

Civic Engagement Language Project

In late 2018, PACE launched an inquiry into perceptions of the language associated with “civic engagement and democracy” work. This project represents a first step towards understanding the resonance of different communications approaches in this space (commonly used words and phrases, in particular), and engaged funders, civic practitioners, and philanthropy-serving organizations in a collaborative exploration.

Goals:

- Understand the culture, practice, and rhetoric of how “civic work” is discussed and perceived
- Gain clarity on the barriers to and opportunities for generating shared understanding
- Consider if/how to overcome those barriers

We see this exploration as the first step in what could become an ongoing inquiry about language and framing of civic work. The goal is not to take a position on—or extrapolate the meanings of—the findings/themes, but to surface the perceptions so they may be understood and considered.

Rationale/Statement of Need

Language is a challenge right now, and an inability to communicate across the political spectrum—especially on issues related to our shared democracy and civic life—can be dangerous for the health of civil society and our social fabric. PACE works with funders and nonprofits that seek to advance principles, practices, and strategies of civic participation. We consistently hear from the following reflections regarding language:

- Much of the language used to describe civic engagement/democracy work is often perceived to have a liberal/progressive bent (whether intentional or not, conscious or not)
- This reality can be a barrier to advancing inclusive, pragmatic, and/or cross-partisan discussion and engagement, and, at worst, may perpetuate ideological divisions that many doing civic engagement work seek to address
- It can be hard to discern what is a difference in language (“we use different words but mean the same thing or have the same end goal”) versus a difference in overarching objectives (“we actually fundamentally do not view this the same way and are blaming it on misunderstanding”)

One motivating factor in this effort is an awareness of deeper political/partisan and social dynamics our field must contend with, related to Americans’ attitudes towards government, democracy, and other civic/social issues—understanding how people perceive, think, and talk about them will be an important first step toward more fully understanding these dynamics. This understanding will also help identify what language *does* resonate with/motivate people toward active and informed engagement in our republic.

Activities

We engaged a diverse audience, through both a quantitative and qualitative approach:

- In collaboration with researchers from Topos Partnership, a communications consulting firm, we convened a series of 28 mini focus groups with participants from across the country, and who represented a range of ideological, geographic, racial, ethnic, age, and economic diversity.
- In partnership with Dr. Parissa Ballard of Wake Forest School of Medicine, we administered an online survey to 1,000 participants. The sample was nationally representative based on race/ethnicity, education level, gender, and age (15 and over).

Themes from these research activities have been captured in reports from individual research teams and will also be captured in a final report from PACE, highlighting takeaways and themes that surfaced throughout the exploration. We hope this sparks further conversation and consideration across fields of practice.