

Does the Term “Latinx” Advance Social Justice?

It’s being pushed by some activists as a moniker for Americans of Hispanic origin. But it’s not clear the term is helping their cause.

by [Amna Khalid](#) and [Jeffrey Aaron Snyder](#), May 1, 2021 [Politics](#)



Congressman Ruben Gallego, a Democrat from Arizona, questions Acting U.S. Park Police Chief Gregory T. Monahan during a House Natural Resources Committee hearing on actions taken on June 1, 2020 at Lafayette Square, Tuesday, July 28, 2020 on Capitol Hill in Washington. (Leah Millis/Pool via AP)

After the November elections showed surprising support for Donald Trump among Hispanics in South Texas and the Rio Grande valley as well as South Florida and the Bronx, Democrats turned to a Hispanic congressman, U.S. Congressman Ruben Gallego, a Democrat from Arizona, about the concerning trend and the much stronger Democratic performance in Gallego’s home district. “Ruben, honest

question, how do we as a party improve our work with the LatinX community across the country as well as we’ve done in AZ?” Gallego [tweeted](#) a sharp reply: “First start by not using the term Latinx.”

He’s not the only one raising questions about this new moniker and wondering why it’s coming up now. After all, there are [more than](#) 20,000 unaccompanied migrant children in government shelters along the U.S. Mexico border. One facility, designed for 250 people, is holding [more than](#) 4,000. Recent photos have [documented](#) the

severe overcrowding, with visitors describing “[terrible](#)” and “[inhumane](#)” conditions. Whether the media, politicians and activists call them “[Latino migrants](#)” or “[Latinx migrants](#),” their conditions remain the same. We suspect the children couldn’t care less what they are called as long as they are treated with dignity and receive due process.

The amount of time and energy spent debating terms like “Latinx” among some activists is staggering and off putting to many of those whom it’s designed to empower. It exemplifies the alluring yet always elusive quest to change the world by changing words.

Let’s start with some background. Latino is an [abbreviated version](#) of “latinoamericano,” a term used by Spanish-speaking residents of California starting in the mid-19th century. The contemporary meaning of “Latino” in the United States emerged in the early 1970s when Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and others [banded](#) together to advocate for affirmative action, fair housing and bilingual education. In order to market consumer products to an otherwise “[highly heterogeneous](#)” population of Latin American descent, Hispanic media and advertising also played a powerful role in the construction and popularization of “Latino” as “a people” and “a culture.” The federal government officially endorsed “Latino” when it [appeared](#) on the 2000 U.S. Census for the first time. [Defined](#) as “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race,” the [nearly 61 million](#) Latinos in the U.S. now make up 18 percent of our population, a larger figure than Black Americans do.

Like all ethno-racial terms—African American, Asian and Caucasian—Latino is a social invention that is imprecise and fluid. As historian Ramón A. Gutiérrez [points out](#), “Latinos occupy various class locations and span the entire spectrum of race and color.” Hailing from more than 20 different countries, half of all Latinos

[describe](#) themselves first and foremost by their family’s country of origin.

In spite of expressing “a strong, shared connection to the Spanish language,” less than a third of Hispanics [say](#) they share a common culture. UC Berkeley sociologist G. Cristina Mora [explains](#) the expansive nature of “Latino” as follows: “You have the person whose great-grandmother came from Argentina, but has never visited Latin America, and does not speak Spanish, lumped into the exact same category as a Guatemalan who just crossed the U.S. border.” The term European American, were it in use, would be equally problematic.

The push for [Latinx](#) has been motivated by an understandable desire to make space for trans and gender nonbinary people. “More than a middle finger to the patriarchy,” journalist Yessenia Funes [sees](#) Latinx as “a word that demands inclusion.” According to author [Ed Morales](#), “Latinx represents an openness that is increasingly under threat in a political climate that is most intent on drawing borders,” especially by celebrating the European-African-indigenous racial mixing known as [mestizaje](#).

We believe that groups and communities should determine what they are called. Consider the evolution from Negro to Black to African American and now tilting back to Black, changes driven by political arguments and popular usage. Latinx, however, has [not exactly caught on](#) among the group it is supposed to represent. Seventy-six percent of Latinos have not even heard of it. Only three percent use it, according to a recent Pew poll. Indeed, Mexican-American scholar David Bowles, who lives a few miles from the border and is in favor of using Latinx, [noted](#), “If I were going down to the local taquería, they wouldn’t know what you are saying if you used the term.” Why should media or academia adopt a term that’s only been embraced by a minuscule percentage of a group’s population?

In fact, a vocal contingent of Latinos, such as Rep. Gallego, have argued against adopting Latinx. For some, the term is [redundant](#), as Latino “can be both masculine and gender-neutral.” (Think of, for instance, the “Latino vote,” which does not just refer to men.) Others see the term as a form of [linguistic imperialism](#): “an absurd Anglicization” that is [unpronounceable](#), tantamount to “the bulldozing of Spanish.”

Yet others [contend](#) that Latinx “undermines hard-fought feminist battles,” erasing the work of women activists who upheld “Latino/a” to “make sure women are represented.” The Latino/Latina combination Latin@ was briefly in vogue in the 1990s, abandoned in part because the “o” was perceived as “[dominating](#)” the “a.” Today, [Latine](#) is a [budding rival](#) to Latinx in the U.S., initially promoted by some LGBTQIA+ communities in Spanish speaking countries as not only gender-neutral but also easier to pronounce.

The Latinx debate revolves around the [increasingly](#) common premise that language “[is key](#) to social justice and can play a powerful role in bringing about positive social change” (our italics).

But is it? As we consider this issue, it may be instructive to look beyond the Americas for guidance. Take the case of the “untouchables” of India. Falling outside the tiers of the caste system and subjected to discrimination of the highest order, “untouchables” were the ultimate pariahs of Indian society, relegated to the “lowliest” and “filthiest” jobs such as scavenging, hide-tanning and sewage disposal. (The very word pariah comes from [Paraiyan](#), a low [caste](#) group in southern India).

In the early 1930s, Gandhi tried to restore dignity to the “untouchables,” by referring to them as Harijan (“children of God”). But even he recognized the limitations of this move, [remarking](#), “not that the change of name brings

about any change of status, but one may at least be spared the use of a term which is itself one of reproach.” Political leader B.R. Ambedkar, himself an “untouchable,” rejected the term Harijan as paternalistic and intentionally [embraced](#) “untouchable” to underscore the harsh realities of their lives. As Ambedkar’s ally Bhaurao Gaikwad [observed](#): “It is no use only giving Untouchables a sweet name. Something practical should be done to ameliorate their conditions.”

Officially known as “Scheduled Castes,” the most widely used term for “untouchables” today is [Dalit](#) (the downtrodden)—a term popularized by the Dalit Panthers activist group in the 1970s. (The group’s name being one of many spinoffs from the Black Panthers.) Despite the official abolition of “untouchability” in 1950, Dalits [continue](#) to bear the brunt of atrocities of all kinds. Their name may have changed, but their status, largely, has not.

Debates about preferred terminology are not new in the US either. “*Africans, Negroes, colored people, or what?*” Pioneering Black historian Carter G. Woodson [raised](#) this question nearly a century ago in a short, scathing essay called “Much Ado About A Name.” In this piece, Woodson [lampooned](#) Blacks and whites alike who believed that a “shift in terminology” could “solve the race problem.” Woodson, known most widely today as the founder of Black History Month, was born to enslaved parents in 1875 and labored in a West Virginia coal mine before earning a history Ph.D. from Harvard. His hardscrabble life must have made him impatient with protracted debates about what people of African descent “should be called.” Whether they were called “Negroes” or “Afro-Americans,” many Black people would still be standing in breadlines, doing their best to make it through the Great Depression. It’s not surprising, then, that Woodson dismissed battles over terminology as fixated on the “trifles rather than the great problems of life.”

To be clear, we recognize that language evolves and ethno-racial terminology changes over time. Good riddance to offensive, antiquated terms such as “Polack,” “Oriental,” and “Mulatto.” Conversely, a new name can be thrilling. See the [explosive power](#) of James Brown’s 1968 anthem “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud,” which gleefully expressed “Black assertiveness, autonomy and solidarity.” But mere shifts in

terminology barely register in the broader fight against social injustice. Given finite resources of time, energy and money, language crusades, like the one for Latinx, strike us as misguided, a [clear case](#) of “majoring in minor things.” Many “politically correct” terms are here today, gone tomorrow, while social problems like poverty, racism, and the crisis at the border remain.

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