

Museums *and* Trust

SPRING 2021



American
Alliance of
Museums



Wilkening Consulting

audience research | knowledge curation

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In our polarized country, trust has eroded significantly.

Historically, museums have been highly trusted institutions.

Is that still true?



The answer is yes.





Research Methodology

BROADER POPULATION SURVEY

- Fielded May 2021
- Sample purchased from Alchemer
- N = 1,206 (1,003 completes + 203 useful partials)

Demographically, the sample closely represents the US adult population by age, educational attainment, and race and ethnicity



IN THIS RESEARCH DECK:

 Overall Results

 Values, Behaviors, and Demographic Lenses

 Museum-going behaviors

 Perceptions of neutrality

 Inclusion

 Race and ethnicity

 Political values



Overall Results

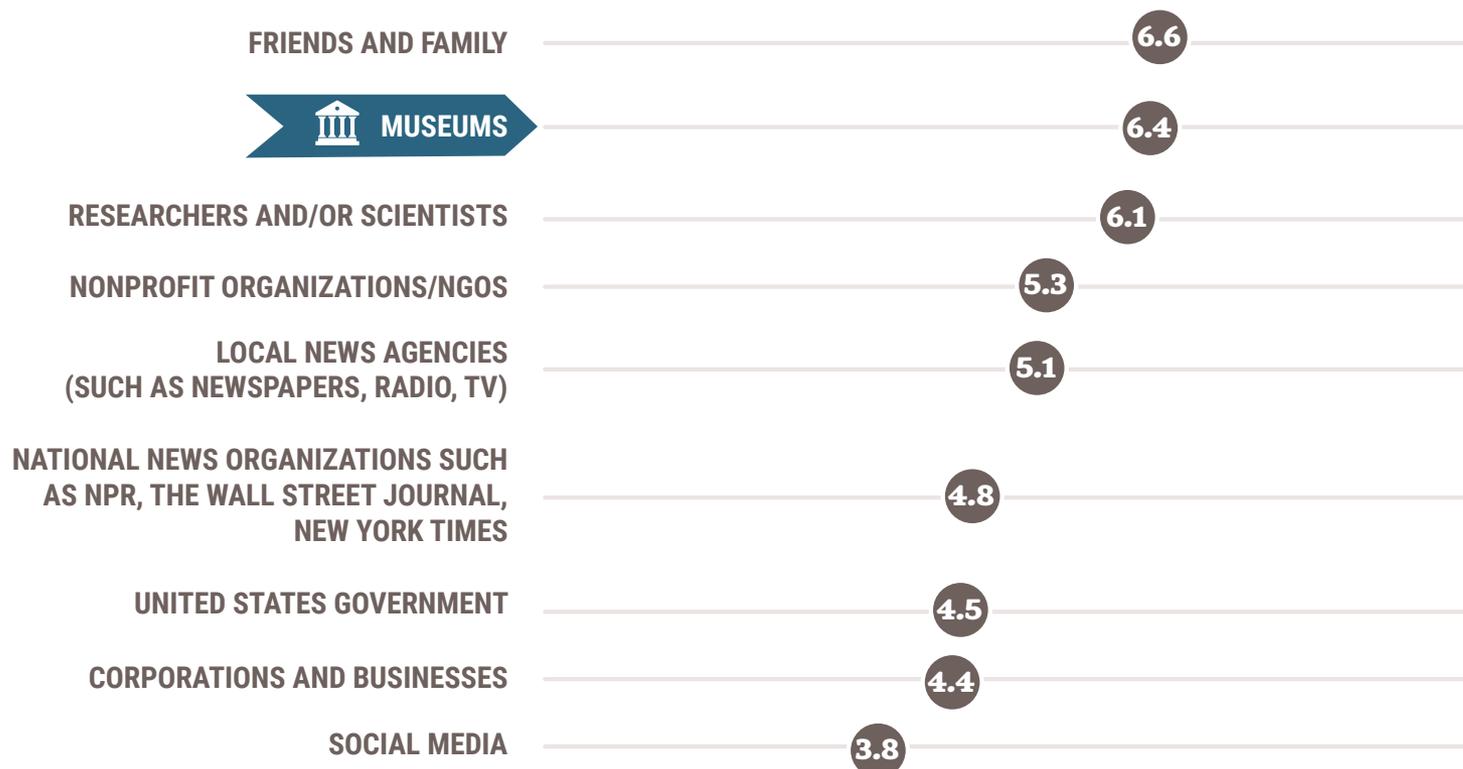
To get started, let's explore the overall results to see how museums rank on the trust scale.





How trustworthy do you find ...

(respondents indicated on a scale of 0 to 10; average scores presented)



OVERALL AVERAGE: **5.1**



How trustworthy do you find ...

(respondents indicated on a scale of 0 to 10; average scores presented)



(Statistically, all these museum types are virtually tied)

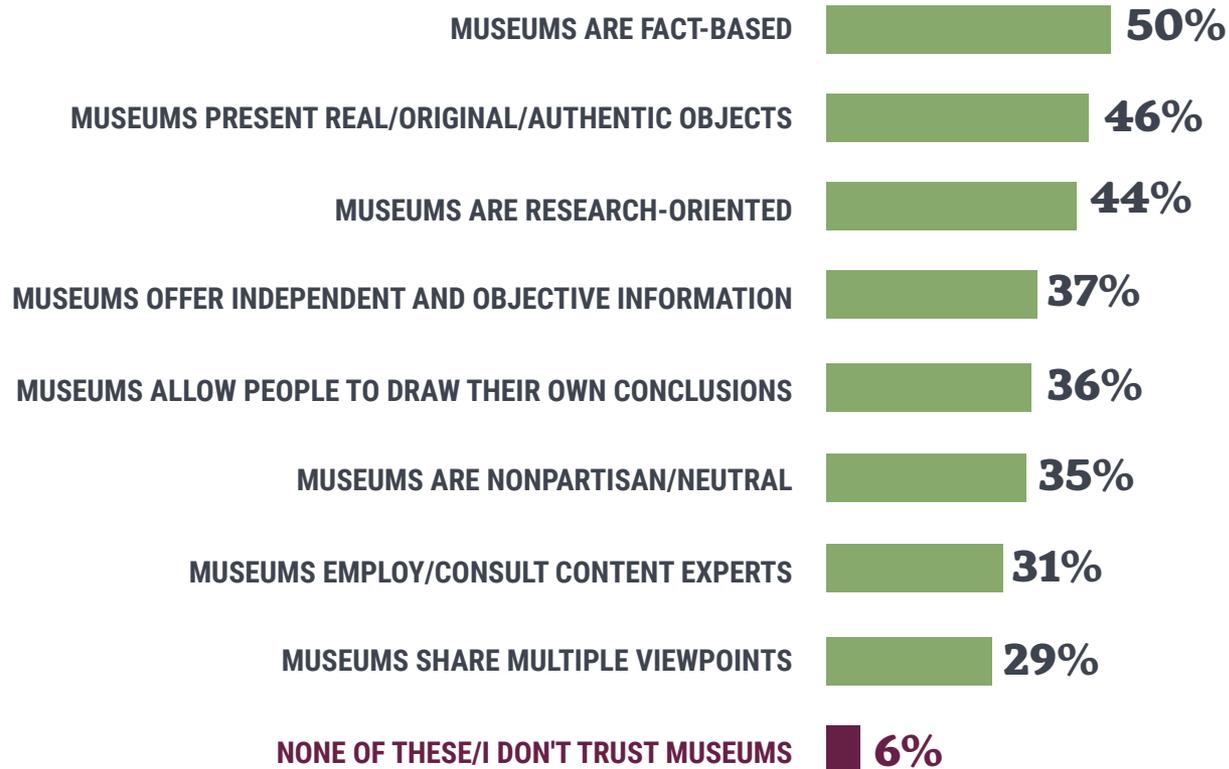
OVERALL AVERAGE: 6.6

**But what contributes to
their trust in museums?**





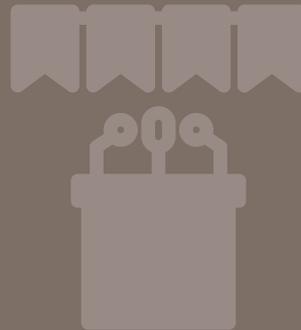
Reasons people gave that **contribute** to trust in museums:



Overall, the trust in museums seems to be rooted in a perception that museums are (or should be) fact-based and non-partisan ... and thus “neutral.”

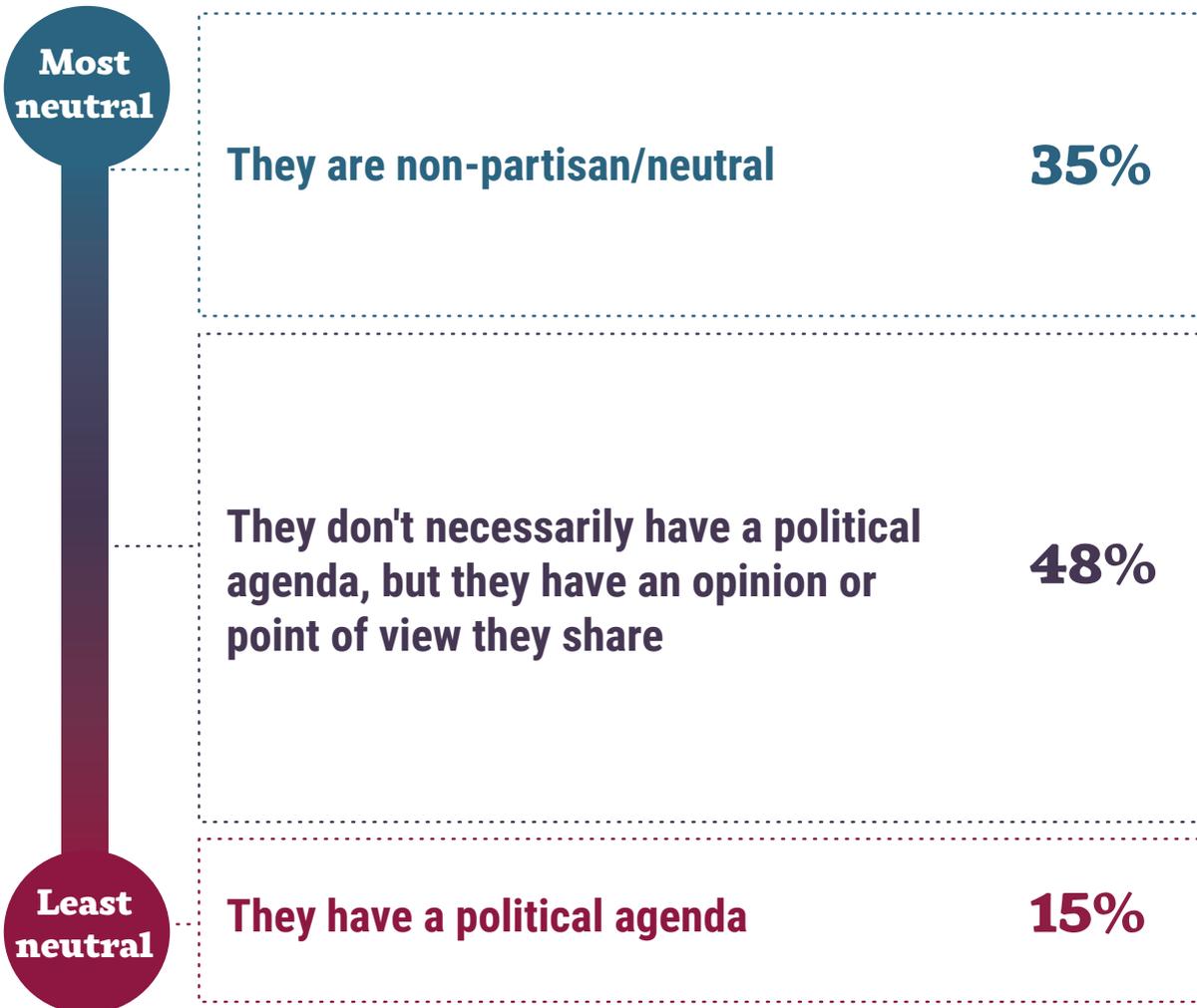


And for many members of the public,
social issues are wrapped up in politics,
and therefore partisan.



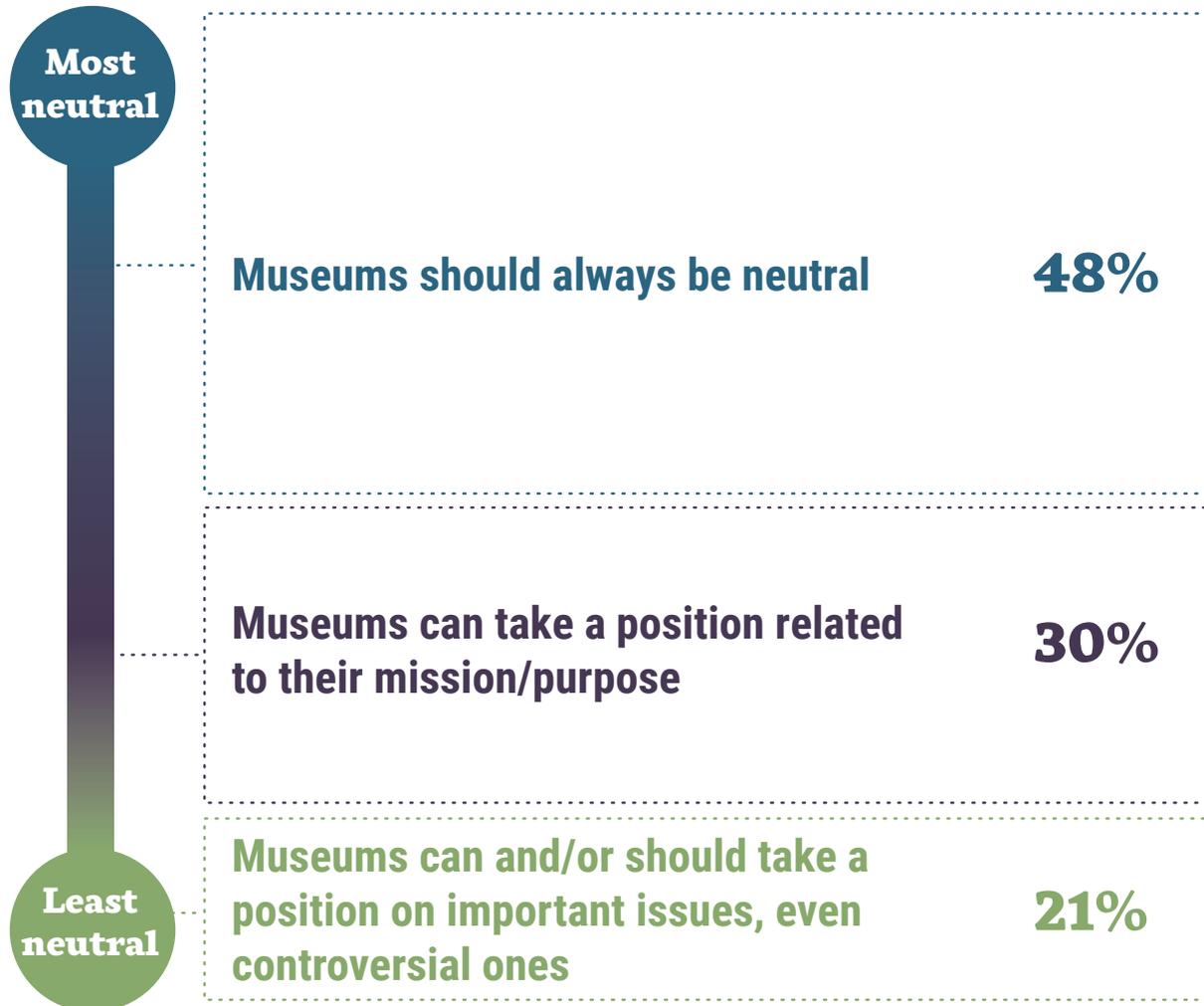


Do you think museums are non-partisan/neutral sources of information, or do you think they have a political agenda?



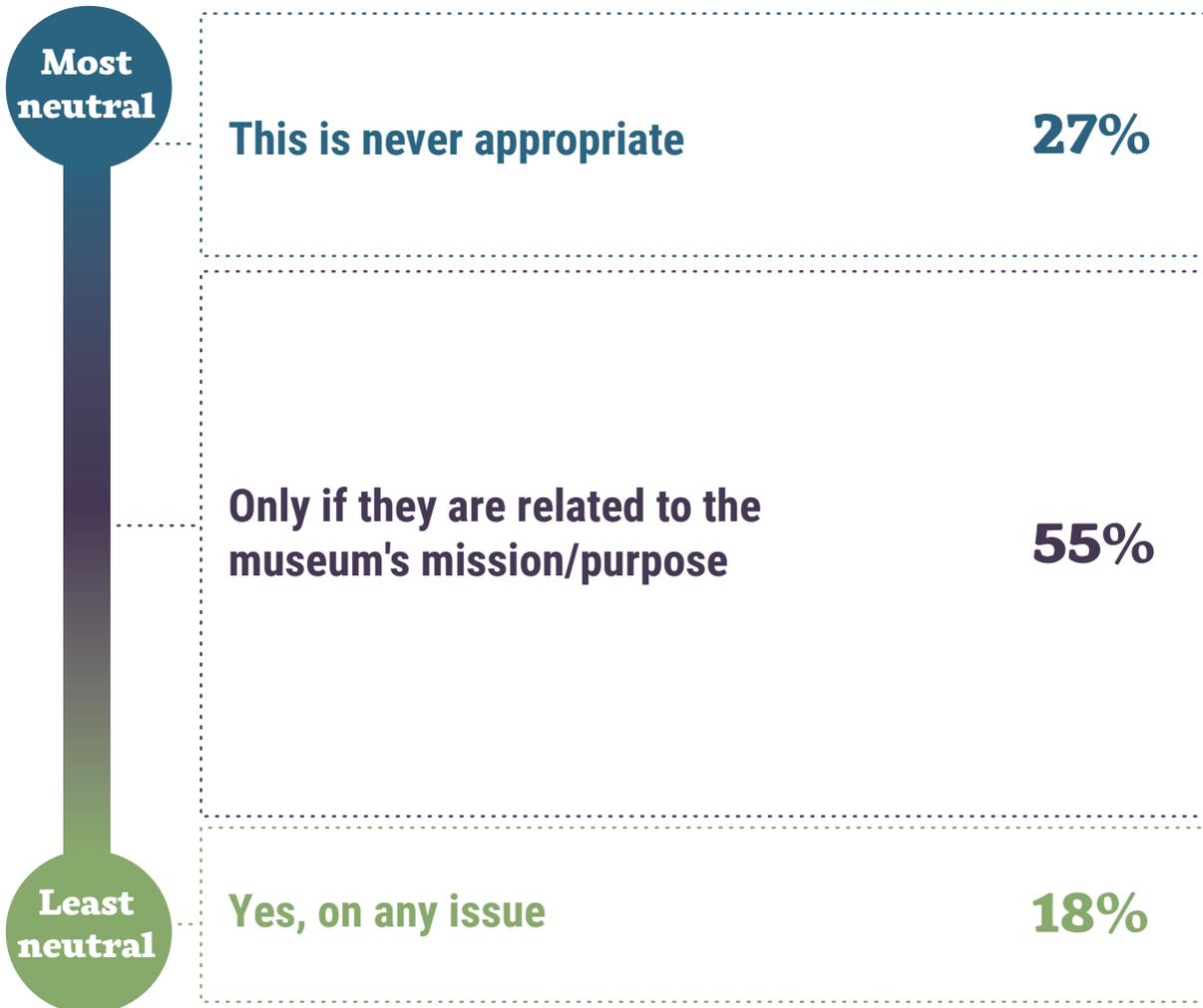


Do you think museums should be neutral, or can they take a position?

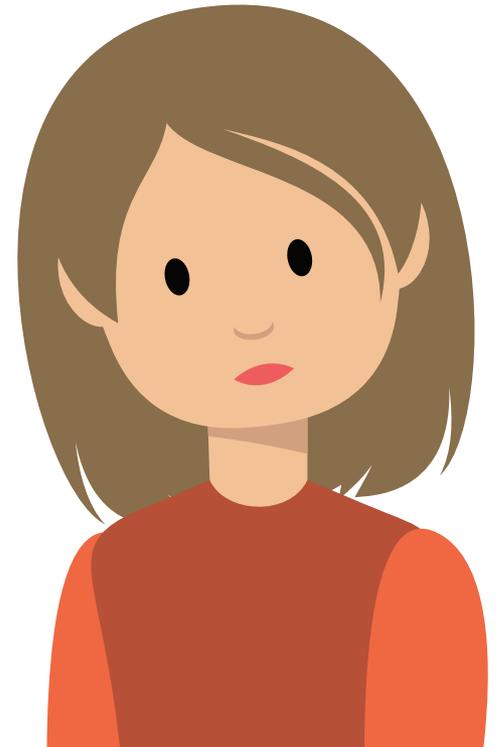
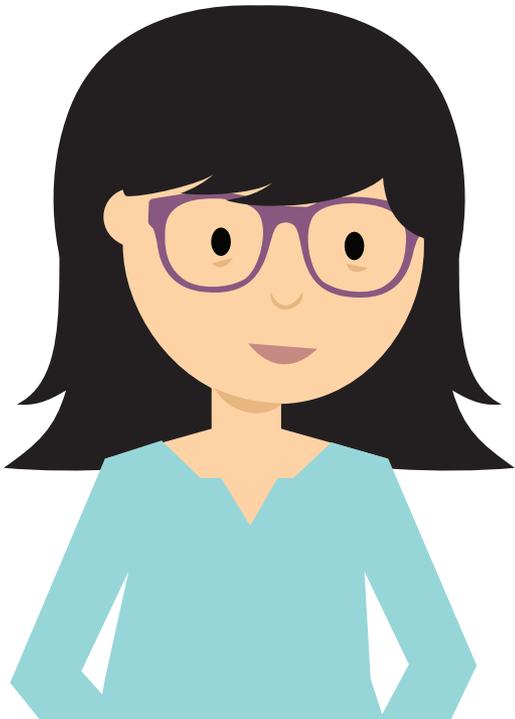


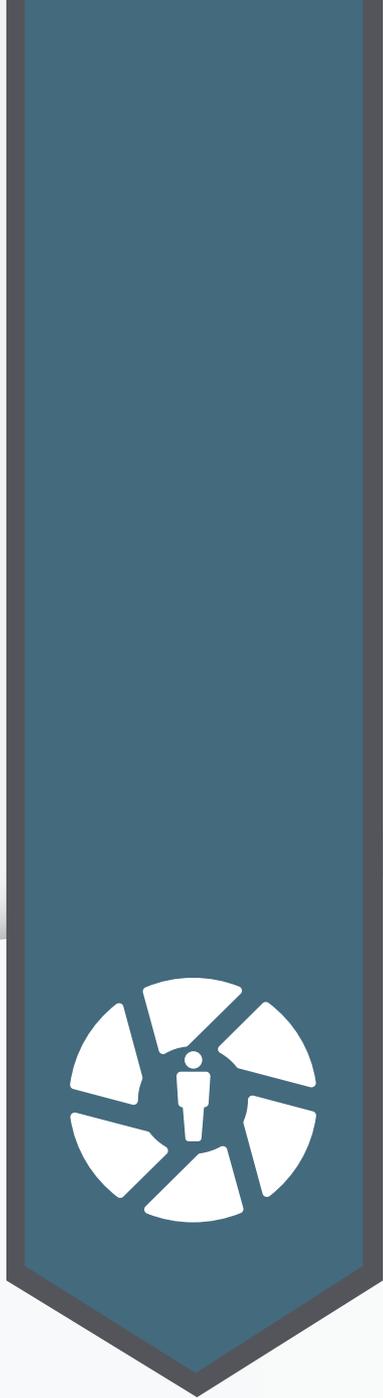


Is it appropriate for museums to suggest or recommend behaviors or actions to the public?



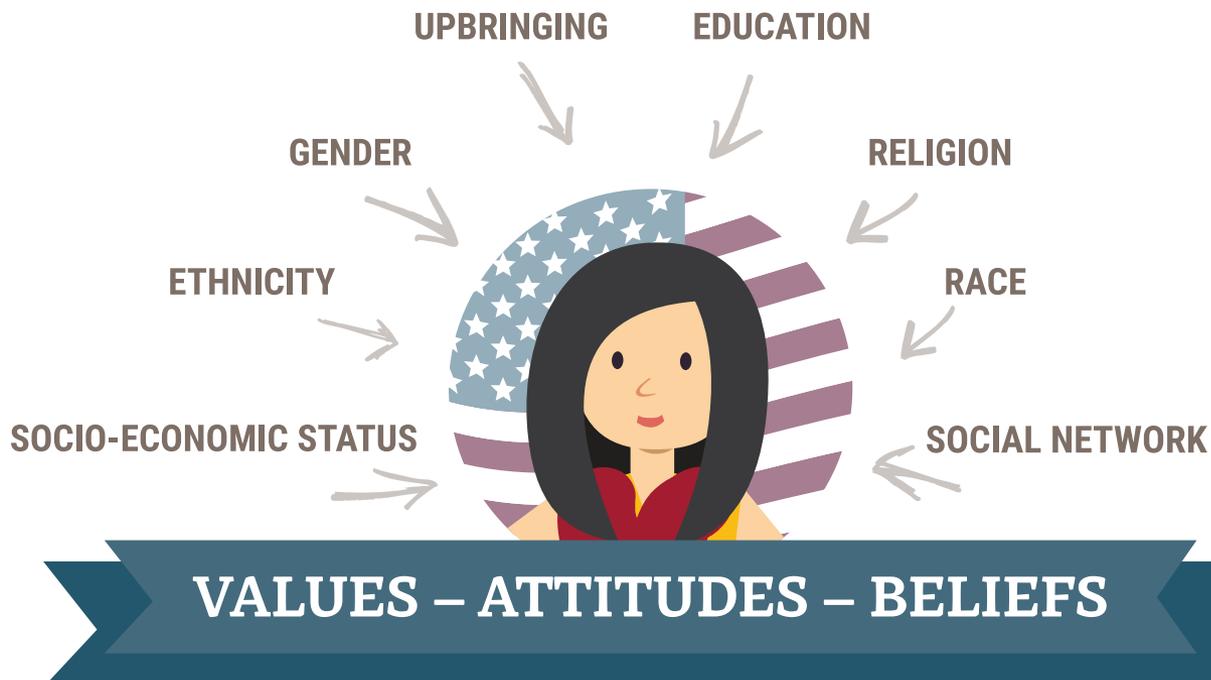
**There is a lot of nuance behind these results,
however, with different segments of the
population having more trust ... and others
being more skeptical.**





Values, Behaviors, and Demographic Lenses

To understand how attitudes around trust can vary, it is helpful to back up and examine what influences us all in the first place.



Turns out, it is a lot of things. From our upbringing to our race (and more), each of us develops our own unique set of values, attitudes, and beliefs that shape our worldviews.

In this research, we are going to look at trust through five values, behaviors, and demographic lenses:

 Museum-going behaviors

 Perceptions of neutrality

 Inclusion

 Race and ethnicity

 Political values



Museum-going behaviors



Museum-going
behaviors

Criteria

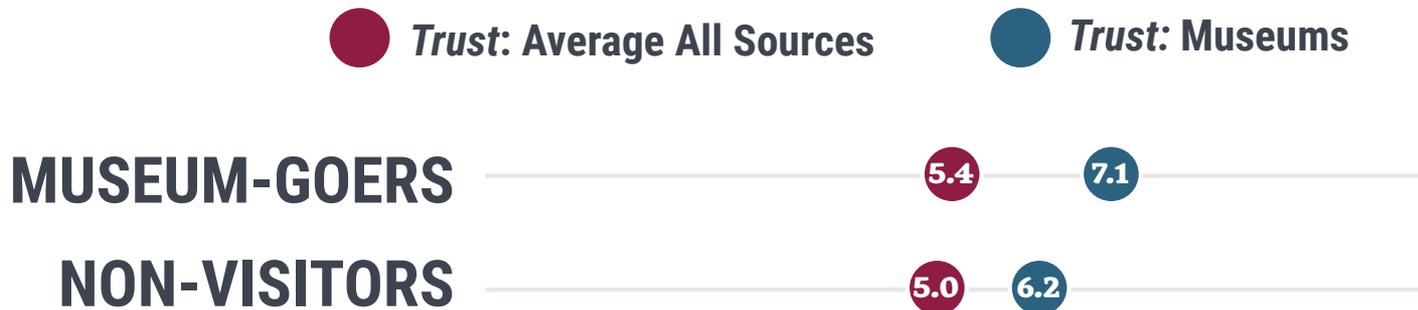


“Museum-goers” are those who said they had been to a museum in the past two years (25% of sample)



Trust Level

Overall, museum-goers are more trusting than non-visitors



(For museum-goers, museums are the #1 trusted source of information; they remain #2 for non-visitors, behind friends and family)



Museum-going
behaviors

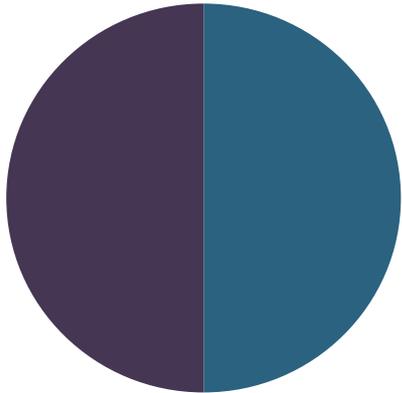
Credibility



Across the board, museum-goers are more likely than non-visitors to find museums credible on the content they share



Neutrality notes



Museum-goers are more likely to think museums have a point of view

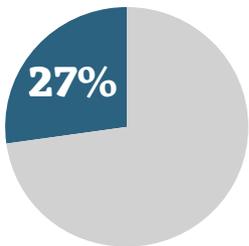
But they are just as likely as non-visitors to think museums “should” always be neutral



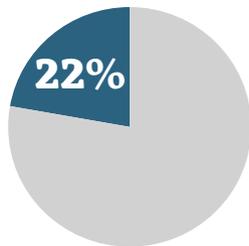
Demographically

Museum-goers skew slightly:

- Younger
- More likely to have *some* post-secondary education



WHITE PEOPLE



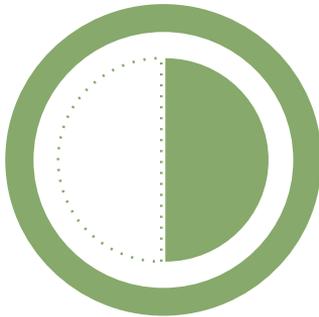
PEOPLE OF COLOR

- *Slightly* less diverse: 27% of white people are museum-goers vs. 22% of people of color



Museum-going
behaviors

Politically



Museum-goers are equally split
between conservatives and liberals
(about 30% each)

About a quarter of museum-goers
are moderate, and 12% identified
as apolitical



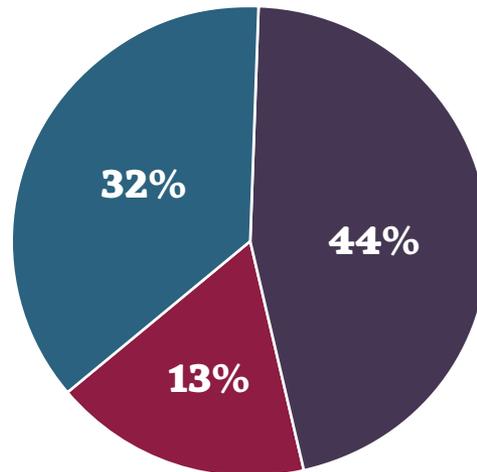
Perceptions of neutrality



Criteria

Three segments, comparing those who think:

- Museums *are* neutral (32% of sample)
- Museums have a point of view (44% of sample)
- Museums have a political agenda (13% of sample)

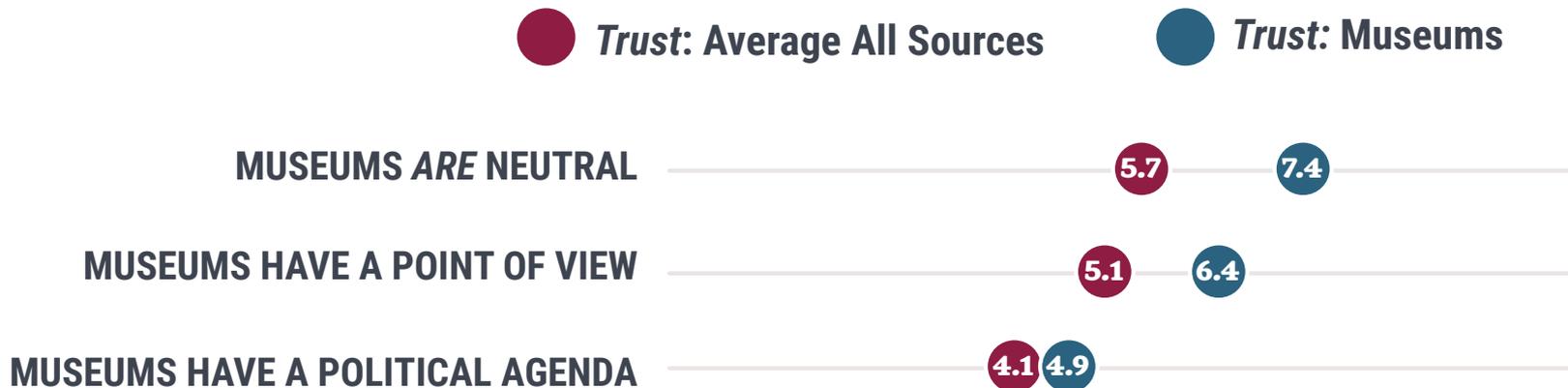




Perceptions of
neutrality

Trust Level

People who think museums are neutral
have higher levels of trust

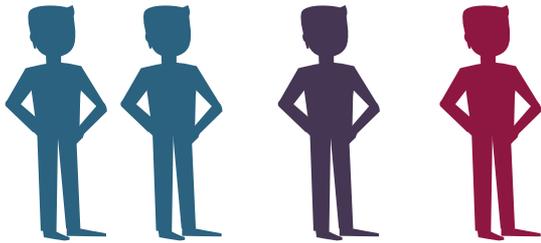


(For those who think museums are neutral, museums are the #1 trusted source;
they remain #2 for the other segments, behind friends and family)



Perceptions of
neutrality

Credibility



On most topics, those who think museums are neutral are over 2x more likely to find them credible sources of information than those who say museums have a political agenda (“point of view” falls in the middle)



Demographically



People who either think museums are "neutral" or have a "point of view" are demographically similar

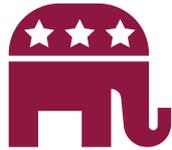
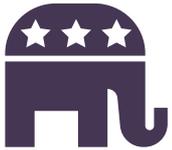


But people who think museums have a political agenda skew:

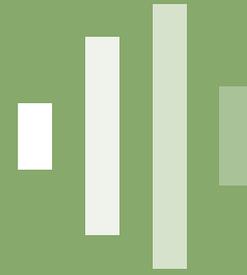
- Somewhat younger
- Less likely to identify as female
- Somewhat lower levels of educational attainment
- More racially and ethnically diverse



Politically



- “Neutral” skews slightly more liberal
- “Point of view” and “political agenda” skew more conservative
- And those who say “political agenda” are less likely to be politically engaged *at all*



Inclusive spectrum



Inclusive
spectrum

Criteria

We assessed respondent attitudes towards inclusive content to develop the following estimates:



- ✘ **“ANTI-INCLUSIVE:”** People who exhibit anti-inclusive attitudes. This can range from extreme white nationalists to those who actively avoid any inclusive content
- 📄 **“STATUS QUO:”** People who neither seek out nor avoid inclusive content; largely satisfied with long-standing presentations of history and art. Exposure to inclusive content can range from none to quite a bit
- 🕒 **“INCLUSIVE:”** People who actively seek out inclusive content and/or explicitly want museums to include inclusive stories of the past and artworks

Trust Level

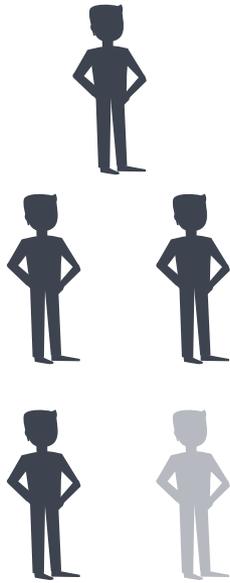
Generally, inclusive people are more trusting



But anti-inclusive people are just as likely to trust museums as the people in the status quo categories



Credibility



While inclusive people think museums are more credible overall ...

... anti-inclusive people are the *most* likely to find museums credible on history ...
4/5 of them.



Neutrality notes

Anti-inclusive people are the most likely to say museums *should* be neutral, while inclusive people generally match the overall results



Additionally, a basis in facts is an expectation of both inclusive people and anti-inclusive people (but not so much the “status quo” segments)



Inclusive
spectrum

Demographically



Anti-inclusive people skew:

- More male
- Most likely to have “some” post-secondary education
- More rural
- More white



Inclusive people skew:

- More female
- *Slightly* higher educational attainment



Inclusive
spectrum

Politically



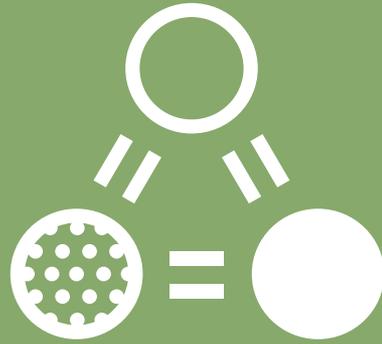
Inclusive people skew more liberal



Status quo skews more moderate



Anti-inclusive people skew more conservative



Race and ethnicity

Criteria

Examined in multiple ways:

- Households that only identify as white (non-Hispanic/Latino/Latina - 66% of sample)
- POC households (households of color/no white people – 31% of sample)
 - And specifically Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino/Latina households (15% and 9% of sample respectively)
 - (Other racial and ethnic groups did not have stable samples)
- 3% of households included both people of color and white people

Trust Level

White people are more trusting than people of color,
and significantly more trusting of museums

 *Trust: Average All Sources*  *Trust: Museums*

WHITE/NO PEOPLE OF COLOR HOUSEHOLDS

5.3

7.1

PEOPLE OF COLOR HOUSEHOLDS

4.7

5.5

BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN HOUSEHOLDS

4.9

5.4

HISPANIC OR LATINO/LATINA HOUSEHOLDS

5.1

6.1

Neutrality notes

White people are significantly more likely to think museums *are* neutral and *should* be neutral than people of color



And people of color are *more likely* to think museums should take positions on important issues than to think museums should be neutral

Demographically



White people skew:

- Older
- More likely to identify as female



Respondents of color skew:

- Younger
- More urban

Politically



NO significant differences



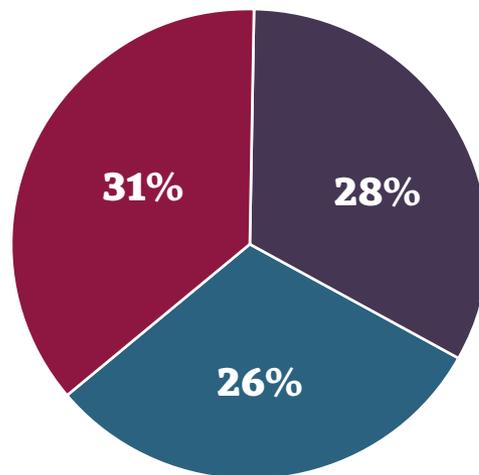
Political ideology



Political
ideology

Criteria

- Conservatives (31% of sample)
- Moderates (28% of sample)
- Liberals (26% of sample)



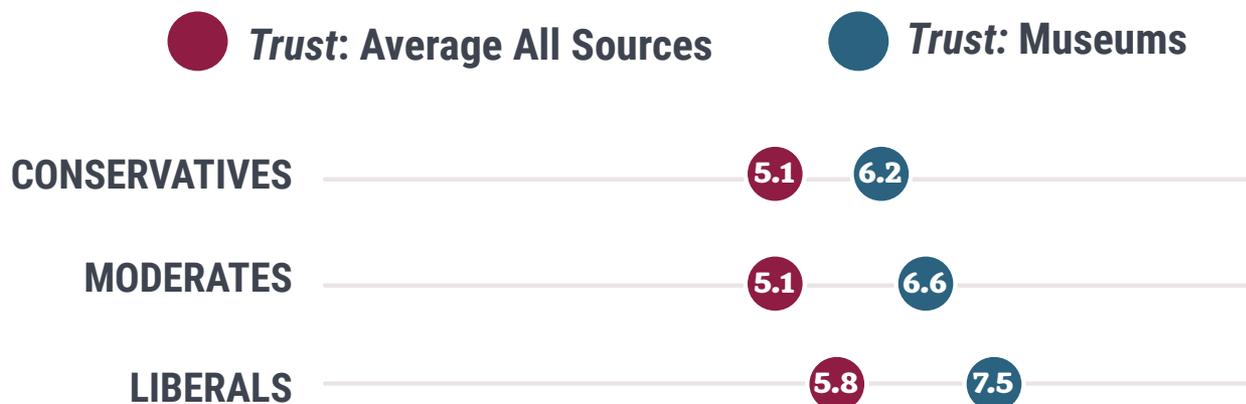


Political
ideology

Trust Level

Liberals overall have higher levels of trust

And they trust museums more



(While museums continue to rank #2 to “friends and family” for conservatives, they are tied with “friends and family” for #1 for moderates; for liberals, museums rank #2 to “researchers and/or scientists”)



Political
ideology

Credibility



Across the board, liberals find museums more credible



Conservatives are significantly less likely to find museums credible about art or racial and ethnic issues rooted in history

(Moderates fall in the middle)



Neutrality notes

Liberals are 50% more likely than conservatives to think museums *are* neutral

But conservatives are more likely to think museums *should* be neutral



That is a *big* distinction, as it likely reflects both perceptions and desires ... as well as different ideas of what “neutral” means



Demographically



Conservatives are more likely to:

- Have “some” post-secondary education



Moderates are more likely to:

- Identify as male
- Have “some” post-secondary education



Liberals are more likely to:

- Identify as female
- Have a college degree
- Live in a suburb
- Identify as white

People of color are slightly more likely to identify as “moderate” or say they “don’t care” about politics

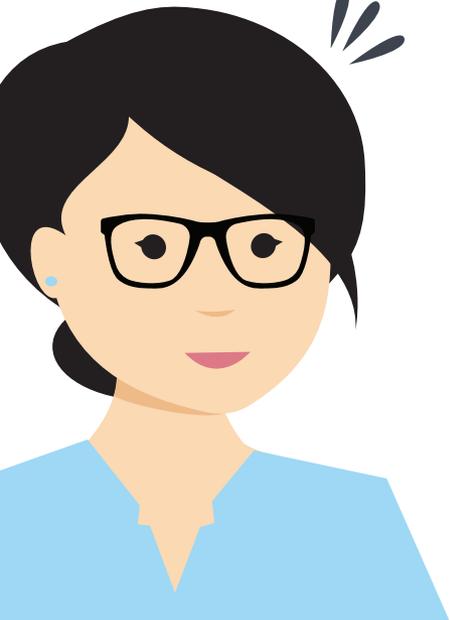


Political
ideology

Additional Note



Liberals are the most likely to fall in the “inclusive” segment, and are the most likely to want prosocial content from museums



In a time when trust in most sources of information is declining, museums have proven resilient, retaining their “superpower of trust.”





Wilkening Consulting

audience research | knowledge curation

Susie Wilkening

.....
DIRECT: 206 283 0098

CELL: 518 281 0887

susie@wilkeningconsulting.com

wilkeningconsulting.com