of Declining White Share of US Population**



SOURCE: Analysis and graphic by Dowell Myers based on Census Bureau data from various censuses up to 2020 and from projections issued in 2017 for years after 2020.

Even in the past, the White percent of population is not a steady line. It jogs down and levels off and jogs again. Every little dip is caused by a measurement change due to a change in classification based on the census questionnaire or tabulation procedure. Hispanics were separated out of the White total. Then, common practice became to exclude Whites who were in combination with another race, restricting the line to only non-Hispanic Whites (W NH). Most recently, in the 2020 census, many more people were classified as belonging to multiple races because of write-in answers about their additional ancestry, information which could be used to remove them from single-race categories (especially White or Hispanic) and move them into the category with the broadest definition (Whites in combination and including Whites who were Hispanic). This fresh result is still being digested as we try to make sense of the change in measuring sticks applied to race. I'll explain more about this later.

### **Extraordinary Challenges Facing the 2020 Census**

First, we need to summarize the extraordinary challenges that have been recognized for conducting the 2020 census. The past decade has witnessed more changes than have ever happened in one decade before, surely making the 2020 census the most challenging ever.

One big change I and others presumed was that we were going to conduct the census collection online for the first time. Rather than have a mail-back form, we would try to reach people through their web addresses, through their email accounts, and through social media.

This was going to be a big risk, we feared, because what if it got hacked? We were very concerned. You don't get a do-over with a census, and any operation collecting information from more than 100 million addresses runs the risk of massive complications. The good news is that there was, apparently, no hacking, and the Census Bureau was proud to report that their website had zero hours of downtime in collecting the data. In fact, the highest response rate of respondents was achieved via the online channel. The bureau had tested the online collection ahead of time and had carefully prepared the website, and it worked. So, very good news.

Then other changes occurred with data collection about race and Hispanic origin. We've had essentially the same system of racial data collection since 1980, involving separate questions about Hispanic origin and then about race. Many people, especially Latinos were confused about the difference and failed to even answer the race question. This problem was well known, so the Census Bureau tested a revised questionnaire for

race and Hispanic origin. I'll show you in a minute what that looks like. They tested it thoroughly, and in 2015, the bureau concluded it best to go forward with using this new, combined question. But that was disallowed by federal agencies that oversee the Census Bureau. So the bureau couldn't bring in the new race question and had to make do with the same old pair of questions. Instead, the bureau decided to make use of information in ancestry write-in lines that had some repercussions that I'll show.

Then, unexpectedly, a year before the census there was a last-minute administration proposal to add an untested question about immigration status. Lots of political uproar occurred over this because this information was not required by the simple mandate in the Constitution to count all persons present in the country, nor had this been included in the test census, and ultimately because of concerns this could lead to substantial undercount in some population subgroups. It was feared that bringing up immigrant status would discourage people from answering the census because if they had anybody in their families who did not have legal status, they would want to avoid any possible contact with the authorities. Given that all the people in a household are listed on the same form, worries about one member might cause entire families to be lost from the census.

Ultimately, the proposal to collect immigrant status was withdrawn. But all that political fracas had already cast a cloud over the census, and as feared, it did depress response rates, especially among Hispanics. The estimated undercount for Hispanics literally tripled in magnitude compared to the previous census. In fact, this undercount was large enough that it might have cost both Texas and Florida an extra seat in Congress that otherwise would have been awarded based on population growth. From many perspectives, the last-minute meddling was not well advised and served the nation poorly.

Then the census faced one last challenge that could not be foreseen, tested, or debated ahead of time. The COVID-19 pandemic arrived, the first pandemic of such magnitude in the nation since 1918. Arriving one month before the census target date of April 1, it totally overturned all the outreach and follow-up efforts of the Census Bureau. Here, the earlier decision to rely heavily on online collection of census facts may have served the nation especially well. But roughly one-third of the questionnaires were not initially returned and would require nonresponse follow-up. The pandemic meant the bureau had to prolong its in-person follow-up to capture responses that were missing from known addresses. Instead of occurring just in the summer, the bureau had to push this into the fall. And ultimately, the administration abruptly cut off that data collection a month earlier than the bureau had planned. So they didn't achieve a full follow-up.

My judgment is that the Census Bureau actually got very good results, given the pandemic and other challenges. It could have been much worse. But the added challenges did have an impact. This census is being judged as being not as good as the previous ones



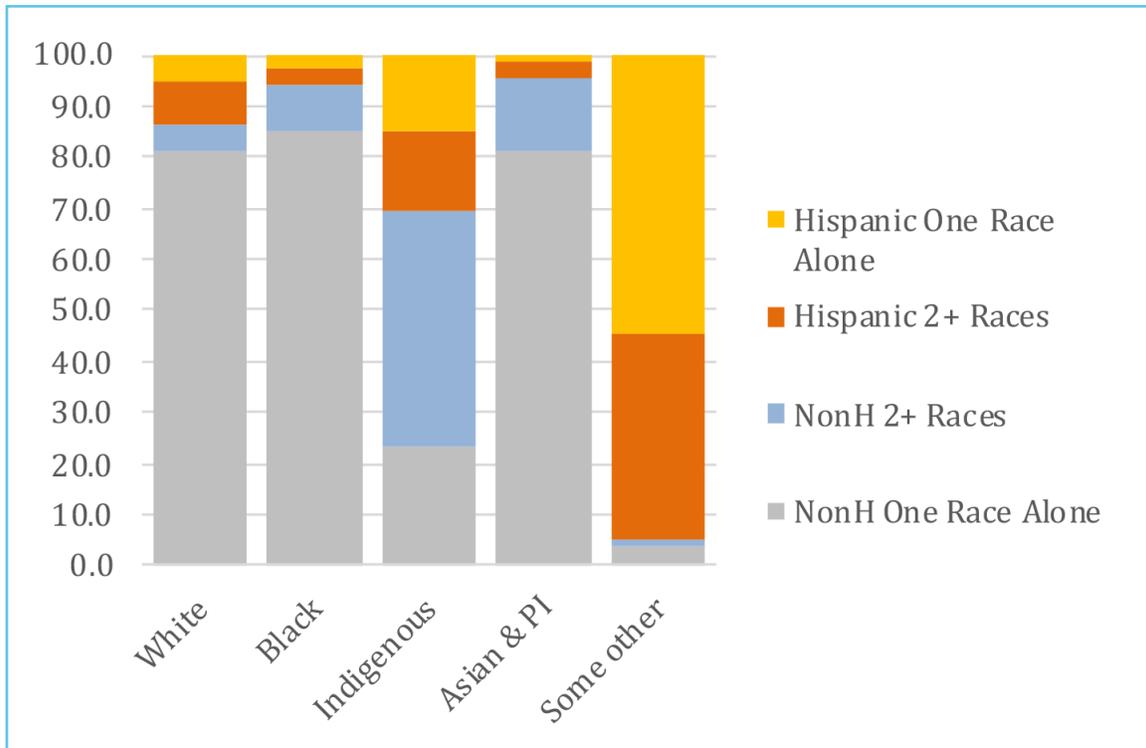
Many people do not recognize that, in the bureau's mind, there are two different questions here. One question (8) is, "Are you Hispanic or not?" And the other one—totally separate—(9) is, "What race are you?"

Latinos, in particular, have a hard time answering this. They don't understand that these are two different questions, or many people of Hispanic origin just don't know what race they identify with if it is not Hispanic or Latino. Accordingly, after gaining substantial expert consultation, the bureau devised the combined version shown (as well as several alternatives), which they tested in a major experimental race survey in 2015. Results were much improved when asking people to respond to the combined all-in-one question. Fewer people were lost and confused and skipping over the answers. Unfortunately, this improved question could not be approved in time for inclusion in the 2020 census. Next decade, in 2030, the change might be made.

### ***Overlapping Categories and Mixed Identities***

The resulting snapshot of race and Hispanic origin for the US population seen in Exhibit 5 shows how much overlap and mixing of identities occurs within each supposedly separate race. The gray portion of each of the five principal race groups shows the "exclusive" portion of each race—the portion that is of single race and also non-Hispanic. Above that are the components of each race that overlap with Hispanic and other racial identity and that sum to the "inclusive" total of all people claiming a given racial identity. (People with two or more races would appear in more than one of these data totals.) The census category of "some other race" is almost wholly composed of Hispanic respondents who declared no other race, which is why the combined race question in Exhibit 4 would be so helpful. The Indigenous group (including American Indians and Alaska Natives) also has 30 percent that share Hispanic identity and another 45 percent that share an additional racial identity (mostly White, but some Black). But all the remaining races also contain sizable numbers that share Hispanic identity or share another racial identity.

Exhibit 5.  
**Overlap of Hispanic Identity and Mixed Races (2020)**



SOURCE: Analysis and graphic by Dowell Myers and Hyojung Lee based on 2020 Census.

The Exhibit 5 racial portrait from the 2020 census suggests the true multifaceted complexity of race in America. Difficulties ensue when people try to describe growth and change over time in this mosaic. The most common change that was used to summarize the nation’s growing diversity is the slow growth and proportional decline of the White population. But slow growth of White population depends on how you classify White—take Jeb Bush’s children, for example. The Bush family is White. But Jeb Bush married a woman from Mexico. And they have children who are proudly Latino and bilingual. So are they going to be included with the White population or not? Are they only Latino or only non-White? That’s a kind of computer programming decision used to simplify the portrait shown in Exhibit 5. In social reality, they’re both White and Latino. But the simplest approach is to assign people to only one single category that is “exclusive.” There was major public interest in seeing what happened to the White population between the 2010 and 2020 censuses, depending on what decisions were made about defining White. Working with my colleagues, Richard Alba and Morris Levy, we found we could use the census data to arrive at four different conclusions about the White trend. The alternatives are presented side by side in Exhibit 6.

Exhibit 6.  
**Declining Size of White Population between the 2010 and 2020  
 Censuses Depends on Definition of *White***

	Non-Hispanic	Hispanics Included
<b>Single Race</b>	1) Single Race White People  <b>- 2.6%</b>	3) Single Race White People (and including Hispanics)  <b>- 8.6%</b>
<b>Single Race or Multiracial</b>	2) All People of White Origin and Identity  <b>+ 1.0%</b>	4) All People of White Origin and Identity (and including Hispanics)  <b>+ 2.6%</b>

*SOURCE:* Levy, Alba, and Myers, “The Truth about White America,” 2021.

One alternative was that there was an 8.6 percent *decline* in the number of Whites. And another one was...well... it’s a 2.6 percent decline. A third result was that Whites actually *increased* by 2.6 percent. A final result showed that the White population increased by only 1 percent. Which one of these do you think the press actually seized upon first for their headlines? Right. They went for the big number: an unprecedented decline of 8.6 percent. That’s what the public heard. Well, where did that come from?

In an article in the *Atlantic* with Morris Levy and Richard Alba, we explained it this way: we figured out that basically there are four possible combinations, depending on how you do it. The 8.6 decline came from including Hispanics in single-race Whites. But the *single-race* Whites meant that all the multiracial people were taken out. And there were many more multiracial people in 2020 than in 2010. So there was more subtraction. That’s how you got the -8.6—largely just changing classification. In reality, the traditional category for Whites, the one most often used, is the non-Hispanic single-race alone. And that resulted in a 2.6 percent decline. However, if you include all people who claim White identity, whether mixed or not, the 2020 census reports an *increase* of 1.0 or 2.6 percent. Which way to go has no simple answer, and it should depend on what exactly your purpose is.

## Narratives Interpreting Racial Change

Every one of these groups is becoming more mixed. And that makes it harder for us to tabulate them, to classify them, to talk about them. Thus, people revert to simple heuristics to do that, which brings us to *narratives*.

The overarching point regarding narratives about racial change is that people make sense of the story by cutting through the complexities and telling something simple. Often this is a message that resonates with what people already know, which includes their previous biases and previous assumptions. Chiefly, the press or other data communicators try to keep it simple so that they can connect better with their audiences, and so that the audiences understand something about what it means. But what it means may be distorted because there is this pre-knowledge that people have that includes prejudice and long-held beliefs. And when things are changing rapidly, how do people reconcile the new facts with what they learned long ago from their parents?

There are several fallacies that people revert to when reporting and responding to change (not just about race). These show up again and again, and I offer here a list of five oft-repeated fallacies, each of which can form the core of a powerful narrative.

1. **Extrapolation fallacy.** Recent trends get extended to absurd lengths: “At this rate of change, pretty soon we will all be foreign born.”
2. **Tunnel-vision time fallacy.** Only one thing is the focus of change over the next 20 years; all the rest is holding constant.
3. **Homogeneity fallacy.** All members of designated groups are alike; e.g., minorities are all Democrats, Whites are all Republicans.
4. **Zero-sum fallacy.** Opportunities are part of a fixed pie; more for one group means less for me; some people are taking more than their rightful share.
5. **Net-change fallacy.** Groups that contribute more to net change of the total are magnified in importance, trivializing the importance of very large but slow-growing groups and magnifying the “upstarts.”

We can illustrate many of these fallacies through a single important example. A narrative of White-majority decline and coming minority status has dominated politics in the last decade and will possibly do so in the next as well. Whites form the largest share of all US voters, as we saw earlier. So this decline has some significance and certainly attracts the attention (even alarm or fear) of a significant number of voters. In his recent book, *Why We're Polarized*, Ezra Klein devotes a key chapter, “Demographic Threat,” to what he calls the driving core cleavage of our politics.

### ***Attention Fixated on the Coming White Minority***

Why should the declining White numbers be such a big deal? In California, we have been watching this national uproar over coming minority status for Whites, while kind of rolling our eyes—been there, done that! California fell below the 50 percent White threshold in 1999, and let me tell you, that does not mean what critics are saying it's going to mean, either good or bad. It's just an imaginary line, and you cross 50 percent. Then what? Not much was different after crossing the threshold in the subsequent decade or two in California, and in fact the date of falling below the threshold, only discovered after the 2000 census, was largely unheralded.

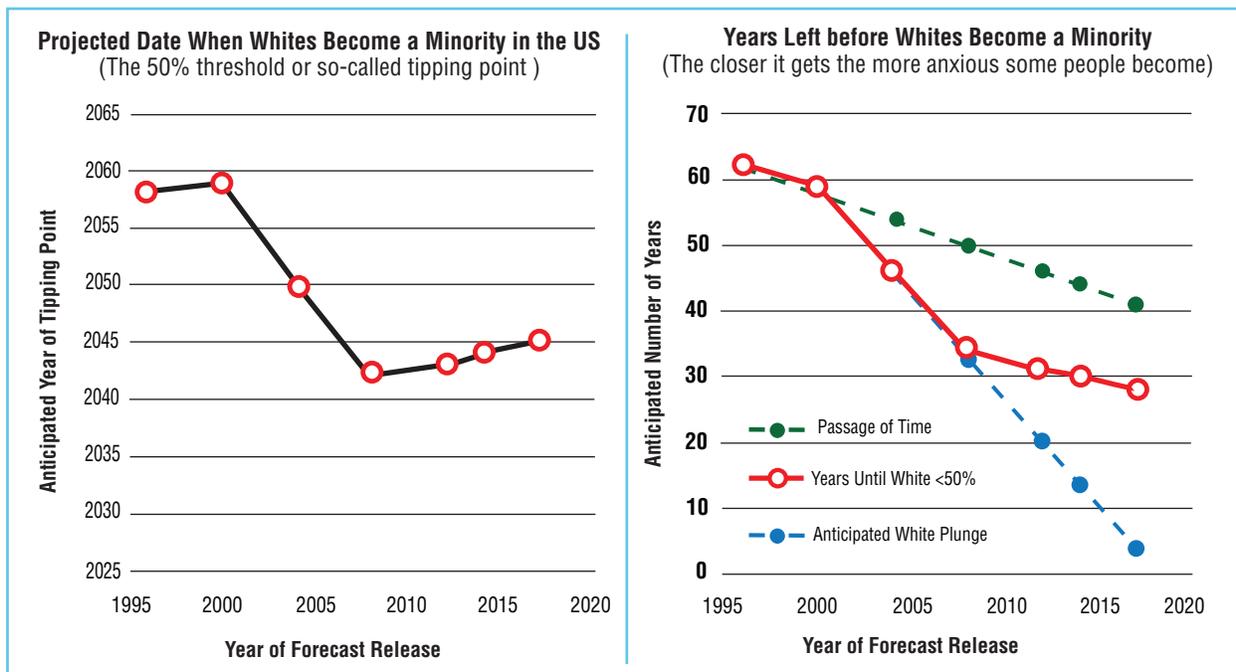
Crossing this threshold in the US lies two decades in the future, and yet it has been brought into present politics through changes in demographic projections and the narrative framing of imagination. A core element has been the metaphoric naming of crossing the 50 percent threshold as the “tipping point.” Widely used by both the public and professional demographers to dramatize this moment, this unfortunate term is highly alarming and ill advised for its metaphoric implications. A tipping point is like a bucket tipping over. You know, once it tips, it goes all the way over spilling everything. This physical process does not resemble a steady line of gradual change, the way we have portrayed the long-term White population changes in Exhibits 2 or 3. Instead, the tipping term suggests a flip, a radical reversal of society, and thus it inflames imaginations with these false illusions and engenders fear because of the implied total reversal of White status. In reality, little is different with 48 percent White in the population compared to 52 percent (before the supposed tipping). And no matter the changes in children or total population, Whites are still expected to retain a majority of voters 20 years past the population “tipping point,” as shown earlier in Exhibit 2. The term *tipping point* is thus less factual than alarmist, and it should be discontinued in any future narrative framing of population change.

Changes in methods and assumptions in Census Bureau projections have generated some very abrupt changes in the future date when the White population is expected to cross the 50 percent threshold. This has proven alarming (or exciting) to many because of the perceived rapid acceleration. It used to be, back in 1995 or 2000, that there was a very distant future when the White population could fall below 50 percent of the nation's total, but it lay beyond the 60-year horizon of most projections and so it remained out of sight. However, a dramatic revision was reported in projections issued in 2004, and once again, between projections in 2004 and 2008. (Subsequent projections have ceased moving this crossover date, even delaying it by a couple years.)

The perceptual impact of the changing projection dates is illustrated in Exhibit 7. Back in 2000, the first visible date when Whites were expected to fall below 50 percent

was 2059, which was still far in the future. But then in 2004 projections, the crossover date was moved up to 2051, and in 2008 projections, the crossover date was moved up again to 2042. Thus, the end of White-majority status was coming far faster (17 years sooner) than expected in 2000. This also happened to coincide with the 2008 election of a Black Democrat into the White House. Surely that was greatly celebrated in many quarters, but among Whites who are Republican, the future looked extremely bleak, even threatening, because the trend seemed to foretell the eternal dominance of Democrats over Republicans, as had been predicted in an inside-the-Beltway book by John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*.

Exhibit 7.  
Accelerated Tipping Point of “Doom”\*



\*What is Doom? California’s population fell below 50% White in 1999 and its economy and society have flourished, marred only by sky-high housing prices.

SOURCE: Analysis and graphic by Dowell Myers, based on racial projections issued in different years by the Census Bureau.

The urgency of a so-called tipping point for those who fear the crossover event is all relative to perceptions of time. Originally, it was a half a century away, far over the horizon. But the closer it comes, the more people may grow anxious about it. Projection changes plus the simple passage of historical time brought the future ever closer. This acceleration of lost majority status fed the political rhetoric of White “extinction” and a feared “doom.”

The date of the coming crossover was accelerated in the Census Bureau projections to be 12 years closer every 4 years. At this point, the **extrapolation fallacy**, number one on our list of narrative fallacies, has taken over in the minds of the audience. At this rate of change, the coming gradual crossover appears imminent and, according to extrapolation, should have occurred by 2018. Is this real? We should note how very common it is for the public to want to extrapolate recent trends, such as with crime rates, house prices, and stock markets. We tend to overshoot and extrapolate from both the ups and the downs. Then people are primed to respond emotionally to their imagined trend. After generations of majority dominance, and the suddenness of the accelerated changes experienced in the 2000s, some White people were spurred to take defensive actions against this perceived revolution, as I'll discuss in a moment.

Perceived doom is a creature of imagination, not a fact. California and Texas are both states where Whites are a minority of the population, and those states haven't fallen to pieces, as Ezra Klein wisely concludes about "the demographic threat" in his book, *Why We're Polarized*.

The four other narrative fallacies I listed a moment ago also helped heighten this narrative of fearful change. Foremost in importance may be the **homogeneity fallacy**, which assumes that all members of designated groups are alike and that these uniform blocs may be diametrically opposed to one another. This assumption is deeply embedded in the notion of separate races along with the more ludicrous assumption that all the multifaceted people-of-color groups are banded together in uniform opposition to the interests of all the many different people grouped under the White label. Aren't Whites comprised of both Democrats and Republicans, and aren't sizable subsets among the people of color also leaning Republican, as well as Democratic? So much for homogeneity.

The **zero-sum fallacy** is also a widespread belief, presuming that there is a single pie that must be divided between different groups such that any benefits for one group detracts from benefits for others. In practice, there are many complementarities and exchanges, as well as agglomeration effects that typically *expand* the total sum of benefits available to all. Only in the sense of a horse race or sporting competition must one winner dominate over the loss suffered by the competitors. But even that example overlooks the fact that the shared benefit of competition draws attention and greater investment for the entire sporting league. And in the off-season, team management engages in many personnel trades that benefit both teams, potentially making both competitors stronger. In fact, in the realm of race, older Whites draw major benefits from a growing young population of immigrants or people of color—think replacement workers for retirees, plus new consumers and taxpayers supporting the economy—as demonstrated in my book *Immigrants and Boomers* (2007).

The **net-change fallacy** is convenient for summarizing which groups contribute most to total change, but it has the well-known bias of magnifying the importance of small but growing groups while minimizing the importance of very large but nongrowing groups. For example, a voting expert recently told me that “95 percent of the growth in Texas population was from minorities.” Yet the great majority of voters are White. Think about the potential disconnect if we needed to raise taxes to support new services or infrastructure. The net change fallacy makes it feel as though the purpose of the new things you’re planning for are just for this net growth. It also makes the largest group in Texas disappear in importance, which is not desirable if you wish to build majority support for tax propositions.

Perhaps the most basic fallacy about the future is what I term the **tunnel-vision time fallacy**, a fixation on a single aspect of the coming future, while ignoring all other supporting or compensating changes that may occur in the same time frame. A single-minded focus on racial change, or specifically, tunnel vision on the declining White share in the population, overlooks all the simultaneous changes ongoing into the future, namely, the aging of the population, growing retirements, surging needs for health-care workers, the changing makeup of the economy, new technologies, and much more. Here we see how the zero-sum and the net-change fallacies reinforce the tunnel-vision assumptions about the declining White share of the population.

### ***Does the Way in Which We Talk about Future Change Make a Difference?***

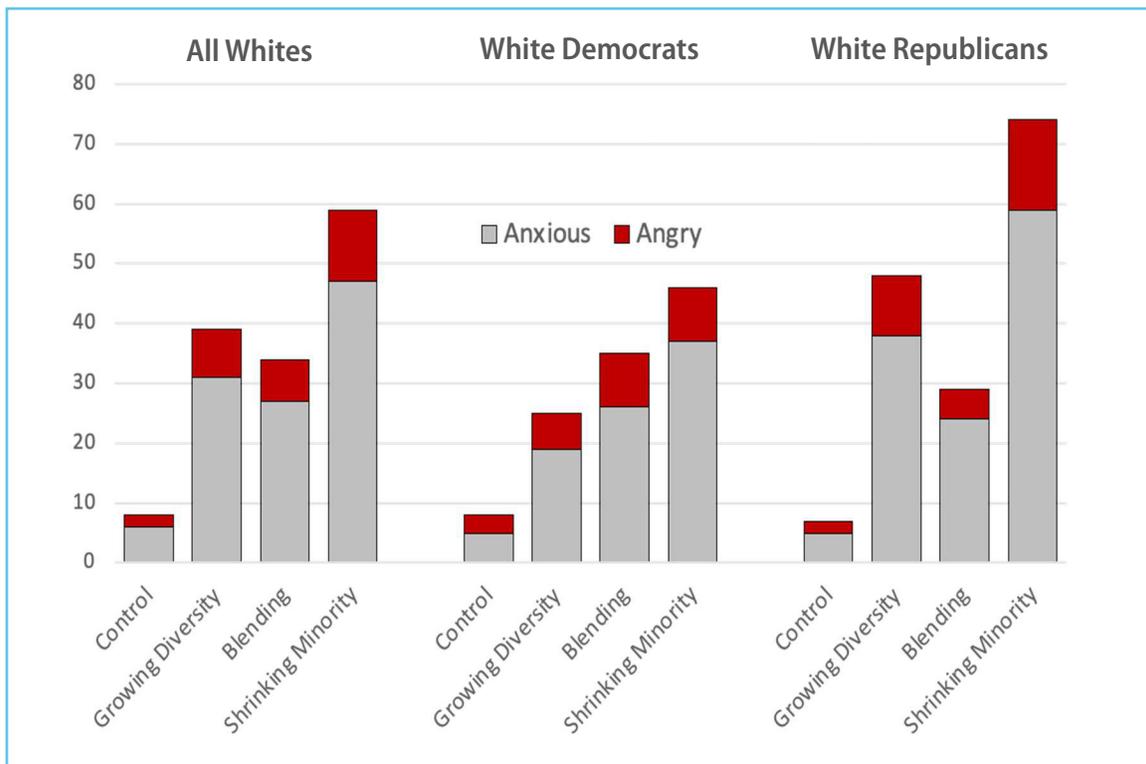
How does the way we discuss Census Bureau projections of demographic change really affect the way Democrats and Republicans feel about those future trends? Back in 2016, during the summer before the Trump election, Morris Levy, a political science professor, and I plotted out an experiment. Is it growing racial diversity that bothers some White people, or is it their projected minority status? If we described the projections with more inclusive definitions of White, rather than the most exclusive, how might that change attitudes? Since all Whites are not the same—some being Democrat, others Republican—and all with different ages, etc., how uniform are their responses to hearing different stories about coming demographic changes?

We put together a large, experimental group and randomly assigned them to read different stories based on the 2014 Census Bureau projections. Then, we asked them how they felt about things. The first story was just about growing diversity, and it emphasized the high percentage growth of Asians and Hispanics. (Blacks among the people of color groups have little growth.) A second story discussed the same growing diversity but added trends built on the prevailing account emphasizing decline of non-Hispanic Whites alone (that is, not multiracial) to a minority by 2044. The third story discussed diversity

again but added trends based on the inclusive definition of Whites as reported in the same projections, showing that they would remain a 70 percent majority to 2060 by including Hispanics who were White and also due to trends in intermarriage. A control group read an unrelated environmental story about pandas in China.

Our sample of online respondents was comprised solely of White people of voting age, each of whom was randomly assigned to read only one of these stories. After that we had everyone answer: How does this make you feel? Hopeful? Happy? Anxious? Angry? Exhibit 8 summarizes their answers, showing opinions separately for Democrats or Republicans and comparing their reactions to the different stories.

Exhibit 8.  
**Reactions to Alternative Narratives about Demographic Change**



SOURCE: Dowell Myers and Morris Levy, “Racial Population Projections and Reactions to Alternative News Accounts of Growing Diversity” (2018). Graphic borrowed from Dowell Myers and Karen Trapenberg Frick, “Rebuilding Common Purpose for the 21st Century with New Civic Infrastructure” (2022).

The clear message here is that the shrinking-minority story really upsets White people, Republicans in particular. And the blending story about intermarriage and inclusive White definition—well, they're pretty happy about that, or at least they're not anxious about it. They're anxious, even angry they say, about being called a minority. Among Democrats too, there's a tendency not to like this minority account. All these stories were based on the actual census projections. We just framed the numbers differently and emphasized different aspects. The same total projections led to different audience reactions. So it matters how you talk about them. It's not just the fact of growing diversity alone. The standard narrative of coming White decline does have real consequences. We (and others) have found this makes people much more defensive and protective of self-interests, and less generous toward others. It even makes Whites fearful of discrimination coming from the new majority against Whites. Morris Levy and I have carried out a series of experimental studies that confirm and extend these findings.

Whites may be fearful of being reduced to a minority of the population but they are much less fearful if the story is just growing diversity. And if Whites are defined more inclusively—when mixed parentage is part of the story—there's much less fear of this idea that they are shrinking to a minority. The alternative is that Whites react more defensively and become more fearful when narrowly defined Whites are projected to decline more rapidly than expected. Despairing Whites also are less generous toward others for social spending. The percent voting for school bonds or saying they would support a hypothetical school bond goes down. All kinds of funding for public goods and common interests decline if Whites are told a story of decline that appears to exclude them from the future.

From my urban planning and demography perspectives, I think it's really worrisome that this fear makes the current majority less supportive of investments in the future. Education, infrastructure, climate change—all those things—people are less likely to support them unless they are made to feel that they are a part of the future. Acute harm results when tunnel vision and fixed-sum fallacies about racial change torpedo investments in our common future destined to be shared by Whites and many other groups of color.

## **Concluding Remarks**

So we see that racial change in America is not only of keen interest but also very potent. The Census Bureau attempts to play its central role of neutral fact collector, designing an outreach plan to count basic characteristics of every resident in the nation. The 2020 census was unusually challenging, for reasons we have discussed, and the bureau has been delayed in producing its final results for all of us to feast upon. The

bureau also attempted upgrades in both the methods of data collection and in the questionnaire processing of race and Hispanic origin characteristics, trying to keep up with the growing mixed-race reality for many Americans.

The once-a-decade checkup of the decennial census is a welcome ritual as we collectively take stock of how much we have changed in our numbers in different locations and also in our race and other characteristics. The race and Hispanic origin data are among the most popular from the census and yet they are also the most complex. That stems from the ability to select multiple categories of race, then overlapping this with Hispanic origin information. Reality is so much richer than a simple binary of White and non-White. In fact, it is not even clear what White means exactly. Even the majority of mixed-race people have a White parent. All of this diversity in categories is accentuated when projections are made into the future. Although the Census Bureau provides many rich alternatives for data users, many people would seem to prefer to use a simple binary from the past (White/non-White) to describe future decades. Twenty-first century racial makeup really requires us to update our racial definitions and our narratives. Too often race is used to divide people into separate categories that have no other social connection. This fosters a narrative of division where the current majority fears what lies ahead.

Instead, if you believe in *e pluribus unum*, that requires fostering more narratives of connection that highlight the positive linkages and mutual benefits between demographic groups because that spurs cooperation and can bring hope. And that is the way for our democracy to move forward with us all together. I hope the ideas and examples I have surveyed here will provide useful food for thought. I think we can talk about that. I look forward to discussion on this now. So I'll stop right there. Thank you.

**Moderator:** Thank you. That was excellent. I'm just going to give folks a second to get back into conversation mode. We'll see what questions we have.

**Participant:** Thank you, Dr. Myers. If our goal is to achieve a future in which most Americans think of themselves not as members of mutually hostile tribes but as proud and optimistic citizens of a diverse democracy, I think one of the most valuable things you've done is you've laid out a set of strategies about what could be done to address this. So I'm wondering, which of those strategies do you find particularly compelling or particularly promising?

**Dowell Myers:** We know that you can provoke people by making them fearful and getting them to respond negatively. What's interesting is there really hasn't been the countervailing approach of trying to draw their attention to connections. There are lots of data out there, lots of things you could show people. There are also parables you can tell and proverbs you can use. There are simple ways of communicating with the public that draw attention to commonality and to interconnection.

In the public sphere, there just has not been an equal balance at all. “The vast majority of coverage has been negative. The neuroscientists say the negative gets a stronger reaction. Politicians know that if you scare people, you can get them to jump because something about the front part of your brain is wired for flight or response. It’s easier to activate it. It’s the cheapest easy solution. But it’s hostile to community, to cooperation. I think we need to figure out ways to bring a more even balance into the public domain. But for that, it’s not helpful just to talk about wishes. You have to have actual data reports that are subject to more optimistic conclusions.

I was commissioned, after the 2010 census, to do a study in California about children. What I found was that the number of kids in California was declining. It had been ignored up to that point.

The politics in California are hostile to kids because kids are expensive. In prior decades, there have been too many kids—and too many kids “of the wrong color.” Voters didn’t want to pay for them. But wait a minute. When you have too few kids, how is that going to work out? Who are going to be your new workers, your new voters, your new taxpayers?

I got my audiences in California to actually stay on message and talk about the declining number of kids. Suddenly children were scarce and valuable, a positive resource to be nurtured. So emphasizing just that one indicator could change perspectives.

**Participant:** I was reading in one of your articles about the way that the census is reported. And something that struck me through your presentation is a sense of diffuse responsibility between the Census Bureau and the press for reporting results. The Census Bureau writes a report of its findings, filled with caveats and nuances. And people read the newspaper headlines that talk about the precipitous 8.6 percent decline of Whites. It changes the narrative. I wanted to ask you, What conversation should we be having about that diffuse responsibility?

**Dowell Myers:** I had a chance to present the research we conducted in the summer before the 2016 election to the Census Bureau in late November after the election. They just had no clue that there was this potentially explosive effect of their projections. There really is no literature in demography that talks about how you talk about it. All the literature is about how you calculate it, what method this is, and how you interpret the results.

So the bureau just gives it over to the press. And the media’s instinct is to score lots of hits by dramatizing the startling changes, which can be quite damaging. But the bureau really changed its approach after seeing my results. And in reporting on their next projections, they shifted the emphasis to what they called turning points—emphasizing the turning point of elderly outnumbering children, for example.

So they're trying to be responsive. But the point is, in demography, there's not a wealth of background, understanding, or training. The demographers don't know what to do. There's a void to be filled there. There should be some coordination. But the bureau also wants to be neutral. They're in a very delicate spot. Their budget could be cut in half by Congress at any moment. So I think it falls more to the nonprofit sector or the philanthropic sector to try to fill that gap because they can take a position that better serves the public interest and not have to worry about their funding being cut.

**Participant:** I was thinking about motivations. Why did we start gathering racial data in the census as far back as 1790? I think the major motivation was political: to exclude or discount certain groups. It's my understanding that a lot of European nations, such as France, prohibit racial demographic data. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you see as the motivation for a democratic nation to gather these data. Why is this the first thing that the census reports? Why is this the central category through which we understand ourselves?

**Dowell Myers:** In 1790, we were counting White settlers of European origin, the enslaved Africans they had imported, and (sometimes) the Indigenous native people who were no longer resisting and had survived decimation. Well, the reasons have changed over the decades.

I think we are pretty much in the civil rights era now where we're trying to remedy the injustices of the past. The Voting Rights Act required that we have equal representation. We keep track of race for equal-representation purposes. And we keep track of it to measure progress toward goals of equality and inclusion.

The traditional measurements carried over from the 20th century are still very exclusive, very segregationist. If you have one drop of non-White blood, then you're non-White. But that was the custom in the past. The problem comes when you use that definition for the present (2020 census) and especially for projections describing the future population, which I object to mightily. Now, you're projecting into the future using this old-fashioned segregationist model and you want to stamp that on the future—a future of intermarriage that has all these kids that are blending across racial lines?

I was just looking at some data today. About 20 percent or so of marriages are across Hispanic and non-Hispanic lines or across races today. These kids are basically living between two different kin networks, one on one side of the line and one on the other side and benefiting from them both. I have been deeply influenced by Richard Alba's book on this mixing, *The Great Demographic Illusion: Majority, Minority, and the Expanding American Mainstream*.

I think you need to switch the definition of race you're using for the future from the one you're using for the past. Yes, we track it using the old method from the past to measure equality and growing inclusion. And for the future, we should be tracking more realistic mixed racial identities and connections that tie people together.

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## Notes

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## About the Speaker

Dowell Myers is director of the Population Dynamics Research Group at the Sol Price School of Public Policy at the University of Southern California where he is also a professor. A planner, an urban demographer, and a consultant to the US Census Bureau, he is author of the most widely referenced work on census analysis, *Analysis with Local Census Data: Portraits of Change* (Academic Press, 1992). He has done considerable demographic work on immigration as well and authored the 2007 book *Immigrants and Boomers: Forging a New Social Contract for the Future of America* (The Russell Sage Foundation). Myers has been an academic fellow of the Urban Land Institute and served on the governing board of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning. He is also one of two recipients of the Haynes Award for Research Impact.

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