Could Opposition to Gender-Neutral Language Become a Wedge Issue?

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ABSTRACT In 2023, both Democratic and Republican elected officials supported banning official use of the gender-neutral term "Latinx." Using a nationally representative survey sample, this study examines whether opposition to the gender-neutral term "Latinx" suggests a potential wedge issue that cuts across partisanship. We find that opposition to "Latinx" is significantly higher among Republican partisans, those who disapprove of Joe Biden as president, and those with "colder" feelings toward Democrats. Opposition to "Latinx" generally converges with factors that predict existing partisan divisions; where it diverges, it does not affect respondent evaluations of Biden or feelings about Democrats. Based on these findings, we conclude that gender-neutral language currently shows little potential as a wedge issue.

In 2023, state legislators introduced hundreds of laws that curtailed the rights of transgender Americans to gender-affirming medical care, public restrooms, school athletic events and to legally change their gender identity. Research indicates that this legislation, primarily led by Republican legislators, aligns with partisan divides. However, public attitudes about changing a person's legal gender and banning transgender athletes from female sports teams do not strictly align with partisanship (Ipsos 2022).

We examined the politicization of attitudes regarding gender-inclusive language, focusing on the gender-neutral term "Latinx," which has exposed a rift within the Democratic Party. The adoption of "Latinx" is congruent with a progressive strain of Democratic politics that embraces transgender rights. However, in January 2023, Democratic state legislators in Connecticut introduced a bill that banned the term "Latinx" in official state communications. The bill's sponsor, Geraldo Reyes—a Democrat of Puerto Rican descent—argued that "The Spanish language, which is centuries old, defaults to Latino....They didn't need to create a word, it already exists" (Eaton-Robb 2023).

Some Democratic members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus were similarly displeased. Representative Nydia Velázquez (D-NY) emphatically rejected the term, arguing "I'm Latina, you know. Latinx—that's bulls**t." Representative Ruben Gallegos (D-AZ) highlighted a racialized dimension of the debate: he banned the use of "Latinx" in his office, stating that the term is used "to appease white rich progressives who think that is the term we use" (Pickett 2021). Arkansas Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders appeared to see a potential Republican inroad to Hispanic voters. On her first day in office in January 2023, she banned all state offices from using "Latinx," arguing that it was "ethnically insensitive and pejorative"—a rhetorical embrace of diversity and inclusion not normally associated with conservative Republicans (State of Arkansas, Executive Department, 2023).

Divisions over the term "Latinx" have implications not only for the loyalty of Hispanic voters but also for other voters who may find gender-neutral terminology alienating. Using a nationally representative panel survey, we assessed whether opposition suggests a brewing political backlash, accounting for differences in respondent partisanship, feelings toward transgender individuals, ideology, ethnicity, age, education, and gender. Because of the limited public familiarity with the term "Latinx," we embedded an experimental treatment in the survey to assess whether clarifying the rationale for "Latinx" affected respondents' attitudes. We then examined associations among opposition to "Latinx," evaluations of the Biden presidency, and feelings toward Democratic partisans.

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TRANSGENDER POLITICS AND GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE: A PARTISAN DIVIDE?

The adoption of gender-neutral language reflects the increased public visibility of transgender Americans and acknowledgment of nonbinary identities. Although public acceptance of transgender individuals recently has improved, it still lags behind other sexual minority groups (Lewis et al. 2017, 2022). Opinion increas-

Donald Trump's reelection fuel Democratic concerns about losing their votes (Russonello and Mazzei 2021). Opposition to the term "Latinx" may particularly facilitate Republicans' inroads to Hispanic voters who are receptive to socially conservative rhetoric, such as evangelicals (Reyes-Barriéntez 2019) and those who self-identify as Anglo-American (Alamillo 2019; Filindra and Kolbe 2022).

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ingly has assumed a partisan cast, with party affiliation predictive of views on whether a person's gender can be different than that assigned at birth and whether transgender acceptance is good for society (Brown 2022; Castle 2019; Elischberger et al. 2016; Hatch et al. 2022; Lewis et al. 2022; Prusaczyk and Hodson 2020). In the policy realm, Republicans have championed anti-transgender legislation, accounting for most of the 607 such bills introduced at the state level in 2023 (Trans Legislation Tracker 2023).

However, attitudes about the scope of transgender rights do not precisely reflect partisanship. For example, whereas a plurality of Americans opposes preventing youth from accessing gender-transition health care, a 2022 National Public Radio/Ipsos poll found that 66% of Americans oppose transgender women and girls' participation in women's sports (Ipsos 2022). Moreover, receptivity to gender mutability differs among predominantly Democratic voting blocs: whereas a 2022 poll found that only 38% of Democrats agreed that gender is fixed at birth, 68% of Black Americans and 55% of Hispanic Americans subscribed to that view (Pew Research Center 2022). Differences across ethnic and racial identities are suggestive of the moral and cultural worldviews that influence attitudes, independently of partisanship. Views on gender transition reflect the same clash of progressive beliefs in "bodily autonomy" versus conservative commitments to "bodily integrity" that have characterized previous debates about abortion and same-sex marriage (Castle 2019; Regnerus and Vermurlen 2022). Age and gender also may underpin conflicting worldviews: males and older adults display less favorable attitudes toward transgender people and are more supportive of anti-transgender policies (Elischberger et al. 2016; Flores et al. 2020; Lewis et al. 2022).

A Democratic strategist recently warned party candidates to downplay their support for transgender rights for fear of alienating moderate voters (Teixeira 2022). This concern is reflective of a wider debate about whether identity issues inadvertently catalyze a right-wing populist backlash (Abrams et al. 2019; Fukuyama 2018). Given that some Democrats object to the gender-neutral term "Latinx," we assessed its potential as a wedge issue capable of diminishing the party's electoral base of support.

Indeed, the term "Latinx" appears likely to divide Democrats. Its "-nx" suffix, alien to Spanish nouns, has elicited criticism that "Latinx" is a culturally tone-deaf project of white progressives. In 2021, pollsters who conducted Barack Obama's outreach to Hispanic voters indicated that 40% of Hispanic respondents were bothered or offended by the term and 30% were less likely to support politicians who used it (Caputo and Rodriguez 2021). The data that indicate that one in three Hispanic voters supported

However, historical bonds of Black and Hispanic voters to the Democratic Party may soften dissonance when individual and party positions conflict. Dawson (1994) argued that a "linked fate" group norm underpins Black American loyalty to the Democratic Party, which may be reinforced at the individual level via social sanctions (Wamble et al. 2022). Similarly, Latino identification with the Democratic Party has been characterized as an expressive group identity, one that is linked to support for policies such as expanding government-provided health care and safety-net programs (Huddy, Mason, and Horwitz 2016; Sanchez and Medeiros 2016; Yang and de la Garza 2017). As a result, individual moral beliefs may be simply less predictive of Hispanic and Black voting behavior. Indeed, nonwhite evangelicals are less likely to vote Republican than white evangelicals (Davison 2017; Gershon, Pantoja, and Taylor 2016; McDaniel and Ellison 2008).

Thus, we had conflicting expectations regarding the partisan effects of opposition to the term "Latinx." Evidence suggests that a discordance between progressive and traditional worldviews may make gender-neutral language off-putting to Hispanic and Black voters as well as male and older Americans. However, research also suggests that Black and Hispanic Democrats are less responsive to mismatches between party positions and their individual social attitudes, whereas Hispanic voters prioritize social spending over cultural issues.

RESEARCH DESIGN: DO ATTITUDES TOWARD THE TERM "LATINX" AFFECT PARTISANSHIP IDENTITIES AND VOTING?

We used a nationally representative August 2022 Dynata survey panel of 1,333 respondents (Reich and Long 2024). Although it was not a probability-based national sample, recent studies show that convenience-sample inferences provide average treatment effects indistinguishable from probability-based samples (Coppock 2018; Mullinix et al. 2015).

By 2019, 60% of Americans had heard of gender-neutral pronouns (Geiger and Graf 2019). However, the term "Latinx" has entered popular discourse only recently, even among Hispanics.[1] A 2020 survey found that 23% of adult Hispanic respondents had heard of the term "Latinx" and only 3%—mostly young adults and college graduates—used it to describe themselves (Noe-Bustamante, Mora, and López 2020). Our survey found similar results: only 3.3% of Hispanic respondents indicated that they identified as "Latinx."[2] To assess the role that familiarity with the term "Latinx" might have, we randomly assigned half of the respondents to an experimental manipulation. Before soliciting their opinion, we provided a sentence explaining that "Latinx" is "a way to describe people of Latin American or Spanish ancestry

that is not gender specific (neither male nor female)." The control group did not receive this clarifying information. We controlled for these two conditions in our models, which also accounted for differences in (1) partisan identity, (2) feelings toward transgender people, (3) race and ethnicity, (4) political ideology, (5) age, (6) education, and (7) gender identity.

RESULTS

We present our findings in terms of (1) the effect of the survey experiment; (2) factors associated with support versus opposition to the terms "Latinx"; and (3) evaluations of President Joe Biden's performance and "warm" or "cold" feelings toward Democrats.

Does Clarifying the Intent of "Latinx" Shift Opinion?

Table 1 shows that most control-group respondents had no definite opinion of the term "Latinx": 61.3% were undecided, 19.4% supported "Latinx," and an equal percentage were opposed.

42% less likely than Democrats to support using the term "Latinx" and 1.5 times more likely to oppose its adoption (p<0.001). Unaffiliated respondents, by contrast, were more undecided about the adoption of the term "Latinx" compared to partisans. As demonstrated in figure 1, Republican partisanship increased the probability of opposing "Latinx" from 23% to 32% and decreased the probability of support from 25% to 15%.

Independently of partisanship, receptivity to the term "Latinx" increased by 1% for every degree of warmer feelings toward transgender individuals (on a 0–100 scale), whereas the likelihood of opposing its use decreased comparably. Moral and ideological conservatism was associated with opposition to the term "Latinx." Every unit increase in support for abortion restrictions increased the probability of opposition by 1.2 times. Thus, those who favored prohibiting abortions under all circumstances were 3.6 times more likely to oppose "Latinx" than those who favored no restrictions. Likewise, respondents who were concerned that "political

...respondents randomly assigned to the treatment question were 1.8 times more likely to support the term "Latinx" but 2.5 times more likely to oppose it.

However, the undecided responses fell significantly in the treatment group: the percentage opposed to "Latinx" increased to 33% of all respondents and support slightly increased, from 19.4% to 23.8%. This constitutes a significant change in the distribution of opinion: respondents randomly assigned to the treatment question were 1.8 times more likely to support the term "Latinx" but 2.5 times more likely to oppose it.

Which Factors Are Associated with Support for or Opposition to the Term "Latinx?"

Model 2 in table 2 includes our control variables. Partisan effects were measured with Democrats as the reference (i.e., excluded) group.[3] Compared to undecided respondents, Republicans were

correctness" inhibits political debate were 1.5 times more likely to oppose "Latinx" than other respondents. Receptivity to the term "Latinx" also was significantly higher among younger respondents but not associated with opposition. Males were 1.4 times more likely to support "Latinx" but also 1.6 times more likely to oppose it, suggesting that they simply were less likely to be undecided. Hispanic respondents also were significantly more decisive about "Latinx": 2.2 times more likely to support its use and 2.8 times more likely to oppose it compared to undecided respondents. Black respondents were more indecisive about the use of "Latinx": they had lower likelihoods of support and opposition—although neither effect was significant.

Does Opposition to the Term "Latinx" Affect Evaluations of Democrats?

The logistic regressions in models 1 and 2 in table 3 divide respondents according to those who approve or strongly approve of Joe Biden's presidency (approve=1) versus those who disapprove or strongly disapprove. Model 1 indicates that approval was significantly higher among self-identified Democrats, Independents, Black respondents, male respondents, and those with warmer feelings toward transgender individuals. Approval was significantly lower among Republicans (i.e., the constant term), those without a college education, those concerned about political correctness, and those who favored abortion restrictions. Notably, opposition to the term "Latinx" decreased the odds of positively evaluating President Biden by approximately 40% (Odds Ratio=0.602).

However, model 2—which includes interaction effects—indicates that opposition to the term "Latinx" did not alter President Biden's approval among Democratic, Hispanic, and Black respondents. Likewise, older and male respondents who opposed "Latinx" were not less approving of the president: although interaction terms were negative, neither was significant.

Models 3 and 4 examine feelings toward Democratic partisans on a standard 0–100 "feeling thermometer." Model 3 indicates that favorable feelings toward Democrats were significantly higher among Democrats and Independents, Black and Hispanic

Table 1
Control versus Experimental Opinion of the Term "Latinx"

Control-Group Question:

Which statement best describes your opinion of the term "Latinx?"	(N=666)
• I support using the term "Latinx."	129 (19.4%)
• I do NOT support using the term "Latinx."	129 (19.4%)
• I am undecided/not sure what I think of the term "Latinx."	408 (61.3%)

Experimental-Group Question (clarifying information in bold):

In place of "Latino" or "Latina," some have proposed adopting "Latinx" as a way to describe people of Latin American or Spanish ancestry that is not gender specific (neither male nor female). *Which statement best describes your opinion of the term "Latinx?"*	(N=667)
• I support using the term "Latinx."	159 (23.8%)
• I do NOT support using the term "Latinx."	226 (33.9%)
• I am undecided/not sure what I think of the term "Latinx."	282 (42.3%)

Table 2

Opinion on Use of the Term "Latinx" (Multinomial Logistic Regressions)

VARIABLES	(1) Support Using "Latinx"	(2) Relative Risk Ratio (Robust Standard Error) Support Using "Latinx"
Treatment	1.783***	1.844***
	(0.252)	(0.281)
Republican/Republican-Leaning		0.568***
		(0.119)
Independent		0.283***
		(0.0740)
Transgender Feeling Thermometer		1.008***
		(0.00296)
Hispanic		2.187***
		(0.534)
Black		0.860
		(0.187)
Male		1.365*
		(0.227)
Age Group (18–29, 30–49, 50+)		0.457***
		(0.0499)
Education (High School or Less)		0.598***
		(0.116)
Political Correctness Stifles Debate		1.209
		(0.202)
Abortion Legality		0.906
		(0.0801)
Constant	0.316***	1.439
	(0.0319)	(0.589)
	Do Not Support "Latinx"	**Do Not Support "Latinx"**
Treatment	2.535***	2.612***
	(0.342)	(0.375)
Republican/Republican-Leaning		1.412*
		(0.255)
Independent		0.588**
		(0.136)
Transgender Feeling Thermometer		0.989***
		(0.00252)
Hispanic		2.857***
		(0.687)
Black		0.751
		(0.175)
Male		1.646***
		(0.250)

Table 2 (Continued)

VARIABLES	(1) Support Using "Latinx"	(2) Relative Risk Ratio (Robust Standard Error) Support Using "Latinx"
Age Group (18–29, 30–49, 50+)		0.969
		(0.104)
Education (High School or Less)		0.699**
		(0.125)
Political Correctness Stifles Debate		1.424**
		(0.212)
Abortion Legality		1.172*
		(0.0985)
Constant	0.316***	0.255***
	(0.0319)	(0.106)
Observations	1,333	
Log-Likelihood	–1,338.78	–1,182.17
Pseudo-R²	0.02	0.13

Notes: ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1 for two-tailed test.

respondents, males, and those with warmer feelings toward transgender individuals. Republicans, respondents who favored abortion restrictions, and those concerned about political correctness had significantly colder feelings toward Democrats—as did those who were opposed to the term "Latinx." However, as in model 2, interaction effects (model 4) indicate that opposition to "Latinx" did not significantly alter feelings about Democrats. Indeed, Democrats opposed to "Latinx" registered slightly warmer feelings toward Democrat partisans—by about 9.5 percentage points—than other respondents.

In general, attitudes about gender-neutral language significantly overlapped with partisanship, race/ethnicity, age, and moral worldviews. Republican partisans had significantly colder feelings toward transgender individuals (r=-22, p<0.01) and voiced more support for restrictive abortion laws (r=0.39, p<0.001) as well as concerns about political correctness (r=0.27, p<0.001). They also were older (r=0.13, p<0.001) and more likely to be non-Hispanic white (r=0.27, p<0.001). Conversely, Democrats had warmer feelings toward transgender individuals (r=0.27, p<0.001); were less supportive of restricting abortion (r=-0.34, p<0.001); were less concerned about political correctness (r=-0.24, p<0.001); were younger (r=-0.06, p<0.05); and were more likely to be Black (r=0.22, p<0.001) or Hispanic (r=0.10, p<0.001).

CONCLUSION

Our study finds that opposition to the term "Latinx" is negatively associated with evaluations of President Joe Biden's performance and feelings toward Democrats and that clarifying the gender-neutral intent of "Latinx" produces more opposition than support. However, the factors underlying opposition to the term "Latinx"—including feelings toward transgender individuals, concerns about political correctness, and views on abortion—largely overlap with

Figure 1

Support/Opposition for Use of the Term "Latinx," Republican/Republican-Leaning Respondents versus Democratic/Democratic-Leaning, Independent Respondents
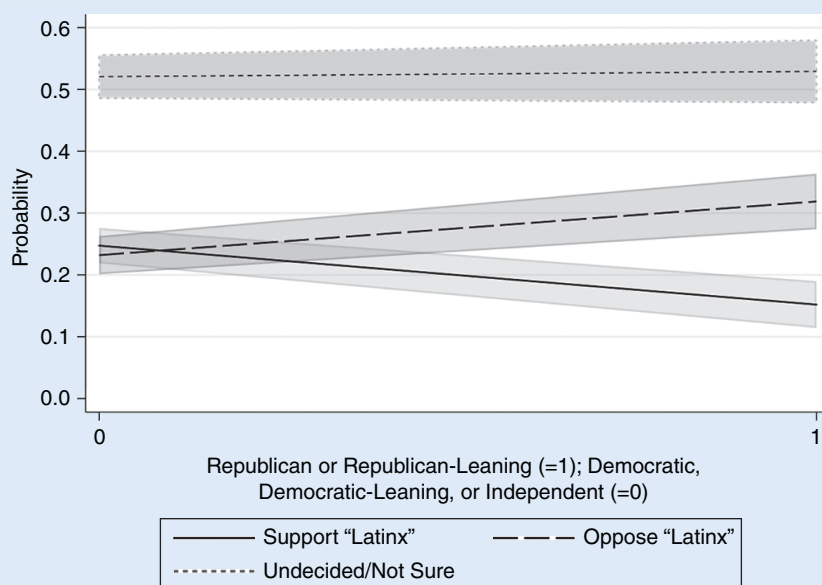

Republican or Republican-Leaning (=1); Democratic, Democratic-Leaning, or Independent (=0)

Support "Latinx" — — — Oppose "Latinx" .... Undecided/Not Sure

Table 3

Job Approval of President Biden and Feelings Toward Democrats

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Approval of Joe Biden as President Odds Ratio (Robust Standard Error)		**Warm Versus Cold Feelings Toward Democrats (0–100)**	
Democrat	17.64***	17.53***	38.19***	35.72***
	(3.504)	(3.858)	(1.767)	(1.882)
Independent	3.004***	3.012***	9.639***	9.059***
	(0.702)	(0.711)	(2.178)	(2.194)
Hispanic	1.185	1.344	3.396*	4.947**
	(0.285)	(0.409)	(2.012)	(2.411)
Black	2.113***	1.754**	6.704***	5.318**
	(0.526)	(0.478)	(1.898)	(2.134)
Male	1.644***	1.852***	4.306***	4.922***
	(0.260)	(0.337)	(1.325)	(1.562)
Age Group (18–29, 30–49, 50+)	1.257**	1.297**	0.849	1.349
	(0.136)	(0.158)	(0.907)	(1.037)
Education (High School or Less)	0.725*	0.720*	–0.983	–1.121
	(0.124)	(0.123)	(1.560)	(1.563)
Political Correctness Stifles Debate	0.653***	0.654***	–4.444***	–4.291***
	(0.0992)	(0.0998)	(1.341)	(1.340)
Abortion Legality	0.929	0.928	0.124	0.119
	(0.0814)	(0.0814)	(0.745)	(0.740)
Transgender Feeling Thermometer	1.013***	1.014***	0.278***	0.277***
	(0.00281)	(0.00282)	(0.0266)	(0.0266)
Oppose "Latinx"	0.698**	1.132	–6.787***	–5.597
	(0.123)	(0.822)	(1.503)	(5.690)

Table 3 (Continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Approval of Joe Biden as President Odds Ratio (Robust Standard Error)		Warm Versus Cold Feelings Toward Democrats (0–100)	
Oppose "Latinx" x Democrat		1.090		9.473***
		(0.397)		(3.061)
Oppose "Latinx" x Hispanic		0.743		–5.483
		(0.370)		(4.336)
Oppose "Latinx" x Black		2.365		6.644
		(1.454)		(4.219)
Oppose "Latinx" x Male		0.620		–2.311
		(0.225)		(2.949)
Oppose "Latinx" x Age Group		0.875		–1.635
		(0.224)		(2.100)
Constant	0.0535***	0.0477***	14.55***	14.70***
	(0.0249)	(0.0238)	(3.588)	(3.809)
Observations	1,322	1,322	1,320	1,320
Log-Likelihood	–615.45078	–612.87543		
Adjusted R^2	0.35	0.35	0.56	0.57

Notes: ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1 for two-tailed test.

...the factors underlying opposition to the term "Latinx"—including feelings toward transgender individuals, concerns about political correctness, and views on abortion—largely overlap with partisanship.

partisanship. Even when the pattern diverged—among respondents opposed to "Latinx" who are Democratic partisans, Black and Hispanic, or younger—it did not alter their evaluations of the Biden presidency or feelings toward Democrats. We thus conclude that, at present, the political divide informing opposition to gender-inclusive terminology shows little promise as a wedge issue that Republicans could use to alter partisan alignments among the electorate.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096524000465.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZWKGPZ.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ∎

NOTES

1. The origins of the -"nx" suffix are unclear. Perhaps the first example dates to 2014, when Columbia University's Chicano Caucus relabeled itself the Chicanx Caucus (Salinas and Lozano 2021).

2. A majority of respondents of Latin American and Spanish ancestry identified as "Hispanic" (55%), followed by "Latino/Latina" (17.2%). An additional 10.6% of respondents used a combination of "Hispanic" and "Latino/Latina."

3. To account for all partisan affiliations, we included a dichotomous variable (not reported) for 51 respondents who affiliated with other unidentified parties. This variable was insignificant in all the models and did not affect the substantive findings.

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