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# New OMB's Race and Ethnicity Standards Will Affect How Americans Self-Identify

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**Abstract:** In March 2024, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approved major changes to the ethnic and racial self-identification questions used by all federal agencies, including the U.S. Census Bureau. These modifications include merging the separate race and Hispanic ethnicity questions into a single combined question and adding a Middle Eastern and North African category. Government officials and researchers have requested evidence on how Americans might react to these changes. We conducted a survey experiment with a nationally representative sample of 7,350 adult Americans. Participants were randomly assigned to answer either the existing separate race and ethnicity questions or a combined question proposed by the OMB. We find that the combined question decreases the percentage of Americans identifying as white and as some other race. We identify the key mechanism driving these effects: Hispanics decrease their identification in other categories when a Hispanic category is available in the combined question format. This results in statistically significant decreases in key minority populations, including Afro-Latinos and indigenous Latinos.

**Keywords:** racial and ethnic identification; U.S. Census; survey research; experiments

**Reproducibility Package:** A replication package containing all data and code used in this analysis is available through the Harvard Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NLDF3N.

On March 29, 2024, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approved major changes to its Statistical Policy Directive 15, which sets standards for collecting all federal data on race and ethnicity. This includes the decennial census, the American Community Survey (ACS), and all federal administrative forms, including benefit applications (Federal Register 2024). These data are vital for political redistricting, congressional representation, resource allocation, academic research, consumer marketing, and more (Federal Register 2023).

The most significant modification to Directive 15 is the merging of the race and Hispanic ethnicity questions into a single question. From 1977 to 2024, Directive 15 mandated that separate race and Hispanic ethnicity questions be used (Bean and Tienda 1987; Snipp 2003). The distinct ethnicity question allowed individuals to indicate Hispanic identity separately from the race question, which lacked a Hispanic category. However, many Hispanics chose the residual category of "Some Other Race" (SOR) in the separate race question, revealing potential confusion with the available categories (Federal Register 2023). In 2020, 8 percent of Hispanics skipped the race question, 35 percent selected SOR alone, and 32 percent chose two or more races, including SOR (U.S. Census Bureau 2023).[1] As most Hispanics self-identified as SOR, it became the second-largest racial group, alone or in combination, in 2020, raising concerns about the validity of these data (Matthews et al. 2017; Wang 2021).

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Survey methodologists have found that changes in the format and phrasing of identity questions can alter individuals' responses, affecting the size and composition of ethnic populations (Hirschman 1993; Pryor et al. 1992; Schuman and Presser 1996; Sulmont 2010). Hispanics may be particularly affected by the OMB's changes, as the most significant change is the removal of the separate Hispanic ethnicity question. This possibility has raised concerns among scholars who believe that the change to a combined question format may decrease the number of Afro-Latinos, individuals who identify as both black and Latino (Lopez 2023).

The second substantial modification is the addition of a MENA category, which will help make this diverse population more visible in federal statistics (Jamal and Naber 2008; Maghbouleh 2017). Prior research suggests that many MENA Americans may choose to identify as MENA rather than white when a MENA box is provided (Maghbouleh, Schachter, and Flores 2022). However, this research relied on small, convenience samples.

In 2015, the Census Bureau conducted the National Content Test Study (NCT) to examine how various changes to the race and ethnicity questions would perform among the population (Matthews et al. 2017). The NCT found that including a MENA category significantly increased the number of individuals identifying as MENA. Furthermore, many Hispanics chose "Hispanic" in a combined ethnicity and race question, leading to reductions in the SOR and white categories. Critically, it found no decline in Afro-Latino identification. However, the questions tested by the NCT do not fully align with the suggested question format recently put forth by the OMB. Furthermore, this test was conducted several years ago, and Americans' identification patterns may have changed since then. Finally, the NCT data have not been available for re-analysis by independent scholars or subjected to external peer review.

Given the scale of these changes, scholars have urged an independent examination of the OMB proposal, noting that "even slight changes in how these questions are presented can have enormous impacts" on population counts (Beveridge and Anderson 2023). The OMB itself has called for "additional research, testing, (and) stakeholder engagement" to assess the impact of these major changes on self-identification practices, especially among minority groups like Afro-Latinos (Federal Register 2024).

We heed these calls by conducting the first systematic independent evaluation of these changes. We do this by addressing two questions: first, how do the proposed modifications affect Americans' ethnoracial self-identification choices? Second, what are the likely mechanisms driving these effects?

We conduct a survey experiment with a nationally representative sample of 7,350 adult Americans. Participants were randomly assigned to answer either the existing separate race and ethnicity questions or a combined question as proposed by the OMB (Federal Register 2023). We find that the combined question decreases the percentage of Americans identifying as white and as SOR. Furthermore, we identify the key mechanism driving these effects. When faced with the combined self-identification question that lists Hispanic separately from categories such as white, African American, or American Indian, some Hispanics who previously identified with these other categories choose to identify solely as Hispanic. This

results in statistically significant decreases in key minority populations, including Afro-Latinos and indigenous Latinos.

We theorize that this might be driven by a general tendency to select only one option in multiple-choice questions, as documented by survey methodologists (Krosnick 1999). In addition, Hispanics may feel a stronger connection to national origin labels like Mexican or Dominican, which are listed under "Hispanic," rather than to ethnoracial labels like black, which may carry more stigma (Bailey 2001; Candelario 2007; Itzigsohn 2009; Roth 2012).

Our analyses provide evidence that the upcoming changes to the questions used for collecting federal data on race and ethnicity are highly consequential. These modifications alter Americans' identification choices in ways that are not yet fully understood. We recommend further testing to better understand how and why the proposed changes affect Americans' racial and ethnic identification.

## Measuring Ethnic Identification

Figure 1 presents the separate race and Hispanic ethnicity questions of the 2020 census ("separate question format") and a combined question with detailed categories, similar to what was presented by the OMB when it first proposed these changes in 2023 ("combined question format"; Federal Register 2023). These two questions are markedly different. As required by the Directive 15 revisions, Hispanic and MENA become new response categories alongside white, black or African American, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN), and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (NHPI). We have also included a SOR category, as mandated by law for the census and the ACS.

Past research finds that even small modifications in question wording can affect how individuals understand and respond to ethnoracial identification questions (Hirschman 1993; Pryor et al. 1992; Schuman and Presser 1996). Changes in the format of questions on ethnicity (i.e., open vs. closed ended) and variations in the number of categories listed as choices of examples can produce different responses (Hirschman 1993; Pryor et al. 1992). These shifts in individual responses may, in turn, affect the size and composition of ethnic populations as recorded in surveys (Sulmont 2010; Telles and PERLA 2014). This is especially relevant in Latin America, where racial and ethnic identities are notably fluid. In 2000, for example, the Mexican Census altered the phrasing of its indigenous identification question based on academic and community feedback (INEGI 2011). These changes more than doubled the proportion of Mexicans who identified as indigenous (Flores, Vignau Loria, and Martinez Casas 2023).

Latino identity in the United States is also fluid and influenced by question wording and available identity categories (Davenport 2020; Hitlin, Brown, and Elder 2007; Telles 2018). In 2014, a Pew study found that 24 percent of Hispanics identified as Afro-Latino or Afro-Caribbean when the survey question included Afro-(nation name) labels such as Afro-Peruvian or Afro-Colombian (Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera 2016). However, in 2021, when Pew used a shorter version of the question without these Afro-(nation name) subgroups, only 12 percent of Hispanic adults identified as Afro-Latino (Gonzalez-Barrera 2022).

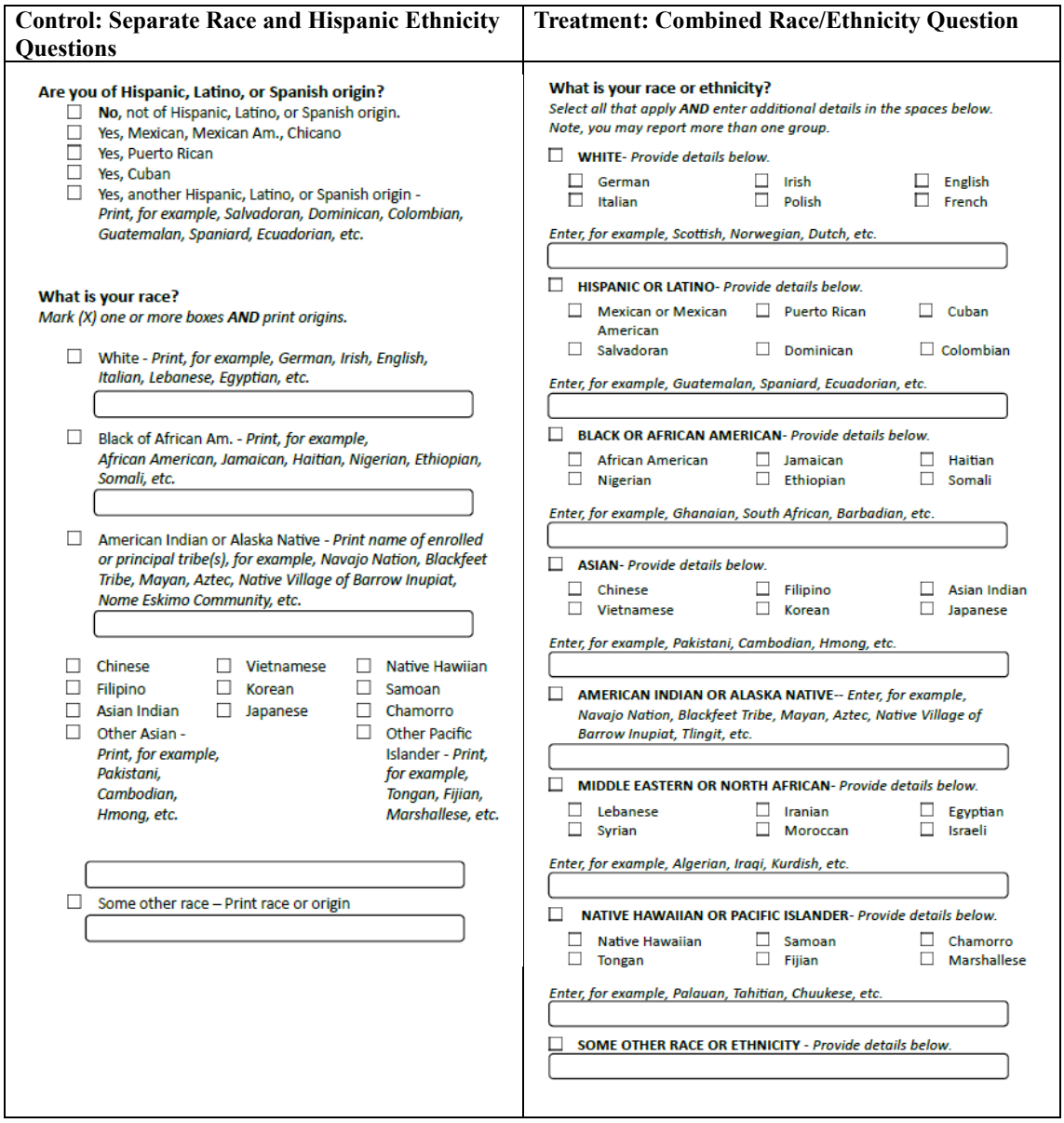


**Figure 1:** Comparison of race and ethnicity formats.

Given this fluidity in Latinos' identities, scholars have raised concerns that the proposed combined question format may affect Hispanics' identification with other racial categories, such as black (Lopez 2023; Lowe et al. 2024). However, the U.S. Census has argued that its internal tests show no reduction in African American identification among Hispanics using a combined question format (Matthews et al. 2017).

Hispanics may be less likely to identify with other racial categories in the combined question for a combination of methodological and substantive reasons.

Survey methodologists have identified the primacy effect, where respondents choose the first acceptable option they see (Krosnick 1999). This effect explains why respondents tend to select only one option in multiple-choice questions (Krosnick 1991). Choosing one option reduces the cognitive load of complex questions, as cognitive load theory suggests, leading individuals to minimize mental effort and opt for simpler tasks (Sweller 1988).

There are also substantive reasons based on how Latinos understand these ethnoracial categories. Hispanics often prefer to identify with their national origin (i.e., Mexican, Cuban, etc.) rather than with broad ethnoracial labels such as black or white (Taylor et al 2012). Furthermore, labels such as black or indigenous are often stigmatized, prompting some Hispanics to avoid them and even to socialize their children to do the same, despite being classified as such by others (Hordge-Freeman and Veras 2020; Telles and PERLA 2014). Dominican immigrants, who often have discernibly African roots, frequently resist black identities, even though they recognize that they are perceived as black in the United States (Bailey 2001; Candelario 2007; Itzigsohn 2009; Roth 2012).

Drawing on this psychological and qualitative research, we propose the following hypothesis: we expect that Hispanics in the combined question format will be more likely to select only one category, as suggested by the cognitive psychology research. Additionally, because qualitative scholarship suggests that Hispanics have a stronger attachment to national origin labels compared to more stigmatized racial labels like black, we expect more Hispanics to choose the Hispanic/Latino label, which includes these national origin categories.

The second substantial alteration to Directive 15 is the addition of a MENA box. Based on prior research (Maghbouleh et al. 2022), we expect that this new identity box will increase MENA identification. The race question used in the 2020 census technically allows individuals to identify their MENA origins. As Figure 1 shows, under each racial box, it asks respondents to write down their national origins. The white box specifically lists two MENA nationalities, Lebanese and Egyptian, as examples. However, providing open-ended responses requires considerable cognitive effort. In contrast, the combined question format offers a dedicated MENA box, which requires less effort. Therefore, we expect it to increase MENA identification.

In summary, survey methodologists have found that changes in question format and phrasing can alter individuals' responses, impacting the size and composition of ethnic populations. Based on theoretical insights from cognitive psychology, survey methodology, and qualitative studies on how Latinos understand ethnoracial categories (Terry and Fond 2013), we hypothesize that the combined question will lead some Latinos to identify solely as Hispanic, foregoing other ethnoracial identities. We also expect that MENA identification will increase due to the inclusion of a dedicated MENA box as a response category in this question format.

## Prior Tests

As mentioned earlier, the Census Bureau conducted the NCT in 2015 to assess how the population would react to various changes in the race and ethnicity questions

(Matthews et al. 2017). The NCT experimented with 36 versions of race and ethnicity questions. Some versions included separate or combined race and Hispanic ethnicity questions. Others incorporated a MENA category. The labeling of response options also varied. They were randomly referred to as examples of race, ethnicity, origins, or simply "categories." This internal test suggested that many Hispanics would choose "Hispanic" in a combined ethnicity and race question, leading to a drastic reduction in the SOR category. Such a reduction could also lead to fewer invalid or missing responses, potentially improving the quality of census race/ethnicity data.

Although this early census exercise is useful, no tested version of the question matches the question that has been put forth by the OMB (Federal Register 2023). Version 34 of the NCT comes closest, but it has significant differences. For example, the instructions are different. The NCT question asked respondents to "select all boxes that apply and/or enter ethnicities in the space below." In contrast, the proposed combined question does not mention the term "ethnicities." In addition, the response categories used are distinct. The NCT included a category named: "Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish." In contrast, the proposed question shortens it to "Hispanic or Latino." The NCT also included a "Central or South American Indian" label, which the proposed question lacks. The MENA option is also different. The NCT used "Algerian" as a stand-alone MENA box, which the proposed question replaces it with an "Israeli" box. In addition, the questions exhibit other minor variations.[2] These differences may be consequential. Even minor modifications in ethnic identification questions, such as alterations in phrasing or example categories, can affect individuals' identification choices (Flores et al. 2023; Pryor et al. 1992; Schuman and Presser 1996). However, we do not know how version 34 performed in the field as NCT microdata are not available. Furthermore, the NCT report does not disclose results for individual versions of the question. The report only presents aggregated results for 12 versions of the combined question (Matthews et al. 2017).

Additionally, because these tests were conducted in 2015, it is uncertain whether Americans would respond the same way today. Some observers argue that recent "shifts in culture and society" have influenced how Americans identify themselves and perceive available identities (Tavernise, Mzezewa, and Heyward 2021). There is evidence that some Americans, particularly Hispanics, change their ethnoracial identification over time in both the U.S. Census and representative surveys (Agadjanian 2022; Anders et al. 2024). These identity changes may have been motivated by recent political and socio-cultural events, including national elections (Agadjanian and Lacy 2021).

In summary, the U.S. Census internal tests offer valuable insights into how Americans might respond to the upcoming changes to the racial identification questions in the Federal Registry. However, these tests were conducted several years ago, and response patterns may have changed since then. In addition, the tests did not include the version of the question advanced by the OMB. Finally, the data from these internal tests are not publicly available, preventing independent researchers from re-analyzing it and verifying the results.

## Data and Methods

Our survey experiment was included in an original survey approved by the University of Chicago's Institutional Review Board (IRB22-0782) under the Project on Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration (PERI). The PERI survey was fielded by YouGov, a reputable online polling company, from July 2023 to March 2024. The sample is designed to be the representative of U.S. adults and is weighted to the general population based on age, gender, race/ethnicity, nativity, education, region, and political leaning. See the online supplement for more information on recruitment, sampling, and survey procedures. The PERI sample includes 7,350 respondents and consists of 1,500 non-Hispanic whites, 1,000 non-Hispanic blacks, 2,150 non-Hispanic Asians, 2,400 Hispanics, and 300 respondents identifying with other racial categories.[3] The weighted sample was designed to match the national composition of these ethnoracial groups in terms of gender, age, education, and region (see Table S1 in the online supplement for a comparison of the PERI sample with the 2021 ACS). The survey was available in both English and Spanish.[4]

To examine how the proposed changes to the racial and ethnic identification questions affect Americans' racial and ethnic self-identification, we inserted an experiment as the first item of the PERI survey. Respondents in the control condition were asked the separate race and ethnicity question format used by the 2020 U.S. Census. In turn, respondents in the experimental condition were asked a combined question similar to that which was presented by the OMB in February 2023 when it first announced its intention to merge the questions (Federal Register 2023).

The question initially proposed by the OMB in 2023 has the same wording, instructions, and main response categories[5] as the version publicized by the OMB in March 2024, when it approved the merging of the race and ethnicity questions. However, there are minor differences in some of the examples provided for smaller groups. These groups do not have their own dedicated box but are listed as additional examples. For instance, the 2023 OMB question includes "Pakistani, Hmong, Afghan, etc." under Asian, while the 2024 version lists "Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc."[6]

Individuals were randomly assigned to either the control or the experimental condition, as shown in Figure 1. See Figures S4 and S5 in the online supplement for screenshots of how the questions were displayed in the web survey taken by our respondents. See Table S2 in the online supplement for a randomization check. We registered the research design and analysis plan at Open Researcher and Contributor ID, an online repository of social science experiments and observational studies (osf.io/489sq), before analyzing the data. See the online supplement for more information on the pre-registration.

In 2020, the census revised the race and ethnicity question wording and changed how it coded open-ended responses (NASEM 2023). In 2010, when respondents wrote in a Latin American or Hispanic origin in the SOR category, their answers were disregarded in the coding. However, the 2020 census treated these as valid SOR responses. This change resulted in a significant increase in the SOR and multiracial populations (Ventura and Flores 2025). To ensure comparability with

prior census results, we used the same coding rules as the 2020 census for responses in both the control and experimental conditions.

First, we assess how the proposed modifications affect the ethnoracial composition of the U.S. population by comparing Americans' self-identification choices in the control and treatment groups. Because these questions were presented to our respondents experimentally, we can rule out the effects of potential confounders. Our dependent variables are respondents' racial and ethnic self-identification choices. Second, we examine if Hispanics significantly contribute to the observed changes in the U.S. population composition, as we hypothesize. We investigate if self-identified Hispanics are less inclined to choose other categories in the combined question format, which offers a Hispanic option, as opposed to the separate question format. As an additional test, we assess whether individuals identifying as black, white, AIAN, and SOR in the combined question format are less likely to exhibit traits associated with Hispanics, such as speaking Spanish or being born in Latin America or Spain, suggesting a decrease in Hispanics identifying with these categories. Finally, to further validate our proposed mechanism, we analyze pre-experiment self-identification data from YouGov to determine if the combined question format shaped how Hispanics identified themselves during our experiment.

## Findings

We examine the effect of the proposed changes to the ethnicity and race questions by comparing identification patterns across both experimental conditions. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who identified in each ethnoracial category across both conditions. We followed census protocols to classify write-in or open-ended answers (see the online supplement). Because respondents could identify in more than one category, totals exceed 100 percent. In this table, we compare our 2024 PERI survey results with those obtained by the 2015 NCT.[7] The combined questions tested by the 2015 NCT's differed from the one approved by the OMB in 2024. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the results presented by the NCT are a combination of 12 different versions of the combined question. However, these results are commonly referenced as favorable evidence for combining the race and ethnicity questions (Matthews et al. 2017).

Table 1 shows that the 2015 NCT found that combining the race and ethnicity questions did not affect Asian or black identification, but it significantly increased Hispanic identification from 11.3 to 12.3 percent among the NCT respondents. In contrast, in our analysis using the 2024 PERI survey, we find that Hispanic identification remains relatively stable across formats, increasing from 16.2 percent (95 percent CI [15.0, 17.4]) in the separate question format to 16.6 percent (95 percent CI [15.4, 17.8]) in the combined question format. Furthermore, we find a non-statistically significant decline in black identification, which decreases from 13.5 percent (95 percent CI [12.4, 14.6]) to 13.0 percent (95 percent CI [11.9, 14.1]) when using the combined question (see also Fig. S1 in the online supplement). We also find that the identification rates for Asian, AIAN, and NHPI groups appear unaffected by the new question format. In addition, we find that multiracial identification

**Table 1:** Ethnic and racial identification by experimental condition, *percentages*.

| | 2024 PERI | | 2015 NCT | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Separate Questions (Control) | Combined Question (Treatment) | Separate Questions | Combined Question |
| White | 74.6 | 68.4* | 78.6 | 75.0 |
| | (0.7) | (0.8) | (0.4) | (0.5) |
| Hispanic | 16.2 | 16.6 | 11.3 | 12.3 |
| | (0.6) | (0.6) | (0.2) | (0.2) |
| Black | 13.5 | 13.0 | 8.3 | 8.3 |
| | (0.6) | (0.6) | (0.3) | (0.3) |
| Asian | 5.9 | 6.2 | 7.7 | 7.8 |
| | (0.4) | (0.4) | (0.1) | (0.1) |
| MENA | 0.4 | 1.5* | 0.9 | 1.1 |
| | (0.1) | (0.2) | (0.0) | (0.0) |
| SOR | 5.6 | 1.2* | 10.2 | 1.0 |
| | (0.4) | (0.2) | (0.2) | (0.0) |
| AIAN | 3.6 | 3.6 | 4.2 | 3.6 |
| | (0.3) | (0.3) | (0.0) | (0.0) |
| NHPI | 0.6 | 0.4 | 0.4 | 0.3 |
| | (0.1) | (0.1) | (0.0) | (0.0) |
| Multiracial | 3.5 | 4.2 | – | – |
| | (0.3) | (0.3) | – | – |

*Note:* $^*p < 0.05$ with $T$-test between separate questions (control) and combined question (treatment) formats in PERI, only. Multiracial is defined as individuals selecting more than one box except for Hispanic or MENA. MENA estimates in the Separate Questions are from the write-ins only. Weighted estimates.
*Source:* 2024 PERI data come from the Project on Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration (PERI). 2015 National Content Test data were adapted from table 4 in Matthews et al. (2017:41). "Combined question" estimates refer to "Combined question with detailed checkboxes."

increases from 3.5 to 4.2 percent of respondents in the proposed combined question, though this difference is not statistically significant.[8]

The 2015 NCT observed that combining the questions reduced identification as SOR by 9.2 points and white by 3.6 points. It also slightly increased MENA identification. The proposed combined question leads to comparable statistically significant effects in the PERI survey data. First, it reduces the self-identified white population from 74.6 percent (95 percent CI [73.2, 76.1]) to 68.4 percent (95 percent CI [67.0, 69.9]). Second, it reduces the percentage of respondents who identify as SOR from 5.6 percent (95 percent CI [4.8, 6.3]) to 1.2 percent (95 percent CI [0.8, 1.5]). Third, it increases the population identified as MENA from 0.3 percent (95 percent CI [0.2, 0.6]) to 1.5 percent (95 percent CI [1.1, 1.9]).

Table 1 also indicates that the 2015 NCT found that combining the questions slightly increased MENA identification. As mentioned earlier, under the 2020 census race question, individuals can only identify a MENA background by manually writing a MENA national origin as a write-in option under the white category. Nevertheless, we find that such a format is not particularly effective in identifying MENA Americans perhaps because write-in responses are time-consuming.

Twenty-three individuals in our sample wrote down MENA national origins in the separate (2020) race question, which constitutes 0.3 percent of the weighted sample under the separate question condition. Nevertheless, as the 2015 NCT and prior work has shown (Maghbouleh et al. 2022), we find that MENA identification among Americans registers a statistically significant increase when a MENA box is provided in the proposed combined question.

In the remainder of the article, we aim to uncover the mechanisms driving these effects. We focus on the non-MENA categories, hypothesizing that the changes in the U.S. ethnoracial composition caused by the proposed combined question format, aside from the MENA population, are mainly driven by Hispanics altering their identification choices. In the next section, we examine if fewer Hispanics identify with the black, white, AIAN, and SOR categories in the combined question format compared to the separate question format. In addition, we test if individuals identifying with these categories are less likely to have traits commonly associated with Hispanics, such as speaking Spanish or being born in Latin America or Spain. If both are true, it would suggest that the combined question format leads to an outflow of Hispanics from these four categories.

## Explaining Population Shifts

### *Hispanic*

Although the 2015 NCT observed an increase in Hispanic identification with a combined race and ethnicity question, we find that Hispanic identification remains relatively stable across both conditions. However, even if the percentage of individuals identifying as Hispanic does not change, there could still be a movement of some individuals into and others out of this category, motivated by the question formatting changes. Such inflows and outflows from the Hispanic category should be reflected in changes in the characteristics of U.S. adults who identify as Hispanic.

Figure 2 illustrates the impact of the combined versus separate question formats on specific traits of self-identified white, Hispanic, black, SOR, and AIAN groups, according to the 2024 PERI survey experiment. These traits include sociodemographic, economic, and political indicators. Figure 2 shows that almost all characteristics of the self-identified Hispanic population remain unchanged across formats, suggesting that the proposed combined question does not influence individuals to switch into or out of the Hispanic category. Nevertheless, the new format might still motivate self-identified Hispanics to shift out of other categories. If true, this would alter the socio-cultural traits of other ethnoracial groups, which we explore next.

### *SOR*

Hispanics are reported to account for a significant proportion of the SOR population (Matthews et al. 2017; NASEM 2023). Since the 2020 race question did not have a Hispanic category, Hispanics who did not identify with any of the standard U.S. racial categories could choose SOR. In case they wrote in a Hispanic response (i.e.

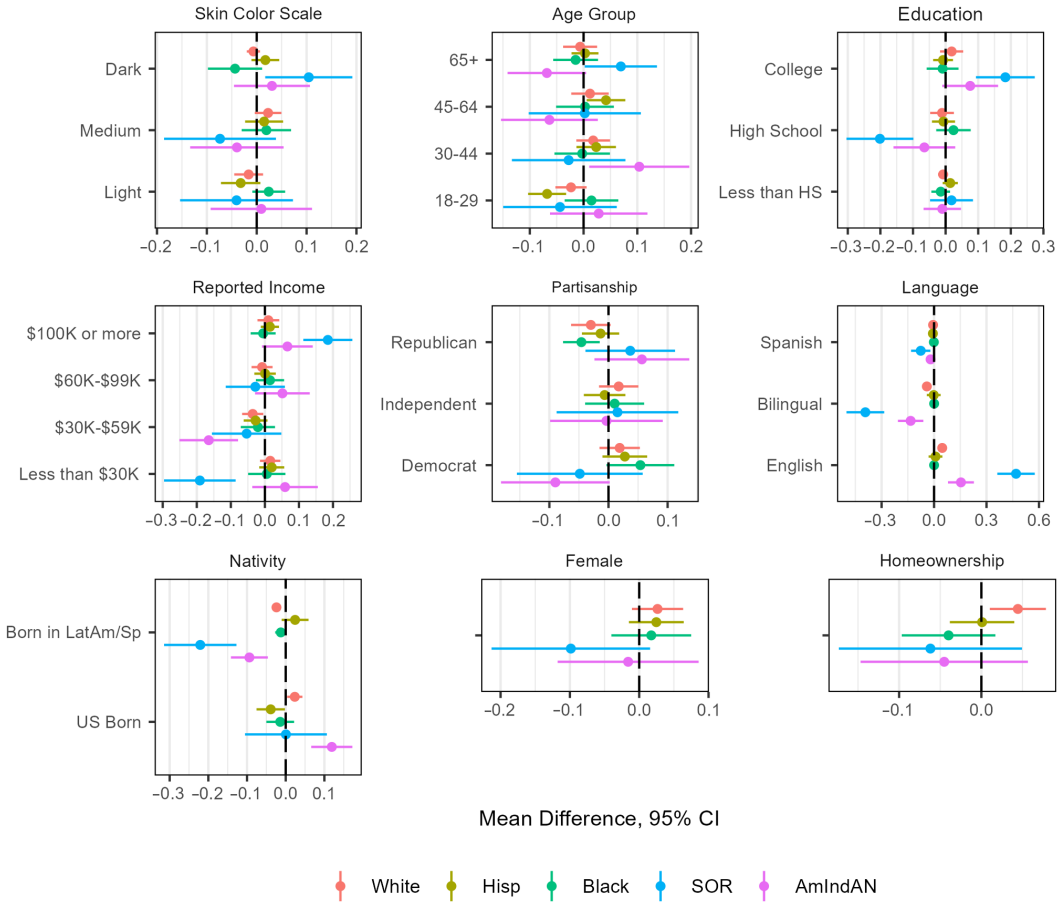


**Figure 2:** Mean differences in select traits of self-identified American Indians, blacks, Hispanics (HS), whites, and SOR across experimental conditions (ref = separate questions format). *Source:* Project on Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration (PERI).

Mexican) under a standard racial category, they would be classified by that category and as SOR (NASEM 2023; Ventura and Flores 2025). Figure 2 provides further evidence suggesting that self-identified Hispanics opt out of the SOR category when presented with the Hispanic category in the combined question format. It reveals that those identifying as SOR in the combined question format are less likely to be born in Latin America or Spain and to speak Spanish or be bilingual in English and Spanish, traits typically associated with Hispanics. Figure 2 also shows that individuals in the SOR category are more likely to have high incomes and a college degree in the combined question format than in the separate question one. These trends are consistent with the loss of Hispanics in the combined-format SOR category.

To further test this hypothesis, we examine all the identity boxes that our respondents selected across both experimental conditions in Figure 3. This allows us to assess the overlap between respondents who select SOR in the race question and those who identify as Hispanic in the ethnicity question.

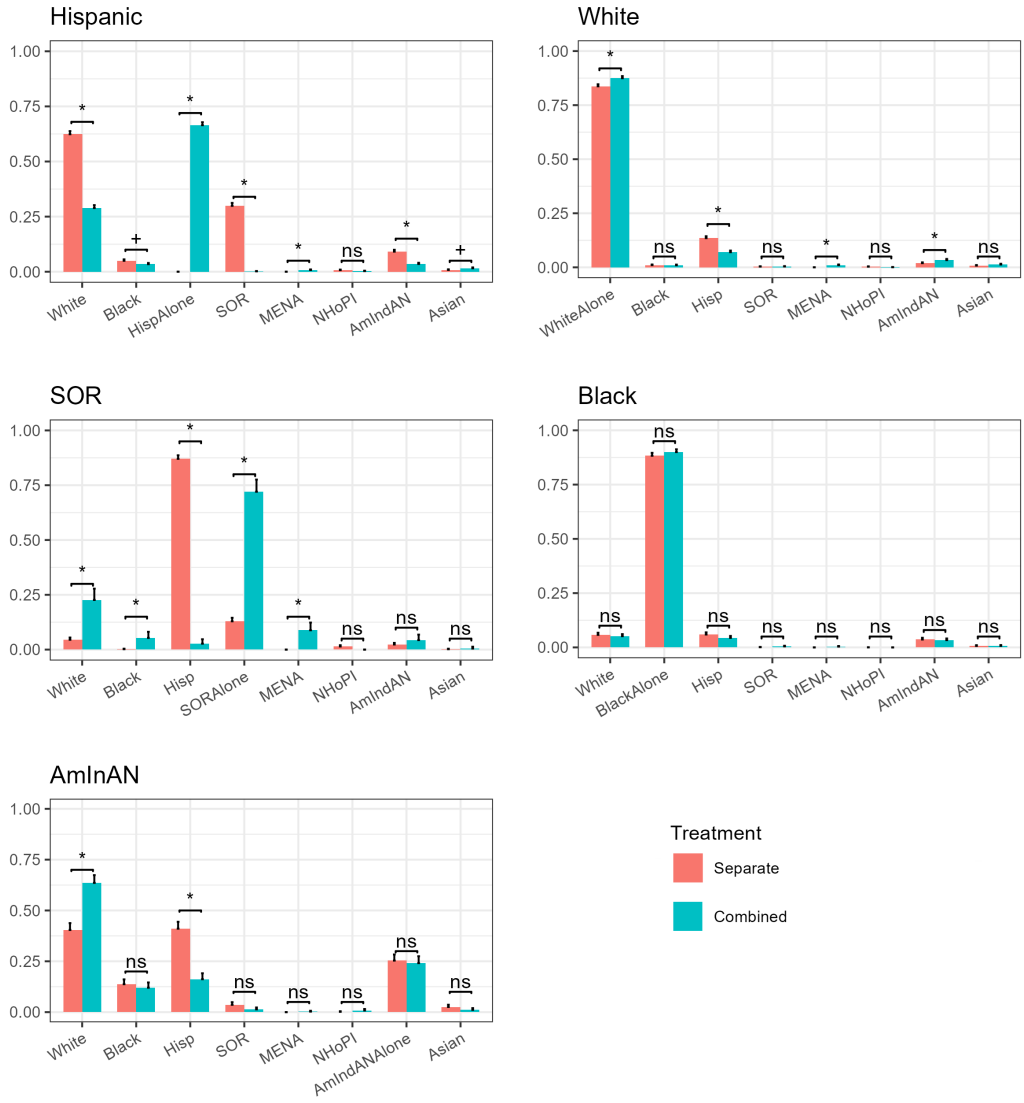


**Figure 3:** Ethnic and racial identification choices by experimental conditions. *Source:* Project on Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration (PERI). *Note:* $^{*}p < 0.05, +p < 0.1$.

Panel 1 of Figure 3 shows the racial and ethnic identification choices made by self-identified Hispanics across both question formats. It shows that 29.9 percent of individuals who self-identified as Hispanic in the 2020 ethnicity question identified as SOR in the 2020 race question. In contrast, only 0.2 percent of those choosing Hispanic also chose or were assigned to SOR in the proposed combined question. Instead, 66.5 percent of them identified solely as "Hispanic."

As an alternative test, we examine the ethnic composition of individuals who self-identified as SOR. Panel 3 of Figure 3 shows that 87 percent of individuals assigned to the 2020 question format who selected SOR in the race question identified as Hispanic in the ethnicity question. In contrast, among respondents assigned

to the proposed combined question format, only 2.7 percent of respondents who identified as SOR also identified as Hispanic.

We also examined the SOR write-ins (see Table S4 in the online supplement). Among all individuals who identified as SOR in the separate question format (who could not be coded into defined census categories), 6.8 percent ($n$ = 30, unweighted) left the SOR write-in blank but marked Hispanic in the ethnicity question and 73.7 percent ($n$ = 325, unweighted) wrote in a Hispanic response. In comparison, of the 66 individuals who identified as SOR in the combined question format, only 3 identified as Hispanic.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that Hispanics are the primary population driving the sharp decline in SOR identification between the separate and combined question formats. Many Americans identify as Hispanic rather than SOR when the option is offered in the combined question.

### *White*

The decline in Americans identifying as white under the new combined question format may also be influenced by Hispanics changing their identification choices. Figure 2 shows that the shift by Hispanics away from the white category in the combined question alters the demographic and linguistic composition of those who identify as white. Specifically, it decreases the number of bilingual (English/Spanish) speakers and those born in Latin America or Spain within the white category, characteristics typically linked to Hispanics. These shifts are consistent with the combined question moving many Hispanics out of the white category. Figure 2 also shows that such departures increase the homeownership rate among self-identified whites, due to generally lower homeownership among Hispanics (DeSilva and Elmelech 2012).

To provide additional evidence, we turn to Figure 3 again. Panel 2 shows that 13.5 percent of self-identified whites in the separate race question also identified as Hispanic in the ethnicity question. However, among respondents assigned to the combined question format, only 7.0 percent of self-identified whites also identified as Hispanic. From the Hispanic identifying perspective, Panel 1 shows that 62.4 percent of Hispanics identify as white in the separate question format. Nevertheless, when the combined question is used, we find that only 28.9 percent of self-identified Hispanics also identify as white. Panels 1 and 2 together suggest that the reduction in white identification is primarily driven by Hispanics who opt out of the white category when the question format includes a Hispanic category.

### *Black*

As mentioned earlier, we find a non-statistically significant reduction in the self-identified black population using the proposed combined question. Larger datasets should be used to confirm this pattern. However, if the combined question reduces black self-identification, we should expect changes in the remaining black population's characteristics. Figure 2 shows that some traits of the self-identified black population change under the combined question, suggesting population flows out of the black category. With the proposed combined question, self-identified blacks

are less likely to have been born in Latin America or Spain, –0.013 (95 percent CI [–0.027, –0.002]), and to identify as Republican, –0.046 (95 percent CI [–0.077, –0.015]).

Hispanics seem to be a factor in the apparent decline in black identification. Figure 3 shows the different ethnic and racial categories that self-identified blacks chose under both experimental conditions. It shows that Afro-Latino respondents, who identify as both black and Hispanic, experience a non-statistically significant decline from 5.9 percent of the total black population under the 2020 format to 4.4 percent under the combined question. In addition, Hispanics who identify as black decrease from 5.0 to 3.4 percent of the Hispanic population, which is a statistically significant change at the 90 percent confidence interval. This finding seems to validate scholars' concerns that the proposed merging of the ethnicity and race census questions may inhibit the identification of Afro-Latinos (Lopez 2023; Lowe et al. 2024). When confronted with a question that seemingly treats black and Hispanic as mutually exclusive categories, some Afro-Latinos seem to prioritize Hispanic over black identity.

To better understand which Hispanic individuals are less likely to identify as black when presented with the combined question, we next test for heterogeneous treatment effects among self-identified Hispanic respondents.[9] We test whether the effect of the combined question on black identification among Latinos varies by national origin, as there are notable differences across Latin America in terms of how blackness has been regarded by nation-building ideologies (Loveman 2014; Sue 2013; Telles and Flores 2013). We also interact treatment assignment with nativity. U.S. born Hispanics may be more aware of U.S. racial ideas and categories than their foreign-born counterparts (Bailey 2001; Roth 2012; Waters 2022). Thus, U.S.-born Hispanics may react differently to the proposed combined question than their foreign-born counterparts. Last, we test the impact of respondents' skin color.[10] Some individuals with darker complexions, potentially more sensitive to stigmatization (Monk 2015), may choose the category they perceive as less stigmatized.[11] Nevertheless, we do not find any significant interaction effects by Latino national origin, nativity, or self-assessed skin color (see Fig. S2 and Table S3 in the online supplement).

## *AIAN*

Overall, identification as AIAN does not significantly change by question format in the 2024 PERI dataset. However, considering that Hispanics appear to opt out of identification as white, SOR, and black in the combined question format, they may also decrease their identification as AIAN. This could lead to significant reductions in AIAN estimates when using larger data sources, including census data.

Figure 3 shows an even steeper decline in AIAN identification among self-identified Hispanics than in black identification. Although 41.1 percent of self-identified Native Americans identify as Hispanic in the separate question format, only 16.2 percent do so in the combined question format. This is an unexpected finding that, to our knowledge, has not been previously expressed. Similarly, among Hispanics, 9.1 percent of self-identified individuals in the separate question format

identify as AIAN, whereas only 3.5 percent do so in the combined question format. This demographic shift is reflected in Figure 2, which shows changes in the traits of self-identified AIAN respondents. They are less likely to be bilingual or to have been born in Latin America or Spain in the combined question format.

In addition, we conduct the same tests for heterogeneous treatment effects that we performed for Afro-Latinos. Our results indicate that Latinos who report an "other" national origin (i.e., not Mexico, Puerto Rico, or Cuba) and foreign-born Latinos are less likely to identify as AIAN in the combined question format compared to those with origins in Mexico, Puerto Rico, or Cuba, and U.S.-born Latinos (see Fig. S3 and Table S3 in the online supplement).

### *Do individuals change their identification choices?*

Our results so far are consistent with our hypothesis that the proposed combined question shapes the estimated ethnoracial composition of the U.S. population primarily by prompting changes in Hispanics' identification choices. However, because we rely on a between-subjects experiment, we do not directly observe individual changes in identification. Instead, we compare how respondents in the control group and the treatment group differ in their identification patterns. Further evidence of the impact of the proposed question on Hispanics' identity choices would involve knowing how respondents' self-identified before the experiment. This would enable us to evaluate whether the combined question format does indeed change individuals' identification choices. Such a test would constitute a within-person test of the combined question's effect.

Fortunately, YouGov routinely gathers data on their panel participants, including their ethnoracial identification. These data were collected before our experiment was implemented.[12] With these data, we can examine if individuals change their identification choices when presented with the alternative census questions. YouGov's question is not identical to the census questions and only permits respondents to select one box. However, it provides critical baseline identification data on our respondents collected *before* our experiment was applied. YouGov's question reads: "What racial or ethnic group best describes you?" Respondents can choose one of the following labels: white, black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian or Asian-American, Native American, Middle Eastern, two or more races, or other.

Table 2 shows how individuals who self-identified as Hispanic in YouGov's question identified in our experiment, which randomly varied the separate question format and the combined question format. We focus on Hispanics because our prior evidence suggests they are driving the population shifts produced by the combined question.

The first row of Table 2 shows that Hispanic identification is highly stable. All (100.0 percent) individuals who identify as Hispanic in the YouGov question also identify as Hispanic in either of the census questions. Although Asian identification among Hispanics remains unchanged at 0 percent, switching the census question influences whether self-identified Hispanics identify in all other categories. Asking the combined question format rather than the separate question format decreases

**Table 2:** Ethnoracial identification of individuals who previously identified as Hispanic in YouGov's surveys (weighted values).

| YouGov ID | Selected Label in PERI Survey | Separate | Combined | Sig Dif? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hispanic | Hispanic | 100.0% | 100.0% | |
| Hispanic | White | 62.7% | 27.4% | * |
| Hispanic | Black | 4.9% | 3.0% | * |
| Hispanic | Asian | 0.0% | 0.0% | |
| Hispanic | MENA | 0.0% | 0.7% | * |
| Hispanic | SOR | 30.1% | 0.2% | * |
| Hispanic | AIAN | 9.1% | 3.6% | * |
| Hispanic | NHPI | 0.7% | 0.3% | |
| Hispanic | More than one race | 6.8% | 2.8% | * |

*Note:* $^{*}p < 0.05$ with T-test between separate questions (control) and combined question (treatment) formats.
*Source:* Project on Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration (PERI).

white identification among self-identified Hispanics from 62.7 to 27.4 percent. It also significantly reduces black identification from 4.9 to 3.0 percent and shrinks identification as Native American from 9.1 to 3.6 percent. In addition, identification as SOR declines from 30.1 to 0.2 percent. All these identification shifts are statistically significant, with a 95 percent confidence level. These longitudinal data confirm that the combined question format, set to be used in the 2030 census, influences the racial identification choices of self-identified Hispanics. It significantly reduces Hispanic identification as white, black, AIAN, and SOR.

As mentioned earlier, survey methodologists find that respondents tend to select only one option in multiple-choice questions to reduce cognitive burden (Krosnick 1999; Lenzner, Kaczmirek, and Lenzner 2010; Sweller 1988). However, is the decrease in identification uniform across other categories in the combined question format? If attrition levels vary substantially, it would suggest the influence of additional factors.

Table 2 shows that attrition rates vary significantly across ethnoracial categories when using the combined question format. Afro-Latino identification decreases by the smallest margin, 38 percent, compared to the separate question format.[13] The combined question format reduces self-identification as white and AIAN by 56 percent and 60 percent, respectively. The largest drop in identification among Hispanics occurs in the SOR category, with a 99 percent decline when switching from the separate to the combined question format. While the greater cognitive load in the combined question format may reduce the likelihood of choosing non-Hispanic categories, the variation in attrition rates from other categories suggests additional reasons for avoiding certain labels.

## Conclusions and Discussion

We applied a survey experiment to a nationally representative sample of 7,350 adult U.S. respondents to test the effects of OMB's changes to the Race and Ethnicity Statistical Standards on Americans' ethnic and racial identification. We randomly

assigned our respondents to either the separate race and ethnicity questions applied by the 2020 census or to a combined question proposed by the OMB (Federal Register 2023). We then assessed this question's effects on the estimated sizes of ethnoracial groups and their sociodemographic, economic, and political traits. We discovered that these changes significantly alter our understanding of the U.S.'s ethnic and racial composition. We found that the move to a combined question decreased the size of the white, SOR, and, possibly, black populations while it increased the size of the MENA population. The Asian and Hispanic population sizes were unaffected.

Using a combination of between-subjects and within-subjects experimental tests, we uncovered the key mechanism driving these effects: self-identified Hispanics decrease their identification in other categories when a Hispanic category is available in the combined question. This leads to statistically significant decline in the percentage of Hispanics identifying as white, SOR, black, and American Indian. Although this result has been previously reported for whites and SOR (Matthews et al. 2017; NASEM 2023), it has only been theorized but not supported for blacks (Lopez 2023; Lowe et al. 2024), and the finding for American Indians was entirely unexpected.

Overall, identification as AIAN or black does not significantly change by question format among all respondents in the 2024 PERI dataset, possibly due to an insufficient number of self-identified Hispanics. However, the movement of Hispanics away from these categories when using the combined question format could significantly reduce the counts of these minority populations in larger datasets, such as the ACS or the decennial census. Given the importance of representation and visibility for minority populations, our findings suggest caution when implementing these changes and analyzing longitudinal trends post-implementation. Importantly, the new changes approved by the OMB only mandate minimum standards. The census and other government agencies can make additional modifications to these questions. These modifications could aim to make it easier for respondents to choose more than one category. In addition, a media campaign could educate respondents on the importance of selecting all labels that reflect their identity.

The reduction in SOR identification suggests that combining both questions improves the quality of the collected data, as the Census Bureau and NAS have found (Matthews et al. 2017; NASEM 2023). Nevertheless, there is a trade-off. The decline in Afro-Latino and indigenous-Latino identification may raise concerns among community advocates and activists, given the role that official race data play in resource distribution and political representation (Citro 2019).

Our findings inform debates on the future of whiteness in the U.S. Scholars have questioned whether Hispanics will become incorporated on the white or non-white side of the racial line (Abascal 2020; Alba 2016; Jones 2019; Light and Iceland 2016; Schut 2021). Such questioning is often based on findings showing that many Hispanics identify as white. However, those findings are primarily based on the separate question format that the Census Bureau has used since 1980, where many Hispanics, lacking a Hispanic option among the racial categories, often choose white (Alba 2016; Logan 2010; Telles 2018; Yancey 2003). Nevertheless, when offered a Hispanic category in a combined question, most Hispanics do not identify

as white. These findings are consistent with historical and statistical findings that a significant portion of Hispanics understand themselves as members of a non-white, non-black racial group (Gómez 2007; Hitlin, Brown, and Elder 2007).

In summary, our analyses provide evidence that the upcoming changes to the questions used for collecting federal data on race and ethnicity are highly consequential. These modifications alter Americans' identification choices in ways that are still not fully understood. No single theory may account for why Hispanics exit other boxes when provided with a Hispanic category. As predicted by the Survey methodologists would predict that the greater cognitive load in the combined question format may reduce Hispanics' tendency to choose non-Hispanic categories. Qualitative research shows that Hispanics' attachment to other ethnoracial labels, such as indigenous or black, varies based on individual traits and social understandings of these categories (Bailey 2001; Candelario 2007; Itzigsohn 2009; Roth 2012). Future research should explore these potential mechanisms. These studies could incorporate larger samples, cognitive tests, and qualitative interviews to better understand how and why the proposed changes impact Americans' racial and ethnic identification choices.

## Notes

1 Respondents are classified as SOR if they select or write in responses that do not match to any of the OMB race categories. Such write-in responses are often a national origin label, such as Mexican.

2 The NCT condition 34 includes a "Black or African Am." option, which the proposed question changes to "Black or African American." Furthermore, the NCT offers a "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander" option, which the proposed question changes to "Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander."

3 We defined non-Hispanic Whites as respondents identifying as White but not as Hispanic in YouGov's core profile of panel respondents. Similarly, non-Hispanic Blacks were defined as individuals identifying as Black but not as Hispanic.

4 Respondents who identified as Hispanic or reported Hispanic ancestry were asked about their language preferences for taking the survey. 159 respondents opted to take it in Spanish.

5 Our question includes a "Some Other Race" category, which is mandated in the Census and the ACS, but not in all federal surveys.

6 Furthermore, the 2023 OMB question lists "Dutch" as an additional example under White, while the 2024 version lists "Swedish." The 2023 question includes "Ecuadorian" under Hispanic or Latino, but the 2024 version lists "Honduran." For the MENA category, the 2023 question lists "Algerian," whereas the 2024 version lists "Yemeni." Lastly, under Black, the 2023 version includes "South African" and "Barbadian," while the 2024 version lists "Congolese" and "Trinidadian and Tobagonian."

7 The population distributions in the 2024 PERI sample and the 2015 NCT show slight differences. This could be driven by changes in the ethnoracial composition of the U.S. population during this period. In addition, the PERI sample includes only adults 18 and older, whereas the NCT draws from the entire population. Furthermore, the NCT's sampling design omitted certain areas in Georgia and Arizona and oversampled specific racial and ethnic groups (Matthews et al. 2017). These factors might account for why

the 2015 NCT's baseline estimates, displayed in Table 1, differ from the 2015 ACS: White 73.1%, Hispanic 17.6%, Black 12.7%, and Asian 5.4% (Census Bureau 2015). While these compositional differences may affect external validity, their impact on internal validity should be lower, as both studies rely on random assignment to estimate the effects of using different identification questions.

8 We adhere to Census practices, defining multiracials as individuals who select more than one box, except for Hispanic or MENA (Marks 2021).

9 These tests were not included in the analysis plan we registered. Thus, we consider them exploratory.

10 As part of the PERI survey, we asked respondents to rate their own skin color using the 11-point PERLA skin color scale, which has been validated by prior scholars (Gordon et al. 2022; Telles and PERLA 2014). Respondents were instructed to place their arm next to the skin color scale on the screen and rate it. We categorize skin colors 1–3 as light, colors 4–5 as medium, and colors 6 and above as dark.

11 Recent polls show that more Americans believe African Americans face more racial discrimination than Latinos (Bump 2023).

12 YouGov collects data on racial and gender identification of their panel participants every 27 months. Unfortunately, we lack precise information on when respondents were asked these questions, but we do know that it occurred before they participated in our experiment.

13 To calculate the relative decline in identification levels, we use this formula: Percent Decrease $=$ [(Old Value $-$ New Value)/Old Value] $\times$100. This expresses the decrease as a percentage of the original value.

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