

Navigating Public Thinking about Democracy:

May 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.

To register for future briefings, go to <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/navigating-public-thinking-about-democracy/>

On May 22, 2025, we shared findings from research on people's assumptions about the Constitution, and how these assumptions shape how the public is making sense of our unfolding “constitutional crisis.” These findings drew on [deep-dive mindset interviews conducted in 2023](#), ongoing focus group research, tracking survey data from November 2024–April 2025, and a survey fielded in early May 2025 on how people are thinking about the current “constitutional crisis.” Key findings, implications, and framing strategies are presented below:

The overarching challenge: We often assume the phrase “constitutional crisis” is self-explanatory. It isn't.

The phrase—and frame—“constitutional crisis” is widespread. Across mediums, [journalists](#), [elected officials](#), [influencers](#), and others are framing this moment—and the Trump administration's anti-constitutional actions—as a “constitutional crisis.” The frame is used to capture the combined effects of executive overreach, from executive orders attempting to strip away birthright citizenship and other fundamental rights, to attacks on due process, to the usurpation of Congress's spending power and disregard for court orders.

This frame is not as self-explanatory as communicators might think. As we describe below, people make sense of it in a range of ways—and these responses provide critical insight about how to talk about the Constitution in the current moment.

How are members of the public making sense of the constitutional crisis we're in?

1. Appeals to the Constitution are likely to cue thinking about core principles... but not institutions.

The Constitution is largely understood as a symbol—an embodiment of our core principles and values—rather than as a piece of foundational law that structures how our government operates.

“[A constitutional crisis is] something or a combination of things that eats away at the core values of our nation.” (Research participant, May 2025)

One of the core principles people tend to associate with the Constitution is **individual liberties**, like the right to free speech. These liberties are front-of-mind when people think about the Constitution. In fact, people often equate the Constitution with the Bill of Rights, focusing solely on this part of the Constitution.

“I would say [the Constitution] is basically documentation of basic rights and freedoms that every person should have access to or should be treated with so that way you know we can have a fair and civil society.” (Research participant, 2023)

While this mindset obscures the role of the Constitution in setting up a structure for governmental institutions (e.g., establishing Congress and the presidency), it usefully opens space for concern about attacks on foundational rights:

“He [the president] is absolutely acting unconstitutionally right now. He is trying to take away due process not only for non-citizens but also citizens. He is trying to take away freedom of speech and freedom of the press and is also arresting judges who go against him. This is absolutely against the Constitution and is dangerous fascism.” (Research participant, May 2025)

While the association of constitutional crisis with an attack on foundational rights is common, people have different assessments of whether rights are currently being threatened. Some participants in our recent survey did not think rights are currently at risk:

“In my mind, a “constitutional crisis” is something that affects your rights given to you in the Constitution. As far as I know and have seen, none of our constitutional rights have been taken away.” (Research participant, May 2025)

“A constitutional crisis to me sounds like getting your American rights taken away from you. Like for example getting freedom of speech taken away. I am unsure what to think about [the president acting unconstitutionally] because I feel like none of my rights have been taken away.” (Research participant, May 2025)

If people aren’t aware of the ways in which our rights *are* at risk—or if they aren’t concerned about attacks on the rights of non-citizens and others being targeted—a “constitutional crisis” frame may fall flat and come across as fearmongering or hyperbole. While linking appeals to the Constitution with principles like individual liberties is likely to be highly resonant, it’s important to name how specific actions pose threats to our rights—and to consistently assert and defend the idea that the Constitution protects the rights of *everyone*.

Another core principle that comes to people’s minds when thinking about the Constitution is popular self-government. Government “by and for the people” is understood as a foundational constitutional principle. To the extent that people see Trump as disregarding the people’s will, they are also likely to believe that his actions are unconstitutional:

“[Is the president acting unconstitutionally?] Simple answer: YES! He is out of control and somehow being allowed to do this. He is acting like a mad king, and nobody seems to be able to stop him. He disregards what the people want and disobeys or outright ignores court orders with no repercussions. I think he needs to be impeached and replaced.” (Research participant, May 2025)

Yet just as with individual rights, people are not always convinced that the president is violating the principle of popular self-government. At times, people see Trump as carrying out the people’s will:

“[Is the president acting unconstitutionally?] Ridiculous. He is doing what we elected him to do. Get waste out of the government and fight crime. Getting illegals out of the country is fighting crime. They are all criminals for entering illegally. (Research participant, May 2025)

The public’s core understandings of the Constitution do not, by and large, extend to institutions—people have only a vague understanding of concepts like separation of powers, checks and balances, and executive power. To make a case for the unconstitutionality of actions that do not specifically implicate ideals like individual liberties or popular self-government, we will have to build this understanding out consistently, clearly, and explicitly.

2. Appealing to the authority of the Constitution or the Supreme Court may be less compelling than we think.

Three mindsets undercut the effectiveness of appeals to the authority of the Constitution or the Supreme Court:

- The *system is rigged* mindset: When drawing on this mindset, people are deeply dissatisfied with the status quo and people in power (including judges). This leaves people less likely to simply accept and defer to the Supreme Court’s judgment.

“Looking at recent developments, the Supreme Court has just become another extension of politics... People are so pressed about whether or not there’s going to be a new vacancy because that means they can put a judge that isn’t aligned with their political views, when the whole premise of the Supreme Court is to have nonpartisan people to judge.” (Research participant, August 2022)

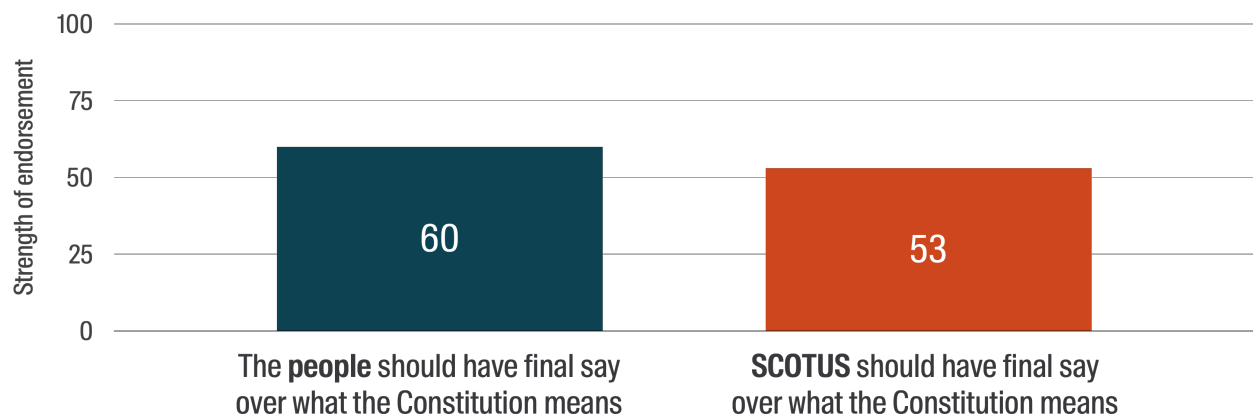
- The *popular model of democracy*: In this way of thinking, ultimate authority lies with the people, not the Court or even the Constitution.

“We don’t get to pick who is on the Supreme Court, we don’t really even have a say [about] who was on the Supreme Court, we just kind of have to learn to deal with it. But really, just as a country having a say in who we allow to make these big decisions which affect all of us would be a really big point that needs to be fixed, honestly.” (Research participant, August 2022)

- The *Constitution as a product of its time* mindset: When using this mindset, people think the Constitution is in crisis because it doesn't meet the needs of our time.

"[A constitutional crisis is when] the Constitution set up since the beginning of the country is challenged by the modern-day environment, conditions, and fast changing interactions on the world stage. I think [the president is acting unconstitutionally], but it might need to be done that way. Our modern world is quite different than the one 100 years ago. And our country is so divided. Plus corruption, systematically, is rampant. Too greedy!" (Research participant, May 2025)

These mindsets work in tandem to undercut the idea that the Constitution is a legal document to be left to lawyers and judges. The public more strongly endorses the idea that *the people* should have final say over what the Constitution means, not the Supreme Court:



All of this means that there's a clear path to challenge the authority of the Court. That path can be used to overturn *or* uphold fundamental principles. The danger is that people may be swayed by the administration's claims, when it ignores Court orders, that they don't need to listen to the Court. Yet there's an opening as well. When the Court rubber stamps the administration's unconstitutional actions, we can contest their judgment. People are open to the idea that we can all weigh in on what the Constitution means—so we should! If the Court makes a decision that we believe is unconstitutional, we should name it as such.

3. Crisis frames risk backfiring.

Framing something as a crisis always runs the risk of actively depressing engagement—especially if people don't believe the people in power, or the system at large, is going to do anything to fix it. A “constitutional crisis” is no different.

Furthermore, framing this moment as a constitutional crisis can come across as partisan rhetoric or fearmongering:

“I am 51 years old and have heard this term or similar terms throughout my life. It honestly means nothing more than a fear tactic by the opposing party. [The president isn't acting unconstitutionally, this is] just more fear tactics.” (Research participant, May 2025)

There may be times when it makes sense to use the frame “constitutional crisis,” but we have to be aware that amping up our language in this way to sound the alarm is not always a winning strategy.

Strategies for framing a constitutional crisis:

Based on what we know about how the public is making sense of this moment, there are five strategies we can recommend for talking about the Constitution right now:

1. Link appeals to the Constitution to animating principles like individual rights and popular self-government.

Example: We are in a constitutional crisis, **and the rights and liberties of everyone in our country are at stake.**

2. Bring institutions (separation of power, checks and balances, executive power, and other institutions) into the picture clearly and explicitly.

Example: The president doesn't have the power to make any changes he wants because **our Constitution places limits on executive power.** That's one reason why the president's executive order on birthright citizenship is unconstitutional: The president simply doesn't have the authority to change who gets to have citizenship.

3. Don't hesitate to make direct claims about constitutionality, or treat what's constitutional as solely up to the Court. People are open to the idea that we can all weigh in on this.

Example: We will continue to fight for the rights of immigrants **in the face of yesterday's unconstitutional decision** by the Supreme Court.

4. Consider replacing the language of “crisis” with language that names specific violations as “unconstitutional” or “anti-constitutional.”

Example: Our Constitution makes it clear that the executive branch has some powers, the Congress has some powers, and the judicial branch has some powers. **When the administration took actions to dismantle the US Institute of Peace, it overstepped the limits placed on executive power and acted unconstitutionally**—because the US Institute of Peace is set up by Congress, not the president.

5. When using the language of “crisis,” ground it with an appeal to people's experience of uncertainty and arbitrariness. (See [findings from April's briefing](#) for more on this experience and the value of appealing to it.)

Example: If you're feeling uncertain and worried about your future (and the future of our country), you aren't alone. That's the feeling that comes from being at the whim of a president who is taking power that isn't his, leaving us living under rules that are constantly changing. The president is ignoring the limits the Constitution places on the executive branch, resulting in a constitutional crisis. Those limits are there for a reason: We believe in the power of the people, not the power of a single person to make decisions that have major consequences on everyone else's lives.