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# Who Are You? The Art and Science of Measuring Identity

**BY** *Scott Keeter, Anna Brown and Dana Popky*

**FOR MEDIA OR OTHER INQUIRIES:**

Scott Keeter, Senior Survey Advisor  
Anna Brown, Research Methodologist  
Nida Asheer, Senior Communications Manager  
202.419.4372  
[www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org)

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## Who Are You? The Art and Science of Measuring Identity

As a shop that studies human behavior through surveys and other social scientific techniques, we have a good line of sight into the contradictory nature of human preferences. Today, we're calling out one of those that affects us as pollsters: categorizing our survey participants in ways that enhance our understanding of how people think and behave.

Here's the tension: On the one hand, many humans really like to group *other humans* into categories. Think, "Women are more likely to vote Democratic and men to vote Republican." It helps us get a handle on big, messy trends in societal thought. To get this info, surveys need to ask each respondent how they would describe themselves.

On the other hand, most of us as individuals *don't* like being put into these categories. "I'm more than my gender! And I'm not *really* a Republican, though I do always vote for them." On top of that, many don't like being asked nosy questions about sensitive topics. A list of the common demographic questions at the end of a survey can basically serve as a list of things *not* to raise at Thanksgiving dinner.

But our readers want to see themselves in our reports, and they want to know what people who are like them – and unlike them – think. To do that, it's helpful for us to categorize people.

### Which traits do we ask about, and why?

Unlike most Pew Research Center reports, where the emphasis is on original research and the presentation of findings, our goal here is to explain *how* we do this – that is, how we measure some of the most important core characteristics of the public, which we then use to describe Americans and talk about their opinions and behaviors.

To do so, we first chose what we judged to be the most important personal characteristics and identities for comparing people who take part in our surveys. Then, for each trait, we looked at a range of aspects: **why and how it came to be important** to survey research; **how its measurement has evolved** over time; **what challenges exist** to the accurate measurement of each; **and what controversies, if any, remain** over its measurement.

These considerations and more **shape how we at Pew Research Center measure several important personal characteristics and identities** in our surveys of the U.S. public. Here are some things to know about key demographic questions we ask:

- Our main **religion** question asks respondents to choose from 11 groups that encompass 98% of the U.S. public: eight religious groups and three categories of people who don't affiliate with a religion. Other, less common faiths are measured by respondents writing in their answer. Our questions have evolved in response to [a rise in the share of Americans who do not identify with any religion](#) and to the growing diversity in the country's population. ([Chapter 1](#))
- Measuring **income** is challenging because it is both sensitive and sometimes difficult for respondents to estimate. We ask for a person's "total family income" the previous calendar year from all sources before taxes, in part because that may correspond roughly to what a family computed for filing income taxes. To reduce the burden, we present ranges (e.g., "\$30,000 to less than \$40,000") rather than asking for a specific number. ([Chapter 2](#))
- We ask about **political party affiliation** using a two-part question. People who initially identify as an independent or "something else" (instead of as a Republican or Democrat) and those who refuse to answer receive a follow-up question asking whether they lean more to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party. In many of their attitudes and behaviors, those who only lean to a party greatly resemble those who identify with it. ([Chapter 3](#))
- Our **gender** question tries to use terminology that is easily understood. It asks, "Do you describe yourself as a man, a woman or in some other way?" Amid national conversation on the subjects, gender and sexual orientation are topics on the cutting edge of survey measurement. ([Chapter 4](#))
- In part because we use U.S. Census Bureau estimates to statistically adjust our data, we ask about **race and Hispanic ethnicity** separately, just as the census does. People can select all races that apply to them. In the future, the census may combine race and ethnicity into one question. ([Chapter 5](#))
- A person's **age** tells us both where they fall in the life span, indicating what social roles and responsibilities they may have, and what era or generation they belong to, which may tell us what events in history had an effect on their political or social thinking. We typically ask people to report just the year of their birth, which is less intrusive than their exact date of birth. ([Chapter 6](#))

Each of these presents interesting challenges and choices. While there are widely accepted best practices for some, polling professionals disagree about how most effectively to measure many characteristics and identities. Complicating the effort is that some people rebel against the very idea of being categorized and think the effort to measure some of these dimensions is divisive.

## It's important that our surveys accurately represent the public

In addition to being able to describe opinions using characteristics like race, sex and education, it's important to measure these traits for another reason: We can use them to make sure our samples are representative of the population. That's because most of them are also measured in large, high-quality U.S. Census Bureau surveys that produce trustworthy national statistics. We can make sure that the makeup of our samples – what share are high school graduates, or are ages 65 or older, or identify as Hispanic, and so on – [match benchmarks established by the Census Bureau](#). To do this, we use a tool called weighting to adjust our samples mathematically.

Some of the characteristics we'll talk about are not measured by the government: notably, religion and party affiliation. We've developed an alternative way of coming up with trustworthy estimates for those characteristics – our [National Public Opinion Reference Survey](#), which we conduct annually for use in weighting our samples.

## You are who you say you are – usually

We mostly follow the rule that “you are who you say you are,” meaning we place people into whichever categories they say they are in. But that was not always true in survey research for some kinds of characteristics. Through 1950, enumerators for the U.S. census typically [coded a person’s race by observation](#), not by asking. And pollsters using telephone surveys used respondents’ voices and other cues in the interview to identify their gender, rather than by asking them.



Nowadays, we typically ask. We still make judgments that sometimes end up placing a person in a different category than the one in which they originally placed themselves. For example, when we group people by religion, we use some categories that are not familiar to everyone, such as “mainline Protestant” for a set of denominations that includes the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and others.

And we sometimes use respondents’ answers to categorize them in ways that go beyond what a single question can capture – such as when we use a combination of family income, household size and geographic location to classify people as living in an [upper-, middle- or lower-income household](#).

## Nosy but necessary questions

As much as people enjoy hearing about people like themselves, some find these types of personal questions intrusive or rude. The advice columnist Judith Martin, writing under the name Miss Manners, once [provided a list of topics](#) that “polite people do not bring into social conversation.” It included “sex, religion, politics, money, illness” and many, many more.



Obviously, pollsters have to ask about many of these if we are to describe the views of different kinds of people (at Pew Research Center, we at least occasionally ask about all of these). But as a profession, we have an obligation to do so in a respectful and transparent manner and to carefully protect the confidentiality of the responses we receive.

If you’ve participated in a survey, it’s likely that the demographic questions came at the end. Partly out of concern that people might quit the survey prematurely in reaction to the questions, pollsters typically place these questions last because they are sensitive for some people and boring for most. Like other organizations that use survey panels – collections of people who have agreed to take surveys on a regular basis and are compensated for their participation – we benefit from a high level of trust that builds up over months or years of frequent surveys. This is reflected in the fact that we have fewer people refusing to answer our question about family income (about 5%) than is typical for surveys that ask about that sensitive topic. Historically, in the individual telephone surveys we conducted before we created the online [American Trends Panel](#), 10% or more of respondents refused to disclose their family income.

One other nice benefit of a survey panel, as opposed to one-off surveys (which interview a sample of people just one time) is that we don’t have to subject people to demographic questions as frequently. In a one-off survey, we have to ask about any and all personal characteristics we need for the analysis. Those take up precious questionnaire space and potentially annoy respondents. In our panel, we ask most of these questions just once per year, since we are interviewing the same people regularly and most of these characteristics do not change very much.

Speaking of questions that Miss Manners might avoid, let's jump into the deep end: measuring religion. (Or choose your own adventure by clicking on the menu.)

# 1. Religion and religious affiliation

*What is your present religion, if any? % of adults saying ...*



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: National Public Opinion Reference Survey, conducted May 19-Sept. 5, 2023.

Despite growth in the share of people who are not religiously affiliated, religion continues to have [significant consequences for American society and politics](#). As a result, we take great care in how we measure religious affiliation and related attitudes and behaviors.

The decline of religion in the United States and many other Western democracies is an important feature of the 21st century. The decline is seen in many ways, perhaps most consequentially in a [downward trend](#) in the percentage of people who say they belong to any organized religion. This measure is sometimes called “religious preference” or “religious identification” instead of affiliation. But, in any case, it refers to how people answer a question about whether they have a religion and, if so, what it is.

Our general rule that “you are who you say you are” works pretty well with religious affiliation. But the devil, as they say, is in the details.

(In fact, our colleagues have written [multiple publications](#) on [how we measure](#) religious affiliation.)

Pew Research Center actually relies on *several* questions to categorize a person’s religion, beginning with an initial question about broad faith traditions. Members of our American Trends Panel are asked, “What is your present religion, if any?” and offered the options shown here. Other polling organizations use a similar question, though often with a different list of options or most of the same options but in a different order.

## What is your present religion, if any?

- Protestant (for example, Baptist, Methodist, non-denominational, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Episcopalian, Church of Christ, Congregational/United Church of Christ, Holiness, Reformed, Church of God, etc.)
- Roman Catholic
- Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or LDS)
- Orthodox (such as Greek, Russian, or some other Orthodox church)
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Atheist
- Agnostic
- Something else (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- Nothing in particular

Our question has evolved over time as the composition of the U.S. population changes and attitudes about religion shift. Younger generations have been coming to adulthood with much lower levels of religious affiliation than older generations did, while immigration has [brought increasing numbers of non-Christians to the country.](#)

## How Pew Research Center’s measure of religion has changed

The previous standard version of our question was based on one used by Gallup for many years: “What is your religious preference – Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, or an Orthodox church such as the Greek or Russian Orthodox Church?” In 2003, recognizing the growth and importance of the U.S. Muslim population, the Center added “Muslim” as an option.



Notice that there was no explicit option offered for people who do not have a religious affiliation. People who were atheist, agnostic or simply did not identify with a religion had to volunteer that fact to an interviewer. In a society as religious as the U.S., secular people may have felt some subtle social pressure to choose a religion. Still, in 2006, an average of roughly 12% in our telephone surveys volunteered that they had no religious affiliation.

(During the 1990s and early 2000s, we occasionally used a more detailed religious affiliation question on surveys explicitly focused on religion. That question asked first about broad faith groups, including Islam, then about denominations and subgroups, including different categories of the unaffiliated.)

We revised the standard religious affiliation question in 2007 after extensive testing that compared different approaches. We added “Hindu” and “Buddhist” as explicit options, in part because of the growing number of Asian immigrants in the U.S. We also added three options to capture the secular or less religious population: “atheist,” “agnostic” and “nothing in particular,” which together we call the religiously unaffiliated.

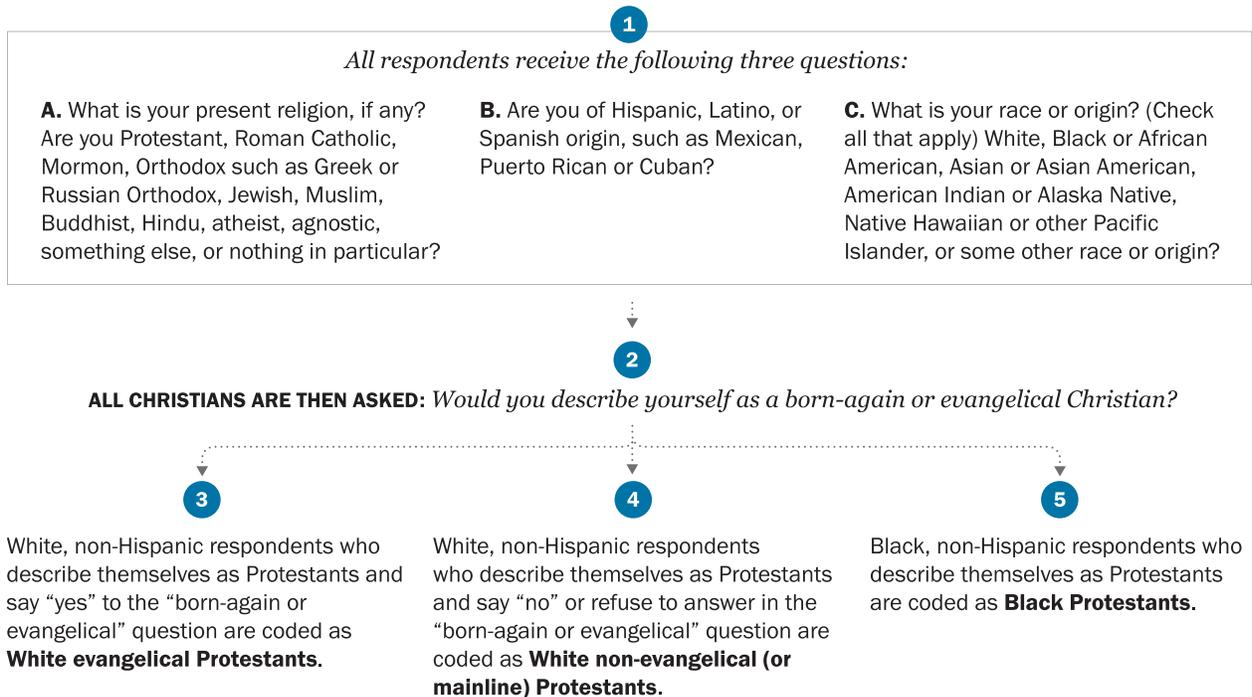
The new question produced very different results. The share of unaffiliated rose from about 12% to 16%. This suggests that some people are loosely attached to their faiths, and when given the explicit opportunity to say they are atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular, they take it. What resides in a person’s soul or innermost thoughts may be beyond our ability to determine (though we’ve tried). But the fact that we saw this change suggested that some people found themselves on

the border between nominally identifying with a religious tradition – perhaps the one they were brought up in – and no longer fully believing, practicing or wanting to claim that religion as theirs.

Given that Christians [remain a majority of the U.S. population](#), our question is a bit of a hybrid. The options we offer consist of entire faith traditions (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism) and subgroups within Christianity (such as Protestantism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy or Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), along with three flavors of secularism or disaffiliation.

This array of response options reflects the fact that faith traditions other than Christianity currently make up very small shares of the U.S. public. A typical survey sample does not yield enough interviews with people in these groups to allow us to look in detail at each one. But within one of the Christian subgroups – Protestantism, the largest American faith tradition – we sometimes look below this second level by comparing people who affiliate with different Protestant traditions.

### One way Pew Research Center categorizes Protestantism: An illustration



Note: Most Pew Research Center surveys do not obtain enough interviews with Hispanic Protestants or Protestants of other races to be able to analyze them separately.

“How Does Pew Research Center Measure the Religious Composition of the U.S.?”

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At this more granular level, some people aren't sure what category they fit in, or they don't see themselves in the categories that we offer. Like most faiths, Protestantism is amazingly diverse, with a multitude of different denominations and many churches that don't identify with any denomination at all. This complicates our ability to place people within traditions of Protestantism. In response, our questionnaires have grown to accommodate the variety of churches and faiths that Protestants currently embrace.

## Who is considered evangelical?

One of the largest and most influential subgroups within Christianity in the U.S. is evangelical or born-again Christians. While there is no single, agreed-upon definition of who is evangelical, churches within the evangelical tradition tend to share religious beliefs (including the conviction that personal acceptance of Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation); practices (like an emphasis on bringing other people to the faith); and origins (including separatist movements against established religious institutions).

*Ask if Christian (Protestant, Roman Catholic, etc.):*

**Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian?**

Yes, born-again or evangelical Christian

No, not born-again or evangelical Christian

Pew Research Center uses two ways of identifying evangelicals. The simplest and most common is to ask all Christians this question:

*Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian?*

White, non-Hispanic Christians who are Protestant and say “yes” to the born-again question are categorized as White evangelical Protestants. This group has become a mainstay of the Republican Party, and Republican candidates routinely receive [upward of 80% of its vote](#).

The other method of identifying evangelicals uses a detailed set of questions asked of Protestants to identify what specific denomination they consider their own. These questions can reliably identify most people who are affiliated with the evangelical Protestant tradition. But for a sizeable minority of respondents who are unable to provide a clear answer to the denomination question, the born-again question [and sometimes the respondent's race](#) are used to classify them as White evangelical Protestant, White mainline (non-evangelical) Protestant or historically Black Protestant.

## **Balancing conflicting principles: The special case of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**

Our general rule when referring to a specific group is to use the name that they prefer. That is easy enough to do when writing about them, but confusion can sometimes arise when we are using a survey to identify who is (and isn't) a member of the group if the group's preferred name is not well known.

The leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has expressed in recent years a desire to no longer have church members referred to as Mormons, a term derived from one of its holy scriptures – the Book of Mormon – and which the church long embraced. The Mormon label is generally familiar to Americans, many of whom may not know the church by its full, official name. Thus, a dilemma for us: How do we refer to the church in our religious identification question in a way that is respectful of its wishes and its members but also obtains an accurate measurement of affiliation?

Our standard telephone survey question about religion simply included the term “Mormon” in a list along with several other faith traditions. In the response options visible to interviewers, but not read to respondents, was a parenthetical reference to the church's official name:

*Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints/LDS)*

This type of guidance is frequently used in telephone surveys. In this instance, it would help an interviewer correctly code a response if the person being interviewed did not use the term “Mormon” but instead said they were a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or the LDS church.

When we began conducting self-administered surveys (that is, surveys where there is no interviewer; respondents simply read and answer the questions online or on paper), we used similar text as a response option:

*Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or LDS)*

But could a version without a reference to “Mormon” obtain accurate results?

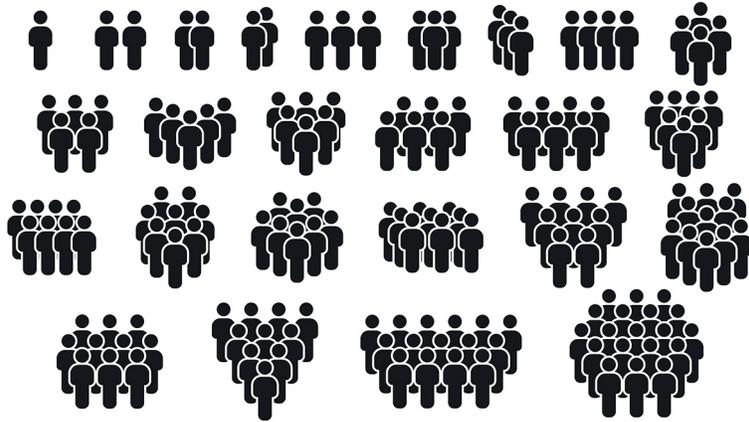
We conducted an experiment to test this by showing one group of respondents the standard version and a second group a version that omitted the word “Mormon.”

The version that omitted “Mormon” and just read “Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)” was clearly confusing to some people. It produced estimates nearly twice as large as the standard version. Researchers hypothesized that some Christian respondents saw “Church of Jesus Christ” and chose it without reading further or recognizing the full name of the church.

While this exercise did not result in a change to our standard question, it did provide us with an opportunity to standardize how we describe members of the church in our reporting and graphics. Going forward, upon first mention of the views or characteristics of the church’s members, we will use the full name along with a parenthetical reference to Mormons: “members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (widely known as Mormons).” Shorter references when space is tight – for example, in a small chart – will refer to “Latter-day Saints (Mormons).”

## How we measure and account for other faith groups

Even though the religion question is one of the lengthiest demographic items in our surveys, the range of possible affiliations is far larger than is captured by the 11 options we offer.



Survey respondents are also given an explicit option of “something else” and asked to write in their church or faith. We carefully review these volunteered responses and, where appropriate, assign them to existing categories or place them into a catch-all “Other” group.

This process of reading the volunteered responses and using them to categorize people is called “back coding” and is an important part of the measurement of religion (as well as race, and sometimes other demographic measures such as sexual orientation) because the options offered in the survey do not cover all the possible ways people think about their identities.

Many of the volunteered responses to the religious affiliation question can be assigned to an existing category. “Christian” or “just a Christian” are perhaps the most common write-in responses, and these individuals are usually back coded as Protestant. Other responses not listed explicitly as options but categorized as Protestant are Seventh-day Adventist, Quaker, Mennonite and many more.

After the back coding is complete, the Other category is home to approximately 2% of the sample. It includes Pagans, Unitarian Universalists, Wiccans, Rastafarians, Deists, Sikhs, people who write in “spiritual” and those who list two or more affiliations, among other groups that constitute very small shares of the U.S. public.

## Studying small religious groups

In our surveys of the general public, we encounter people who identify with religious traditions that represent a very small percentage of all Americans. That usually means we do not have enough interviews [to be able to describe the groups in any detail](#). But occasionally we conduct special, targeted surveys to be able to provide an in-depth portrait, as we have done with U.S. [Jews](#), [Muslims](#) and members of the [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#). These studies typically involve drawing very large samples that are somewhat concentrated in areas with larger numbers of the target population.

In our surveys of Muslim Americans, we are able measure what branch of Islam each respondent identifies with (16% Shiite, 55% Sunni). We can distinguish between converts (21% of all U.S. Muslims in 2017) and those who were raised Muslim.

Studying Jewish Americans brought a unique measurement challenge: A sizeable number of people consider themselves to be Jewish ethnically, culturally or by family background. They may have been raised Jewish or have a Jewish parent, but do not claim Judaism as their religion.

To better understand the views and experiences of all kinds of Jewish Americans, Pew Research Center conducted a [complex two-part study in 2019-2020](#). The first part screened a very large random sample of the public to identify people who said that they are Jewish in response to our standard religion question. But the screener also sought additional people who potentially could be part of a group we call “Jews of no religion.” The main survey included questions that further identified or confirmed those who could be a part of that group. Ultimately, they needed to meet three criteria: 1) they responded atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” to the standard religion question; 2) they consider themselves Jewish in any way aside from religion; and 3) they were either raised in the Jewish tradition or had one or two Jewish

**Q15. ASIDE from religion, do you consider yourself to be any of the following in any way (for example, ethnically, culturally or because of your family's background)?**

**a. Jewish**

- Yes, consider myself this
- No, do not consider myself this

**Q16. Please indicate whether you were raised in any of the following traditions or had a parent from any of the following backgrounds.**

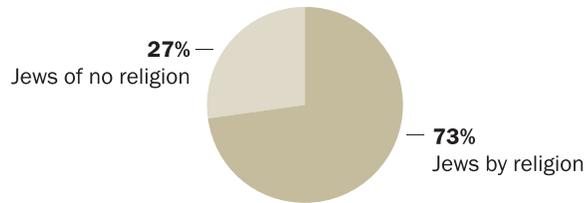
**a. Jewish**

- Yes, was raised in this tradition or had a parent from this background
- No, was not raised in this tradition and did not have a parent from this background

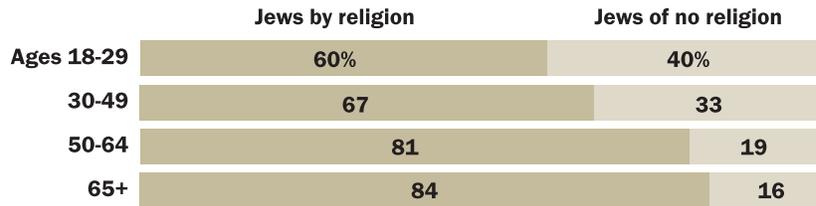
parents. These “Jews of no religion” constituted 27% of all Jewish Americans in the 2019-2020 survey.

Having a large sample of Jews made it possible to describe this population in much greater detail, such as how identification with different branches of Judaism varies by age. For example, the study found that, compared with older Jewish people, the Jewish population under age 30 includes larger shares of both Orthodox Jews and Jews with no denominational identity.

### Jewish identity in the United States, 2020



### U.S. Jewish identity, by age



Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020.  
 “Jewish Americans in 2020”

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## What ‘religious affiliation’ does not mean

Affiliating with a religion does not necessarily mean that a person holds any particular set of beliefs or engages in particular practices. If someone tells us they are Catholic, we consider them Catholic even if they also tell us that they never go to Mass or confession, or even that they do not believe in God. Similarly, people who do *not* affiliate with a religious tradition may still believe in God, pray regularly or say that religion is very important in their life. They are categorized as unaffiliated but may still be considered religious.

Getting a full sense of the role of religion in a person’s life may require understanding “the three B’s” – *believing, behaving, belonging*. Religious affiliation is mainly about belonging, but knowing about a person’s beliefs and behaviors is important to create a well-rounded portrait of their religiosity. We routinely ask all three kinds of questions in our surveys.

## 2. Income

*Last year, that is in 2022, what was your total family income from all sources, before taxes?  
% of adults saying ...*

Less than \$30,000	\$30K to less than \$70K	\$70K to less than \$100K	\$100K or more	Refused
19%	32%	15%	30%	4%

Source: National Public Opinion Reference Survey, conducted May 19-Sept. 5, 2023.

In arguing for the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, [James Madison wrote](#) in the Federalist Papers that “the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property.” Because the study of public opinion is often the study of the political factions in society, polls need to be able to measure the economic circumstances of individuals who directly experience “the various and unequal distribution of property.”

No single measure of a person’s economic situation is wholly adequate for this purpose. We can – and do – ask if respondents own the home they live in, and occasionally we ask if they have money in investments like stocks or mutual funds. But asking deeper questions about property and wealth takes time, and many find such questions intrusive. Instead, personal, family or household annual income is often used as a shorthand – if imperfect – indicator of Americans’ financial circumstances.

For government officials, income is a vital measurement to [determine program eligibility and allocate funding](#) for

### **Last year, that is in 2022, what was your total family income from all sources, before taxes?**

Less than \$30,000  
\$30,000 to less than \$40,000  
\$40,000 to less than \$50,000  
\$50,000 to less than \$60,000  
\$60,000 to less than \$70,000  
\$70,000 to less than \$80,000  
\$80,000 to less than \$90,000  
\$90,000 to less than \$100,000  
\$100,000 or more

*Ask if family income is less than \$30,000:*

### **And in 2022, would you say that your total family income from all sources, before taxes, was ...**

Less than \$5,000  
\$5,000 to less than \$10,000  
\$10,000 to less than \$15,000  
\$15,000 to less than \$20,000  
\$20,000 to less than \$25,000  
\$25,000 to less than \$30,000

*Ask if family income is \$100,000 or more:*

### **And in 2022, would you say that your total family income from all sources, before taxes, was ...**

\$100,000 to less than \$125,000  
\$125,000 to less than \$150,000  
\$150,000 to less than \$175,000  
\$175,000 to less than \$200,000  
\$200,000 to less than \$225,000  
\$225,000 to less than \$250,000  
\$250,000 or more

affordable housing, Medicaid, education and more. At Pew Research Center, we use income to understand how Americans' attitudes and experiences differ depending on their financial status. But despite its importance, income is notoriously difficult to measure accurately.

## The challenges of measuring income

A cardinal rule of writing survey questions is that respondents need to be willing and able to answer them. Income questions are often associated with [high rates of item nonresponse](#) – that is, when respondents decline to answer certain questions. Some respondents may be reluctant to answer income-related questions because they consider them [uncomfortable or an invasion of privacy](#).



On Pew Research Center surveys, questions on income are refused more often than any other demographic question. Typically, item nonresponse for questions on gender, race and education hovers around 1% or less. But on an American Trends Panel survey conducted in 2023, 5% of respondents refused to answer the family income question.

Notably, a 5% refusal rate is relatively low compared with past surveys. Prior to the establishment of the online panel, refusals to the income question averaged about 13% in our telephone surveys. [Several government surveys](#) have even higher rates of nonresponse on income questions, in some cases ranging from 20% to 40%.

Historically, higher-income respondents have been especially hesitant to disclose their income and assets. Their aversion can be seen [as early as the 1940 census](#), when the U.S. Census Bureau first began asking income-related questions. In response to concerns from high-earning Americans, Census interviewers grouped any incomes above \$5,000 together as \$5,000+. The [interviewer instructions](#) noted, “Some persons who might otherwise be reluctant to report wages or salary would be quite willing to do so if they learn that the amount above \$5,000 need not be specified.”



the annual [American Community Survey](#) use a detailed series of questions because their statistics are relied upon as the definitive national measurement of income. Most social science researchers are limited to shorter surveys and often do not have the space to mimic the Census Bureau's approach, even if respondents are willing to answer such detailed questions.

## How we measure income

Center surveys generally ask about total family income, rather than individual or household income, as part of our standard group of demographic questions.

The goal of asking about family income rather than individual income is to gain a more complete picture of the total income-related resources that a respondent might rely upon. This is especially important for respondents who are not the sole earner of their household.

While family income is similar to household income, they differ in important ways. The U.S. Census Bureau defines [household income](#) as the total income of all people ages 15 and older who live in the household, including people who may not be related to the respondent (such as roommates). On the other hand, [family income](#) is meant to include the income from just the people within a household that are related to or cohabitating with the respondent.

Surveys like the [General Social Survey](#) and the [American National Election Studies](#) have been asking about family income for decades. But other than those conducted by the government or for official purposes, most surveys (including ours) do not spell out the various age and household composition qualifications in detail, nor do they include the level of detail necessary to capture a respondent's exact income figure. To do so would require significant time and space, and runs the risk of frustrating respondents. The consequence of forgoing this added detail is that income estimates are less precise than many other demographic characteristics captured in surveys.

## Addressing sources of error in income questions

Researchers can combat [nonresponse and measurement error](#) on income questions in a few ways.

The first is by asking about income using categories or brackets rather than asking respondents to provide an exact number. For respondents who feel uncomfortable disclosing their exact income, the income brackets can provide a sense of anonymity.

Providing income brackets can also make answering easier for respondents who might not have an exact picture of their income but have a rough idea of where they fall. And if a respondent does not recall all of the various income sources they have, their actual total income may still fall in their selected bracket.

While income ranges do not provide the same detail as a write-in figure, respondents are [generally more willing to answer](#) with a range than with an open-end question. In this case, the benefits are likely to outweigh the costs.

On the Center's American Trends Panel, researchers typically ask about income in a sequence of questions. The first asks respondents to select their income from a list of brackets, with options for "less than \$30,000," "more than \$100,000" and a set of categories between these two. If a respondent indicates their family income is below \$30,000 or above \$100,000, they will receive one of two follow up questions asking them to specify further.

This process can lower item nonresponse rates among those with the highest and lowest family incomes. For instance, a respondent with a family income of \$260,000 might feel comfortable saying their earnings are above \$100,000 but would not feel comfortable specifying further. In these cases, Center researchers can still collect limited information on income from respondents who might have otherwise refused the question altogether.

Finally, income questions often reference the previous calendar year rather than "the past 12 months" because income taxes for individuals are typically computed on a calendar year basis. People may be more likely to recall the income reported on a tax form from a previous year. Recalling the past 12 months' income may require a mental calculation that people cannot or will not undertake.

## Going beyond income brackets to income tiers

While family income can be a useful tool to understand Americans' finances, annual income alone can present a misleading picture of a respondent's financial situation. Families differ in size and the cost of living varies depending on where people live.

For instance, consider two respondents who each say they have a family income of \$70,000. One lives alone in Jackson, Mississippi, and the other lives with their spouse and four children in San Francisco, California. Using the standard income brackets, these respondents would be grouped and analyzed in the same category. But the lived experiences of these two people might be very different, given the needs of each household and the cost-of-living differences between the two locations. Lumping these two households into the same category might not be effective when researchers want to analyze how respondents in different socioeconomic groups interact with their communities and the world around them.

To address these concerns, Pew Research Center researchers created a three-category measure of purchasing power called [income tiers](#). These tiers consider household size and geography along with family income.

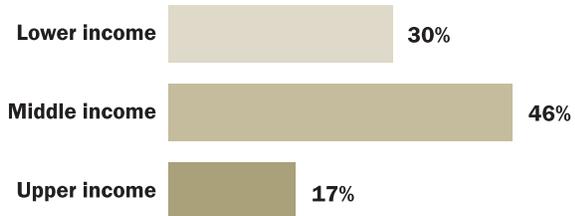
To create the income tiers, Center researchers identify each respondent's cost-of-living adjusted family income by accounting for differences in prices across states and metropolitan areas. They also account for the respondent's household size. Using this adjusted income, each respondent is assigned to an income tier. Respondents are classified as lower income if their adjusted family income falls below two-thirds of the median adjusted income of all the survey respondents; middle income if their income is two-thirds to double the median; and upper income if it's greater than double the median.

On the American Trends Panel, researchers reassess each panelist's income tier on an annual basis, using updated income information from the latest calendar year. The median income in this case comes from the entire panel, and not from the subset of panelists in each individual survey.

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### Income tiers on the American Trends Panel

*% of ATP panelists in each income tier*



Note: Family income tiers are based on adjusted 2022 earnings. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 7-27, 2023.

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Using this method, 30% of panelists are lower income, 46% are middle income and 17% are upper income. An additional 7% skipped either the income question or household size question, and as a result could not be assigned an income tier.

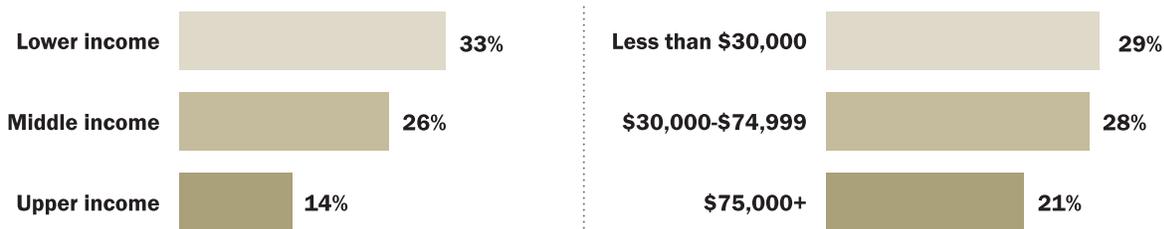
## Using income tiers to understand public opinion

Income tiers often tell a clearer story of how Americans' attitudes and experiences differ than we would see just using income. Consider [our analysis of layoffs during the COVID-19 pandemic](#): When looking at the unadjusted data, Americans with a family income less than \$30,000 appear just as likely as Americans with an income between \$30,000 and \$74,999 to say that they or someone in their household has been laid off or lost a job because of COVID-19.

---

### Adjusted income tiers can better explain our respondents' economic realities

*% saying they or someone in their household has been laid off or lost a job because of the coronavirus outbreak*



Note: Family income tiers are based on adjusted 2019 earnings.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 3-16, 2022.

"Improving the way we categorize family income"

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However, when accounting for household size and geographic differences, Center researchers were able to see that Americans in the lower income tier were more likely to have experienced a job loss in their household. In general, the association between financial situation and likelihood of a layoff is stronger when income tiers are used as the measure, rather than income itself.

Going forward, our researchers will continue to use income tiers as a key tool to understand Americans' attitudes and experiences. Recent Center analysis finds that workers from lower-income families are less likely to view their career as [central to their identity](#). Lower-income parents are also the least likely to say they are trying to [raise their children similarly](#) to how they

were raised, and lower-income adults are the most likely to say that [lack of affordable housing](#) is a major problem where they live.

**Related:** [Are you in the American middle class? Find out with our income calculator](#)

## Which of the income tiers do you fit in? Try our American middle class income calculator

Click here: [\[AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS INCOME CALCULATOR\]](#)

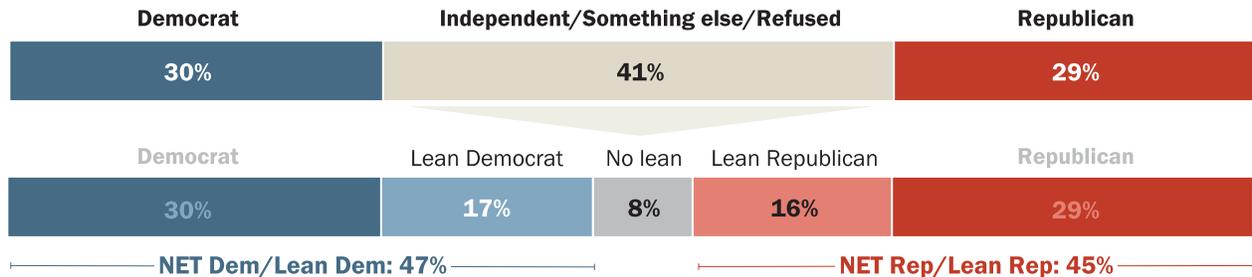
<p><b>State:</b></p> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 2px; width: 150px;">Select a state ▼</div> <p><b>Metropolitan area:</b></p> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 2px; width: 150px;">Metro area ▼</div> <p><b>Household income before taxes:</b></p> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 2px; width: 60px;">\$</div> <p><b>People in my household:</b></p> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 2px; width: 30px;">#</div>	<p>SHARE OF AMERICAN ADULTS IN EACH INCOME TIER</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 10px;">Upper</td> <td style="background-color: #c4a33b; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">19%</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2"><hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #ccc;"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Middle</td> <td style="background-color: #c4a33b; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">52%</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2"><hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #ccc;"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Lower</td> <td style="background-color: #c4a33b; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">29%</td> </tr> </table>	Upper	19%	<hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #ccc;"/>		Middle	52%	<hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #ccc;"/>		Lower	29%
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### 3. Party affiliation

*In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, independent or something else? As of today do you lean more to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party? % of adults saying ...*



Source: National Public Opinion Reference Survey, conducted May 19-Sept. 5, 2023.

Partisanship is frequently criticized as a destructive force in U.S. politics, with some arguing it leads to polarization, gridlock, and possibly anti-democratic attitudes and actions. Even the [framers of the Constitution warned](#) about its potential for harm. At its base, partisanship is just the simple action of choosing sides – but it’s powerful. Identifying or allying with the Democratic Party or the Republican Party is perhaps the most important predictor of how a person is likely to vote or what opinions they hold about various issues, and that connection has grown over time.

Pollsters and political observers call this “party affiliation” or “party identification.” For at least the past two decades, [the vast majority of voters in presidential elections](#) have regularly chosen the candidate of the party they prefer, and [partisan differences on political attitudes](#) far surpass those by age, race and ethnicity, and other demographic factors.

Pollsters typically measure party affiliation in the U.S. by asking people two or three questions. First is whether the respondent considers or thinks of themselves as a Republican, a

#### In politics today, do you consider yourself a ...

Republican  
Democrat  
Independent  
Something else

Ask if Independent, something else, or refused:

#### As of today do you lean more to ...

The Republican Party  
The Democratic Party

Ask if Republican:

#### Do you identify with the Republican Party ...

Strongly  
Not strongly

Ask if Democrat:

#### Do you identify with the Democratic Party ...

Strongly  
Not strongly

Democrat, an independent or something else. Anyone who identifies as a Republican or Democrat is classified as such. We typically ask a follow-up question of these individuals to gauge whether they identify “strongly” or “not strongly” with their party. For people who do not identify with either of the two major parties – who describe themselves as independent, as something else or refusing the question altogether – a follow-up question asks whether they “lean” (or feel closer) to one major party or the other.

## Most independents aren't independent

In response to the initial party affiliation question, around four-in-ten Americans decline to say that they “consider themselves” to be a Democrat or a Republican – after all, political parties [aren't very popular these days](#). But most of those who initially decline to identify with a party will nevertheless indicate a preference between the two parties if asked whether they *lean* to one party or the other.

Those who pick a party when first asked are, on average, older and more politically engaged than those who don't pick a party but lean toward one on the second question. However, both those who identify with a party and those who lean toward it are overwhelmingly supportive of that party's candidates in elections, with leaners only slightly less so. Partisans and leaners also tend to hold [similar views on issues](#). For this reason, Pew Research Center's standard approach is to report on what is called “leaned party” – analyzing those who identify with and lean toward a party together – when reporting the views of Republicans and Democrats.

But how many *real* independents, and affiliates of third parties, are there? In our 2023 [National Public Opinion Reference Survey](#) (NPORS), 8% of all adults declined to lean to one of the two major parties. The share of the public who does not lean to a party depends to some extent on the mode of the survey and on the wording and format of the question. NPORS is self-administered, either by web or a paper questionnaire. Its version of the political affiliation question does not provide an explicit “no lean” option, which means that people who do not lean must skip the question to indicate this. Some other polling organizations provide an explicit “no lean” option and find somewhat higher shares for the no-lean population. In live interviews, people can volunteer responses that are not explicitly offered, and thus can more easily say that they do not lean, even if not offered an explicit no-lean option.

Though sometimes portrayed as independent-minded swing voters who carefully weigh the issues, the no-lean group is actually much less politically engaged than leaners and partisans. They are less politically interested, less knowledgeable about politics and [far less likely to vote](#).

## Declaring a party affiliation when registering to vote

The preference for one party versus another can also be expressed when a person registers to vote. Many states allow voters to identify their party affiliation on their registration, and in some of these states voting in partisan primaries is restricted to people who are registered partisans.

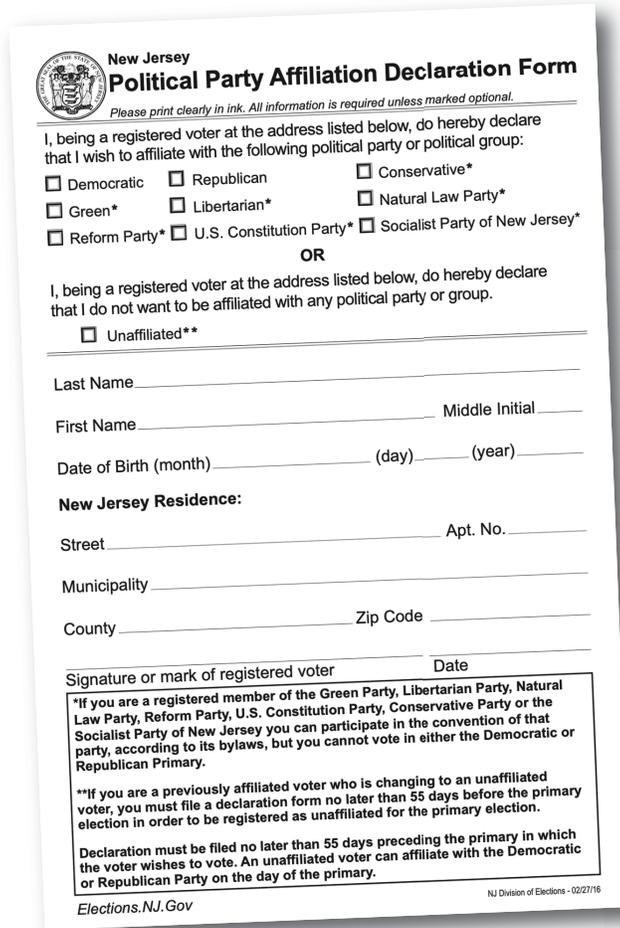
But compared with the standard party affiliation survey question, reported registration with a party (or from the voter's official state registration record) is [not as reliable a predictor](#) of which

party's candidate a person will support. Particularly in states where primaries are not restricted to partisans, a person's party registration might be quite dated. For example, some older residents of Southern states who now reliably vote Republican remain registered as Democrats, a legacy of when conservative Democrats dominated politics in the region. In addition, many states do not record a party preference when registering a voter. And those that do also permit registration as a member of a minor party, as an independent or as unaffiliated.

Compared with researching these topics in the U.S. electoral system that includes features that make it difficult for third parties to gain a foothold – like single-member legislative districts and the Electoral College – [measuring party affiliation in other nations](#)

poses different and sometimes steeper polling challenges such as multiparty systems and more formal party registration practices.

## How New Jersey voters declare a party affiliation



**New Jersey**  
**Political Party Affiliation Declaration Form**  
*Please print clearly in ink. All information is required unless marked optional.*

I, being a registered voter at the address listed below, do hereby declare that I wish to affiliate with the following political party or political group:

Democratic     Republican     Conservative\*  
 Green\*     Libertarian\*     Natural Law Party\*  
 Reform Party\*     U.S. Constitution Party\*     Socialist Party of New Jersey\*

**OR**

I, being a registered voter at the address listed below, do hereby declare that I do not want to be affiliated with any political party or group.

Unaffiliated\*\*

Last Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 First Name \_\_\_\_\_ Middle Initial \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date of Birth (month) \_\_\_\_\_ (day) \_\_\_\_\_ (year) \_\_\_\_\_

**New Jersey Residence:**  
 Street \_\_\_\_\_ Apt. No. \_\_\_\_\_  
 Municipality \_\_\_\_\_  
 County \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Signature or mark of registered voter \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**\*If you are a registered member of the Green Party, Libertarian Party, Natural Law Party, Reform Party, U.S. Constitution Party, Conservative Party or the Socialist Party of New Jersey you can participate in the convention of that party, according to its bylaws, but you cannot vote in either the Democratic or Republican Primary.**

**\*\*If you are a previously affiliated voter who is changing to an unaffiliated voter, you must file a declaration form no later than 55 days before the primary election in order to be registered as unaffiliated for the primary election.**

**Declaration must be filed no later than 55 days preceding the primary in which the voter wishes to vote. An unaffiliated voter can affiliate with the Democratic or Republican Party on the day of the primary.**

NJ Division of Elections - 02/27/16  
 Elections.NJ.Gov

Source: New Jersey Division of Elections

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## 4. Gender and sexual orientation

*Do you describe yourself as a man, a woman or in some other way? % of adults saying ...*



Source: National Public Opinion Reference Survey, conducted May 19-Sept. 5, 2023.

Not so long ago, most surveys measured a person’s gender either by observation or with a question that had two response options – “male” or “female.” Survey research, like society more generally, rarely allowed for the possibility that a person’s gender might not match the sex on their birth certificate, or that they might not describe themselves as a man or a woman at all. Similarly, social conventions combined with the presumed small size of the population that is not heterosexual meant surveys rarely asked about sexual orientation.

While [Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey’s](#) studies of sexual behavior in the 1940s and 1950s were based on interviews that included questions about same-sex attraction and behavior, questions about sexual orientation were not common in surveys prior to the 1980s. Public health researchers attempting to combat the AIDS epidemic began regularly asking questions about sexual orientation and behavior, and such questions slowly became more common in general public surveys.



Today, gender and sexual orientation are topics on the cutting edge of survey measurement. As of 2022, more than four-in-ten U.S. adults report that they personally [know someone who is transgender](#), and one-in-five say they know someone who is nonbinary – that is, they are neither a man nor a woman, or aren’t strictly one or the other. Surveys show that the share of U.S. adults who indicate that they are LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer) has [gradually increased over the past decade](#). Social science and health researchers are particularly interested in accurately capturing data on gender and sexual orientation to learn more about how Americans identify, their experiences in society, health outcomes, wages and more.

Accurately measuring gender and sexual orientation poses several challenges to survey researchers. An obvious one is that some people may not be comfortable identifying as LGBTQ in a

survey due to the fear of discrimination or social stigma. This hesitation is [less of a concern](#), but may still be present, in the context of a confidential survey that doesn't use live interviewers.

Another issue is that some of the terminology that LGBTQ or nonbinary individuals use to describe themselves may be unfamiliar to many Americans. For example, a 2022 Center survey found that 21% of Americans said that they had [heard nothing at all](#) about people not identifying as a man or a woman and instead using terms like “nonbinary” or “gender-fluid” to describe themselves. And some people simply reject the idea that someone's gender can be impermanent and are offended by questions that suggest otherwise.

## How we ask about gender

For most of the telephone surveys we conducted over the past three decades, interviewers either recorded the assumed sex of the respondent based on their voice, or selected a respondent by asking specifically for a male or a female and recorded the person's sex based on that selection, typically without asking for further confirmation. Until recently, the standard demographic battery on most of Pew Research Center's self-administered surveys used a binary question that didn't make a clear distinction between sex and gender. (“Are you male or female?”)

In 2020, we undertook research to [determine a better way of asking about sex and gender](#) on our surveys. Because we frequently look at [men and women as key subgroups](#) when analyzing our survey results, it was important to find the right way of asking this critical demographic question, and we recognized that the language we had been using didn't capture the way some of our respondents describe themselves.

Reconfiguring the gender question required a balancing act. We had to make sure that our respondents would recognize themselves in the categories we offered and know which one to pick. Offering a wide range of options to capture the [many ways people describe themselves](#) might be helpful for a small group of respondents but risks confusing others.

**Do you describe yourself as a man, a woman or in some other way?**

A man  
A woman  
In some other way

After testing several new options for gender and sex questions, we settled on asking, “Do you describe yourself as a man, a woman or in some other way?” This clarifies that we are asking about gender (by asking how they describe themselves and using the terms “man” and “woman,” which

are usually associated with gender) and allows those who are neither a man nor a woman to indicate this without introducing terminology that some respondents may be unfamiliar with.

This approach comes with some complications, though. The share of people who describe themselves “in some other way” besides man or woman is so small that we cannot report their views separately in any typical survey (though their responses are always included in the general population figures in our research). Also, extra care must be taken to ensure respondents’ confidentiality when [releasing our datasets](#) to the public, since nonbinary adults are a small share of the population and may or may not be open about their gender with people in their lives.

## How we ask about sexual orientation

Our sexual orientation question has also changed in small ways over the years, though our approach closely resembles [questions asked on government surveys and others](#).

### Do you think of yourself as ...

- Gay or lesbian
- Straight, that is, not gay or lesbian
- Bisexual
- Something else
- I don’t know the answer

One of our main purposes in developing this question is to use plain language that will be recognized by as many participants as possible. This is why we avoid terms like heterosexual and homosexual and say “straight, that is, not gay or lesbian” in case respondents don’t know what “straight” means.<sup>1</sup>

Being conscious of terminology may be especially important for surveys translated into Spanish, where “straight” does not have a universally understood translation. Even the premise of the question is framed using [plain language](#) – we simply ask how respondents think of themselves, rather than, “What is your sexual orientation?” This is similar to the way we ask how respondents *describe* themselves to learn their gender identity.

In this question, we also allow respondents to select “something else” or “I don’t know the answer” in case the response options provided don’t fit, or if they are not sure of their sexual orientation. However, we do not include responses of “something else” as part of the lesbian, gay and bisexual population because studies have shown that most people who select this are [protesting the question](#) rather than indicating a sexual orientation.

<sup>1</sup> This terminology comes with limitations. “Straight, that is, not gay or lesbian” assumes that being straight is the norm. It also doesn’t take into account that there are other sexual orientations besides straight, gay and lesbian.

## Digging deeper on gender identity and sexual orientation

In a typical survey sample, the number of people who are transgender or nonbinary is too small for separate tabulation. Research that focuses on these and other gender minorities require larger samples and more detailed measures. Choosing a set of measures comes with a few challenges.

Psychologists and health researchers make a distinction between gender and sex, though our research shows that [much of the U.S. public rejects the idea that these can be different](#).

Researchers in this field define the terms this way:

- **Sex** refers to the biological characteristics that make one male or female, such as chromosomes, hormones, reproductive organs and secondary sex characteristics like breasts and facial hair. Survey questions may ask respondents’ [“sex assigned at birth”](#) and may offer “male” and “female” as response options – though this could change as some states begin [issuing birth certificates](#) that specify intersex or other options for sex.
- **Gender** relates to how people think of themselves. Some people think of themselves as a man or a woman, while others think of themselves another way. They may be nonbinary or use a [myriad of other terms](#) such as agender or genderqueer to describe themselves. While overall a small share of U.S. adults are nonbinary – [1%, by our count](#) in 2022 – it’s more commonplace among young adults and in [some cultures](#). Pew Research Center’s current standard question asks about gender, since gender is most directly relevant to our analysis of Americans’ attitudes and experiences.

Identifying whether someone is **transgender**, that is, whether their gender is different from the sex they were assigned at birth, requires a different approach.

### In the U.S., young adults are the most likely to be transgender or nonbinary

*% of U.S. adults who say their gender is different from their sex assigned at birth*



Note: Trans men are those who said they were assigned female at birth and described their gender as a man. Trans women are those who said they were assigned male at birth and described their gender as a woman. Figures may not add to subtotals due to rounding.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 16-22, 2022. “5 key findings about LGBTQ+ Americans”

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Some surveys simply add “transgender” as a third option to a gender question, alongside “man” and “woman.” However, this approach may underestimate the number of people who are transgender, many of whom might use several of these terms to describe themselves and may prefer to select “man” or “woman” if forced to choose.

Another approach is to ask a yes/no question like, “Do you consider yourself to be transgender?” This should capture people who identify with the term transgender, but not everyone whose gender differs from their sex assigned at birth [uses that term to describe themselves](#).

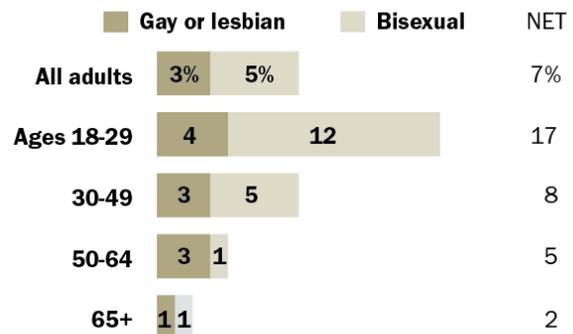
The generally accepted gold standard for capturing a broad range of transgender individuals uses one question asking about sex assigned at birth and another asking about gender. If the respondent answers the two questions differently – for instance, if they indicate their assigned sex is female but their gender is a man – they would be considered transgender in this definition. This is the approach Pew Research Center took when [estimating the share of the population that is transgender or nonbinary](#). Among other findings, that study found that about 5% of adults under the age of 30 say that their gender is different from their sex assigned at birth.

There are also many facets of sexual orientation to consider:

- Someone’s **sexual identity or orientation** – whether they are straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual or another identity such as asexual or queer – is the concept that we and many other social science researchers focus on. But measuring sexual identity is not without its complications. More and more people are identifying with terms other than straight, gay, lesbian and bisexual, or rejecting labels altogether. These labels also may not fit well for people who are trans or nonbinary, or for those who are attracted to trans or nonbinary people. But surveys of the general public must balance allowing respondents to see their own identity in the question while also using language that most people will understand.

### 12% of young U.S. adults think of themselves as bisexual

*% of U.S. adults who think of themselves as ...*



Note: Figures may not add to subtotals due to rounding.  
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 18-Aug. 21, 2022.

“5 key findings about LGBTQ+ Americans”

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- **Sexual behavior** is another facet of sexual orientation, measuring the sex of a respondent's current or past romantic or sexual partners (if they have had any). This is a critical measurement for many [health researchers](#) and [demographers](#), but without a measure of how people self-identify, it may provide an incomplete picture of a person's sexuality.

This isn't an exhaustive list of all the facets of gender and sexual orientation that researchers might be interested in. For example, **gender expression** – how you outwardly express your gender identity, such as with your clothing, hairstyle or [what pronouns you use](#) – could be of interest for those who are studying identity.

Depending on the purpose of the survey, researchers may want to use different combinations of these concepts. For example, a researcher studying health outcomes may ask about sex assigned at birth and sexual behavior. For a study about identity and discrimination, questions on gender, transgender identity and sexual orientation could be more appropriate.

## Thinking on this topic continues to evolve

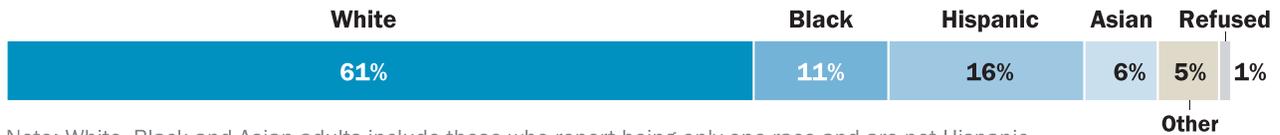
Some federal surveys are beginning to measure these concepts and report data on the [LGBTQ population](#) and [same-sex couples](#). Perhaps the most critical challenge is that survey research must keep up with the rapidly evolving way that people think about these topics. Terms such as queer, asexual and others are gaining popularity, and some people even reject labels outright. There's also a growing recognition that many view their gender or sexuality as fluid and the terms that they identify with may change.

The political backlash against efforts to provide more rights and services to transgender and nonbinary individuals may also affect how some respondents react to this question. In particular, concerns about possible discrimination may lead some individuals to be less forthcoming about their sexual and gender identities in surveys.

And finally, another topic ripe for more research is translation of these questions into other languages. While gender and sex questions can be fairly straightforward, a perpetual challenge for U.S. survey researchers is [the translation of the sexual orientation question into Spanish](#). No [direct translations](#) of “heterosexual,” “straight” or “gay” exist in Spanish, and commonly used substitutes for these terms can vary from country to country in the Spanish-speaking world.

## 5. Race and ethnicity

*Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican or Cuban?  
What is your race or origin? % of adults saying ...*



Note: White, Black and Asian adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: National Public Opinion Reference Survey, conducted May 19-Sept. 5, 2023.

The measurement of race and ethnicity in the U.S. has evolved over the centuries, alongside changes in Americans' views about race and the way race has come to be incorporated into the nation's laws and policies.

Pew Research Center uses a two-question sequence that asks first about Hispanic origin and then about race. The race question gives six options, including an open-ended one for "some other race or origin."

Why these particular categories? And why do we ask about Hispanic or Latino origin *before* asking about race?

### Modeling our questions after the census

The [U.S. Census Bureau's race question](#) [has changed a lot](#) since the [first census in 1790](#), in which the census taker placed a person into one of only three categories: 1) free White male or female, 2) all other free persons, or 3) slave.

Today's version of the question – or, actually, two questions – is very different. Pew Research Center and many other survey organizations typically follow the U.S. Census Bureau's lead when it comes to asking about race and ethnicity. There are several reasons for this:

**Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican or Cuban?**

Yes  
No

**What is your race or origin?**

*[Check all that apply]*

White  
Black or African American  
Asian or Asian American  
American Indian or Alaska Native  
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander  
Some other race or origin (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

- The Census Bureau aligns its question with how race and ethnicity is defined in the nation's laws and [reporting directives from the Office of Management and Budget](#) (OMB). Results from Census Bureau surveys are often used to implement government policies that take race and ethnicity into account.

- The Census Bureau takes extraordinary care in crafting its questions, [typically conducting extensive testing](#) before settling on a version to be administered to the nation's more than 300 million residents.
- Pew Research Center uses statistical weighting to align the demographic composition of our survey samples with the results of Census surveys. To be able to match our measurement with the Census Bureau's, our questions must be comparable.

People completing the decennial census – and Center surveys – choose among the categories offered to them on the survey forms, but that has not always been the case. For over 150 years, most people cooperated with the census by speaking face-to-face with an enumerator, who recorded the person's race based on their observations. This approach was simple but obviously prone to error.

Beginning in 1960, when the decennial census moved to collecting data [primarily via mail-in forms](#), the measurement of race shifted to allowing respondents to provide their own race. This approach has persisted out of necessity now that face-to-face surveys are rare in the U.S., but also because of a cultural shift toward allowing people the autonomy to [self-define many of their personal characteristics](#).

Yet while people can volunteer any identity they wish, how they are ultimately grouped is determined by laws and policies about the use and reporting of the data.

## How the 2020 census asked about Hispanic origin and race

→ NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 6 about Hispanic origin and Question 7 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.

### 6. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
- Yes, Puerto Rican
- Yes, Cuban
- Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – *Print, for example, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.*

### 7. What is your race?

Mark  one or more boxes **AND** print origins.

- White – *Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.*

- Black or African Am. – *Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc.*

- American Indian or Alaska Native – *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc.*

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese  | <input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese   | <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Filipino   | <input type="checkbox"/> Korean   | <input type="checkbox"/> Samoan          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian   | <input type="checkbox"/> Japanese   | <input type="checkbox"/> Chamorro        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian – <i>Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Other Pacific Islander – <i>Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshalese, etc.</i> |  |

- Some other race – *Print race or origin.*

Source: Census Bureau paper questionnaire.

"Black and Hispanic Americans See Their Origins as Central to Who They Are. Less So for White Adults"

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For example, by the [OMB standards](#) for reporting race and ethnicity last updated in 1997, the Census Bureau officially considers Hispanic or Latino to be an ethnicity, not a race. Respondents in the decennial census are first asked about their Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origins, before being asked a check-all-that-apply race question that does not include Hispanic or Latino as an option.

The [vast majority of those who select “some other race” write in Hispanic or Latino](#), or a specific Hispanic or Latino origin, indicating that they consider it to be their race even though the Census Bureau does not recognize it as a race. In a [2020 Center survey](#), Hispanics – and U.S.-born Hispanics in particular – were more likely than White and Black adults to say the census’s race and ethnicity questions did not reflect how they see their race and origin very well.

### **Why is the Hispanic question asked before the race question?**

The U.S. Census Bureau, following OMB guidelines, does not consider Hispanic or Latino to be a race, even though evidence suggests that many Hispanics [do consider Hispanic to be their race or origin](#). For decades, the decennial census placed the Hispanic question further down in the questionnaire, below the race question. But researchers found [high rates of leaving the question blank](#) and theorized that people felt that they had already given their answer in the race question. The Hispanic question was [moved above the race question](#) for the first time in 2000, and more detailed instructions for answering the questions were provided. Even with the design change, in the 2020 census 42% of those who answered “yes” to the Hispanic question [then said their race was “some other race” alone](#).

The Census Bureau [has an extensive set of rules](#) to try to place people into federally defined categories. They reassign people who write in that they are “some other race” to one of the existing race categories when possible.

For example, someone who checks “some other race” and no other category and writes in “Haitian” and “Moroccan” as their origin under some other race will be [reclassified as Black and White](#), because the Census Bureau counts Haitian origin as Black and Middle Eastern or North African origins as White.

Other rules determine how to handle missing responses (usually assumed to be the same as another household member), conflicting race and ethnicity responses, and selecting all race categories.

## Capturing multiracial identity through a check-all-that-apply approach

Another, more recent change in the measurement of race and ethnicity is allowing people to identify as two or more races.

In censuses from 1990 and earlier, enumerators and respondents had to pick one race, although categories indicating that a person was more than one race appeared on decennial census forms in 1850 through 1920. But beginning in 2000, respondents were allowed to select all that applied to them.

Measuring the size of the nation’s multiracial population is uniquely challenging and highly dependent on the question asked.

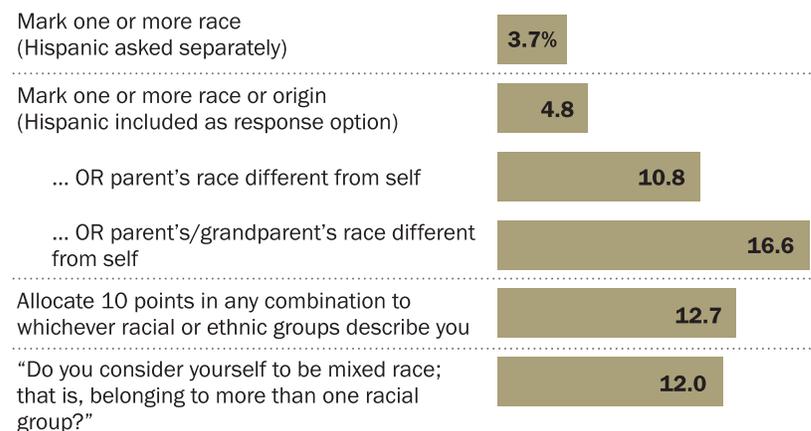
In one clear demonstration, the U.S. multiracial population [appeared to more than triple](#) – from 9 million people (2.9% of the population) in the 2010 census to 33.8 million people (10.2%) in the 2020 census. While undoubtedly the true share did increase at least somewhat in that time period, most of the dramatic jump was [likely caused by changes to the Census Bureau’s question format](#) and data cleaning procedures, which sometimes include reassigning volunteered responses to one of the existing categories.

### Testing different questions about multiracial identity

A [Pew Research Center study in 2014](#) found that the share of the U.S. adult population that can be classified as multiracial varies from a low of 3.7% to a high of 16.6%, depending on how the question is asked and how multiracial identity is defined.

### Multiracial share of U.S. adults varies widely across different measures of race

*% of population who gave two or more races/consider themselves multiracial for each measure*



Note: Hispanic and “Some other race” are not counted as races. “Some other race” verbatim responses were backcoded when possible into the major racial categories. For point allocation, respondents are considered multiracial if they gave at least one point to two or more races; excludes 204 respondents who did not give a valid response for the point allocation measure.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Sept. 9-Oct. 3, 2014.

“Who Is Multiracial? Depends on How You Ask”

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The lowest estimates were derived from the Center’s standard two-question race and ethnicity format used for telephone polls at the time, and from a question [that was similar but included Hispanic or Latino as a race](#). For these questions, respondents who selected two or more races (not including Hispanic or some other race) were classified as multiracial.

The study also used a version of the question that asked about the race of the respondent’s parents and grandparents. When people with immediate ancestors of different races were categorized as multiracial, this produced a much higher estimate of the multiracial share of the population.

Asking respondents directly whether they considered themselves to be “mixed race; that is, belonging to more than one racial group” also resulted in a relatively high share saying “yes,” as did an approach that allowed respondents to numerically record their racial mix by allocating 10 points to whatever combination of racial groups they identified with (e.g., all 10 to one race, 5 each to two races, or some other mix).

As the [multiracial and multiethnic population continues to rise](#) in the U.S., this will become an ever more critical measurement to get right.

## Alternative ways of measuring race and ethnicity

Like other identities described in this report, race and ethnicity are not cut-and-dried concepts. In fact, race and ethnicity sometimes conflate or act as proxies for other ideas such as nationality, birthplace, ancestry, culture and other people's perceptions of someone's identity. Pew Research Center has sought to measure some of these other concepts separately from race and ethnicity.

Our 2022-2023 survey of Asian American adults asked a series of questions related to different markers of ethnic identity. The type of question asked can make a big difference in whether someone identifies themselves as part of a certain group. Take the example of [Taiwanese Americans](#): The 2022-2023 survey found that 126 respondents in the sample [reported they were Taiwanese](#) and no other ethnicity in a question asking about origin groups. (This narrow definition is the group that was considered Taiwanese for the purposes of analyzing the survey data.) But an additional 34 respondents said their ethnic origin was both Taiwanese and Chinese. Expanding the concept of ethnicity further, 119 respondents said Taiwan was their birthplace but did not identify ethnically as Taiwanese alone or as Taiwanese and Chinese. And another 38 people who didn't otherwise identify as Taiwanese ethnically or by birthplace said at least one of their parents was born there.

Other Pew Research Center work has found that asking people directly if they self-identify with a certain group often yields *higher* size estimates for those groups than deriving identity from broader questions, like the race and ethnicity questions that appear on the census.

One example is from [our work on Afro-Latinos](#). Far more people identify as Afro-Latino when asked directly if they consider themselves Afro-Latino than report being both Black and Hispanic on the census form.

Similarly, [more people self-identify as mixed race](#) than select multiple races in a check-all-that-apply question. Many Hispanics also [consider themselves to be multiracial](#) when asked about multiracial identity directly.

Skin color is yet another dimension related to the measurement of race and ethnicity. In a 2021 Center survey, [many Hispanic adults saw skin color as having an important impact](#) on their lives and opportunities. This study asked respondents to select the image that most resembled their own skin tone from a [scale of images](#). Those with darker skin were more likely to report experiencing discrimination.

### Example of scale used in studies documenting that skin color is associated with reported experiences of discrimination



Source: Ostfeld, Mara C. and Nicole D. Yadon. 2021. "¿Mejorando La Raza?: The Political Undertones of Latinos' Skin Color in the United States." *Social Forces*.

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## Racial identification is a sensitive topic for some

Race questions on surveys see [relatively high rates of refusal to provide an answer](#) compared with other demographic questions like age and gender (though they're lower than the share who refuse to answer questions about their income).

In 2020, we conducted an experiment in which we asked respondents to [describe their race and ethnicity in their own words](#). In this open-ended question, 18% of respondents did not provide an answer (similar to [nonresponse rates for our other open-ended questions](#)). An additional 3% gave an answer that appeared to protest the premise of the question, or an answer irrelevant to the topic of race and ethnicity:

*"I believe that is the cause of most racism in the world, having to be segregated into groups."*

*"I am a human like everyone else."*

*"Taxpayer."*

Another 1% of respondents said their race and ethnicity was "American," which the Census Bureau does not code as a standard race or ethnicity response, though it is a [common response](#) to questions about ancestry or ethnicity.

The remaining 79% of respondents in the Center survey provided a race, ethnicity or origin that could be mapped onto the traditional census categories.

If this reluctance to answer is due to mistrust over how the answers will be used, the concern is not necessarily unfounded. The Census Bureau is [bound by law](#) to keep all information that could be

### Proposed race, ethnicity census question

**What is your race or ethnicity?**  
 Select all that apply **AND** enter additional details in the spaces below.  
 Note, you may report more than one group.

**WHITE** – Provide details below.

<input type="checkbox"/> German	<input type="checkbox"/> Irish	<input type="checkbox"/> English
<input type="checkbox"/> Italian	<input type="checkbox"/> Polish	<input type="checkbox"/> French

Enter, for example, Scottish, Norwegian, Dutch, etc.

**HISPANIC OR LATINO** – Provide details below.

<input type="checkbox"/> Mexican or Mexican American	<input type="checkbox"/> Puerto Rican	<input type="checkbox"/> Cuban
<input type="checkbox"/> Salvadoran	<input type="checkbox"/> Dominican	<input type="checkbox"/> Colombian

Enter, for example, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.

**BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN** – Provide details below.

<input type="checkbox"/> African American	<input type="checkbox"/> Jamaican	<input type="checkbox"/> Haitian
<input type="checkbox"/> Nigerian	<input type="checkbox"/> Ethiopian	<input type="checkbox"/> Somali

Enter, for example, Ghanaian, South African, Barbadian, etc.

**ASIAN** – Provide details below.

<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/> Filipino	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian
<input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese	<input type="checkbox"/> Korean	<input type="checkbox"/> Japanese

Enter, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.

**AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKA NATIVE** – Enter, for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Tribal Government, Tlingit, etc.

**MIDDLE EASTERN OR NORTH AFRICAN** – Provide details below.

<input type="checkbox"/> Lebanese	<input type="checkbox"/> Iranian	<input type="checkbox"/> Egyptian
<input type="checkbox"/> Syrian	<input type="checkbox"/> Moroccan	<input type="checkbox"/> Israeli

Enter, for example, Algerian, Iraqi, Kurdish, etc.

**NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER** – Provide details below.

<input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian	<input type="checkbox"/> Samoan	<input type="checkbox"/> Chamorro
<input type="checkbox"/> Tongan	<input type="checkbox"/> Fijian	<input type="checkbox"/> Marshallese

Enter, for example, Palauan, Tahitian, Chuukese, etc.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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used to identify a person confidential and to use all information gathered for statistical purposes only. Under this law, someone's personal information cannot be used against them by a court or government agency.

Yet during World War II, the Census Bureau [provided the U.S. Secret Service](#) with the names and addresses of Japanese Americans, many of whom were U.S. citizens. The government used this information to assist in [locating and incarcerating these individuals](#). At the time, these actions were legal, as the Second War Powers Act of 1942 temporarily repealed the law requiring the Bureau to keep its records confidential.

## Thinking on this topic continues to evolve

The racial and ethnic categories on the census – and thus, on surveys that try to match the census measures – have [changed over time](#) depending on the prevailing demographics and social and political attitudes. Changing racial attitudes and immigration policies led to changing terminology for Black Americans and other groups, as well as the addition of categories for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, and Hispanic Americans.

This process of change continues. The federal government has [proposed updates to the race and ethnicity measures](#) on the census and other federal surveys. One notable change under consideration is combining race and Hispanic origin into a single question so that respondents have the option of selecting Hispanic alone, without selecting one of the current race categories.

And [following years of urging by activists](#), the government is proposing an option for Middle Eastern or North African origins (often abbreviated as MENA) rather than defining MENA origins as White. Whether these changes will ultimately be adopted remains to be seen.

## 6. Age and generations

*What is your age? % of adults saying ...*



Source: National Public Opinion Reference Survey, conducted May 19-Sept. 5, 2023.

A person's age is one of the most valuable and informative demographic characteristics available to those who study public opinion. Age is many things at once: It places a person in the biological arc from birth to death; it roughly corresponds with where they are in the life cycle of social roles and responsibilities; and it situates each of us as a member of a group born around the same time, who experience the real world together as time passes. All three of these ways of thinking about age are potentially useful to those who study social behavior.

Unlike religious affiliation, race or gender, age is relatively easy to measure. Some organizations ask for the respondent's current age, while others ask for year of birth.

**In what year were you born?**

Select year ... | v

We do both, depending on the survey situation. Year of birth is our preferred method for the American Trends Panel, since we typically retain panelists for many years and their birth year does not change. Still, relying only on age or year of birth collected once a year means that a panelist's age is updated at an arbitrary point in the year (at the time of our annual data collection) rather than on their birthday, and so their age is inaccurate for part of the year. The most useful and accurate measure of age would be a person's actual birth date, but we stopped asking this question several years ago as privacy concerns were becoming more widespread.

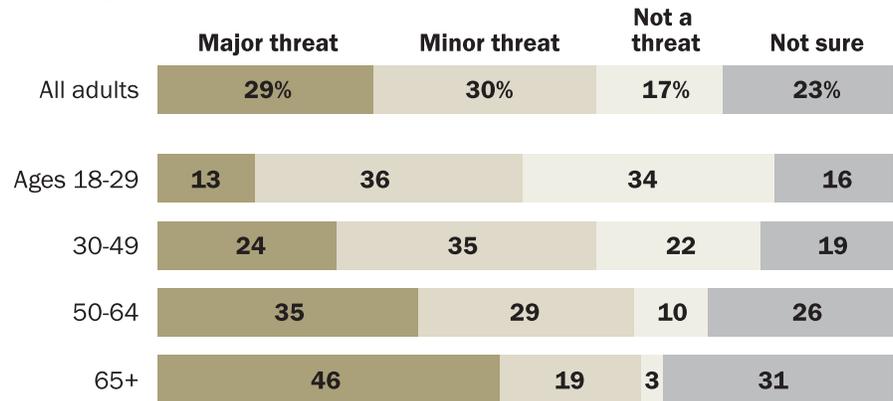
While measuring a person's age is straightforward, it is a personal characteristic and is sensitive for some people. In our national demographic survey in 2023, 1.5% of respondents refused to state their age. Nonresponse on this question arises from both a cultural belief that one's age is a private matter and from modern concerns about privacy and potential identity theft. Among members of the American Trends Panel, however, nonresponse on year of birth is extremely low – less than 0.5%.

## Using age to understand public opinion

When we want to compare the opinions of older and younger people on some topic, we typically use a set of categories that break up the sample into age brackets. The choice of cut points for the categories is somewhat arbitrary, but it is common in survey analysis to see groups like “younger than 30” and “65 and older.” The categories are determined both by the needs of the analysis (e.g., if we want to compare retirement-age people with others) and by whether a group will have a sufficiently large sample (e.g., there is interest in data about adults of college age, such as those 18 to 22, but most survey samples will not have enough respondents in this age group for reliable analysis).

### Majority of Americans say TikTok is a national security threat, but this varies by party, ideology and age

*% of U.S. adults who say they think TikTok is (a) \_\_\_ to national security in the United States*



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer are not shown.  
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 15-21, 2023.  
 "Majority of Americans say TikTok is a threat to national security"

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## Age and generation

A person's age tells us not only where they fall in the life cycle but also what historical circumstances they have lived through.

People sometimes [bear the imprint of these circumstances](#) – especially those that occurred around the time of adolescence – many years later.

A group of people who share a set of birth years is called an age cohort. Sometimes age cohorts are given labels and referred to as generations. For example, these days it's pretty hard to avoid [references to Millennials and Gen Z](#).

While generational analysis is highly popular, the drawing of generational lines is fairly arbitrary. One of the clearest was the post-World War II Baby Boom generation, who have been a distinctive and consequential part of the population since they first appeared with a surge in births in 1946. Demographers consider the end of the Baby Boom generation to have been 1964, when the birth control pill became widely available and the demographic bulge was fading.

The dividing lines for more recent cohorts are less clear. Perhaps the best-known generational grouping after the Baby Boomers are the Millennials, [a label popularized](#) by the authors Neil Howe and William Strauss. But in a survey we conducted in 2015, only 40% of adults categorized as Millennials (ages 18 to 34 at the time) considered themselves to be a part of the Millennial generation. Even those in Gen X were more likely to embrace their label.

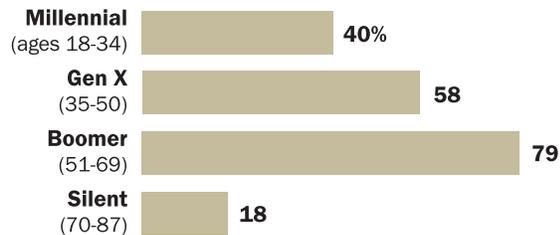
While the idea that powerful experiences during adolescence can leave a distinctive mark on people is generally accepted, there are widespread concerns among scholars that the kinds of generational groupings commonly used in marketing and popular culture are often not scientifically sound. In response to such concerns, we've modified how we will use the idea of generations in ongoing and future research.

**Related:** [How Pew Research Center will report on generations moving forward](#)

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### Millennials less likely than Boomers, Gen X to embrace generational label

*% of those in each generation who consider themselves to be part of that generation (2015)*



Note: Respondents could select more than one generation label.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 10-April 6, 2015.

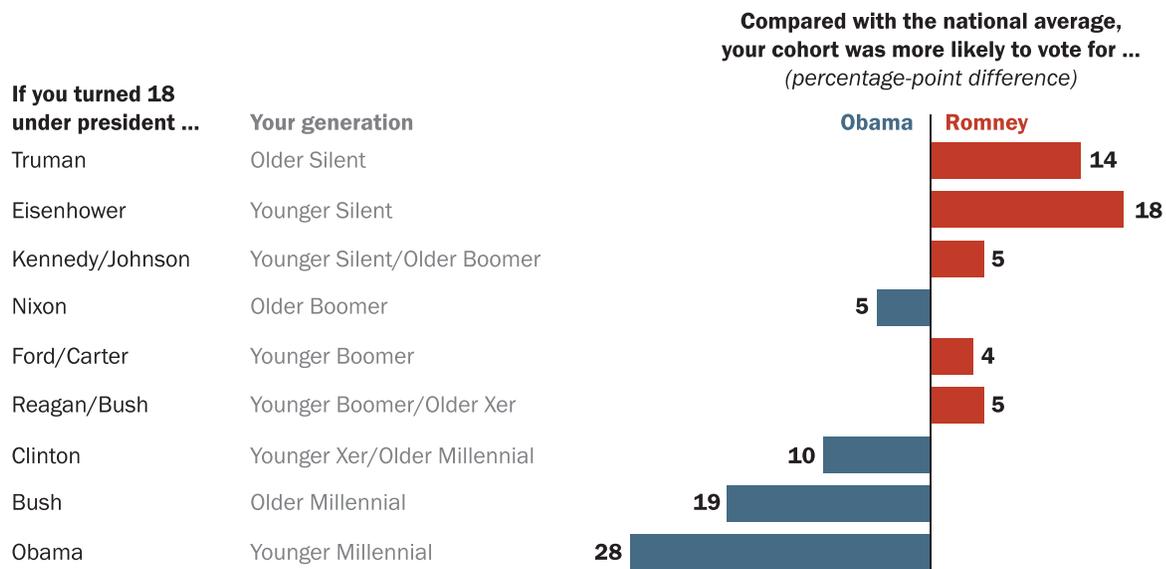
"Most Millennials Resist the 'Millennial' Label"

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One example of a different approach was a [2015 Center study](#) that defined age cohorts by who was president when the individuals turned 18. It found that those who reached this age milestone when Richard Nixon was president tended to vote more Democratic than those on either side of them chronologically. The theory is that people who first formed their political identity during the time of a disgraced Republican president were more supportive of the Democratic Party than those who formed their identity during the presidential terms of relatively unpopular Democrats (Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter).

## The 2012 vote: Differences within generations



Note: Based on the difference between each age cohort and the national average among likely voters in four pre-election surveys (Obama +3 percentage points among likely voters).

“A Different Look at Generations and Partisanship”

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### Research team

Scott Keeter, *Senior Survey Advisor*  
 Anna Brown, *Research Methodologist*  
 Dana Popky, *Associate Panel Manager*

### Communications and editorial

Nida Asheer, *Senior Communications Manager*  
 Talia Price, *Communications Associate*  
 Anna Jackson, *Editorial Assistant*

### Methodology

Courtney Kennedy, *Vice President, Methods and Innovation*  
 Ashley Amaya, *Associate Director*  
 Dorene Asare-Marfo, *Panel Manager*  
 Andrew Mercer, *Senior Research Methodologist*  
 Arnold Lau, *Research Methodologist*

### Graphic design and web publishing

Bill Webster, *Senior Information Graphics Designer*  
 Sara Atske, *Digital Producer*  
 Nick Zanetti, *Associate Web Developer*

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