

Unrigging the Tax System: A Framing Strategy for Organizers

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Contents

Introduction	3
Methods and Sampling	4
Research Design and Frame Development	4
Survey Experiment	4
The Framing Strategy	5
The Elements of the Strategy	5
Putting It All Together: Three Narratives	12
Conclusion	15
Appendix	16
Evidence	16
Survey Outcome Measures	19
Demographics	21
About FrameWorks	24

Introduction

The tax system is designed to benefit ultra-wealthy individuals and corporations. In turn, it disadvantages people with less wealth – including working people, Black people, and other people of color.

The system can only be changed by building power to demand change. Yet tax reform can be challenging to organize around. The “tax system” feels abstract, the policy changes needed technical and inaccessible. Building power to demand change requires effective ways of framing the system that resonate with people’s experiences and help people see why changing the system is critical for their lives.

In this brief, we present a framing strategy that, our research shows, is highly effective in building power to change the tax system. It’s a strategy that organizers can use to engage movement-aligned people in target communities – especially young people, working people, Black people, and other people of color.

This strategy leverages the **widespread recognition that the system is rigged** against most people to bring tax policy out of the clouds and ground it in people’s experiences. Yet it’s not enough to simply say that the tax system is rigged – we also need values that build a sense of collective agency and ways of explaining how the tax system is rigged that build demand for specific changes to the system.

Below, we sketch the core elements of this strategy, briefly review the research evidence behind them, and then offer three ways of putting these elements together into discrete narratives organizers can use and adapt.

Methods and Sampling

Research Design and Frame Development

Through conversations within the [Culture Change Project](#), [FrameWorks](#) and [Liberation in a Generation](#) identified a shared interest in adapting the project's recommendations on [system is rigged framing](#) for use in organizing around tax reform. Together, we identified outcomes of interest (e.g., beliefs about the tax system, support for policy change, and collective agency) and brainstormed how the frames explored in previous research could be adapted for these purposes. This co-design of the research ensured its integrity, relevance, and usability.

Survey Experiment

Researchers conducted a quantitative survey experiment to test different ways of talking about how the tax system is rigged. It was fielded in March–April 2025. The survey sample was constructed to approximate target communities for tax reform organizers. Specifically, the sample was majority young (age 18–34), lower income, and non-white; all participants identified as Democrats or as leaning Democratic; and all participants indicated that they have engaged in activism (e.g., attending a protest, canvassing, donating or volunteering with a “large activist” organization) or civic activity (e.g., attending a town hall meeting to advocate for an issue, volunteering at a local polling location).

The experiment included survey items to measure beliefs (e.g., that the tax system advantages white people and disadvantages people of color), policy support (e.g., equalizing taxation of investments and wages), attitudes (e.g., collective agency), and mindset endorsement (e.g., of mindsets like *Market Naturalism*).

The experiment included a null control group, which received no message and only answered these survey items. Treatment groups read one of a set of framed messages and then answered the same set of survey items as the control group. Quantitative analysis compared the ways in which participants in the control groups and the treatment groups responded to survey items. Significant differences between these groups on an outcome were understood as frame effects—that is, we inferred that the frame led to a change in thinking on that outcome. Stratified analyses were conducted to identify effects for particular groups of interest: people aged 18–34, Black participants generally, and Black women specifically.

For more details on methods, sampling, outcome measures, and frames tested, see the appendix.

The Framing Strategy

The framing strategy involves three core elements:

1. Lead with an **effective value** – *Popular Self-Government* or *Freedom from Domination* – that cultivates a sense of collective agency.
2. Provide a brief but clear **explanation of how the tax system is rigged**. This can either involve spotlighting a specific aspect of the problem, or zooming out and explaining how the tax system as a whole is rigged.
3. Offer **solutions that match the scale at which the problem is explained** -- and explain **how we can bring them about**.

Below, we review each element in turn, explaining why it's important and what it looks like. We also discuss one additional element that can be useful in certain contexts: identifying the villain as a “small group of corporations.”

After reviewing the elements, we offer a few different narratives that offer specific ways of putting them together.

The Elements of the Strategy

Element #1: The Values of *Popular Self-Government* and *Freedom from Domination*

The values of *Popular Self-Government* and *Freedom from Domination* orient people toward the potential for change. These values activate ideas of collective power: no one has the right to rule us without our consent, and we (the people) can act together to create change.

What Do These Values Do?

Quantitative research found that both values increase understanding of problems with the tax system while cultivating a sense of collective agency – they boost people's feeling that they can and want to contribute to collective efforts to reform the tax system. Collective agency is critical for organizing efforts. When people feel a sense of collective agency, this makes them open to coming together with others to act collectively. (See appendix for details on evidence.)

What Does This Look Like?

As with all frames, different wording can be used to convey these values. Specific messaging must be adapted for context, but we can express the core ideas as follows:

Popular Self-Government

We believe that power lies with the people, and we have the right to govern ourselves.

Freedom from Domination

No one has the natural right to rule over others. We should all be free from domination.

Element #2: An Effective Explanation of *How* the System Is Rigged.

As we've discussed **elsewhere**, when we talk about rigged systems, it's vital to fill in the blanks:

Who is rigging the system? What are they doing to rig the system? At whose expense is the system rigged?

If we fail to fill in these blanks, people fall back on preconceptions about the world or look to available narratives that purport to offer answers – including exclusionary right-wing narratives that point the finger at immigrants, liberal academics, Jews, or others. These narratives promote exclusion while shifting focus off of the corporations and wealthy people who are *actually* rigging the system. And even when people recognize who is really rigging the system, they often don't know *how* they are rigging the system, which makes it impossible to imagine how the system can be *unrigged* and leaves people fatalistic about the possibility of change.

By offering a simple explanation of who is rigging the tax system and how, we can inoculate against these exclusionary narratives and cultivate collective agency – a sense of being able and motivated to contribute to collective efforts for change. We can alternatively **spotlight a specific aspect of the system** and explain how it is rigged, or we can **zoom out and explain how the tax system as a whole is rigged**.

What Do These Explanations Do?

The *Spotlighting Strategy* can increase understanding of how the tax system advantages white people and disadvantages people of color, and how it privileges wealth over income. It also builds support for equalizing taxation on investments and wages and increases collective agency. (See appendix for details on evidence.)

The *Zooming Out Strategy* can be used to foster the same understandings, while having wider ranging effects on policy support. When paired with an explanation of how people power can force change, this strategy increases support not only for equalizing taxation on investments and wages, but also for increasing the top income tax rate and increasing the estate tax. It also increases collective agency.

What Does This Look Like?

The *Spotlighting Strategy* involves the following components:

1. Name a specific aspect of the tax system (e.g., taxation on investments vs. wages).
2. Name who the system is rigged by and for: ultra-wealthy individuals and corporation.
3. Name who the system is rigged against: working people, Black people, and other people of color.
4. Explain concrete and specific ways in which the system privileges the powerful few and disadvantages working people and people of color.

Here's an example of what this looks like, if we spotlight taxation on investments vs. wages.

Spotlight: Taxing Investments vs. Wages

Our tax system favors wealth over work. Ultra-wealthy individuals and corporations are working with the government to rig the tax system for their own benefit. The system lets wealth from unearned income like investments grow without being taxed. When stocks are sold, the tax on the profit is capped at 20%. But taxes on income earned from work are much higher. Some people pay nearly 40% of their income on taxes. The tax system is rigged so that those of us with less money to invest – including working

people, Black people, and other people of color – are made to pay higher taxes, leaving us with less money and power.

The *Zooming Out Strategy* involves similar components:

1. Highlight how the tax system as a whole is rigged.
2. Name several specific aspects of the tax system that are rigged.
3. Name who the system is rigged by and for: ultra-wealthy individuals and corporations.
4. Name who the system is rigged against: working people, Black people, and other people of color.
5. Explain several different concrete and specific ways in which the system privileges the powerful few and disadvantages working people and people of color.

Here's an example of what this looks like. In brackets, we highlight how the explanation paints a broader picture by weaving together brief explanations of how different aspects of the system are rigged.

Zooming Out: How the Tax System as a Whole is Rigged

Ultra-wealthy individuals and corporations are working with the government to rig our tax system so it benefits the richest people at the expense of the rest of us. It lets rich people build up and pass huge amounts of wealth on to their children with little or no tax [*wealth and estate tax*]. While our wages can be taxed up to nearly 40%, the rigged tax system caps taxes on unearned income from investments at just 20%, and corporate profits at 21% [*investments vs. wages, personal vs. corporate tax*]. The system is rigged so that those of us with less wealth – including working people, Black people, and other people of color – are made to pay higher tax rates than the richest people, leaving us with less money and power.

Element #3: Solutions that match the scale at which the problem is explained – and an explanation of how we can bring about these solutions.

When people think about rigged systems, there's often a mismatch in scale between the problem as they imagine it (it's big) and the solutions they think could feasibly happen (typically quite small). This leaves people in a bind: We can think big and imagine transformative solutions, but this feels utopian. Or we can think realistically about what might actually happen, but this feels inadequate to address the problem.

Framing can help with this by finding effective ways of matching the scale of the problem and solution in how we explain system rigging. The two different ways of explaining problems described above – the *Spotlighting* and *Zooming Out* strategies – must be accompanied by different ways of talking about solutions:

- Spotlighting -> Smaller-Scale, Feasible Solution
- Zooming Out -> Transformative Changes + Explanation of People Power

What Does This Look Like?

When we use the *Spotlighting Strategy* to explain one aspect of how the tax system is rigged, this tees up solutions in a straightforward way: by getting concrete and specific about the problem, we help people get their heads and their hands around what could be done to help. And because the problem we've explained is smaller scale, it feels tractable and the solutions we propose seem feasible. Here's an example of how to talk about solutions that could follow the *Spotlight* explanation of how the tax system is rigged specifically through taxation investments vs. wages:

Spotlight Solution: Taxing Investments vs. Wages

We can begin to unrig the tax system by taxing income from buying and selling stocks at the same rates that we tax income from working. By doing this, we can start to make the system work for all of us, not just the wealthy few.

Increasing taxes on investments is a sufficiently small policy change that it won't strike people as impossible. When we use the *Spotlight Strategy*, introducing solutions isn't hard – we can simply name a solution that follows from and would solve the specific aspect of the rigged tax system that we've explained.

When we use the *Zooming Out Strategy*, talking about solutions is trickier. It requires three key steps:

1. Describe transformative solutions that would unrig the system at scale.
2. Explain how we can bring these solutions about through the power of numbers.
3. Illustrate how these big changes would practically benefit people.

The first step is important, and we can't take it for granted. People often struggle to envision fundamentally different ways of designing systems like taxes. The second step is critical because it helps people overcome the feeling that such changes sound nice but aren't realistic. By explaining how we can force change by coming together in numbers, we can overcome the sense that big change isn't possible.

Here's an example of how, when using the *Zooming Out Strategy*, we can talk about unrigging the tax system at scale:

Solving the Problem at Scale: Envisioning Transformative Change

To unrig the tax system, we need to force those in power to change the tax system so it works for all of us. If we taxed inheritances and unearned income at higher rates, we could expand and increase the child tax credit, putting money in the pocket of every family. We could also create a “nest egg” of money for all children at birth that they can use when they turn 18. If we increased corporate tax rates, the government could provide essential public services and things that support us all – like guaranteed jobs, healthcare, and housing.

These are big changes, but we can make them happen by leveraging the collective power of the 99%. When we come together with the strength of the many, our calls for action are louder and force the government and those in power to reshape the rigged system.

An Optional Addition: Identifying a small group of corporations as the villain.

While it's always important to name the villain, in our [research on talking about rigged systems](#), we've found that it's critical not to focus on *who* is rigging the system at the expense of focusing on *how* the system is rigged. In other words, villains aren't a stand-in for an explanation of the problem. We've also found that

naming *specific* villains (e.g., individual billionaires or specific companies) can backfire by undercutting systemic thinking or potentially opening the door for antisemitism.

In this new research on talking about the rigged tax system, we continued to explore villain framing and found that there can be benefits to highlighting a “small group of corporations” as the actors responsible for rigging the system.

What Does Talking about Villains This Way Do?

Highlighting that the system is rigged by a “small group of corporations” is effective in cultivating collective agency. The idea that a few corporations are wielding so much power can motivate engagement with tax reform and may help people see the problem as changeable (we just need to displace the power of a relatively small set of actors). There is also some evidence that this strategy deepens understanding that the tax system benefits white people and disadvantages people of color and builds support for equalizing taxation on investments and wages.

What Does This Look Like?

Highlighting the disproportionate power of a few corporations is straightforward – it’s just a matter of emphasizing this point when explaining how systems are rigged and can be unrigged. Here’s an example of how to do this:

A Small Group of Corporations as the Villain

Our tax system is rigged by a few big corporations to benefit themselves and their shareholders at the expense of the rest of us. By taking power back from these few companies, we can unrig the system so it works for us all.

Putting It All Together: Three Narratives

The elements above provide the core structure of effective messaging for organizing around tax reform:

1. One of the values (*Popular Self-Government* or *Freedom from Domination*) +
2. A *Spotlight* or *Zoomed Out* explanation of how the tax system is rigged +
3. A solution that matches the scale at which the problem was explained

Communicators can use their creativity and understanding of their context and audience to develop specific messages that follow this general structure. To aid in this effort, we've put together three sample narratives that illustrate how these elements can be put together that are easily adaptable for specific purposes. For each, we briefly note the audiences for whom the narrative is best suited.

Narrative 1: Transforming the Tax System to Work for the People (Elements: *Popular Self-Government* + *Zooming Out Strategy* + *Transformative Solutions Achieved through Power in Numbers*)

We believe that power lies with the people, and we have the right to govern ourselves. Nothing can happen without our consent. But right now, ultra-wealthy individuals and corporations are working with the government to rig our tax system for their benefit. Those of us with less wealth – including working people and people of color – are made to pay higher tax rates than the richest people.

Our tax rules let rich people pass on huge amounts of wealth to their children with little or no tax. Their investments and corporate profits are taxed at just 21% while our wages are taxed up to nearly 40%. We need to take back our collective decision-making power and change our rigged tax system.

We need to force those in power to change the system so it works for all of us. By taxing inheritances, investments, and corporations at higher rates, we can make big changes that would make life better – like putting money in the pocket of every family by expanding the child tax credit, creating a “nest egg” for every child that they get when they turn 18, and providing

guaranteed jobs, healthcare, and housing. If we leverage the collective power of the 99%, we can force the government to remake the rigged system.

This narrative is well-suited for any group. In our experiments, this narrative's elements were highly effective with the whole sample, increasing understanding of the tax system, building support for policy change, and cultivating a sense of collective agency.

Narrative 2: *Freeing Ourselves from the Domination of Corporations* (Elements: *Freedom from Domination + Small Group of Powerful Corporations + Spotlight on Investment + Specific Solution*)

No one has a natural right to rule over others. We shouldn't have to live according to the whim of powerful people who can tell us what to do.

Right now, a few big corporations rule us all, rigging the tax system so they can pay what they want in taxes while we pay more. They've twisted the tax rules by slashing taxes on investments and corporate profits. The system is rigged so a few big companies can get rich, leaving the government without the money to pay for essential public services.

We must resist these big corporations and demand higher taxes on investments and corporate profits. We need to reclaim the power to shape our own lives.

This narrative is particularly well-suited for younger people. In our experiment, we found that focusing on a small group of corporations as the villain works particularly well with young people. This framing strategy moved both policy support and collective agency for people aged 18–34 (see appendix for details).

Narrative 3: *Unrigging the System by Taxing Investments* (Elements: *Popular Self-Government + Spotlight on Investment + Specific Solution*)

We have the right to govern ourselves. What happens in society is up to us. But right now, ultra-rich people and corporations are working with the

government to rig the tax system. They've manipulated the rules – when rich people sell stocks, this is taxed at no more than 20%, while the taxes we pay on income from work go up to almost 40%. This means that those of us with less money to invest, like working people and most Black people and other people of color, have to pay higher taxes than rich people and big corporations.

We need to reclaim our power as a people and unrig the tax system. We can take back power and unrig the tax system by taxing income from buying and selling stocks at the same rates as we tax income from working.

The elements of this narrative worked particularly well with Black participants – and particularly Black women – in our experiment.

Conclusion

Framing taxes as a rigged system can be a highly effective way to move the issue out of the abstract realm of policy and connect it to people's experiences. Yet it's not enough to simply say that the tax system is rigged. We need to pair this framing with values that tap into the idea of collective power, illustrations of how the rigged tax system works, and effective ways of talking about how it can be *unrigged*.

The framing strategy laid out in this brief is highly adaptable. Organizers can use the structure of the strategy as a flexible framework, using their knowledge of their own communities to find the right ways of articulating the values and of using the *Spotlight* and *Zooming Out* strategies. By using this common framework, organizers in different communities can amplify each other's efforts and raise the salience of the issue across public spaces.

Appendix

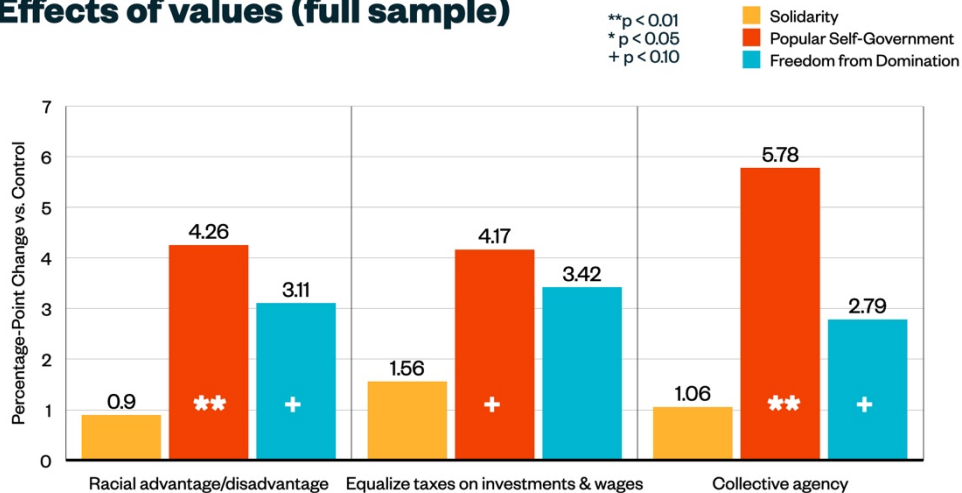
Below, we provide graphs that depict the evidence for the findings and recommendations discussed in this brief, along with sample survey items and demographic information about the sample. For a full description of the experimental survey methodology used in this research, see pp. 51-53 of our recent, related report, *Filling in the Blanks: Contesting What “the System Is Rigged” Means*. While the sampling, survey measures, and message treatments described in that report were different from the current research, the general approach for fielding and analyzing the survey was the same.

Evidence

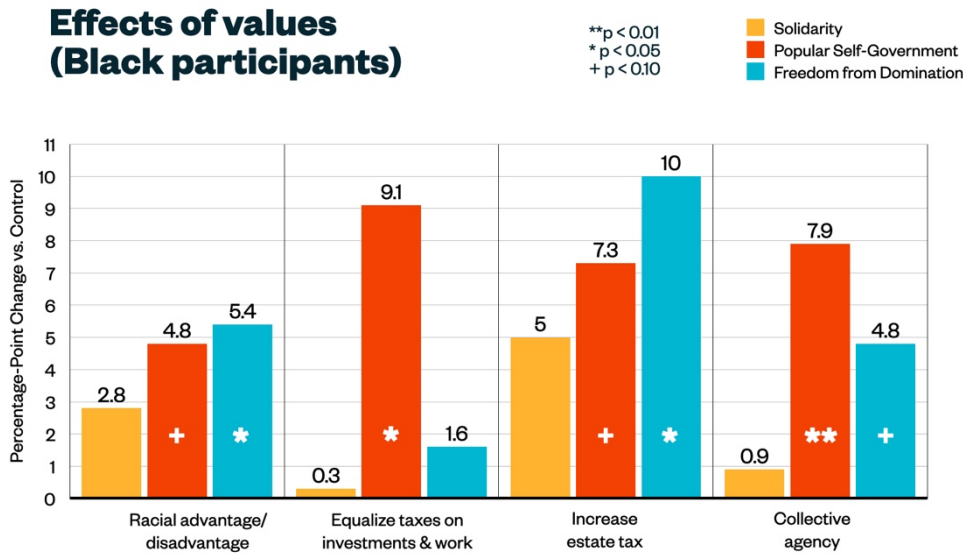
Values

The graph below shows the effects of the three values tested – *Popular Self-Government*, *Freedom from Domination*, and *Solidarity*.

Effects of values (full sample)

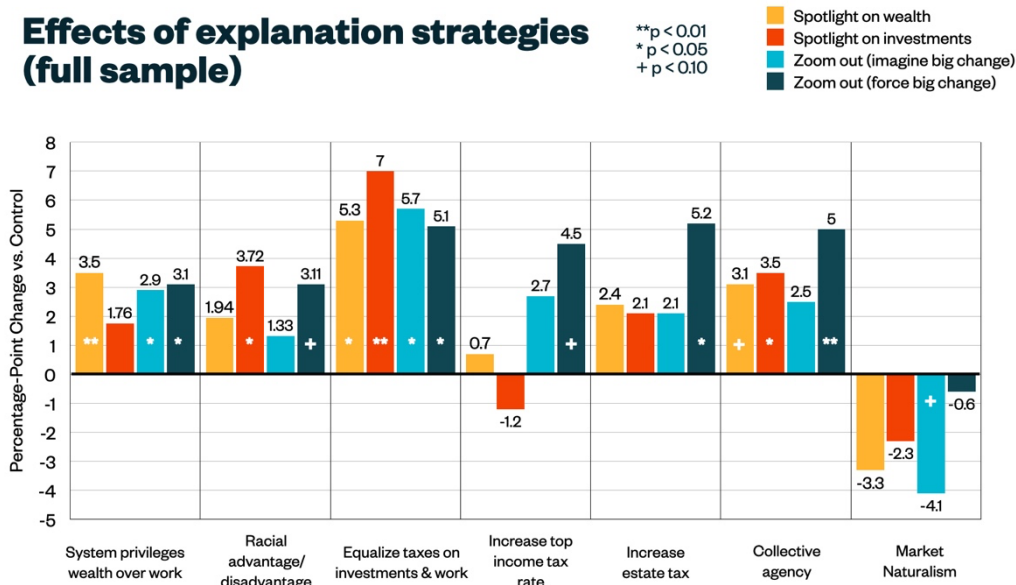


The following graph shows the effects of these values with Black participants specifically. *Popular Self-Government* worked particularly well for Black participants, though *Freedom from Domination* was also effective.



Spotlight and Zooming Out Strategies

The graph below shows the effects of two messages that used the *Spotlight Strategy* to explain one aspect of how the tax system is rigged and can be unrigged, one focusing on wealth, the other on investments. They also show the effects of two messages that used the *Zooming Out Strategy* and talked about the transformative changes needed to unrig the system -- one explaining how this can happen by spreading a new vision of what's needed (imagine big change), the other explaining how this can happen through power in numbers (force big change). These messages both explained the problem and the solution, covering the second and third elements of the framing structure discussed above.

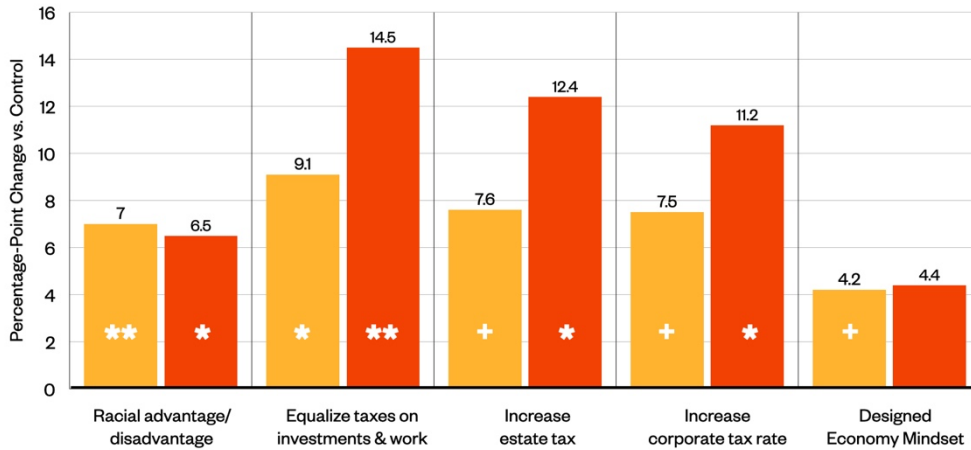


The following graph shows the effects of the *Spotlight on Investment* frame among Black participants generally and Black women participants specifically.

Effects of *Spotlight on Investments* framing (all Black participants + Black women specifically)

**p < 0.01
* p < 0.05
+ p < 0.10

■ All Black participants
■ Black women participants



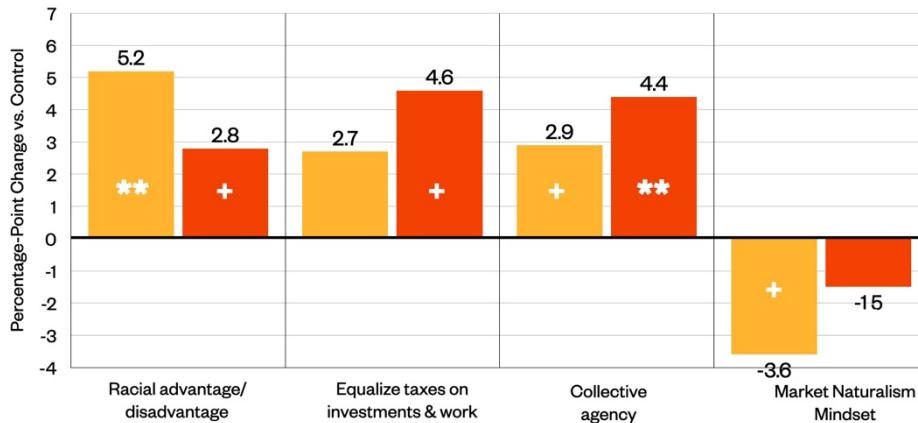
Villains

The graph below shows the effects of two villain frames – one highlighting a few small corporations as the villain, the other highlighting a few wealthy individuals as the villain.

Effects of villain frames (full sample)

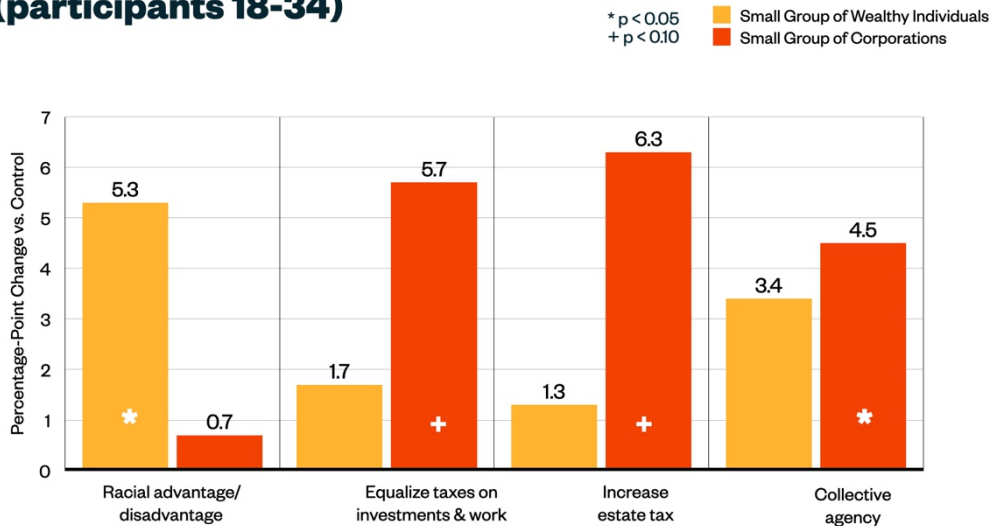
**p < 0.01
* p < 0.05
+ p < 0.10

■ Small Group of Wealthy Individuals
■ Small Group of Corporations



The following graphs shows the effects of these villain frames among young participants, aged 18–34.

Effects of villain frames (participants 18-34)



Survey Outcome Measures

In the survey experiment, we measured a range of outcomes to understand the effects of different ways of talking about the tax system as a rigged system. Most outcomes were measured using sets of questions, or batteries, although for policies individual survey items were used. Survey items generally included statements accompanied by Likert-type scales (e.g., a seven-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”).

The table below lists the outcomes included in the experimental surveys. For each outcome, we provide a sample survey item for illustration. The full list of survey items is available upon request.¹

¹ There were a few additional outcomes included in the survey, but we have excluded them here because the measures did not function well (e.g., there were “ceiling effects” indicating very high levels of baseline agreement).

Outcome	Sample Items
— Belief – tax system privileges the wealthy	— There are more tax advantages for high-income taxpayers than there are for lower and middle-income taxpayers. (5-point Likert-scale: “definitely false”; “probably false”; “possibly”; “probably true”; “definitely true”)
— Belief – system privileges wealth over work	— Wealth from unearned income, like inheritances, is taxed at lower rates than income earned from jobs. (5-point Likert-scale: “definitely false”; “probably false”; “possibly”; “probably true”; “definitely true”)
— Belief – racial advantage/disadvantage	— Our tax system favors white taxpayers at the expense of non-white taxpayers. (5-point Likert-scale: “definitely false”; “probably false”; “possibly”; “probably true”; “definitely true”)
— Policy – equalize taxes on investments and work	— Tax profits from buying and selling stocks (currently 0-20%) at the same rate as wages and salaries (10-37%). (7-point Likert scale: “Strongly oppose”; “Oppose”; “Somewhat oppose”; “Neither oppose nor favor”; “Somewhat favor”; “Favor”; “Strongly favor”)
— Policy – increase estate tax	— Restore gradual estate tax rates, reaching up to 55% tax for estates above \$28 million. (7-point Likert scale: “Strongly oppose”; “Oppose”; “Somewhat oppose”; “Neither oppose nor favor”; “Somewhat favor”; “Favor”; “Strongly favor”)
— Policy – increase top income tax rate	— Increase the top tax rate to 50% for incomes above \$626,350 (\$751,600 for couples). (7-point Likert scale: “Strongly oppose”; “Oppose”; “Somewhat oppose”; “Neither oppose nor favor”; “Somewhat favor”; “Favor”; “Strongly favor”)
— Policy – increase corporate tax rate	— Increase the maximum corporate tax rate from 21% to 46%, restoring corporate tax levels seen in the mid-1980s. (7-point Likert scale: “Strongly oppose”; “Oppose”; “Somewhat oppose”; “Neither oppose nor favor”; “Somewhat favor”; “Favor”; “Strongly favor”)
— Attitude – collective agency	— I can cooperate with others who want tax reform in order to advance our shared goals. (7-point Likert scale: “Strongly oppose”; “Oppose”; “Somewhat oppose”; “Neither oppose nor favor”; “Somewhat favor”; “Favor”; “Strongly favor”)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Attitude – collective efficacy (systems change – general) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In your opinion, how realistic is it for our society to change for the better? (<i>7-point Likert scale: “Not at all realistic”; “Slightly realistic”; “Somewhat realistic”; “Moderately realistic”; “Very realistic”; “Extremely realistic”; “Totally realistic”</i>) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Attitude – collective efficacy (fair outcomes – tax System) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How optimistic or pessimistic are you that we can create a fair tax system? (<i>7-point Likert scale: “Very pessimistic”; “Pessimistic”; “Somewhat pessimistic”; “Neither pessimistic nor optimistic”; “Somewhat optimistic”; “Optimistic”; “Very optimistic”</i>) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mindset – Designed Economy (goal is to increase endorsement) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Economic inequality is the result of the laws and policies our government has put into place. (<i>7-point Likert scale: “Strongly oppose”; “Oppose”; “Somewhat oppose”; “Neither oppose nor favor”; “Somewhat favor”; “Favor”; “Strongly favor”</i>) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mindset – Market Naturalism (goal is to decrease endorsement) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Who benefits in our economy is determined naturally by the free market. (<i>7-point Likert scale: “Strongly oppose”; “Oppose”; “Somewhat oppose”; “Neither oppose nor favor”; “Somewhat favor”; “Favor”; “Strongly favor”</i>) |
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Demographics

As described above, the survey sample was constructed to be majority young (age 18–34), lower income, and non-white. All participants identified as Democrats or as independents who lean Democratic. And all participants indicated experience with activism or civic engagement. The survey used the following question to determine activism/engagement:

Have you recently engaged in, or considered engaging in, any of the following activities? (*Participants were excluded from the survey if they did not answer “Yes”*).

- Volunteering with a grassroots organization
- Attending a protest
- Donating to or volunteering with a large activist organization
- Volunteering at a local polling location
- Canvassing your community for a social or political issue
- Attending a town hall meeting to advocate for an issue, or
- Other similar activities

The below table reports demographic information for the sample for the survey.

Demographic Variable	Total Participants (N = 2565)	Total %
Age		
18-29	1,396	54%
30-44	459	18%
45-59	353	14%
60+	357	14%
Gender		
Man	1,015	40%
Woman	1,549	60%
Intersex	1	<1%
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian (non-Hispanic/Latino)	911	36%
Hispanic/Latino	390	15%
Black/African American	971	38%
Asian	139	5%
American Indian/Alaska Native	37	1%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	8	<1%
Middle Eastern/North African	9	<1%
Other/Biracial or multiracial	100	4%
Income (USD)		
0-24,999	308	12%
25,000-49,999	664	26%
50,000-99,999	934	36%
100,000-149,000	407	16%
150,000+	252	10%

Education

High school diploma or less	545	21%
Some college or associate degree	845	33%
Bachelor's degree	763	30%
Graduate/Professional degree	412	16%

Political Party

Democrat	2,146	84%
Independent/Other—closer to Democratic Party	419	16%

About FrameWorks

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