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A 'Usable Past'?: Irish Affiliation in CANZUS Settler States

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Abstract: In a 2023 article in this journal, Esther and Michael Fitzpatrick wrote that "complicated are those diaspora people who yearn to claim 'Irishness' in their places as something distinct from colonial settlers". An Irish identity seems to offer something unique in these contexts, having been embraced by Joe Biden, for example, as a keystone of his political identity. In this article, I utilise census data from the four primary Anglo-settler polities of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States to demonstrate the comparatively greater extent that Irish ethnic antecedents are remembered by local-born Whites. While acknowledging that drivers of ethnic affiliation are personal and multifaceted, and not directly discernible from answers on a questionnaire, I consider the nature of Irishness as a political identity in settler-colonial contexts.

Keywords: decolonisation; settler colonial studies; Irish studies; Indigenous-settler relations; settler identity; census

> I am well aware that some believe the Irish beyond any human criticism and unlikely to deserve divine.
>
> Patrick O'Farrell (1990)

1. Introduction

While home to Indigenous nations that supersede this paradigm, as settler migrant nations ('countries of migration') the CANZUS states[1]—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States—are experiencing a growing interest and engagement with family history or genealogy (Evans 2022). Family history serves as a profound driver of ethnic consciousness, creating a tangible bridge between individuals and their ancestral roots (linking 'the past' to 'the present'). Indeed, the largest genealogy services provide DNA tests that both identify genetic relatives and provide "ethnicity estimates" of an individual's DNA broken down into percentages. As Robinson-Sweet (2021) argued, those engaging with such services "have turned to a company to help them understand who they are" (2021, p. 80).

In this way, genealogy is implicated in processes of ethnic construction. As social scientists have long known, ethnic identities are not fundamental ('estimated' percentage breakdowns notwithstanding) but rather social constructions, contingent on, and shifting in response to, local historical and political contexts (Barth 1969; Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Solomos 2022). As Peter Aspinall argued, "processes of seeking to delimit ethnic and racial groups—to divide the population into distinct communities or groups—link closely to political agendas" (Aspinall 2009, p. 1419). While always complex and multifaceted, ethnic identity was once centred for whites in settler states on a relatively homogenous 'British' (or Anglo-Saxon) identity. This identity has become ever-less tenable, implicated as it is on the exploitation, dispossession, and erasure of non-white peoples. The difficulty in sustaining a narrative centred on a pioneering, settler colonial identity seems to have coincided with growing recognition of more narrow and diverse ethnic origins. As Jacobson (2006) has put it, "after decades of striving to conform to the Anglo-Saxon standard, descendants of

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earlier European immigrants quit the melting pot. Italianness, Jewishness, or Greekness were now badges of pride, not shame".

While this broader white 'ethnic revival' is now well recognised in the literature (Jacobson 2006; Kaufmann 2018), few studies have explored it quantitatively, that is, how it may have influenced or be reflected in official ethnic counts or data collections (for notable exceptions see Alba and Chamlin 1983; Hout and Goldstein 1994; Lieberson and Waters 1986), or in a cross-national perspective. In this paper, I focus on Irish identity, interrogating empirical evidence from census counts across the four CANZUS states to chart the number of non-Irish-born whites indicating Irish on census forms. Many authors have noted the unique cachet of Irish identity or affiliation: In her 2023 novel *The Rachel Incident*, Caroline O'Donoghue (2023) has written that "perhaps it's because so many people claim Irishness that we keep putting our private jokes on higher and higher shelves", while Frank McCourt in his autobiography 'McCourt (1999) asked "Why is it the minute I open my mouth the whole world is telling me they're Irish and we should all have a drink?". The expression 'Plastic Paddy' is even used to describe 'inauthentic' claims of Irishness by those "desperate to find some trace of green in their blood" (Massie 2006).

Scholarship formerly (and the popular imagination perhaps currently) views such group-based identities in terms of biologically distinct 'races', emphasising physical differences more imagined than real (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). However, contemporary scholarship acknowledges the absence of any genetic or objective foundation to such labels, which are fluid, context-dependent, and evolving, shaped through ongoing negotiation and social dynamics (Barth 1969; Egan 2020; Solomos 2022). Ethnic identity can be understood as a process, a strategic choice, or even a form of performance (McClean 2012), constantly shaped and reshaped in response to social and historical influences. As Nagel (1994, p. 152) points out,

> origin, content and form of ethnicity reflect the creative choices of individuals and groups as they define themselves in ethnic ways. . .through the actions and designations of ethnic groups, their antagonists, political authorities, and economic interest groups, ethnic boundaries are erected dividing some populations and unifying others.

Given that censuses in CANZUS states have long recognised the principle of self-identification (Aspinall 1997), responses to census questions related to an ethnic group, ethnic origin, or indeed ancestry are always examples of these ongoing processes of identity construction.

This article builds on a body of literature in Irish studies that has considered how Irish identity does a particular kind of work, particularly in an ethnically conscious post-Civil Rights era (Duffy 2014; Nash 2008; Negra 2006). But this scholarship has largely focused on the Irish in America and, in keeping with a trend in studies on white ethnicity that Kennedy (2022) has perceptively pointed out, is mostly undertaken "in a symbolic rather than empirical register" (see also Gans 2014). Some studies have empirically considered Irish ancestry in the United States: in their 1994 article *How 4.5 million Irish immigrants became 40 million Irish Americans*, Hout and Goldstein used Ancestry data from the 1980 and 1990 censuses to show that identification with some groups, notably Irish and German, 'exceeds what natural increase would imply'. Heinz (2013) charts the number of people indicating Irish Ancestry between the 1990 census and 2002–2009 American Community Surveys. These studies are now somewhat dated and are limited in their singular focus on the United States, despite similar political and sociological trajectories across the Anglo-World settler states (Belich 2009; Wolfe 2006).

In the sections below, I assess the number of people claiming Irish affiliation in recent decades from a cross-national perspective, i.e., across the CANZUS states. This analysis finds an increase in 'Irish' responses across all four countries. Probing into the ethnic group and ancestry categories and their subjective underpinnings, I ask what is it that makes Irishness in these countries—even for people generationally removed from Ireland—of growing attractiveness? Reflecting on the social dynamics at play, I argue that Irishness—

understood to be less complicit in processes of dispossession and resettlement—proffers a 'usable past' for settler-origin people coming up against their colonial heritage.

2. Data and Method

This study relies on official census and (in the US) American Community Survey data for the four countries. More specifically, I sought to quantify for each country the number of people identifying as 'Irish' at two time points: the census/count closest to the year 2000, and that closest to the year 2020. In keeping with the interest here on Irish as a 'historical' identity amongst members of the settler majority, where possible (for Australia, Canada, and New Zealand), figures provided are for those identifying as Irish who are locally born (i.e., not direct immigrants from Ireland). Table 1 shows the sources of the data.

Table 1. Sources for the number of people self-identifying as Irish.

Country	Year	Source
Canada	2001	2001 Census of Canada long form (Statistics Canada 2003)
	2021	2021 Census of Canada long form (Statistics Canada 2022a)
Australia	2006	2006 Census of Population and Housing (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006)
	2021	2021 Census of Population and Housing (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021)
New Zealand	2001	2001 Census of Population and Dwellings (Statistics New Zealand 2024 pers. comm.)
	2018	2018 Census of Population and Dwellings (Statistics New Zealand 2024 pers. comm.)
United States	2000	2000 Decennial Census (U.S. Census Bureau 2007)
	2020	2015–2020 American Community Survey 5-year estimates (U.S. Census Bureau 2024)

It is worthwhile briefly outlining the counting approaches taken in each country. In Canada, relevant data has been collected via a question on *ethnic or cultural groups*. In 2001 and 2021 this 'ethnic origin' question was collected via the census long form—a 20% (2001) or 25% (2021) sample of households, with counts applied to the national population via weighting (Statistics Canada 2022b). The 2001 long-form question stated that "This question refers to the **origins of the person's ancestors**" (emphasis in original) and asked "To which ethnic or cultural group(s) did this person's **ancestors** belong?" with space for four write-in responses. Irish was one of 25 named examples given. In 2021 the question asked "What were the ethnic or cultural origins of this person's ancestors?", without examples provided on the form but with a link given to a website with examples (Statistics Canada 2022a). Four lines were provided for responses and up to six were retained in the data.

In Australia, data is on ancestry, which "describes the ethnic origin or cultural heritage to which a person identifies and/or to which a person's forebears are/were attached" (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014). While the 2001 Australian census did include an ancestry question, the closest data publicly available to 2000 is from the 2006 census. This census asked "What is the person's ancestry" with instruction to provide up to two only. Seven tick boxes—including Irish—and a write-in option were provided. The question wording in 2021 was identical, though 9 tick boxes, again including Irish, were provided. In both 2006 and 2021, when a person provided more than two ancestries, only the first two were processed (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022).

Group counts in New Zealand have been collected in a census question on ethnic groups since 1991 (previously ethnic origin and blood quantum measures were used). The 2001 and 2018 censuses used identical questions: "Which ethnic group do you belong to? Mark the space or spaces which apply to you", with 8 tick boxes provided and an 'other' write-in space with 3 examples given (neither the tick boxes nor example write-in answers included Irish in 2001 or 2018). Up to four ethnic groups are recorded in the data. Ethnic

data from this question are often aggregated to broad groupings and lowest-level Irish counts are not publicly available disaggregated from wider (e.g., British and Irish) counts. Data on narrowly Irish responses were obtained from Statistics New Zealand as customised data requests (Statistics New Zealand, pers. comm.).

In the United States, aside from longstanding questions on race (supplemented with a more recent 'ethnicity' question on Hispanic or Latino origin), censuses between 1980 and 2000, and since then the American Community Survey (ACS)[2], have also asked "What is this person's ancestry or ethnic origin?". According to the US Census Bureau, this question "refers to a person's ethnic origin or descent, "roots," or heritage, or the place of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States" (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). The question wording, examples, and format in the ACS are identical to Census 2000, with responses comprising two write-in lines in which respondents can report their ancestry or ancestries. Irish is not provided as an example response. The Bureau codes up to two ancestries per person (generally counting the first two if a person reports more than this).

All data presented in this paper is from official data sources, either the national population census or the ACS national survey. In all cases, it has been collected on the basis of self-identification, although countries differ in the number of categories individuals can record (2 in Australia and the United States, 4 in New Zealand, and 6 in Canada). In the US and New Zealand, Irish was not provided as a tick box or example response in the forms in question, an Irish tick box was provided in 2006 and 2021 Australian forms, and Irish was listed as an example on the 2001 Canadian census but not directly in 2021. Finally, the conceptual basis used for the question also differs between the countries, with Australia using ancestry, the USA ancestry and ethnic origin, Canada the ethnic or cultural origins of one's ancestors, and New Zealand ethnic group. As Aspinall (2001, p. 831) noted, ancestry is different from ethnic groups in that it "focuses the question back in time and conveys a historical and frequently geographic context", whereas ethnicity is a "self-perceived conception of social group membership"[3]. Due to these differing approaches, counts are not directly comparable between countries.

3. Results

This section reports the number of people reporting Irish in the official national population counts of the four CANZUS states. Available counts nearest to the years 2000 and 2020 are reported, and where possible (i.e., except for the USA) include only those also recorded as being locally born.

3.1. Canada

In the 20 years between the 2001 and 2021 censuses of Canada, the number of people reporting 'Irish' ethnic or cultural origins increased by 578,310 persons, or 15.97 percent (see Figure 1). This was the third largest ethnic or cultural origin reported in the 2021 census, after Canadian or English (Statistics Canada 2022c). As outlined by Wilson (1989), after 1815 the Irish were the largest contingent of those from the British Isles migrating to British North America (Canada), until after the middle of the century when migrants from England and Wales caught up, and the 1890s when those from Scotland did also. Houston and Smyth (1990) suggest that in the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish in Canada outnumbered English and Scots by two to one. Uniquely amongst the settler-receiving nations, a very large proportion of settlers—up to two-thirds—of Irish migrants to Canada were Protestant.

To exclude those with more direct Irish ties, 2001 figures include only the 'non-immigrant population' (i.e., those who are Canadian by birth), while the 2021 figures include only 'second generation' or 'third generation or more' (those born in Canada with at least one parent born outside Canada and those born in Canada with all parents born in Canada, respectively). Only 'Irish' responses are included—these figures exclude Northern Irish (totalling 25,205 persons in 2021), Ulster Scot (1395 persons in 2021), British Isles

origins, n.o.s. (not otherwise specified), British Isles origins, n.i.e., (not included elsewhere), and Celtic, n.o.s. responses.

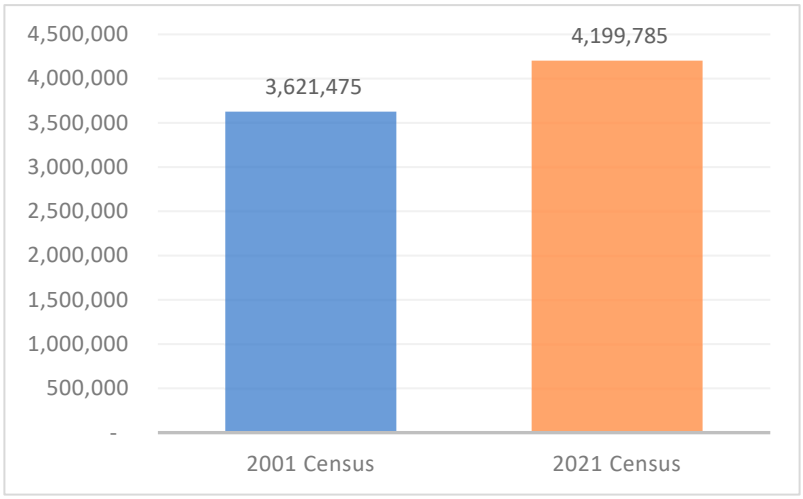

Figure 1. The number of respondents indicating Irish ethnic or cultural origins in the 2001 and 2021 censuses of Canada, Canadian-born respondents only.

3.2. Australia

In Australia, where 2001 census figures are not publicly available and we must rely on 2006 figures, the Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded an increase in the number of people indicating Irish Ancestry between the 2006 and 2021 censuses of 503,136, or 32.47 percent (see Figure 2). This is the greatest percentage increase across the four countries, and in the shortest length of time: 15 years. In 2021, Irish was the third largest nominated ancestry, behind English and Australian. Only Australian-born people are included in these counts.

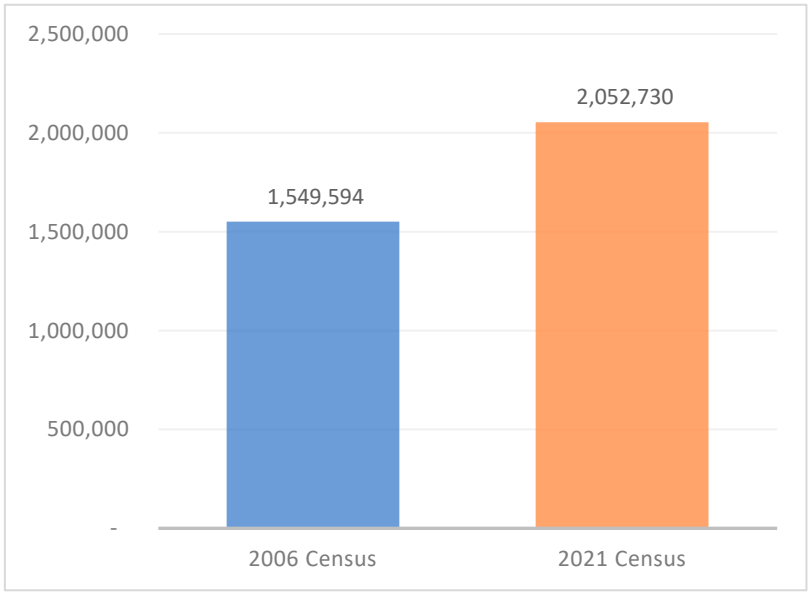

Figure 2. Irish ancestry in the 2006 and 2021 censuses of Australia, Australian-born respondents only.

British 'not elsewhere classified' or 'not further defined' responses are not included. No other groups listed in the Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups (ASCCEG) could be considered Irish, although the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019) notes that 'Celtic' is coded to broader North-West European group as 'North-West

European, nfd' (not further defined), as Celtic groups originate in North-West Europe. This is of interest because the label 'Anglo-Celtic' is commonly used in Australia to describe the ethnic grouping of 'British and Irish' (Robb 2001). This term gives greater emphasis to the Irish contribution to the settler population than Anglo-Saxon and is probably more commonly used in Australia given the large proportion of Irish colonial migrants: Irish migrants accounted for a full quarter of Australia's overseas-born population in 1871 (Australian Department of Home Affairs 2016). The National Museum of Australia states that "Australia remains the most Irish country in the world outside Ireland" (n.d.).

3.3. New Zealand

In New Zealand, where the conceptual basis of the census question was quite different inasmuch as it emphasised current cultural ties, the number of people indicating Irish is much smaller, both numerically and as a proportion of the population. Between the 2001 and 2018 censuses, the number of New Zealand-born people indicating Irish as an ethnic group increased by 741 or 11.66 percent, from 6357 to 7098 (see Figure 3). Note that these figures include only those recorded as Irish: European nfd (not further defined), British nfd, Celtic nfd, British nec (not elsewhere classified), and European nec counts are not included.

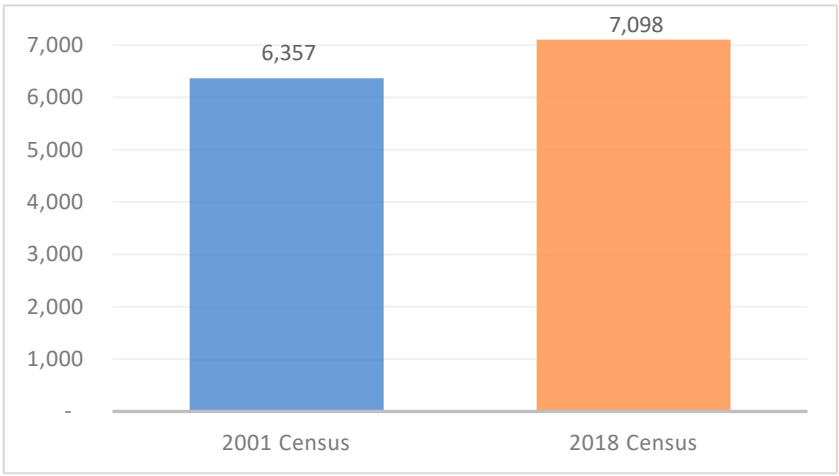

Figure 3. Irish ethnic group in the 2001 and 2018 censuses of New Zealand, New Zealand-born respondents only.

Though these numbers are much smaller than the other CANZUS states, it is worth examining in the New Zealand context the large number of Irish ethnicities recorded in the immediately prior New Zealand census, held in 1996. In this census the wording of the question changed, making it more explicit that respondents could select more than one affiliation ("tick as many circles as you need to show which ethnic group(s) you belong to") and also included a separate 'Other European' tick box with further drop-down boxes for 'English', 'Dutch', 'Australian', 'Scottish', 'Irish' and 'Other—print your ethnic group(s)', in addition to the typical 'New Zealand European' tick box (Lang 2002; Statistics New Zealand 2002). These changes saw a significant increase in the number of 'other Europeans'—an additional 395,670 from the previous census, with a concurrent decline in New Zealand European responses (Broman 2018). Table 2 lists the ten largest 'Other European' groups counted in this census. Those provided as a tick box in the questionnaire are listed in bold.

Table 2. Top 10 Other European Responses, 1996 New Zealand Census.

Ethnic Group	New Zealand-Born	Overseas-Born	Total
English	100,527 (36.1%)	178,254 (63.9%)	281,895
Scottish	68,190 (64.5%)	37,575 (35.5%)	107,007
Irish	53,406 (74.1%)	18,627 (25.9%)	73,044
Australian	13,743 (26.0%)	39,075 (74.0%)	53,625
Dutch	22,272 (47.2%)	24,942 (52.8%)	47,571
German	5571 (41.9%)	7719 (58.1%)	13,410
Welsh	3894 (39.6%)	6030 (60.9%)	9963
American	1605 (20.3%)	6306 (79.7%)	7974
South African nec [1]	375 (5.6%)	6360 (94.4%)	6762
French	3732 (64.0%)	2100 (36.0%)	5889

Census Usually Resident Population (URP) with other European ethnicity specified, either alone or in combination with some other ethnic group (e.g., "Irish" and "Maori"). Records with no birthplace recorded are excluded from this analysis. [1] Not elsewhere classified.

Unsurprisingly, the top five responses were those that had a specific tick box included on the form. Not coincidentally, these groups represent the largest source countries of New Zealand's European settlement (Belich 1996; Phillips and Hearn 2008). It is worth drawing attention to the 53,000+ New Zealand-born people who indicated Irish ethnicity—over half the ~100,000 who indicated English. This is noteworthy because, with reference to source documents, historian Donald Akenson (1990) estimated that between the 1860s and 1950s (i.e., the primary settlement period), European settlers in New Zealand were around 50–53 percent English or Welsh, 21–24 percent Scots, and just 16–18 percent Irish. That the Irish ethnic group included the highest proportion of people who were New Zealand-born is also of considerable interest. Almost three-quarters of Irish respondents had been born in New Zealand, compared to just 36 percent of English. In total, 40.4 percent of those indicating 'Other European' in the 1996 census were New Zealand-born (Broman 2018).

3.4. United States

While the numbers are derived using quite different methodologies, the number of people in the United States reporting Irish ancestry increased between the 2000 census and national 5-year estimates from the American Community Survey published in 2020 by 1,133,252—or 3.71 percent (see Figure 4). This is the largest numerical increase observed in the four CANZUS states, though the smallest in percentage terms.

In contrast to the other countries covered here, the United States counts include both native- and foreign-born people because ancestry data cross-tabulated by nativity (birthplace) are not publicly available for 2000 census counts. However, the ACS data (estimates) for 2020 record that 31,412,798 of the 31,658,051 people, or 99.2% of those recording Irish ancestry were native (i.e., not foreign-born) (U.S. Census Bureau 2024). As such, the vast majority of the 2000 counts can be also assumed to be American-born Irish. These counts include only direct 'Irish' responses. Not included are Scotch Irish (a further 2,928,032 people nationally in 2020 ACS estimates), Irish Scotch (1,982,890 people), British Isles (118,540 people), or Celtic responses (47,934 people).

It is worthwhile considering the concept of Scotch Irish or Irish Scotch here in further detail. These terms describe descendants of settlers from the Irish province of Ulster who were mostly Protestant and descendants of people from Scotland who had settled in Ulster during the 'plantation' period of the 1600s. Scotch Irish are considered to have represented up to one-sixth of the European population of pre-revolutionary America (Eid 1986). They were likely to consider themselves Irish—and they are likely to have made up a larger proportion of the Irish diaspora in Canada and the United States than is typically acknowledged, especially in the period before the 1840s famine in Ireland (Akenson 1993). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the religious affiliations of historic Irish migration patterns in great depth, it is important to note that Irish migration in each of the countries was differentially structured—and what might have been 'normative' Irish

migration shifted over time. A range of personal and historic factors, including religious identity, undoubtedly play a role in retaining or shaping any residual sense of Irishness in the descendants of these settlers (see Byrnes and Coleborne 2023 for an insightful discussion around why particular narratives or roles might be retained across colonial or migrant generations).

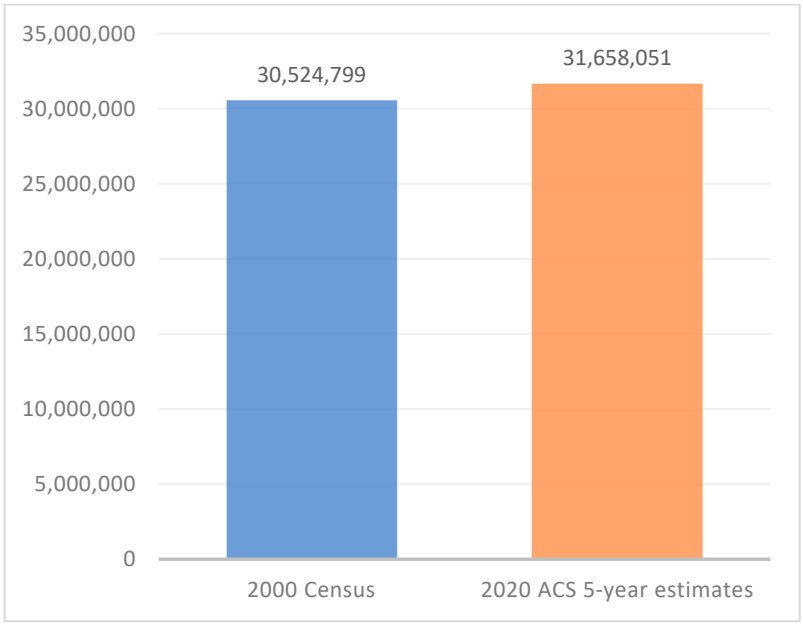

Figure 4. Irish ancestry or ethnic origin recorded in the 2000 census and 2020 ACS 5-year estimates of the United States.

4. Discussion

The number of people indicating Irish ties, in flagship census counts, has grown over the course of the 21st century in all four CANZUS states. This growth has occurred in the context of sub-replacement birth rates amongst the (white) majority population in all four CANZUS countries[4], and no changes in the number of such ties recorded. The growing number of people recording Irish has therefore occurred relative to other (or no) groups and suggests a population-level trend toward identifying as such over the period. While not questioning the authenticity of these self-identified identifications, and acknowledging that identities are always complex and multifaceted, in this section, I propose two interconnected explanations for the increase in those indicating Irish in the censuses of all four countries.

The first likely driver is the extent to which Irishness offers a distinctive (if perhaps superficial) identity beyond the apparent 'culturelessness' (Perry 2001) of majority whiteness. In the early 20th century, numerous scholars foresaw the diminishing importance of ethnicity or race, believing that modernity would eradicate these 'primitive' connections (Gordon 1964; Warner and Srole 1945). These predictions characterised assimilationist theories such as those of Park (1950), who posited that the ethnic dynamics among immigrant groups in American society would progress from competition to accommodation and, ultimately, assimilation. However, the anticipated universal decline in ethnic identity never materialized, and by the 1960s, a global "ethnic revival" was well underway (Fishman 1985). Ethnic-based conflicts, mobilisations, and political movements have characterised the post-war period, particularly for minority groups, and this, in turn, has only increased the salience of ethnicity for individual members of the 'white ethnic' majority in CANZUS countries (Kaufmann 2018). With growing diversity making whites' own race more difficult to ignore, research in America has found the racial consciousness of whites to be increasing (Knowles and Tropp 2018).

If previously members of the demographic and discursive majority white group had perhaps tended not to consider themselves in 'ethnic' terms and understood themselves simply in terms of an unremarkable norm, this certainly seems to be changing. In this context, Irishness offers a categorisation distinguishable from, but—crucially—still proximate to, the 'Anglo' white majority. As Sarah Heinz (2013, p. 82) has convincingly argued, "Irishness has become an increasingly popular means for white Americans to enrich their whiteness with a specifically ethnic but nonetheless white and familiar identity". Its attractiveness is unsurprising given growing empirical evidence showing cultural identity is less secure amongst settler majority populations. One example is from the ~4500 youth participants in the 12-year data collection wave of *Growing Up in New Zealand* (GUiNZ), a longitudinal study broadly generalisable to New Zealand youth. When asked to consider "I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group", 48 percent of the 2268 (solely) European respondents agreed or strongly agreed, compared to 76 percent of 979 Indigenous Māori. Indeed, of five broad ethnic groupings, European youth were the least likely to agree or strongly agree in all 12 measures of ethnic and cultural connection (Neumann et al. 2023).

To understand this ability for white ethnics to identify as Irish, it is worthwhile referring to Waters's (1990) concept of white ethnic options. Waters, from interviews in suburban California and Pennsylvania, discovered a perhaps surprising level of 'ethnic' identity and affiliation amongst whites who tended to adopt one recognised grouping over others in their heritage or ancestry. These white ethnicities are voluntary, flexible, and in essence symbolic (involving little or no constriction on individual lives). The ability to choose Irish is tied to the political power of dominance, which results in whites having a far broader range of options regarding their ethnic identification than other groups, even to the extent of disavowing ethnicity completely (Waters 1990). For others, those outside dominant groups, ethnic or racial identity is more difficult to repudiate. As Joane Nagel points out, "European Americans and Black Americans represent two ends of an ethnic ascription continuum, in which Whites are always free to remember their ancestry and Blacks are never free to forget theirs" (Nagel 1995, p. 949).

If this impulse—i.e., towards an identity that is 'different and special' (Heinz 2013)—involves remembering, the second key driver I suggest for the increases in Irish responses shown here involves more conscious forgetting. Avril Bell (2022) has pointed out in this journal how settler descendants (of whom those in CANZUS are archetypical) prefer, like other dominant groups, to forget how this dominance was attained. She suggests that the "histories, literatures, and private family narratives of settler societies are replete with forms of forgetting the past the past violence and with legitimising narratives that explain why settlers occupy the centres of their societies". The former identity claims of white settlers in these countries, as 'colonist' 'pioneer', 'settler', and even 'British' are ever less tenable, given global decolonisation movements and Indigenous resurgence of recent decades (Alfred and Corntassel 2005; Elliott 2018; Walker 1990). In this milieu, Irishness offers members of the colonial/settler/white majority an opportunity to distance themselves from the crimes (slavery, persecution, theft, extermination, genocide, and forced cultural assimilation) of colonisation. As the first British colony, Ireland certainly suffered, and the Irish were often considered other, alien, or inferior (Knobel 1986; National Museum of Australia n.d.). But Ireland was both 'subject and agent' of British colonisation (Kenny 2004)—being colonised, but also part of the Empire's colonising missions elsewhere. In the 'postcolonial' context of modern CANZUS states, the subject-of-colonisation narrative tends to be emphasised: New Zealander Jen Margaret (2018), *Joan Cook Memorial Essay*, writes of people "distancing themselves from colonisation—'I didn't do it' 'My ancestors were Irish, they were oppressed too.'"

What Irish offers in this (modern political) context is clearly visible in American electoral politics. Of 46 US presidents, 22 have made claims to Irishness, including all 11 Presidents since John F. Kennedy except Donald Trump, and in the case of Bill Clinton claims were made without any documentation supporting ancestry (Canellos 2023; Geoghegan

2011). Fintan O'Toole (2020), in a 2020 essay on Joe Biden in the *New York Review of Books*, is worth quoting at length:

> . . . The Kennedys defined an Irish-American Catholic political identity—white (even in their case conspicuously privileged), yet by virtue of the grimness of Irish history and the outsider status of Catholics, supposedly not guilty of the grave crimes of racial oppression. Its promise was to act as the bridge across the great divide of US society, being mainstream enough to connect to the white majority but with a sufficient memory of past torment to connect also to the black minority. Its underlying appeal was to the very thing that Biden would come to embody—"a sense of the depth of their pain" rooted in "vivid memories of sad times". This is what Biden chose when he defined himself as he has throughout his public career: "I see myself as an Irish Catholic".
>
> And this was indeed a choice. Biden is not an Irish name—he recalled in Promises to Keep his Irish-American aunt, Gertie Blewitt, telling him: "Your father's not a bad man. He's just English". Nor is his middle name, Robinette. The Robinettes, his paternal grandmother's kin, traced their ancestry in America to a tract of land near Media, Pennsylvania, originally granted by William Penn. So Biden could have presented himself, had he chosen, as an all-American boy. Instead he identified with his mother's ethnic ancestry, making himself, as he puts it in Promise Me, Dad, a "descendant of the Blewitts of County Mayo. . .and the Finnegans of County Louth, on a volatile little inlet of the Irish Sea". Part of the attraction was undoubtedly the devout Catholicism that has been Biden's great consolation. But another part was the great escape from American history and its burdens of guilt.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Biden grew up in relatively prosperous middle-class American comfort and went to Archmere, a privileged fee-paying Catholic high school in Wilmington. Even as a national politician, he seems to have been largely shielded from anti-Catholic venom. But one of the advantages of being an Irish-American Catholic is that you can attach yourself to a history of oppression in Ireland and release yourself from white guilt in America. Your forefathers are sinned against, not sinning.

The concept of 'usable past', first coined by Van Wyck Brooks (1918), is useful in understanding the modern attractiveness of Irish identity. Brooks understood that 'new world' societies required usable pasts and selective interpretations of history that resonate with contemporary political, cultural, and social aspirations. It does not surprise that people—particularly whites, who have 'ethnic options' (Waters 1990)—might embrace an Irish identity in the wake of the Civil Rights movement and growing awareness of racial injustice. In a context where the fundamentally racist nature of these states and societies is increasingly hard to deny, being Irish offers at least partial absolution. Historic connections to Ireland, since they emphasise aspects of Ireland's historical struggles for independence and resilience while downplaying or reinterpreting aspects of white privilege and colonial oppression, proffer a usable past that English affiliations, for example, cannot. At least for some 'white ethnics', Irishness offers absolution: a distancing from the colonial project, and this is a credible explanation for the increases shown here.

No discussion of these findings is complete without some consideration of the difference in numbers identifying between those countries framing the question in terms of ancestry and listing Irish as a response option tick box or example, and the relatively low numbers in New Zealand where the question uses ethnicity as the conceptual basis and 'New Zealand European' is provided as a catch-all term[5]. The high number of people identifying as Irish in the New Zealand census of 1996—when Irish was provided as an easily indicated response category—suggests a level of what Didham (2015; see also Didham and Rocha 2020) termed 'tickbox tyranny', whereby question framings and answer categories (and subsequent coding rules) structure individual's responses. The mere presence of a

given category in a questionnaire can significantly impact counts: a 'South Sea Islander' response newly listed as an example response in the 2001 Australian census saw a six-fold increase in those reporting this Ancestry (Khoo and Lucas 2006). Genealogists and other researchers utilising census data should be mindful that the way questions are framed sometimes influences responses in significant ways, and that this is not something restricted to smaller or minority groups.

5. Conclusions

This article demonstrated an increase, over the course of the 21st century, in people indicating Irish in censuses in all four CANZUS states. While universal or essentialist statements regarding individual ethnic affiliation must be used with caution, it is posited that these increases can be attributed to two factors. The first is that Irish offers essentially 'symbolic' differentiation from the white 'Anglo' norm offering appeal in an era of identity politics. The second is that some affective attraction lies in the Irish having experienced their own histories of dispossession and outsider status and thus offers a discursive distance from settler colonialism. These findings offer further evidence that for white ethnics, as for other groups, shifting group relations at the macro level are implicated in shifting individual micro-level identity claims. Those consulting official records while undertaking genealogical research should be aware that ancestries or ethnicities identified in records are neither fixed nor certain: individuals may choose elements of the past that they find useful or relevant to their identity, beliefs, or political agendas, highlighting certain aspects of history while downplaying or ignoring others.

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Notes

1 The four CANZUS states have well-recognised similarities as (predominantly) English-speaking, Anglo-settler democratic states, located geographically on the homelands of Indigenous peoples and with politically active Indigenous populations (Ford 2012). They have historically been and today remain countries of immigration, with relatively large overseas-born populations (OECD 2024).

2 The ACS is an ongoing national survey conducted by the US Census Bureau, currently surveying ~3.5 million households annually. The Bureau publishes 1-year and 5-year estimates, providing pooled counts/data for geographic areas in the United States, with 5-year counts used here being more reliable and comprehensive, though less current. The 2020 5-year estimates for the United States used here represent the estimated characteristics of the national population for the entire 2016–2020 period, not a specific time within that period (U.S. Census Bureau 2020).

3 The more subjective nature of ethnic group is further highlighted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which has stated in ABS Views on Content and Procedures (Edwards 2003) that ancestry has been adopted as the predominant ethnic determinant to ensure high-quality data and "identify the respondents' origin rather than a subjective perception of their ethnic background".

4 The total fertility rate (the number of children the average woman is expected to have in her lifetime) was 1.8 for White women in the United States in 2010 (Pew Research Center 2012) and 1.92 for European women in New Zealand (Ministry of Social Development (New Zealand) (2010)). While data on fertility by ethnicity are not available for Australia and Canada, total rates (with 'white ethnics' the majority population) were 1.89 for all Australian women in 2010 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011) and 1.63 in Canada (Milan 2013). Total fertility rates of around 2.1 are required for replacement-level fertility, being the average number of children women must bear to reproduce themselves with a daughter who survives to childbearing age (U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs (Statistics Division) (2007)).

5 A possible further underlying reason for the smaller proportion of white ethnics indicating Irish in New Zealand (even where Irish is included on the form in 1996) despite Irish having been c. 16-18 percent of settlers (Akenson 1990) is the relatively large proportion in this more planned settlement who were Protestant—and perhaps therefore more easily integrated into the 'Anglo'

majority than in, for example Australia. Per McCarthy (2005), two-fifths of the Irish migrants to New Zealand arriving between 1840 and 1890, and a majority thereafter, were Protestant. This compares to Australia, where three quarters or more of Irish settlers were Catholic (O'Farrell 1990).

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