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Is *Hispanic* the Same Thing as *Latina*?

Not quite.

By *Christopher Beam*

Posted Wednesday, May 27, 2009, at 6:40 PM ET

Read more from Slate's [coverage of Sonia Sotomayor's nomination](#).



Sonia Sotomayor

Not exactly.

Hispanic is an English word that originally referred to people from

Spain and eventually expanded to include the populations of its

Barack Obama [announced](#) Tuesday that he would nominate 2nd

Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme

Court. The *New York Times* wrote that Sotomayor, if confirmed,

would be "the nation's first Hispanic justice." But Sotomayor has

[referred](#) to herself in the past as "a Latina judge." Do *Hispanic*

and *Latina* mean the same thing?



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colonies in South and Central America. *Latino* is a Spanish word—

hence the feminine form *Latina*—that refers to people with roots in

Latin America and generally excludes the Iberian Peninsula. For

many, *Hispanic* has negative connotations because of its

Eurocentrism. Others prefer it because it's gender-neutral. *Latino*, meanwhile, is perceived as a more authentic-

sounding, Spanish-language alternative. Generally speaking, Democrats [use](#) *Latino* more often than

Republicans, who [favor](#) *Hispanic*.

For years, Spanish-speaking people in the United States were identified according to their ancestral nationality.

In the 1970 U.S. census, for example, people were asked whether they were Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban,

Central or South American, or "other Spanish." (The question caused much confusion because many Americans

from the middle or southern regions of the United States identified themselves as "Central or South

American.") The word *Hispanic* was not used until the 1980 census, after the Office of Management and Budget

[imposed rules](#) standardizing ethnicity statistics. (The change came after a federal committee on minority

education complained about the lack of useful data.) In 1997, the OMB changed its classification to "Hispanic or

Latino," explaining that "Hispanic is commonly used in the eastern portion of the United States, whereas Latino

is commonly used in the western portion."

Some commentators have [wondered](#) whether Sotomayor would really be the first Hispanic justice. After all,

[Benjamin Cardozo](#), who was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1932, [had family who originated in Portugal](#).

But most Portuguese speakers—whether from Portugal or Brazil—do not consider themselves Hispanic or



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Latino. Furthermore, Cardozo identified as a Sephardic Jew. That said, former Rep. Tony Coelho and Rep.

Dennis Cardoza, both of whom have roots in Portugal, have been members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

Ultimately, there is no strict definition of *Hispanic* or *Latino*. The College Board, which administers the SAT, leaves it up to the student to self-identify. The U.S. Census Bureau makes no distinction between the two terms. It [defines](#) Hispanics and Latinos as "persons who trace their origin or descent to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Spanish speaking Central and South America countries, and other Spanish cultures." But if someone from Brazil says he's Hispanic, the census doesn't say, *No, you're not*.

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Explainer thanks Jeffrey Passel of Pew Hispanic Center, Ilan Stavans of Amherst College, and Brent Wilkes of the League of United Latin American Citizens.

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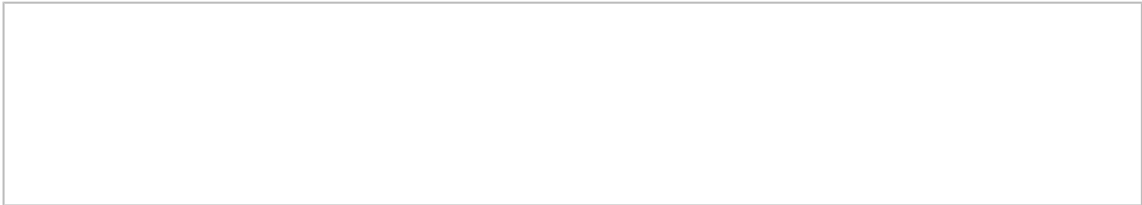
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