

Contextualizing the Citizenship Question: History, Current Practices, and Potential Plans for 2020

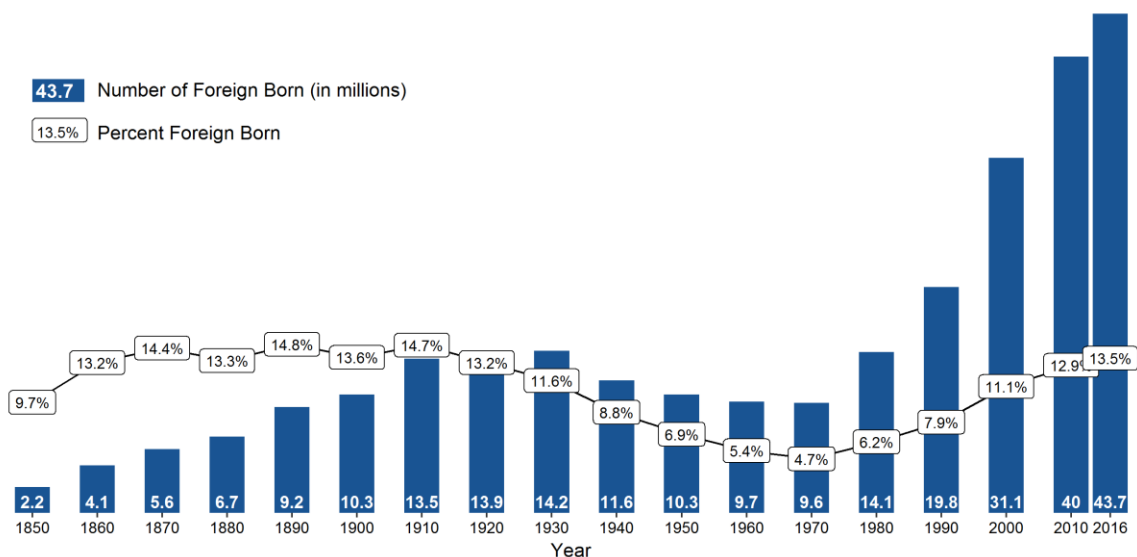
Long Abstract:

The U.S. Census Bureau has a long history of asking residents about nativity and citizenship. This paper will cover the history of the citizenship question, starting in 1820 and leading through the 2000 Census and the American Community Survey. It will discuss the testing performed on the citizenship question and how the question has changed in response to test results. The paper will address current practices, highlight available data products and geographies, and discuss content submission for the 2020 Census. It will also describe the current social and demographic characteristics of the foreign-born population.

The foreign-born population in the United States, as both a share of the population and overall, has changed over time. The figure below plots the total number of foreign-born residents of the United States as blue bars. As can be seen, in 1850, there were 2.2 million foreign-born residents. By 1930, this had grown to 14.2 million residents. After 1930, the numbers of foreign-born residents fell until it reached 9.6 million in 1970. Since then, the foreign-born population has increased steadily, reaching 43.7 million in 2016.

The figure also displays the relative share of the foreign-born population over time. The relative share rose after 1850, hovered between 13-15% between 1890 and 1920, then fell. By 1970, only 4.7% of the population was foreign born. Since 1970, however, the foreign-born share of the population has risen substantially and is now 13.5%

Figure 1: The Foreign-Born Population 1850 – 2016



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population, 1850-2000; 2010 and 2016 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

Citizenship was first asked in the 1820 Census, when enumerators listed the number of “foreigners not naturalized” present in each household. The 1830 Census asked a similar

question, but only of white persons. After 1830, the question was not a part of a decennial census until 1870, where it appeared under a “constitutional relations” section and was asked of all male respondents aged 21 or older. (As shown in the appendix, the question that followed asked if voting-age male citizens had ever been denied the right to vote.)

The 1880 Census once again did not include a citizenship question, but it re-appeared in the 1890 Census. The “Eleventh Census – Report on Population of the United States” states that citizenship was asked in 1890 due to the “constantly increasing body of foreign born” and to determine the “extent to which the potential voter of foreign birth had taken steps toward acquiring citizenship.” Three questions were asked of foreign born males aged 21 and older: number of years in the U.S., whether naturalized, and, if not naturalized, whether naturalization papers had been taken out (that is, whether the respondent had initiated the process to be naturalized).

Subsequent decennial censuses through 1950 asked similar questions of the foreign born, with only a few changes. The 1920 Census asked, for the first time, foreign-born women and men of all ages about their citizenship status. The 1940 Census and 1950 Census included a response option for American citizens born abroad.

In 1960, the citizenship question was not asked of the entire population; rather, it was asked only of the residents of New York state and Puerto Rico. The question was specially added for New York state in order to fulfill a requirement of the New York state constitution for reapportionment of the state legislature on the basis of the number of citizens in each area.

The 1970 Census and 1980 Census asked the citizenship status of the foreign born on the “long form” of the questionnaire sent to a sample of households. Although the content of the question was similar to 1950, respondents now completed their own questionnaires and mailed them back.

Despite high response rates, a content quality study conducted after the 1980 Census indicated that the question posed substantial problems for respondents. Notably, despite the instruction that directed native-born respondents to skip the question, 22% of them instead marked themselves as “naturalized citizens” or “born abroad of American parents.” This led to a series of tests designed to reduce respondent burden and increase data quality.

The first test was the 1980 Content Reinterview Survey (CRS), where all respondents – not just the foreign born – were asked about their citizenship status. In this format, misreporting for respondents born in the United States decreased significantly, as they were able to find themselves in the revised response categories. However, there remained substantial misreporting among respondents born in Puerto Rico: about 15% of these respondents did not mark that they were native-born citizens of the United States. To address this, the 1986 Census Test and 1986 National Content Test introduced new response categories that clarified where respondents should answer by utilizing language that had previously appeared in the Place of Birth question. This new question format carried into the 1990 Census.

Figure 2: Testing the Citizenship Question

1980 Census	1980 Content Reinterview Survey	1986 Test Census; 1986 National Content Test
<p>12. If this person was born in a foreign country – a. Is this person a naturalized citizen of the United States?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, a naturalized citizen</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No, not a citizen</p> <p><input checked="" type="radio"/> Born abroad of American parents</p>	<p>15a. Most persons who are in the United States fall into one of the following groups. To which of these groups do you belong? Show flashcard C</p> <hr/> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Citizen of a foreign country, temporary resident of the United States } SKIP to 15c</p> <p>2 <input type="checkbox"/> Citizen of a foreign country, permanent resident of the United States }</p> <p>3 <input type="checkbox"/> Naturalized citizen of the United States</p> <p>4 <input type="checkbox"/> Born abroad of American parents }</p> <p>5 <input type="checkbox"/> Native-born citizen of the United States } SKIP to 16, page 6</p>	<p>Is this person a CITIZEN of the United States?</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born in the United States – Please skip to 15a</p> <p>2 <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born in Puerto Rico, Guam, or the U.S. Virgin Islands</p> <p>3 <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born abroad of American parent or parents</p> <p>4 <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, U.S. citizen by naturalization</p> <p>5 <input type="checkbox"/> No, not a citizen of the United States</p>

Both the 1990 Census and the 2000 Census featured the redesigned citizenship question on the long form asked of a sample of households.

After the 2000 Census, the decennial long form was discontinued and replaced by the American Community Survey (ACS) starting in 2005. The ACS is a nationwide, continuously-operating survey that contacts over 3.5 million households per year to ask detailed questions about population and housing characteristics, including questions on citizenship, place of birth, and other data related to migration patterns.

Citizenship remains a highly-reported question on the ACS. Only 6% of citizenship item responses were assigned or allocated in 2016, which is in line with questions like school enrollment and whether a respondent had married in the prior 12 months.

Data Products and Geography

All data products and tabulations from the ACS are based either on a single year of collected data (called 1-year estimates) or on five years of collected data (called 5-year estimates). 1-year estimates have the benefit of being up-to-date, but they generally have larger margins of error and are only published for national, state (including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico), and certain other geographic levels where the population is greater than 65,000. 5-year estimates are more precise, and they are published for the nation, states (again, including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico), counties, tracts, and block groups (among other geographic levels).

Statistics on citizenship and nativity from the American Community Survey are published in a variety of data products and tabulations. The most straightforward, basic table of citizenship status is Table B05001, which is shown in Figure 3 below. Other products cross-tabulate citizenship status by sex, age, place of birth, year of entry, race, and Hispanic origin. Table S0501 in particular allows comparison among native, foreign born, foreign-born naturalized citizens, and foreign-born non-citizens on a host of measures, including educational attainment, employment status, occupation and industry, and household size.

Figure 3: Table B05001 based on 2016 1-year ACS estimates.

	United States	
	Estimate	Margin of Error
Total:	323,127,515	*****
U.S. citizen, born in the United States	274,384,971	+/-128,741
U.S. citizen, born in Puerto Rico or U.S. Island Areas	1,969,031	+/-31,963
U.S. citizen, born abroad of American parent(s)	3,034,168	+/-33,422
U.S. citizen by naturalization	21,238,372	+/-80,462
Not a U.S. citizen	22,500,973	+/-129,193

The Census Bureau also publishes a citizen voting-age population (CVAP) data product to support state redistricting efforts that tabulates the total population, the voting-age (18+) population, the total citizen population, and the citizen voting-age population crossed with race and Hispanic origin. These estimates are produced at the block group geographic level based on 5-year ACS estimates.

Citizenship in 2020

On March 26, 2018, the Department of Commerce issued a memorandum to document the 2020 Census Program decision on the citizenship question. The Secretary of Commerce, Wilbur Ross, made the decision to reinstate the citizenship question on the 2020 Census. He spelled out his reasoning in a memo that is available on the Department of Commerce’s website at https://www.commerce.gov/sites/commerce.gov/files/2018-03-26_2.pdf.

After that announcement, the Census Bureau submitted its proposed list of questions for the 2020 Census to Congress on March 31, 2018 that included the citizenship question, as well as background information about its history and purpose. As discussed in the document, the citizenship question will be used to create statistics about citizen and noncitizen populations, which “are essential for enforcing the Voting Rights Act and its protections against voting discrimination.” These data will also help researchers, advocacy groups, and policymakers understand demographic changes occurring in the United States.

The Census Bureau remains committed to counting every person in the United States, as required by the Constitution. All responses will remain confidential, can only be used for statistical purposes, and cannot be shared with any other agency or entity under Title 13 of U.S. Code.

Going Forward

The Census Bureau relies on stakeholders, researchers, and community partners to communicate that responding to the decennial census is important for many reasons – including apportionment, redistricting, and federal funding – and that responses are confidential and protected. The Census Bureau is working hard to ensure that everyone is counted.

Appendix: The Evolving Citizenship Question

1820	Foreigners not naturalized								
1830	<p>WHITE PERSONS included in foregoing.</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="618 415 1089 611"> <tr> <td data-bbox="618 415 727 611">Who are Deaf and Dumb, under fourteen years of age.</td> <td data-bbox="727 415 813 611">Who are Deaf and Dumb, of the age of fourteen and under 25.</td> <td data-bbox="813 415 911 611">Who are Deaf twenty-five and upwards.</td> <td data-bbox="911 415 997 611">Who are blind.</td> <td data-bbox="997 415 1089 611">ALIENS—Foreigners not naturalized</td> </tr> </table>			Who are Deaf and Dumb, under fourteen years of age.	Who are Deaf and Dumb, of the age of fourteen and under 25.	Who are Deaf twenty-five and upwards.	Who are blind.	ALIENS—Foreigners not naturalized	
Who are Deaf and Dumb, under fourteen years of age.	Who are Deaf and Dumb, of the age of fourteen and under 25.	Who are Deaf twenty-five and upwards.	Who are blind.	ALIENS—Foreigners not naturalized					
1870	<p>Constitutional Relations</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="618 747 1089 1192"> <tr> <td data-bbox="618 747 813 1192">Male Citizens of U.S. of 21 years of age and upwards</td> <td data-bbox="813 747 1089 1192">Male Citizens of U.S. of 21 years of age and upwards where rights to vote is denied on other grounds than rebellion or other crime</td> </tr> </table>			Male Citizens of U.S. of 21 years of age and upwards	Male Citizens of U.S. of 21 years of age and upwards where rights to vote is denied on other grounds than rebellion or other crime				
Male Citizens of U.S. of 21 years of age and upwards	Male Citizens of U.S. of 21 years of age and upwards where rights to vote is denied on other grounds than rebellion or other crime								
1890	13	Number of years in the United States.							
	14	Whether naturalized.							
	15	Whether naturalization papers have been taken out.							
1900	Citizenship								
	Year of immigration to the U.S.	Number of years in the U.S.	Naturalization						

1910	Year of immigration to the U.S.	Citizenship							
	Whether naturalized or Alien								
1920	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td colspan="3">Citizenship</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Year of immigration to the United States</td> <td style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Naturalized or alien</td> <td style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">If naturalized, year of naturalization</td> </tr> </table>			Citizenship			Year of immigration to the United States	Naturalized or alien	If naturalized, year of naturalization
Citizenship									
Year of immigration to the United States	Naturalized or alien	If naturalized, year of naturalization							
1930	Year of immigration to the United States	CITIZENSHIP							
	Naturalized or alien								
1940	Citizenship of the foreign born		CITIZENSHIP						
1950	<table border="1" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20%; padding: 5px;"> <p style="text-align: center;">If foreign born—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Is he naturalized?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Yes, No, or AP for born abroad of American parents)</p> </td> <td style="width: 80%;"></td> </tr> </table>			<p style="text-align: center;">If foreign born—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Is he naturalized?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Yes, No, or AP for born abroad of American parents)</p>					
<p style="text-align: center;">If foreign born—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Is he naturalized?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Yes, No, or AP for born abroad of American parents)</p>									
1960	P36a. Where was he born? <input type="radio"/> U.S. <input type="radio"/> Puerto Rico <input type="radio"/> Other	P36b. If "Other" – Is he a U.S. citizen? <input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No							

1970	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin-bottom: 10px;">5 percent</div> <p>16. For persons born in a foreign country—</p> <p>a. Is this person naturalized?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, naturalized <input checked="" type="radio"/></p> <p><input type="radio"/> No, alien</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Born abroad of American parents</p> <p>b. When did he come to the United States to stay?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 1965 to 70 <input type="radio"/> 1950 to 54 <input type="radio"/> 1925 to 34</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 1960 to 64 <input type="radio"/> 1945 to 49 <input type="radio"/> 1915 to 24</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 1955 to 59 <input type="radio"/> 1935 to 44 <input type="radio"/> Before 1915</p>	
1980	<p>12. If this person was born in a foreign country —</p> <p>a. Is this person a naturalized citizen of the United States?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, a naturalized citizen</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No, not a citizen</p> <p><input checked="" type="radio"/> Born abroad of American parents <input checked="" type="radio"/></p> <p>b. When did this person come to the United States to stay?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 1975 to 1980 <input type="radio"/> 1965 to 1969 <input type="radio"/> 1950 to 1959</p> <p><input type="radio"/> 1970 to 1974 <input type="radio"/> 1960 to 1964 <input type="radio"/> Before 1950</p>	
1990	<p>9. Is this person a CITIZEN of the United States?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, born in the United States — Skip to 11 <input checked="" type="radio"/></p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, born in Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Northern Marianas</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, born abroad of American parent or parents</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, U.S. citizen by naturalization</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No, not a citizen of the United States</p>	
2000	<p>13. Is this person a CITIZEN of the United States?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born in the United States → Skip to 15a</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born in Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Northern Marianas</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born abroad of American parent or parents</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, a U.S. citizen by naturalization</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No, not a citizen of the United States</p>	
2005 – 2007	<p>Is this person a CITIZEN of the United States?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born in the United States → SKIP to 10a</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born in Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Northern Marianas</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born abroad of American parent or parents</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, U.S. citizen by naturalization</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No, not a citizen of the United States</p>	
2008 – Present	<p>Is this person a citizen of the United States?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born in the United States → SKIP to 10a</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born in Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Northern Marianas</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, born abroad of U.S. citizen parent or parents</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, U.S. citizen by naturalization – Print year of naturalization</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80px; height: 20px; margin: 5px 0;"></div> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No, not a U.S. citizen</p>	