



# Navigating Public Thinking about Democracy: June 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 June 18, 2025, we shared findings from research on people’s understandings of authoritarianism, mindsets that drive and create openings for authoritarianism, and how to use this knowledge to counter authoritarian thinking. These findings drew on deep-dive mindset interviews conducted in 2023, ongoing focus group research, and tracking survey data from April 2024–June 2025. Key findings, implications, and framing strategies are presented below:

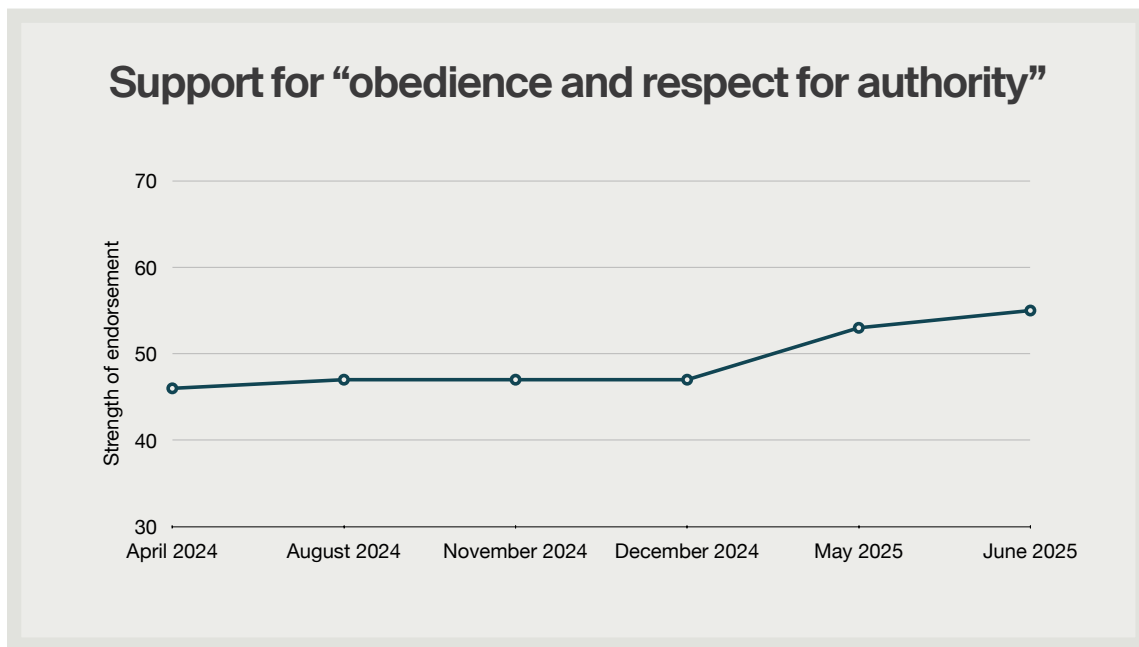
## **Authoritarian attitudes are on the rise.**

In our ongoing tracking survey, we measure authoritarian attitudes by asking to what extent participants agree or disagree with statements such as the following:

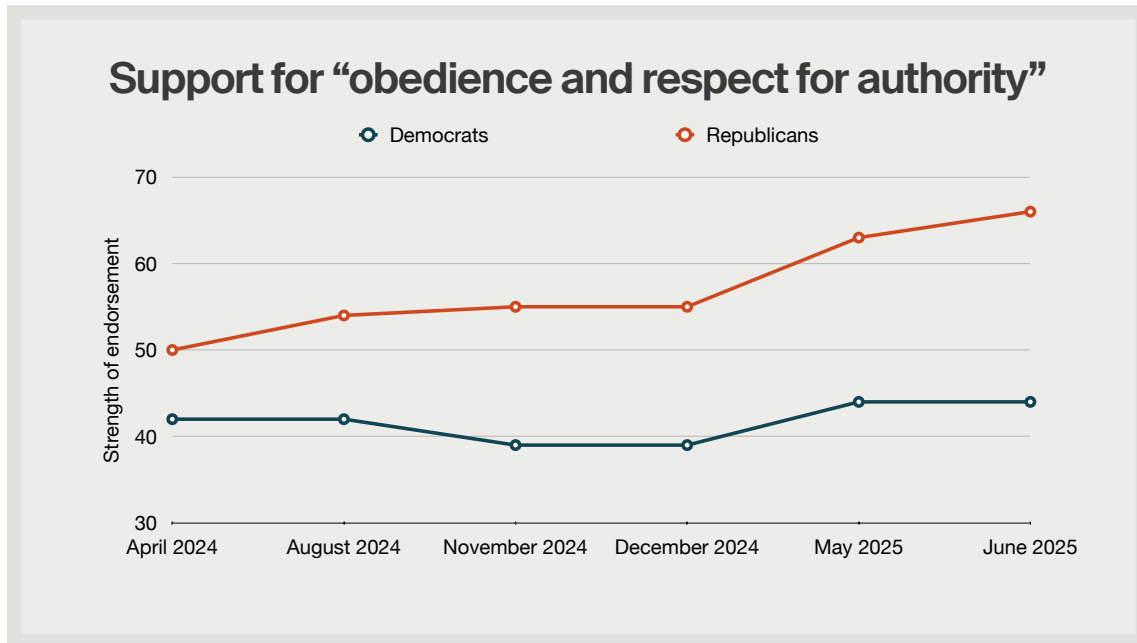
- “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.”

- “Our country will be great if we show respect for authority and obey our leaders.”
- “The real keys to the ‘good life’ are respect for authority and obedience to those who are in charge.”

Between December 2024 and June 2025, we’ve seen an overall rise in authoritarian attitudes:



While there are significant differences when this data is broken down by political party, it’s important to note that authoritarian attitudes are higher than they were in December 2024 for both major parties:



## People understand “authoritarianism” as the opposite of whatever democracy is.

Warnings about authoritarianism are widespread, coming from sources ranging from [late night TV hosts](#) to [political figures](#) to [academics](#). It’s important for us to understand how people are likely to be making sense of all this talk about “authoritarianism.”

Most members of the public don’t define authoritarianism on its own terms, but rather think of it as the opposite of democracy. And because they have different ways of understanding democracy, this leads to different understandings of authoritarianism. Below, we summarize how understandings of democracy lead to mirrored understandings of authoritarianism.

- When people understand democracy as a system of government in which people have **individual liberties**...

They think that under authoritarianism, people **lose their individual liberties**.

*Implication for communicators:* If people don’t recognize (their) individual liberties as being at risk, warnings about authoritarianism can fall flat or come across as partisan hyperbole. By expanding understandings of the many ways in which our individual liberties *are* at stake, we can productively navigate this way

of thinking.

- When people understand democracy as a government **by and for the people...** They think that under authoritarianism, the government **doesn't listen to the people.**

*Implication for communicators:* This mindset is flexible and leaves space for different answers to key questions: Who is included in “the people” and who isn't? How do we know their will? Who gets to act on behalf of the people? For guidance on how our communications can most effectively address those questions, refer to the *Democracy as Government “by and for the People”* section below.

- When people understand democracy as **all about voting...** They think that under authoritarianism, people **aren't given an opportunity to vote.**

*Implication for communicators:* If people don't see (their) right to vote as restricted or under threat, they may not be inclined to listen to warnings about authoritarianism. And when democracy is reduced to the act of casting a vote, it can be easy for authoritarian leaders to frame actions like mass demonstrations as illegitimate, undemocratic resistance to elected officials. To bring into view the multitude of ways authoritarian governments exert power over their citizens, we must paint a more complete picture of what a flourishing democracy looks like (including protests).

- When people think about democracy as **whatever the United States does...** They think that **the United States can't be authoritarian.**

*Implication for communicators:* Pushing back against American exceptionalism and the idea that our democracy is and will always be the best in the world is crucial to building public resistance to the rise of authoritarianism. One way we can do that is to help people see the effects of authoritarianism on their daily lives, right now. For more on how to do that, check out: [Communicating about Democracy Under Threat](#).

A complete guide to each of these understandings of democracy and authoritarianism can be found in: [By and For the People? Cultural Mindsets of Democracy and the Political System.](#)

## **Authoritarian attitudes are driven by a specific regressive mindset: “Unity through Restoration.”**

In our ongoing culture tracking research, we’ve seen yearning for a more “united” country grow stronger and stronger over the last five years, across party lines and other demographic groups:

*“We all agree that **our country is divided**, and we all agree that **we want our country to come together**, and that **if it did come together, we would all prosper**. Not only as a nation, but as a people.”*

Research participant, January 2024

Division is understood as a signal that our country isn’t doing well, and is something that concerns and frightens many people:

*“I think that **we are more divided as a country than we’ve been in my lifetime**. And that’s what makes it scary. **It’s not so much that we’re divided, but that we’re really divided**. I mean, it’s like, if one side wins the other is going to be unhappy, and vice-versa. So I just don’t know what’s going to happen.”*

Research participant, January 2024

Beneath the surface of this shared yearning for unity are two very different ways of thinking about what unity looks like and how we should get there. One of these understandings – the idea that we must achieve *unity through restoration* of the past – drives authoritarian attitudes.

The *unity through restoration* mindset is deeply nostalgic, oriented toward an imaginary past when Americans were (supposedly) socially and politically unified. The idea of restoring the past carries with it – implicit and sometimes explicitly – the idea that we need to restore racial, gender, and other hierarchies. When people draw on this mindset, they see attempts to address injustice or express “nontraditional” identities as the causes of division. To achieve unity, people need to accept their place.

This mindset often comes through in subtle ways, as in this participant’s suggestion that discussion of gender identity undercuts a sense of rules and the attempt to have a “solid idea about society.”

***“You don’t have the same black and white rules that we used to have before. Everything is different, from how we raise our children to the dynamics of our families. Even the small things we took for granted, like gender identity. That’s a very complicated and very, uh, sensitive topic now. Whereas it wasn’t a concept before... How does that pertain to us, to our survival, our evolution? We have so many issues like global warming and constant wars and nuclear bombs and all these other things going on. It’s just, it’s very complex right now. There’s no one solid idea about society right now. It’s just chaos.”***

Research participant, February 2024

This mindset is widely available, although Republicans tend to draw on it more frequently than Democrats, and people with less education more than people with more education.

Quantitative analysis found that out of all the mindsets we regularly track – which includes cross-cutting mindsets like *individualism*, mindsets around the economy like *market naturalism*, and pathologizing and essentializing mindsets around race and gender, among others – *unity through restoration* was the mindset with the single most powerful influence on authoritarian attitudes. In other words, it’s the biggest driver of authoritarian thinking.

The connection here is intuitive. When people think that unity depends on everyone accepting their place and restoring hierarchies, it’s an easy jump to the idea that – if people are resisting this – we need someone to *put* them in their place and restore order. The idea that people should fall in line quickly slides into the idea that people should be forced to obey.

Countering *the unity through restoration* mindset is critical for preventing authoritarianism from taking root. One way to do that is to lean into an alternative way of thinking about unity that is available across groups—the *unity through progress* mindset. In this way of thinking, our deep social divisions are the product of injustices, and the path to unity is through addressing injustices:

***“I think that the government has a really big role to play with resolving divisions because they need to make sure that the systems that are in place do help out other***

*people, and people that are really in need. They shouldn't be turning a blind eye to certain things that are injustices."*

Research participant, February 2024

This mindset embraces pluralism and prompts a democratic orientation. Unity requires putting us on the same footing, not reinforcing hierarchy.

Keep the following strategies in mind to leverage the *unity through progress* mindset:

- Link divisions to injustice.

*What this looks like:* One reason our country is so divided is because certain groups are given power over other people based on their race, gender, or how wealthy they are.

*What this looks like:* Our country is divided because people are treated unfairly because of where they live or the color of their skin.

- Explain how addressing injustices can bring us together.

*What this looks like:* If we really want to heal the divisions in our country, we need to make sure that everyone in our society has the power to shape their own lives.

*What this looks like:* To be a more unified country, we need to come together and demand policies that address injustices and consider the needs of all neighborhoods and communities.

- Be careful of framing that suggests we need to “go back” to some other time—that politics “used to be” more civil, that the news “used to be” less biased, or that we “used to” be in dialogue with each other before social media. Cuing the idea of restoration could trigger ideas about hierarchy and the authoritarianism that accompanies this.

For more on these dueling mindsets about unity, see our recent report: [Whose Unity? Which Diversity? Cultural Mindsets around Pluralism in the United States.](#)

# Other mindsets can create openings for authoritarianism—but careful framing can redirect thinking in other directions.

## 1. Personalism

One of the most prevalent ways of thinking about government is the mindset of *personalism*, which equates government with the individual leaders in charge. This mindset completely obscures the role of institutions and systems and opens space for notions of charismatic leadership that can slide into authoritarian attitudes.

People believe that our country is facing major problems that require big fixes (because it is!), but they aren't familiar with the systems and institutions that are at the root of these problems, and don't know which structural changes are needed to fix them. Instead, they default to *personalism*, assuming that the problems must stem from bad leaders who don't care and that we must need a "good" leader to solve our problems.

*"It seems like **we lack leaders** in both parties who have character and who are well respected. **Maybe we need such a leader**, somebody that rises above the normal politics, and who's a positive person, and that people can get behind. And **maybe that would make a difference.**"*

Research participant, January 2024

Dissatisfaction with the status quo and a singular focus on personal character opens space for the personality cults that authoritarian leaders try to cultivate.

To redirect this way of thinking away from authoritarianism, we can:

- Situate leaders in the context of institutions.

*What this looks like:* Congress isn't doing what people say they want. Even hugely popular laws don't get passed. One reason for that is the way our political system is set up. In our country, where you live determines how much your vote counts. If you live in a state with a small population, your vote counts a lot. But if you live in a state with a large population, your vote counts a lot less. That means that even if most of the country wants something, elected officials might not feel any pressure to do something



about it.

- Show how structural changes would enable government to serve people, so that people can see a path to change other than following a charismatic leader.

*What this looks like:* The government should do what most people want. But right now, our political system makes it hard for the government to take popular steps, like raising taxes on the rich. And when Congress does overcome the hurdles built into our process and passes popular legislation to address climate change, gun violence, healthcare, and other issues, the Supreme Court frequently strikes it down. We need to pass reforms that get rid of some of these barriers, like getting rid of the filibuster and putting term limits on the Supreme Court.

## 2. System is Rigged

The idea that our systems are rigged is incredibly pervasive in American culture, and it's true that many of our systems *are* designed to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few. However, the *system is rigged* mindset sometimes leads people to believe that rigged systems are unfixable, which can make people more susceptible to the idea that we need a strong leader to crush and reshape these systems.

The key is *how* we engage with this mindset. By talking about rigged systems in the right ways, we can build support for a more just world and actually decrease authoritarian attitudes. By clearly and explicitly filling in the blanks of how the system is rigged, and how it can be unrigged, we can steer system is rigged thinking in more productive directions.

*What this looks like:* Our society was rigged, by design, to let wealthy white people rule and to limit the power of people of color. Our Constitution was written by and for slaveholders, and our economic system still depends on paying Black people and immigrants of color low wages for essential work like childcare and home care. It's time for us to come together and demand a new social system—one that enforces anti-discrimination and voting rights laws, heavily taxes inherited wealth, and lays the groundwork for a country that works for all of us.

For more on the core elements of effective system is rigged framing, read our full report: [Filling in the Blanks: Contesting What “the System Is Rigged” Means](#).

### 3. Democracy as Government “by and for the People”

One of the ways people have of understanding democracy is as government by and for the people—democracy means government that does what the people want. This mindset doesn’t provide a clear understanding of who is included in “the people” (and who isn’t), how we know their will and how it can be carried out, or who gets to act on behalf of the people. These questions can be and are contested— including by authoritarian leaders claiming to be the unique bearers of the people’s will.

When the mindset is mobilized in this way, it can give a democratic sheen to authoritarian disregard for limits to the leader’s power. And if “the people” is narrowly defined (e.g., as native-born Americans only, as White Christians, etc.) this mindset supports exclusion in the name of democracy.

Yet this mindset can also provide a basis for resistance to authoritarianism and broad inclusion. It’s vital to contest what it means for our government to work “for the people,” and not to let authoritarian claims to act on behalf of the people stand. To redirect this way of thinking, we can:

- Speak as the people—say what we the people want, consent to, and demand.

*Language to use/adapt:*

- We believe that power lies with the people.
  - We have the right to govern ourselves.
  - What happens in society is up to us.
  - Nothing can happen without the consent of the people.
  - We refuse to live according to the whims of powerful people.
  - We the people don’t consent to [action].
  - We the people demand [action].
- Be explicit in describing “the people” expansively.

*What this looks like:* In a democracy, the people have the power to decide what happens to us. Our system is rigged against immigrants, Black people, other people of color, and those of us with less wealth. It’s time for us to come together

and demand change.

- Show how institutions block popular will, and help people picture how they could channel it instead.

*What this looks like:* In a democracy, military force should never be used to shut down the voices of people speaking up for what they believe. Our goal should be making it safer—not more dangerous—for people to speak up.