

# Quiz: You Can't Say That! (Or Can You?)

**By Quoc Trung Bui, Sara Chodosh, Jessica Bennett and John McWhorter**

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There seems to be genuine confusion over what a well-meaning person can say without offending someone.

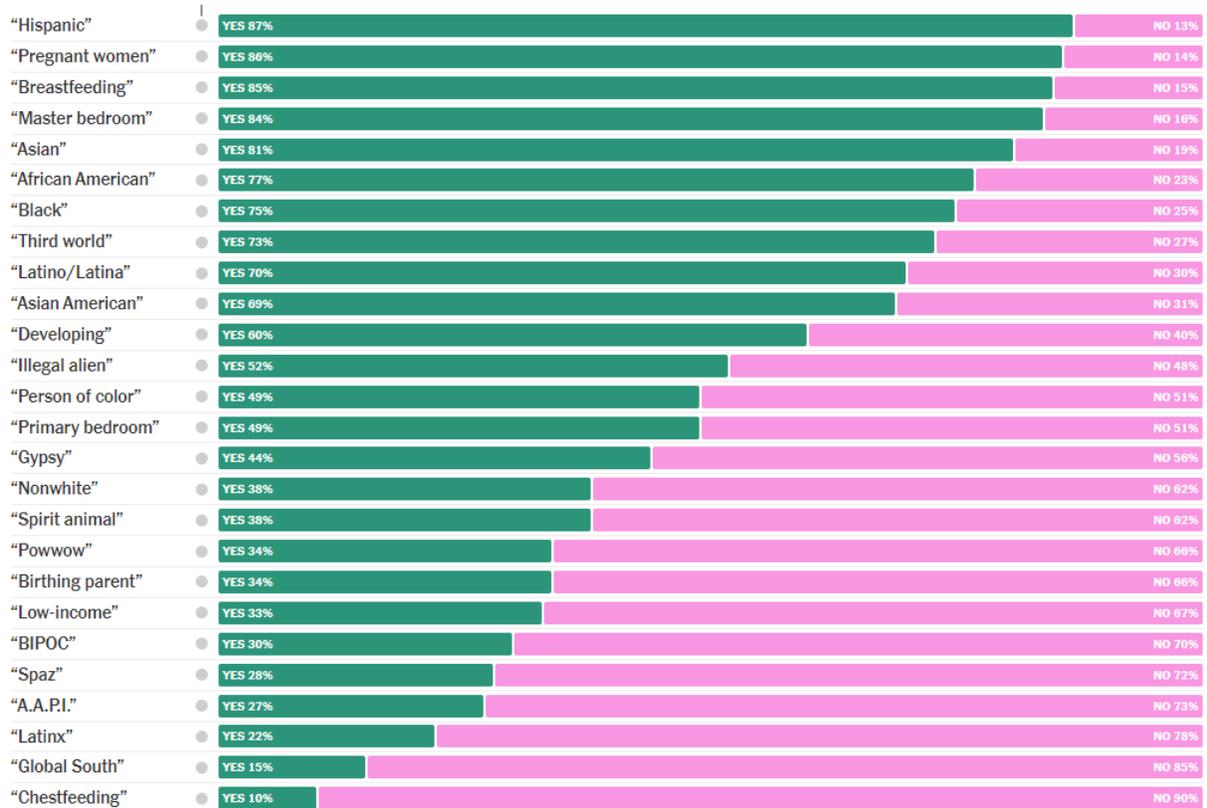
According to Pew, a majority of Americans believe there isn't any agreement on what language is considered sexist or racist of late, with the boundaries seemingly ever shifting.

It's something we've all experienced, perhaps more so over the holidays — a neighbor uses a word that makes you cringe, or a niece gives you an elbow and a disapproving look. You might find yourself wondering: Can I use that word? Am I not supposed to say that anymore? Where is the rulebook?

To find out, we enlisted the help of the polling firm Morning Consult to survey a representative sample of over 4,000 Americans. We asked about some words for which

we believe the rules are still unsettled, as well as how our respondents identified along the political, socioeconomic and generational spectrum.

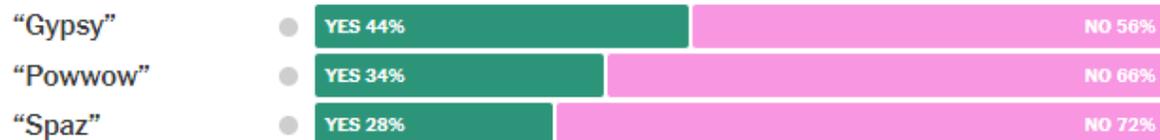
Where did they stand? Where do you stand? Take our quiz and see how your language use compares, then scroll down for the full results and discussion.



Note: Survey conducted from Dec. 1 to Dec. 4, 2022. Source: Morning Consult

## Where most Americans actually agree with the 'language police'

HOW 4,423 AMERICANS RESPONDED





Sara Chodosh, Times Opinion graphics editor

I'll admit I was surprised by the stat that over 70 percent said they wouldn't use the term "spaz." That word, you may remember, was the subject of debate this year after Lizzo and Beyoncé each [changed their lyrics to remove it](#). At the time, this revealed something of a divide: [Neither artist](#) seemed aware that the term was considered offensive, and yet the criticism of the word — used, in Lizzo's case, to connote losing control — was rooted in a broader movement to stop using [language](#) that [demeans disabled people](#).



Jessica Bennett, Times Opinion contributing editor

This gets at one of the reasons we wanted to do this survey in the first place, which was to find out how widespread the sensitivity and outrage over the use of some of these words really was. Interestingly, according to these results, the public is relatively aware. And yet what is considered current (or progressive or inclusive) at this moment can also feel like a moving target. Even the term "disabled person" is on at least one "don't use" list, [put out by the ADA National Network](#), which advises using "person with a disability" instead. The thinking there is that these single words define a person by that identity and they sometimes carry stigma. Which is a fine point to make, but how many people know these new rules?

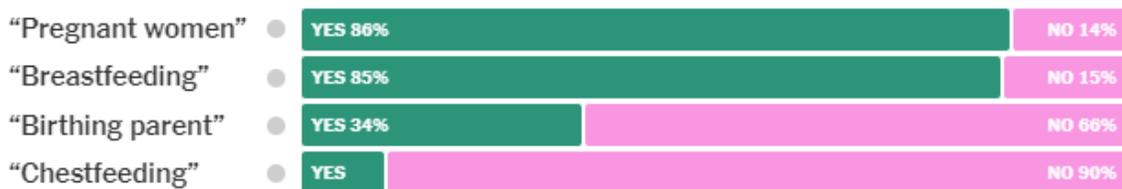


John McWhorter, Times Opinion writer on language

The tricky thing is that some people may have thought the question was about whether one should, in general, call people nasty names. I admit that it had never occurred to me that “spaz” referred to a medical condition, as opposed to simply associating a person with awkward movement. (As such, it always struck me as a rather weak and unimaginative insult, actually.) I am sure I wasn’t alone.

## Despite the panic on the right, few have stopped using ‘woman’

HOW 4,423 AMERICANS RESPONDED



Quoc Trung Bui, Times Opinion graphics editor

I remember debating with colleagues recently whether we should use “pregnant people” over “pregnant women” when working [on a story about abortion](#). On the one hand, we wanted to be inclusive of trans men who can get pregnant, but we also didn’t want to erase women, given that the vast majority of abortions are had by women and how important this issue was for women historically. Interestingly, the general public is very clear on the usage. “Pregnant women” is the dominant term.



Jessica Bennett, Times Opinion contributing editor

I had an experience recently where I used the word “pro-life” on a podcast — then quickly corrected myself to “anti-abortion,” which is the current turn of phrase preferred by the left. I think this gets at part of the problem with all of this language policing: It can be hard to keep up, even when it is, well, literally your job to keep up. And who makes the rules, anyway? Meanwhile, Dictionary.com just declared “woman” [the 2022 word of the year](#).

## ‘Master bedroom’ lives on, despite efforts to introduce ‘primary’

HOW 4,423 AMERICANS RESPONDED



Quoc Trung Bui, Times Opinion graphics editor

“Master bedroom” became [verboten among many real estate professionals](#) in the summer of 2020, in the wake of George Floyd’s death. Many were concerned it could be perceived as racist (as in “slave master”) or sexist (the master of the house was often considered a man), so they offered “primary bedroom” instead. But what’s interesting here is, after two years, over 80 percent of Americans still use the term, and that usage is consistent across demographics.

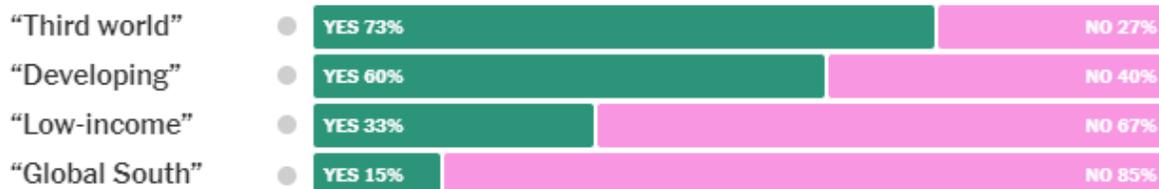


John McWhorter, Times Opinion writer on language

The term seems to date back only to early in the 20th century, as real estate lingo for the room slept in by the master of the house. It did not originate as the term for where slaves' masters slept, but that doesn't mean there can't be a discussion as to whether using it now can be taken to suggest that anyway.

## 'Global South' is not yet a thing, and 'illegal alien' is still divisive

HOW 4,423 AMERICANS RESPONDED



Sara Chodosh, Times Opinion graphics editor

I was surprised to learn that almost three-quarters of Americans said they would use the term "third world country." To me, that's both a misunderstanding of the original Cold War-era meaning and an antiquated, fairly offensive phrase. "Third world" began as a kind of catch-all for countries that weren't aligned with either the Western allies or the Communist bloc. Many of those countries were poor (at least in the moment), and over time the term became a shorthand for almost any impoverished nation. Even without that historical context, [the inherent hierarchy of "the third world"](#) is demeaning. In contrast, almost no people said they would use "low-income country," which I'm very used to seeing in [World Health Organization reports](#).

No clear consensus on 'illegal alien'

HOW 4,423 AMERICANS RESPONDED

"Illegal alien"

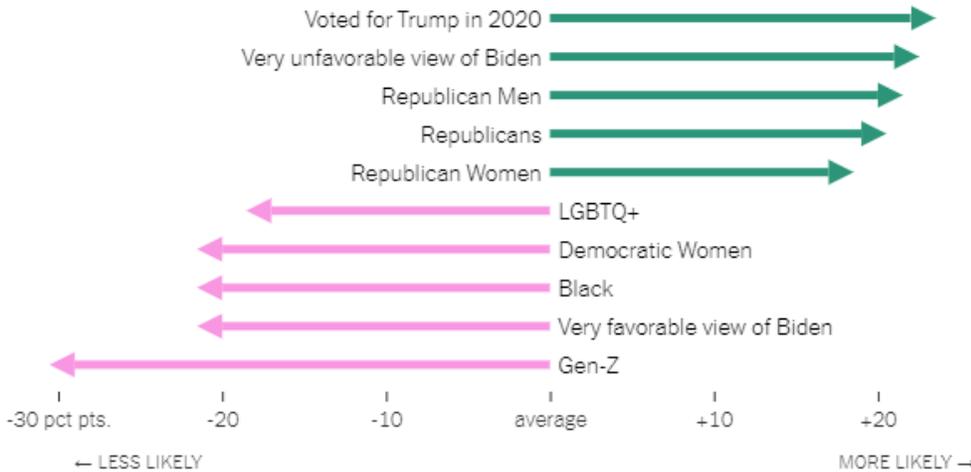


Quoc Trung Bui, Times Opinion graphics editor

“Illegal alien” was another curveball in this survey, at least for me. I thought most people had stopped using this term. Our style guide here at The Times changed [its approach in 2013](#) (in short: Be more specific than “illegal” if you can and do not use “alien”). But Americans are largely split on this term, and of all the words we surveyed, their responses varied the most across demographics. The gap between those most likely to say it (people who voted for Donald Trump in 2020) and not (Gen Z) is over 50 points.

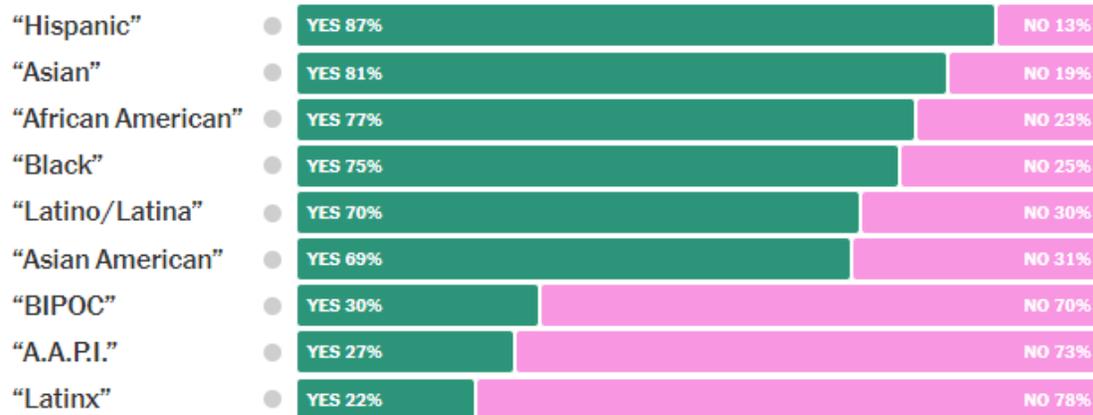
## The use of 'illegal alien' is split ideologically

THE FIVE DEMOGRAPHICS THE MOST AND LEAST LIKELY TO SAY "ILLEGAL ALIEN"



## New terms for race have a long way to go

WORDS 4,423 AMERICANS SAID THEY WOULD USE TO DESCRIBE VARIOUS RACIAL GROUPS



Sara Chodosh, Times Opinion graphics editor

Our results showed clearly that many of the newer [racial identifiers](#) — terms like “[Asian American Pacific Islander](#)” (A.A.P.I.), “[BIPOC](#)” and “[Latinx](#)” — simply have not caught on with the general public. For those who are members of these communities, this might come as no surprise; Pew, for instance, found that [only 3 percent of Hispanics identify as Latinx](#).



Quoc Trung Bui, Times Opinion graphics editor

As a person who grew up in Asian communities in the Midwest and California, I think there are two reasons a term like “Asian American Pacific Islander” may have rated so poorly. First, there is still [debate](#) over whether Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders should be grouped together; in some ways, the notion that you can condense people who have roots from the remote isles of Fiji with those from the mountains of mainland China strikes me as a little absurd. The second is that “Asian American Pacific Islander” reads like a census definition — which it kind of is. Saying it might sound too wordy and perhaps too explicitly politically correct to be widely adopted.

I've rarely heard Asians say “Asian American” or “Asian American Pacific Islander.” Those terms have always felt a little too performative or academic, and when I did hear them, it was precisely because we were in a professional or academic setting.



John McWhorter, Times Opinion writer on language

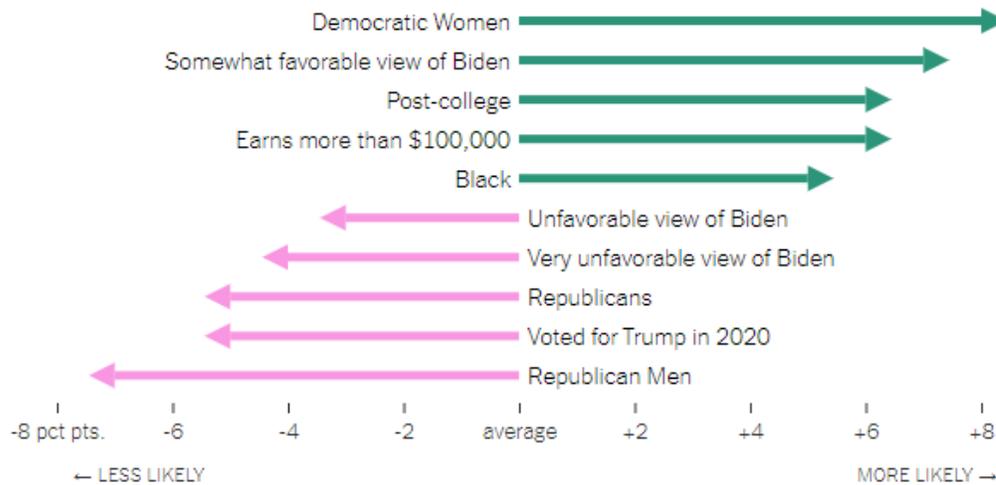
I don't know the histories of “A.A.P.I.” or “BIPOC” in detail, but none of these terms emerged from the folk, as it were. They are enlightened suggestions from the educated and the highly activist. It isn't an accident that I learned of all of them on Columbia's campus.

“BIPOC” has good intentions, but for one thing, the groups it refers to do not, in any unitary sense, feel themselves as one entity. Then there is the problem that “BI” initially sounds like it refers to bisexuals or at least two of something. And more subjectively, it sounds like the name of a disease.

There has always been a certain studied air about “African American” as well. It also strains perception a bit in its implication that a Black middle manager in Cleveland is African. But the penetration of “African American” into even colloquial American English has been remarkable. It seems safe to say that pretty much all non-Black people use the term to some extent and have since a few years after Jesse Jackson formally announced [his support for the term in the late 1980s](#), in part as a response to the use of “Blacks” in the plural.

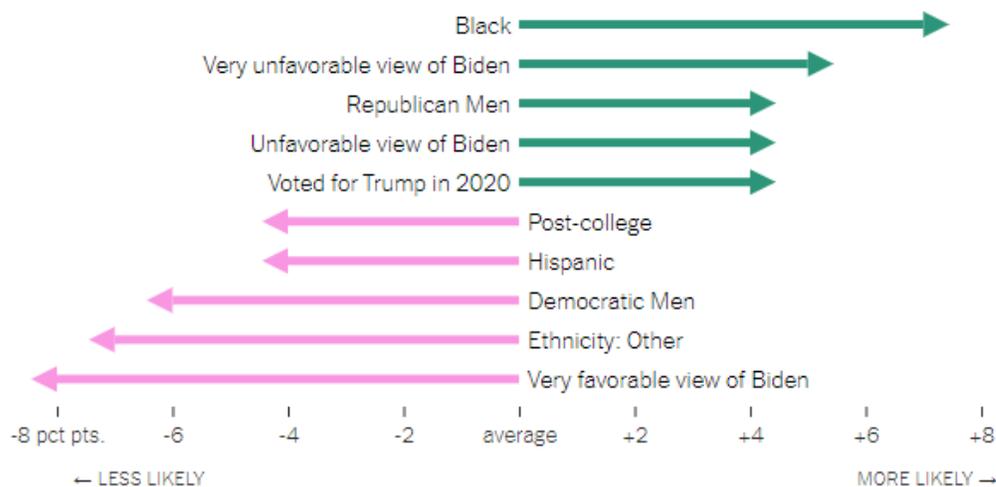
### Democratic women more likely to use ‘African American’

THE FIVE DEMOGRAPHICS THE MOST AND LEAST LIKELY TO SAY “AFRICAN AMERICAN”



### Black Americans preferred ‘Black’

THE FIVE DEMOGRAPHICS THE MOST AND LEAST LIKELY TO SAY “BLACK”





John McWhorter, Times Opinion writer on language

However, “Black” has retained its currency more vividly among Black people than others. In general, “Black” among Black people is the warmer and truer term. I should note here that I typically write “black,” while [The New York Times now mandates “Black.”](#)



Quoc Trung Bui, Times Opinion graphics editor

Similarly, our poll found that the most common usage among Americans for those of Hispanic descent is “Hispanic.” And very few Hispanics in our data use the term “Latinx.”



John McWhorter, Times Opinion writer on language

This is not surprising; a lot of these racial name changes tend to come from above or outside a community rather than within it. I am struck, for instance, how in my overeducated world, “Latino” has all but taken the place of “Hispanic,” which I process as a relic of the 1980s and before, while in my heavily Latino neighborhood, “Hispanic” and “Spanish” are the preferred terms among Latinos themselves.

This top-down approach to language is perhaps inevitable, as the people most committed to this kind of change tend to be more educated, given to thinking about groups and actions in the abstract – as opposed to those who may be too busy living an

existence to be concerned about the labels for it. In any case, where we are headed is that a certain sliver of our population will control a rich jargon of prescribed terms, of little import to most people.

Morning Consult conducted a survey of 4,423 American adults in December 2022. The survey was weighted on gender, age, race, education and region, with a margin of error of plus or minus 1 percentage point. Word choice is extremely contextual, so we asked people simply if they used a term, not whether they preferred one term over another.

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