

# Navigating Public Thinking about Democracy:

## April 2025 Briefing

### Key Takeaways

*Navigating Public Thinking about Democracy* is a monthly briefing series from the FrameWorks Institute's Culture Change Project. Each month, we share insights from our latest research into how Americans are thinking about democracy, our political system, and the Constitution—and what that means for those of us working to counter authoritarian threats and strengthen our democracy.

On April 11, 2025, we shared findings from focus groups conducted in February 2025. Key findings and implications from that research are presented below:

### **The overarching challenge: Discussions of democracy and authoritarianism are notably absent.**

When asked about the state of the country and their thoughts on the new presidential administration, participants talked very little about democracy and authoritarianism. While democratic concepts like representation were sometimes implicitly invoked, participants did not explicitly raise concerns about threats to US democracy.

### **What are people talking about?**

#### **1. People are talking about individuals, not institutions.**

While observations and critiques of individual people in power are widespread, institutions are missing from the conversation. Participants talked little about Congress, the presidency, Courts, or the Constitution, for example, focusing all their attention on individuals like Elon Musk and Donald Trump.

This is driven by one of the most dominant mindsets of government: **Personalism**, which simply equates government with the people in charge. By focusing attention on individuals rather than institutions, *Personalism* is obscuring how institutions are under threat and failing to function properly.

## 2. Musk's power as an unelected official is drawing people's ire, while Trump's authority as president remains unquestioned.

People are wary of the actions of Musk and DOGE and are angry at the fact that Musk is exercising so much power without being elected:

*"Do I think government could be reformed, and there could be greater efficiency? Sure. Do I agree remotely with the process with which it's being done? Currently, not at all... Do you think Elon Musk has your best interest at heart at the end of this process?"* (Research participant)

Criticisms of Musk are driven in part by the **system is rigged** mindset—the idea that “the system” is rigged by the powerful few for their own benefit—with Musk's actions being understood as a case of system rigging. The concern about his power as an unelected official stems from the **representation model of democracy**—the assumption that, in a democracy, elected officials represent the people and their interests—which is implicitly drawn upon to reason that because Musk does not represent the people, he should not be entitled to so much power.

Meanwhile, Trump's expansive use of power remains largely unquestioned because he *was* elected:

*"I mean, there's not a ton that we can do. The country spoke, like, he is our president whether we like it or not. You know what's gonna happen from here. I mean, I pray that, like, there's just gonna be some growing pains, and then things will get better."* (Research participant)

Drawing on the **voting model of democracy** (the idea that democracy is simply the act of voting), people reason that once the president has been elected, it's up to him how to use his power. And given a lack of institutional thinking (for example, about “executive power”), the question of *what* powers the president does or doesn't have is largely off the radar.

## 3. People are concerned about the cost of living and what the government is (or isn't) doing about it.

This isn't new. People are deeply concerned about the cost of consumer goods, and they're frustrated by what the government is (or isn't) doing to bring them down.

*“The President we have now. The politicians protecting the rich. They’re not taking care of us. They’re not taking care of the middle class. They’re not taking care of the poor. They’re taking care of their own people. So yeah, they’re going to have all these tax cuts and tax breaks. But what about us? What breaks are we getting? You know, our pay is going higher, but look at our food. I don’t know where you guys are at, but eggs out here, it’s like \$10 for a carton of eggs...”* (Research participant)

This is driven by two mindsets: The widespread **system is rigged** mindset and a mindset that’s been gaining in strength over the last decade—the **economic design** mindset (the idea that laws and policies, not just the free market, determine how our economy works). These “kitchen table” issues are much more top of mind than threats to democracy, though—as we discuss below—there are opportunities to connect the two.

#### **4. There’s a widespread experience—across party lines—of uncertainty and arbitrariness.**

*“I’ve never been in America in a time where everyone, whether rich or poor, is uncertain; like even people who have the means to move to another country or to live a substantial, a good life, are still worried about it... Another thing that worries me is not being able to do anything to change these things, and being powerless to an extent... You know, it’s to me, that kind of scares me. That uncertainty, that level of uncertainty.”* (Research participant)

*“You know, we’re talking about millions, tens of millions of people affected by this. So yeah, I feel like they’re just kind of doing things a little bit too fast... How much is it going to affect, because they might press a button and we can’t go back, you know?”* (Research participant)

While people don’t talk about authoritarianism or the erosion of the rule of law, they’re feeling the effects of this acutely, expressing deep feelings of uncertainty, concerns about unpredictability of government actions, and feelings of powerlessness and fear that stem from being subject to what legal and political theorists call the arbitrary use of power.

**To build public resistance to authoritarian attacks on democratic institutions and claims to power, we need to find ways to connect abstract notions of democracy to what's happening right now in people's lives. This can be done by:**

**1. Linking arbitrary, unilateral decisions to real-life effects on the cost of living.**

For example, when discussing economic policies like tariffs, we don't have to stop at talking about the effects tariffs will have on the cost of living and economic climate. We can and should talk about those effects—but if we want to start building an understanding of what authoritarianism looks like, we should go one step further and link tariffs back up to unfettered presidential power.

**2. Leveraging the experience of arbitrariness and uncertainty as an opening to get to the rule of law.**

To do this, we can start by affirming and acknowledging the anxiety and feeling of uncertainty that many of us are feeling right now. Then we can trace those worries back up to executive overreach and an erosion of the rule of law, explaining that actions taken outside the bounds of legal authority naturally make us feel as though we're at the whim of people who can, at any time, take actions that have major consequences on our lives.

**3. Understanding what is likely to be cued when we talk about “democracy.” For more on mindsets around democracy, government, and the Constitution and how to navigate them, see:**

- [Framing Democracy: A Quick-Start Guide](#)
- [By and For the People? Cultural Mindsets of Democracy and the US Political System](#)

**4. Leveraging the *system is rigged* mindset to build support for progressive change. For more on this, see:**

- [How to Talk about Rigged Systems: A Quick-Start Guide](#)
- [Filling in the Blanks: Contesting What “the System is Rigged” Means](#)