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New Findings: Evolving Language Related to Race, Gender and other Identities Generally Seen as Positive, but Opinions are Split on Pace of Change

Popular narrative around potentially divisive language ignores the fact that people from both sides of the political aisle want to get it right and are willing to learn

Bethesda, Maryland – Changes to language used to describe race, gender and other identities, as well as a variety of social issues, are seen as a positive and understandable evolution for most. But the pace at which this is happening concerns some, according to in-depth qualitative research released today from Bellwether Research and Burness, a mission-driven global communications firm. The online focus group discussion held earlier this year with a mixed partisan group of registered voters was designed to explore how people feel about increasingly common words and phrases, their thoughts on why newer terms emerge, where these words and phrases come from, and the speed at which they are expected to learn and adopt them.

“Several national surveys have explored whether people like or feel comfortable with certain terms, or whether they don’t,” said Andy Burness, founder and president of Burness. “We were interested in *why*, which is why we opted for in-depth conversations with a small group of people online over a period of two days. While not nationally representative, we feel the comments we heard helped uncover the nuance and complexity of perceptions of changing language in a way that ‘approve’ or ‘disapprove’ cannot.”

Participants were shown a number of words and terms, which included words like “marginalized,” “unsheltered,” “food insecure,” “racism,” and “equity” (the full listed is included below) before researchers probed their reactions. The most common objection to or feedback on newer terms is that they are too broad, confusing, awkward, and not more accurate than the existing terms. For example:

- Participants were asked to react to the word “homeless,” which until recently was the term in many style guides, but is now sometimes being replaced by “unhoused,” “unsheltered,” and/or “unhomed.” The phrases “unsheltered” and “unhomed” were more negatively rated than “unhoused”; that term and “homeless” were generally the preferred terms overall.
- When asked to react to the words “hunger,” “food insecurity,” and “living in a food desert” -- with the exception of Democratic women -- more participants disliked the terms “food insecurity” and “living in a food desert” than liked them; “hunger” received mixed responses. None were received positively overall. Asked why, some felt the terms were unclear, confusing or less impactful, and some thought they sounded awkward.
- When asked about the term “pregnant women,” “pregnant person,” and “people who give birth,” participants had an overwhelmingly positive impression of the term “pregnant women.” While Democratic women of color and a few other Democrats were open to all three terms, most were not. “Pregnant person” was generally preferred over “people who give birth.”

- “Civic participation” edged out “civic engagement” as the highest ranked term while “civic health” and “civil society” were viewed least positively. This was explained by some as feeling more passive than “participation” and “engagement.”
- When asked to react to “freedom,” “rights,” “liberty,” and “independence,” more than half of respondents had a positive view of all four terms.
- ⊘ Opinions about “equality,” “equity,” “justice,” and “fairness” were positive to neutral, with few people having strong negative views. A few expressed concern that “justice and fairness” could be subjective. Democratic women, Republican influencers, and younger adults ranked “equality” as more positive than “equity,” and only a few participants reacted negatively to “equity.”

Generally, concerns about emerging language and phrases were articulated as either being “clunky” or uncomfortable, overly “PC” or too abstract and making issues less concrete (e.g., “marginalized,” “food insecure” instead of “hungry”).

“We know that language is a powerful tool to change attitudes and opinions,” said Burness. “We weren’t simply looking for the most palatable language, but to understand which terms resonate and which raise questions or concerns. We learned that the way we use increasingly commonplace words on a range of social issues can land very differently based on your audience.”

“As a public opinion researcher, one of the most common things I hear is that people feel we have lost the ability to talk civilly across the partisan divide and they are unhappy about that,” said Christine Matthews, president of Bellwether Research. “What we found in this research is that no one was looking to incite or inflame with their choice of language and, in fact, they were more worried about saying the wrong thing. More than anything, this research showed how much people just want to get it right and to be shown grace when they don’t. They are willing to learn.”

As a Republican respondent noted, “It is the intention behind the words that gives them power. Crafted in a way with the intent to inspire, words can bring out the best in us, but crafted in a way to degrade or harm, words can wound and anger people.”

When asked “who” is driving language change, some respondents pointed to younger generations, while others acknowledged that culture and language are constantly evolving. The majority of participants agreed it’s good that people are working to update their language to be more inclusive, but a majority also felt it’s unclear what a well-meaning person can say without offending someone. More than half of respondents said the pace of change is happening “at about the right speed,” while 43 percent believe it is happening “too fast.”

Burness is one of the nation’s most experienced and largest communications firms promoting social justice and scientific progress, and Bellwether Research is a public opinion research firm with a broad range of policy and political clients. Together, they conducted research to better understand how emerging or increasingly common words and terms are received.

“We are living in a time of deep polarization, yet this research gives us a refreshing glimpse into how people can positively react to terms that could be seen as divisive,” said Burness. “It’s generally with more understanding and empathy than some of the national narrative might suggest. While this

research only captures a moment in time and draws on a small sample, it provides valuable insights into how people in the U.S. are thinking about changing language."

The acceptance of same-sex marriage and rights of lesbian, gay and bisexual citizens was the most commonly cited example of how people in the U.S. have become more accepting. At the same time, the most common struggle with new language cited by participants was with changing terms related to gender identity and pronouns. Without prompting, many raised that they did not want to be required to declare their pronouns (on Zoom calls, in email signatures, at work, etc.).

Participants raised these issues of language—and specifically pronoun use—even before researchers introduced the evolving language about pregnancy. Many reported struggling with changing pronouns and the use of “they/them”—even if they were supportive of emerging language. However, most respondents said they were trying to use pronouns for others correctly and typically feel they are forgiven when they unintentionally misgender someone.

The full findings, recommendations and methodology are available [here](#).

Tested terms were chosen for their current relevancy to social change communication and include:

- Homeless, Unhoused, Unsheltered, Unhomed
- Poor, Low Income, Underserved, Marginalized
- Hunger, Food insecurity, Living in a Food Desert
- Pregnant woman, Pregnant person, Person who gives birth
- Civic Engagement, Civic Health, Civil Society, Civic Participation
- Segregation, Discrimination, Racism, Structural or Systemic Racism
- Equality, Equity, Justice, Fairness
- Rights, Liberty, Freedom, Independence