

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

CENSUS CHANGE TO RACE, ETHNICITY QUESTIONS SHELVED BY TRUMP ADMINISTRATION DELAY

Census will keep separate questions for race and Hispanic ethnicity instead of combining them

By Paul Overberg
January 30, 2018

The Census Bureau has scrapped a plan to overhaul how it asks about race and Hispanic ethnicity in the 2020 Census, after the Trump administration delayed making a decision on the matter in time for the rollout.

As a result, the Census will keep separate questions for race and Hispanic ethnicity instead of combining them. It also will not add a planned category called "Middle Eastern/North African." Both changes had undergone extensive testing, including a nationally representative survey of 1.2 million households in 2015. Census Bureau experts endorsed both changes last year.

Albert Fontenot Jr., who heads the Census 2020 program, told a review panel Friday that the White House Office of Management and Budget didn't clear the change in time for the bureau's testing schedule.

The Trump administration hasn't taken a public stance on the changes. An OMB spokesman didn't respond to multiple requests for comment on why it hadn't made a decision in time for the Census to implement them for 2020.

OMB began studying revisions and solicited comment in 2016. Last spring, it sought more comment, noting the complexity of the proposal and changes it would require in federal forms and data systems. OMB said that it would issue a decision by mid-2017, but never did.

Census figures determine how congressional and state legislative districts are drawn as well as the distribution of more than \$675 billion a year in federal funds.

Backers of the changes said the new question format better reflects how people talk about race and ethnicity, and would boost the accuracy of the Census count. Critics saw the changes as exercises in so-called identity politics, by asking Americans to further categorize themselves along racial and ethnic lines.

The combined race/ethnicity question would have aligned federal standards with the way many Americans think and talk about the concept—as a single idea that includes "Hispanic" as a category alongside the five races that OMB requires be tallied: "American Indian," "Asian," "black," "Native Hawaiian" and "white."

The decision to keep separate race and Hispanic ethnicity questions in turn scuttled the proposed "Middle Eastern or North African" category. Karen Battle, chief of the Census Bureau's population division, told the review panel that the category had only been tested

on surveys where race and Hispanic ethnicity had been combined in a single question. Now that the bureau must keep them separate, more study is needed, she said.

Michael Gonzalez, senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation, applauded OMB's delay on both proposed changes. "I don't think the government should be going out of its way to get people to obsess about ethnicity," he said. "We're losing sight of our common identity."

Advocacy groups criticized the move.

"The decision to ignore years of research and the expert advice of scientists is a blow to science and the collection of the best data possible," said Arturo Vargas, executive director of the NALEO Educational Fund.

Maya Berry, director of the Arab American Institute, said that OMB's delay should be viewed together with the administration's failure to nominate a Census Bureau director and to boost funding for Census 2020 in line with the run-up before earlier censuses.

"I can't help but wonder if there's not a desire to suppress that count," she said, referring to Hispanics and Middle Eastern groups.

Although the census is two years away, the bureau faces imminent deadlines for a dress rehearsal this spring in Providence County, R.I. Forms have been printed, software has been tested and workers are being hired. All 264,000 households will receive the first of several mail notices by mid-March.

The Census Bureau said its tests showed the revision to the race and ethnicity portion would improve accuracy and lower costs, as more people completed the combined race/ethnicity question than in the previous format. When people don't complete surveys, the bureau must follow up, either by phone or in person. As a last resort, the bureau must fill in missing information using statistical formulas based on similar households nearby.

After Census 2010, the bureau's research showed it undercounted Hispanics by 1.5 percent while it overcounted white non-Hispanics by 0.8 percent.

OMB determines how federal agencies collect information on race and ethnicity. The rules were last changed in 1997 and rolled out with Census 2000.

The bureau will be allowed to tweak Census 2020 to collect more detail on people who identify as Hispanic, white and black. This would give researchers and policy makers better insight into immigration from Europe, Latin America and Africa.

Test versions of the new wording offered people marking "black" a blank line to fill in further descriptions, such as African-American, Jamaican, or Nigerian. Hispanics could fill in additional descriptions such as Mexican-American, Puerto Rican or Salvadoran.

Separately, bureau officials are reviewing a recent request by the Justice Department to add a citizenship question to Census 2020. New questions typically require legal justification, testing and a period for public comment, which the question hasn't had. The question will not be included in this spring's census test.

The bureau must submit its Census 2020 question list to Congress by March 31.