

PART I

BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK

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Excerpt
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I

The Rise of the Multiple-Race Population

In what has been called “the greatest change in the measurement of race in the history of the United States,”¹ in the 2000 U.S. census Americans were allowed, for the first time, to self-identify with more than one racial group.

This recognition of multiple-race identities signals a sharp about-face in the way Americans understand race and ethnicity. Traditionally, race has been assigned by others, devoid of personal choice and confined to discrete, mutually exclusive categories.² Americans’ response to the “mark one or more” race question, then, marks a huge shift in how racial categories and boundaries are perceived.

Since 2000, the multiple-race population has skyrocketed. Figure 1.1 illustrates this growth: between 2000 and 2015, the number of people identifying with at least two races rose by 106 percent – more than 17 times the rate of growth of the single-race population (just 6 percent). This dramatic increase masks even higher rates of multiple-race identification for certain mixed-race subgroups; for example, the number of people identifying as black-white *tripled*.

Strong public approval of interracial marriage is another testament to the breakdown of racial barriers. Although interracial marriage was illegal in many states as recently as 1967, a 2013 Gallup poll found that 87 percent of Americans support intermarriage between blacks and whites – an all-time high.³ The actual rate of intermarriage has spiked, too. As Figure 1.2 shows, in 1980 just 3 percent of all U.S. marriages were interracial or interethnic; by 2015, it was true of some 10 percent of marriages. Moreover, the percentage of *new* marriages that were interracial or interethnic grew from 2 percent in 1960 to 17 percent – or 1-in-6

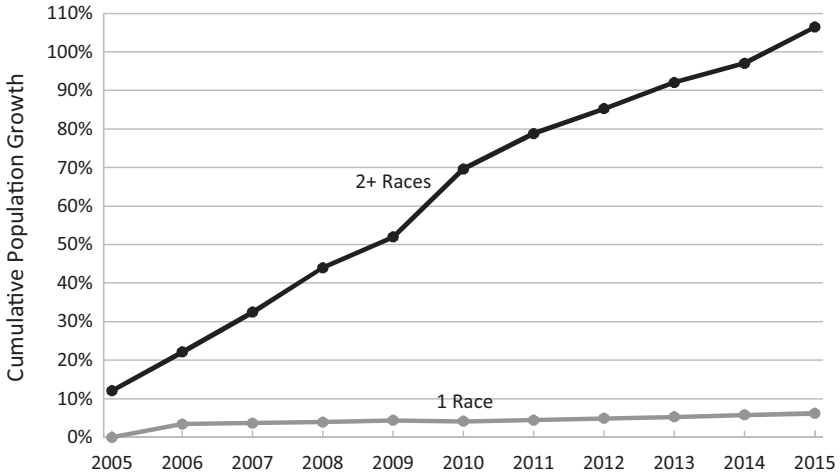


FIGURE 1.1 Cumulative Population Growth Since 2000 in Single-Race and Multiple-Race Identification (non-Hispanic)

Source: Author's calculations based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2005–2015 American Community Surveys and 2000 decennial census.

marriages – in 2015. The intermarriage rate among Asians and Latinos is even higher, at 1-in-4 new marriages.⁴

Corresponding with rising rates of intermarriage are increases in the share of children born to interracial couples. As Figure 1.3 exhibits, just 1 percent of babies born in 1970 had parents of different races; by 2013, that number had risen to 10 percent.⁵ The multiple-race population is now the fastest-growing youth group in the nation. If present trends persist – the data indicate that current rates may actually hasten – the U.S. Census Bureau projects that the mixed-race population will triple by 2060.⁶

Media commentators have trumpeted the emergent mixed-race population as confirmation that America is “post-racial.” A special edition of *Time* magazine in November 1993 revealed the “remarkable preview of The New Face of America” in the form of a woman computer-generated from a mix of several races. The 2008 election of President Barack Obama – the biracial son of a white mother and a black father – further catalyzed public discourse on multiracialism. In marking its 125th year of publication in October 2013, *National Geographic* magazine depicted an increasingly racially blended nation with its feature “The Changing Face of America,” which included portraits of dozens of mixed-race Americans, of varied ages and ethnic backgrounds. In a discussion of the piece, one

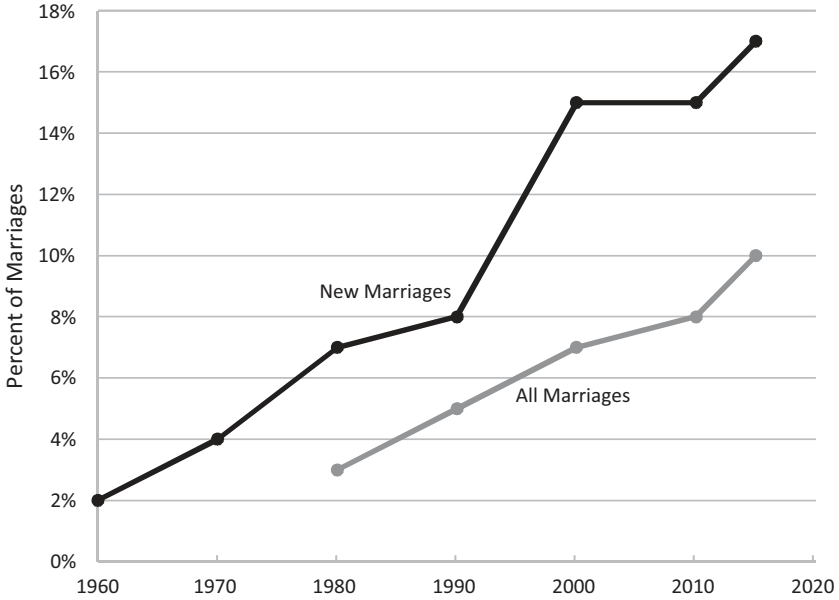


FIGURE 1.2 Rates of Intermarriage, 1960–2015

Note: Percent of marriages that are interracial. Estimates do not include same-sex couples.

Sources: Livingston and Brown, “Intermarriage in the U.S. 50 Years After Loving v. Virginia,” Pew Research Center, May 18, 2017; Passel, Wang, and Taylor, “Marrying Out,” Pew Research Center, June 15, 2010.

article contended that the “average American” would be multiracial by mid-century, heralding, “*National Geographic* Determined What Americans Will Look Like in 2050, and It’s Beautiful.”⁷ And in June 2017, *The New York Times* recognized the 50th anniversary of *Loving v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court decision that overturned state laws against interracial marriage, with an article entitled “How Interracial Love is Saving America.”⁸ More broadly, advertisers, movie executives, and the creators of print advertising increasingly choose to feature interracial families.⁹

The ascendance of multiracialism illustrates a new sort of racial moment. On the one hand, changing demographics reflect an ongoing blurring of ethnic margins and seem to suggest a possible end to the U.S.’s deeply rooted racial hierarchy. Since intermarriage is the standard benchmark of social proximity and distance between groups, high rates of race-mixing and multiracial identification demonstrate greater intergroup tolerance and racial inclusion alongside weakened racial boundaries.¹⁰

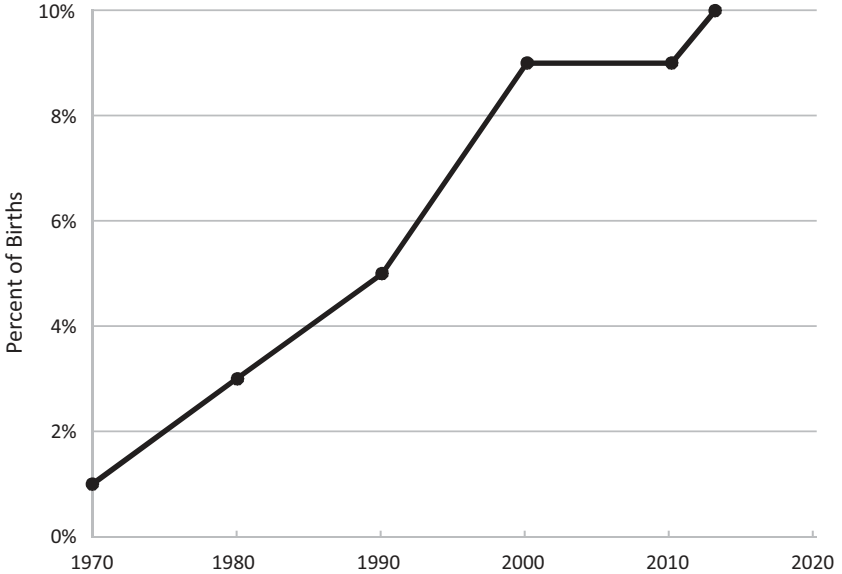


FIGURE 1.3 Percent of Births that are Mixed-Race, 1970–2013

Note: “Mixed-race” is defined here as being born to parents of different races, or having a grandparent of a different race. Findings are limited to babies living with both parents.

Source: “Multiracial in America: Proud, Diverse, and Growing in Numbers,” Pew Research Center, June 11, 2015.

And yet, a less rosy alternative is also plausible. Although at record highs, the intermarriage rate is lower than we would expect by chance.¹¹ In important ways, the types of people who choose to intermarry differ from the types of people who do not. Rather than widespread race-mixing pushing us further toward a “post-racial” society, it may paradoxically produce a more nuanced form of stratification. Several signs hint at this likelihood.

First, the vast majority of new interracial marriages – 83 percent – include a white spouse, and Asians and Latinos are much more likely than blacks to intermarry with whites.¹² Since most Americans are non-Hispanic whites, it is unsurprising that a very large proportion of intermarriages involve a white spouse; because non-whites comprise a smaller share of the overall U.S. population, the potential for them to intermarry with whites is greater, as they have more opportunity to do so. But as I will discuss in Chapter 2, there are persistent, sharp divisions regarding the social acceptability of particular interracial pairings. Surveys show

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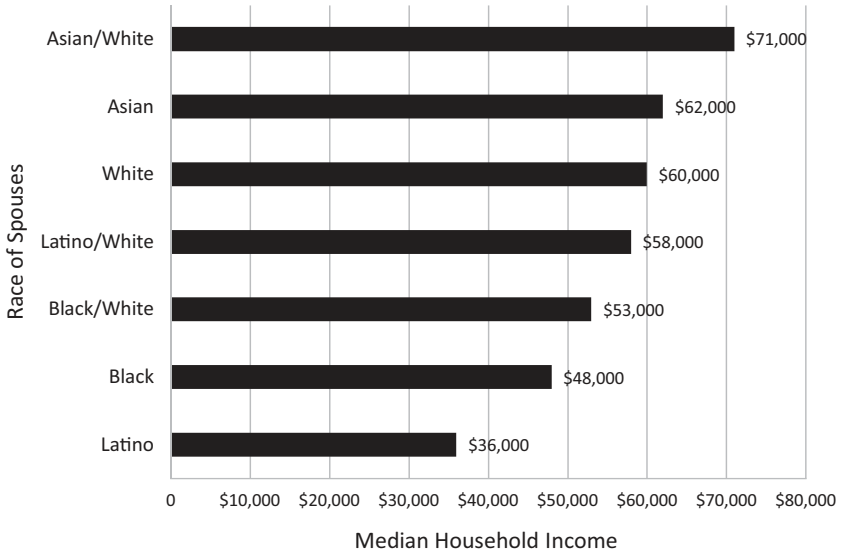


FIGURE 1.4 Median Income of Newlywed Couples in 2010
 Source: Wang, “The Rise of Intermarriage,” Pew Research Center, February 16, 2012.

that while whites, Asians, and Latinos support intermarriage in general, they are most likely to be bothered by the prospect of a black person marrying into their family – resistance that speaks to distinct and persistent anti-black biases and divisions. Blacks, paradoxically, are the most tolerant of intermarriage in all of its forms. That blacks are the most accepting, but least desired marriage partners would seem to reify the rigidity of a black/non-black racial boundary. The greater approval of whites, Asians, and Latinos as intermarriage partners may mean that these groups are more integrated than blacks into the American mainstream. If such disparate behavioral and attitudinal patterns continue, interracial marriage may very well have the auspicious effect of reducing social distance among non-blacks – while the gap between blacks and other racial groups remains stagnant or widens.

Furthermore, marriage type and social class are strongly correlated. Figure 1.4 shows the 2010 median household incomes of seven newlywed pairs. Across the board, intermarried non-white/white couples had higher earnings than their same-race, endogamous minority counterparts. Black/white couples had higher combined earnings than black couples, and Latino/white couples earned more than Latino couples. Of all seven

racial pairings, Asian/white couples had the highest combined median incomes, earning significantly more than couples in which both spouses were Asian or both spouses were white.¹³ The patterns for intermarried couples' educational attainment match household earnings. These disparities are important, because assets and social and cultural capital are transferred from parents to children; hence, the offspring of these interracial unions have, on average, higher socioeconomic status than their monoracial minority counterparts. Thus in addition to being lighter in skin tone than their minority peers, biracials of Asian-white, Latino-white, and black-white parentage are afforded greater economic resources that, in turn, facilitate their opportunities for success.

Taken together, current and projected population trends suggest that a new American color line is materializing, with the established black/white racial divide giving way to a more complex hierarchy in which racial labels, socioeconomic status, and skin tone are tightly linked. The option to identify with multiple races may sustain and reinforce this hierarchy by enabling people of mixed-race ancestry to separate themselves from less advantaged racial minority groups.

All this means that the racial identification decisions of mixed-race Americans carry symbolic and substantive political repercussions. As racial categories have expanded, the meanings attached to these categories may have evolved. People of mixed-race parentage who opt to assert a multiracial identity may be wittingly differentiating themselves from members of their minority racial background. Heightened interracialism may weaken mixed-race individuals' minority ethnic group ties.

Shifts in racial identification raise serious questions about African American political cohesiveness in particular. Traditionally, individuals of mixed white and black heritage have been integral in advancing the political agendas of the black community.¹⁴ The push for a multiracial census option in the early 1990s was seen as a threat to black solidarity and population counts among civil rights groups, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and National Urban League.¹⁵ Since 2000, the number of Americans identifying as black-white has soared, such that in 2015 it was the country's largest mixed-race subgroup and the most rapidly rising of any major racial or ethnic label in the U.S. This increase is extraordinary, given that racial group membership has been exceptionally stringent and legally demarcated for Americans of African ancestry, who for generations adhered to hypodescent, or the one-drop rule, and identified as singularly black.¹⁶ The political loyalties of these multiple-race identifiers concern activists

and lawmakers, who wonder whether the rise of multiracial labeling now reflects a deliberate “opting out” of minority heritage.¹⁷ A related concern is that mixed-race identification might correspond to weaker minority group attachments, diminished awareness of issues affecting minority communities, and, ultimately, a decreased commitment to minority causes.

In short, the increasing number of multiple-race identifiers makes salient critical points surrounding the future of racial group solidarity in U.S. politics. While scholars have long debated the social and political consequences of race-mixing, we know little about why mixed-race Americans identify as such. Even less is known about the political opinions of multiple-race identifiers – and mixed-race individuals more generally – and from where their opinions arise.

No longer bound to a single, exclusive racial label, how do people of mixed-race backgrounds construct their identifications? How do these choices map onto political views? Does a multiple-race label signify a depression of minority identity and a desire to politically distance oneself from a minority background? Or is the embrace of multiple labels an affirmative identification that represents a progressive approach to racial and social issues? This book asks and answers such questions.

THE IDENTITY-TO-POLITICS LINK

Mixed-race Americans’ identities provide a window into the contextual nature of race and ethnicity by clarifying the processes by which race and ethnicity develop. Whereas racial labels are often seen as limited to the shared race of one’s parents – devoid of choice – racial identity is uniquely constructed for individuals of mixed-race backgrounds. Their decisions shed light on the extent to which once sharply drawn boundaries of belonging have relaxed.

Racial identification is also an act that has very real political ramifications. Beyond informing our understanding of the meaning and significance of race in contemporary American culture, the rising multiple-race population affects a range of political domains. Most substantively, aggregate-level racial identification is consequential for the allocation of political resources and the implementation of racial legislation.¹⁸ States employ race and ethnicity data to fulfill legislative redistricting obligations, monitor compliance with federal laws, and enforce bilingual election rules. Racial statistics are also used to enforce civil rights and anti-discrimination laws in employment, education, and

housing.¹⁹ Race figures are referenced in the development of federal policies, such as those focused on detecting and understanding racial health disparities, and racial data help researchers identify the presence or absence of discriminatory credit practices, such as those targeting minorities in inner-city neighborhoods.²⁰

The way in which survey respondents choose to racially label themselves is even tied to how we understand political behavior.²¹ But to accurately interpret the impact of race on a political outcome of interest, we must dissect the meanings of racial labels. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, for millions of Americans, racial identification is all but thoughtless. Despite recognition among political scientists that racial boundaries are increasingly porous, statistical models of American public opinion typically treat race as mutually exclusive and inelastic, often in the form of identity categories such as “black” or “Latino.”²² Enabling a more flexible conception of racial identification in political surveys may unmask important nuances between groups. Disentangling the context surrounding racial labels will certainly help in creating a stronger theoretical framework for understanding the political ramifications of race.

More broadly, racial disparities have been a deep and enduring element of American society. Relative to blacks and Latinos, whites and Asians have more wealth,²³ live in better neighborhoods,²⁴ attend superior schools,²⁵ and experience lower rates of incarceration.²⁶ Blacks are more likely than whites and Latinos to perceive unequal treatment by law enforcement.²⁷ Blacks and whites disagree on explicitly racial issues, such as affirmative action, and implicitly racial policies like federal spending on the poor and government provision of health insurance.²⁸ Examining the political positions of individuals who straddle racial cleavages adds specificity to our understanding of an entrenched racial divide.

WHAT WE KNOW (AND WHAT WE DON'T KNOW) ABOUT MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY

Although the ability to self-identify with multiple racial groups on surveys and federal forms is relatively new, race-mixing is not a recent phenomenon. Interracial relations between African women and European traders occurred in Africa for hundreds of years prior to the settlement of North America. As a result, many of the original European settlers to the U.S. colonies were mixed-race, as were some of the first slaves brought over from Africa.²⁹ Later, sexual assaults of enslaved black women by