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# These Are The Words That Do (And Do Not) Persuade Americans, Study Shows

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Americans are mostly united in their love of the words *freedom*, *liberty* and *community* according to the latest data from the [PACE Civic Language Perceptions Project](#). They like *citizen* and *belonging* more today than they did two years ago, but *diversity* has fallen in favorability. Overall, Americans have a more favorable opinion of

Privacy - Terms

words that describe democracy than they do about words that describe civic engagement or racial equity.

These are the results of an extensive study conducted in 2023 by Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) in partnership with Citizen Data to understand how the language we use impacts public life, and how it is changing over time.

## Which words motivate certain actions?



Civic Language Perceptions Project Data Dashboard, PACE (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement) ... [+]

## The Results

These were the most effective words for motivating Americans...



- to help others: *community, service* and *belonging*.
- to stand up for a cause: *unity, equality* and *civility*.
- to vote: *freedom, American, citizen* and *liberty*.

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There were also clear trends among the types of terms that Americans liked and disliked:

- Democratic terms were viewed mostly favorably.
- Civic engagement terms had mixed favorability.
- Racial equity terms were less favorable.

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The reasons given for having positive feelings about any given term were primarily:

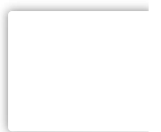
- personal values, and
- feelings about the future.

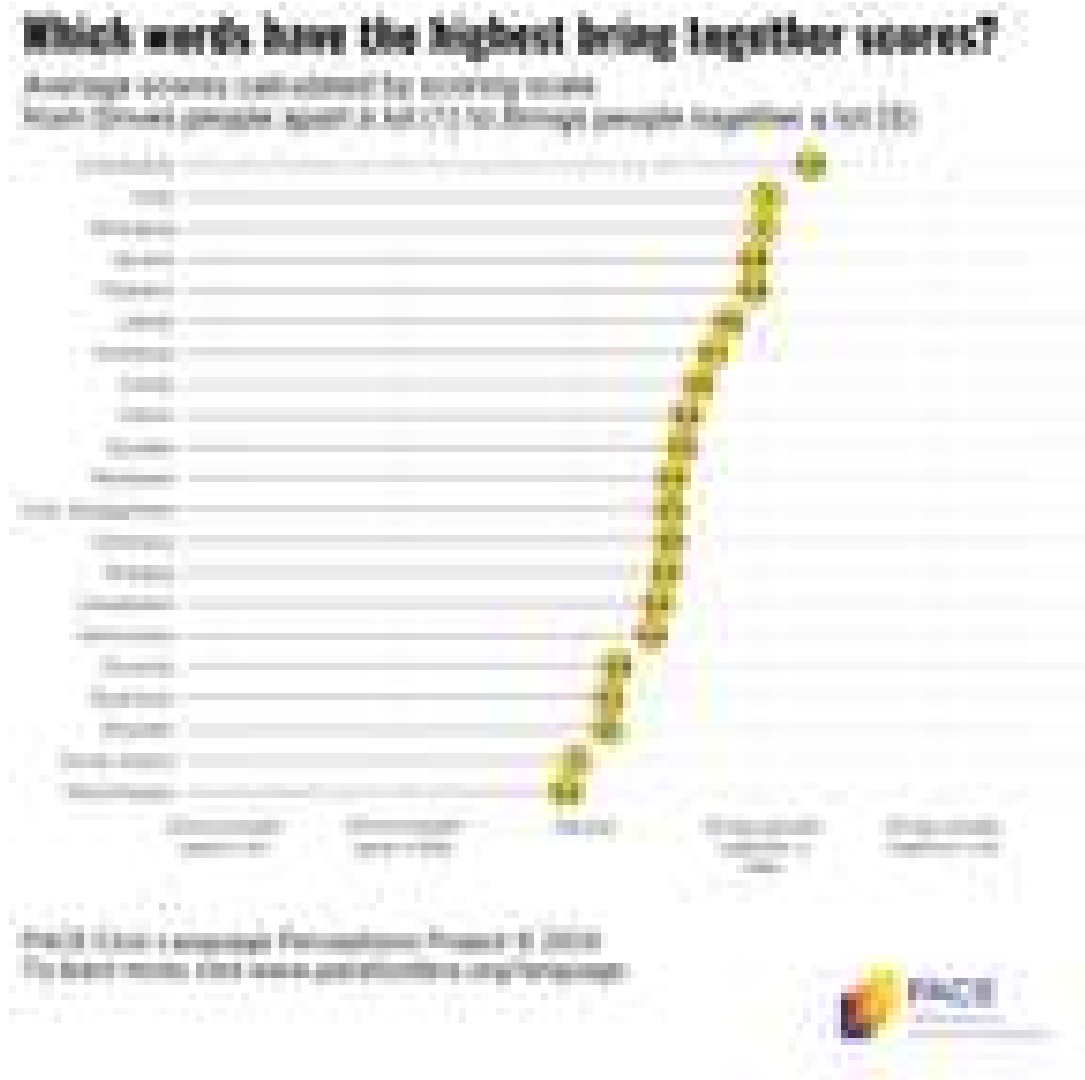
Reasons given for having negative feelings about a word were less decisive. The leading explanations were:

- politicians' use of the word,
- the people it made them think of,
- media portrayals, and
- feelings about the future.

One clear takeaway: avoid jargon and insider language.

“Political jargon has been found to be a turn off for everyday Americans, as it can send a signal that they don't belong,” [according to Amy McIsaac](#), Managing Director for Learning and Experimentation at PACE. “This may be why terms like “bridging,” “republic,” and “civic engagement” were not perceived as bringing people together according to our survey, earning less than 4 on a 5-point “bringing together” score.”





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## ***Patriotism* And What It Reveals About Us**

The PACE study was premised on the idea that certain words in civic life have become coded signals for partisan affiliations and identity. Many of the words tested revealed stark differences among Americans’ use of language depending upon their age, race and political ideology. The clearest example of this dynamic was the word *patriotism*.



By definition, patriotism is the quality of being supportive of, or devoted to, one's country. But the word invokes far more than that in contemporary politics and public life.

In the aggregate, Americans had a favorable view of the word *patriotism*, but when controlled for age an unmistakable pattern emerged. People over 75 had an overwhelmingly positive view of the word at 87%. That favorability fell precipitously with age, and only 43% of the the 18-24 year-old group had a positive view.

Race was also a key variable with white people reporting the highest favorability of the word *patriotism*.

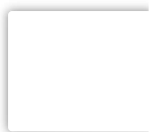
But the starkest divide was by political ideology. People who consider themselves "somewhat conservative" had the highest favorability of the word *patriotism* at 87% (slightly more than "very conservative") and the "very liberal" group had the lowest favorable opinion of the word at 33%.

Over the past two years, those numbers went up for conservatives and down for liberals. In other words, they become even more polarized. The most common reason that people who viewed *patriotism* unfavorably gave was that it made them think of people they dislike.

### **These Differences Are Rhetorical And Substantive**

The disparity in opinions about the word *patriotism* tracks with recent polling about American values. According to a 2023 [Gallup poll](#), Americans 55 and older were nearly 3 times more likely to be extremely prideful of their nationality than younger generations.

[Gallup](#) first asked this question almost 24 years ago. At the time, 55% of U.S. adults were extremely proud to be American. That number went up after the 9/11 attacks and then declined again a



few years later, but a majority of Americans expressed pride in American through 2017. After 2018, extreme pride dropped below 50% and stayed there, according to [Gallop](#).

The theories for this divergence of opinion are a matter of partisan contention, with liberals regularly making the case that young people are disillusioned about racial and economic inequality, failure to act on climate change, America's role in foreign conflicts and more. Conservatives, on the other hand, have been arguing that American schooling and culture is conditioning kids to feel ashamed of their national identity.

## **We Still Agree On A Few Things**

Underlying these differences is a disagreement about how Americans *should* be. In other words, what is the value of patriotism? Is it a worthy goal on its own or is it a necessary ingredient to greater ends like civic cooperation, problem-solving and neighborly relations?

The hidden good news in this study is that Americans are largely in agreement about some of those loftier aspirations — the greater ends of patriotism. *Community* was the third most popular word and it ranked as the most likely term to bring people together, with *unity* right behind it. It's also encouraging that these words are likely to spur action in the electorate.

“The more a term was perceived to bring people together, the more it was motivating Americans to action, according to McIsaac. “We can't say it's a cause and effect relationship, of course, but we can say that there is a correlation. In fact, the correlation coefficient is 0.62, which is considered strong.”

To be sure, America works better when we're motivated by a desire for unity than by opposition and hate.

There are a lot of red flags for American democracy in this study — starting with the apparent rise in distrust for the language around racial equity — but it’s not all bad news. The value of this information is that it empowers those who work in public life to invite everyone in and to speak in common terms, even as we disagree on the substance.

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