

SEMPRE AVANTI – December 2006

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WHO ARE WE?

By Dona De Sanctis

If the U.S. Census Bureau has its way, after the next census we will know how many Eskimos live in New York City but not how many Italian Americans.

That is very bad news because most of the hard facts and statistics we have about Italian Americans come from the census taken every 10 years by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Thanks to the last census in the year 2000, for example, we learned that Italian Americans are the nation's fifth largest ethnic group with 66% of those in the work force holding white-collar professions.

We learned that they have higher-than-average levels of education – 48% have either a high school or college diploma -- compared to 44% of the general population and that they earn a median annual income of \$61,300 or \$11,300 more than the national median of \$50,000.

We learned which is the state with the most Italian Americans (New York State with 2.7 million) and which has the fewest (North Dakota with only 5,300).

THE ANCESTRY QUESTION

We learned all this and more thanks to the “Ancestry Question,” which collected data on ethnic communities that the Census Bureau sent to every one in six households as part of the last census.

Now the Bureau has dropped the Ancestry Question from the 2010 Census. In its place, it has put a new question that will be put to all Americans – but it will only ask their race and Hispanic origin.

This is a bad idea because the Ancestry Question is the *only* reliable way to learn about the size, education, employment profile, earning power, etc. of various ethnic groups, including Italian Americans.

Reporters and researchers rely on Ancestry Question data to study population groups and trends. The business world depends on it for marketing and economic expansion. Civil rights agencies use it to monitor discrimination and politicians need it to respond to the concerns of the ethnic communities they represent.

The Ancestry Question data is particularly vital to Italian Americans. From it, the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice (CSJ) created *A Profile of Today's Italian Americans*, a detailed report that helps educate the media and the general public by giving concrete government statistics and facts about the “real” Italian Americans who are 180 degrees removed from the fictitious ones that populate movies, TV shows and commercials.

[For a free copy of the report, go to www.osia.org at FIGHTING DISCRIMINATION and click on “Reports and Studies.” Or send a large (9 x 12) addressed envelope to: Sons of Italy CSJ, 219 E Street NE, Washington, DC 20002.]

WHITES NEED NOT APPLY

But if the U.S. Census Bureau drops the Ancestry Question all information about Italian Americans will be collected in the “white” racial category along with information about people of Irish, Polish, English, French and other Caucasian groups. That will make it impossible to know how many Italian Americans there are compared to Irish Americans, Lebanese Americans, Polish Americans and so on. We will only learn how many Caucasians there are compared to non-white populations.

While European, Asian-Indian and Middle Eastern Americans will all be classified as “white,” the Census Bureau will explore in depth the racial identities of non-white Americans, who will be allowed to choose one or more races to indicate their identity.

These include 15 categories of race that they can check off and three more that they can write in. As a result, the next census will give us detailed information about American Indians, Eskimos, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Native Hawaiians as well as Mulatto, Creole and Mestizo Americans.

Why has the Census Bureau made this decision? It appears to have been at the recommendation of five Race and Ethnic Advisory Committees that are working with the Census Bureau to create the next census. These committees represent African Americans, American Indians and Alaska Natives, Asians, Hispanics, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders. Where is the European American Committee?

Ironically (and undemocratically), despite the fact that European Americans represent the largest racial group in the United States, they had no say in what information will be collected in the next census.

The reason so much care is being given to racial minorities is that “millions of American Latinos do not fit neatly into one of the Census Bureau’s (previous five) race categories,” according to Congressman José Serrano (D-NY), who was among those who successfully lobbied the Census Bureau to make these changes.

“This will ensure that Americans are not forced to racially self-identify in a way they are uncomfortable with,” he says, “and will produce census results that better reflect the realities of race in America today.”

RACIAL vs. ETHNIC IDENTITY

The problem with Mr. Serrano's argument is that most white Americans do not "self-identify" themselves as Caucasians, but as members of specific, separate and identifiable ethnic and cultural communities. The same is true for many Asian Indians while many Middle Easterners do not even consider themselves white!

In sum, in order to compensate for alleged past "undercounts" among certain racial minorities, the Census Bureau is going out of its way to collect detailed data—some might even say "minutiae" -- about America's racial populations.

No one would have a problem with this were it not done at the expense of the white majority, whose tax dollars, by the way, constitute most of the funds that finance the Census.

But why can't the Census Bureau include *both* the Racial/Hispanic Question *and* the Ancestry Question on the next census? The author of this column put that question to a high-ranking Census official and was told, "The paper isn't long enough for both." Apparently, using a longer sheet of paper or a smaller font would be beyond the technical abilities of the Census Bureau.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

What can you do about this? Plenty. Pick up that mighty pen and contact your two Senators at www.senate.gov and your congressional Representative at www.house.gov.

No computer? Call 202/224-3121 for their names and contact info. Remember, faxes are better than surface mail these days. E-mails, once so popular, now usually wind up as "Junk Mail" and are rarely read by the Congress.

In your faxes, insist that your two Senators and your Congressional representative support including the Ancestry Question on the **short form** of the 2010 U.S. Census. The

decision will be made this coming January so time is of the essence. If you want to know who we will be in 2010, you need to act today.

Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D., is deputy executive director of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), the oldest and largest national organization in the U.S. for men and women of Italian heritage. To join the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice and fight defamation, contact her at ddesanctis@osia.org or call (202) 547-2900.