



Equal Opportunity: Where American Voters Are Today



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Chrissie McHenry, Managing Principal, Raben

Chrissie McHenry is a managing principal in Raben's Strategic Communications practice, joining the firm after holding senior positions at corporate, nonprofit, and media organizations. She brings a journalist's eye to her work, coupled with robust experience supporting the communications efforts of hundreds of community development organizations.

Chrissie was previously the senior vice president of public relations at NeighborWorks America, a national housing and community development organization chartered by Congress that leads a network of almost 250 independent, local nonprofits nationwide. Chrissie provided strategic communications counsel to the NeighborWorks CEO and to colleagues in four regional offices. She also provided high-level communications support to the leadership of network organizations around crisis communications and reputation management, nonprofit governance, and overall visibility, including politically sensitive stakeholder and funder messaging and outreach.

Prior to joining NeighborWorks, Chrissie was director of communications, community, and corporate responsibility for Fannie Mae, working extensively in crisis communications, reputational risk, community relations, and managing diversity communications for the company. Throughout the foreclosure crisis of the late 2000s, Chrissie worked to help homeowners facing foreclosure and the communities where they lived weather the financial storm of the Great Recession.

For much of her career, Chrissie was a broadcast journalist covering politics for several leading news organizations, including as the senior producer of Washington Week with Gwen Ifill on PBS and in various roles with CBS News, ABC News Nightline, and PBS's NewsHour.

Chrissie sits on the boards of Fairwinds — Nantucket's Behavioral Health Center, the Nantucket Boys and Girls Club, and the Global Electronics Council. She splits her time between Washington, D.C., and New England. In her spare time, Chrissie enjoys needlepoint and plans to eventually walk the Appalachian Trail (despite the skepticism of her three children). She holds a bachelor's degree from Tufts University in Political Science and French.





Research Scope + Methodology

Qualitative

Bellwether Research conducted a representative national survey of 3,012 voters online June 16 - 21, 2025. The full sample was balanced to approximate a target sample of U.S. registered voters based on the Current Population Survey (CPS Census). The data was weighted by age, gender, race, education, Hispanic ethnicity, and geographic Census region. An additional oversample of 200 AAPI voters was obtained between June 20 - 21, 2025. This oversample was balanced to approximate a target sample of AAPI voters in the U.S. based on the CPS Census. The oversample was weighted by age, gender, education, and geographic Census region.

Quantitative

Bellwether Research and Hart Research conducted 10 focus groups prior to the national survey. Specifically, we spoke to the following populations: White suburban women (2 groups), Black men under 40, Latina women, Latino men (2 groups), Men who voted for Biden in '20 and Trump in '24, White men who listen to the Joe Rogan podcast, Community college students, and Young men from Northern Virginia.

Each firm conducted a Qualboard following the survey. Hart Research participants were men under the age of 45 and Bellwether Research convened independent voters who split their vote between Harris and Trump in '24.

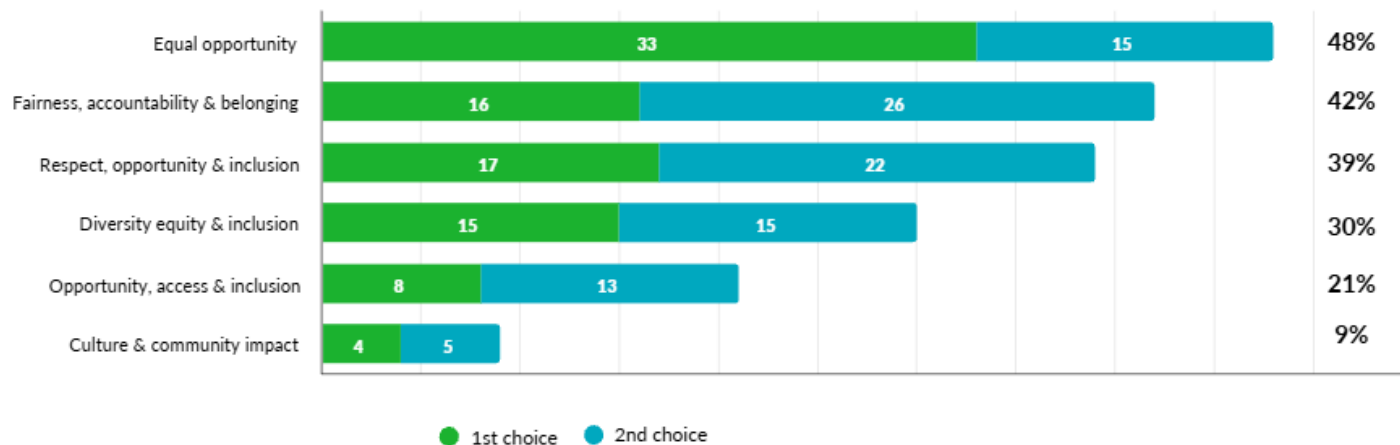
Key Findings

- The values of diversity, equity, and inclusion continue to poll well.
- Voters are much more familiar with the acronym “DEI” than they were in 2024, and a majority have a positive view of it—driven by strong favorable movement among Democrats this year.
- Unlike issues such as Social Security or Medicare, we found that DEI has an advocate problem. Few of those who may have benefitted are willing to directly step up to say that. We heard them say "who knows," if DEI may have helped them, or more commonly, emphasize their own agency in terms of hard work or qualifications.



To describe an organization's goals, voters prefer "Equal Opportunity" over "DEI"

The following are some phrases that could describe a company's organizational goals. Which, if any, do you prefer?



- However, voters do not believe that equal opportunity and DEI are direct synonyms, with many proposing that there are instances of DEI that directly contradict equal opportunity.
- DEI is not given credit for positive changes in the workplace. Too often, voters say that enhancements are just a natural evolution - a changing of the times - or something that individual companies or leaders did that was based on common sense.
- Liberals are the only group among whom diversity, equity & inclusion is at parity with equal opportunity; all other groups strongly prefer equal opportunity.
 - In our discussions, the strongest supporters were white Democratic suburban women who supported DEI on behalf of others.





Targets of Discrimination



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Key Findings

- One of the most noteworthy findings in this research is that voters across the political spectrum told us - through the survey and in discussions - that they believe groups facing significant bias and discrimination in hiring today are:
 - People with physical disabilities
 - Older adults over 50
 - People with mental health challenges
- Democrats and younger people - more than Republicans and older adults - also rank LGBTQ and Black adults as experiencing high levels of discrimination.
- DEI is seen as helping Black and LGBTQ adults, but not those with physical disabilities, older adults, or those with mental health challenges.

Perception of Who DEI Helps vs Hurts

When thinking about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, which of the following groups—if any—do you think they help?

Group	% Say Faces Bias/Discrimination in Hiring	% Say DEI Helps	Gap (Bias - Help)
Older adults over 50	45%	20%	25
People with mental health issues	44%	21%	23
People with health issues	39%	20%	19
People with a physical disability	50%	32%	18





Message Testing



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Key Findings

- Democrats and allies like heated messages that are strongly critical of the motives and actions of those who oppose DEI, but a more level tone proves more effective with everyone else.
- And there are arguments that can be made that have bi-partisan support. Among them are these themes:
 - Government should not be telling private companies what to do on DEI. If a company thinks it's good for their business, that's their choice.
 - We can't erase history or only tell a version of American greatness. History is history - we can't learn from our mistakes if we don't acknowledge them.
 - DEI cuts to medical research that focus on specific populations imperil people's health.



Key Findings

- We tested ten messages with men under 45 and independents divided between Harris and Trump, both groups aligned on these top three messages:
 - DEI isn't just about race or gender. It helps level the playing field so everyone has a real chance to succeed, including people with disabilities, veterans and those from low income backgrounds.
 - DEI doesn't replace merit. It helps ensure people from all backgrounds get a fair chance to be considered based on their skills.
 - DEI programs aren't perfect. But the solution isn't to get rid of them. It's to improve them so they actually live up to their promise.



Some messages fall flat and should be avoided:

- Messaging on systemic barriers and unconscious bias triggers backlash from Republicans and is only neutral with Democrats
- “There’s room for everyone” is one of the lowest testing messages and may feel tone-deaf in a tough job market.



Message Summary: Government-Funded Programs and Research

- We can't just tell a version of history that reflects only American greatness. Telling the truth isn't anti-American. History is history - the good, bad and ugly - and our children need to learn the truth so they don't risk making the same mistakes.
- We should not try to whitewash our history by eliminating the stories of people like Jackie Robinson or Harriet Tubman. They did achieve something important and the color of their skin was part of that. The government is trying to erase whole groups of people - women, people of color, LGBTQ people and native Americans who have made history or served our country and that is wrong.
- The United States is known as the world's leader in scientific research. The work from universities or federal labs on everything from cancer to climate change is in jeopardy because it may include words like "race" or "gender" or "diversity" which could trigger a funding cut in an effort to root out DEI. We can't wage a war on DEI that hurts science and research.
- DEI initiatives in education, research, and public health help ensure that programs are tailored to the specific needs of all populations, including women, racial and ethnic minorities, low-income people, rural communities, veterans and people with disabilities. If this work is ended, it will impact everyone's health and well-being.



Message Summary: Organizations and Businesses

- The U.S. is diverse and so are the customers of many businesses. If a company wants to appeal to different types of customers, then it makes sense for their team to be diverse too. This is why successful large corporations like Apple, Walmart and Costco say their DEI programs help them compete and it's why their shareholders have overwhelmingly rejected proposals to eliminate these policies.
- Our company focuses on inclusion - making sure everyone is given consideration in hiring and promotions and when they are part of our team, that they feel valued and respected. As a result, our employees are more engaged, satisfied, and likely to stay with the company.
- It is in a company's best interest to hire a diverse team. Diverse teams bring together different perspectives and experiences, leading to more creative problem-solving and innovative solutions.
- Companies should get to decide what they want to do without government interference. If a company wants to have diversity, equity and inclusion programs that's fine, but it's also fine if a company chooses not to. Businesses know their employees and customers best, not the government.





The Future of DEI



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Who People Want to Hear From

- Effective messengers speak authentically from experience
- Personal experience builds trust. Real stories and practical examples help audiences connect and see the messenger as credible.
- Tone is critical. Swing voters are especially sensitive to emotional tone. If a speaker sounds angry or resentful, the message can feel like a personal vendetta and get dismissed as a “rant” or “bitterness.”
 - Avoid speculating on others’ motives. Saying things like “my boss was jealous” can sound petty and distract from the core message
 - On emotional content, messengers should stick to what happened and how it affected them to keep the message grounded and relatable
- Connect to bigger picture. Use data, statistics, or examples of how others are affected to show it’s not an isolated incident. This helps the audience see the relevance and scale of the issues.



What do voters want to see prioritized in the future?

- Transparency in pay and hiring practices
- Programs to improve accessibility for both people with and without disabilities
- Employer paid emergency childcare to help with working parents
- Veteran hiring programs
- More networking opportunities, especially for people who do not come from privileged backgrounds
- Programs that increase attention to rural areas that are underserved and under resourced
- Paid leave for caregivers
- Programs designed to ensure the government and large corporations purchase products and services from people from a variety of backgrounds





Conclusions and Opportunities



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- Support for diversity, equity, and inclusion is shifting—and so must the way we talk about it. By acknowledging that these efforts aren't perfect and that gaps remain, we can ground our language in authenticity and reimagine diversity, equity, and inclusion in ways that feel more meaningful and relevant.
- The American public firmly believes in the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and that programs that advance these values should continue to exist.
- Voters too often associate diversity, equity, and inclusion programs as a replacement for merit in the hiring and promotions process. They also overlook how these programs benefit both individuals and organizations by creating greater transparency, respect, and belonging for all team members. Expanding how these benefits are perceived and understood are key areas of opportunity.
- Those we traditionally think of as benefiting from diversity, equity, and inclusion programs don't attribute their opportunities or achievements to "DEI," instead they point to their own hard work and agency.



- Acknowledging our country's history, while also noting how much progress has been made, resonates broadly with the public. People respond favorably to the notion that while progress has been made, there are still challenges to overcome.
- Overly polarized messages, such as ones that say the attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion border on censorship or seek to take us back to the 1950s, are ineffective with voters.
- The notion that diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and programs exist to ensure we correct past and existing injustices and unfair practices is one of the most polarizing messages. While this message may resonate with some Black audiences, it does not land well with other voters.
- Call out diversity, equity, and inclusion opponents for using government overreach to police law-abiding private entities. This message works especially well with more conservative voters who philosophically oppose a heavy-handed role for government.
- Frame diversity, equity, and inclusion opponents as "dividers" to align with the public's fatigue with division and polarization and their support for the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.





Thank You!



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