
The Time Of Fluidity in Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity isn't fixed. There is a large and growing literature on the fluidity of ethnic identity, and how individuals often change their identities over the course of a lifetime. Consider, for example, the work of Patrick Egan, a political scientist at NYU. Drawing on General Social Survey data from 2006, 2008, 2010, Egan recently traced the changes in how respondents identified themselves over time. Among other things, he found that while people often switch in and out of a particular national origin identity, those who claim to be of Mexican origin tend to do so consistently while those who claim to be American Indian or American Only tend to do so inconsistently — that is, almost all of those who identify as American Only in one year will decline to do so the next time the survey comes around.

Racial identification is for the most part pretty stable; religious identification is much less so, especially for those who identify as simply "Christian" rather than as members of a specific religious denomination. The list goes on. Egan's chief concern is the extent to which partisan affiliation might influence the social identities individuals do or do not claim, and he finds some evidence that it does indeed have an effect, as Perry Bacon Jr. recounts at FiveThirtyEight. It's worth noting, though, that the stakes involved in choosing one identity or another on the General Social Survey are low. Nothing is riding on whether you report that you are American Indian or American Only, a Presbyterian or a Methodist. What happens when the identities you choose have bearing on, say, whether or not you're admitted to a selective college?

In "Incentives To Identify: Racial Identity In The Age Of Affirmative Action," the economists Francisca Antman and Brian Duncan evaluate the effect state-level changes in affirmative action policies have on racial self-identification in order to determine if racial self-identification can reflect changing economic incentives. They start by positing that affirmative action policies give college applicants who have some plausible claim to identifying with an underrepresented group that stands to benefit from them a reason to do while giving those who might identify with overrepresented groups that would find themselves disadvantaged by said policies a reason not to do so. Assuming this is true, banning affirmative action would change these incentives to identify. To test this proposition, they use Census data to categorize individuals by race (a proxy for self-identification) and ancestry (a proxy for "objective" racial identity), with a focus on those who claim only African or Asian ancestry, some African or Asian ancestry (multiracial individuals), or no African or Asian ancestry in Texas, California, Washington, Florida, Michigan, Nebraska, and Arizona, all of which are states that passed affirmative action bans at some point in the 1990s or 2000s. Their results, summarized below, are striking: Consistent with a diminished incentive to identify as an underrepresented racial minority, we find that multiracial individuals with some black ancestry are about 30% less likely to identify as black once affirmative action policies are banned. In contrast, multiracial individuals with some Asian ancestry are about 20% more likely to identify as Asian once the bans are implemented. Nevertheless, because the biggest response comes from multiracial individuals and each of these groups represents a relatively small portion of the black and Asian ancestry samples, it is unlikely that the effects seen here result in any significant distortions in demographic trends in the near term. As the group of multiracial individuals continues to grow rapidly, however, and affirmative action policies continue to be struck down, this may present cause for concern in the future.

My sense is that in elite higher education, where racial preferences are very much intact, multiracial individuals have grown significantly more common among students and applicants. In these environs, incentives to identify (or disidentify) are very much in play. And of course Antman and Duncan are focused on incentives to identify as they pertain to admissions. One could speak of broader incentives to identify. The prestige of identifying with one group or another can wax or wane over time, depending on broader social currents. In some environments, claiming membership in a given group can mean gaining a certain moral authority. This is one potential explanation as to why many Americans of predominantly European ancestry have been so keen to identify as American Indian, even when the remoteness of their (supposed) American Indian ancestry is such that it won't confer membership in a federally recognized Indian tribe. It also sheds light on why many (e.g.) left-leaning affluent Americans of South Asian descent will emphasize their status as people of color over their class origins — the former can be more strategically useful than the latter, especially in the confines of elite institutions. Expect to see more savvy identity-politicking in the years to come.

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