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UK CENSUSES 1991-2022

Policy Changes¹

ABSTRACT: The aim of the paper is to look into the processes of organizing censuses and to analyze them as a form of public policy reflecting but also shaping social relations. The paper acknowledges the challenges inherent in the running of censuses at the decentralized level and administered by different institutions. The content analysis of the census forms is used to track the changes introduced within the last decades and differences between censuses across the United Kingdom. The changes in the census questionnaires are presented as affected by external, sociodemographic factors, concurrent legislation, and political considerations.

Keywords: Census policies, United Kingdom, identity politics, ethnicity, religion

INTRODUCTION

The starting point of the paper is to see the Census processes as a form of public policy, an Eastonian output – within the framework of political system analysis.² Building on that, the census does not only mirror or reflect the socio-political reality of the day but

¹ The article builds on my previous analyses of the census themes – see M. Kułakowska, “Rozwiązania dotyczące przynależności etnicznej i narodowej przyjęte w spisach powszechnych Polski i Wielkiej Brytanii,” in S. Jackiewicz (ed.), *Kwestie spisowe a tożsamość etniczno-kulturowa autochtonicznych mniejszości na pograniczach*, Białystok 2012, pp. 99-112.; M. Kułakowska, “Konstruowanie tożsamości za pomocą działań instytucjonalnych – możliwości i ograniczenia,” in P. Borowiec, R. Kłosowicz, P. Ścigaj (eds), *Odmiany współczesnej nauki o polityce*, Kraków 2014, pp. 147-159; M. Kułakowska, *W poszukiwaniu spójności wspólnotowej. Polityka rządu brytyjskiego w latach 2001-2010*, Kraków 2018. I would also like to thank the reviewers for helpful and inspiring comments.

² J. Stewart, “Public Policy as Information,” *Prometheus*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2013), pp. 3-19.

simultaneously shapes it.³ Of political significance and consequence there are then not only census data, but also decisions on census organization including the focus of this paper – the choice of census questions. The aim of the paper is then to track selected changes in census forms used in the UK within the last thirty years, from the 1991 Census to the last one held in Scotland in 2022, and situate them in the context of broader socio-political changes but also the activity of political actors. The focus of the article is on identity-related questions, such as ethnic group, religion, country of birth, and language(s) spoken.

The article aims at answering the following research questions at the general, cross-country level. How is the Census being organized across the UK and what might be the policy consequences of such arrangements? What changes have been implemented in terms of Census organisation across the last four census iterations? What does the process of changing Census questions look like? Then, the selection of chosen examples from England is presented to illustrate the significance of advocacy groups in the process. The 2001 census brought the reconceptualization of the ethnic group question and (re)introduced the religion question, while the 2011 census introduced the national identity question, aimed arguably to complement and/or supplement information gathered using the ethnic group question. The paper provides insight into the consultation process on some of the new additions, asking about the important actors and factors.

Censuses in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland⁴ are organised usually every ten years⁵ by three different institutions: the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for England and Wales,⁶ National Records of Scotland (NRS) and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).⁷ Taking part in the census is obligatory, which renders it an invaluable source of information not only for re-

³ Kertzer D.I., Arel D., „Censuses, identity formation, and the struggle for political power,” in D.I. Kertzer and D. Arel (eds) *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses*, Cambridge 2004, pp. 1-42, at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/census-and-identity/censuses-identity-formation-and-the-struggle-for-political-power/CB5AD300E-5B774A20B29817D632BDCD1>, 8 January 2025.

⁴ „About the Census,” *Office for National Statistics*, 19 July 2022, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/aboutcensus/aboutthecensus>, 2 November 2024.

⁵ The 2021 Census in Scotland was rescheduled for 2022 due to COVID related concerns; „News Release – Scotland’s Census to Be Moved to March 2022,” *Scotland’s Census*, 17 July 2020, at <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/news-and-events/news-release-scotland-s-census-to-be-moved-to-march-2022/>, 8 January 2025.

⁶ In 2008 the UK Statistics Authority was established, and now it oversees the Office for National Statistics as its executive office; „UK Statistics Authority: About Us,” *gov.uk*, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-statistics-authority/about>, 8 January 2025.

⁷ More information on the history of UK censuses to be found in O. Duke-Williams, „A History of Census-Taking in the UK,” in J. Stillwell (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Census Resources, Methods and Applications: Unlocking the UK 2011 Census*, London 2017, pp. 18-30; G. Compton, A. Wilson, B. French, „The 2011 Census: From Preparation to Publication,” in J. Stillwell (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Census Resources, Methods and Applications: Unlocking the UK 2011 Census*, London 2017, pp. 33-53.

searchers but perhaps more significantly for central and local authorities, as well as other institutions.⁸ The process includes getting input from several different bodies, for instance, the Treasury Select Committee or the Local Government Association, in the case of England and Wales. One of the strategic aims of the census design is to *provide high-quality, value for money, fit-for-purpose statistics that meet user needs, inspire user confidence, and are consistent, comparable and accessible across the UK as far as possible*⁹ – in order to gauge those users' needs, the wide consultation is taking place prior to each census. Garnett Compton, Amy Wilson and Brian French discuss it in reference to the 2011 Census – which brought on – as was mentioned before – several new questions.

*In order to understand user needs, formal public consultations were held, supported by a number of national open meetings about particular issues, including equality-related questions on ethnicity, identity, religion and language. As part of this, the views and needs of government departments, local authorities, the health service, the academic community, the business sector, voluntary sectors and local communities were collected.*¹⁰

As explained in the White Paper on the 2021 Census, 'Help Shape Our Future', the census operation is governed by the Census Act 1920, with the necessary secondary legislation required. The UK Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales approve of the questionnaire. There is also similar legislation in place for Northern Ireland – with the Census Act (Northern Ireland) 1969.¹¹

In terms of the changes implemented in the Census within the last four decades, this paper will look mostly at the content of questionnaires, but it should be added that the process of data collection has also undergone several changes, shifting nowadays predominantly towards the online technologies. Furthermore, there have been discussions on the wider trend to replace a traditional census with surveys and administrative data, as well as deliberations on holding censuses more frequently than once in a decade. In the past in the UK there were attempts to either ask longer questionnaires to only a sample of the population, or else – only record the responses to certain questions for a sample of the population (usually 10%). The latter practice – '10 per cent coding of some hard to code fields'¹² was kept for the 1991 Census, with the 2001 Census moving towards 100% data fully coded. Additional attention was given to the level of enumeration which was found to be unsatisfactory in 1991. In 2011 the option was added to return the census form via the Internet, and the 2021 edition was planned as predominantly online, with an ONS target of 75% online return rate (while the overall response target rate was 94% nationally for England and Wales).¹³

⁸ Cf. HM Government, *Help Shape Our Future: The 2021 Census of Population and Housing in England and Wales*, 2018.

⁹ G. Compton, A. Wilson, B. French, "The 2011 Census...", p. 35.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 36.

¹¹ HM Government, *Help Shape Our Future...*

¹² O. Duke-Williams, "A History...", p. 23.

¹³ HM Government, *Help Shape Our Future...*

CHANGES IN THE CENSUS FORMS

In order to analyze changes in the census questionnaires, 16 documents have been included – four census forms from 1991, 2001, 2011 and the 2021/22 iterations.¹⁴ The analysis was restricted to individual questionnaires, leaving aside household-related questions. The questionnaires have been coded using MAX QDA software in order to look for similarities and differences not only between four UK countries but also within the time framework. The basic unit of analysis was a census question along with the possible responses. The first step aimed at establishing which questions changed within the chosen period. There were two aspects included here: whether there have been any new questions introduced after 1991 and whether there have been any significant differences between UK countries. It was seemingly possible to divide most of them into four broad categories, even though some classifications might have felt arbitrary.

The first category would include questions that have not changed significantly within an analyzed period nor there have been any significant differences between the four countries where the censuses took place. Here we have the usual demographic questions like name, sex, and date of birth, even though the last 2021 edition introduced an additional note on gender identity within the question on sex in two forms – for England and for Wales. I would include here also the questions like the country of birth, even if there were some minor differences in wording, and for practical reasons the order of the options varied (in England it started with England, in Scotland from 2001 with Scotland, in Wales from 2011 with Wales, and in Northern Ireland throughout the period with Northern Ireland), as I believe the essence of the question has not been changed.

¹⁴ The complete list of the analyzed documents and their sources is provided in the Annex at the end of the paper.

Table 1. Overview of the selected census topics 1991-2022¹⁵

Topic	Were these topics included in census forms?				Were there any differences between the countries at any given time?	Were there any changes from previous census editions?*
	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales ¹⁶	England		
Name, sex, date of birth	√ (yes)	√	√	√	-	-
Country of Birth	√	√	√	√	of a minor character	-
Marital status	√	√	√	√	- ¹⁷	√
Sexual orientation/gender-related themes	Introduced partially in 2021	Introduced in 2022	Introduced in 2021	Introduced in 2021	Minor	√
Ethnic group	Introduced in 2001	√	√	√	√	√
National identity	Introduced in 2011	Introduced in 2011	Introduced in 2011	Introduced in 2011	Minor	√
Religion	√	Reintroduced in 2001	Reintroduced in 2001	Reintroduced in 2001	√	√
Migration experience	Introduced in 2011	Introduced in 2011	Introduced in 2011	Introduced in 2011	minor	√
Passports held	From 2011	From 2022	From 2011	From 2011	√	√
Health-related issues	√	√	√	√	√	√
Main language*/English skills	From 2011	From 2011	From 2011	From 2011	√	√
UK indigenous languages	√	√	√	-	√	√

* The analysis of changes along the time axis is limited to the period between 1991 and 2022.

The second category would include questions that changed (including being introduced) in a more or less unified fashion across all four UK countries, like marital status or some work/qualification/transport-related questions. For example, while 1991 census forms included five rudimentary options for *marital status* (*single, married, re-married, divorced* and *widowed*), the later censuses saw the introduction of new options like *separated (but still legally married)* in 2001, or *same-sex civil partnerships* (in 2011). I would also classify here the newest 2021 editions on (trans)gender and sexual orientation, even if there were some minor differences between the NI, Scotland

¹⁵ The overview has been prepared mainly on the basis of the analysis of the census questionnaires made publicly available on websites such as the Calls-Hub project or UK Data Service, but also inspired by previous works on that topic – see “1991 and Earlier Census Data,” *Office for National Statistics*, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/historiccensusdata/1991andearliercensusdata>, 5 November 2024; O. Duke-Williams, O. Duke-Williams, “A History...”. The list of all the forms and their sources is provided in the Annex at the end of the paper. The focus of this paper is on identity-related questions, so the questions related to health, work, transport and some aspects of usual residence were treated with lesser attention.

¹⁶ Welsh forms were only analyzed in English language versions.

¹⁷ There was a minor change within the wording between Scottish and all the other forms on the marital status question in 1991, due to the peculiarities of Scottish law.

and England and Wales editions. Here I would analyze the question on a national identity as well – introduced in 2011 across the United Kingdom, even if the order of options provided varied. The form of the question was standardized in England, Wales and Northern Ireland – ‘How would you describe your national identity’ with a Scottish form asking, ‘What do you feel is your national identity?’. In all the cases, the respondents could choose more than one answer. I would argue that the questions on main language and/or English skills might be treated here with caution. What happened was the following. In 2011 two new questions were added – on the main language and competence in English – in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Scotland the questions were similar in essence, but residents were asked what language they speak at home. Furthermore, the question on English skills was merged with the one on Scottish languages, and the respondents were asked to assess their linguistic skills in more detail. A similar pattern was kept in 2022.¹⁸ With some reservations, I would include here the question on the time of migration introduced¹⁹ in 2011 across the United Kingdom. Now, the question on *country of birth* (discussed earlier) already provided the information on the foreign-born residents. What changed in 2011 was a new question, phrased in most of the forms, ‘If you were not born in the United Kingdom, when did you most recently arrive to live here?’²⁰ The reservations on the classification of this question analytically are connected with the differences between the UK countries – in Northern Ireland residents were additionally asked about the intended length of stay (but only those who arrived within the previous 12 months) and about any experience of longer stays abroad, in England and Wales only about the intended length of stay and in Scotland only about the time of arrival. For the last census only England and Wales kept the additional question on the length of stay for recent migrants. The question on passports held needs to be seen as of a hybrid nature – it was introduced in 2011 in all countries but Scotland – yet in the last census held in 2021 and 2022 it was asked across the whole United Kingdom. A similar hybrid character can be assigned to the question on health, which started to diversify throughout the time, with Scotland and Northern Ireland residents being now asked more specific questions than people residing in England and Wales.

The third category includes questions clearly connected to the peculiarities of devolved character of the British state, taking into consideration regional, cultural and political differences, the questions that differ between the countries but hardly changed during the analyzed period. The questions on indigenous languages skills

¹⁸ It should also be noted that along the questions on main language and/or English skills, the options to assert one’s ability to use Sign Language(s) have also been added.

¹⁹ The official documents usually comment on this question as a new question, even though there were some previous attempts to ask foreign-born UK residents about the year of entry. O. Duke-Williams, “A History...”; cf. D. Hough, *2011 Census of Population: Background: SN/SG/06595*, at <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06595/SN06595.pdf>, 11 January 2025.

²⁰ Office for National Statistics, *2011 Census: Individual Questionnaire: England*, 2011, at <https://calls.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/2011-Census-form-11-England-Individual.pdf>, 5 November 2024.

will fall into this category. For example, only people residing in Northern Ireland are asked about how well they speak Irish (and Ulster-Scots since 2011), only people in Scotland are asked about their competences in Scottish Gaelic (and Scots since 2011), and only people in Wales are asked how well they speak Welsh.

The fourth category includes questions that a) were introduced during the analyzed period and b) varied significantly between the UK countries, in terms of wording or the time of introduction. Here, I would classify *ethnic group* and *religion*. When the ethnic group was introduced in 1991, it happened with a similar wording and list of options across Great Britain, but not in Northern Ireland, where this question was absent at that time. In 2001 all four countries included it, but with different options and layouts. The Northern Ireland version was similar in a sense to the 1991 versions in giving the list of options and asking an individual to choose one (examples being, White, Chinese, Irish Traveller or Black Caribbean). All the other countries had options categorised within sections, with headings like: White, Mixed, or Asian/Asian British, plus there were some differences within like Scotland including the option 'Scottish' under 'the White' heading or England and Wales including an 'Irish' option under the same heading. A similar pattern continued in 2011 and in 2022 with Northern Ireland keeping the layout simplified and not even distinguishing being Irish as a separate ethnic group (sic!), while all the other countries keeping it within sections with some differences among themselves.

Even more striking differences could be noticed when analyzing the question on religion.²¹ In 1991 the only census that included that was the one in Northern Ireland, where residents were requested to state the 'Religion, Religious Denomination or Body'²² to which they belong. In 2001 all parts of the UK included this question but the settings, given options, or even the number of questions were very much different. This pattern continued through the 21st century census editions. One of the few common denominators across the UK was the voluntary character of the question.²³ In England and Wales, the first option given was no religion (or none in previous editions), all Christian denominations were joined together, and the other options were dedicated to religious minorities. In Scotland in 2001 two questions were asked – on belonging to any particular religion and on being brought up in any, and the choices included (besides none) Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, other Christian as well as other religious communities. From 2011 on, only one question has been asked – on

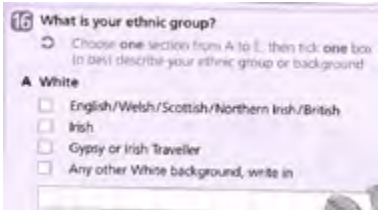
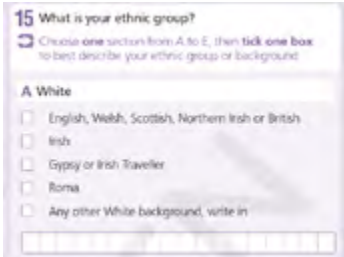
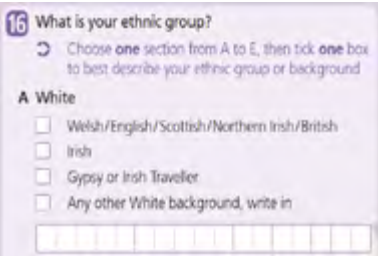
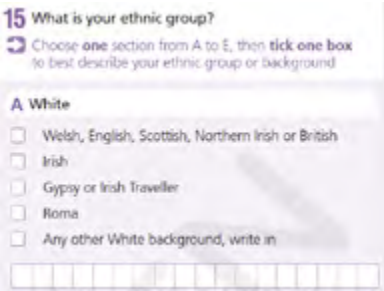


²¹ See the visualisation in the Annex.

²² Registrar General, *1991 Census Northern Ireland: Individual Form*, 1991, at <https://calls.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/1991-Census-Form-Individual.pdf>, 3 November 2024.

²³ Even if wording and phrasing of this exemption differed across census forms. For instance, I could not find an adequate piece of information on the Northern Ireland 2011 census form, while the legal guidance is clear about the lack of obligation on this matter. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Background to the Religion and 'Religion Brought Up in' Questions in the Census, and Their Analysis in 2001 and 2011*, 2013, at <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/background-to-the-religion-and-religion-brought-up-in-questions-in-the-census-and-their-analysis-in-2001-and-2011.pdf>, 7 January 2025.

belonging. In Northern Ireland from 2001 on there have been two questions (though filtered) and the options were all different Christian denominations treated separately.

Chart 1. Visualizations of some differences on an ethnic group question

	Ethnic group in 2011	Ethnic group in 2021/2022
England Section <i>White</i>		
Wales Section <i>White</i>		
Scotland Section <i>White</i>		

Northern Ireland	<div><p>16 What is your ethnic group?</p><p>➡ Tick one box only:</p><div><input type="checkbox"/> White</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Chinese</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Irish Traveller</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Indian</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Pakistani</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Bangladeshi</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Black Caribbean</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Black African</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Black Other</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Mixed ethnic group, write in</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Any other ethnic group, write in</div></div>
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Sources: Census forms from 2011, 2021 and 2022 – see the Annex.

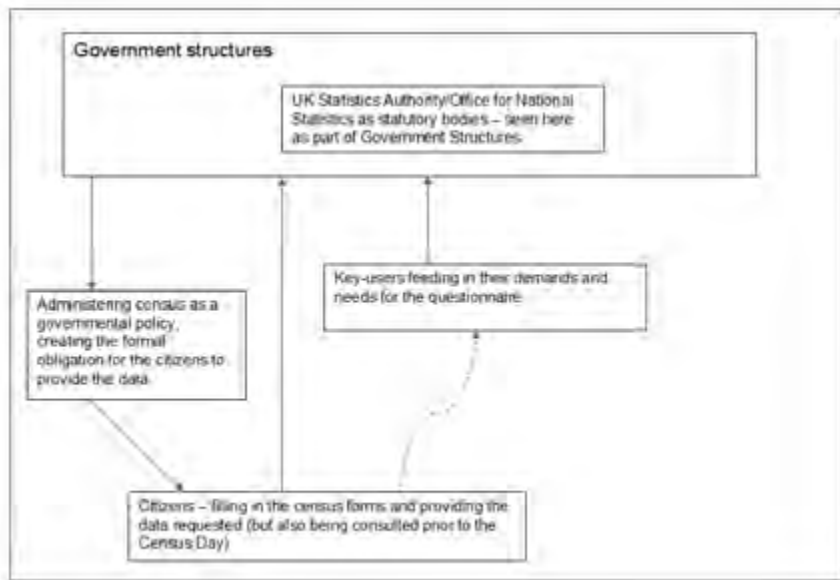
ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

In terms of further analyzing the data, two categories of questions are of main interest then. The second one – including the questions reflecting the wider sociodemographic changes, and the fourth one – not only reflecting the wider changes but also accounting for the differences within the UK.

The focus of the article is on explaining changes in census forms. In this regard, migration flows taking place since 1990s, changes in the role and understanding of a modern family, recognition of flux gender identities are recognised as independent variables affecting the census content. As Oliver Duke-Williams remarks, *census questions have always reflected the changing interests of the day*.²⁴ We could then look at a census policy as being affected by two kinds of processes – demographic ones - at the macro-societal level, and more institutional ones - at the mezzo-micro level where different key users are providing input for preferred census content. Conceptualizing and modeling the process could then be inspired by the concepts of outputs and inputs by David Easton²⁵ with census policies being a governmental output, while consultations process creating the opportunity for key users to provide inputs. The whole process would also be impacted by other government policies and socio-demographic changes.

²⁴ O. Duke-Williams, “A History...”, p. 21.
²⁵ D. Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis*, Chicago 1979, quoted in: A. Heywood, *Politics*, Basingstoke 2013.

Figure 1. Model of the census organization process



Let us look at some examples and see how they could enrich the model above. As mentioned before, the analysis is limited to England's experience. In 2001 there was a new question on religion but also some changes to the ethnic question, in 2011 a new question on national identity and in 2021 a new question on sexual orientation.

It is believed that the question on religion was introduced in England in response to the needs of faith communities,²⁶ even if there is no consensus what the decisive factor was. While Jamil Sherif from the Muslim Council of Britain presents it as a community success story,²⁷ Joanna Southworth attributes more meaning to some strategical and political calculations.²⁸ Peter Aspinall calls faith communities *the most active in seeking recognition of the importance of religion*²⁹ in the census, mentioning the activities of organizations such as the British Sikh Federation and the Kashmiri Workers Association. When listing the arguments in favor of re-introducing the question on religion to censuses in Great Britain,³⁰ Aspinall refers to groups who are *currently invisible in*

²⁶ P. Aspinall, "Should a Question on 'Religion' Be Asked in the 2001 British Census? A Public Policy Case in Favour," *Social Policy & Administration*, vol. 34, no. 5 (2000), pp. 584-600.

²⁷ J. Sherif, "A Census Chronicle – Reflections on the Campaign for a Religion Question in the 2001 Census for England and Wales," *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2011), pp. 1-18.

²⁸ J.R. Southworth, "'Religion' in the 2001 Census for England and Wales," *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2005), pp. 75-88.

²⁹ P. Aspinall, "Should a Question...", p. 590.

³⁰ Previously it was asked in the middle of the 19th century.

*the classifications used*³¹ or impossible to differentiate, providing yet another argument about the prowess of census classifications. He also mentions enabling monitoring and countering (for) religious discrimination, situating census policies in the wider framework of equality policies.

In the same year, Irish communities pressed for including 'White Irish' in 2001 Census.³² Kevin Howard demonstrates the political significance of ethnic classification in the context of multicultural and equality policies, asserting that *official ethnic classifications have become sites of contest in contemporary identity politics*.³³ Even prior to the introduction of ethnic group question in 1991 Census (which had been preceded by turbulent discussions as well),³⁴ the Irish activists mobilized in their efforts to include the Irish category as one of the ethnic options, arguing about *socio-economic disadvantages of the Irish ethnic community [being] (...) rendered invisible*.³⁵ One of the reasons behind including a national identity question was concern about 'the lack of a Welsh tick-box category'.³⁶ A similar notion of inclusion was visible in the statements of LGBT community welcoming the new additions to census questionnaires in 2021.³⁷

Building on that, we could cautiously consider adding an additional link between citizens and key users in the model. Caution is based on the fact that key users are constituted also by central, devolved and local government representatives so they are not to be seen as direct emanations of non-state actors. For instance, the consultation report from 2007 groups them into *four stakeholder types: central and devolved government (...); expert, community and special interest groups (...); local and regional government; [and] local service providers [including the police or fire service]*.³⁸ It should also be underlined that the final decision on what to include in the next census is a political one, and many input suggestions are being dismissed.

What could then be expected in terms of the future of the next census iterations? We can arguably predict the continuation of current struggles in that many communities

³¹ P. Aspinall, "Should a Question...", p. 590.

³² K. Howard, "Constructing the Irish of Britain: Ethnic Recognition and the 2001 UK Censuses," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2006), pp. 104-123; cf. M. Kułakowska, "Konstruowanie tożsamości..."

³³ K. Howard, "Constructing the Irish of Britain...", p. 106.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 106-110; D. Thompson, "The Ethnic Question: Census Politics in Great Britain," in P. Simon, V. Piché, A.A. Gagnon (eds), *Social Statistics and Ethnic Diversity: Cross-National Perspectives in Classifications and Identity Politics*, Cham 2015, pp. 111-139. These discussions taking place in 1970s and 1980s are beyond the time framework of this paper even though the Author recognizes their historical and political significance.

³⁵ K. Howard, "Constructing the Irish of Britain...", p. 112.

³⁶ Office for National Statistics, *2011 Census: Ethnic Group, National Identity, Religion and Language Consultation: Local Service Provider Responses to the 2011 Census Stakeholders Consultation 2006/07*, London 2007, p. 43.

³⁷ Odawson, "LGBT Foundation Cautiously Welcomes the First Snapshot of LGBTQ+ Identities in the Census," *LGBT Foundation*, 6 January 2023, at <https://lgbt.foundation/lgbt-foundation-cautiously-welcomes-the-first-snapshot-of-lgbtq-identities-in-the-census/>, 13 November 2024.

³⁸ Office for National Statistics, *2011 Census: Ethnic Group...*

would seek recognition in the census categorization. The outcomes of those battles are not always easy to foresee, some groups have been more successful than others, and the results seemed to depend on an intricate play of internal and external factors.³⁹ However, what is also worth noting is the fact that modern online technologies have made it easier for respondents to self-identify by providing write-in tools.⁴⁰ We could then say that the bottom-up input mechanisms and links are getting stronger, as via providing space for citizens to self-define, they are given the opportunity to co-create the census language.⁴¹

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Some of the interpretations or classifications of census questions might arguably be seen as arbitrary. The analytical distinctions were based also on the author's assessment of certain differences as minor or major. Certain themes were treated with more attention, while the analysis of a changing landscape of work and occupation-related questions has been almost entirely missing. More importantly, the wider context of changes within the British society, connected with international migration, political changes and cultural diversity was only briefly accounted for. Finally, equality policies that strongly impact communities' needs for recognition were put outside the scope of this paper, which intentionally focuses on census policies.

SUMMARY

The article argues that the method of collecting data on communities and societies is a deeply political and politicized tool having an impact on power relations in any given state. Using the example of UK Censuses administered by different institutions in four UK countries, it situates the census policies in the middle of identity politics. The concept that census policies might render some communities visible (and thus some invisible) draws our attention to the possibilities and opportunities connected with being officially recognised and counted, but also with risks linked to reinforcing images of fixed, stable, homogenous communities whose members might only possess one (main) identity. The focus of the article is on census forms and questions in the context

³⁹ D. Thompson, "The Ethnic Question..."

⁴⁰ S. Wood, "How Am I Represented in Census 2021 Data?," *Office for National Statistics*, 25 November 2022, at <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2022/11/25/how-am-i-represented-in-census-2021-data/>, 12 January 2025.

⁴¹ The details matter here though. It was reported that the search-as-you-type function might have reduced non-standardised responses for languages spoken. Office for National Statistics, *Ethnic Group, National Identity, Language, and Religion Quality Information for Census 2021*, 2022, at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/methodologies/ethnicgroupnationalidentitylanguageandreligionqualityinformationforcensus2021>, 12 January 2025.

of constructing meanings and labels, even though other aspects like the intervals between censuses, the modes of collecting information and penalties for failing to fill in the proper data are also undeniably of political character.

The questions introduced to the census forms in the last decades connected to national identity, religion, or main language, might be seen as a sign of changes in the British society, increasing super-diversity⁴² and creating new forms of identities and communities. They might be seen then as a rational governmental reaction aiming at taking account of the changes happening at the social level. Yet, there should be also another interpretation at play, situating census policies in the middle of power dynamics between interest groups, non-state and state actors, communities and the government of the day. Furthermore, these processes are taking place in a dynamic context of legal obligations at both a national and international level. It is no coincidence that the discussions on census classifications are so often held in the context of monitoring, measuring, and finally countering discrimination. The classifications used have then a substantial impact on real life chances and opportunities.

ANNEX

The list of analyzed census forms

1991

Office of Population Census and Surveys, *1991 Census England: Individual Form*, April 1991, https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/app/uploads/1991_england_individual.pdf.

Registrar General, *1991 Census Northern Ireland: Individual Form*, April 1991, <https://calls.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/1991-Census-Form-Individual.pdf>.

Registrar General for Scotland, *1991 Census Scotland: Individual Form*, April 1991, <https://calls.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/1991-Scotland-Individual.pdf>.

Office of Population Census and Surveys, *1991 Census Wales: Individual Form*, April 1991, https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/app/uploads/1991_wales_individual.pdf.

2001

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Chart 2. Visualizations of some differences on a religion question

Religion questions in 2021/22	
England	<div><div>16 What is your religion?</div><div><div>This question is voluntary</div></div><div><div><input type="checkbox"/> No religion</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Buddhist</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Hindu</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Jewish</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Muslim</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Sikh</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Any other religion, write in</div></div><div></div></div>
Wales	<div><div>16 What is your religion?</div><div><div>This question is voluntary</div></div><div><div><input type="checkbox"/> No religion</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Christian (all denominations)</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Buddhist</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Hindu</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Jewish</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Muslim</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Sikh</div><div><input type="checkbox"/> Any other religion, write in</div></div><div></div></div>

Sources: Census forms from 2011, 2021 and 2022.

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