

# Hispanic or Latino? Debate Stirs Pride, Emotion

By Darryl Fears  
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On a recent summer's day, Sandra Cisneros walked into Valenzuela's Latino Bookstore and thought she had discovered a treasure. It was one of the few independent booksellers in her hometown of San Antonio, and on top of that, she said, its name appealed directly to her.

But within minutes, her mood changed. A clerk innocently used a word to describe a section of books, and it made Cisneros' skin crawl. "She used the word Hispanic," Cisneros said, her voice dripping with indignation. "I wanted to ask her, 'Why are you using that word?'"

"People who use that word don't know why they're using it," said Cisneros, a Mexican-American poet and novelist. "To me, it's like a slave name. I'm a Latina."

That declaration "I'm a Latina" is resounding more and more through the vast and diverse Spanish-speaking population that dethroned African Americans as the nation's largest ethnic minority a few months ago.

It is also deepening a debate over how the group should identify itself as Hispanics or Latinos. The subject is increasingly popping up wherever Spanish speakers gather.

It was raised last month at the National Council of La Raza's convention in Austin. The Internet is littered with articles and position papers on the issue. Civic organizations with Hispanic in their titles have withstood revolts by activist members seeking to replace it with the word Latino.

Some have called the argument an insignificant disagreement over words, which is being blown out of proportion. But others believe such labels can change the course of a people, as advocates of "black power" showed when they cast aside the term Negro during the 1960s civil-rights movement.

"I think the debate reflects the flux this community is in right now," said Angelo Falcon, a senior policy executive for the Puerto Rican Legal and Education Fund.

Although the terms Latino and Hispanic have been used interchangeably for decades, experts who have studied their meanings say the words trace the original bloodlines of Spanish speakers to different populations in opposite parts of the world.

Hispanics derive from the Iberian Peninsula, which includes Spain and Portugal, while Latinos are descended from indigenous Indians of the Americas south of the United States and in the Caribbean, conquered by Spain centuries ago.

Latino-Hispanic is an ethnic category, in which people can be of any race. They are white, like the Mexican-American boxer Oscar de la Hoya, and black, like the Dominican baseball slugger Sammy Sosa.

They can also be Indian and Asian. A great many are mixtures of several races. More than 90 percent of those who said they are of "some other race" on the 2000 Census identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino.

"As a poet, I'm especially sensitive to the power a word has," Cisneros said. "It's not a word; it's a way of looking at the world. It's a way of looking at meaning."

Duard Bradshaw has a different opinion. "I'll tell you why I like the word Hispanic," said the Panamanian president of the Hispanic National Bar Association. "If we use the word Latino, it excludes the Iberian peninsula and the Spaniards. The Iberian Peninsula is where we came from. We all have that little thread that's from Spain."

A survey conducted in 2002 by the Pew Hispanic Center of Washington, D.C., found that nearly all people from Spanish-speaking backgrounds identify themselves primarily by their place of national origin. When asked to describe the wider community, 53 percent said both Hispanic and Latino define them. A substantial but smaller group, 34 percent, favored the term Hispanic. The smallest group, 13 percent, said they preferred Latino.

But advocates for the term Latino were unfazed. "The very fact that it's called the Pew Hispanic Center tells you something," said Fernando Guerra, the Mexican-American director of the Center for the Study of Los Angeles at Loyola Marymount University. "The fact that Hispanic is in the name of the organization ... biased the question."

The term Hispanic was given prominence by the Nixon administration more than 30 years ago when it was added to the census questionnaire in 1970. By the 1980 census, Hispanic had become fixed as the official government term. It appeared not only on census forms but also on all other federal, state and municipal applications for employment, general assistance and school enrollment.

Mexican-American activists in California and Puerto Rican activists in New York favored a term that included the indigenous Indians who they believe are the source of their bloodline.

"Hispanic doesn't work for me because it's about people from Spain," said Luis Rodriguez, author of *The Republic of East L.A.* "I'm Mexican, and we were conquered by people from Spain, so it's kind of an insult."

The disagreement over the terms is an annoyance to some. When the subject came up at the National Council of La Raza's annual meeting, Lisa Navarette, the group's Cuban-American spokeswoman, dismissed it. "We've got so many real important issues to work on; we can't be bothered with this nit-picking."

At the Latino bookstore Cisneros visited, owner Richard Martinez said: "I don't know which is correct. I'm a Mexican, a Latino, a Hispanic, whatever. Be who you are. Be proud, like everyone else."