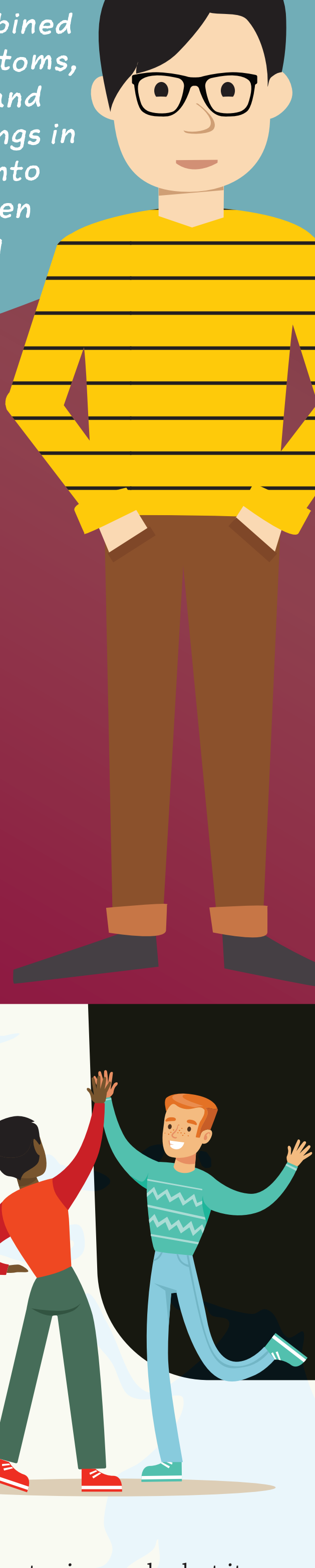


CIVICS, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND MUSEUMS, PART 1: INTRODUCTION

A 2023 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY

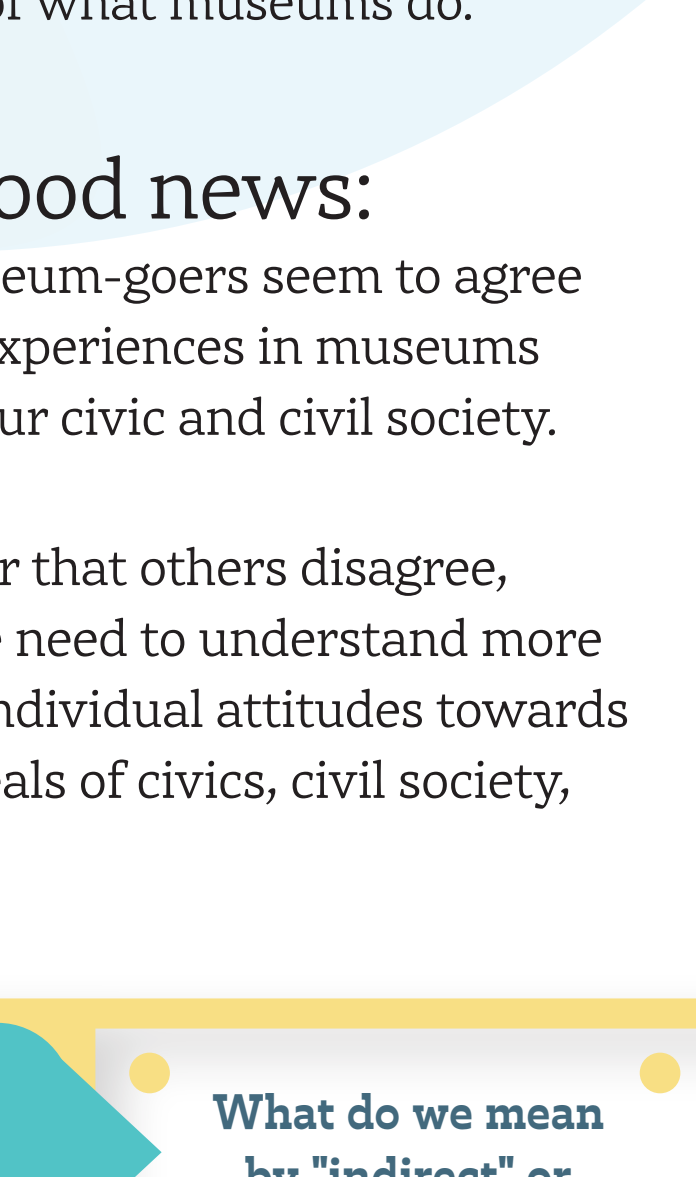
"The materials of a culture, combined with video and audio of their customs, make them so much more real and urgent. Without seeing those things in person, I wouldn't take them into consideration as seriously when I take civic action like voting or protesting."



Over the past few years, we have tackled some tricky topics, examining how different people have different values and attitudes around things like:

- Inclusion
- Climate change and conservation action
- Patriotism and democracy
- Trust
- Public health

Fundamentally, all of these topics have *civics and civil society* at their heart. How do we want to live as human beings in our communities? In our country? And on this planet?



The choices we make, the ways we connect with others (or not), and who is empowered to effect change--on virtually any topic--reflects our individual and collective capacity to engage both civically and civilly with other humans.

And all of these topics, and what it means for us individually and collectively, are often seen by those of us who work in the museum field as at the heart of what museums do.

The good news:

most museum-goers seem to agree that the experiences in museums support our civic and civil society.

But it is also clear that others disagree, which means we need to understand more about differing individual attitudes towards the ideas and ideals of civics, civil society, and museums.

In the 2023 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, there were five questions that examined, either indirectly or directly, attitudes about civics and civil society among museum-goers. In this Data Story, we'll share those overall results, and then explore the nuance in follow-up Data Stories.

What do we mean by "indirect" or "direct" questions?

An **indirect** question is typically broad, but has answer choices that tell us who feels strongly about specific things. If we wanted to know who was really interested in, say, mushrooms, we might ask "what types of exhibitions would interest you?" and include eight or so different topics, including mushrooms. Respondents don't know we are specifically interested in the mushroom response, and they make their choices (for this reason, we typically put indirect questions near the beginning of the survey, so we don't tip our hand). And now we know who probably has a decent interest in mushrooms, because they selected it!

A **direct** question is one that the respondent can tell what we are interested in learning (so we tend to put these in the back half of the survey). For example, "would you be interested in an exhibition on mushrooms?" In this case, we would likely record some false positives, with some respondents who are merely OK with the topic indicating sure, they'd be interested. But what it really tells us is who *isn't* interested, because they said "nope."

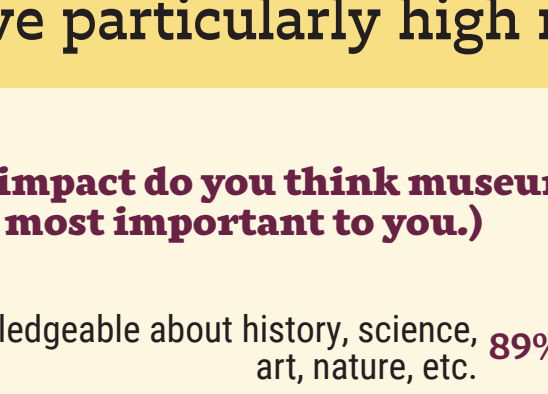
Using a mixture of indirect and direct questions helps us get a more accurate read on what people think, because we can use the indirect to find those with the strongest interest, the direct to find those with little/no interest, and also identify those who may be more ambivalent.

So, what was the mixture of questions we used in the 2023 survey? We started off with Indirect Questions.

Question 1:

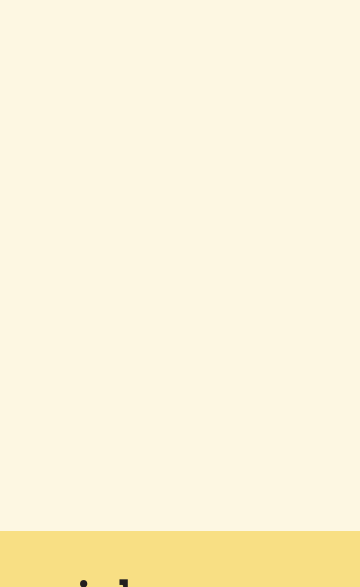
Respondents were asked to identify the most important ways they thought museums should share content with visitors (they could pick as many as they wanted). We're interested in one of the answer choices:

"Promoting cohesive democracy and civility in our communities"

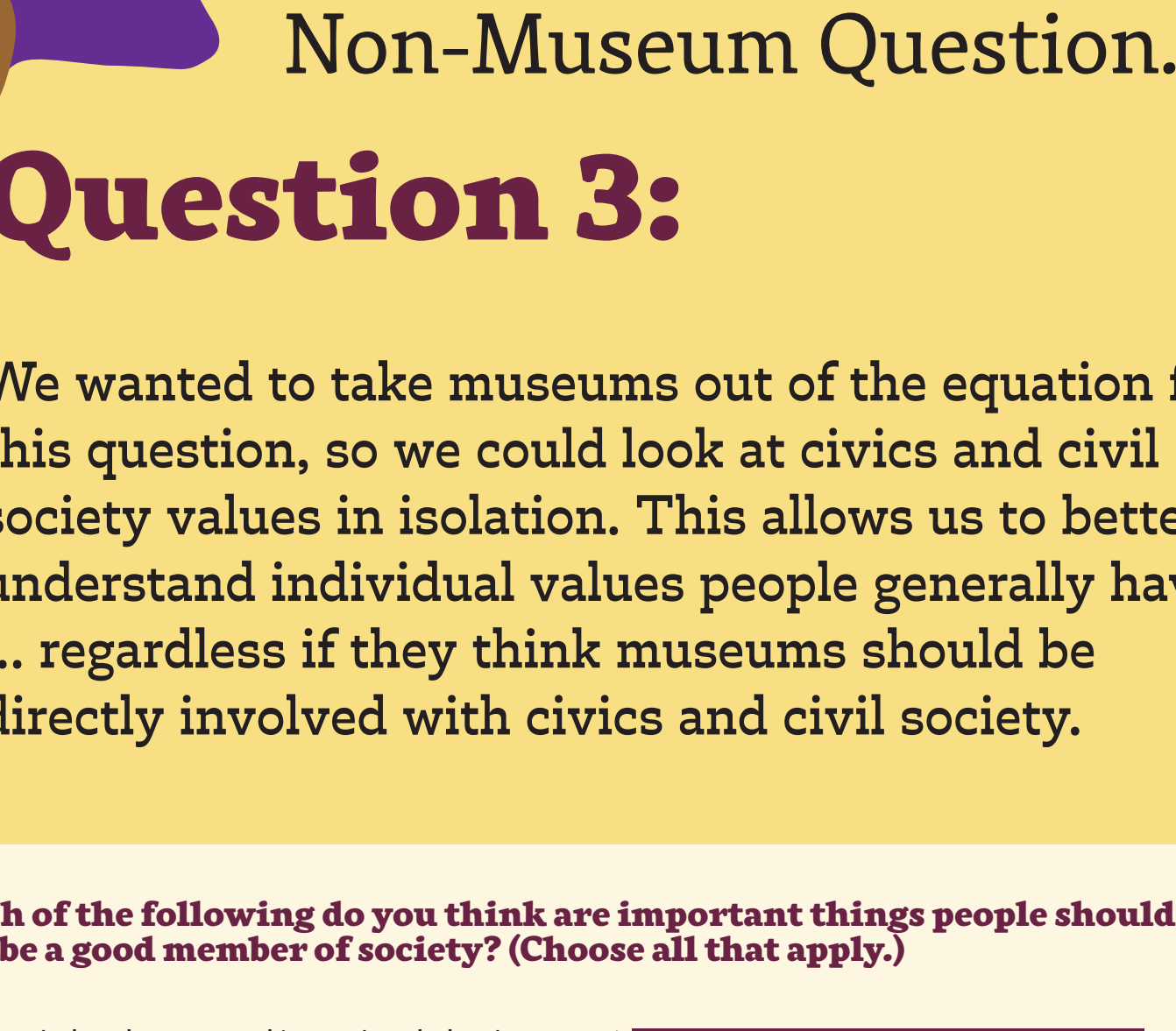


Question 2:

Later, we used a question about impact to see who connected museums and community ... and who just skipped over those answers entirely. As you can see, the community-related answers did not have particularly high responses.



What kind of impact do you think museums have had in your life? (Choose those that are most important to you.)



While these low percentages might seem disappointing, they actually aren't terribly unusual for indirect questions. But they do help us identify those who are most enthusiastic about these ideas.

Then, we asked a Non-Museum Question.

Question 3:

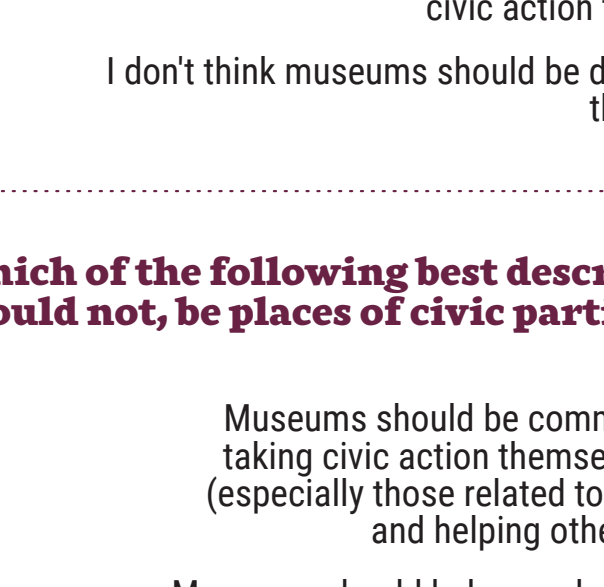
We wanted to take museums out of the equation for this question, so we could look at civics and civil society values in isolation. This allows us to better understand individual values people generally have ... regardless if they think museums should be directly involved with civics and civil society.

Which of the following do you think are important things people should do to be a good member of society? (Choose all that apply.)



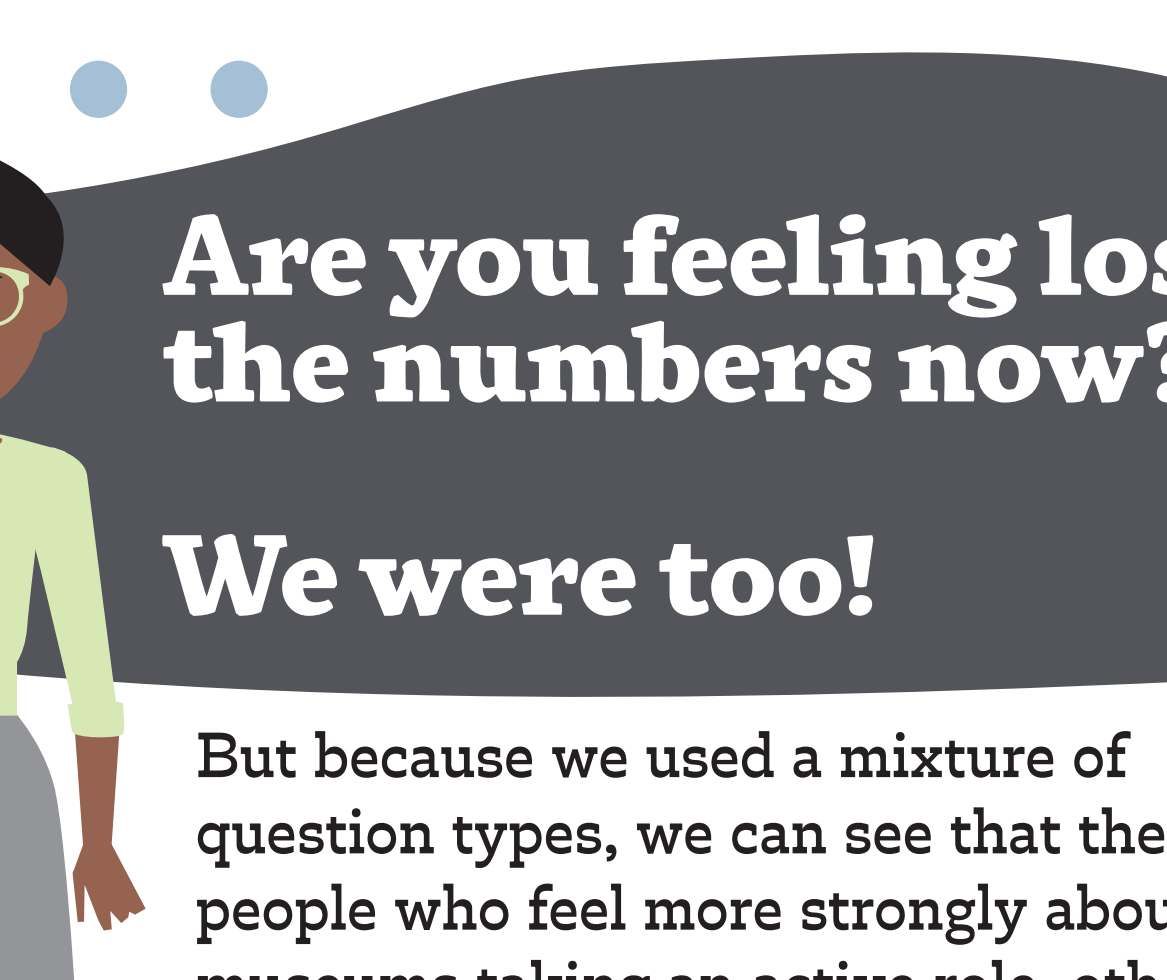
Here, we see pretty strong enthusiasm for many of the ideas we shared about civil society.

To bring museums directly into the mix we asked two Direct Questions.

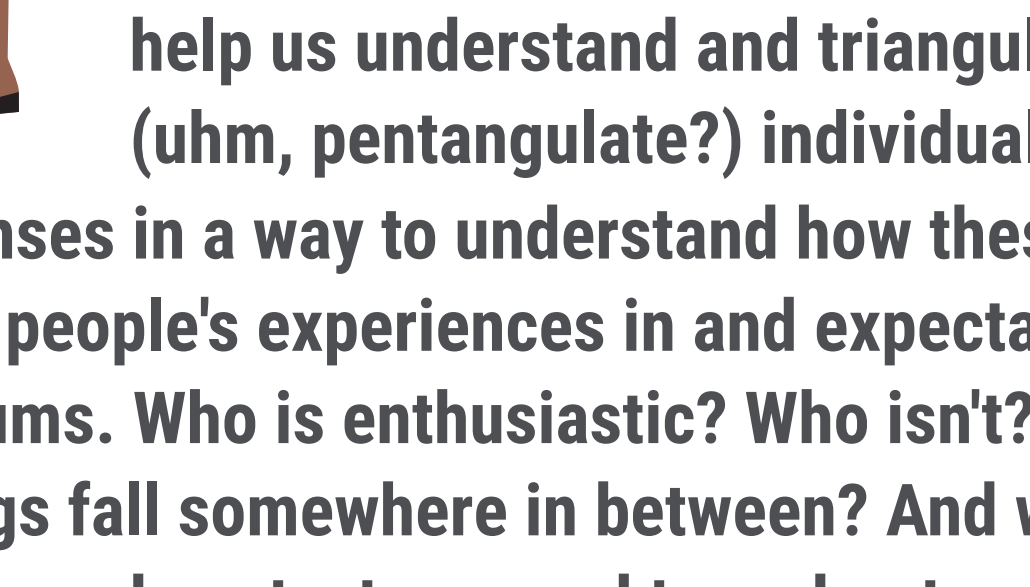


For these questions, most respondents found answer choices they liked. But as you can see, roughly 1 in 5 respondents gave what could be considered "hard no" responses.

What role should museums play in building a civil society you want to be a part of? (Choose all that apply.)



Which of the following best describes how you think museums should, or should not, be places of civic participation?



Are you feeling lost in the numbers now?

We were too!

But because we used a mixture of question types, we can see that there are people who feel more strongly about museums taking an active role, others who simply don't think it is our job, and a lot who feel somewhere in between.

What we need, however, is a tool that will help us understand and triangulate (uhm, pentangulate?) individual responses in a way to understand how these values affect people's experiences in and expectations of museums. Who is enthusiastic? Who isn't? Whose feelings fall somewhere in between? And what's the nuance and context we need to understand this more thoroughly?

And our next Data Story is going to explore the tool we developed and what we learned.

Stay tuned!

