AMERICA CIVIC LANGUAGE

Provocations from PACE’s Civic Language Perceptions Project

October 2022
The words Americans use to describe, debate, and examine our civic values, ideals, and practices are also the words we use to connect, share, and co-create our community and national future. What can we know about how aligned we are on our language choices related to our civic lives? Perhaps a more important concern underlies this question: are we talking past each other about values we think we share?

This was the core inquiry that animated Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE)'s Civic Language Perceptions Project. In November 2021, PACE and Citizen Data surveyed a nationally representative sample of 5000 American voters to understand their perceptions of 21 terms that are commonly used in democracy and civic engagement work, and who they associate using those terms. In March 2022, we released the data to the public and embarked on an effort to analyze and disaggregate the data from multiple angles and perspectives. We now combine the quantitative and qualitative analysis conducted to highlight key findings in three categories:

**Assumptions we hear about civic language that our data affirm**

- “Civic education makes a difference.” Respondents who reported having civic education are 11% more familiar with and 7% more positive towards civic terms than their counterparts without civic education.

- “Civic terms code liberal and college educated.” Liberals are 8% more positive on civic terms than conservatives and college graduates are 10% more positive than non-college graduates. Additionally, Americans are more likely to say liberals and people with college degrees use civic terms.

- “Messengers matter.” The data demonstrate a person’s perception of a term is changed based on their feelings towards the people using it. The impact ranges between 7% and 36% across all terms. Who uses the term seems to matter the most for social justice, privilege, and patriotism.

**Assumptions we hear about civic language that our data complicate**

- “Americans are divided and don’t aspire to unify.” While some words (patriotism, activism) and identities (political, racial) tend to demonstrate different sentiments towards our civic language, there are also major areas of alignment. Taken collectively, Americans’ positivity for civic terms far outpaces their negativity, with unity as a stand-out unifying term (70% positivity).

- “Words are ‘owned’ by certain people or groups.” While some groups are more positive towards terms and other groups are associated with terms at higher rates, the range of association was 11-61% and the average was 31% across all terms, which means there is only a 1-in-3 chance overall that any group could be associated with any term. Even for groups that Americans associate with terms at higher rates, it does not mean they themselves are positive towards the term (for example, Black people and racial equity). Given these points, we believe it is hard to assert that any group “owns” a particular term.

- “Young people are negative about ‘democracy’.” While young Americans have the lowest positive perception of the term democracy across all age groups, they are still significantly more positive than negative towards the term. In fact, 47%—almost half—of 18-34 year olds have positive perceptions of democracy; they may just express it differently.
Findings about civic language that the civic field needs to face

- **“Civic” is not landing.** For the words in our survey that included “civic” or “civil” as adjectives—civic engagement, civic infrastructure, civic health, and civil society—our data signal that Americans do not have much response, association, or relationship to these words overall, and the words are not intuitively understood by many. Which begs the question, are there better ways to talk about our work?

- **Civic terms are favored by historically “dominant” identities.** Americans of historically “dominant” identities (such as White, Christian, college graduate, upper class, male) are 6% more positive and 3% more familiar with the civic terms. While those are not double digit numbers, the consistency of these identities outpacing other identities in positivity and familiarity of these terms is not something we can overlook.

- **The disconnect between professional usage and public perception of civic language is real.** Respondents with characteristics similar to those who work in civic philanthropy professionally (such as income of >$100,000, college degree) are, on average, 4 percentage points more familiar and 9 percentage points more positive towards the civic terms than everyone else. Some words are at a higher risk for disconnection with the public (like pluralism and bridge builder) while others present potential for understanding and connection (like unity and justice).

We elaborate on these points—and more—in the narrative that follows, and we invite you to join us for a series of Civic Language Solution Sprints in October and November 2022, which will provide space for funders, practitioners, and thought leaders to wrestle with five of the findings in this report and determine what we might do about some of the most pressing issues about civic language. More details are included in the “Conclusion + What’s Next” section below, and you can learn more at PACEfunders.org/Language.
Introduction

What do we do about the disconnect between how the professional field—particularly philanthropy—talks about civic engagement and democracy and how the audiences and people they seek to engage understand and talk about them? At best, are we talking past each other? Or worse, are we furthering divisions, disillusionment, or disengagement?

These were the questions PACE was asking as we first embarked on the Civic Language Perceptions Project in 2019. In 2021, we began to deepen and broaden our inquiry and partnered with Citizen Data to field a nationally representative survey of 5000 American voters between November 21-28. The survey gathered information on 21 terms frequently used in “civic engagement and democracy work,” and provided insight into respondents’

- perceptions of the words (Do people feel positive, negative, neutral, or unfamiliar about the terms?)
- associations of the words (What types of people do Americans associate with using the terms?)
- sentiments of associations (Are people warm or cold towards the groups they associate with using the terms?)

The survey also captured respondents’ demographics (What is your race, religion, educational attainment, political ideology, etc), experiences (Do you remember having civic education, did you vote in 2020, where do you get your news from, etc), and attitudes (Which civic activities are important to ensure democracy works, how do you define democracy, etc). The result was 16,000 pages of data, which PACE and Citizen Data organized into an interactive dashboard and released along with early findings in March 2022.

Next, PACE led an effort that invited many people and organizations to dig into the data with us. We designed, developed, and implemented a variety of programs and activities that (a) increased capacity to analyze the quantitative data, and (b) democratized the analysis process and encouraged the civic field to engage with the data for their own learning and goals. This phase included:

- **Six “Deep Dive” sessions**, where PACE presented our analysis on a variety of “looks” into our data and provided an opportunity for funders and practitioners to share what they are seeing in the data, how it applies to their work, and where they could benefit from further sense-making with peers. Topics included race, gender, religion, age, political party and ideology, and civic education.

- **Four focus groups**, where PACE was able to ask deeper questions about Americans’ relationships with the terms and complement the quantitative data with a qualitative component. In partnership with Citizen Data, we explored if people interpreted the words based on their aspirations or the reality of their lived experiences of the terms, the disconnect between philanthropists and the public in understanding and usage of the terms, why certain terms are coded and in what contexts, and the impact and influence of culture in finding meaning, importance, and usage of terms.
Two mini-papers, which focused analysis on two questions: (1) What does the data tell us about how media consumption might form perceptions and associations to civic language? (2) What opportunities might exist to brand or rebrand terms, based on perceptions and associations? The paper discusses which terms are considered open for branding, moveable, transcendent of association, open to reconsideration, or very entrenched.

Mini-grants, which made $500 stipends available to anyone in the civic field who was interested in analyzing the data and creating something customized with it. This program supported 19 projects in exploring a variety of topics of interest to researchers and organizations across the country.

Infographic series, which presented various analyses in a visual format, including highlights on each of the 21 terms, major takeaways from each of the deep dive sessions, and headlines from oversample data.

You can explore each of these programs and activities more deeply by visiting PACEfunders.org/Language.

With all of this analysis collected, we now turn to making sense of what we learned. Even with just six months of investigation, the findings in our data are rich and plentiful. We are less interested in writing a report and more interested in sharing what meaning we can make of this for those of us that work in democracy and civic engagement. When starting this project, we held some assumptions—often informed by what we heard from colleagues and peers in the civic field—about what we thought the research might tell us. Now we ask ourselves: What assumptions do we hear about civic language that were confirmed with our data? What assumptions were challenged or complicated? And perhaps most importantly, what are the hard truths our data present that we need to face and wrestle with as a field? We engage all of these questions—and more—in the pages that follow.

This paper is authored by Amy McIsaac, PACE’s Managing Director of Learning and Experimentation. The very premise of this project recognizes the power and impact of language and words, and we hope our words in this report offer thoughtful provocations in the spirit of curiosity and inquiry. We aim to spark discussion, whether that be agreement, disagreement, and/or other perspectives to contribute to ongoing dialogue about civic language.
Assumptions: Affirmed

In this section, we explore three common assumptions we frequently hear about civic language, and we demonstrate where our data and analysis affirm their assertions.

“Civic education makes a difference.”

Ninety-seven percent of Americans say civics should be taught in schools. An entire field exists to strengthen civic education and civic learning in the United States, operating on the belief that civics makes a difference in building the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and capacities that its citizens—especially its young people—need to uphold a healthy democracy. So while many believe civic education makes a difference in America, the data we can analyze in the Civic Language Perceptions Project show us just how much of a difference it makes in preparation for civic life.

In our survey, we asked participants “Did you take civics or American government classes in high school?” to which 68% responded yes, 25% responded no, and 7% were not sure. Filtering for this question, we compared the perceptions of civic language of those who recall taking a civics class and who did not.

Overall, we see that people with civic education were 11% more likely to be familiar with the civic terms. This tracks with logic, given that those individuals were intentionally exposed to and taught the terms. However, what is important for us to see is that those with civic education were also, on average, 7% more positive on the civic terms than their counterparts without civic education. This tells us that not only does civic education make a difference in being familiar with civic terms and the concepts they represent, but it also seems to make a difference in embracing them.

When we layer political ideology with civic education, we see this trend continue for most terms. In the graph below (Graph 1), civic education increases positivity on 76% of the terms (16 out of 21), regardless of political ideology. Very interestingly, we see that civic education makes a significant difference in increasing positivity around democracy and civility for conservatives (gaining 22 and 30 percentage points, respectively, for those with civic education) and common ground for liberals (gaining 23 percentage points with civic education). Interestingly, we also see in this analysis that for both political ideologies, civic education slightly decreases positivity on justice and civic health. There are several possible reasons behind this finding; for example, perhaps as individuals learn about these terms, they detect that their lived experiences around these concepts are complicated and do not live up to the ideals they feel they should represent.

The analysis that stands out most to us is where civic education has an opposite impact on positivity between political ideologies. For example, for the term patriotism, civic education seems to decrease positivity for liberals and increase positivity for conservatives. The inverse is true for racial equity—civic education seems to make liberals more positive and make conservatives less positive on those terms—and activism, where civic education makes liberals slightly less positive and conservatives more positive. Given that these terms consistently showed up as the most polarized terms in our survey across various cuts of our data, it might be worth examining the role of civic education in shaping the meaning of these concepts for young people.
Either way, we cannot ignore that civic education makes a difference in civic language—whether positive or negative. This trend plays out in our data beyond perceptions of civic terms and extends to civic activities. When asked which civic activities (such as voting, volunteering, etc) participants think are important to ensure democracy works, respondents with civic education select voting at a much higher percentage than those without civic education (75% to 57%, respectively). In addition, the median number of activities those with civic education select is 3 (among 14 possible responses), while those without civic education select 2 activities. One of the most notable insights related to the difference civic education makes is that 20% of people without civic education think none of the activities are important to ensure democracy works, while that percentage drops to 5% for people with civic education. Perhaps those without civic education are less hopeful about democracy working or the impact of their participation, or perhaps the options presented did not fit their definition or experience of participation for a working democracy. More research into this area would be needed to understand these possible explanations.
“Civic terms code liberal and college educated.”

We detected an overarching narrative coming into this project that “this” language (civic language) was coded for “these” people (liberals, college educated), or at least signals a political and educational bias. For the most part, our analysis affirms this assumption. The data show that liberals are 8% more positive on the terms than conservatives, and college graduates are 10% more positive than non-college graduates. Interestingly, we found that liberals were no more familiar with the civic terms than conservatives, and college graduates demonstrated only a small–4%--familiarity advantage over non-college graduates.

Graph 2

What terms are viewed positively by Liberal and Conservative respondents?

Terms are ordered from highest to lowest positivity. The percent difference between groups is shown to the right. The 5 highest difference scores are highlighted with yellow diamonds.

- Median positivity is 56.9%
Another important way for us to consider this is to look at the association data. These data allow us to understand with whom Americans associate using the terms most frequently. Here, we see that, on average across all terms, Americans perceive college graduates using civic terms more frequently (33%) than non-college graduates (24%), and for political ideology there is also a gap; Americans perceive liberals/progressives use these terms (37%) more than conservatives (31%). By education, the gaps particularly skew towards college graduates on terms like civic engagement, diversity, privilege, and social justice, while by political ideology, the gaps significantly lean towards liberals on terms like activism, diversity, racial equity, and social justice. Even for the terms that our analysis demonstrated were “open for branding”--which means they had high levels of unfamiliarity and/or neutrality, like pluralism, civic health, civic infrastructure, and civil society—all of these terms had associations with liberals, progressives, and college graduates. Our data indicates that no term is ever fully neutral or without association.
So to be clear, our data did not tell us that conservatives and non-college educated people were against these terms, but rather, that liberals and college graduates tend to view them more positively, and they were more likely to be associated with using them. As a result, it is not a surprising assumption that many consider civic language to code liberal and college educated.

“Messengers matter.”

A common rule of thumb is to not only be thoughtful about what is being said, but also who is saying it. This is based on an assumption that the trust one places in a messenger is an important element in influencing a person’s thinking or behavior, and that has been repeatedly confirmed by research and experience. We wondered if this assumption also applied to civic language.
It turns out, messengers most certainly matter in civic language. Most notably, our data tell us that a person's feelings towards the people they think most often uses the term changes their perception of the term. To demonstrate, we looked at the positive advantage (that is, % positive ratings minus % negative ratings) for each term, and then we separated the ratings by whether the respondents felt warmth or coolness towards the groups that Americans felt most frequently used the term. On a scale of 1 (very cold/unfavorable) to 10 (very warm/favorable), we considered a response of 7 or higher as indicating “warm” feelings towards a group, while below 7, we considered indicating “cool” feelings.\(^1\) (See footnote for methodology explanation.)

For all terms, respondents were more positive toward a term when they thought it was used by a person they felt more warmly towards than a person they felt cool towards. The baseline impact is at least 7% across all terms, but goes as high as 36% for a term like social justice. Who uses the term seems to matter the most for patriotism, civic infrastructure, activism, social justice, and privilege.

**Graph 5**

*How does one's warmth toward people who most often use a term impact term perception?*

The positive advantage (% positive ratings minus % negative ratings) for each term is shown separated by whether the respondents felt Warmth or Coolness toward the groups that most frequently used the term. The warmth advantage (warm % - cool %) is shown to the right. The 5 highest warmth advantage scores are highlighted with yellow diamonds.

\(^1\) We chose 7 because there was a natural break in the data at that location, and the two groups formed with that boundary were similar in size. In addition, given the high number of people using 5 (neutral) as their answer with fewer people using the lower end of the scale (i.e., 0-4), we suspected that respondents viewed choosing 5 as a socially acceptable way of expressing colder feelings toward a group.
This, too, can be looked at separately for the various groups that people feel warmth/coolness toward to see if some groups result in a larger discrepancy in ratings than others. For this analysis, we focused just on the six words that we found typically show the biggest differences in their positivity ratings—patriotism, activism, social justice, racial equity, diversity, and justice—and calculated the warmth advantage within the association categories.

**Graph 6**

How does warmth toward people who most often use a term impact perception of the term?

The warmth advantage (% warm minus % cool) is shown separated by the group using the term. The largest difference for a particular term is hown in orange.

If we focus on the longest bars, then activism, diversity, racial equity, and social justice are viewed more positively when they are used by liberals and the respondent feels warmth toward liberals. For patriotism, the opposite pattern is observed—there is a warmth advantage for conservatives and relatively no difference for liberals or progressives. This would suggest that who uses a term makes a difference for how one perceives the term. In other words, the messenger matters, and many of the largest differences arise in political groups.
Assumptions: Complicated

In this section, we explore three common assumptions we hear about civic language and demonstrate how our data challenge or complicate their assertions. It is not that these assumptions are totally unfounded, but there are important nuances we need to understand.

“Americans are divided and don’t aspire to unify.”

Especially in the last few years, we have heard an almost inescapable chorus of thought leaders and commentators asserting that Americans are divided, that we do not trust each other, and that we no longer share a common vision for our national future. Much of this is supported by important research, and while we do not refute these points, we wondered if this division was apparent in Americans’ civic language, too. Ultimately, we find that our research complicates the narrative that Americans are divided, and in some ways, provides hope that we are not as divided on civic values as we might be led to believe.

One area to highlight is our analysis on which identities produce alignment on positivity towards civic language. In the chart below, we calculated the average difference in positivity between key comparison groups, and we see that Americans are most aligned by gender and community type, moderately aligned by class and education level, and least aligned by race and politics. We think this is important to understand. We all exist with multiple identities that often intersect, but these data show us that not all identities are equal in terms of how easy it is for us to use civic language to connect across difference. For example, our data suggest it is three times harder to use civic language to connect with someone of a different political ideology than to someone of a different gender identity.

**Graph 7**

What is the average difference between comparison groups?

For each term, the positivity score of one group listed below (e.g., male) was subtracted from the other group listed (e.g., female). The absolute values of these differences were averaged across all terms. This average difference score is shown for each comparison (e.g., female & male).
Similarly, when looking at the words themselves, there are terms that appear to have the potential to divide us while others that have the potential to bring us together. Across all comparison groups, we see that patriotism and activism push us furthest apart, while civil society and unity bring us closest together. Whether that is about the words themselves or what those words reveal about our values and assumptions behind them, it seems fair to conclude that: (1) Americans are divided in our civic language, (2) but not in as many ways as dominant narratives might suggest, (3) and there seems to be some bridges that are easier to connect across than others.

**Graph 8**

**How large is the average difference for each term across all comparison groups?**

The absolute values of the positivity difference scores for each term were averaged across all categories (e.g., race and political ideology). This average difference score is shown in the bars.

Perhaps the learning that feels like the most prominent takeaway is that, on the whole, Americans are much more positive on civic terms than they are negative. Except for the word privilege, positivity ratings far outpace negativity ratings, and for popular terms like unity, Americans are 14 times more positive than negative. That feels very important for us to understand. While there may be words and identities by which Americans’ divisions are apparent, Americans are united in their warmth towards civic language—not just the words they use, but also the concepts they represent.
A participant in one of our deep dive sessions shared “I’m terrified that words are increasingly owned by specific parties. And the more words that are owned that way, the more I feel [that] we are losing a common language.”

We hear versions of this sentiment often. There seems to be a pervasive narrative—which we acknowledge comes from real experiences—that certain words are permissible in certain audiences and are not welcomed in other audiences. We wanted to look into our data to understand if “word ownership” was a perception or a reality.
In some ways, our data supports this reality. The most clear evidence of this is in the association data, where Americans tell us which groups they associate with using civic terms most frequently. In Graph 4 above, we see for example that racial equity is significantly more associated with Black people, patriotism with White people and conservatives, and diversity with Black people and liberal/progressives. Similarly, Citizen Data’s analysis of the relationship between civic language and media consumption reinforces this as well: “One key finding from the data is that people appear to feel less positively about terms which they feel belong to someone else; typically when a term has strong association with a group other than one’s own, that term becomes less appealing... In many cases, it seems as though positive perceptions are connected to the extent to which people feel terms are ‘for them’; whereas negative perceptions are associated with feelings of disconnect and resentment.” This perception was also very present in the focus groups, especially in the two focus groups convened around political ideology. In both cases, the liberal group and the conservative group spoke about the terms they valued and associated with their political ideology, and they were asked how they think the “other side” perceives and defines the term. In a discussion about the term common good, one participant in the conservative group summarized her reflection by concluding, “So I guess what I’m saying is...I think there’s a liberal common good and a conservative common good.”

However, in other ways, we cannot ignore that our data also challenge this “word ownership” perception. For example, looking again at the association data, we see each word is associated with each group at a rate ranging between 11-61%, which means that the highest number on this graph is 61%--the percentage of Americans that associate Black people with using the term racial equity. While that is a high number relative to our data, it is not a high number overall. One might look at the data and conclude that racial equity is “owned” by Black people, but that would negate the fact that almost 40% of people do not associate it most frequently with Black people. In fact, across all terms and all groups, the average rate of association is only 31%, and no group got anything close to 100% association. This suggests that any specific group has--on average--a 1-in-3 chance to be associated with any term, which makes it hard to assert that Americans believe terms are truly “owned” by a certain group of people.

We recognize that some identity groups are more positive towards particular terms than others, which might be another way to understand “word ownership.” For example, when we look at Graph 10 below demonstrating term positivity by race, it might be compelling to conclude that White people “own” words like citizen, democracy, and patriotism, Black people “own” words like activism, diversity, and social justice, and Hispanic people “own” words like common good, civil society, and racial equity. However, we think it is critically important to acknowledge two nuances in this:

1. Just because a group is more positive towards a term than other groups does not mean they “own” the word at the exclusion of other groups. In this case, saying that White people “own” democracy negates the 50% of Black people and 59% of Hispanic people who are also positive towards that term. We cannot ignore those groups.

2. Just because Americans associate a group with using a term does not mean that group is positive towards the term themselves. For example, we see this with racial equity. While 61% of Americans associate Black people with using that term most frequently, Black people are 22% negative (which is more negative than White [16%] and Hispanic [18%] respondents) and only 43% positive (which is less positive than White [47%] and Hispanic [50%] respondents) towards racial equity. We posit this complicates the “word ownership” argument in a major way.
All of these points, we believe, make it hard to credibly assert that Americans believe any term is truly “owned” by a certain group of people. This might be a perception and challenge unique to those of us who are steeped in “civic engagement and democracy” work, but not transferable to the perceptions of the broader American public.

“**Young people are negative about democracy.”**

There is an overarching perception that young people are negative about the term—and the concept—of democracy. The narrative we hear often, especially in the media, is that young people are not engaged in democracy or American politics, which is not entirely unfounded. Younger Americans vote in elections at lower rates than older Americans, and the December 2021 Harvard Youth Poll found that only 7% of young Americans viewed the United States as a “healthy democracy.” Especially in the context of the democratic decline occurring in the U.S. and worldwide, many people are operating on an assumption that young Americans have given up on our system of government.

But, as our data show, that is not the whole story. For example, while it is true that young Americans have the lowest positive perception (and highest negative, neutral, and unfamiliar perceptions) of the term democracy across all age groups, they are still significantly more positive than negative towards the term. In fact, 47%—almost half—of 18-34 year olds have positive perceptions of democracy. This should not be overlooked, particularly when considering the opportunity to shape perceptions among the “neutral” and “unfamiliar” respondents.
Perception of democracy by age range.

Young Americans were...

0.15% more likely to be **POSITIVE**

22.37% more likely to be **NEGATIVE**

26.02% more likely to be **UNFAMILIAR**

0.76% more likely to be **NEUTRAL**

...towards the various terms than people 35+
When looking at the 21 civic terms we surveyed together—all of which represent ideals that are critical for democracy—we see that young Americans (18-34) are basically on par with older Americans (35+) in their positivity towards civic terms. It’s notable that young Americans are 26% more likely to be unfamiliar with and 22% more likely to be negative towards the civic terms than older Americans. However, it is also important to note that young Americans are the group least likely to report having civic education, which would logically contribute to their unfamiliarity, and perhaps negativity. In fact, the Civic Language Perceptions Project Mini-Grant Program supported a project from Divided We Fall that explored this through a debate on this issue: “Seemingly at the root of one’s positive or negative perception of various terminology is their having had, or having not had, a civics education. Younger Americans report having less civics education and believe civic engagement is less important than those 35 or over.”

Rather than perceiving that young Americans are negative about democracy, we see indicators in our analysis that signal to us that young Americans are evolving what democracy means to them, separate from what it might mean for older generations. First, we see large positive differentials between older and younger respondents on terms such as liberty (70% vs 47% respectively), citizen (69% vs 48%), and democracy (67% vs 47%). Conversely, younger Americans show more positivity towards activism (49% vs 38%), social justice (49% vs 40%), and diversity (63% vs 58%). This suggests there might be a difference in generational prioritization, or one could argue, this might be a natural stage-of-life issue as young people learn and experience more first-hand. Additionally, when we look at which civic activities Americans said are important to ensure democracy works, we see that older and younger Americans differ yet again. Not only do young Americans select voting at a much lower rate than older Americans (49% versus 78%, respectively), but they more frequently select activities that explicitly push for change in an action-oriented way, such as joining a cause or movement, posting on social media, or attending protests or rallies. Again, we believe our data challenge the assumption that young Americans are negative about democracy, and instead, may demonstrate where they are providing leadership towards a new chapter in our democratic story.
In this section, we discuss three findings about civic language that are important for those of us who work in the “civic engagement and democracy” field to hear. These findings have real implications on how we work, and while they may not be easy or convenient to hear, acknowledging them is likely important to the field’s ability to be effective moving forward.

“Civic” is not landing.
Especially for those of us who work in the professional field of building and strengthening American democracy, we hear the words “civic” and “civil” a lot—civic engagement, civic duty, civic identity, civic education, civil society, civility, civil discourse. Many organizations and democratic initiatives have incorporated “civic” in their name and branding. It’s a popular adjective in our field—often intended to “denote the virtues, assets, and activities that a free people need to govern themselves well,” as Educating for American Democracy describes.

There are four words in our data that include “civic” or “civil” as adjectives: civic engagement, civic infrastructure, civic health, and civil society. Together, we started to refer to these terms as the “civic cluster,” and we noticed that the “civic cluster” reacted differently than the other words in the survey. Both overall and in subgroups, these words rank high for unfamiliarity; they all appear in the top third of unfamiliar terms for groups (see Graph 12). They are also the words that provoke the most neutrality (see Graph 13) and the least association (see Graph 4). This suggests that Americans are relatively indifferent to the terms, they may not hold meaningful connotations, and people do not think of them as being used by many groups of people.

### Graph 12

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<th>Liberals (very and somewhat)</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
This trend was reinforced in the focus group conversations as well. For example, focus group participants consistently interpreted *civil society* to mean "a society that acts civilly" versus thinking about non-governmental organizations and institutions. In regards to *civic infrastructure*, participants focused on physical or “tangible” aspects, such as roads, bridges, hospitals, and schools versus social or “relational” aspects, such as community, the public square, and collaboration.
Our data signal to us that Americans do not have much response, association, or relationship to these words overall, and the words are not intuitively understood by many. It does not seem to be working as a way to communicate with the American public, and we cannot help but notice that a common thread among them all is the incorporation of “civic” or “civil” as an adjective. Which begs the question—why does our field use these terms so frequently? How can we translate these technical terms used by professionals in the field into plain language? Or, is it time to evolve our language to something that lands more solidly and broadly with the American public? How might we “denote the virtues, assets, and activities that a free people need to govern themselves well” without using “civic”? Alternatively, how might we challenge ourselves to infuse these civic terms with more meaning and resonance for a broader group of Americans so that they inspire positivity, imagination, excitement, and agency?

**Civic terms are favored by historically “dominant” identities.**

As we analyzed our data in our deep dive sessions and looked through the lens of particular demographic groups, we started to observe a trend: groups that represented historically “dominant” identities in American society were often more positive towards civic terms than other identities. Was this a coincidence or something bigger? We needed to investigate further.

First, let's be clear about what we mean by “historically dominant identities.” For us, it is not just about the groups that hold population majorities, but rather, the identities that have historically shaped and led our civic institutions. As history tells us, that has traditionally been White, Christian, upper class, college-educated men. Next, we investigated how much more positive and familiar these groups are to the civic terms than the rest of their demographic cohorts. The major takeaway is that Americans of “dominant” identities are, on the whole, 6.3% more positive and 3.1% more familiar with the civic terms. While those are not double digit numbers, the consistency of positivity and familiarity towards dominant identities is not something we can overlook.

**Graph 14**

**What is the average positivity difference between comparison groups?**

For each term, the positivity score from non-dominant group(s) was subtracted from the presumed dominant identity (e.g., male). The differences were averaged across all terms. This average difference score is shown for each comparison (e.g., male > all other genders).
There are many reasons why this might be true. Undeniably, people who were at the table throughout history writing much of the foundational language of American democracy were White, Christian, upper class, college-educated men. In many ways, the civic language they created—and we still use almost 250 years later—was built by and for people like them. It should not be a surprise that this civic language still resonates most with those identities.

Another factor might be civic education. Our analysis demonstrates that civic education makes a difference in increasing positivity and familiarity towards civic language for Americans. When we look at our data to see who reported having civic education, we see that in most categories, these dominant identities report higher levels compared to their counterparts. We might conclude that while civic education is effective in increasing familiarity and positivity of civic language, it is also serving as a mechanism for those concepts to advance dominant culture.
No matter the reason, we cannot ignore that civic language and “dominant” culture identities have a relationship. What would it look like for our civic language to be influenced by the values and wisdom of non-dominant cultures and identities? How might we start to reimagine the words we use in order to better represent the democratic values held across cultures? Does it mean starting from scratch, or evolving the language already created?

The disconnect between professional usage and public perception of civic language is real.

The original catalyst of the Civic Language Perceptions Project was to understand more about a perceived disconnect between the language used by the civic philanthropy field—those of us that “do” democracy and civic engagement as our jobs and vocation—and the rest of the American public. We could not wrap up the analysis portion of this project without looking closely at what we learned about this disconnect and offer a few insights that emerged, which we believe are important for the civic philanthropy field to face.

First, we confirmed that a disconnect exists. Many of the ways the disconnect was expressed to us was through a sense or a feeling of missed connection. Funders would share that they felt people were not understanding them, they sensed they were misunderstanding people, and they detected that when they were in discussions with other democracy professionals, there was a “democracy speak” at play that was unique to those spaces. For better or worse, our data confirmed these suspicions.

To demonstrate, if we operate on the assumption that most professionals in the civic philanthropy field report an income of $100,000 or more and have a college degree, we can compare the group of respondents who share these income and education characteristics (“civic philanthropy professionals” or their similarly situated peers) with those who do not (“everyone else”). While we acknowledge these are not perfect representations, we feel they are adequate enough to tell us something meaningful related to our inquiry.
First, we see in the graphs below that “civic philanthropy professionals” are more positive (by 9 percentage points) and familiar (by 4 percentage points) with the civic terms than “everyone else.” Interestingly, we see that “civic philanthropy professionals” may be less positive than “everyone else” towards civic health and less familiar on democracy, racial equity, unity, and citizen. As civic philanthropy professionals ourselves, we wonder if the closer you are or the more time you have put into reflecting on a concept a term represents, the less you feel like you know the term anymore.

Graph 17

What terms are viewed positively by Civic Philanthropy Professionals and Everyone Else?

Terms are ordered from highest to lowest positivity.
The percent difference between groups is shown to the right.
The 5 highest difference scores are highlighted with yellow diamonds.
Second, we learned that the potential for connection and disconnection is higher for some terms. For example, we see the words with the highest potential for connection as the ones where both groups ("civic philanthropy professionals" and "everyone else") demonstrate high positivity, and where "everyone else" has low unfamiliarity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average positivity across both groups</th>
<th>Unfamiliarity of &quot;everyone else&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conversely, the highest risk for disconnection can be found in the words that “civic philanthropy professionals” most outpace “everyone else” on positivity and “everyone else” demonstrates high unfamiliarity. The five terms below share the highest potential for disconnect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>How much more positive “civic philanthropy professionals” are than “everyone else”</th>
<th>How much less familiar “everyone else” is than “civic philanthropy professionals”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civic Engagement</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge Builder</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civility</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluralism</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic Infrastructure</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages in this graph represent the percentage point difference between the two groups.

Given the previous discussion on the terms that incorporate “civic” and their ineffectiveness with the American public, it is not a surprise to see that two of the five words of highest risk for disconnection are part of the “civic cluster,” further reinforcing the need for the civic philanthropy field to thoughtfully consider that aspect of our lexicon.

Additionally, we believe the civic philanthropy field needs to contend with the term pluralism. With the current state of democracy and concerns about toxic polarization heavily on the minds of civic philanthropy, efforts to build pluralism are emerging and growing. We believe this is a necessary and positive development, but how we talk about these values and concepts need to translate to the American public if they are going to be successful. Currently, pluralism jumps out to us as a word that the civic philanthropy field understands, likes, and uses, but that the rest of the American public does not. When we explored this in our focus groups, pluralism was a widely unknown term, but participants responded to it positively once they knew what it meant. As one participant shared, “I definitely didn’t know what it was and actually, based on what I’ve seen now, I would put it at the top of my list [of values] so we can all coexist.” In other words, the disconnect on civic language—especially for words like pluralism—is real, but our analysis gives us hope that connection can be made with the broader values that underlie them. Which begs the question, should we push ourselves to strip our civic language down to its core values and build back from there? How can the civic philanthropy field understand, listen, and most importantly, incorporate the language that “everyone else” is using to represent these concepts?
Conclusion + What’s Next

As we said at the top of this report, the findings in the Civic Language Perceptions Project data are rich and plentiful. Undoubtedly, we could have shared many, many more points, but the nine we selected to discuss felt like priorities for the field to hear, understand, and discuss. So where do (and should) we go from here?

Civic Language Solution Sprints
A major hope many people had for PACE in this project was to ultimately deliver recommendations, and we often field questions like: What do I do about the disconnect between how I use civic engagement and democracy words and how Americans use them? What should I say instead? Can you give me guidance on what language does resonate?

We still do not have answers that likely satisfy the desire for instruction and certainty that we hear in these questions; given the nuances, distinctions, and preferences of various groups, perhaps we never fully can. But we believe that the guidance needed likely already exists in the wisdom of the broader civic field.

So for the next stage of this project, PACE will host Civic Language Solution Sprints around five of the points raised in this report. Each sprint will engage a group of 10-15 funders, practitioners, and thought leaders to participate in a conversation that invites them to explain how the issue is impacting their work, share what solutions they are deploying to address the issue, and apply some of the principles of imagination to how we might move forward on the issue as a field. The goal is to democratize the process of determining what we might do about some of the issues raised in the data and analysis about civic language.

Civic Language Solution Sprint 1 | October 31, 2022, 3-4 pm EST
A perception exists that young people are negative about “democracy”…what do we do about that?

Civic Language Solution Sprint 2 | November 1, 2022, 3-4 pm EST
A perception exists that words are “owned” by certain people or groups…what do we do about that?

Civic Language Solution Sprint 3 | November 2, 2022, 3-4 pm EST
“Civic” is not landing…what do we do about that?

Civic Language Solution Sprint 4 | November 3, 2022, 3-4 pm EST
Civic terms are favored by historically “dominant” identities…what do we do about that?

Civic Language Solution Sprint 5 | November 4, 2022, 3-4 pm EST
The disconnect between professional usage and public perception of civic language is real…what do we do about that?

If you are interested in joining one of the Civic Language Solution Sprints, please let us know by emailing Language@PACEfunders.org. After these sprints are complete, we intend to release their findings and share the wisdom and guidance that emerges. Stay tuned!
Areas of Future Exploration
Throughout this project, additional questions were raised about civic language, and we intend to continue exploring and analyzing our data as needs arise. For example, we are currently working with partners to publish analysis on additional looks into our data, including:

■ **By community type (rural/urban/suburban)**
■ **By the five Census regions**
■ **By particular geographies of interest (including Arizona, Massachusetts, and Southwest Michigan)**

Similarly, here are questions that raise other areas of interesting exploration:

■ **Exploring the potential for social cohesion in civic language.** If we look closely at the “social cohesion”-oriented words in our data set (*bridge builder, civility, pluralism*, etc.), how do these words differ from the other terms? Where are the points of alignment and highest leverage points for social cohesion across subgroups?

■ **Building a communication guide.** If we believe there are no universal “right” answers in how to use civic language, how can we support civic funders and practitioners in their own communication objectives and goals? How do we change hearts and minds with civic language? What can we learn from message testing?

■ **Looking deeply at the media landscape.** If we understand how Americans perceive and associate civic terms, where and how are those terms showing up in the media landscape and how might the media be shaping them?

As we publish learnings and findings, we will alert our network and keep [www.PACEfunders.org/Language](http://www.PACEfunders.org/Language) updated. Check there for the latest news from this project!
APPENDIX A: PACE TEAM’S PICKS

Similar to when a library displays “staff picks” of the staff’s favorite books, below, some members of the PACE team (staff, Board, consultants, and partners) who have been engaged with the Civic Language Perceptions Project over the last year share their favorite findings. These findings stood out to them, shaped their thinking, and merit amplification. They are presented in alphabetical order by last name.

**Kristen Cambell, CEO**

Often, I think we have a tendency to assume that if you know something about someone’s religion, you know something about their politics, but we saw something fascinating when we compared the data in this way. The three terms that had the smallest positive differentials (that is, the most agreement on positivity) between liberals and conservatives were civility, civil society, and pluralism—these are the same three terms that had the largest differences in positivity (the least agreement on positivity) between those who are religiously affiliated and not. The inverse was also true—where religious affiliation found very little difference in positivity, we saw the largest positivity differential by political ideology (those terms being diversity, social justice, and racial equity). I thought it was so interesting to see that when it comes to civic language, the places where religion might unite us, politics might divide us, and where religion might have us consider differently, politics might bring us together. To me, this indicates the importance of helping people hold onto multiple cross-cutting identities when trying to find points of commonality and agreement.

**Kyle Chambers, Data Analyst**

When asked which activities were important to ensure democracy works, college graduates chose 10 out of those 12 more frequently than non-college graduates. For example, 80% of college graduates indicated that voting was important while only 65% of non-college graduates did. In addition, college graduates were more positive than non-college graduates about the terms civic engagement (25 percentage point difference), civility (20 percentage point difference), and democracy (18 percentage point difference). Taken together, these data are consistent with the possibility that the college experience helps develop citizens that value democracy, treating others with courtesy and respect, and being active members of their communities.

**Elizabeth G. Christopherson, Board Chair Emeritus**

President and CEO of the Rita Allen Foundation

Reflecting that bridge builder and citizen were the two terms with the lowest negatives, 4.9% and 3.5% respectively, the data suggest an opportunity for a new narrative about the future of democracy in the space where 95.1% of respondents view bridge builder as positive, neutral, or unfamiliar and 96.5% of respondents view citizen as positive, neutral, or unfamiliar. For several years now, we have been engaged with diverse partners to bring together early-career boundary spanners to create a new culture of civic science. Seeing this open space captured in the language of bridge builder and citizen offers an opportunity ahead of us from multiple perspectives.

**Diane Douglas, Consultant, Faith In/And Democracy**

The data demonstrate that Christians are 5.92% more likely to be positive towards all tested civic terms than people affiliated with other religious or secular identities, and particularly so with regard to the term patriotism. Reciprocally, respondents with other or no religious affiliation are most positive about the term racial equity. I wonder if those results reflect Christians’ sense of comfort in and belonging to America’s dominant religion, while members of religious minorities identify more immediately with our country’s ongoing struggle to achieve racial equity.

**Siri Erickson, Program Manager**

Females are less positive and less negative on the vast majority of these 21 civic terms. I was really surprised to see that females had a higher positivity than males for only two of the 21 words: unity and belonging. Males were also more negative than females on 17 of the 21 terms. While the size of the female/male positivity gap was small for most of the terms, the two words that had the largest gap were very key terms in our field: democracy (13% difference) and civic engagement (14% difference). What is it that is making females so much less positive towards these terms? Our data do not answer that question, but it is an interesting one to ask!
Mindy Finn, Data Partner
Founder & CEO, Citizen Data

Coming Together: In these polarized times, the terms Unity and Common Good are received positively across the board, regardless of one's political orientation, race, or preferred media sources. This suggests that efforts to “unify” are in demand, and people are hungering to feel more connected and united with their communities and their fellow Americans. We learned in the focus groups that those on the political right feel more pessimistic about our ability to achieve unity, and based on the full body of data, it seems that Unity and Common Good make a more attractive pairing. Together, they communicate the aspiration of unity while also respecting that diverse viewpoints can be heard and reconciled.

Jon Gruber, Board Chair
Einhorn Collaborative Building Lead, New Pluralists Core Partner

Since pluralism is top of mind for me through the work of New Pluralists, I was intrigued by the data on perceptions of the term. While only 19.3% of respondents have a positive view of pluralism, a much smaller 6.6% have a negative view. Most notably, 36.3% of respondents have neither a positive nor negative view, and 37.7% are not familiar with the word. The neutral valence and lack of familiarity of the term pluralism – adding up to 3/4 of people's perceptions – afford an opportunity to elevate a conversation about pluralism, to breathe new life into an age-old concept, and to make the case for why a culture of pluralism is central to the health of our increasingly diverse and divided democracy.

Danielle Marshall, Equity Analyst

At a time where social identities and historical policies are being discussed at unprecedented levels, it is interesting to examine both how groups define democracy and what it means to them personally. The data underscores the idea that terms such as “of, by, for the people” may continue to be aspirational in nature and not yet accessible to all citizens. For example, 61% of White people agreed with this definition of democracy, whereas only 39% of Black people did. The nuance is further brought to light as one looks at the data related to “minority voices are prioritized,” and considers who has traditionally had or not had access to the benefits of democracy. Comparatively, only 11% of White people selected this definition, whereas 27% of Black people chose this option.

Amy McIsaac, Managing Director of Learning and Experimentation

I think the fact that the data demonstrate Americans have low familiarity with “social cohesion” words is something we need to contend with as a field. For example, the most unfamiliar word in the analysis is pluralism with 38% of Americans saying they do not know this term. Sixteen percent of Americans are unfamiliar with bridge builder, and even 5% of Americans report unfamiliarity with the term unity. Is it that they do not know the words, or are the concepts also unknown to Americans? Is it that Americans are not experiencing these values, or are they calling it something else? As the civic philanthropy field more prominently takes on polarization and division—and subsequently, promotes social cohesion and bridge building—we need to think through how we are communicating and connecting these concepts to the American public; otherwise, we risk talking past each other.

Julian Santos, Operations Manager

Registered voters who took civics or American government classes in high school were 25 percentage points more likely to have a positive view of the term civility. That gap suggests that when people are exposed to civics or U.S. government in school, it instills in them not just the value of being civically engaged but also of being engaged in a civil manner.

Janet Tran, Board Treasurer

Director of The Center for Civics, Education, and Opportunity, Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute

With our work in the opportunity sphere, I am struck by the gender differences as females tend to view terms less positively than their male counterparts. In particular the differential between democracy and civic engagement stand out because these terms are widely used in the field. A myriad of assumptions can be made. Perhaps democracy is not working as well for people who identify as female? Perhaps they have less access to civic engagement? Of course, the data does not imply or answer these assumptions. What it does provide is an opportunity to have a conversation based on shared facts, something that is troublingly lacking in this day and age.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The lead author of this report is Amy McIsaac, Managing Director of Learning and Experimentation at PACE, with support from Siri Erickson, Program Manager at PACE, data analysis from Kyle Chambers, Dean of Academic Analytics & Innovation at Gustavus Adolphus College, and design from Cameron Blossom.

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