

# Latino, Hispanic, Latinx, Chicano: The history behind the terms

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People rallying in Sacramento, California, to protest discrimination against Americans of Mexican descent, on August 7, 1971. Photo: Bettmann/Getty Images Photo: Bettmann/Getty Images

The terms Latino, Hispanic and Latinx are often used interchangeably to describe a group that makes up about 19 percent of the U.S. population. While it's now common to use umbrella terms to categorize those with ties to more than 20 Latin American countries, these words haven't always fostered a sense of community among the people they are supposed to describe.

Before activists, the media and government officials worked to group these identities into one, they were seen as separate. Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, for example, lived in different parts of the country and had their own distinct political and cultural identities.

Yet, as long as there have been people from Latin American countries living in the United States, there have been words to describe them. Some have fallen out of favor, while others have evolved. And many of them have a history as complicated as trying to unify multiple nationalities under one banner.

### **"Hispanic" Helps Unify Communities, Agenda**

The first time the federal government used the word "Hispanic" in a census was in 1980. The appearance of the term was borne from decades of lobbying. "It took the debates of the 1970s, the protests of the late 1960s to get us to 1980," explains G. Cristina Mora, a sociology professor at UC Berkeley and author of "Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American."

Before 1980, those of Latin American descent were considered Spanish-speaking, having Spanish origin, or white on the census. The latter frustrated Mexican American activists because they had no data to prove that their communities needed resources for programs, such as job training. The National Council of La Raza, known today as UnidosUS, led in lobbying the U.S. Census Bureau to change the way it categorized Latinos and uniting Puerto Ricans and Mexicans to "hammer out a Hispanic agenda."

"In the late 1960s and early 1970s as people in the Census Bureau and bureaucrats in the Nixon administration were thinking about what this new group would be called, Hispanic became a term



that people thought would probably be well known because it was linked to *hispano*," Mora says. "But Hispanic was helpful because it seemed more American."

Hispanic refers to those from Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries, which excludes Brazilians. Grace Flores-Hughes, who worked as a secretary in what was then known as the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, has said she coined the term. However, as Mora explains, it's possible that Hispanic was in use before then.

While 1980 marked a milestone, this pan-ethnic term didn't really catch on until about the 1990s. By then, there had been two rounds of censuses and the media, particularly Univision and Telemundo, had helped to unite these communities.

"It wasn't just activists and it wasn't just bureaucrats," Mora says. "It was certain figures like Telemundo, Univision, who had a huge vested interest in connecting their audiences across the country and having those audiences across the country see themselves as one market."

### "Latino" As Alternative To "Hispanic"

While Hispanic may have utility, the term has been criticized for highlighting Spain, which colonized much of Latin America. Some have offered "Latino" as an alternative. This term refers to those from Latin America, meaning it includes Brazil but not Spain.

The word existed long before the 1960s. But Ramón A. Gutiérrez, a Preston & Sterling Morton Distinguished Service Professor of United States history at the University of Chicago, explains that it was previously a Spanish-language word that came from *Latino America*, which Colombian writer José María Torres Caicedo helped popularize.

"Latino is short for *Latino Americano*," he says. "And it's the result of what happens between 1808 and 1821 as the Latin American countries become independent."

In the second half of the 19th century, the abbreviated words "*hispano*" and "*latino*" were in use in California among Spanish speakers, but eventually, other terms replaced them. By 1920, they had "virtually disappeared," Gutiérrez writes.

The term Latino gradually reemerged in English, appearing in books and even in a 1970 White House diary entry by Claudia "Lady Bird" Johnson. In another early example, a March 17, 1973, issue of the Black Panther Party's newspaper described a program drawn up by an "action group composed of Blacks, Latinos and Whites." By 2000, Latino was on the census, with the question, "Is this person Spanish/Hispanic/Latino?"

Though Latino deemphasized the connection to Spain, some still rejected the term as it attempted to group several distinct cultures into one. For example, a popular bumper sticker declaring,



"Don't Call Me Hispanic, I'm Cuban!" circulated in Miami during the early 1990s, according to Mora. In many cases, those who didn't want to identify as Hispanic or Latino chose nationality.

According to a Pew Research Center 2013 study, only one in five respondents described themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Meanwhile, 54 percent used "their family's Hispanic origin term (such as Mexican, Cuban Salvadoran) to identify themselves" and 23 percent used "American" most commonly.

### **Some Mexican Americans Embrace "Chicano"**

For some Mexicans who shunned Latino and Hispanic, this meant turning to the word "Chicano."

There are a few theories about the origins of Chicano, including that it comes from *mexicano* (pronounced *meshicano*), a word that some "groups of Nahuas (Indigenous speakers of Nahuatl) began calling their language," writes David Bowles, an author and professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Another possibility is that Chicano is a result of hypocorism. "It's basically using baby talk," Bowles says. "If you think about nicknames, Spanish nicknames, if you're Ignacio, you're called 'Nacho.' Graciela, you're called 'Chela.' It's possible that that could be some type of hypocorism behind the change from *mexicano* to Chicano — a playful kind of thing."

One of the first mentions of Chicano in print is in the Spanish-language newspaper La Crónica in 1911, where it was used as a slur against "less cultured" Mexican Americans and recent immigrants. But by the 1960s, the word had changed. While not every Mexican or Mexican American would use the term, it gained traction, including among Mexican Americans who were fighting for civil rights.

"Because the word was in regular use at that time," Bowles says, "it was kind of this way of reclaiming the slur and using it for a political Latinx identity."

### **"Latinx" Emerges As Gender-Neutral Term**

Spanish is a gendered language. If there is a group made up of women, they can be described as "ellas." If there is a group with men and women, it defaults to the masculine (ellos instead of ellas). The word "Latino" follows this convention, labeling nouns as either masculine or feminine. For those who fall outside the gender binary, this word fails to represent them, which is where the gender-neutral "Latinx" comes into play.

Much like the other words used to describe those of Latin American descent, Latinx has faced some pushback—from arguments that it's difficult to pronounce to the Real Academia Española, the institution tasked with maintaining the consistency of the Spanish language, saying it's unnecessary. Some even argued non-Latino whites imposed the word on Latinos.

Bowles argues against this notion. "White people did not make up Latinx," he says. "It was queer Latinx people. ... They are the ones who used the word. Our little subgroup of the community created that. It was created by English-speaking U.S. Latinx people for use in English conversation."

Though it's unclear when or how it began, it's mostly tied to the early 2000s, with it reportedly appearing on Google Trends in 2004. There are a few possibilities about how the word came to be.

One theory is that Latin American protests inspired the word. From the 1970s to the 1990s, as feminists protested, they would X out words ending in "OS" to "visually ... reject the notion that the default is the masculine," Bowles says. It could have also been a nod to the use of X during the civil rights movement in the United States.

Despite an August 2021 Gallup poll finding that only 4 percent of Hispanic Americans use Latinx, it's a term that gained momentum through the 2010s and 2020s, cropping on TV shows and in politics.