

TIME

Why 'Latinx' Is Succeeding While Other Gender-Neutral Terms Fail to Catch On



People attend a vigil in front of the Masp in Sao Paulo, Brazil on June 15, 2016, in reaction to the mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Cris Faga—NurPhoto/Getty Images

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APRIL 2, 2018

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here are plenty of gender-neutral terms that people have tried to make a thing in American English. Take upstart **pronouns** like *xe* or *zir*, which have had champions for centuries and remain little-used. Consider “first-year student,” which is **gaining steam** but has a long way to go before supplanting *freshman*. Or recall the discussions about genderless **military titles**, like “midshiperson,” which have yet to leave port.

There have also been success stories, from *flight attendant* to *alum*. And it appears that the adjective *Latinx* — an alternative to Latino or Latina — is headed in that direction. Academic **centers** are adding the word to their titles. The term is becoming de rigueur among **artists** and politically active youth. Media outlets **like NPR** are using it without remark or explanation. Another sign that this word has staying power: dictionaries have recently taken the time to **define it**.

Latinx (adj.): *Relating to people of Latin American origin or descent (used as a gender-neutral or non-binary alternative to Latino or Latina)*

The word, which bubbled up from college campuses, has appeal on several levels.

For some, using *Latinx* can feel feminist. **Cristina Mora**, an associate professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, says she first encountered it as a gender-neutral term that young people were using because they were “tired of reaffirming the patriarchy inherent in language.” For example: In Spanish, a group of women is referred to as Latinas, while a group of men or a mixed group — even one that is mostly women — is a group of Latinos. Feminists might balk at this the same

way they'd balk at using *he* as a default pronoun or referring to mixed groups as “guys” but never “gals.” The subtext is the same: *It's a man's world, you ladies are just in it.*

Latinx gives people a way to avoid choosing a gender for a group or an unknown individual, much like using singular “they” avoids the choice between “he” or “she” in English. Both are gaining steam in a time when America is rethinking gender and whatever boundaries might come with it.

Mora notes that there have been other attempts to avoid this awkwardness in the past, like including both endings when writing about ethnicity (*Latino/a*) or writing the word as Latin@, because that symbol looks like the offspring of a feminine “a” and masculine “o.” But using a slash is clunky. And while there has been criticism that it's not clear how to pronounce *Latinx* — many say “La-TEE-nex,” like Kleenex — it's even less obvious how to utter “@.”

The “x” also jibes with LGBTQ politics that have been permeating the culture. A growing number of young people reject the notion that everyone falls into the binary categories of male or female (just like a growing number refuse to identify as either totally gay or totally straight). People who describe themselves as non-binary might feel that neither box fits or that both do or that their feelings can change over time. “This is a generation that has emerged with different understandings about gender and sexuality,” Mora says. And for some, the label *Latinx* “pushes against that idea that we should be gendered in the first place.”



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The letter X can refer to unknown locations or quantities and has a rebellious patina. “There’s something visually arresting about the letter,” says linguist Ben Zimmer. “It looks good on a poster announcing your group is meeting on campus.” He says that the “x” helps the label immediately appear to be a political statement. Think Malcolm X, who used that letter as a way to buck a system in which many black Americans had ended up with the last names of slave owners. Zimmer also notes that the description has become popular enough to inspire imitation: Chicano is being recast as Chicanx; Filipina, as Filipinx.

Katherine Martin, head of Oxford’s U.S. dictionaries, points out the similarity to the **gender-neutral honorific Mx.**, which people can use instead of Mr. or Mrs. if they want to leave their gender undeclared. She

says that, per their research, the word *Latinx* was thrust into the American consciousness after the horrific shooting at the **Pulse nightclub** in Orlando in 2016. It was a gathering spot where patrons were likely to have roots in both the LGBT community and Latin American culture, and the word cropped up **time** and **again** in the media coverage about what happened there. “That was the inflection point,” Martin says.

While many view the label as inclusive, the word also has detractors. Ed Morales, a lecturer at Columbia University’s Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race, says that *Latinx* sounds futuristic — and while some consider that a good thing, others would prefer tradition. Critics have **suggested** that it sounds too American, erasing a Spanish language that needs to be preserved by immigrant communities. Others have said the word creates distance between Americans and people in Latin America who aren’t using the term. “Some people just think it sounds odd, maybe forced,” Morales says. And some conservatives **see the label** as just one more example of unnecessary political correctness.

There is a long history when it comes to political labels that have been adopted by — and forced upon — Americans with Latin American or Spanish roots. “No label has ever been perfect,” says Mora, the Berkeley professor. People have objected to the word *Hispanic* because it has vestiges of colonialism, she says. People have objected to Latin American for sounding “too foreign,” while Latino was “too vague.”

The tussling over labels mirrors a complex history of attempting to politically unite people **from disparate backgrounds** under a single umbrella, finding common cause for Cubans, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, for example. Mora suggests that some prominent immigrant

rights groups may see a word like *Latinx* as a distraction in a time when they're still trying to "affirm that Latinos belong to the U.S."

Others see the rather mysterious-looking *Latinx* as the perfect label for a group that is hard to define. Morales may be biased, having decided to use the word in the title for his **upcoming book** about race and politics in the U.S. But he believes people will only see more of the word, one that his students have recently started wearing on T-shirts. "I see less and less resistance to it," he says, "and I think it may actually become standard."

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