

"I am Canadian"

by Derrick Thomas

The people of Canada have a long tradition of identifying themselves according to the land or nation of their sometimes remote ancestors. Over the past few decades, however, a rapidly growing number have begun describing themselves in the census as Canadians. The proportion of the population claiming some element of Canadian ethno-cultural ancestry climbed from fewer than 1% in 1986 to nearly 40% in 2001, making it by far the most common ethno-cultural ancestry reported on the census. Moreover, more than half of the 11.7 million persons who reported 'Canadian' described their ancestry as *exclusively* Canadian without mentioning any other ethnic connection.

What lies behind these changing views of ethnicity? Why do people who not so long ago claimed an English or French ancestry, for example, now report that they are Canadian? Using data from the censuses of population, this article explores the potential reasons behind these changes. It begins by discussing our understanding of ethnicity and how it has changed over time. The article then reviews some of the meanings attached specifically to Canadian ethnicity and follows by examining the characteristics of individuals who, according to the 2001 Census, reported having a Canadian ethnic background.

The evolution of 'ethnicity'—then and now

Some type of question concerning 'origins' has appeared in virtually every census since Confederation. Census takers have asked variously about 'origins,' 'race,' 'ethnic group,' and most recently 'ethno-cultural



ancestry.' The word 'ethnic' first appeared in 1946.

Ethnicity means different things to different people. While it has always referred to the categorization of people or the formation of groups, the specific definitions have evolved over time. Traditionally, observers have viewed ethnic groups as made up of people with shared characteristics. They have often disagreed, however, about the importance of different characteristics in defining these groups.¹

Some have emphasized inherited, or what might be considered comparatively permanent, traits, such as common geographic origins or historical experiences. Sometimes ethnicity has been seen as a matter

of racial or genetic characteristics. More recently, membership in an ethnic group was considered a question of a shared language, culture, traditions, values or sense of belonging.

Broadly over the last half century, however, people have come to understand ethnic groupings as fluid constructs that change according to the social context. A person's beliefs about who is inside or outside their group may change as they assess their social environment, build networks, make alliances or choose sides in issues or debates. Increasingly, people have come to understand the role that ethnic categorizations can play in personal self-esteem and the life chances of individuals.

CST What you should know about this study

The Census of Population provides residents of Canada with an opportunity to describe their ethnic origins. The data, collected every five years, allows us to track the growing popularity of the 'Canadian' response.

Changes in question format and processing have affected the comparability of ethnic origin data between censuses. Although it is likely that data for all ethnic groups have been influenced to some extent by these changes, counts for some groups have been affected more than for others. The increases in the reporting of multiple responses and of 'Canadian' are the most noticeable results of changes.

Along with the changes to the ancestry question, two new related census questions have been added to get at some of the more objective aspects of ancestry. A "population group" question was included beginning in 1996 in order to support employment equity legislation by identifying members of visible minority groups. And for the first time in 30 years, a question was added in 2001 about the birthplace of each parent of each respondent. It is this data along with information on the respondent's own birthplace or immigration status that is used to separate subjects into first-, second- and third-generation residents.

If information on the birthplace of grandparents or great-grandparents were available, it is likely that more of the variation in the reporting of 'Canadian' would be explained.

The following is question number 17 on the 2001 Census of Population:

*While most people in Canada view themselves as Canadians, information on their ancestral origins has been collected since the 1901 Census to capture the changing composition of Canada's diverse population. Therefore, this question refers to the **origins of the person's ancestors**.*

17 To which ethnic or cultural group(s) did this person's **ancestors** belong?

For example, Canadian, French, English, Chinese, Italian, German, Scottish, Irish, Cree, Micmac, Métis, Inuit (Eskimo), East Indian, Ukrainian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Filipino, Jewish, Greek, Jamaican, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Chilean, Somali, etc.

Specify as many groups as applicable

questionnaire themselves. Then, beginning in 1981, respondents were able to report multiple ancestries, whether through the male or female (or both) lines of descent; in fact, respondents are now encouraged to "specify as many [ancestral] groups as applicable." Finally, in 1986, the ethnic origin question dropped the phrase "on first coming to this continent," leaving respondents to determine for themselves how far back to trace their ancestors when answering the question.

Throughout this period, there was also a transition away from pre-defined, check-off categories toward blank spaces where respondents could write in their own unprompted response. Because it was so frequently written in by respondents to the 1991 Census, 'Canadian' was included as one of a list of example answers in 1996. Perhaps partly as a result, it became the most frequently reported origin and now leads the list of examples provided on the census form.

One of the main effects of these changes was to give more freedom to Canadians to define their own ethno-cultural origins.^{2,3} They now decide for themselves how far back in their family tree and along which branches to trace their ancestors. And, at least among those whose ancestors have been in Canada for many generations, the census question about ethnic origin has begun more and more to be interpreted as a question about individual identity.

What do people mean when they tell us they are Canadian?⁴

By choosing an identity, individuals situate themselves according to social dimensions that are relevant to them, and define themselves with labels likely to enhance their prestige.⁵ But who they distinguish themselves from may be as important as who they affiliate themselves with. The identity claims of individuals should, therefore, be considered in the context in which they were made.

Asking the 'ethnicity' question

In response to the evolving concepts of ethnicity, the content, wording and presentation of the census questions dealing with this topic have undergone significant changes over the years. Historically census respondents were actively discouraged from describing their origins as Canadian. This was done to avoid confusing current nationality or citizenship with

ancestry. Enumerators instructed people to report 'Old World' or 'Native Indian' ancestries and were allowed to record Canadian only if the respondent "insisted."

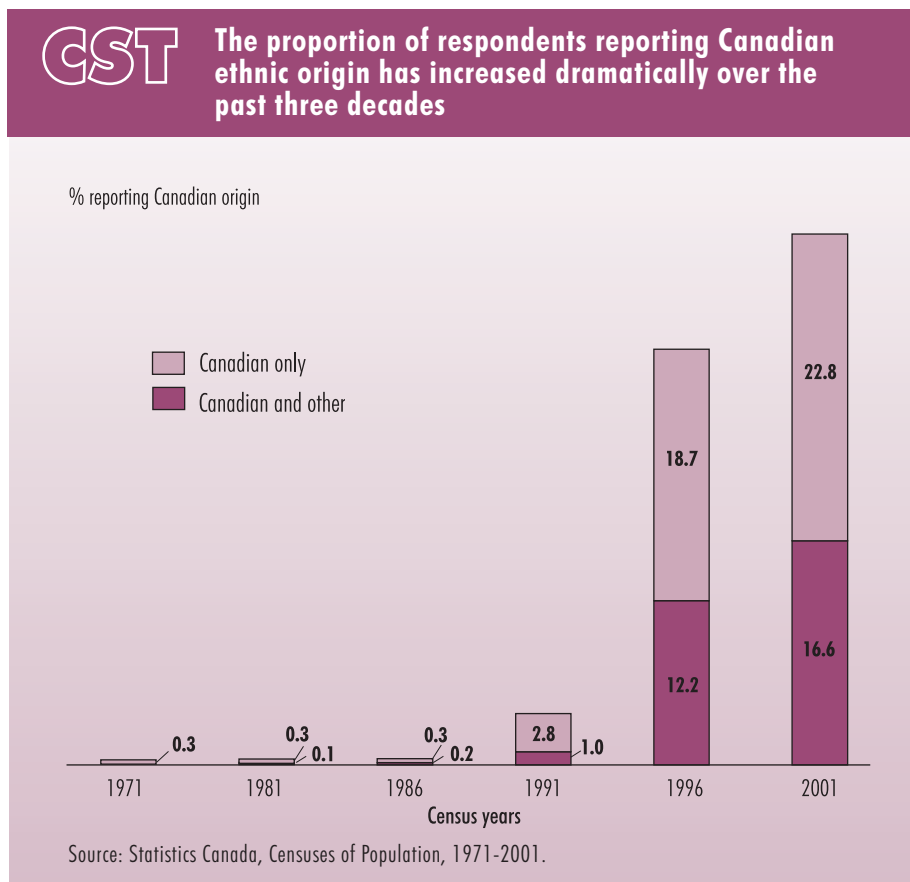
Starting in 1971, however, there have been a number of changes to the census questionnaire and the ethnicity question. First, with the introduction of self-enumeration, respondents completed the census

When they describe themselves as such, Canadians first of all distinguish themselves from the peoples of their ancestral homelands. It was seemingly the French-speaking settlers of the Saint Lawrence valley who first claimed to be 'Canadiens.' Especially when cut off from their mother country by the British Conquest, they began to distinguish themselves from all Europeans. One of their first British Governors said of his French subjects: "... it seems to be a favourable object with them to be considered as a separate Nation; *La Nation Canadienne* is their constant expression..."⁶ As English-speaking settlers also adopted the label 'Canadian,' the prefixes 'French' or 'English' began to be used as qualifiers.

Perhaps the dominant view of the 'Canadian Identity' is that it emerged in opposition to the 'American Identity.'⁷ Contrasting and comparing ourselves with Americans is a much-mentioned and constant preoccupation of Canadians.⁸ For many Canadians, Americans seem to be *the* relevant outgroup.⁹ By claiming to be Canadian in the period just following the emotional debate over free trade in 1991, Census respondents may have been asserting their national distinctiveness from the United States.

The label 'Canadian' can also be used to distinguish established residents from newcomers. In fact, some experts see in the growing popularity of the 'Canadian' response a fundamental ethnic realignment. Traditional distinctions between French and English are giving way, they argue, to a dichotomy based on period of settlement. According to this view, longer settled European groups adopt the Canadian label in order to distinguish themselves from the more recently arrived immigrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America.¹⁰

Others argue that there is no necessary connection (and claim to have found no empirical association) between attachment to Canada and



tolerance or support for multiculturalism.¹¹ In fact, their supposed multiculturalism and tolerance of diversity are among the dimensions along which Canadians habitually compare themselves favourably with Americans. The new willingness to identify themselves as Canadian may reflect a patriotism that has less to do with the preservation of a culture than with citizenship, adherence to their particular institutions and the protection of more recent collective achievements like the charter of rights and the Medicare system.^{12,13}

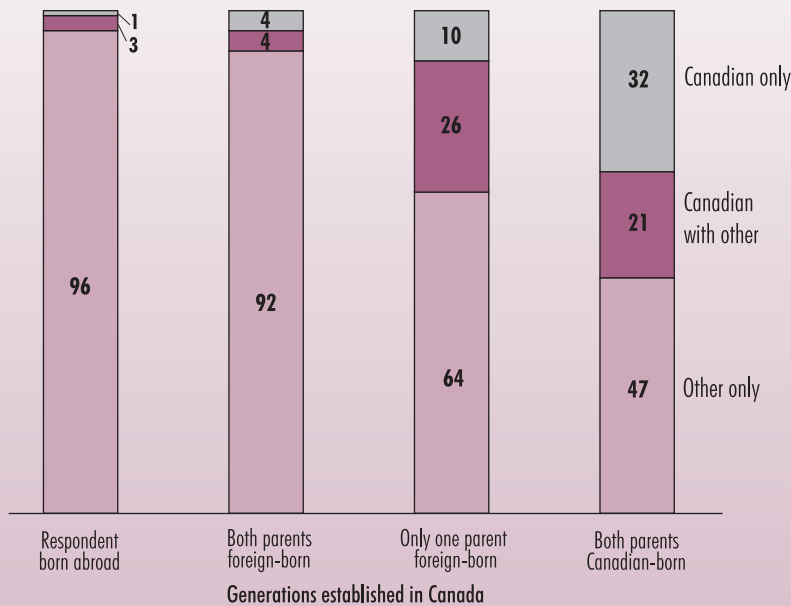
'Canadian' response more likely as number of generations born in Canada increases

It appears that census respondents are indeed answering the question posed with respect to their ethno-cultural ancestry. Those born in Canada of Canadian-born parents are increasingly reporting 'Canadian' instead of the origins of their more distant ancestors. Indeed, 53% of these individuals are claiming some

element of Canadian ancestry. They constitute the great majority (almost 90%) of those who do. Not surprisingly, this group is also far more likely than any of the others to report an exclusively Canadian ancestry. It is likely that if more information were available about, for example, the birthplace of grandparents and great grandparents, the effect of the number of generations in Canada on the 'Canadian' response would become even clearer.

Most likely to report 'Canadian' in addition to another ethno-cultural ancestry were, not surprisingly, persons of mixed Canadian-born and foreign-born parentage: 26% versus 21% of individuals with two Canadian-born parents, for example. Marriages between Canadian-born and foreign-born individuals tend to complicate narratives about ancestry and may encourage people whose forebears have been in Canada for some time to report 'Canadian' on the census.¹⁴

% reporting various ancestries



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

Younger respondents more likely to report Canadian ancestry

In general, those who indicated their ethnic origin as Canadian appear to be younger than other census respondents. For example, about 40% of persons in their twenties responded 'Canadian' to the census ethnic question compared with about 30% of those in their eighties.

Those who identify as Canadian generally have somewhat lower levels of education than persons who do not. Perhaps this is related to the differing age structure of the two groups. The association between education and a Canadian ethnic background is also influenced by generations in Canada. For example, about one in five immigrants and their children hold university degrees, compared with one in seven of those who have been in Canada for three or more generations.

There is some evidence that may point toward more secular or cosmopolitan attitudes among those who claim Canadian ethnic affiliation. These individuals are more likely to report having no religion, to be divorced, separated or living in a common-law relationship and are less likely to live in families with more than four persons. They are also a little more likely to live in an urban area.

Canadians are drawn from English and French ethnic groups

A large number of respondents who reported a Canadian ethnic origin in 2001 are persons who declared different ethno-cultural affiliations on previous censuses. Perhaps prompted by the sample answers provided, some respondents have simply reported Canadian as a multiple ethnicity along with their usual choice(s). But well over half (57%) of those who responded Canadian in 2001 chose to mention no other ethnic group.

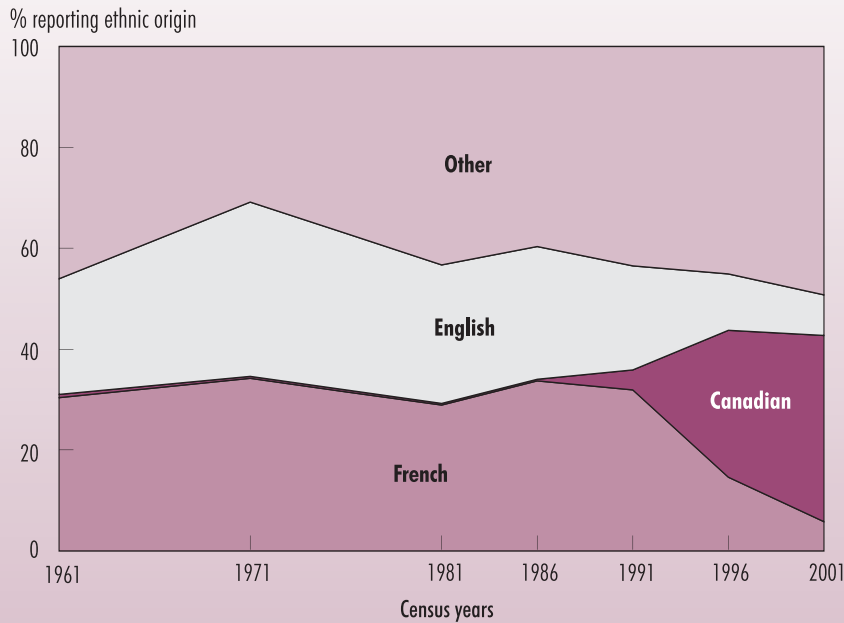
In contrast, immigrants—regardless of their place of birth, how long they had lived in Canada or at what age they arrived—seldom reported Canadian ethnic ancestry (less than 4% in 2001).

French speakers and residents of Quebec are more likely than others to respond 'Canadian/Canadien'

At least since 1996, those who grew up in French-speaking households have been more likely to describe their ethno-cultural ancestry as Canadian/Canadien. In 2001, some 52% of individuals with a French mother tongue claimed a 'Canadian only' ethnic origin compared with 18% of those with an English mother tongue. Similarly, residents of Quebec (69%) and to a lesser extent of the Atlantic provinces (52%) are more likely to claim a Canadian heritage (Canadian only or Canadian with other ethnic background) than are residents of Ontario (30%). Residents

of the Western provinces are least likely to do so (25%). The pattern, in short, seems to roughly reflect the stages in which the country was settled and, consequently, the number of generations that the families of respondents have been in Canada.

A number of other factors linked with the reporting of Canadian ethnicity are also connected with generations in Canada. Members of visible minority groups, for instance, are more likely to be immigrants or descendants of immigrants within relatively few generations. The same is true for non-citizens, naturalized Canadians and those who profess a faith other than Christianity or Judaism. Not surprisingly, all of these groups are less likely than average to identify their ancestors as Canadian. According to the 2001 Census, for example, some 8% of visible minority individuals claimed some element of Canadian ethnicity compared with 46% of other respondents.



Note: Data between census years were interpolated.
 Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population, 1961-2001.

By and large, these single-response Canadians were the people who in previous censuses had checked off English or French as their ethnic origin.^{15,16,17} Between 1986 and 2001 the number of people claiming French ancestry fell by over 3.4 million and the number reporting English dropped by 3.3 million. This would seem to entirely account for the 6.7 million persons who claimed Canadian ancestry alone in 2001.¹⁸

Interestingly, however, other similarly long-established groups such as Aboriginal people, Irish, Scots, Germans and Ukrainians continue to report their original ethnic affiliations. These groups did not experience any decline in their numbers over the past decades, although more of them are reporting Canadian as a second ethnicity. Many of these groups draw inspiration from long-standing struggles for ethnic survival and recognition in their ancestral homelands.¹⁹ In some

cases their identities or independence as peoples have been recovered only recently.

In contrast, the English and French have exported their culture on a global scale. Research undertaken by social psychologists suggests that identification with one's group increases in proportion to the degree of perceived threat to the group's survival.^{20,21} While French Canadians may fear that their culture is at risk, neither the English nor the French as such would seem to have cause to feel this way. In fact, of the reduced proportion who continues to report 'French', almost half also report 'Canadian' suggesting, perhaps, that it is French Canadian rather than French culture they are interested in preserving.

In addition, there are good reasons why persons of mixed, complex or unknown ancestry might have checked off 'English' or 'French'

in previous censuses, when the 'Canadian' answer was not available. English and French have historically represented the poles of ethnic conflict in Canada. They also correspond to our official languages and both groups were accorded constitutional guarantees with respect, for example, to education. Perhaps, as a consequence, people with mixed, unknown or weak ethnic attachments had chosen to identify with the "mainstream" or official language, which they or their ancestors happened to have adopted.²² Today 'Canadian' may represent an easier choice for such people. There is, however, no reason to suppose that the English and French answers of the past are any more accurate or descriptive of the ethno-cultural lives of respondents than the Canadian responses of 2001.

Another factor related to the reporting of Canadian ethnic roots also appears to be at work. Americans, Australians, Mexicans and Métis — that is people with new-world or more complex identities — are more likely to report Canadian as an additional ancestry than are the members of other groups. Perhaps this is because new-world groups are more often of mixed ancestry or divided by many generations from their old-world connections.

Summary

The large increase in the number of persons who describe their ethno-cultural ancestry as Canadian has been mainly due to changes in the census question which, in turn, reflects society's evolving concepts of ethnicity and identity. Because they are no longer told that foreign ancestries are the only correct ones, many people whose parents and perhaps more distant ancestors were born in Canada answer 'Canadian.' This choice may also be popular with those whose ancestries are complicated by intermarriage or migration through several homelands.

It is clear that the likelihood of reporting 'Canadian' increases with the number of generations the respondent's family has spent in Canada. The long-established French speakers and other residents of Quebec, for instance, are more likely than others to identify their ethnic origin as Canadian. British groups also report 'Canadian' quite frequently. Of these, many respond 'Irish' and 'Scottish,' along with 'Canadian.' Persons reporting Canadian as their sole ancestry, however, appear to be drawn almost entirely from among those who previously described their background as English or French.

Many established European groups are reporting a Canadian background, while the newer groups from Asia and Africa tend to state their original ethnic ancestry. As a result, it may appear that an ethnic realignment is indeed underway. It is not clear, however, that people who answer 'Canadian' do so to distinguish themselves from recent newcomers. Those whose families have been established in Canada for generations may simply be reporting, in the absence of any instruction to the contrary, what they regard as their true ancestry. Canadians may also be anxious to distinguish themselves from Americans and to protect their particular democratic institutions and what they may regard as collective achievements like universal publicly funded health insurance and the charter of rights.



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