

# Why Most Americans Think the System is Rigged

Seventy percent of Americans believe that people in power are rigging the system to benefit themselves at the expense of the rest of us. In the FrameWorks Institute's 25 years studying [mindsets](#), the system-is-rigged mindset is among the strongest and most pervasive we've seen in American culture. Americans draw on this mindset to make sense of almost every aspect of society—from the economy, to the political system, to how people are treated based on their gender or race. This can lead to productive critiques of power and increased demand for changes that create a fairer society. But it can also prompt xenophobic and racist scapegoating, or lead to fatalism—the conclusion that the problem is just too big to solve.

## Methods

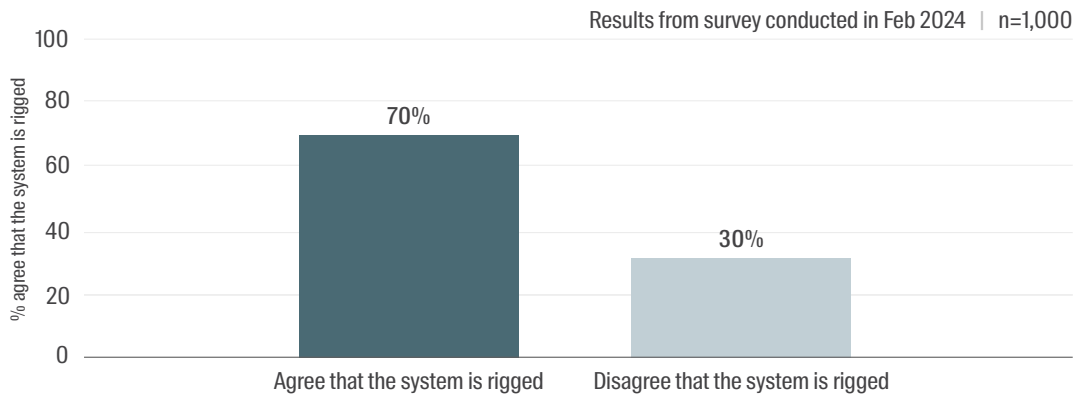
**The findings below are based on:**

- An ongoing, nationally-representative survey of Americans from August 2020–present. More than 35,000 Americans have been surveyed thus far. The survey has helped our researchers understand the extent to which Americans hold and use this mindset.
- Individual interviews with 85 participants between August 2020 and April 2024. These interviews shed light on broad sets of assumptions and mindsets that inform participants' thinking.
- 88 focus groups conducted between May 2020 and July 2024. Like interviews, focus groups provide us with deeper information on how people think about these issues.
- A series of three controlled experiments conducted in October 2022, July 2023, and May 2024, with a total of 12,590 participants. The experiments were designed to assess the effects of different ways of talking about rigged systems.

## How Americans Think About Rigged Systems

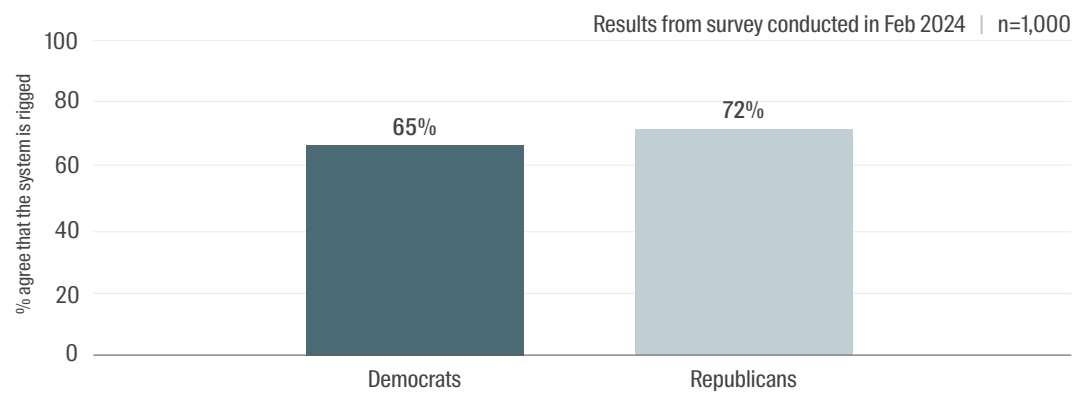
The majority of Americans think the system is rigged. When asked “do you think the system is rigged in America?” 70% of respondents said “yes” and 30% said “no” (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Majority of Americans Think the System is Rigged**

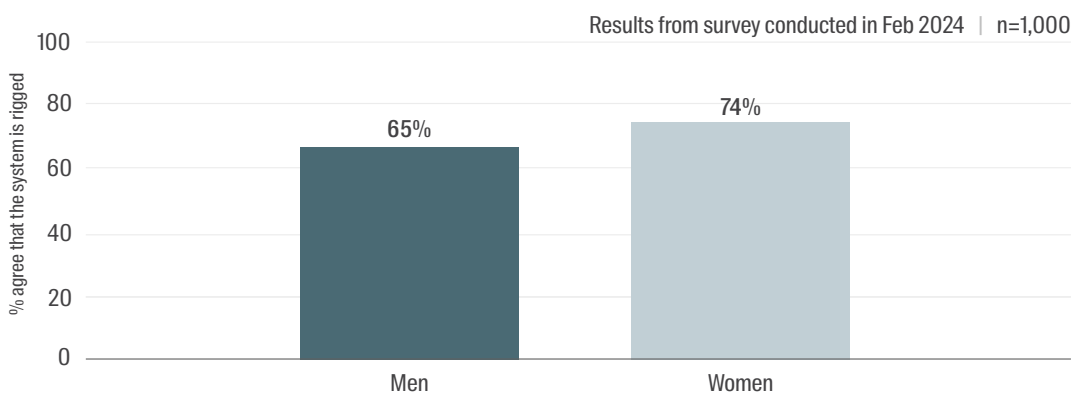


According to our survey, people across political affiliation (Figure 2), gender (Figure 3), race (Figure 4), income (Figure 5), and age (Figure 6) identify with the idea that the system is rigged.

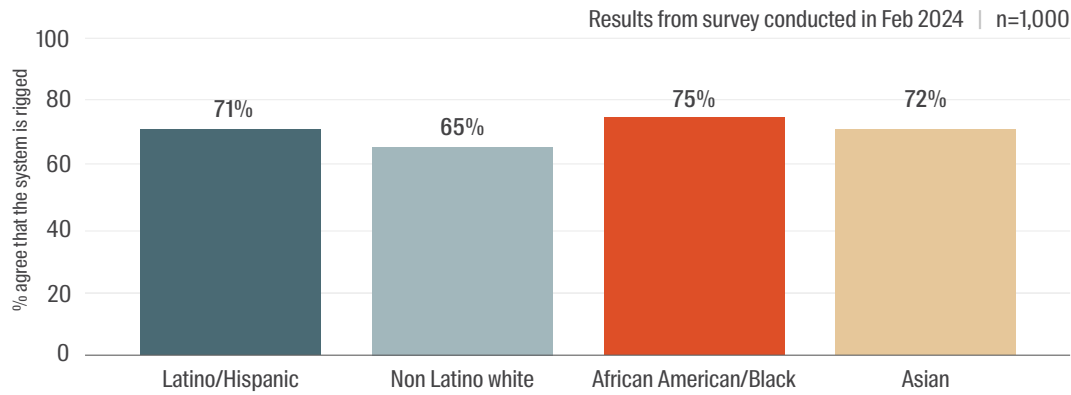
**Figure 2: The Majority of Democrats and Republicans Think the System is Rigged**



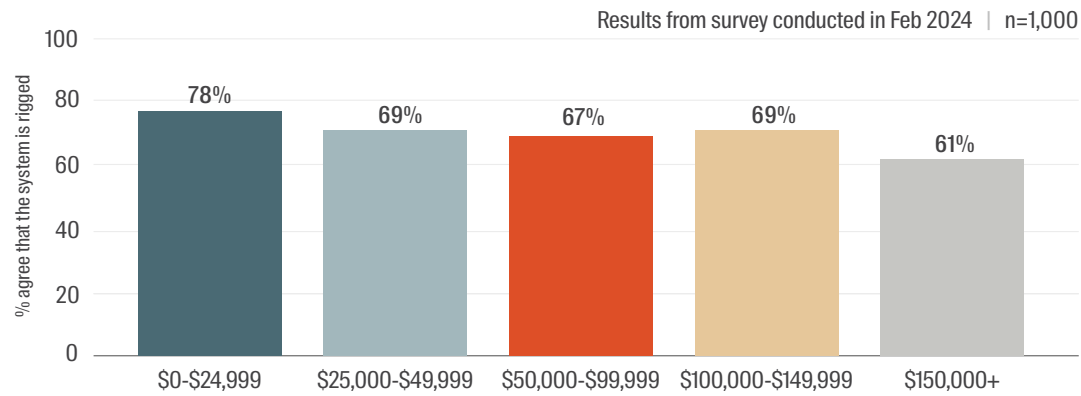
**Figure 3: The Majority of Men and Women Think the System is Rigged**



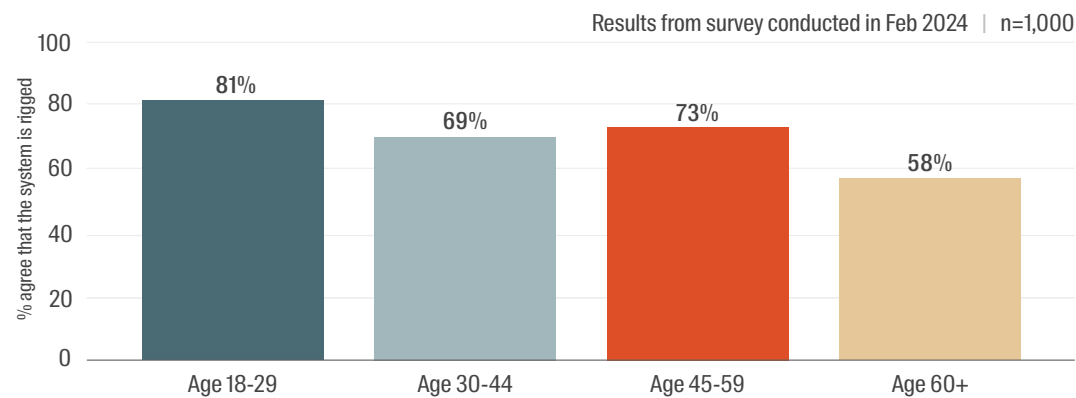
**Figure 4: People Across Racial Groups Think the System is Rigged**



**Figure 5: People Across Income Levels Think the System is Rigged**

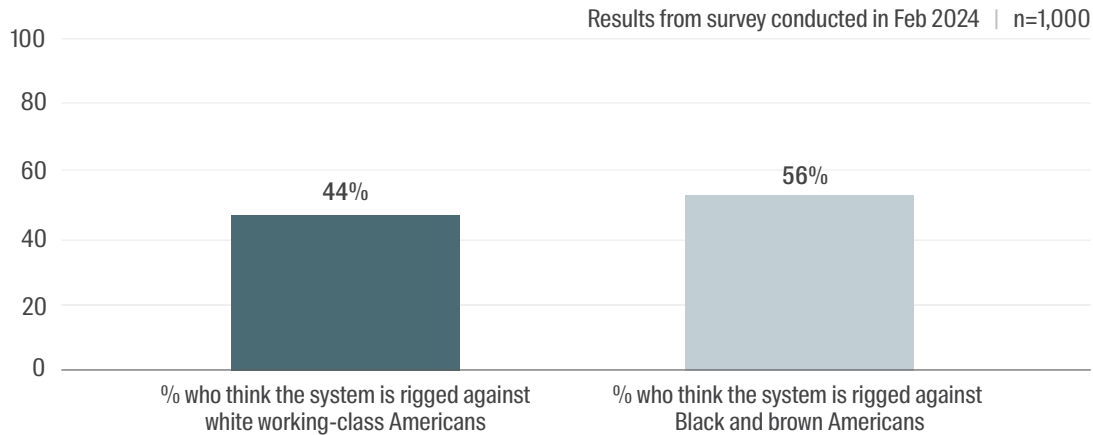


**Figure 6: People Across Age Groups Think the System is Rigged—  
Particularly Young People**



Although the overall mindset is widespread, it can lead to dramatically different conclusions. Just under half of participants believe the system is rigged against white, working class Americans, while just over half believe the system is rigged against Black and brown people (Figure 7). This demonstrates the way that a single mindset can lead people in very different directions.

**Figure 7: The System is Rigged Mindset Leads to Dramatically Different Conclusions**



In interviews and focus groups, FrameWorks' research participants have given voice to different activations of the system-is-rigged mindset—from acknowledgements of racist structures to anti-Semitic tropes:

*“Politicians are rigging the system [...]. The cronies who are perpetuating their viewpoints and their policies that benefit themselves and others at their station. And it's affecting those who are not aligned with their viewpoints.”*

*“It's a great example of exactly the sort of thing that our social systems are supposed to be stopping from happening and they aren't because they are specifically built [that way]. Things like redlining, things like when they originally tried to do 'separate but equal.' All that kind of stuff is meant to keep that 'other,' whatever that 'other' is—whether it's brown people, Black people, or women, you name it—they knew what they were doing.”*

*“Everybody that has money is rigging the system. Everybody with money. Politicians, businessmen, real estate moguls, even criminals, everybody's rigging the system.”*

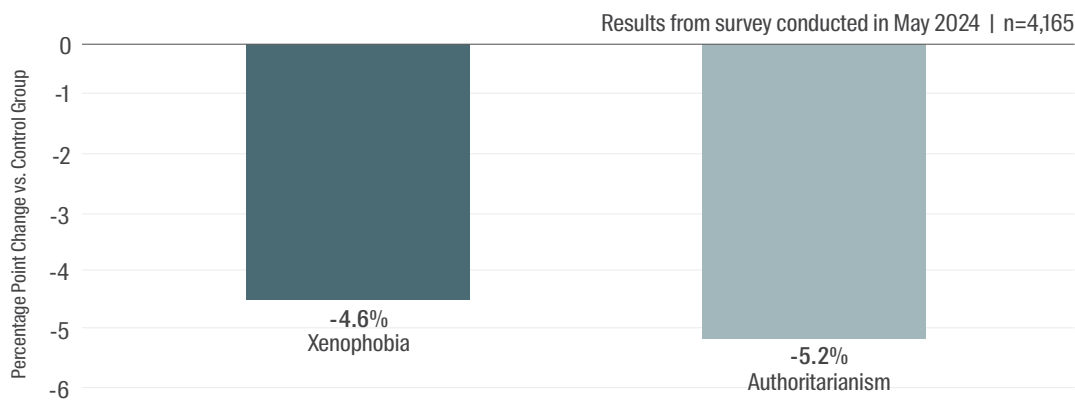
*“There are a couple of public figures, George Soros and Schwab, that have made no secret about their intent to instill a one-government world. While our country as a governmental concept is actually quite young, it's all we know is our independence. We're resistant, but it's difficult to battle money and all the influence it carries.”*

## Different Ways of Talking about Rigged Systems Shape Interpretations

FrameWorks research shows that different ways of talking about rigged systems shape *which* interpretations of this mindset get pulled to the foreground or pushed to the background of people’s minds.

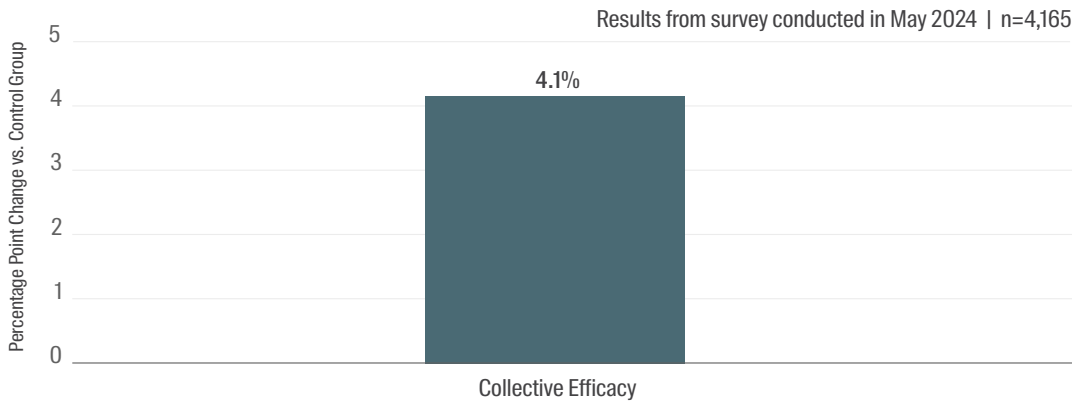
**1. Providing an explanation of who is rigging *what* system and *how* reduces xenophobic and authoritarian ways of thinking.** *Just* stating that the system is rigged without explaining who holds the power and how it’s used leaves things open to interpretation and invites people to apply their own underlying assumptions about the world that may be unproductive or even harmful. Figure 8 shows that providing an explanation for how the system is rigged in ways that concentrate economic power reduce xenophobic (e.g., the system is rigged to benefit immigrants and hurt the white working class) and authoritarian thinking (e.g., the system is rigged so we need a strong leader to eliminate all the ‘troublemakers’ in our society).

**Figure 8: Explaining How the System is Rigged in Ways That Concentrate Economic Power Reduces Harmful Thinking**



**2. Matching the size of the *problem* and *solution* helps people see social problems as solvable.** Talking about rigged systems can make people fatalistic. Many solutions (e.g., expanding the Child Tax Credit) can come across as too small to fix a big problem (e.g., that the economy is rigged). However, our data show that when solutions are discussed in a way that people perceive to be of equal scale and scope to the problem, people are more likely to see problems as solvable. This happens in two ways: either by spotlighting a specific aspect of the system, explaining how it works, and offering a tangible solution that would fix it, or offering a vision of transformative change at scale that would genuinely unrig whole systems (Figure 9). Importantly, evidence shows that Americans are growing more receptive to these more transformative and radical ideas. In May 2024, 61 percent of participants surveyed indicated that they believe our society needs to be fundamentally changed, agreeing with statements like “our society needs to be radically restructured” and “we need to remake our society in major ways.”

**Figure 9: Matching a Big Problem (e.g., Rigged Economic System) with a Big Solution (e.g., Maximum Wage) Boosts Efficacy**



### What Does This Mean?

This research shows a thread of common thinking amidst a polarizing time—a thread that is too dominant and pervasive in American culture to sidestep or avoid. As we enter 2025, with new leaders in Washington and around the country, it’s important that policymakers, advocates, and social issue communicators are aware of the widespread and durable nature of this mindset and how it’s shaping American culture. The FrameWorks Institute will continue to study the different angles with which this mindset pervades American life. To stay up-to-date on this research, click [here](#).

## About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis<sup>®</sup>, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks<sup>®</sup>, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Learn more at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org)



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