

TRUST AND RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNITY, PART 2: RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNITY

A 2025 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY



OVER THE PAST several years, we have asked a lot of questions about how museums can better engage or serve the community.

And, consistently, we received pushback from about 10 - 20% of museum-goers saying this is "not your job" and to "stay in your lane."

To be honest, we've always found this somewhat puzzling. Since virtually all museums are either nonprofit organizations or part of a government entity, serving the public is core to our work. So, why the pushback?

Last year, however, there were a handful of written-in comments that had a new take. In fact, we shared a couple in our Data Story: **Museum and Community: Perceptions and Engagement.**

"The museum has unfortunately become a community center."

"Community engagement ... often detracts from the mission. Drop the 'woke' and pick up the painting."

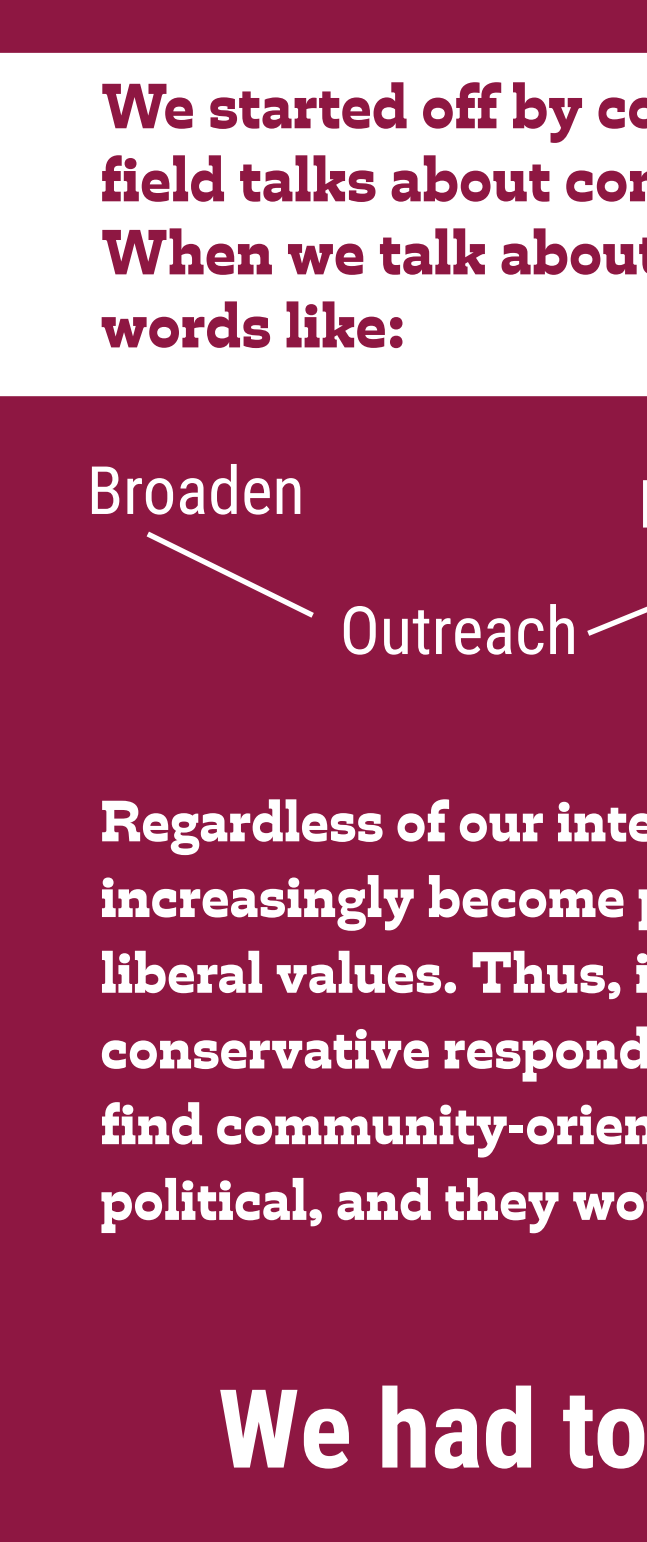


It was a lightbulb moment. A connection was being made between "community" and inclusion, and "woke" was being used as a pejorative to dismiss these efforts. They were suggesting that museums were using "community" to cover up a liberal political agenda.

To be clear, serving your community is not a political act.

But it's important to consider why some individuals pushed back on this.

When we were writing the 2025 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, we thought long and hard about these comments.

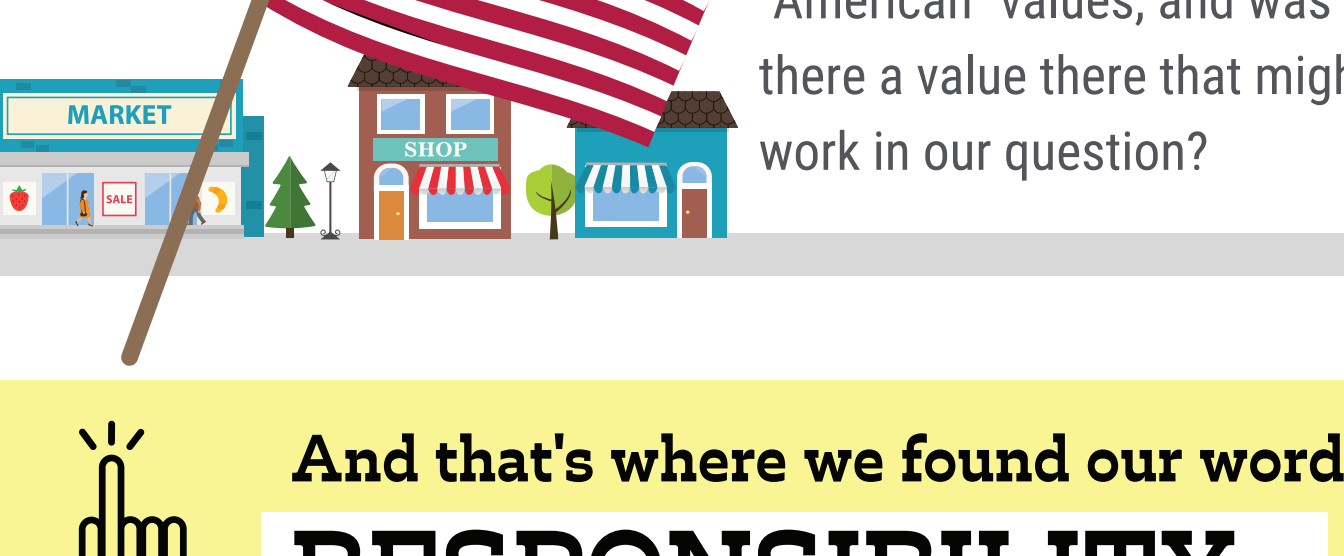


In particular, we wanted to sort out if this was an issue of what museums were *doing* or how museums *talk* about what they do.

And if the issue was language, was it the word *community*, or the words we tend to use *around* the word community?

Could we write a community-focused question that would *not* receive the political pushback our previous questions had engendered?

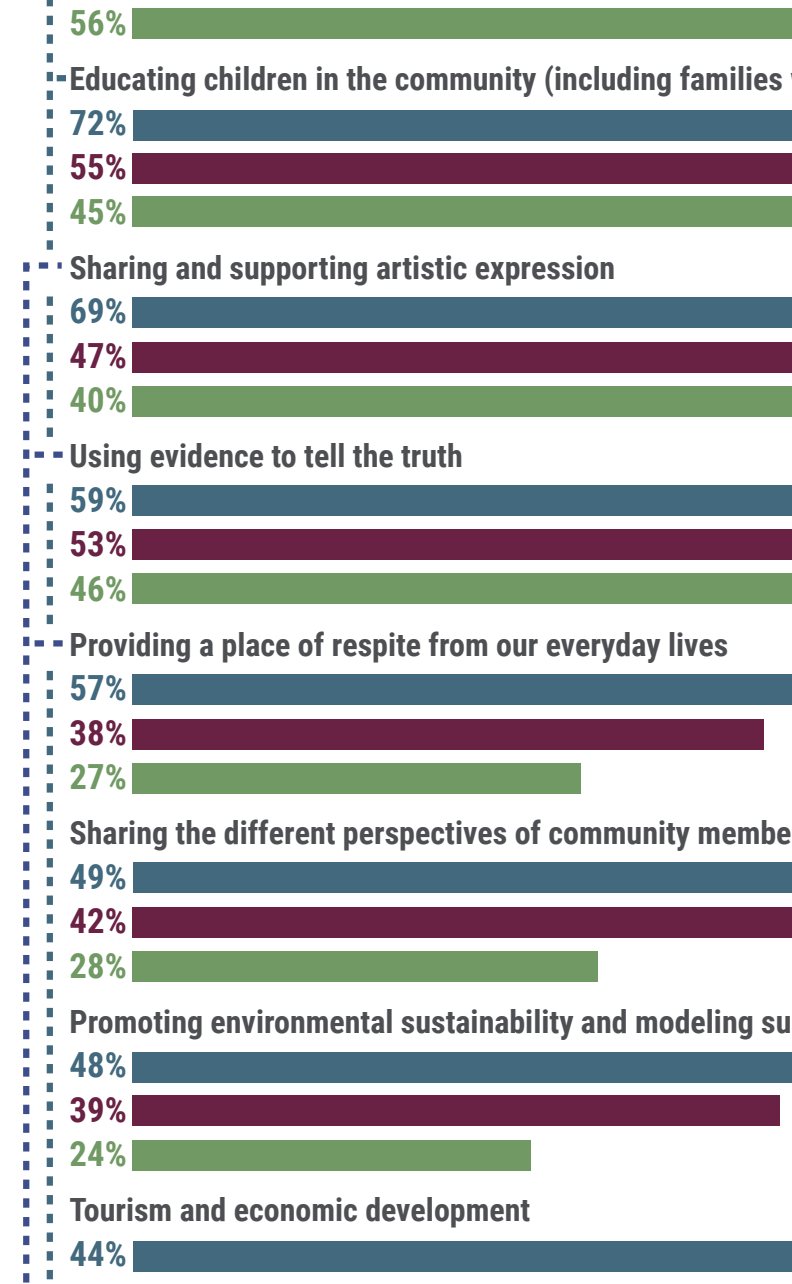
We started off by considering how the museum field talks about community in the first place. When we talk about community, we tend to use words like:



Regardless of our intentions, these words have increasingly become polarized as words aligned with liberal values. Thus, it is less surprising that some conservative respondents (and some moderates) would find community-oriented questions using those words political, and they would respond in kind.

We had to start from scratch.

Keeping the word "community" was important to us, and we didn't actually think that word was the issue. To frame the question, we drew on previous research we fielded examining history museums and the founding of the United States.



In particular, what did conservatives see as "American" values, and was there a value there that might work in our question?



And that's where we found our word: **RESPONSIBILITY.**

Responsibility is a word that conservatives identify strongly with, but liberals and moderates don't perceive in particularly political terms. It also worked well for our question:



What do you think are the responsibilities of museums to their communities?

Did it work?

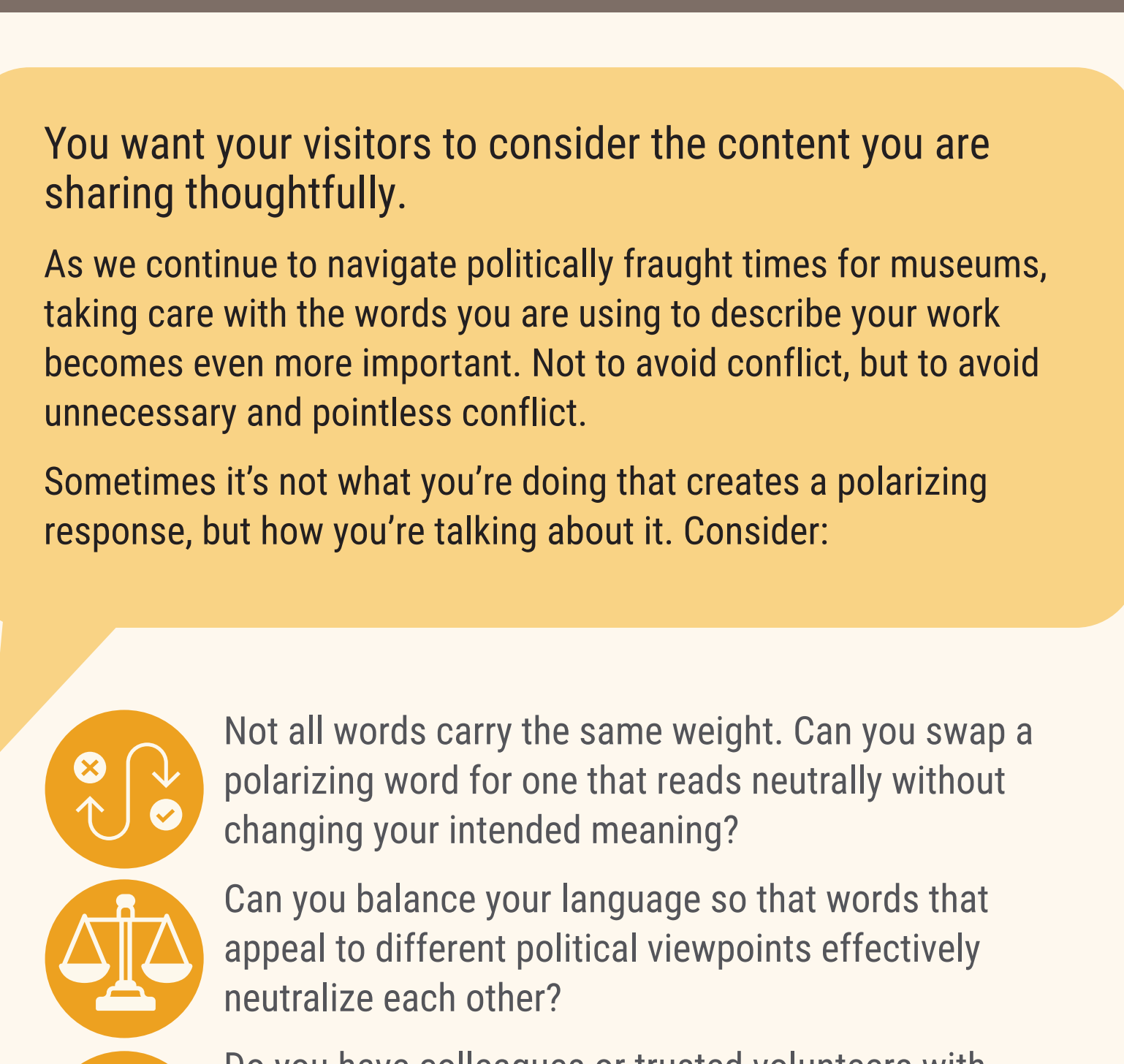
Our first test was to look to see what percentage of respondents said "none of these." A response of 10% or more would mean it was a **polarizing** question, while a response of less than 5% would mean it was a **neutral** question that read as non-partisan.

Less than 1% of frequent museum-goers said "none of these."

And scarcely anyone wrote in an "other" response either. Not only did the question work, but it worked extremely well.



What do you think are the responsibilities of museums to their communities? (Choose all that apply.)



Our answer choices were similar to those we've used in the past. Overwhelming majorities of frequent museum-goers chose "preservation of community history, objects, and stories" as well as "educating children in the community." Those responses make sense because they embody the strengths and missions of most museums.

"Sharing and supporting artistic expression" performs strongly as well (and does even better among art museum respondents), as does "using evidence to tell the truth" and "providing a place of respite from our everyday lives."

Overall, casual and sporadic visitors were also enthusiastic, choosing several options (and scarcely any said "none of these").¹

Whether a question is asked directly or indirectly matters when interpreting results. For example, take a look at these two responses and their results:

Sharing the different perspectives of community members

Promoting environmental sustainability and modeling sustainable behaviors

This question functions as an indirect measure of attitudes toward inclusion and sustainability. Because we are not asking directly about these topics, respondents selected what felt most important to them in that moment. Those who chose them likely value them highly, but what about those who did not? Well, we don't know. Their thoughts could range from mildly supportive to ambivalent to against. All we do know is they don't feel strongly supportive about it in this context.

When we ask directly about these topics, however, we tend to receive far more positive responses.²

What's the truth, then? Probably somewhere in the middle, which is why we don't use a single question to assess people's values on these topics, but a mix of questions to create a spectrum.

Our conclusion is that the word "community" has not become polarized in the way we initially feared. That was a bit of a red herring.

Instead, we discovered that words associated with community (outreach, engage, serve, etc.) seem to have been stigmatized in a political way.

When thinking about your work, and considering pushback, there are two things to consider:

- 1) The words that you are using to describe your work
- 2) The actual work and how people will respond (we may have data about that!)

In the case of our earlier surveys, at least for some respondents, #1 (the words) was coming into play before #2 (the work) could even be considered.

You want your visitors to consider the content you are sharing thoughtfully.

As we continue to navigate politically fraught times for museums, taking care with the words you are using to describe your work becomes even more important. Not to avoid conflict, but to avoid unnecessary and pointless conflict.

Sometimes it's not what you're doing that creates a polarizing response, but how you're talking about it. Consider:

Not all words carry the same weight. Can you swap a polarizing word for one that reads neutrally without changing your intended meaning?

Can you balance your language so that words that appeal to different political viewpoints effectively neutralize each other?

Do you have colleagues or trusted volunteers with different political values that can help you identify polarizing language before it goes public?

Getting the language right matters. We'll keep sharing what we've learned about language this year.

There's more to consider, however. In a time of misinformation, disinformation, AI slop, and more, credibility becomes more important. And we'll examine that in our next Data Story.

Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include: 2025 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 98,904; 2022 museums participating; 2025 Broader Population Sampling, n = 2,079; 2017 - 2024 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers.