

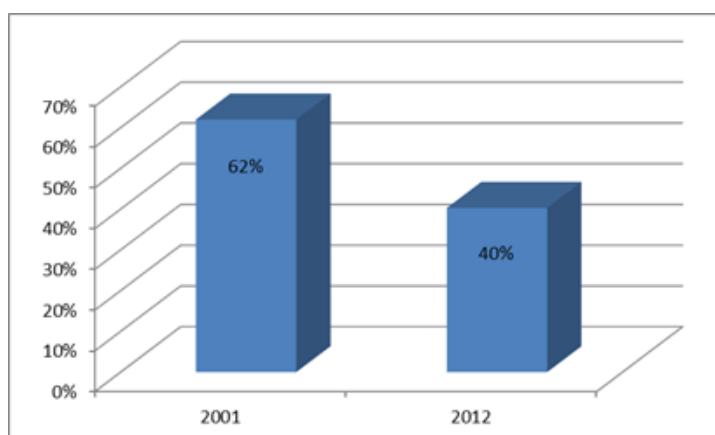
COUNTING BOLIVIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

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Determining the share of the population held by various ethno-racial groups is not an exact science. Government agencies frequently report varying numbers that represent the share of the population that is of a particular race or ethnicity in a country. There are various grounds for these discrepancies. One of the primary causes for the differentiation in the reported numbers falls on the fact that countries may not have censuses or surveys that specifically ask individuals about their race or ethnicity. Where there is no quantitative tool available to determine the ethno-racial composition of a country, civil society and academics often provide estimates of ethno-racial populations. In countries where censuses and surveys ask about race and ethnicity, it is preferred that the question rely on self-identification, or in other-words, allowing individuals to choose their ethnicity. This can however be complicated when individuals feel as though they belong to none or several of the ethnic groups, a pattern that is common in Latin America.

Shortly after President Evo Morales was elected in 2006, he referred to Bolivia as a “majority indigenous nation.” This view was substantiated by the 2001 Bolivian census, in which 62 percent of the population had self-identified as indigenous. However, in 2012, when the nation’s most recent census was conducted, only 40.3 percent of the population self-identified as indigenous (See Figure 1). This large drop in the share of the population made up by indigenous peoples has been a hotly contested topic and one that has led to an important question; how large is the indigenous population in Bolivia?

Figure 1. Indigenous Population in Bolivia Based on Census Data



Source: Data from Bolivian Censuses 2001 and 2012. Bolivian National Statistics Institute (INE).

The 2001 Census marked the first time that the Bolivian Government included questions on ethnicity in the national population count. In censuses prior to the turn of the millennium, the government of Bolivia had opted to ask questions on the primary language spoken in a household. While this may be used as a proxy for determining the share of the population that is indigenous, it is an imperfect comparison; many ethnically

¹ This note was prepared by Adam Ratzlaff, Consultant, under the supervision of Judith Morrison, Senior Advisor

indigenous individuals speak Spanish. The discrepancies of using language as a proxy for indigenous identity make it preferable to use self-identification when possible. The 2001 Bolivian Census included a question on ethnicity; it read, “¿Se considera perteneciente a alguno de los siguientes pueblos originarios o indígenas...?”² This was followed by a list of five indigenous groups³ or the option to fill in a different *pueblo*. When the results of the census were announced, approximately 62 percent of the national population had self-identified as indigenous.⁴

For the 2012 Bolivian Census, the number of ethnicities was expanded, yet the share of respondents that self-identified as indigenous dropped substantially. In 2012, the question was altered from the original wording to “Como boliviana o boliviano ¿pertenece a alguna nación o pueblo indígena originario, campesino o afro boliviano?”⁵ This was followed by 40 different ethnic groups to select from, including all of those in the 2001 census as well as other indigenous groups and Afro-Bolivians (not included in the calculation of the indigenous population). Although there had been an increase in the number of *pueblos* that one could choose to identify with, the share of the population that self-identified as indigenous fell to 40.3 percent. In the 2001 Census, the question pertaining to indigenous identity was phrased in an open and inclusive manner; the question asked if an individual considered themselves to be a member of an indigenous or original peoples. However, in

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2012, the question was more restricted. Different indigenous peoples may have specific rules about membership. As such, rewording the question as “do you belong to...” rather than “do you consider yourself to belong to...” may have led to some indigenous descendants unable to answer in the same way that they had in the previous census. A similar challenge occurred between the 1992 and 2002 Chilean censuses.⁶

In the lead up to the 2012 Bolivian Census, the media began to report on the “omission” of mestizos from the national census. Although the use of ethno-racial definitions in the census only began in 2001, the question had revolved around identity as belonging to a specific ethno-racial group. The use of the term “omission” by the media was thus somewhat misleading as it led many to conclude that the mestizo category had been removed, when in fact it had never been part of the national census. This problem was compounded by the existence of graffiti in the capital reading, “I'm not Aymara. I'm not Quechua. I'm a mestizo.”⁷ While some countries in the region have elected to have all individuals self-identify, many Latin American countries have preferred to only have those individuals who self-identify as either indigenous or African descendant answer.⁸ This is in part due to the tendency of

² Do you consider yourself to belong to one of the following original or indigenous peoples?

³ The indigenous groups listed were; Quechua, Aymara, Guarani, Chiquitano and Mojeño.

⁴ Of this, 30.7 percent self-identified as Quechua, 25.2 percent as Aymara, 1.6 percent as Guarani, 2.2 percent as Chiquitano and 1.5 percent as Mojeño.

⁵ As a Bolivian, do you belong to an indigenous or original nation or people or are you Afro-Bolivian?

⁶ Inter-American Development Bank. 2014. “Counting Chile’s Indigenous Peoples.”

⁷ Valdez, Carlos. 2013. “Bolivia’s Census omits ‘mestizo’ as category.” Associated Press. Available at: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/bolivia-s-census-omits-mestizo-category>

⁸ It is important to note that some Latin American countries ask if an individual is indigenous, but not about whether they are an African descendant (as Bolivia did in the 2001 Census). There are no Latin American countries that ask if an individual is African descendant, but do not ask about indigenous. Of the thirteen countries in the region that ask about race or ethnicity in their national censuses, five ask all individuals for their ethno-racial identity (Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Venezuela) while eight ask only if individuals belong to a particular ethno-racial group (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama and Paraguay).

indigenous and/or African descendant individuals choosing to identify as *mestizo* despite being predominantly of indigenous or African descent.

Migration patterns and the politicization of the term indigenous may have also had an impact on the share of the population that self-identified as indigenous. Although confusion over the “omission” of the *mestizo* category and its reporting in the media may explain some of the reduction in the number of people who self-identified as indigenous, other factors may also have been partially responsible for the change in Bolivia’s demographics. Individuals of indigenous

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descent who live in urban areas are typically less likely to self-identify as indigenous than those who reside in rural settings. In 2012, 32.7% of Bolivia’s population resided in rural areas, a five percentage point decrease from 2001.⁹ This five percentage point change is, however, not large enough to explain the 22 percentage point decline in the share of the population that self-identified as indigenous in 2012 compared to 2001. Additionally, the term and definitions of what it is to be indigenous have become increasingly politicized in Bolivia in recent years. This politicization may have led some indigenous peoples to elect not to self-identify as indigenous for political reasons rather than due to changes in actual demographic patterns.

The nearly 22 percentage point decline in the share of the indigenous population as measured by the census was likely the result of political and structural changes rather than that of a change in the size of the indigenous population. The results of the most recent census should be used as this is the most up-to-date data. Although there are many factors that can determine the manner in which an individual chooses to identify, self-identification remains the right of the individual. Although it is believed that the share of the population that is ethnically indigenous may be significantly higher, the official share of the population that is indigenous is 40.3 percent until a new census is taken that reflects the current size of the indigenous population.

⁹ www.iadb.org/en/research-and-data/tables,6882.html?indicator=2.