



# Thinking and Talking About Civic Engagement

## Findings from Qualitative Research

By the Topos Partnership

For PACE (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement)

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### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

As Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) and likeminded colleagues work to promote greater participation in civic life, they need an understanding of how audiences respond to ideas and communications in this space.

The observations in this document derive from a first step towards providing PACE and other philanthropic organizations with this kind of understanding. More specifically, they are based on a set of twenty-eight small-group discussions, with a diverse group of Americans from across the country, and from across the political spectrum. (See next section for further detail.)

Some of the observations concern general patterns as Americans think about and grapple with concepts related to civic engagement. In part the study is intended as an initial exploration of cognitive and cultural challenges and opportunities related to this topic area. Other observations concern specific language that is currently used by communicators—how people respond to it, what it means to them, whether they relate to it, and so forth.

Importantly, the research reported on here—and the corresponding quantitative study undertaken at the same time<sup>1</sup>—do not provide us with the “answers” about how best to communicate in this topic area, either in terms of specific language, or key ideas that should be the focus of discussion. But it does yield helpful insights that can begin to guide communication in more constructive directions.

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<sup>1</sup> Ballard, P.J. (2019) Civic Language Survey: Project Report. Prepared for PACE (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement).

## METHODS

The goal of a typical Topos project is to identify the existing cultural common sense—the hidden patterns of understanding that contribute to or undermine citizen engagement—and look for ways to adapt to or shift this common sense in order to open new possibilities for moving forward. Developed over 15 years of close collaboration between its three principals—a cognitive linguist, a public opinion strategist, and a cultural anthropologist—the Topos approach is designed to give communicators a deeper picture of the issue dynamics they are confronting, and suggest the fundamentally different alternatives available to them.

For this initial effort towards a new discourse about civic engagement, Topos conducted a set of mini-group telephone discussions, during which we were able to assess how particular themes and language fare in a small conversational group. What ideas and words get picked up? Rejected? Misunderstood? Do variants emerge that seem clearer and more compelling to participants?

Topos conducted 28 mini-groups from around the country, with a diverse total pool of 92 participants from 32 US states. 38 identified as liberal-leaning independents or Democratic voters, 26 as conservative-leaning independents or Republican voters, 7 as libertarian, and 21 as moderate independents. The sample was balanced in terms of gender, and diverse in terms of age and income. Sixty participants had a 4-year college degree and 32 did not. The racial mix was roughly 60% white and 40% non-white.

Some group conversations focused more on conversations sparked by specific terms while others focused more sets of scenarios related to civic engagement. (See appendix for details.)

## PART I. GENERAL PATTERNS/OBSERVATIONS

We begin with a discussion of a set of patterns that are not about specific terms, but rather about the more general character of discussions with lay people about this topic. These patterns reflect Americans' default ways of thinking, feeling and talking about topics related to civic engagement, and begin to give us a view of what Topos calls the "cultural common sense" in this sphere—the widely shared views, understandings, misunderstandings, priorities and so forth that may not be consciously recognized or explicitly articulated, but that underlie more specific opinions and behaviors.

### ***Most terms currently used by the field feel like "insider" language.***

Based on various responses in conversation, it is clear that language that is very meaningful to advocates is not particularly "relatable" for lay people. Common terms in the field—such as *civic engagement*, *advocacy*, *activism*, *civility*—fail to elicit engaged responses, seemingly because they feel like "somebody else's" language. (Note that this finding is confirmed by quantitative results regarding whether terms are frequently used or heard by the survey participants.)

*Q: Who would you imagine... talking about civic engagement, using this term?*

*M1: Using the term, you'll probably hear from politicians or lecturers. You won't hear every day, from people talking with each other, but it still happens nonetheless, without people maybe being as aware of that word itself.*

*Q: Is there another word that people use that you think of?*

*M1: I guess just like community involvement. That's the way I would look at it . . . (29-year-old moderate white man, NJ)*

*M2: I agree . . . I think it is more likely to be that term used in government. In nonprofit organizations, as a way ... And I think community involvement is probably a comparable term that the average American probably uses to say the same thing. (46-year-old moderate white man, TN)*

*M3: I was going to say government . . . like mayors or district commissioners will probably use that word . . . more than a normal citizen. (36-year-old moderate African-American man, FL)*

### ***The public tends not to think EXPLICITLY about partisan uses of language.***

When asked about how people with different political leanings use language differently, lay people often have trouble reflecting on the question. They understand that politicians and partisans are opportunistic and rhetorical in their use of language, but rarely think in terms of partisan usages. (Some exceptions are noted in the section on specific terms.)

Importantly, however, the lack of explicit awareness in this area, or ability to articulate perceptions, does *not* mean there are no party-based differences in people's responses to language—only that people have a limited ability to focus *consciously* on the question.

*Regardless of whether they're Republican or conservative or liberal or Democratic, they care about their community. (42-year-old conservative white woman, TX)*

*Q: What if a Republican candidate were to say that the important focus ought to be on civic engagement?*

*F1: In my area, [as a liberal] I am in the distinct minority in my area. So a majority candidate suggesting that civic engagement is their priority would not be particularly interesting to me because it would mobilize persons who don't necessarily support what I support. (62-year-old liberal white woman, VA)*

*F2: I would actually agree with [F1] that this shouldn't be the primary focus. There are a lot of other issues in my area that take precedence over this, and even if it was Republican candidate like you said, I would still say there's a lot of other issues that they should be looking at and trying to engage the whole community, not just the Democrats or Republicans, to believe in what they're saying . . . (66-year-old liberal white woman, IL)*

*F3: I think it should apply fairly. I would have the same concerns and questions for the Republican candidate that I did for the Democratic one. (45-year-old liberal white woman, OR)*

Note that here too the quantitative findings indirectly corroborate the patterns, as people say that language isn't particularly important, yet respond differently to it based on their own beliefs, demographics, and so forth.

### ***A number of ideas seem appealing but not realistic.***

There is apparent good news in the fact that Americans say they are drawn to ideas like more civil politics, more connected communities, and people having more of a say. And there is even strong consensus that America must do better, in terms of civility, dialog, education, engagement.

On the other hand, the qualitative research suggests that the appeal of such concepts is not matched by optimism or understanding of how they can be achieved. In fact, people are often explicit in expressing their pessimism about the “return” of civil discourse, civic engagement, and so forth. Likewise, when it comes to ideas like democracy and power, people very much would like to “have a say” and “be heard, listened to” (natural, conversational terms) but are (very) skeptical these things will happen. Town Hall meetings, for instance, are “only for show”—filled with shouting people who can't agree or aren't interested in solving

problems, run by politicians who have already made decisions behind the scenes.

*I would think that in a meeting like the one being described . . . the decision might have already been secretly made and it's just for show—that they're having a meeting like that just to try and say, oh we tried to get everybody involved and appease everybody. But it didn't actually happen because it was already kind of decided in advance. (34-year-old liberal Hispanic woman, VA)*

*Well if it worked the way it should, the town meeting would actually make a difference and change the outcome because, again, I think they have these town meetings just as a way of appeasing people because the powers that be have already made those decisions. (49-year-old moderate African-American man, NY)*

*The things I would most like to see is people getting involved at the local level and being respectful of other people. I think that has been lost in our communities and in our country, that we don't respect and listen to one another. I think that the more we get involved in the other people from other walks of life, the more empathetic and compassionate we are and the more likely we are to want to help and see them as people and want to make a difference for their lives, too. So I'd really like to see more respectful to one another, kindness, and getting involved in your own community. (32-year-old liberal white woman, CA)*

Implications: On one hand, the lack of a clear vision for improvement contributes to fatalism about our politics and our society. On the other, it is clear that there is potential energy here to tap into: Additional research could identify ways of conveying a concrete, common-sense vision of what an engaged society and functioning democracy could look like.

***“Little picture” thinking: Being involved is about (individual) moral caring and helping others.***

The research discussions established that when lay Americans are asked to think about civic engagement, they are often most engaged as they picture personal, involvement with other individuals. To be a good person, good neighbor, good citizen means caring for and helping others around us, beyond ourselves and our family—not for reciprocal gain, but because we are morally engaged.

*We need to have more people who are engaged and involved. [Who] stand up for more of the social issues that may not necessarily benefit them. Again, looking out for the greater good. Being more open to seeing other people's sides, seeing other people's positions. (29-year-old liberal Asian-American man, OH)*

Besides feeling morally obligated (whether or not they personally live up to it), people also agree that it “feels good” to help, that there are emotional rewards for helping, making a difference and connecting with others.

Relatedly, first responders, teachers and others are cited appreciatively as examples of people working to keep a community safe and functioning.

While the priority placed on caring and helping is certainly positive, the limitation—from a civic engagement perspective—is that people typically focus on images of individuals helping other individuals, on the moral character of the helpers, and the moral imperative to be a helper.

Importantly, this focus on “direct helping” and personal involvement with other individuals can obscure bigger-picture ideas about institutions, political participation, etc. It can also make it difficult to imagine how change can happen, since so much depends on whether individuals are nice, generous, and so forth.

### ***“Being involved” is essential for real communities.***

Another way lay people express motivation related to civic engagement has to do with “being involved” (a natural, conversational term) in the community. A healthy community entails connection among people, some degree of harmony and common purpose. These, in turn, require engagement, involvement, participation on the part of people in the community.

*We all should know we can't always depend on the government to take care of everyone. We all should take care of our own communities. The government's just there to sometimes help. We all should be taking care of our own communities. (34-year-old mixed-race conservative woman, MN)*

Importantly, though, while the positive idea of engaged communities is a no-brainer piece of cultural consensus, this doesn't mean people have a concrete sense of how to achieve such a goal, or even that they are optimistic it is possible. Once again, the conversation often ends up focusing on the types of individuals that are present in a community, whether they are natural doers and helpers, and so forth.

On the brighter side, there is certainly potential energy here to tap into if communicators can offer a concrete, plausible vision for how to move towards greater community engagement. (Additional research could help determine how best to convey such a vision.)

### ***Conceptual vacuum: There is little sense of what healthy politics/institutions might look like.***

Related to the previous points about personal caring, involvement and community, lay people typically do not naturally scale up to larger, more “abstract” ideas about institutions, or civic and political functioning.



As a matter of thought, as opposed to language, 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 where they have so little shared vocabulary in this domain. (Note that survey responses corroborate this lack of a lexicon of engagement, as responses are scattered and “off-target”—from an insider point of view—when people are asked how they would talk about civically-engaged people and actions.)

Responses to various terms tested in the study reflect the lack of a clear and meaningful picture of engagement:

*Civic duty, civic education*—While people feel they can guess at the meanings of these terms, discussions are “dry” and limited to narrow ideas about voting, learning the mechanics of the branches of government, etc.

*Power*—Many responses are negative, e.g. focused on people who try to maneuver for personal power, or on leaders who pretend to listen to their powerless constituents. There is little positive sense of how engagement leads to the power to make change, or of collective power as an avenue for making wanted change.

*Advocacy, activism, protesting*—These forms of engagement are often thought about in terms of individual agendas and specific issues, rather than overall health of a democratic society. Most negatively—in keeping with general cynicism about “politics”—they can just be about people who “like to make noise.”

See further discussion in Part II of the report.

*If the government gets involved then politics gets involved in it and city council members have certain political leans this and that, certain groups are rewarded. So I think if you encourage people to help other people in your community, your neighbors and everything, you help build a sense of community where it's not political, it's just about helping people who need help. (57-year-old moderate Hispanic man)*

*Civic engagement is important. But I prefer to think of it in nonpolitical terms, where people are giving of themselves, their time, their money, and hopefully their energy to causes that are important to them. And it's important for a bunch of reasons. One is state and federal budgets just can't cover all the good work that needs to be done. People need to pitch in and do their share. And it's also a way of people learning that there's more commonality in all of their various viewpoints than they necessarily think. When you're breaking bread at a soup kitchen, whether you're being served or whether you're serving, there's a whole lot more common humanity there than Democrat Republican fighting it out at the polls. (62-year-old liberal white woman, VA)*

Overall, these patterns powerfully confirm that lay Americans need help (from communicators) understanding civic and political engagement in clear,

compelling, constructive, big-picture ways. Additional research could help identify effective ways of achieving this.

***Implications about role of government/business can be divisive.***

Finally, we note that views of the respective roles of government and business in the life of our country are obviously contested and mixed—even if not always consciously and explicitly—and that it is therefore relatively easy for certain kinds of language to trigger skepticism and pushback among many. Communications that seem to imply a significant role for government can alienate moderates and conservatives, but also some liberals who view government with deep skepticism. And communications that seem to imply either support for or condemnation of an important role for business can likewise push unconstructive buttons.

*Q: Why do we need to be advocates or activists? Don't we have representatives? Don't we have a government that's supposed to deal with these things? [laughter]*

*F1: We're all laughing. [other 2 women agree] There doesn't seem to be a lot of confidence right now in this country among general citizens that our government is doing what's best for us. (50-year-old very liberal white woman, TN)*

*It feels like we've been at this place for so long where neither side wants to give on anything, and, 'I just wanna win, and if I don't win, I take my toys and go home.' (45-year-old moderate African-American man, MS)*

In short, communicators need language that avoids problematic assumptions that may be heard in current messages about the public vs. private sector, in order to avoid inadvertently and unnecessarily distancing segments of the audience.



## PART 11. TERM-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

In this section we offer observations focused on specific terms that were selected for exploring in the research—plus several additional terms that arose in the course of conversations with participants.

As noted earlier, it is often difficult for lay people to explicitly reflect on their responses to language—for instance, the ways in which a particular term strikes them as partisan—or may even say that language choices are not important, compared with actions. Importantly, this does not mean that language has no political dimensions: only that lay people have difficulty consciously articulating them.

Another very important point to keep in mind while reviewing findings about language is the difference between self-reported approval of a given concept on one hand, and actual, less explicitly articulated responses on the other. (The contrast between self-report and other measures is well understood in the social sciences.) For instance, while people may express support for a given value in the abstract, their actions or their feelings about a specific situation may betray a very different perspective (see discussion of *cross-partisanship* for an example).

### **Activism / Advocacy**

Neither of these terms is used much by the public; they are essentially insider terms.

Each is primarily thought about in terms of people speaking out on specific issues, rather than about broader community or civic responsibility.

*I advocate for breast cancer because it's in my family. To me it's like something personally affected you—but I guess that could mean activist, too, where you know, like an example, the Women's March . . . Lots of activists all gathering, fighting for, speaking out for different things. (36-year-old liberal white woman, CA)*

Whether or not people in your community are active in this way may or may not contribute to the overall quality of your community. A person might advocate for a (good, useful) community center, or for (less locally relevant) lemur protections in Madagascar, due to their personal priorities and agenda.

While people acknowledge that some important things might not happen without activists, the term can also strike people in a negative way. It can be more about seeking attention or making noise than getting something done.

The prototype of activism is *protesting*, which conservatives and moderates can sometimes be uncomfortable with.

*When I think activism, I think of people . . . yelling and screaming and picketing outside some guy's house. (39-year-old moderate white man, MA)*

## **Bridging Divides**

This term has positive associations, related to overcoming divisiveness and disunity—ethnic, ideological, political, class-related and so on. It is about listening and finding common ground, not turning away.

*F: It sounds very positive. Like trying to mend broken fences. Help people with different opposing views learn to respect one another and to agree to disagree. That's what it makes me think of. (48-year-old conservative Native American woman, VA)*

*M: Like [she] said, people coming together. Maybe taking two opposite opinions or two opposite sides and finding that common ground, instead of just turning your back to each other. (49-year-old conservative white man, OH)*

*[If] somebody was talking about [bridging divides], I imagine they were trying to connect different groups, whether it's ethnic, whether it's income levels, or whatever. Just trying to connect different diversity groups, or even taking minority groups to talk with maybe the majorities. (23-year-old liberal white man, WA)*

Importantly, though, it tends not to be seen optimistically, or in relation to a realistic path forward. It is a “nice idea” that people can wish for, without engaging in a very motivated way.

## **Civic Duty**

This is not a term the public uses much.

It tends to be understood as a category of things people are supposed to do: particularly voting and jury duty, but also military service and potentially all the things we should do to participate as active citizens, primarily in relation to government.

It tends to be a term that is discussed “dryly”—not with passion, but with a sense of obligation, as people might talk about chores.

“Civic responsibility” is sometimes treated as a synonym.

*When I think about civic duty, I think about certainly jury duty . . . I don't think voting is a civic duty. I think voting is a choice. I don't believe anyone should be compelled to vote. (35-year-old libertarian white man, RI)*

## **Civic Education**

This is not a common public term, but is easy enough to understand and relate to.

It is associated primarily with social studies class, and secondarily with immigration citizenship classes.

In terms of content, it is usually understood as having to do with being informed about civic matters, such as who the Congressperson is for your district.

Alternatively, it can sometimes be interpreted as *moral* education, such as helping kids overcome humans' natural egocentrism. In this case, it is more about gaining experience and understanding through active participation rather than a classroom setting.

In either sense, a strength of the term is that it transcends partisan differences, since it is about learning facts and “the rules of the game,” or learning to be a responsible member of society.

*I would hope that in a lot of the schools you are teaching them how to be good citizens, just through the day-to-day activities of the school—having them involved in the student elections and in solving problems at the school level. (57-year-old libertarian white woman, CO)*

*I think it starts in the schools with children. Learning about social studies, how locally your area might be different or the same as other areas. And I think that kind of extends into adulthood . . . being in the homes and local happenings. Watching the news, making sure that you are getting diverse sources, listening to the radio, that kind of thing. (31-year-old liberal Asian-American woman, OH)*

### **Civic Engagement**

This core term has universally positive associations, and is more or less understood as communicators intend it—though with less detail, richness and urgency.

In contrast with *duty*, *engagement* carries associations of being self-motivated, committed and interested in being involved.

*[It's] knowing what's going on, exercising your right to vote, but I also think it's being engaged in the community, whether it's through work with a charity or work on a local board or volunteering your time, whether that be, say, civic organization or a charitable organization. (69-year-old conservative white man, OH)*

On the other hand, this is not a term people tend to use themselves, compared with language such as *being involved*, *involvement* (*in the community*).

In political contexts, the term can be conflated with (partisan) mobilization.

## **Civility**

This is not a commonly used term among the public, and never spontaneously arose in conversations touching on relevant topics. Instead, people tend to talk about *listening* to others.

It is understood, positively, as treating difference in a polite and respectful way. Importantly, it does not mean being persuaded, and in this sense is somewhat less substantive and compelling than public language like “listening” or “being heard.”

It is universally acknowledged that discourse today lacks civility and would benefit from more.

On the other hand, there is little optimism about civility coming back. It is seen as a disappearing virtue, particularly in a political context.

*I think it means being respectful, being courteous and open-minded to other people's opinions, and if you do disagree, to do so appropriately, not at the expense of another person's feelings or for your own gain . . . When we're talking about crossing partisanship, when we're talking about protests and even when we're talking about civic engagement, I think it's the appropriate attitude that we should have when doing each of those things. (46-year-old moderate white man, TN)*

*Civility just means treating people with respect. Making sure that you treat people how you like to be treated. You have in mind their feelings and their thoughts, and take those into mind every time you engage someone or talk with them. Treat them with kindness. (49-year-old conservative white man, OH)*

We also note that this may be a case where people applaud an idea in the abstract, yet applaud aggressiveness in their own leaders and champions.

## **Common Good**

At a conceptual level, this term is understood more or less as experts would hope: It is about things that benefit all of us, and is perceived as an obviously positive goal.

*I would say common good would be something that would be beneficial amongst community. People can get together and maybe find common ground and do something that is going to benefit their entire community. Everybody coming together maybe for a particular cause or something that matters to their community. (48-year-old moderate white woman, NV)*

People tend not to use the term, and more naturally focus on *(the) people*—as in, what the people want and need.

Due to underlying problems related to politics, the term often triggers thoughts about what leaders should strive for *but don't*.

Perhaps because it is a term associated with political discourse, there are some cynical perceptions that appeals to “the common good” are more tactical than sincere: Appeals to the common good are powerful arguments to get people to do what you want them to do.

*If a politician said it, I'd probably first be skeptical. Because in my mind, that sounds like more taxes. (35-year-old libertarian white man, RI)*

### **Cross-partisanship**

Like the related terms *partisanship* and *bipartisanship*, this is basically an insider word, not used or picked up on by lay people.

Instead, people use other language, such as talk about politicians *crossing the aisle*, or everyone being more *open to compromise*.

*I think the term the media often uses is . . . reaching across the aisle. So I think it's just when different political factions unite for what's truly best for their constituents. I mean I think in general, [cross partisanship] would also be a term that I think most likely would be uttered by politicians. I don't see that being a word that most common Americans would use. (46-year-old moderate Hispanic man, TN)*

The term is strongly and positively associated with pragmatism; moving away from partisanship either for new ideas or to get something done via compromise or cooperation. Absolutely no-one comes to the defense of partisanship—which seems to be about rigidity and stubbornness rather than getting things done.

*Cross partisanship. I believe it's where two parties can actually work together regardless of their political views . . . It just seems that somebody who's within the barriers of the political views but are willing to let those barriers down to actually work for the greater cause. (29-year-old conservative African-American man, IL)*

The bad news is that support for cross-partisanship seems ambivalent when pushed, and surface enthusiasm is probably misleading. People typically do not want “their side” to give in on important principles; they also tend to trivialize, distort or dismiss opposing positions.

### **Democracy**

This term is one of the most universally positive in the set—despite insistence from a few conservatives that we live in a “republic”—and is seen as a defining American value. Broadly speaking, it is about *people having a say* in things (a commonly used phrase), which everyone agrees we should, in principle.

There are several senses, though, in which the term sometimes brings up counterproductive associations:

- Often it is understood narrowly in terms of voting, as though that is our sole role—to the exclusion of various other forms of civic engagement, which can slip off the radar.
- A partisan minority on each side views opponents as profoundly anti-democratic, respectively associating conservatives with authoritarianism or gerrymandering and liberals with socialism and big government (“tyranny”).
- There is considerable skepticism about whether—beyond the most local, community-based self-governance—elected leaders actually represent, understand or care about the public. In short, related to problematic views of government already discussed, the concept is sometimes seen as nice and even important, yet increasingly unrealistic.

*As far I'm concerned, the parties aren't interested in democracy, they're just interested in what's best for them. I look at the government more as a big business and what's going to benefit them, and not necessarily what's gonna benefit the people . . . The parties give us which officials we get to choose from, which is really not opening it up to the people that say we want this person or that person . . . That's not really allowing us the freedom to have a full say in things. (63-year-old moderate white woman, MN)*

*I mean, we are a democratic government. But I think it's more a matter of the conservatives and liberals see a different role for government. Conservatives want limited government and the liberals want really the government to take care of people . . . I don't think they'd see the word or the definition of democracy differently, it's more how they view the role of government. (51-year-old conservative white man, AZ)*

### ***Dialog (Engaging in dialog)***

This is a relatively natural term for lay people, and has positive associations across the political spectrum. Together with *respect* and *listening*, this is one of the ways people prefer to talk about ideas generally related to “civility” and “cross-partisanship.”

It comes up often in relation to government listening to the people and holding meetings with an open mind, rather than with decisions actually made ahead of time.

In short, it is a goal everyone agrees on, and can be motivated by, *if* they see a realistic path forward.

*A two-way conversation between equals. Someone not talking down to someone. Someone not going on a rant or like a tirade, but rather a conversation. (29-year-old moderate Asian-American man, OH)*

*Immigration . . . [is] another big issue in our country, and we don't really have a dialog. We don't get together. Everybody is so entrenched in their own political realm that no one listens. There is no dialog. Everybody*



*wants what they want and it's very partisan. I would add the word 'open' dialog, not just ... in one ear and out the other. (49-year-old liberal white man, NJ)*

## **Diversity**

This is one of the terms where political and demographic divisions show up most strongly. Conservatives (especially whites) and liberals (including non-whites) may interpret the idea very differently:

For liberals, valuing diversity means recognizing *real and important differences*. E.g. older white male leaders probably cannot relate to or represent the experience of younger people or people of color.

For conservatives, diversity is the result of not discriminating, partly because *differences are not real/important*. E.g. a black person who prefers a black candidate, for racial reasons, is being racist.

In both cases, the primary interpretations of the term center on race, as opposed to diversity in other senses.

Conservatives also hear *diversity* rhetoric as advocating a liberal agenda and/or the agendas of specific groups. Diversity as a public concern shades into quotas, reverse racism and the assumption that people are chosen based on their category rather than their competence.

Liberals, for their part, often perceive conservatives as afraid of and antagonistic to diversity, e.g. on the issue of immigration.

Less prominently than the patterns already discussed, there is a fairly widespread and constructive view (non-partisan) that diversity is a strength in that different people bring different ideas and perspectives to the table. In this sense, diversity is often broadly defined, and is not all about race.

*We need to concentrate . . . on the abilities and competence . . . and the willingness of leadership to hear and to act on everybody's needs and concerns. And if they're able to do that, then that's most important. Do they look like me? Well, maybe they do and maybe they don't, and maybe some of the ones who look like me don't think like me. (48-year-old conservative white man, KY)*

## **Power**

Overall, most associations with this word are negative—reflecting limited understandings of and visions for a functioning democracy.

Top of mind associations include *abuse* of power, individuals having *too much* power, and (helpful) efforts to *limit* power—e.g. through term limits, checks and balances—and the *corrupting* influence of power, since there is a tendency for people to like it for its own sake, or for selfish reasons, rather than as a tool for doing good.

Interestingly, associations tend to focus (negatively) on *individuals* with power, which leads thinking directly away from the kinds of collective power that civic engagement can produce. Assembling numbers (of allies, supporters) in order to have power and influence is often not on the radar as people think about how to improve community, for instance.

*Power, power, everybody wants power . . . but you have to have more people that are willing to sit down and negotiate and talk. (61-year-old liberal white woman, OH)*

In sum, it would be *very helpful* if communicators had ways of conveying more constructive and hopeful understandings of ideas like collective power, public sovereignty—and of people’s own potential to participate in these.

### **Privilege**

Along with *diversity*, this is one of the terms most frequently seen as politically charged, used for rhetorical purposes.

It is often seen by conservatives as a divisive, pot-stirring, liberal usage, all about holding people’s (natural or earned) advantages against them—with anti-wealthy and anti-white being the most familiar agendas behind the term.

Interpretations cut directly to a major fault line between different Americans—whether wealth, status, etc. are distributed in a just or unjust way. If you see systemic injustice lurking under privilege then it becomes a point to attack. (Only a subset of liberals see the world this way.) If you see privilege as a result of meritocracy, then it is a reward.

Finally, the researchers were surprised at how little grasp there appears to be among lay people regarding the concept as experts/activists think of it. Many were largely unclear or inconsistent on the meaning of the term—e.g. a person who gets “welfare” and spends it on lobster is “privileged”; every American who gets to vote is “privileged.”

*I hear [the left] say, you know, “this person is white, so they have a white privilege.” I’m black, but the reason I don’t agree with that is if you’re really gonna say a white person has a special privilege, I think of a white person who comes from a wealthy family, or white person who’s well educated ... It’s not just because they’re white that they’re privileged. It would be because of other circumstances. (61-year-old conservative African-American woman, MA)*

*F1: I think that a Democrat would probably more talk about like social privileges . . . where Republicans might look at it from more of an economic way. (47-year-old libertarian white woman, KY)*

*M1: I think that’s a very fair assessment that Democrats will talk about race-based privileges based on our history of slavery. And Republicans will tend to say that we’ve moved beyond that and*

*ignore the topic. Or minimize it. (39-year-old libertarian Asian-American man, VA)*

*M2: I mean I hate the word privilege, because I feel like it just separates one type level of civilians or one type of community of people and all. I just feel like when they talk about privilege, I just feel like—honestly, I feel like it should be thrown out the window. (35-year-old moderate white man, LA)*

## **Protesting**

This a common public term, and is seen as a somewhat extreme form of civic engagement. The prototype is a march—but the idea also includes boycotts, kneeling by NFL players, and so forth.

Overall, liberals in the qualitative study were more positive about protest than conservatives, who sometimes complained about “paid protesters.” (This pattern is consistent with social science findings related to hierarchical thinking and respect for authority among conservatives.)

Protesting is not about bridging divides or finding common ground, but about standing up for a cause *in the face of opposition*, making it an interestingly different focus from many of the other concepts explored in the study.

*Let's say I wasn't happy with what's going on in the government right now. I could protest on that . . . It's not just political. It could be a protest against the NFL, protesting a clothing line, it could be anything. (36-year-old moderate African-American man, FL)*

*People have serious issues, and to me it's a positive thing, for the most part. No violence, of course . . . but protest is part of our system here in this country. (74-year-old moderate white woman, NY)*

## **Volunteering (Volunteerism)**

This is a common public term, whose meaning basically tracks expert usage.

Perceptions are universally positive. Lay people see it as important in practical terms—for getting things done; for supplementing or replacing government action—as well as moral, social and emotional ones. People *should* give back; they get personal satisfaction from giving and gratitude; and communities are stronger when individuals get involved and help each other.

*I know the volunteers in our area, they make a difference. We have volunteers that help the veterans get to medical, doctor's appointments, things like that, and we have volunteers that just go and check on the elderly. So I think they should be recognized for all the time and money they spend out of their own pocket just to help others. (63-year-old moderate white woman, MN)*

The important downside of the value placed on volunteerism—which has obviously positive aspects—is that it can tend to obscure thinking about collective and policy-based action/solutions. The image of “a thousand points of light” was often understood as a *substitute for* collective action and public policy. In this respect, perceptions of volunteerism reflect the same key dynamics discussed earlier: appreciation of individual virtues and relative blindness to collective interests and collective enterprise.

\* \* \* \*

In addition to the terms selected for testing, it is worth considering two additional (families of) terms that emerged from research participants’ own language.

### ***Involvement / Being involved in X/ Getting involved***

Terms like “getting involved” are often used by lay people to cover the ground insiders refer to as civic engagement or democratic participation.

*Q: What does civic engagement mean to you?*

*F: . . . When you're engaged, you're participating. You are learning, you are speaking your mind, you're asking questions, you're being actively involved. (42-year-old moderate white woman, FL)*

*Q: Do you think that civic education is important for the county, for our communities?*

*F: Yes . . . To be able to exercise your rights, to have a say in what's happening in the country, to understand the government, to have some involvement. If people don't have civic education, or people don't get involved and understand what's going on, all the decisions are made by a few. Decisions and things that affect your own rights, your own life, they're made by just a few people who take the time to become involved or get educated. (48-year-old moderate white woman, VA)*

“Being/getting involved” is very natural language for lay people, and may have potential to capture important facets of civic engagement.

### ***Listening (Being listened to)***

This is another term that emerged as important because of its natural and comfortable use by research participants.

It is about paying genuine attention to others’ points of view, and is evidently preferred (as a term) over related insider words such as *civility*, that may be more about politeness than an impactful exchange of views.

Listening is the crucial ingredient for true or open dialog. It isn’t just about the opportunity for people to talk, but the willingness of people to hear and understand each other.

The idea of listening is also tied to understandings of power. Government doesn't really "listen" to the people, though it may pretend to: It doesn't actually take regular people's voices and opinions into account when decisions are made, because it has all the power and doesn't have to listen.

*Democracy means the freedom to vote and the freedom to voice my opinion about a particular issue, and actually have my voice be heard and taken into consideration. (34-year-old liberal Asian-American woman, CA)*

*F1: Ideally, [leaders] would be trying to get ideas and trying to respond to people's feelings in the community, even if they are disparate, somehow find a way to address everybody's concerns . . . And I don't think they listen to anybody. I think they just [hold events like town hall meetings] to--*

*M1: Let people vent. (56-year-old moderate white man, OH)*

*F1: . . . I think they just do it for show. (58-year-old libertarian Hispanic woman, NY)*

*[At the town meeting] hopefully, people are actually listening and engaged in the dialog. Unfortunately, I feel like a lot of times when there are two distinct viewpoints, people spend a lot of time thinking about what to say next, as opposed to listening to both sides and both perspectives to find out what really is best. (41-year-old libertarian Hispanic woman, OH)*

*Q: What sorts of actions can you also think that would be worthy of being recognized?*

*F1: Maybe like a listening award. I know that sounds really bizarre, but listening and re-stating what one person said, because [what we usually hear is] this is my opinion, blah, blah, blah, blah, this is my opinion blah, blah, blah, blah. (53-year-old conservative woman, IL)*

## CONCLUSION

The qualitative research for the current effort has yielded a set of insights that PACE and likeminded philanthropic organizations can take into account as they work to promote greater civic involvement.

Some of these insights have to do with reactions to language used by the field—which may be motivating and compelling, may alienate listeners and sound like insider talk, may strike audiences as cynical or politically loaded.

Other insights relate to more fundamental dynamics as lay Americans think about this topic area. Most clearly and importantly, the research identifies a problematic “vacuum”—in both thought and discourse—as the heart of the challenge. Qualitative discussions with a broad cross-section of Americans suggest that it is hard for them to focus on collective stakes and participation, on institutions, on the ways that power is created and used to accomplish important public goals. They tend to have neither the language nor the intuitive understandings that would help engage them in a big-picture vision of a healthy democratic society. Among the most important contributions philanthropists and communicators can make in this area is to find effective—and research-proven—ways of telling this story, and bringing average Americans into the conversation.



## APPENDIX: MINI-GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDES

### **Protocol I: Scenario Testing**

The first question here is a kind of thought experiment you all can work on together:

Imagine you all are the city council and you want to come up with a list of awards that would recognize (the work of) people who are really involved in the community. If you were going to make up 5 or 6 award categories, what would those be? (what would you call them / name them?) You want to recognize and encourage a broad a spectrum of activities.

Now let's think about some specific scenarios:

So, imagine [First Scenario]:

Is there a word or phrase for these kinds of activities (that some people do)?  
What's the word for the kinds of people who do these things?

Let's think about another scenario. [Second Scenario]:

What would you call this kind of activity?  
Is it important? (why / why not?)  
[Discuss and introduce relevant TERMS]

Thinking of both examples – how would you explain to an 18-year-old – who's new to voting and thinking about these things – what kinds of activities these are and why they might be important?

Another issue I'd like to turn to is [Inquiry]

What does 'democracy' mean to you?  
What do you wish [the other side] understood about the concept that they don't get?  
Do you ever feel like [the other side] uses the term differently – or misuses the term?"

One thing we haven't really talked about is "power" – how do you think that relates to these things we've been talking about?

Let me ask the same about the word "privilege" – people seem to understand it differently. Could you talk a bit about that?

[WRAP-UP, choose 1 or 2]

If you were going to describe for a friend what this conversation is about, what would you say?

Thinking back on the topics we've covered here, could you describe for us what you'd most like to see happening in our country? [probe for specifics, see if they deploy any of the terms and ideas introduced]

Of all the things we covered, what ideas are going to stick with you after?

### SCENARIOS and INQUIRIES

*S 1. A kid has been injured crossing a busy street to get to their local public school and other kids tell about close calls with traffic. Parents put together information and present it to the school, local school board, and community decision makers to educate them about the problem and convince the community to build a bridge or overpass for the kids to walk across.*

- What would you call this?
- Is this sort of thing important? Why? What happens if people don't . . .

*S 2. A small town has been riled up by a proposed factory, with some residents concerned about pollution and property values, while others see the promise of jobs and new businesses. Rumors are flying, people are getting angry and upset with one another, so town leaders decide to set up a series of town meetings where everyone can come together and air their thoughts and concerns.*

- What's your sense of what town leaders are trying to accomplish here? (Best words to describe what they are trying to achieve?)
- How would you describe the kinds of people who might go to and participate in meetings like this?

*S 3. The town community center has been hugely successful – keeping teenagers occupied with sports and after school activities, offering affordable child care for families and giving seniors a place to gather and socialize – even running a small food pantry. But even with some state grants and charging a modest membership fee it can't cover its expenses and staffing. Concerned citizens have put out a call for everyone in town to pitch in and do what they can to keep the center going.*

- What kinds of things could be done?
- If you were talking to your circle of friends how would you make your case [in favor of service or volunteerism]

*S 4. A small city in Wisconsin has been changing. Settled by Swedish dairy farmers a century ago, now new industries have brought people in from other parts of the country and the world. But so far, none of the newcomers are on the school board, the police force, city council, and so on. Some folks are starting to wonder whether it's a problem that the town still seems to be run by people from the same established families and whether something needs to be done.*

- Does something need to be done? (If so, what – talk about it a bit?)
- When you hear the word “privilege” – what does that mean?
- How does it relate to what we're talking about?
- Does the word get used in party politics at all? [probe]

*Inquiry 1. Imagine your state board of education is concerned that graduating students (and their parents) don't have a very good understanding of how to participate fully in society as citizens.*

- What should be done?
- (What should be / could be taught?)
- What would you name this initiative?

*Inquiry 2. Can you recall a time when the two political parties compromised on something? (if not, any example in politics – local or state?)*

- Describe what happened and how you felt about it?
- How about parties on opposite sides of an issue – ever seen this kind of progress there?

### **Protocol 2: Term Testing**

We're going to talk about some words and ideas you may or may not have heard of. Don't think of it as a quiz since there are no right or wrong answers here. We're just asking for your impressions.

What does [ TERM 1 ] mean to you?

Is [ TERM 1 ] something that's important for our country, our communities? Why/how so?

Imagine you're at a town hall meeting, where candidates are speaking and the Democratic candidate makes the statement, "My most important focus is going to be on [ TERM 1 ]"

What would your reaction to that statement be? What do you think they have in mind?

Would you hear it differently if a Republican said it?

Could it mean different things depending on who's using it?

If you were going to explain this idea briefly to a friend who's never heard of it, how would you explain it?

Great – let's move on to another idea . . . What does [ TERM 2 ] mean to you?

How important is [ TERM 2 ]? Why/how so?

Who do you imagine talking about [ TERM 2 ]? In what contexts? (Could it mean different things depending on who's using it?)

Imagine you're part of a charity or community organization and some folks wanted to make [ TERM 2 ] a priority. What would your gut reaction be to that?

If you were going to explain [ TERM 2 ] briefly to a friend who's never heard of it, how would you explain it?

Let's move on to another idea. If you heard a person was engaging in [ ACTION 1 ], how would you describe that kind of activity?

[If they don't know] What is your best guess?

How would you describe a typical person who would engage in [ ACTION 1 ].

Do you think people should be encouraged to engage in [ ACTION 1 ]? Why (not)?

Can you think of a current issue/challenge in your community or state or the country as a whole where engaging in [ ACTION 1 ] might be helpful or important?

[Discussion questions: choose 1]

What can we as a community or society do to make sure it's not always the same people making the decisions? [inclusion, diversity, equity, power]

Are there things we can do so that people will get more involved? [engagement]

Are there things we can do to bridge divides, so all different kinds of people work together? [civility, tribalism]

What image comes to mind if you heard that a person is doing [ACTION 2]?

What does [ACTION 2] entail? Can you describe it in more detail?

Do you think people should be encouraged to do [ACTION 2]? Why (not)?

A couple more terms very quickly:

What does [TERM 3] mean to you?

[If they don't know] What would be your first guess?

What are your thoughts about that?

What does [TERM 4] mean to you?

[If they don't know] What would be your first guess?

What are your thoughts on that?

[WRAP-UP, choose 1 or 2]

Thinking back on the topics we've covered here, could you describe for us what you'd most like to see happening in our country? [probe for specifics, see if they deploy any of the terms and ideas introduced]

What do you wish people understood about this topic? (or what do you wish you understood?)

Of all the things we covered, what ideas are going to stick with you after?