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Hispanic–Latino naming dispute

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The **Hispanic/Latino naming dispute** is an ongoing disagreement over the use of the **ethnonyms** "**Hispanic**" and "**Latino**" to refer collectively to the inhabitants of the **United States** who are of **Latin American** or Spanish origin—that is, Hispanic or Latino Americans. The usage of both terms has changed to adapt to a wide range of geographical and historical influences. The term "Hispanic" was used first; later, some Hispanics in the western United States came to prefer the term "Latino."

While the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, "Hispanic" is a narrower term which only refers to persons of **Spanish**-speaking origin or ancestry, while "Latino" is more frequently used to refer more generally to anyone of Latin American origin or ancestry, including Brazilians.^{[1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9][10]} "Hispanic" thus includes persons from Spain and Spanish-speaking Latin Americans but excludes Brazilians, while "Latino" excludes persons from Spain but includes Spanish-speaking Latin Americans and Brazilians. Because **Brazil's population** of 191,000,000^[11] is several times larger than **Spain's population** of 47,000,000^[12] and because there are more **Brazilian-born Americans** (325,547 as of 2012)^[13] than **Spanish-born Americans** (88,665 as of 2012)^[14] in the United States, "Latino" is a broader term encompassing more people. The choice between the terms among those of Spanish-speaking origin is associated with location: persons of Spanish-speaking origin residing in the eastern United States tend to prefer "Hispanic", whereas those in the west tend to prefer "Latino".^[15]

"Latino" as a category used in the United States may be understood as a shorthand for the Spanish word *latinoamericano* or the **Portuguese** phrase *latino americano*, thus excluding speakers of **Romance languages** from Europe.^{[16][17]} Both "Hispanic" and "Latino" are generally used to denote people living in the United States,^{[18][19]} so that "[o]utside the United States, we don't speak of Latinos; we speak of Mexicans, Colombians, Peruvians, and so forth."^{[20][21][22]}

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History [\[edit\]](#)

The term "Hispanic" was adopted by the United States government in the early 1970s during the administration of [Richard Nixon](#)^[23] after the Hispanic members of an interdepartmental Ad Hoc Committee to develop racial and ethnic definitions recommended that a universal term encompassing all Hispanic subgroups—including Central and South Americans—be adopted.^[24] As the [1970 census](#) did not include a question on Hispanic origin on all census forms—instead relying on a sample of the population via an extended form ("Is this person's origin or descent: Mexican; Puerto Rican; Cuban; Central or South American; Other Spanish; or None of these"),^[25] the members of the committee wanted a common designation to better track the social and economic progress of the group vis-à-vis the general population.^[24] The designation has since been used in local and federal employment, [mass media](#), academia, and business market research. It has been used in the [U.S. Census](#) since 1980.^[26] Because of the popularity of "Latino" in the western portion of the United States, the government adopted this term as well in 1997, and used it in the 2000 census.^{[15][27]}

Previously, Hispanic and Latino Americans were categorized as "Spanish-Americans", "Spanish-speaking Americans", or "Spanish-surnamed Americans". However:

- Although a large majority of Hispanic and Latino Americans have Spanish ancestry, most are not of direct, "from-Spain-to-the-U.S."^{[28][29]} Spanish descent; many are not primarily of Spanish descent; and some are not of Spanish descent at all. People whose ancestors or who themselves arrived in the United States directly from Spain are a tiny minority of the Hispanic or Latino population (see figures in this article), and there are Hispanic/Latino Americans who are of other [European ancestries](#) in addition to [Spanish](#) (e.g., [Portuguese](#), [Italian](#), [German](#), and Middle Eastern, such as the [Lebanese](#)).^[30]
- Most Hispanic and Latino Americans can speak Spanish, but not all, and most Spanish-speaking Americans are Hispanic or Latino, but not all. For example, Hispanic/Latino Americans often do not speak Spanish by the third generation, and some Americans who speak Spanish may not identify themselves with Spanish-speaking Americans as an ethnic group.
- Not all Hispanic and Latino Americans have [Spanish surnames](#), and *most* Spanish-surnamed Americans are Hispanic or Latino, but not all. Those without Spanish surnames but of Hispanic or Latino origin include politician [Bill Richardson](#), former [National Football League](#) (NFL) star [Jim Plunkett](#), and actress [Salma Hayek](#). [Filipino Americans](#), and [Pacific Islander Americans](#) of [Chamorro](#) ([Guamanians](#) and [Northern Mariana Islanders](#)), [Palauan](#), [Micronesian \(FSM\)](#), and [Marshallese](#) origin often have Spanish surnames, but have their own, non-Hispanic/Latino ethnic identities and origin. Likewise, while many [Cajuns](#) and [Louisiana Creole people](#) have Spanish surnames, they identify with the mostly [French](#)—though partially Spanish—culture of their region.

Usage of "Hispanic" [\[edit\]](#)

Further information: [Hispanic](#)

The term "Hispanic" has been the source of several debates in the US. It was first used officially by the US government in the [1970 Census](#) to refer to "a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race."^[15] The OMB did not accept the recommendation to retain the single term "Hispanic". Instead, the OMB has decided that the term should be "Hispanic or Latino" because regional usage of the terms differs. Hispanic is commonly used in the eastern portion of the United States, whereas Latino is commonly used in the western portion of the United States. Since the [2000 Census](#), the identifier has changed from "Hispanic" to "Spanish/Hispanic/Latino".^[31]

Other federal and local government agencies and non-profit organizations include Brazilians and Portuguese in their definition of "Hispanic". The [US Department of Transportation](#) defines "Hispanic" as "persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Central or South American, or others [of] Spanish or Portuguese culture or origin, regardless of race."^[32] This definition has been adopted by the [Small Business Administration](#) as well as by many federal, state, and municipal agencies for the purposes of awarding government contracts to minority-owned businesses.

The [Congressional Hispanic Caucus](#) (CHC)—which was organized in 1976 by five Hispanic Congressmen: Herman Badillo (NY), Baltasar Corrada del Río (PR), Kika de la Garza (TX), Henry B. Gonzalez (TX) and Edward Roybal (CA)—and the [Congressional Hispanic Conference](#) include representatives of Spanish and Portuguese descent. The [Hispanic Society of America](#) is dedicated to the study of the arts and cultures of [Spain](#), [Portugal](#), and [Latin America](#). The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, which proclaims itself the champion of Hispanic success in higher education, has member institutions in the US, Puerto Rico, Latin America, Spain, and Portugal.

In a recent study, most Spanish speakers of Spanish or Latin American descent did not choose to use the terms "Hispanic" or "Latino" when describing their identity. Instead, they preferred to be identified by their country of origin. Over half of those surveyed said they had no preference for either term. When forced to choose, 33% chose "Hispanic" and 14% chose "Latino."^[33]

A study done in 2009 shows that there is not a significant difference between the attitudes/preference towards the terms among young (18-25) and older individuals. The statistical numbers are almost identical. The overall Hispanic population, young Hispanic prefer to identify themselves with their family's country of origin. Interestingly, both groups prefer the term "American" versus "Latino/Hispanic. Yet, older Hispanics are most likely to identify as white than younger Hispanics.^[34] When it comes to the preference of Latino or Hispanic, the younger subgroup is more likely to state that it does not matter. If they do have a preference, both groups prefer the term Hispanic rather than Latino.^[35]

Origin of "Latino" [edit]

Further information: [Latino](#)

The name was first coined by the french in the 19th century, during the time of the French Intervention in Mexico. It was used to symbolically sever Mexico's Spanish roots, while at the same time, reinforcing a notion of belonging between the two nations. The latin race, as defined

in this context, was composed of all people descending from nations who spoke romance tongues, descending from latin. This definition would effectively include French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese people as "latinos" along with the people descended from their former colonies. Napoleon III used the term to justify the french occupation, saying that France was interested in preserving the latin race against Anglo-Saxon, or American imperialism, as the french nation saw the emerging nation as a threat.

The adoption of the term "Latino" by the [US Census Bureau](#) in 2000^[36] and its subsequent media attention brought about several controversies and disagreements, specifically in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in [Mexico](#) and other [Spanish-speaking](#) countries. Regarding it as an arbitrary, generic term, many [Latin American](#) scholars, journalists and organizations have objected to the [mass media](#) use of the word "Latino", pointing out that such ethnonyms are optional and should be used only to describe people involved in the practices, ideologies and [identity politics](#) of their supporters.^{[37][38][39][40]} They argue that if "Hispanic" is an imposed official term, then so is "Latino",^[41] since it was the [French](#) who coined the expression "Latin America" (*Amérique latine*) to refer to the Spanish, French, and Portuguese-speaking countries of the [Western Hemisphere](#), during their support of the [Second Mexican Empire](#).^[42]

Distinctions among the terms "Latino", "Latina", and "Hispanic"

[\[edit\]](#)

Some authorities of [American English](#) maintain a distinction between the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino":

"Though often used interchangeably in American English, *Hispanic* and *Latino* are not identical terms, and in certain contexts the choice between them can be significant. *Hispanic*, from the Latin word for "Spain," ... potentially encompass[es] all Spanish-speaking peoples in both hemispheres and emphasiz[es] the common denominator of language among communities that sometimes have little else in common. *Latino*—which in Spanish means "Latin" but which as an English word is probably a shortening of the Spanish word *latinoamericano*—refers ... to persons or communities of Latin American origin. Of the two, only *Hispanic* can be used in referring to Spain and its history and culture; a native of Spain residing in the United States is a *Hispanic*, not a *Latino*, and one cannot substitute *Latino* in the phrase *the Hispanic influence on native Mexican cultures* without garbling the meaning. In practice, however, this distinction is of little significance when referring to residents of the United States, most of whom are of Latin American origin and can theoretically be called by either word."^[16]

The [AP Stylebook](#) also distinguishes between the terms. The *Stylebook* limits "Hispanic" to persons "from - or whose ancestors were from - a Spanish-speaking land or culture. Latino and Latina are sometimes preferred".^{[8][9]} It provides a more expansive definition, however, of "Latino". The *Stylebook* definition of "Latino" includes not only persons of Spanish-speaking land or ancestry, but also more generally includes persons "from - or whose ancestors were from - ... Latin America."^[10] The *Stylebook* specifically lists Brazilians as an example of a group

^[10]

which can be considered Latino.

It is important to note the difference between Latino and Latina. Latino is traditionally reserved for males and Latina for females. A group of Latina women is termed “Latinas”, whereas a group of Latino men or a combination of Latino and Latina individuals are designated as “Latinos” ([See Latino \(demonym\)](#)). Some individuals choose to use “Latin@”, which combines the Spanish masculine ending “o” and the feminine “a” in one character. Latin@ may be used to promote gender neutrality or be used to encompass both Latinos and Latinas without using the masculine “Latinos” designation for the mixed genders group.^{[43][44]}

Hispanic/Latino ethnic groups [edit]

The U.S. government has defined "Hispanic or Latino" persons as being "persons who trace their origin [to] ...Central and South America, and other Spanish cultures".^[15] The Census Bureau's 2010 census provides a definition of the terms "Latino" and "Hispanic": "Hispanic or Latino" refers to a person of Mexican, Argentinean, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. It allows respondents to self-define whether they were Latino or Hispanic and then identify their specific country or place of origin.^[45] On its website, the Census Bureau defines "Hispanic" or "Latino" persons as being "persons who trace their origin [to]... Spanish speaking Central and South America countries, and other Spanish cultures".^{[15][27][46]}

These definitions thus arguably do not include [Brazilian Americans](#),^{[15][27][47]} especially since the Census Bureau classifies Brazilian Americans as a separate ancestry group from "Hispanic or Latino".^[48] A surge of Portuguese-Americans faced a big scare when the Census Bureau revealed plans to categorize people of Portuguese descent as “Hispanics” in the 2020 National Census. The unified feelings of dispute were displayed in a national survey conducted by Palcus within the Portuguese-American community. The results were an overwhelming 90% of participants objecting to Portuguese-Americans being classified under the Hispanic ethnicity. Fortunately for those opposed to the Portuguese-as-Hispanic classification, the Census Bureau later released an update stating that they never intended to classify people of Portuguese descent as Hispanic in the 2020 National Census.^{[49][50]} The 28 Hispanic or Latino American groups in the Census Bureau's reports are the following:^{[27][51][52]} "Mexican,; Central American: Costa Rican, Guatemalan, Honduran, Nicaraguan, Panamanian, Salvadoran, Other Central American; South American: Argentinian, Bolivian, Chilean, Colombian, Ecuadorian, Paraguayan, Peruvian, Uruguayan, Venezuelan, Other South American; Other Hispanic or Latino: Spaniard, Spanish, Spanish American, All other Hispanic".

Criticism from the media [edit]

In the US, the terms are officially voluntary, self-designated classifications.^{[53][54][55][56][57]}

However, the [mass media](#) has helped propagate them irrespective of this fact. The rapid spread of "Latino" in the US has been possible due to the policies of certain newspapers such as the [Los Angeles Times](#) and other [California](#)-based media during the 1990s. The use of the term as a label has been the target of journalists like Raoul Lowery who have attacked it, denouncing it as a misleading and simplistic way of tagging a group as diverse as Latin Americans:

"For years I have campaigned against the *Los Angeles Times*-imposed word, "Latino", in describing the country's fastest growing ethnic "Group," those with Spanish-surnames, those who speak Spanish, et al. The *LA Times* set its feet in concrete and the use of the word "Latino" and nothing has cracked the concrete since. Worst of all, other newspapers have followed the *Times*' lead and news coverage, accuracy and the community have suffered."^[58]

Lowery argues that, according to the statistics of the Census Bureau, most [middle-class](#) people with Latin-American background living in the United States reject the term.^[59] He traces the polarization of the word to *Los Angeles Times* columnist Frank del Olmo, who regarded the term "Hispanic" as "ugly and imprecise".^[58] He writes:

"The third reason Del Olmo objected to the word "Hispanic" and championed the word "Latino" was that "[Chicano](#)" had been roundly rejected by all Mexican Americans but the most radical, [blue collar](#), less educated, under-class people of Mexican-origin. Del Olmo pushed "Latino" as a substitute for the rejected "Chicano." Unfortunately, he was in a position to push this substitution into the language of the "[Newspaper of Record](#)" in the West. Other papers and broadcast stations took up the word because it was the "style" of the *LA Times*. Frank Del Olmo single-handedly branded millions of people."^[60]

Lack of use of the term “Latina” in the media [edit]

It is no surprise that the term “Latina” isn’t used as much as the term “Latino,” because in Spanish grammar the grammatical gender of the adjective "Latino" is male when it modifies either a group of males, a group of males and females, a group described by a grammatically masculine noun, or a group whose actual gender is not known. For this reason, the use of the grammatically masculine form is much more common. Additionally, English grammar does not require speakers of English to follow foreign rules to decline foreign loan words or cognates.

Latino, Hispanic or national identity [edit]

The naming dispute is a phenomenon that has its roots mainly in [California](#) and other neighboring states.^[60] Before the adoption of the ethnonym "[Hispanic or Latino](#)" by the [United States Government](#), the term Hispanic was commonly used for statistical purposes. However, many people did not feel satisfied with the term and started [campaigns](#) promoting the use of "Latino" as a new ethnonym. The [Office of Management and Budget](#) has stated that the new term should be, indeed, "Hispanic or Latino" because the usage of the terms differs—"Hispanics is commonly used in the eastern portion of the United States, whereas Latino is commonly used in the western portion".^[61]

Despite this, the debates regarding the proper name of the perceived homogeneous population of US citizens with Latin American or Spanish background still abound and are even more acute. In order to find out to what extent people agree or disagree with either term, many polls have been conducted.^{[62][63]} According to a December 2000 poll by Hispanic Trends, 65% of

the registered voters preferred the word "Hispanic", while 30% chose to identify themselves as "Latino". Daniel David Arreola, in his book *Hispanic spaces, Latino places: community and cultural diversity in contemporary America*, points out that many Latin Americans feel more comfortable identifying themselves with their country of origin:

What most of us know and what the results from the 1992 Latino National Political survey demonstrate is a preference for place of origin or national identity in what we call ourselves. Face-to-face interviews of 2,817 people were conducted in 1989 and 1990. Some 57 percent to 86 percent of Mexicans and [Puerto Ricans](#)—whether born in Mexico or born in the United States, whether born in the island or in the mainland—preferred to call themselves Mexican or Puerto Rican rather than panethnic names like Hispanic or Latino.^[64]

A Pew Hispanic Center survey^[65] conducted 9 November – 7 December 2011 and published 4 April 2012 reported:

Nearly four decades after the United States government mandated the use of the terms "Hispanic" or "Latino" to categorize Americans who trace their roots to Spanish-speaking countries, a new nationwide survey of Hispanic adults finds that these terms still haven't been fully embraced by Hispanics themselves. A majority (51%) say they most often identify themselves by their family's country of origin; just 24% say they prefer a pan-ethnic label.

Academic opinion and the social sciences [edit]

Further information: [Ethnonym](#)

One of the major arguments of people who object to either term is not only the perceived [stereotypical](#) overtones they carry, but the unjust and unfair labeling of people who do not even belong to the practices and ideologies of such identities.^[66] This is true of many indigenous peoples such as the [Wixarikas](#) and the [Lacandonese](#), who still practice their own religious rituals without [syncretism](#) with [Catholic](#) elements. Journalist Juan Villegas writes:

"The word 'Latino' may be loaded with negative connotations when used by non-Latinos in American culture because of its association with the sign 'Latin' which may imply a stereotyped character partially imposed by [Hollywood](#). Latino is a sign that needs to be contextualized. It may bring some groups together, but it also may contribute to depoliticize a movement and to stereotype a diversity of social groups and cultures.^[67]

These characteristics that are often used, such as Hollywood, to classify a person of Latina/o culture and identity has been termed by scholars, "As a system of media signification, *Latinidad* is a performative and performed dynamic set of popular signs associated with Latinas/os and Latina/o identity. Common signifiers of *Latinidad* are language, linguistic accents, religious symbols, tropical and spicy foods, and brown skin as a phenotypic identity" (Berg Ramirez

p. 40-41). As Guzman discusses, “signifiers most commonly associated with Latinidad produce a sense of authenticity within media texts,” (p. 235). Ramirez continues to discuss how these signifiers of Latinidad do not necessarily mean they are stereotypical. In actuality, Latina/os may utilize these “signifiers” for self-identifying purposes. In terms of media portrayal, Hollywood has invested a lot of time and money to develop a general notion of “Latinidad” because marketers, advertisers and media content producers have found that they are a very bankable demographic, thus turned “Latinidad” and Latina/o culture and identity to a commodity. What is problematic about this is when creating this general notion, the diversity within this demographic becomes suppressed and flattened in a demographic that is very heterogeneous just so marketers, advertisers and media content producers can communicate their version of “authentic” racial identity to consumers. Consequently, this opens the space for stereotypes to be created and perpetuated.^[68]

Others, such as Catherine Alexandra Carter and [Rodolfo Acuña](#), address the issue from a more global and political perspective, stressing the importance of terms like "Latino" or "Hispanic" for the marketing industry and for statistical ends:

"The terms 'Hispanic' and 'Latino', although first created for the purpose of lumping together a diverse group of people and making them more economically marketable, have grown into something far more significant. Over time the legitimacy and accuracy of these terms have come to influence not only the functioning of the marketing industry, but the organization and structure of many other aspects of life".^[69]

"When and why the Latino identity came about is a more involved story. Essentially, politicians, the media, and marketers find it convenient to deal with the different U.S. Spanish-speaking people under one umbrella. However, many people with Spanish surnames contest the term "Latino". They claim it is misleading because no Latino or Hispanic nationality exists since no Latino state exists, so generalizing the term "Latino" slights the various national identities included under the umbrella.^[70]

Davila expands on the ramifications of the mass media’s dominant use of “Latino” or “Hispanic” to categorize this demographic, “...the extent to which assertions of cultural differences intersect with dominant norms of American citizenship that give preeminence to white, monolingual, middle-class producers of and contributors to a political body defined in national terms. My concern is...with how notions of citizenship, belonging, and entitlement are directly intertwined and predicated on dominant U.S. nationalist categories. Such categories conflate race, culture, and language with nationality, establishing the hierarchies and coordinates against which cultural and linguistic differences are ultimately evaluated (Ong 1999; Williams 1989). It is therefore these hierarchies that frame the discourses of Latinidad channeled in the media, as well as the media’s treatment of language and what it may potentially communicate to and about Latino’s claim to belonging, and in what terms they may or may not be within the political community of the United States.” Consequently, this may leave issues, concerns, and topics relevant to this demographic left unheard, discussed and addressed. They are left

invisible, therefore not only conflating the cultural differences, but also marginalizing them for the sake of convenience and marketability to the mass media. However, this is not to say this is a monolithic issue. Instead, this further gives incentive for the demographic to create a space in which they can transform these notions where the representations are more diverse, complex and authentic.^[71]

Not everyone rejects the terms and in fact feel that this idea of Latinidad is taken for granted. G. Christina Mora, author and UC Berkeley sociologist professor emphasizes the importance of the Hispanic term. In her book, "Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American" she explains the origins of the term and how it positively unites Hispanics. The term officially came into existence through United States government but it was due to an activist movement. Before this term, groups such as Mexicans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans were only accounted for in census data as "white." The lack of specific data tied to Hispanics failed to show their social circumstance and therefore could not create necessary changes. There was no data to back up that they were significantly being affected by poverty, discrimination, and disadvantageous education. Without data, Hispanics would not receive adequate funding to change their circumstances and future. Due to the activism on behalf of Chicano and Puerto Rican individuals, there is data that supports and unites a group towards social equality.

Mora, states the following about the term and what she hopes it will mean for her daughter:

"I hope that my daughter will be conscious that the idea of Latino/Hispanic was actually rooted in an effort to work for social justice and political inclusion. Though we are a diverse community, many still grapple with disadvantage, discrimination and underrepresentation. All in all, I hope my daughter will embrace her Latinidad by being conscious of its roots in social justice and by continuing the cause of civil rights and political participation in America."^[72]

See also [edit]























- Media bias
- Native American name controversy
- Naming controversy






















Hispanic and Latino Americans portal

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languages are derived from Latin. People from Brazil, Mexico, and even Haiti are thus all 'latinoamericanos. Continuing this line of reasoning Canada is also Latino' Individuals who are decendants of the former British or Dutch colonies are excluded. ... Finally, 'hispanoamericanos' are persons from the former colonies of Spain in the 'New World.' The expression 'Hispanic' probably derives from 'hispanoamericanos.'"

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External links [edit]

- Los Angeles Times – Look beyond the 'Latino' label
- The Term 'Latino' Describes No One
- Latino or Hispanic Panic: Which Term Should We Use?
- Yale University – Understanding Ethnic Labels and Puerto Rican Identity
- Latino Times has 20-1 ratio of the use of "Latino" over "Hispanic" from news articles worldwide.

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