

# USA Today

## The nation's changing complexion

By Sheryl McCarthy

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When I was in college and working part-time for a newspaper, I had a debate with my editor over how important African Americans were in the national scheme of things.

"We're 10% of the population!" I said.

"Yes," he said, "but the other 90% are Americans!"

*(Alejandro Gonzalez / USA TODAY)*

I thought of him when the Census Bureau released its latest projections about the vanishing white majority. Because of increased immigration, a higher birthrate among Hispanics and the black population holding its own, the nation's racial and ethnic minorities will outnumber white Americans of European descent [by 2042](#), earlier than had been predicted. By 2050, these "minorities" will make up a majority of 54%.

With a turnover in the nation's racial makeup looming right down the road, having to choose between a white guy and a black guy for president takes on added significance. Whether some voters' admitted inability to pull the lever for Barack Obama because he's black will outweigh the excitement many others are feeling about his historic candidacy, or vice versa, could determine the outcome of the election.

The Census projections made headlines that seemed designed to play on the fears of one racial group or another. The subtext was, "They're coming soon to a place near you, they might not speak English, and they could take your job."

Does it matter whether Caucasians are no longer the face of the USA? And what effect will the complexion change have on the country? These questions go to the heart of what it means to be an American, a "minority," and why no one wants that label.

### **Stereotypes**

I teach journalism, and I tell my students never to use the word "minority" if they can help it. If they're talking about a specific racial or ethnic group, they should say which one. That's because minority has become a euphemism for blacks and Hispanics, with all the negative stereotypes that attach. In the public mind, minorities are those who, because of discrimination and an assortment of cultural baggage, have had a harder time assimilating into the mainstream than others. They are people who do bad things and have bad things happen to them.

I once heard an Asian-American journalist describe riding the New York City subway and seeing "the minorities" get off uptown. He wasn't talking about other Asians. Since we've turned "minority" into a dirty word, it's no wonder no one wants to be one.

There are also those who, like my former editor, view Caucasians as the only true Americans and fear the loss of power that comes with belonging to the largest group. Nor is that fear limited to whites. When the [2000 Census showed](#) Hispanics had overtaken blacks as the country's largest minority group, some blacks worried about losing political clout to Hispanics.

Whether Obama or John McCain is elected, one of his biggest challenges will be to reduce the inequities separating blacks, Hispanics and our newest immigrants from the rest of Americans. This will become more urgent as the more affluent white population ages and the new majority is called on to bear more of the burden of paying for entitlement programs.

"Whether you're talking about financing Social Security or about the basic social cohesion of the country, if our racial trends cause a continuation of our inequality trends, we'll be in very deep trouble," says [Christopher Edley](#), the dean of the [Boalt Hall Law School](#) at the University of California-Berkeley.

### **Investing in the future**

As I scrolled through hundreds of Internet comments in response to the Census story, I agreed with those who quipped that it was time someone other than white folks got to be the majority. But I was bothered by the predictions that once blacks and Hispanics "take over," the country will go the way of [cities](#) such as Detroit, Newark and Camden and be beset by poverty, crime, corruption and mismanagement.

What the complexion change means will depend on what we make it, on how well our lawmakers and communities address the needs of the emerging majority. The U.S. education system lifted the boats of generations of European, black and Asian immigrants, but it has been [slipping](#) for years in comparison with other industrialized countries.

The coming changes don't scare me because I live in New York City, where [60% of New Yorkers](#) are already black, Hispanic, Asian and other races, and only 35% are white. It's the most culturally vibrant city in the country; it is mostly clean and well run, with a [relatively low crime rate](#).

Even so, according to a recent report by the Urban Justice Center's [Human Rights Project](#), shocking disparities exist between black and Hispanic residents and other residents, whether we're talking about homelessness, wages, health insurance or education.

Depending on what we do, 2050 could find us staring at more horrific images like those we saw after Hurricane Katrina, showing which [racial groups in New Orleans](#) were the haves and have-nots.

Or the country could look more like the U.S. Olympic team that brought back [all those medals](#) from Beijing. It boasted [33 foreign-born athletes](#) and every race under the sun. And there was nothing scary about them.

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