

Civic Language Perceptions Project

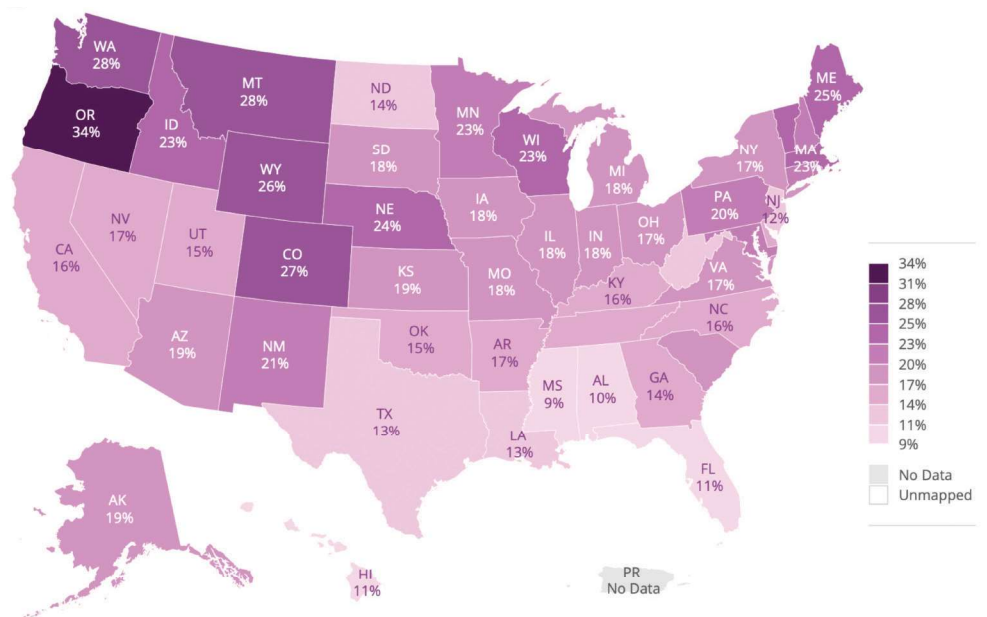
An Arizona Snapshot



September 2024 There is power in language. Inside we look closely at how both voters in Arizona and nationally perceive terms used by civic organizations.

Background: What is the Landscape of Civic Health in Arizona?

Arizona, a state rich in geographic and demographic diversity, is a proving ground for civic innovation. Arizonans are hungry for change and want civic engagement that solves problems as well as a democracy that works for all. Furthermore, research shows that communities with robust civic health have higher employment rates, stronger schools, better physical health, and more responsive governments.



Source: <https://www.arizonafuture.org/progress-meters/civic-participation>




LEARN MORE ABOUT FINDINGS ON CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND CONNECTED COMMUNITIES IN ARIZONA AT [ARIZONAFUTURE.ORG/CIVICHEALTHMETERS](https://www.arizonafuture.org/civichealthmeters)

Arizona Civic Health Progress Meters

The Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA) and the Arizona Center for Civic Leadership at the Flinn Foundation are both guided by a north star of *The Arizona We Want*, a shared vision of success around what matters most to Arizonans. This agenda—created and owned by Arizonans—was first established in 2009 when CFA launched its first Gallup Arizona Survey. The results of this survey revealed Arizonans’ deep concern in our elected leadership, and in 2010 inspired the creation of the Arizona Center for Civic Leadership to cultivate the Flinn-Brown Fellowship, a network of civic leaders who could work collectively to advance on the issues that matter most to Arizonans.

In 2019, CFA launched the Arizona Progress Meters to measure and track how we are doing in realizing *The Arizona We Want*. The Civic Health Progress Meters define, track, and measure Arizona’s progress on civic participation and connected communities, and offer the opportunity to frame conversations and prompt action by individuals and organizations throughout our state. The Civic Health Progress Meters draw on data from the Congressionally-chartered National Conference

The top half of the page features a stylized graphic of the Arizona state flag. It consists of a blue field with a large, five-pointed orange star in the center. From the top right corner of the star, several rays of yellow and red extend outwards, creating a sunburst effect. The graphic is set against a white background that curves downwards from the top right.

on Citizenship (NCoC) to provide a close look at the civic life of Arizonans by age, education, income, ethnicity, gender, and the impact of living in urban areas.

The 2023 update of the Arizona Civic Health Progress Meters reveals new insights:

- A continued low ranking for Arizona residents who spend time with neighbors discussing community issues, including a decline from 2019 to 2021 in community connectedness across the state.
- A significant decline in volunteerism, tracking with national trends.
- A greater likelihood among Arizonans compared to peers across the country to leverage buying power as a sign of approval or disapproval for a product or company.
- An increase in charitable giving between 2019 and 2021.
- According to recent data from the 2022 election, the number of Arizonans who were eligible but did not vote, because they were not interested or felt their vote wouldn't matter, jumped to 24 percent, a significant increase from 16 percent as of the last midterm election in 2018.

Arizona Civic Life Partnership

Driven by the understanding of the critical importance of civic health for a thriving state, and building upon a decade of shared history, CFA and the Arizona Center for Civic Leadership at the Flinn Foundation launched the Arizona Civic Life Partnership in 2021.

The partners are working together to drive a statewide strategy for civic renewal with a sharp focus on lifelong civic learning, engagement and leadership by activating the Civic Health Progress Meters. This is centered on the following strategies:

- Generate dialogue and shared understanding through the Arizona Civic Language Project.
- Build a wider community of statewide partners to work toward shared goals.
- Use data to drive action that strengthens civic engagement.
- Become a hub for state and national partners to convene, collaborate, and multiply impact.

“IT’S IMPORTANT TO INFORM THOSE DOING CIVIC WORK HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH PEOPLE IN A WAY THAT DOESN’T POLARIZE OR ALIENATE THEM.”

Community Conversation Participant

Shared Language: Why the Civic Language Perceptions Project?

When the Arizona Civic Life Partnership was launched in 2021, CFA and the Arizona Center for Civic Leadership assembled a statewide Civic Health Steering Committee (CHSC) in order to work alongside diverse geographic, demographic, and issue-based communities as we created a shared vision, mission, objectives, and set of strategies.

Early in our discussions as a group, a foundational insight emerged—we needed to begin with a common vocabulary and language as a community of partners first. The committee helped identify that shared values and data built on the foundation of shared language creates a path to finding the greater, common good.

This insight met with an opportunity to collaborate with an innovative national research project spearheaded by Philanthropy for Civic Engagement (PACE). Lead partners in the Arizona Civic Life Partnership, Arizona Center for Civic Leadership and Vitalyst Health Foundation, are members of PACE representing Arizona.

What is the Civic Language Perceptions Project?

In early 2022, PACE released data seeking to understand people’s perceptions of the language associated with civic engagement and democracy work. Between November 21-28, 2021, PACE fielded a nationally representative survey of 5,000 registered voters to poll 21 terms commonly used in civic engagement and democracy work. The resulting data is accessible via an interactive dashboard and an infographic series.



ACCESS THE CIVIC
LANGUAGE PERCEPTIONS
PROJECT DATA AT
[WWW.PACEFUNDERS.ORG/
LANGUAGE](http://WWW.PACEFUNDERS.ORG/LANGUAGE)

In its essence, the project aims to gather insight on the language we use around civic engagement in communities across the country and explore the central questions: “At best, are we talking past each other? At worst, are we furthering divisions, disillusionment, or disengagement?”

In collaboration with the Arizona Civic Life Partnership, Vitalyst Health Foundation sponsored an oversample of 601 Arizona residents to look more closely at how Arizonans perceive and associate civic language. With both the national and Arizona data in hand, we observed some interesting takeaways, and themes emerged through a series of data visualizations. As there are many ways to look at the data through a demographic lens, PACE researchers made a choice—primarily based on sample sizes in the oversample data—to prioritize an analysis that looked at a comparison of Hispanic and non-Hispanic white Arizonans. Throughout this report, anyone who identified as “Hispanic/Latino” were classified as “Hispanic.” For example, “Hispanic,” “Hispanic & Black,” and “White & Hispanic” are all considered “Hispanic,” so a figure that compares “Hispanic” to “White” is comparing Hispanic of any race to Whites that are Non-Hispanic. (The full series of Arizona visualizations can be found flinn.org/civic-leadership/programs/civic-health-progress-meters, and we have included some key graphics throughout this paper.)

In order to deepen our understanding of the data, probe the findings, and explore what resonated with communities across the state, the Arizona Civic Life Partnership launched a series of community dialogues in 2022-2023.

In spring 2024, PACE released new data based on an updated survey, with new insights and findings nationally.

In the report that follows, you will be able to explore:

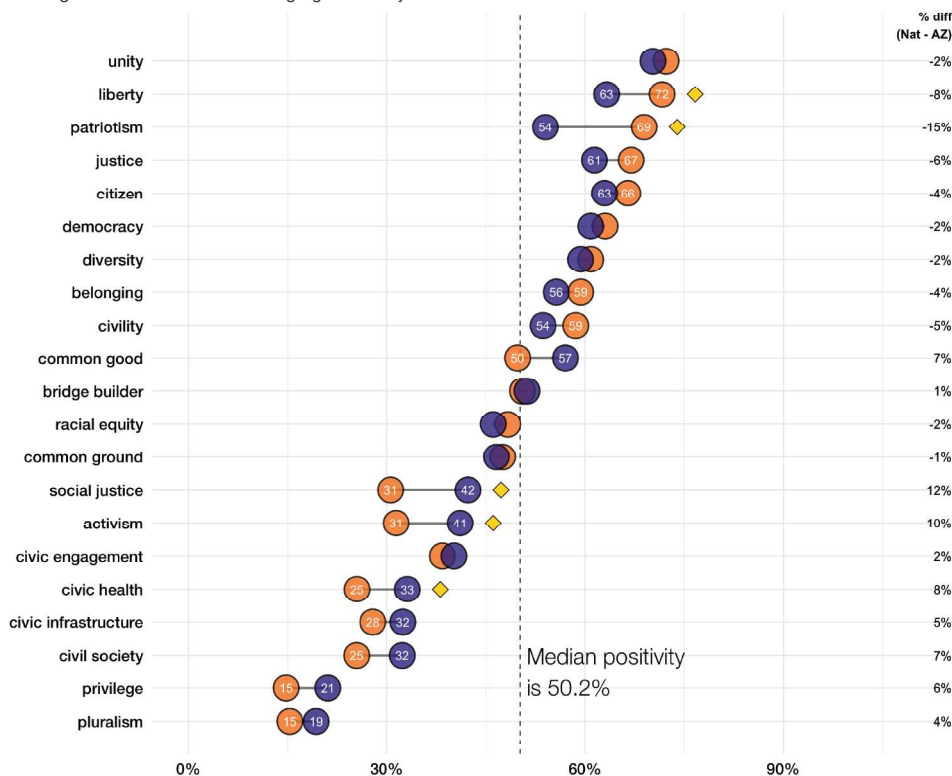
- Key findings and a deeper dive into the 2022 Civic Language Project data for Arizona.
- Key reflections and takeaways from the 2022-2023 series of Community Conversations.
- A snapshot of key findings from the 2024 Civic Language Project data nationally.
- Lessons learned.

How Do Arizonans Perceive Civic Language?

Arizonans are more extreme in their perceptions towards civic terms than Americans overall. For the words where the national population is most positive (*unity, liberty, justice, citizen*), Arizona residents are even more positive towards those terms. The converse is true as well—the words where the national population is least positive (*civic infrastructure, civil society, privilege, pluralism*), Arizona residents are even less positive.

What terms are viewed positively by National and Arizona?

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



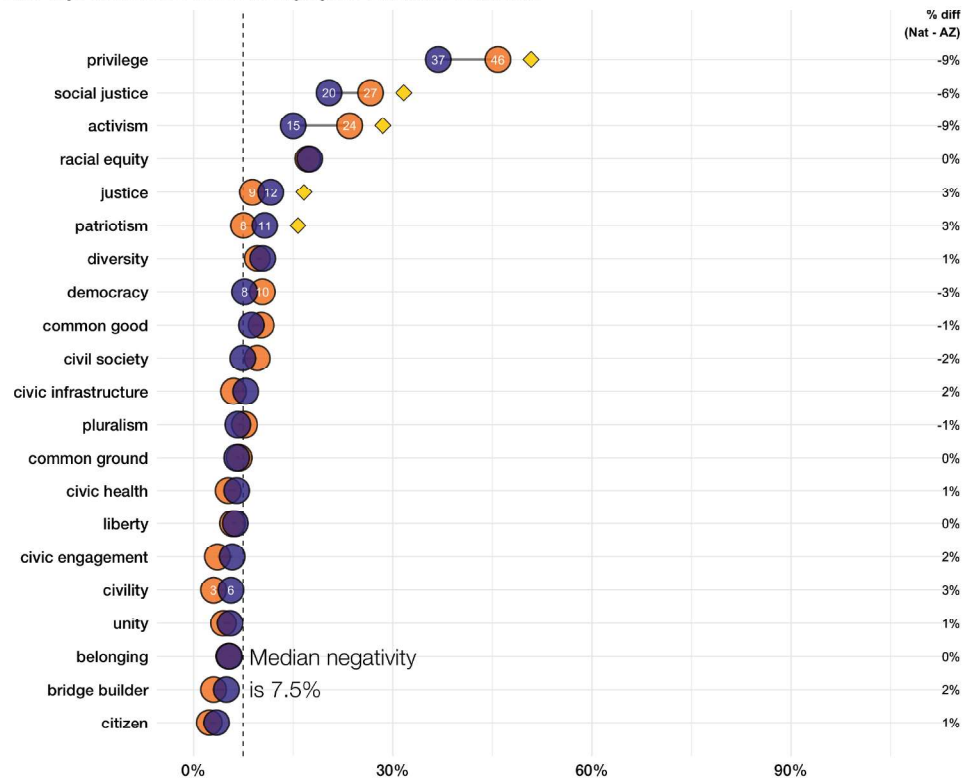
“EDUCATION AROUND COMMON LANGUAGE IN CIVIC EDUCATION IS CRUCIAL IF WE WANT TO POSITIVELY IMPACT OUR COMMUNITIES.”

Community Conversation Participant

Source: www.pacefunders.org/language

What terms are viewed negatively by National and Arizona?

Terms are ordered from highest to lowest negativity. The percent difference between National and Arizona is shown to the right. The 5 highest difference scores are highlighted with yellow diamonds.



Source: www.pacefunders.org/language

“WE ARE DIVIDED AND ALSO DON'T HAVE POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS WITH CERTAIN WORDS THAT COULD BE AND ARE SUPPOSED TO BE POWERFUL TOOLS FOR GOOD. MAYBE THAT'S OKAY THOUGH - MAYBE WE ACTUALLY JUST NEED TO KNOW WHAT TERMS CAN REACH PEOPLE.”

Community Conversation Participant

Civic education makes an outsized difference in Arizona.

Mere exposure to civic education, even distinct from general educational attainment, is paired with the highest increases in positive perceptions towards concepts valuable for a healthy democracy, such as *civic engagement* and *democracy*. But while positivity of a term like democracy jumps 14 percentage points when a respondent indicates they had civic education in our national sample, it jumps 31 percentage points in the Arizona sample. Furthermore, Arizonans with less than a college degree and no civics education were 13% positive towards the term *civic engagement*, whereas that number jumps to 40% for Arizonans with less than a college degree and civics education. These findings show a clear incentive to continue the push for increased civic education in Arizona.

Patriotism is a polarizing term, and Arizonans mostly love it. It was notable how strongly positive Arizona residents are to the word *patriotism* compared to the nation. In Arizona, *patriotism* is the third most positive term surveyed (69% positive), while nationally, it is ranked ninth (54%). It's also worth noting that two of the biggest positive differentials of all the subgroup analysis on this term between younger and older Arizonans (41% and 76% respectively) and between Hispanic and white Arizonans (43% and 76% respectively). Conversely, there is less than a 10-point spread by class, education, and community type. In fact, PACE researchers found it interesting that rural respondents are only 3% more positive towards *patriotism* than urban respondents.

How Do Demographics Shape Arizonans' Perceptions of Civic Language?

Demographics matter in civic language and attitudes towards democracy and civic engagement. In Arizona, people are more aligned on civic language by economic class and education level than by age and race, and our analysis demonstrates that the largest gaps exist between urban and rural residents.

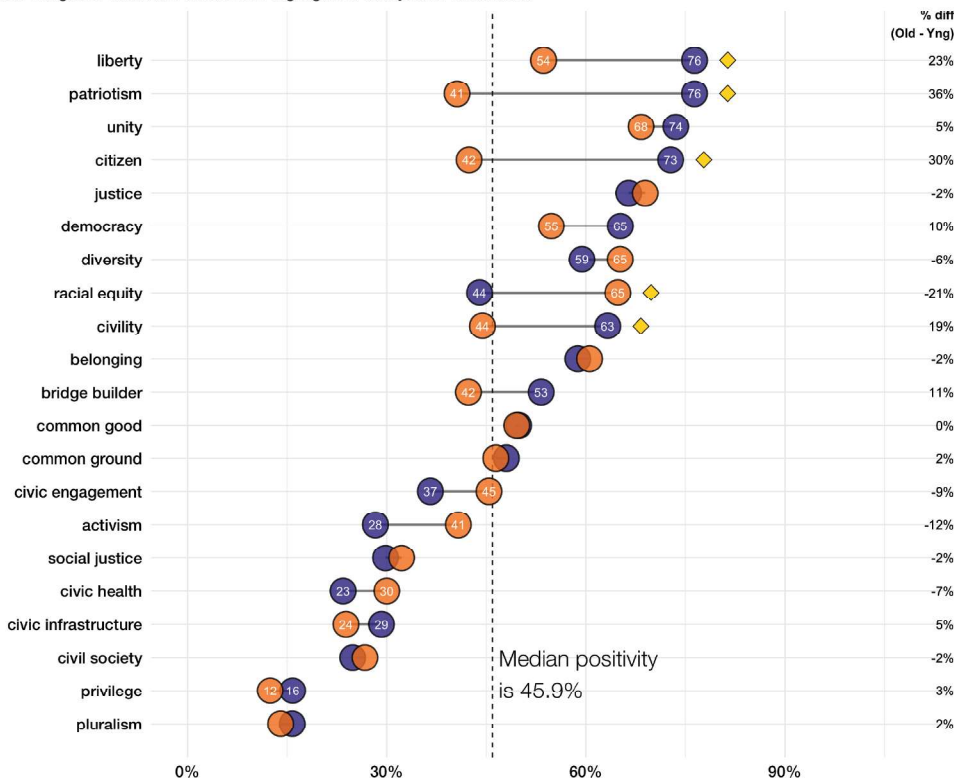
The dataset is large enough to cross-tabulate with different identity and experience demographics, which makes subgroup analysis rich with insights. As there are many ways to look at the data through a demographic lens, PACE researchers made a choice—primarily based on sample sizes in the oversample data—to prioritize analysis that looked at the following demographic categories:

- age (older = 35+/younger = 18-34)
- education level (college graduates/non college graduates)
- economic class (middle class/working class)
- community type (urban/rural)
- race/ethnicity (white/Hispanic)

Younger Arizonans have lower positivity on civic terms than older Arizonans (this is also true on the national level). For example, there are large positive differentials between older and younger respondents on terms such as *liberty* (76% vs 54%, respectively), *patriotism* (76% vs 41%), *citizen* (73% vs 42%), and *civility* (63% vs 44%). Conversely, younger

What terms are viewed positively by Older and Younger?

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.



“MORE CIVIC EDUCATION [IS NEEDED] BECAUSE A LOT OF PEOPLE WERE UNSURE WHAT TO MAKE OF THESE TERMS.”
Community Conversation Participant

Source: www.pacefund.org/language

Arizonans show significantly more positivity towards *racial equity* (65% vs 44%), *activism* (41% vs 28%), and *civic engagement* (45% vs 37%), which suggests there might be a difference in generational prioritization of “civic engagement” activities. This is reinforced by which civic activities younger and older Arizonans said are important to ensure democracy works. Older respondents more frequently select activities such as serving on a jury, voting, serving in military/civilian programs, and attending public meetings; conversely, younger respondents more frequently select joining a cause or movement, advocating for a cause, and attending a protest or rally.

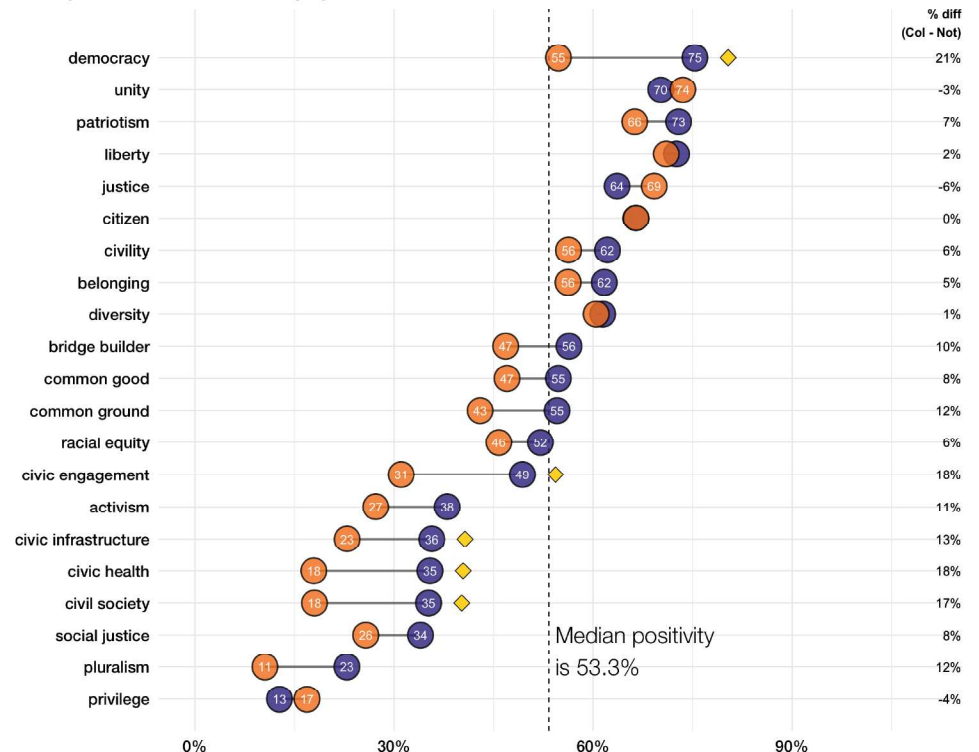
Additionally, when looking at how younger and older Arizonans define democracy, older respondents are much more likely to define it as “a system or structure of government that is of, by, and for the people,” while younger

respondents are much more likely to define it as “a form of representation in government that ensures the voices of those least likely to have access to political power are prioritized in policies and decisions.” Overall, there is a theme that younger respondents in Arizona are evolving what democracy means to them (for example, placing a larger emphasis on ideals and activities that advance change and inclusivity), separate from what it might mean for older generations.

Arizonans with a college education are more positive on 85% of the terms surveyed than non-college graduates, and they are 21% more positive towards the term *democracy* and 18% more positive towards the term *civic engagement*. For three terms, non-college graduates are more positive than college graduates—*unity*, *justice*, and *privilege*—though the differential is 5% or less in each case.

What terms are viewed positively by College Graduates and Not College Graduates?

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.

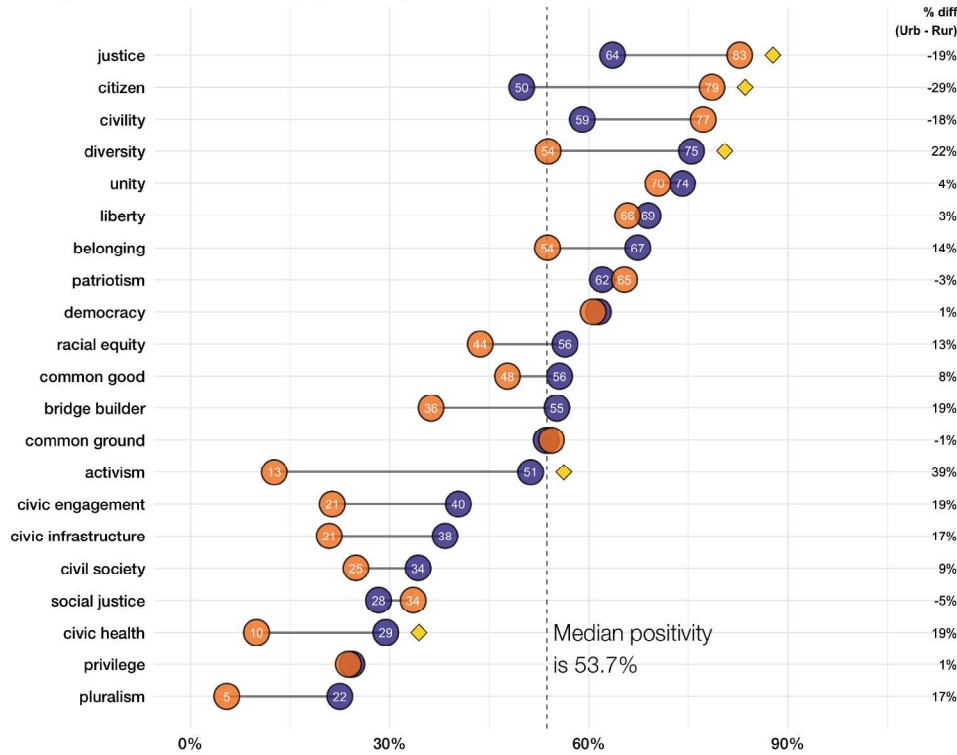


Source: www.pacefunders.org/language



What terms are viewed positively by Urban and Rural?

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.



Source: www.pacefunders.org/language



Over half of the terms surveyed have over a 10% positivity differential between urban and rural respondents, with the largest gaps for the following terms: *justice*, *citizen*, and *civility* (which rural respondents heavily favor) and *diversity*, *activism*, *civic health*, and *bridge builder* (which urban respondents heavily favor). When considering race and ethnicity and comparing data between white and Hispanic respondents, there is alignment on positivity towards terms like *civic engagement*, *civic infrastructure*, *civic health*, and *unity*. These two groups are aligned on the importance of volunteering, advocating for issues, and donating to causes to ensure that democracy works.

Race/ethnicity presents some of the biggest differences within the subgroup analysis. As there are many ways to look at the data through a demographic lens, PACE researchers made a choice—primarily based on sample sizes in the oversample data—to prioritize analysis that looked at a comparison of Hispanic and white Arizonans.

For example, positivity towards the following words: *patriotism*, *liberty*, and *common ground* have over a 20% differential, with white respondents heavily favoring those terms, while Hispanic respondents favor terms like *unity*, *justice*, *diversity*, *racial equity*, *bridge builder*, *activism*, and *pluralism*. Hispanic Arizonans are much less likely than white Arizonans to say voting, serving on a jury, and attending public meetings ensures democracy works.

Lastly, there are three terms that stand out as worthy of discussion when looking at the subgroup analysis:

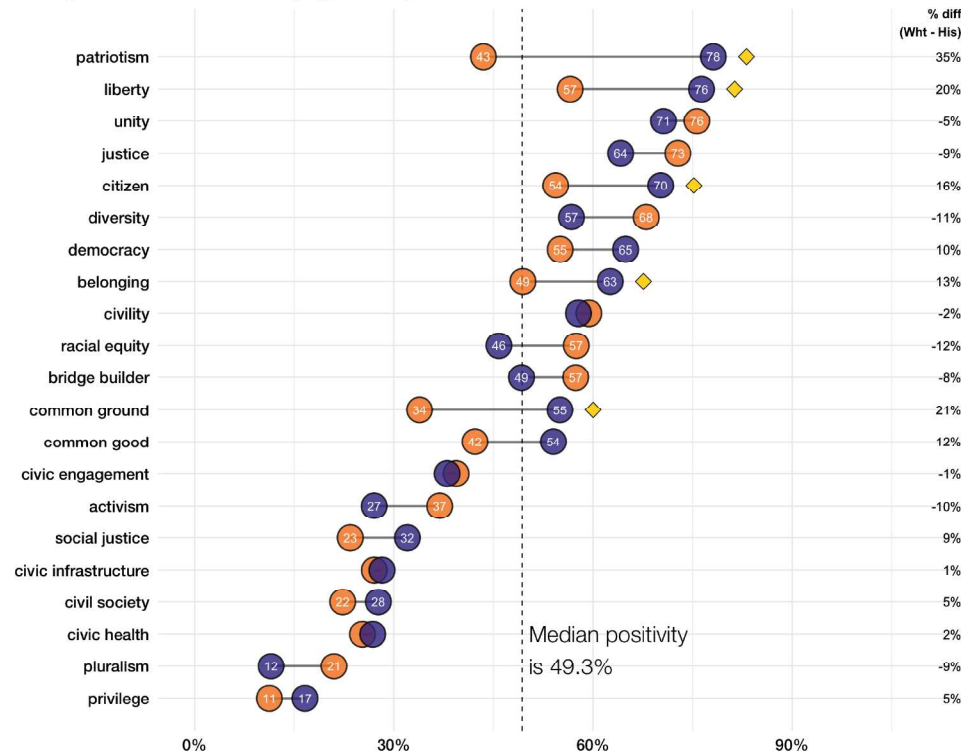
- Democracy.** Given the state of the country over the last few years and the global conversation about democracy, there is a lot of interest in understanding how people feel about the term *democracy*. The subgroup analysis demonstrates that Arizonans who are older, white, college educated, and middle class are the most likely to be positive towards *democracy* (urban/rural is virtually the same). However, that should not overshadow that large percentages of other groups are also warm towards the term. For example, over half of Hispanics (55%), working class (58%), non-college graduates (55%), and younger respondents (55%) are positive towards *democracy*, which demonstrates broad support for the term and concept in Arizona. That said, subgroup analysis about what democracy means and which

activities ensure it works presents a more complex picture; groups demonstrate a variety of preferences across the board for civic activities they prioritize and how they define democracy.

- Citizen.** The term *citizen* is either very polarizing or a place of alignment for subgroups. For example, *citizen* presents some of the biggest positivity differentials by age (older: 73%/younger: 42%), by community type (rural: 79%/urban: 50%), and by race (white: 70%/Hispanic: 54%). By class and education, on the other hand, working class, middle class, college graduate, and non-college graduate Arizonans are all 66% positive towards the term. This suggests to us that the term *citizen* has complexity to unpack in Arizona, which could also present an opportunity. (Reminder: The survey was completed by registered voters.)

What terms are viewed positively by White and Hispanic?

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.



“NO MATTER YOUR ECONOMIC OR CULTURAL DEMOGRAPHIC, PEOPLE IN ARIZONA SEEM TO FEEL SIMILARLY ON A LOT OF ISSUES.”

Community Conversation Participant

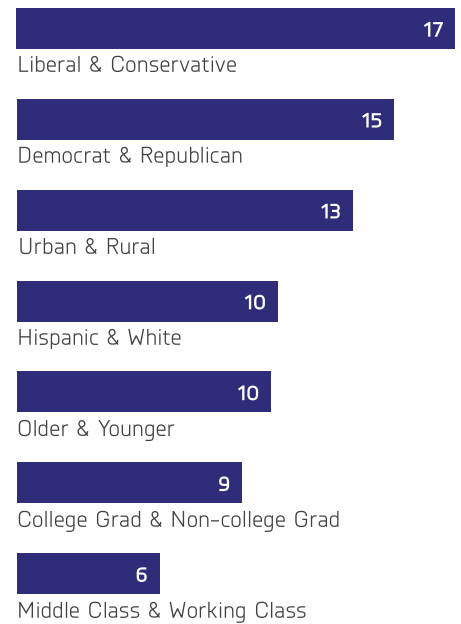
Source: www.pacefunders.org/language

- Patriotism.** Somewhat similarly, *patriotism* also presents both major polarization and alignment, depending on the subgroup. Two of the biggest positive differentials of all the subgroup analysis on this term between younger and older Arizonans (41% and 76% respectively) and between Hispanic and white Arizonans (43% and 76% respectively). Conversely, there exists less than 10 point spreads by class, education, and community type. In fact, rural respondents are only 3% more positive towards *patriotism* than urban respondents.

A key takeaway from the subgroup analysis is that demographics matter in civic language and attitudes towards democracy and civic engagement, and some identities may experience more opportunity for alignment than others. For example, in Arizona, people are more aligned on civic language by class and education level than by age and race, and PACE analysis demonstrates that the largest gaps exist between urban and rural residents.

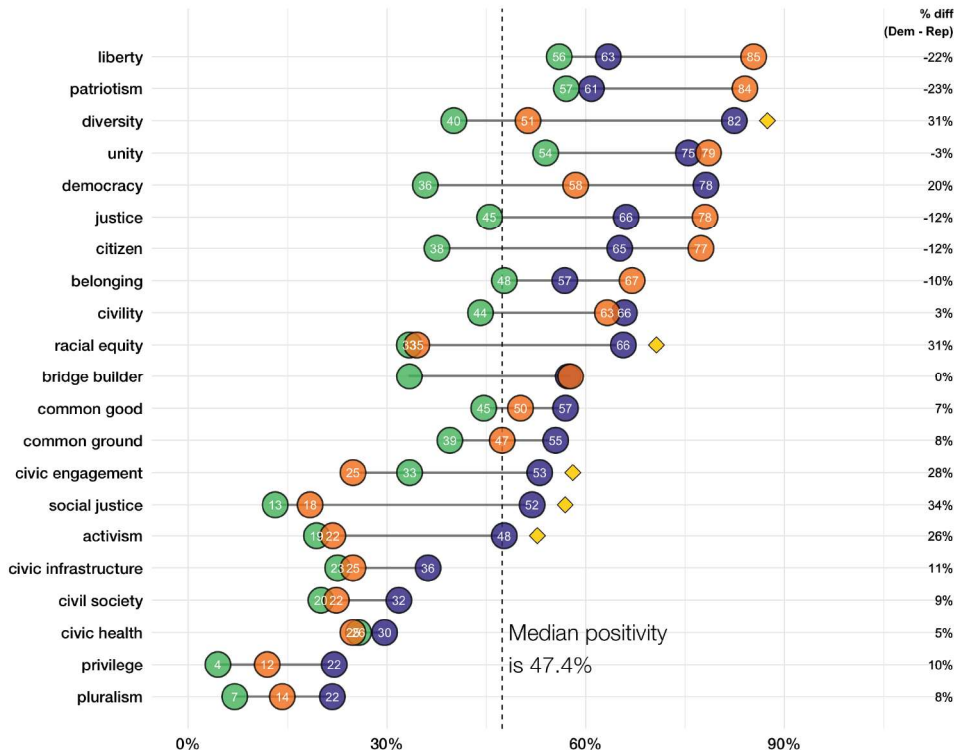
What is the average difference between comparison groups?

For each term, the positivity score of one group listed below (e.g., older) was subtracted from the other group listed (e.g., younger). The absolute values of these differences were averaged across all terms. This average difference score is shown for each comparison (e.g., older & younger).



What terms are viewed positively by Democrat, Republican, and Independent or Non-Partisan?

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.



Source: www.pacefund.org/analysis-of-civic-language-perceptions

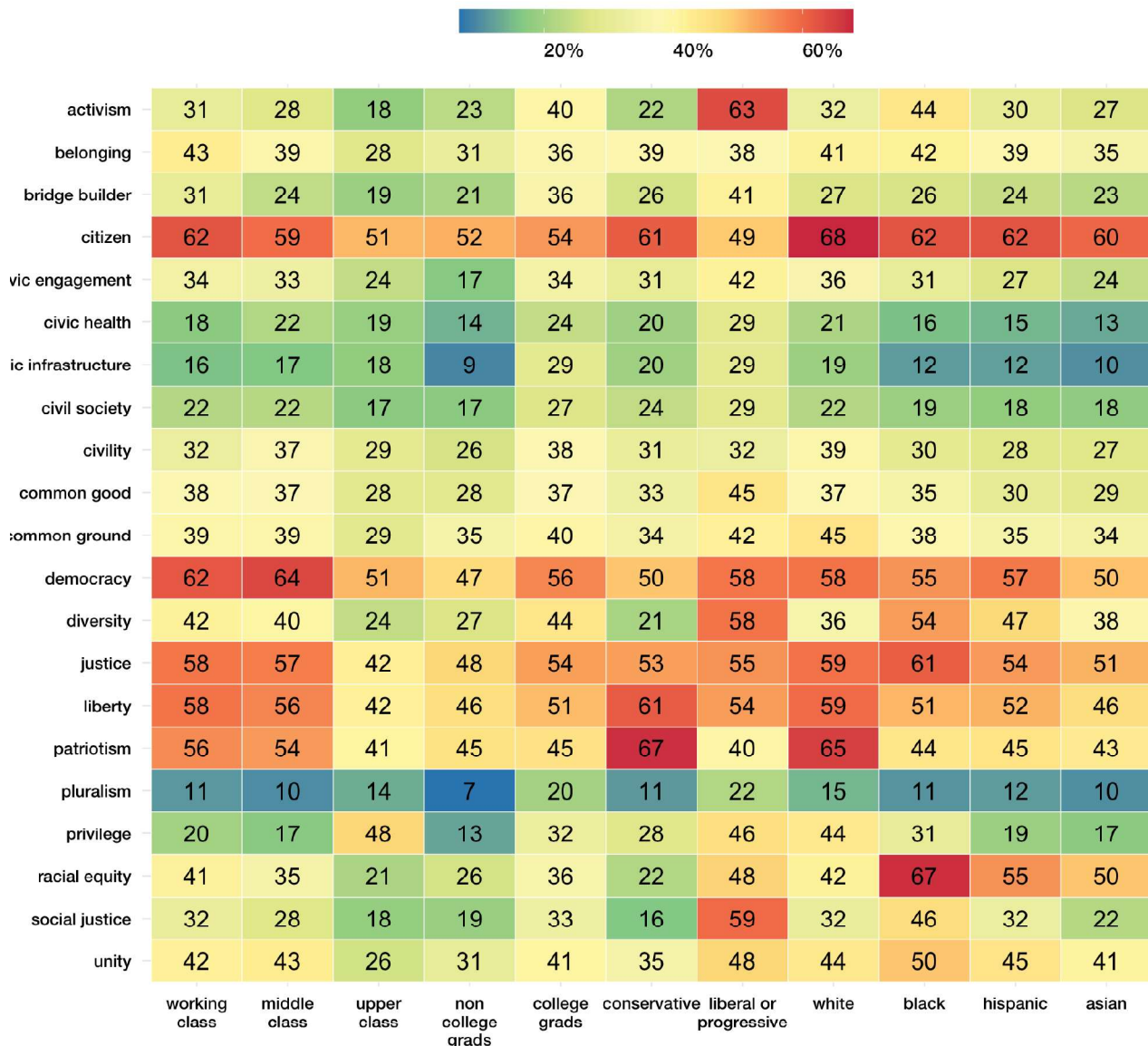
“THERE ARE SOME DEFINITE DIFFERENCES IN THE LANGUAGE USED IN OUR COMMUNITY. THIS DATA VERIFIES THAT.”

Community Conversation Participant

Lastly, some terms have higher association rates (*citizen, democracy*) than others (*pluralism, civic infrastructure*), presenting an opportunity for education and branding in Arizona. The analysis also finds that some words have strong associations with certain groups of people, particularly by political ideology. Survey participants were asked to indicate the kinds of people they think use the 21 civic terms. They were presented with eleven demographic options, and they could select as many as applied. This gives us a way to understand which words respondents most closely associated with certain groups of Arizonans.

How often did respondents indicate that a group of people used a term?

Survey participants were asked to indicate the kinds of people they think use the 21 civic terms; they were presented with 11 demographic options, and they could select as many as applied.



Source: www.pacefund.org/language

Community Conversations: What We Learned from Arizonans

As partners, we aimed to deepen our understanding of the findings from the Civic Language Project’s quantitative research through a series of community dialogues across the state in fall 2022. We collaborated with the Civic Health Steering Committee who helped identify and convene key audiences across Arizona. These included:

- State of Black Arizona: African American Leadership Institute Alumni
- Arizona Community Foundation: Courage to Listen Roundtable of Community Leaders
- Northern Arizona University: Civic Engagement Minor Students
- Statewide AmeriCorps Participants
- Project Central: Rural Leaders in Northern Arizona

As we heard from leaders across the state, a few common takeaways emerged:

- There are clear differences in how language is perceived among different subgroups across Arizona when looking at factors like education, geography, and age. Participants were concerned about the limited nature of a survey of 600 respondents, with particular concern about appropriate representation of Black and Native American communities.
- While the data provided interesting insights, it prompted more questions around what factors motivated survey responses. Some participants wondered whether the different perceptions were more about differences in definition or interpretation of the terms; others wondered if the differences were more in the lived experiences and interactions with the concepts in day-to-day life.
- Participants wondered how much the idea of ‘ownership’ by groups of people influenced any given individual’s response to the terms.
- Some participants felt strongly the research pointed toward opportunities for strategic messaging when working with different communities in order to build bridges. Others felt that the research might be used irresponsibly to try to target or influence communities without authentic engagement.
- Participants questioned whether the relative neutrality or lack of understanding of terms like *civic health* presented an opportunity for education—or suggested these terms do not have enough traction to drive public messaging.
- Ultimately, participants wrestled with the idea that language matters, and that it can serve to build connection and community, or can also serve to divide and build barriers.

“TAKING INTO CONSIDERATION INDIVIDUALS’ FEELINGS ON CERTAIN WORDS AND SEEING HOW THOSE ISSUES CAN BE ADDRESSED [IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ARIZONA].”

Community Conversation Participant

Language Does Matter: What's Next?

2024 Civic Language Perceptions Project Update

PACE fielded another nationally representative survey of American voters in November 2023—exactly two years after the 2021 survey. While PACE researchers continue to analyze that data, there are a few headlines to continue sparking the conversation about civic language in the United States:

“THERE IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO EDUCATE VOTERS ON TERMS USED, SO THEY CAN MAKE THOUGHT-OUT DECISIONS WHEN IT COMES TO ELECTIONS.”

Community Conversation Participant

- **Positivity increased for 9 out of the 11 the words PACE retested from 2021 to 2023**, with an average positivity increase of 13 percentage points in two years. The two terms that did not see a positivity increase (*unity* and *diversity*) stayed relatively the same (within or close to the margin of error). PACE researchers were surprised to see this storyline emerge and will be digging into the data more to understand what factors might be driving the increase.
- **The terms that Americans perceive as bringing people together are also the terms that motivate them to civic action.** This finding flies in the face of conventional wisdom that negative messages and fear-based tactics are most effective in motivating people to action.
- **Americans have different reasons for feeling positive and negative towards civic terms.** The number one reason Americans told PACE they feel positive towards a civic term is that it aligns with their personal values. The reason they are negative towards a civic term is because politicians portray the term in a negative light—demonstrating the role politicians are playing in shaping our perceptions of and relationships with civic language.





Lessons Learned

The fundamental goal of the Arizona Civic Language Perceptions Project was to uncover if and how language matters in the field of civic engagement and democracy, and to begin to explore how it might inform and shape behavior and action. While the data was limited in its representation of Arizona’s communities and by its design prompted more questions than it could answer, it did provide a resounding yes—**that language does matter**. Participants responded consistently with interest, engagement, and emotion to the findings and echoed its value in deepening our understanding of who we are as Arizonans, as well as the implications for action.

However, we also learned that we do not share language in the civic engagement and democracy field in Arizona uniformly and that language does take shape very differently across the rich diversity of Arizona’s communities. We also learned that Arizona has some unique assets and nuances relative to the nation that are worth understanding and exploring further.

Ultimately, we learned through the process that there is power in language and it can be used to build bridges and sense of community, or also runs the risk of offending, shutting out, or deepening divisions. For those interested in strengthening democracy and civic life in Arizona, we hope this report contributes to a deeper understanding of who we are and a path forward to building The Arizona We Want.

Produced in Partnership



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PACE (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement), Citizen Data, Vitalyst Health Foundation (2022).
Civic Language Perceptions Project, National Survey and Arizona Oversample collected November 2021.

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