

CIVIC LANGUAGE PERCEPTIONS PROJECT

REPORT PREPARED BY PHILANTHROPY FOR ACTIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (PACE)



INTRODUCTION

When your work is as grand and complex as democracy—and as dependent on shared understanding and participation—language and effective communication are critical. [Philanthropy of Active Civic Engagement](#) (PACE) is a community of funders that invest in the sustaining elements of democracy and civic life in the United States. Many of our members have expressed that talking about these themes can be challenging: much of the language we use to describe civic engagement and democracy work can feel academic and theoretical, and has become politicized and fraught with misunderstanding. While our field seeks to foster inclusive, pragmatic, and cross-partisan discussion, these challenges can create barriers—and, at worst, perpetuate the ideological divisions we seek to address. Furthermore, in some cases, it can even be difficult to discern whether communication challenges stem from a difference in language (i.e. “we use different words but mean the same thing or have the same end goal”) versus a difference in overarching objectives (i.e. “we fundamentally do not view this the same way and are blaming it on word choice”).

Especially today, the divisive tenor of dialogue in our public square—especially on issues related to our shared democracy and civic life—can be [dangerous](#) for the health of civil society and the strength of our social fabric. This constellation of realities—that our members and their grantee partners confront daily—inspired this research inquiry, which is aimed at understanding how the words practitioners use to describe civic engagement and democratic practice resonate (or don’t) with the broader public. So when we say “civic engagement” or “democracy” or even “patriotism” to most Americans, what do they hear? And what does it mean to them?

Another motivating factor for this project is an awareness of deep partisan and social divisions our field must contend with regarding Americans’ attitudes towards government, democracy, and other civic and social issues. Understanding how people perceive, think, and talk about these ideas is an important step toward addressing the underlying challenges they reflect. We approached this effort with an understanding that not all differences are negative ones; our guiding vision was not to align different interpretations, but rather to understand perceptions as a first step toward identifying what language resonates with and motivates people toward active and informed engagement in our republic, and what kinds of messages might not be leading us in a constructive direction. For us, this research inquiry represents a first step in what we hope will be an ongoing arc of exploration.

This effort was made possible with collaboration and/or support from the Foundation for Harmony and Prosperity, Kettering Foundation, Fetzer Institute, Ford Foundation, the National Conference on Citizenship, and the Pritzker Innovation Fund. Additionally, PACE assembled a working group of colleagues—funders, practitioners, academics, and young people—who partnered with us in the development and execution of this project and helped us ensure it was as inclusive as possible of the communities we aim to serve. Their input and guidance in shaping the research protocol, interrogating the data, and disseminating this research has been invaluable.

RESEARCH METHODS

Since Americans encounter and use language in numerous ways, it was important to approach this inquiry with multiple approaches; our team engaged both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In consultation with the working group, we prioritized about 20 key words and phrases for exploration. PACE worked with [Topos Partnership](#), a communications research and strategy firm, to lead a series of small focus groups, and Dr. Parissa Jahromi Ballard of [Wake Forest School of Medicine](#) to field a comprehensive survey to a nationally representative pool of 1,006 respondents.

The 28 small focus groups engaged participants from across the country, representing a diverse range of ideological, geographic, racial, ethnic, age, and economic characteristics. Participants were recruited from a national database of individuals who have expressed interest in participating in studies of public interest topics and were compensated for their time. A total of 92 focus group participants from 32 U.S. states, of which 38 participants identified as liberal-leaning Independents or Democrat voters, 26 as conservative-leaning Independents or Republican voters, 7 as Libertarian, and 21 as moderate Independents. The sample was gender balanced and diverse in terms of age and income, and 60 participants had 4-year college degrees and 32 did not. The racial representation was approximately 60% white and 40% non-white. To learn more about the findings of the focus group conversations, read a memo from the Topos Partnership [here](#).

The survey was administered online to respondents age 15 and over, and was [nationally representative](#) in terms of race and ethnicity, education level, gender, and age. Survey participants were recruited via an online survey platform called Qualtrics, which enabled us to survey nationally representative panels of participants. The sample very closely reflects our nation in terms of political affiliation by major political party (Democrats and Republicans) according to [Gallup poll](#) reports during the time period of the research. The sample was also diverse with regard to income level and respondents came from a mix of urban, suburban and rural communities. To learn more about the survey, read Dr. Ballard's summary of findings [here](#).

This paper summarizes high-level reflections and take-aways from both efforts, taken together.

Finally, because a core acknowledgement of this project is that words and phrases can be interpreted in numerous ways, we did not provide context or definitions for respondents in the survey, instead inviting participants' "gut reaction" based on their own understanding. This is because the purpose of this exploration was to better understand public perceptions of this language based on their own knowledge and experience, and further, we wanted to avoid biasing responses by leading with framing. That said, when focus group participants asked for clarification, basic definitions of the terms and concepts were offered. To learn more about the respective research protocols, including a copy of the survey and focus group questions, please reference the full memos from our research team, linked above.

WHAT WE HEARD

The primary purpose of this research effort was to listen. Our intention is not to take a position—or even to extrapolate meanings or implications from the data—but rather to represent the perceptions we heard, so they may serve as a foundation for deeper understanding and continued dialogue within our field.

In the words of the Topos Partnership, we aimed to uncover an “existing cultural common sense” or the “hidden patterns of understanding” that shape the way citizens understand and engage with the ideas that are central to civic engagement and democracy. We also hope the information contained in this data can inform and influence the way we discuss our work. And by “our,” we mean all of us in the field of civic engagement—the funding community, educators, and anyone for whom civic engagement and democracy are motivating forces.

Data has a way of telling a story, and it does so through patterns. The findings in this summary are not just about specific terms or even specific democratic values or ideals, but about the patterns that emerged in the data across methods. Below are a series of high-level findings. We invite you to read on, and to learn more about the findings of our research teams in their respective memos. (The memo from Topos Partnership on Focus Group findings is [here](#); the memo from Parissa Ballard on quantitative survey data can be found [here](#).)

OVERALL THEMES

THEME 1: SOMEONE ELSE’S LANGUAGE

One theme came through clearly: Americans simply do not think or talk in the terms our field uses to describe democracy and civic engagement. The words and phrases practitioners use to describe this work—like *civic engagement*, *activism*, *civility*, and *advocacy*—do not tend to appear in the everyday vernacular of people beyond the scope of our field. But this dynamic goes deeper than language.

The ideas and concepts that make up “civic engagement”—ideas of participation and community, getting involved, helping others—surfaced often among participants, who agreed that personal involvement and connecting with others is emotionally rewarding. However, they rarely connected their personal behaviors and activities with the concepts of *civic engagement* and *democracy*. In other words, the values that underlie democracy are alive among Americans, but seem disconnected from the traditional notions of engagement used by civic engagement practitioners. They also don’t seem to view their behaviors and activities as connected to government per se, but rather as ways they personally choose to show up for their neighbors and communities.

This dynamic sparks the question: *what language did people use to describe what we as professionals might call “civic engagement?”* On the survey, responses varied, as did the categories of types of response—that is, some people included a noun or a verb (for example, “citizen” or “volunteering”) and others included descriptions (for example “good,” or “honorable”). The word clouds below reflect survey questions and responses that speak to this question:

If you were to say one word or very short phrase to describe the act of participating in your community, what would it be?



What word or very short phrase would you use to describe a person who is active in their community?



Not only do the vast majority of Americans not relate to the language most commonly used within our field to describe civic engagement and democracy, many of them also reported that it felt “like somebody else’s language.” This finding was notable: at the root of the divisions our nation faces today are feelings of disconnection—[and distrust](#)—in our system of government, and from [each other](#). If the language we use to describe civic engagement feels to Americans like “somebody else’s language,” what does this mean for our efforts to bridge divides and cultivate the shared sense of responsibility and spirit of participation our [democratic republic](#) requires?

THEME 2: THE INDIVIDUAL VS. THE COLLECTIVE

Another theme that surfaced is an apparent disconnect between individual personal experiences and a collective “big picture” of democracy. When focus group participants were invited to think about the concept of civic engagement, their most resonant associations were personal involvement with other individuals—themes of being a good person, neighbor, or community member, and the idea of “helping others” emerged consistently. While participants agreed that being of service to others was important, it is notable that the extent of most visions of civic participation were focused on the individual, person-to-person level, and not necessarily connecting civic participation to visions for broader, institutional change.

Similarly, when survey respondents were asked to state a word or short phrase to describe the act of participating in their community, responses varied: some responded with adjectives, most of which (73%) were positive, like “fulfilling,” “helpful,” and “important.” Others described types of actions, and 90% of these responses focused on direct service activities, those that focus on alleviating social issues, and included responses like “recycle,” “do good deeds,” “be neighborly,” and “serve others.” These themes surfaced in discussions about power as well—a term respondents overwhelmingly associated with individual people rather than something that can be built collectively.

Focus group participants also indicated mixed perspectives regarding the roles of government and business; perspectives varied sharply along partisan lines, and the importance of careful and intentional communication around these themes became evident: language that seemed to imply a significant role for government in civic life can alienate moderates and conservatives. Further, communications that imply support or condemnation for the role of business can also push unconstructive buttons along partisan lines.

This disconnect between individual and collective ideals around civic engagement and democracy prompt questions about how to connect the moral imperative respondents felt to be in service to others on an individual basis, to broader themes of civic engagement in service of a greater whole. In focus group discussions, a clear consensus around the importance of engagement in communities was resounding, but conversations about how to achieve such a goal tended to falter, defaulting to considering the types of individuals present in communities—and whether they were natural helpers and doers. Could this individual lens on engagement obscure bigger-picture ideas about our democratic system, political participation, and institutional change? How might a seemingly shared moral imperative to help others inform our efforts to bridge this gap? Finally, how does America’s culture of

individualism influence people in direct and personal ways, and how might we also consider its relationship to understandings of common cause or community connection?

THEME 3: CONTEXT MATTERS

While the focus of much of this research centered on specific words and phrases, another pattern emerged: context matters too. While one of the inspirations for this project was a shared concern by many funders and practitioners that particular words and phrases feel politicized in our current political climate, most focus group respondents suggested that context matters more than actual words. Survey results did indicate some differences in perception based on political affiliation and demographic characteristics, but focus group participants indicated they didn't put a lot of stock into the meaning of words as much as what they perceive to be their intent. A common refrain we heard was "they're just words," though as we dug deeper, there was acknowledgement that what those words symbolize often feels personal and important.

On the other hand, survey results revealed implicit associations people may hold, and those associations tended to vary based on respondents' backgrounds. For example, whether people like certain words, have emotional reactions to them, or report hearing or using certain phrases, differs by background characteristics such as political affiliation, age, race, and gender. In other words, while focus group participants dismissed questions about connotations of particular words as relatively inconsequential and deferred to context, survey results indicated that understandings of these words *did* spark reactions that varied by demographic factors, indicating that some reactions to specific words and phrases may be unconscious.

For example, Republicans were more likely to use and think the word *citizen* is important than Democrats, whereas Democrats were more likely to like and feel the term *racial equity* is important. Interestingly, despite not being widely liked overall, non-white participants were more likely to say they like, understand, and feel the terms *civic engagement*, *civic health*, and *civic virtues* were important. Non-white people were also more likely to like, use, hear, and have an emotional reaction to the term *racial equity*. White respondents were more likely to like and feel the terms *patriotism* and *liberty* were important. Finally, survey respondents age 24 and younger were more likely to hear and use the words *diversity* and *racial equity*, while people age 25 and older were more likely to like and feel familiar with the words *patriotism*, *citizen*, and *civility*. [See: "Perceptions of Civic Terms by Demographic Characteristics," beginning on Page 12 of the [Quantitative Research Memo](#)].

When it comes to partisanship, interestingly, the terms "partisanship" and "bipartisanship" themselves were seen as insider words, and rarely used among participants. Language describing politicians "crossing the aisle" or being "open to compromise" was more common, and the survey indicated the term "common ground" was relatively well-liked. Two themes emerged in focus group conversations around cross-partisanship: first, these ideas were strongly and positively associated with pragmatism (absolutely no one spoke in defense of partisanship, which was perceived largely as stubborn and rigid), at the same time, support for "cross-partisanship" seemed to falter when pushed past the surface. That is, people tend not to want "their side" to be the one that has to concede.

These findings indicate patterns of understanding among participants that became more complex under the surface. Despite explicit consensus that context matters more than particular words or phrases, survey results indicated clear patterns of responses that varied by demographic characteristics, indicating unconscious reactions to language and prompting questions about what might be shaping these responses, and how practitioners might better understand them. Furthermore, while it was heartening to learn that participants overwhelmingly supported “common ground,” pushing beyond these assertions in conversation revealed that participants weren’t necessarily willing to concede personal beliefs for the sake of compromise. Does this reluctance speak to underlying beliefs about our system of government—or each other? What might this dynamic mean for our field’s efforts to bridge divides in ways that go beyond surface-level platitudes?

THEME 4: A MISSING VISION

Another theme that emerged in the data in various ways is an apparent lack of a shared vision or aspiration for our democracy. As Topos Partnership described, “It seems Americans have no strong, clear sense of what a healthy, civically engaged democracy or society entails. This appears to be an important reason why they have so little shared vocabulary in this domain.” This finding surfaced as a pattern in focus group discussions, and was also supported by survey data: when respondents were asked how they would describe civically engaged people and actions, responses were scattered and lacked a central focus that might be understood as “civic engagement” in the ways our field commonly sees this concept. This absence of a shared vision for a healthy democracy and civic life, sparks the question: how can we talk with others about ideas and work toward a vision we cannot collectively imagine? Furthermore, given that language both reflects and shapes reality: if we do not have the language (or our existing language isn’t resonating), how does this impact the creation of a shared vision for our democracy?

Despite some partisan divergence in language use, we also saw that Americans consistently feel drawn to ideas like more civility in political discourse, more connected communities, and people having their voices heard in decisions that shape their lives. This theme arose in focus group conversations as well as in the survey, where the term “common ground” was well-liked across the full sample. We also saw a strong consensus that America needs to do better in terms of fostering and improving civility, dialogue, education, and engagement. But that shared sense of importance “is not matched by optimism or understanding of how they can be achieved.” In other words, there is strong pessimism about a “return” to civil discourse and civic engagement. And that pessimism persisted with relation to aspirations for democracy as well, and the possibility of their voices being heard in political processes.

So while many Americans didn’t express a strong explicit connection to particular words—their implicit preferences often surfaced between the lines. For example, survey respondents reported liking words such as liberty, justice, and common ground more than terms such as civic health, civic virtues, and privilege. And while survey results indicated that people connect to some terms more than others, the way people perceived civic language varied according to demographic backgrounds.

Despite differences, however, some important themes emerged. While many didn't intuitively connect with words like "civic engagement" and "democracy," for example, values at the heart of this work materialized often: collaboration, community, and service, among others. We also witnessed an expressed inclination toward civility and cross-partisanship, and a simultaneous resistance to "concede" to the other side, sparking a question around what motivates this inclination to work together, and what prevents it from happening in practice. Furthermore, how can language—and the shared values that surfaced throughout these conversations—begin to bridge that divide?

SUMMARY OF THEMES

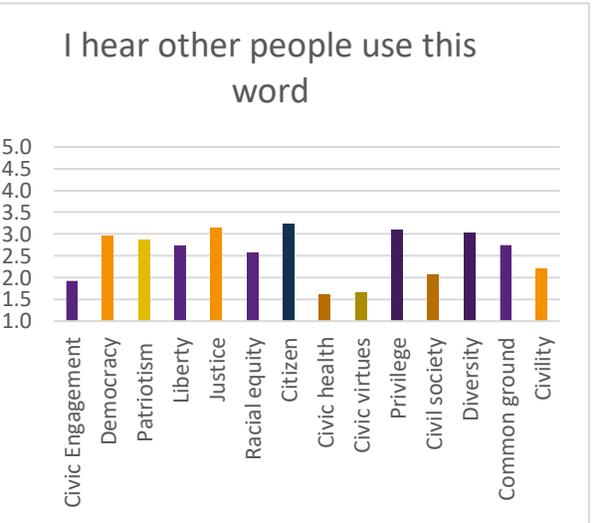
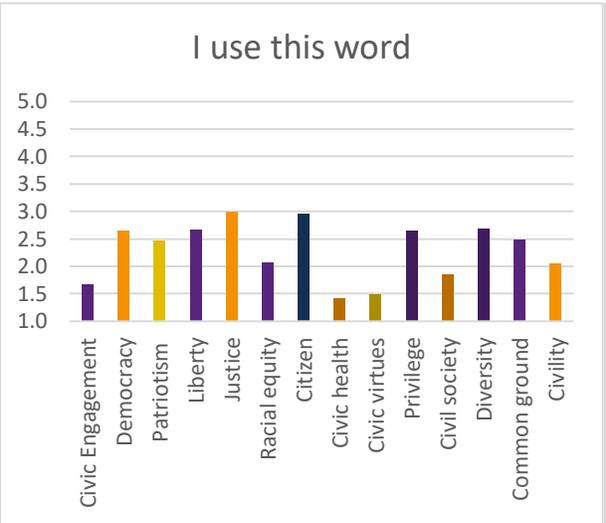
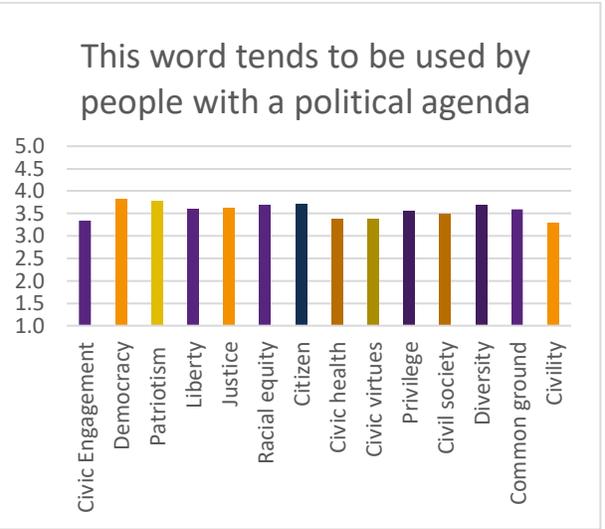
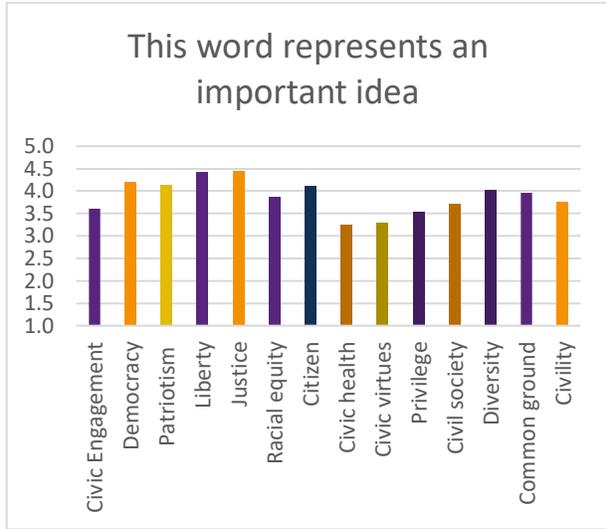
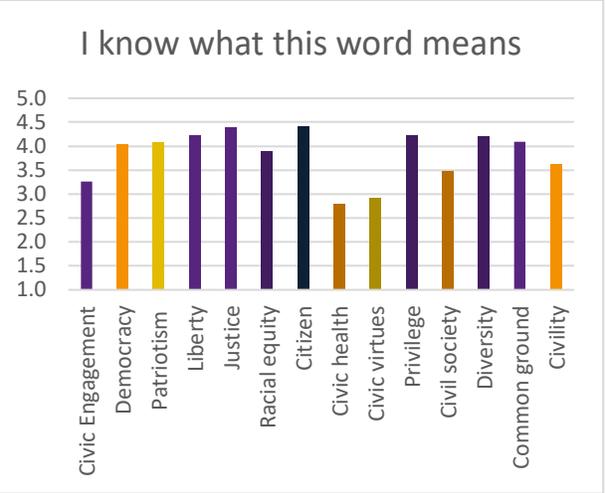
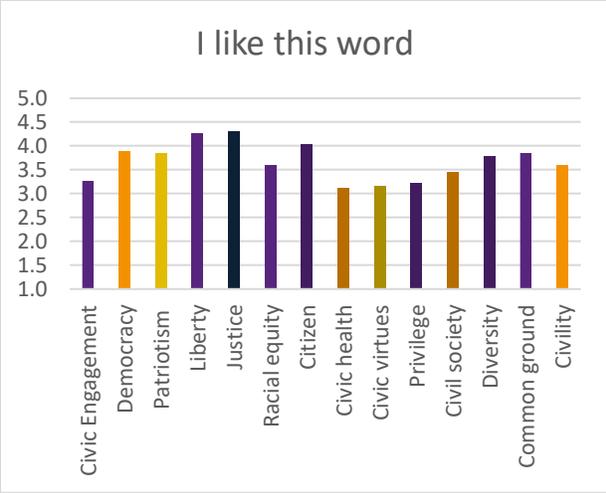
One consideration worth exploring further is the degree to which two findings relate to and reinforce one another: a general sense that the language of civic engagement and democracy feels like "someone else's language" and at the same time, the lack of a shared vision for a healthy democracy. To what degree does the perceived lack of cohesive shared language make it difficult to build a shared vision—and to what degree does the lack of shared vision influence the development of shared language?

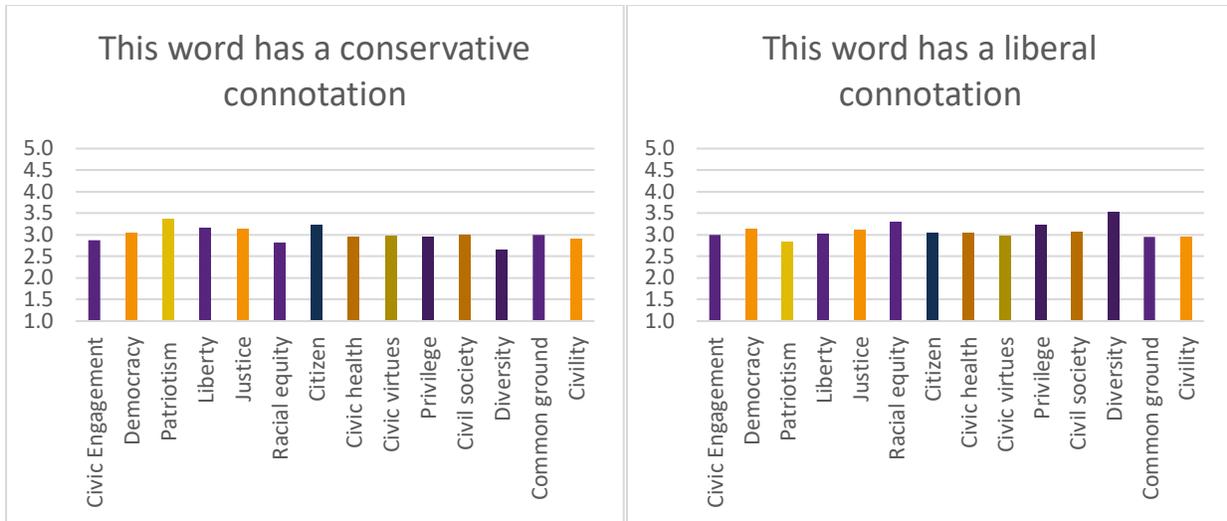
Furthermore, we saw that Americans do have words for feelings and actions that feel personal: notably, the individual, human-level interactions that take place between community members. And while those words seem to come naturally to most Americans, the same is not true for more formal, institutional concepts around democracy and civic engagement. In other words, most Americans are inclined to think about the personal connections within these broader institutional concepts, but struggle to think about and relate to institutional concepts in personal ways.

Overall, these themes may speak to a potential starting place for our field to consider. We saw respondents resoundingly agreed on the fundamental tenets of social cohesion: helping one another, being of service to others, and getting involved. While respondents faltered in translating these individual-level actions to communal power and change, there are clear shared values to build upon in shaping the narrative of broader community engagement. While a shared vision for a healthy democracy was notably absent, a clear sense of shared priorities—around civility, connection, voice, and dialogue—did surface, and could serve as building blocks for a broader democratic vision.

PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIFIC WORDS: OVERALL

The information below is derived primarily by quantitative data, reinforced by focus group discussions. Scale: 1: strongly disagree through 5: strongly agree.





DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION BY IDENTITY CHARACTERISTICS

We also sought to understand how people from different demographic backgrounds understand and interact with civic language. As one way to explore this, we tested differences in perceptions of civic language across demographic characteristics of participants such as self-reported political affiliation, race/ethnicity, education level, age, gender, and community type (urban, rural, suburban). In contrast to the qualitative approach of asking people about their thoughts directly, the survey allowed us to uncover differences that become apparent when enough people from demographic groups provide their gut reactions, captured in numerical form, to different civic terms. This analysis revealed both similarities and differences in the degree to which people like, understand, use, and hear civic language.

There were many differences in how civic language is perceived when we grouped participants according to their self-reported political affiliation. This analysis suggests that civic language confers meaning and evokes preferences depending on one’s political orientation, even though the exact nature of meaning derived from the civic language isn’t clear through the pattern of preferences. Similarly, preference for civic language varied across racial/ethnic group background when differences were examined between White and non-White participants and to some extent by education level and by gender. Differences by age suggest that there may also be a generational gap in perceptions of language. When it comes to perceptions of civic language by community type, there were more similarities than differences across survey respondents who report living in urban, rural, and suburban communities.

Some more specific variations by demographic characteristics by term are referenced throughout this report. For more information on differences in perception by identity characteristics, please see the full [quantitative research memo](#).

SENTIMENTS ABOUT KEY CONCEPTS

In addition to understanding perceptions and sentiments around specific words, we also wanted to explore some larger concepts, which A) may not be easily captured in a word or phrase, and B) may have broader application than their literal definitions, particularly with regard to the social context in which they are often used. *These findings were driven primarily by qualitative (focus group) research, and supported by survey data.*

POWER

The concept of power is nuanced and complex, with numerous important applications. Given the many potential perceptions and contexts associated with this word, “power” was presented without context in both the focus groups and survey, to allow respondents to respond with their own instincts and associations. What we saw was that most associations with *power* were negative, and seemed to focus on the flawed nature of power and its corruptibility.

The most common associations with *power* included its abuse, individuals with too much power, and helpful efforts to limit power; many respondents focused on people who were trying to gain personal power, or leaders who pretend to listen to powerless constituents. Power was associated primarily as being held by individual people, and not necessarily considered as a communal, citizen-level property (“*they* have power, *we* do not”). That is, participants did not talk about their civic agency as power, did not seem to view power as something that could be built/generated, nor did they characterize their involvement in communities as an exercise of power.

PRIVILEGE

Privilege is one of the terms most frequently perceived as being politically charged, and its interpretations of this word “cut directly to a major fault line between different Americans—whether wealth, status, etc. are distributed in a just or unjust way,” as the Topos researchers concluded. “If you see systemic injustice lurking under privilege, then it becomes a point to attack . . . If you see privilege as a result of meritocracy, then it is a reward.”

The survey data also revealed that this term is received differently depending on one’s demographic background. Survey respondents who identified as conservative were more likely to say that privilege had liberal connotations while those who identified as democrats were more likely to say it had conservative connotations. Survey data also revealed that this term was judged to be more important among people from non-white backgrounds.

The term may also be more familiar to young people; the survey data suggested that people age 24 and younger were significantly more likely to say they hear and use the word regularly, while older respondents heard and used the word with less frequency. People with advanced educational experiences were more likely to say it was used by people with a political agenda, and that their feelings about it depended on who was using it.

Finally, most participants did not seem to have a grasp of this concept; many were uncertain about the meaning of the term, and interpretations varied widely. In the survey, a clear pattern emerged between words that people understood, and words that they liked—indicating that people tended to like words that they were familiar with. This was true in all cases except for the word *privilege*, which was disliked despite being well known.

DIVERSITY

Diversity is one of the terms that varied most by political and demographic perceptions. For liberals, diversity meant acknowledging and representing real and important differences, whereas conservatives expressed that diversity is a natural result of not discriminating, partly because they perceived the differences often associated with *diversity* as not important to distinguish. For both, the association of race as the primary component of diversity was prevalent—as opposed to diversity of other kinds (age, ideology, gender, etc.).

For conservatives, *diversity* often signaled a liberal agenda, and surfaced mentions of quotas, “reverse racism,” and the assumption that people were being valued based on an identity category rather than their competence. Liberals often perceived conservatives as afraid of and antagonistic to diversity. Despite the stark political differences in perception of *diversity*, researchers also saw a relatively widespread and non-partisan view of diversity as a strength. This was especially true when diversity was defined broadly (and less associated with race), and respondents agreed that when different people brought different ideas, experiences, and perspectives to the table, it is ultimately a good thing.

In the survey, where terms were not explicitly defined, respondents who identified as Democrats, as women, and as non-white, liked the term *diversity* more, and were more likely to think the term was important, compared to their conservative, male, and white counterparts. At the same time, people who identified as conservative were more likely to think the term *diversity* tends to be used by people who have a political agenda.

DEMOCRACY

This was one of the most universally positive terms we studied, and seems to be widely regarded as a shared American value. However, there was some skepticism about how achievable *democracy* really is, especially on the national scale. We heard a broad sentiment about democracy being about people “having a say,” which was widely regarded positively, and a theme that also surfaced in other tactical concepts like civility, dialogue, and cross-partisanship. In some contexts, *democracy* can bring up counterproductive associations: first, when it is narrowly perceived in terms of voting, to the exclusion of other acts of civic engagement; and second, when hyper-partisan minorities on each side view the other side as inherently anti-democratic because of the profound differences between their positions.

Associations with the term were universally positive, however, it was not a term people tended to use themselves—rather, terms like “being involved” or “community involvement” were much more common. Survey results also indicated that people with a college degree were more likely to know, hear, like, and feel the terms *civic engagement* and *democracy* are important.

DEFINING KEY TERMS

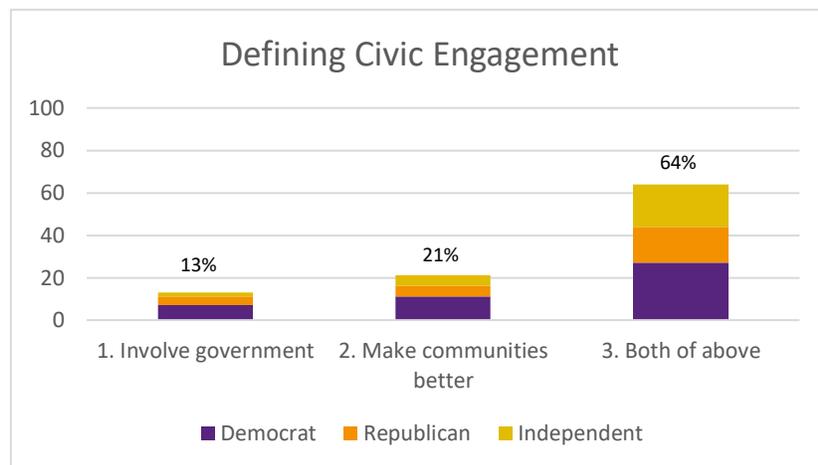
In addition to survey questions (as described above) that aimed to uncover respondents’ “gut reactions” to words—without context or definitions—our team also wanted to better understand what specific terms meant to Americans. In other words, we understand that assessing perceptions of words alone is potentially limited, unless we can also understand what people believe those words mean. In that spirit, in one section of the survey, we offered some conceptual ways to think about a few terms, and asked what most closely aligned with their understanding. For participants who answered “agree” or “strongly agree” to knowing exactly what a particular word mean, they were asked a follow-up question: *This term can be defined in several different ways. Here are a few ways we hear people describe this term. There are no right or wrong answers. Which most closely aligns with how you understand it?*

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

1. Participating in actions that **involve government** and intend to influence the way it functions (such as voting, attending public meetings, contacting representatives, attending marches or rallies, political involvement)

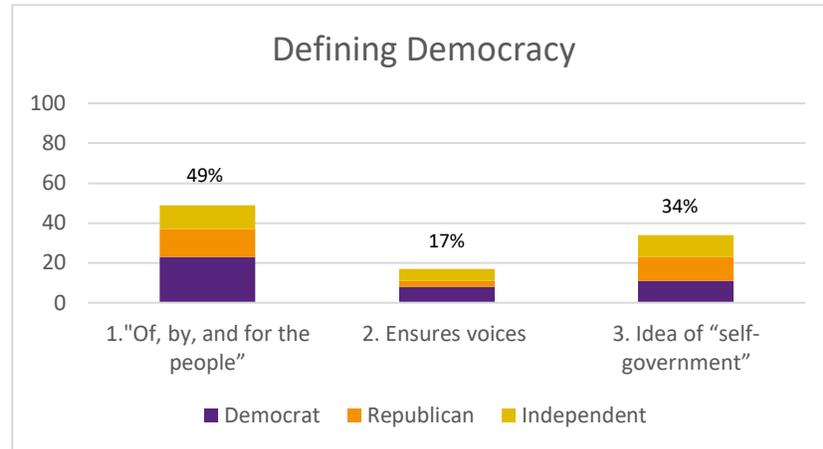
2. Participating in actions that allow people to **make their communities better**, but may not directly involve government or politics (such as volunteerism and service, helping neighbors, giving to charity, joining community groups)

3. **Both of the above** (that is, civic engagement can be government/political oriented AND also include voluntary/charitable associations)



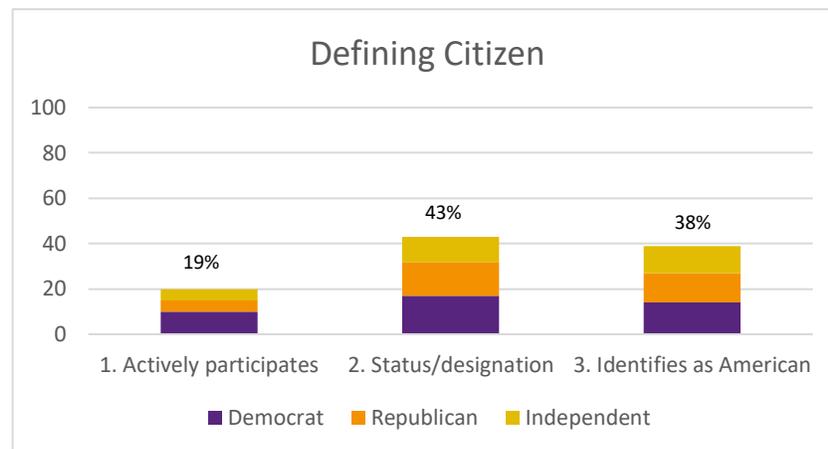
DEMOCRACY

1. A system or structure of institutional government that is **“of, by, and for the people”**
2. A way of government representation that **ensures the voices** of those least likely to have access to political power or decision-making are prioritized
3. The **idea of “self-government”** which means people have the right and responsibility to have voice in government decisions as well as other political and non-political activities across society.



CITIZEN

1. A person who **actively participates** in and contributes to the “civic life” of their community
2. A person who possesses a specific government **status/designation** as a resident of the United States
3. A resident of a community who defines themselves or their identity as **being American**



WHAT'S NEXT?

As professionals whose work is motivated by a shared concern for the health of our democracy, so much of what we do is predicated on the ability to talk about what we believe and why it matters. And in order to be able to do this well, the language we use has to feel relevant and meaningful to all Americans—beyond the scope of our field, from all walks of life—and in ways that inspire them to take action.

At PACE, we often talk about civic engagement as less about a specific activity for a specific objective, but rather about generating a sense of purpose and commitment—a belief in something larger than oneself that illuminates the many ways we can participate in making our communities better. So if part of our job is to generate this sense of belonging and belief in a collective whole, how do we make the case? This research is a first step in understanding what we're up against, by painting a picture of existing understandings of civic engagement and democracy—and the concepts we use to describe these practices.

Of course, it's also true that language and perceptions are often reflections of reality. And therefore, if the concepts of democracy and civic engagement do not feel possible or even relevant to large numbers of the American public, this is not merely a function of language. It would behoove us to ask ourselves: How are the stories we tell falling short of people's aspirations, values, and/or lived experiences? And if we aim to build a clear and compelling vision of American democracy, how can we do so in a way that speaks to those experiences and the shared values that do exist among the American public?

Despite the divisions we face, there is much that is shared—so much that we, as Americans, have in common. And the idea of what binds us feels particularly important when we talk about democracy and civic life. While we saw that many of the traditional words and phrases related to this work didn't tend to resonate with respondents, the concept of democracy itself was one of the most highly-rated terms, which could speak to a grounding in shared values that could orient future communications and bridge-building efforts. We also saw widespread skepticism about the possibility of a successful democracy—perhaps, in part, due to a lack of shared vision for what a healthy democracy could look like. Furthermore, the need to delve further into understanding how this lack of vision might be linked to another theme—that the language we use to describe democracy and civic engagement did not seem to resonate widely with respondents. Future research might consider: How does the language we use to describe civic engagement and democracy impact our shared democratic vision? How does our lack of shared vision influence the language Americans use to describe this work? And how might our field begin to bridge this gap?

The opportunity to build a shared vocabulary for civic engagement and democracy is evident, which prompts the question: who should build it? How can the process of building a shared language and vision for a healthy democracy model the kind of collaborative, democratic process we aspire to? What might the co-creation of language to describe civic action look like, beginning with everyday Americans and the words they already use to describe their civic lives?

PACE members share a belief that America will be healthier and more successful, resilient, and productive if democracy is strong and the office of citizen is treated as central to how it functions. We also believe that democracy will thrive when all of its people are informed and engaged in the process of creating it. Given the results of this data, it seems that not only should all Americans have a hand in creating a healthy democracy—but perhaps first, a voice in creating a vision for what that could look like.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE FIELD

We hope this inquiry sparks conversation—both about what we heard, and also what the considerations and implications may be for the work of practitioners. Below is a series of discussion questions that could make fruitful conversations for group discussion. The first set of questions is intended as context setting for a group that is coming together to discuss the report; the second set of questions delves into themes that arose in the research, and related questions for our field’s collective consideration. We invite you to host a community discussion, conference session, or discuss the findings with your colleagues in the context of your own work. We also invite you to share with us what you hear, so we can all benefit from the wisdom and insights that arise. Given the exploratory nature of this project, we welcome feedback, for its own sake as well as in service of shaping the next point of exploration on this journey. You can use [this form](#) to share your reflections with us directly.

- What surprised you about respondents’ sentiments and perceptions? What didn’t surprise you?
- In what ways might you incorporate some of the learnings from this research into your work?
- What did this leave you wondering? Given the findings and patterns that surfaced in the data, if you or your organization were to recommend a subsequent arc of research, what would you suggest as a next step?

Field-Building Questions

1. We heard that many Americans don’t relate to the language our field most often uses to refer to civic engagement and democracy. In fact, they seemed to feel those words felt “like someone else’s language.” How might this dynamic be impacting our field’s efforts to bring people together? How might it be impacting the perceptions people have of our field? What role might civic education play in this dynamic?
2. Given the language that respondents used to describe civic engagement and democracy, do you see possibilities for evolving the way our field refers to the work we do? What might that process look like? How might it incorporate everyday Americans and the words they already use to describe civic life?
3. A central challenge our democracy faces today is a pervasive lack of trust in our democratic institutions. How might these findings—in particular, around perceptions of power and individual notions of engagement—influence this reality? How might we shift this dynamic?
4. Despite lack of resonance around traditional vocabulary related to civic engagement and democracy, the concept of democracy itself was one of the most highly-rated terms. Why do you think this is? How can this positive sentiment inform communication about democracy and democratic ideals?
5. If we accept the premise that language both reflects reality, and also shapes it, what do the findings suggest about the lived experiences of everyday Americans? In what ways might our prevailing narrative of democracy be mis-aligned with the lived experiences of everyday Americans? And how might we use this information to shape future communication about civic engagement and democracy work?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This effort was made possible with collaboration and/or support from the Foundation for Harmony and Prosperity, Kettering Foundation, The Fetzer Institute, Ford Foundation, the National Conference on Citizenship, and the Pritzker Innovation Fund. This summary report was authored by PACE Communications Director, Adiel Suarez-Murias. PACE also convened a working group of colleagues, who provided invaluable insights and guidance in the development of this project:

WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

Mike Berkowitz, Third Plateau Social Impact Strategies
Nellie Ellis, Student
Sasha Fisher, Spark Microgrants
Kristina Gawgry-Campbell, Independent Sector
Angela Graham, Fetzer Institute
Jon Gruber, Einhorn Family Charitable Trust
John Guido, Foundation for Harmony and Prosperity
Neel Hajra, Ann Arbor Community Foundation
Meredith Higashi, Philanthropy Northwest
Edna Ishayik, Obama Foundation
Abby Kiesa, Tufts University
Matt Leighninger, Public Agenda
Jane Leighty Justis, The Leighty Foundation
Lindsay Lloyd, George W. Bush Presidential Center
Taliah Muhammad, Student
Maggie Osborn, United Philanthropy Forum
Sean Parnell, Philanthropy Roundtable
James Piltch, The Citizen's Story
Valeriano Ramos, Everyday Democracy
Brad Rourke, Kettering Foundation
Sterling Speirn, National Conference on Citizenship
Janet Tran, Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute
Jessica Trubowich, Jewish Community Relations Council
Aditi Vaidya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Jessica Weare, Microsoft