



Claiming Contested Values

How *Fairness, Stability and Freedom* Can Help Us
Build Demand for Transformative, Structural Change



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Contents

Introduction	3
Executive Summary	5
Core Concepts: Values, Mindsets, and Frames	9
Fairness	15
How Does the US Public Think about Fairness	15
Framing Strategies for Fairness	16
Stability	23
How Does the US Public Think about Stability	23
Framing Strategies for Stability	24
Freedom	27
How Does the US Public Think about Freedom	27
Framing Strategies for Freedom	28
Endnotes	35

Introduction

Values are a crucial part of our framing strategies.¹ They help progressive organizations and campaigners make the case for why the issues we work on are important, and they can motivate collective action toward big, structural changes.

In a moment where executive orders are designed to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and memoranda are designating nonprofits as domestic terroristic organizations based on their stated missions, many in civil society are questioning how to communicate their values effectively. Sometimes this raises tactical challenges, like how to keep appealing to the value of *Equity* without necessarily using the word “equity.”² But it raises a much bigger question about our framing strategies: **How do we draw on the values Americans care about to tell a powerful story of what’s wrong in our society and what needs to change?** How do we engage with these deeply held ideals in ways that overcome immediate challenges while laying the groundwork for the structural changes needed to move us beyond what can feel like intractable problems? This research shows how the values of *Fairness*, *Stability*, and *Freedom* can help us do that.

However, the role of values in framing is often misunderstood. Values sometimes get conflated with policies, as if something like universal health care is itself a value rather than the underpinning concern for equity or justice. Values are also seen as “magic words” (or, in today’s political climate, “dangerous words”) that do their work by simply being named, as if the words “equity” or “freedom” on their own carry all the meaning we need them to carry. Words like “freedom” are indeed powerful, but they are big and broad enough for people to understand them in different ways.³ These words do not, by mere mention, lead people to support specific policies or to behave in particular ways. For these reasons, we need to pay careful attention to how we appeal to our values—the ways we articulate them and unpack their meaning; *how* we connect them to actions that advance structural change; and how we link them to other parts of our framing strategies.

We focus here on the values of *Freedom*, *Fairness*, and *Stability* because they have broad appeal throughout the US public and are used by communicators across the political spectrum. This sets them apart from values that tend to be used in more conservative communications (e.g., *Tradition*) or in more progressive communications (e.g., *Solidarity*). All values are contested in the sense that they can be understood and acted upon in different ways, but these values are particularly politically contested.

Freedom, *Fairness*, and *Stability* have special importance in our politics because they are both salient *and* contested. How these values are interpreted and mobilized, and who wins the contest over their meaning, will play a significant role in shaping the cultural and political terrain in the years to come. The question is not *whether* we engage with these contested values but *how* we engage with them to point them toward social justice and system change.

Our interest is in the potential of these values to expand systemic thinking and build support for structural changes. In the Culture Change Project, we have tracked the rise and shift in some of these key systemic cultural mindsets, like the mindset that racism is a systemic problem or the mindset that the economic system is designed by humans and determined by laws and policies.⁴ A value that “works” is a value that can strengthen such mindsets, helping people think about our systems in ways that emphasize human design, structural problems, and the need for collective and inclusive solutions. Conversely, a value works if it can weaken the dominance of individualistic mindsets, like the idea that people are solely responsible for what happens to them in life, or naturalistic mindsets, like the idea that men and women are biologically suited to different types of jobs or the idea that the economy is a natural force best left to its own devices. These types of mindset shifts are the main focus of this research—and what distinguishes it from messaging efforts that focus on other metrics of success, such as emotional responses or intention to take particular actions.

When evaluating the potential of values to shift mindsets, it’s important to consider the effects that values can have *across* issues. A value might work very well in connection with, say, the economy, but work less well or even backfire on another issue, like reproductive justice. Alternatively, a winning value on one issue can have a *positive* “spillover effect” on how people think about other issues that aren’t even mentioned in the frame.⁵ These spillover and backfire effects make values a particularly potent framing element. Whatever issue we work on, the values we appeal to can strengthen mindsets that are helpful—or harmful—for progressives more generally. By leveraging values in the right ways, progressive communicators can strengthen mindsets that are helpful across issues, amplify each other’s efforts, and avoid inadvertently undercutting each other.

This brief is organized into the following sections:

- **Executive summary.** A short overview of the main findings and recommendations.
- **What are values, what are mindsets?** A brief introduction to what we mean by values and cultural mindsets as well as how this research differs from message testing.
- **Methodology.** A brief summary of the methods we used in this research project, which are covered in more detail, along with the evidence supporting our recommendations, in our [Methods Supplement](#).
- **Findings and recommendations.** A detailed unpacking of how the US public thinks about *Fairness, Stability, and Freedom*, and what the research tells us about how we can most effectively use and engage with these values in our communications.

Executive Summary

Value Variants and Issue Pairings Matter

Values like *Freedom*, *Fairness*, or *Stability* can come in many different flavors. The effect of each value depends on which variant is communicated and how it is paired with different issues. *Freedom*, for instance, has different impacts on thinking if it is expressed as *Freedom to Thrive* or *Freedom from Domination*. The value of *Stability* pairs better with some issues than others—moving thinking easily when connected with the political system and less easily when connected to technology. Yet there are some key patterns that hold *across* different value variants and different issues, yielding a set of general guidelines.

Overarching Recommendations

- **Don't just say “freedom,” “fairness,” or “stability.”** The meaning of these words is strongly contested, and they can cue different things for different groups of people. That means the context we give them is very important. Each of these values requires a framing strategy if we are to use them to build support for a progressive vision of change. **This is particularly critical when it comes to freedom.** While *Freedom* can motivate collective action for systems change, it can also backfire in ways that are harmful to progressives, reinforcing support for limited government and increasing individualistic thinking about self-made success. It is challenging for progressives to claim *Freedom*, at least in the short term, because the word “freedom” is so strongly associated with the freedom of individuals to do what they want without the constraint of government. That's why it's essential not just to mention the word “freedom” but to connect it clearly to designed systems and collective action.
- **Default to *Fairness* to build support for a different and more inclusive society.** Of these three contested values, *Fairness* can most consistently be used to build support for systemic change. With the right framing, it is by far the most powerful at shifting mindsets in a more collective and structural direction. It is also much less likely to inadvertently reinforce unhelpful thinking
- **Across these contested values, make sure to foreground systems and system design.** These values work best when they are couched in clear language about the role of laws and policies in governing how systems work. This is particularly important for the value of *Freedom*, which can easily backfire if this element of the frame isn't strong.

- **Lead with a shared value and show how it is being violated.** Making the connection between our values and our systems is important. We can do this by talking about how our systems either support our values or violate them depending on how they are designed and governed. Winning frames use the following structure:
 - Open with a clear appeal to a shared value.
 - Provide a brief explanation of how that value is currently being undermined or violated in the way our systems work.
 - Show how system redesign, through new laws and policies, can enable that value.

This reflects long-standing advice that the FrameWorks Institute has given about order effects and the need for explanation⁶ alongside other framing and messaging experts like [ASO Communications](#) and [The Opportunity Agenda](#). Progressives tend to lead with the problem but should instead lead with shared values, *then* talk about the problem in terms of violating those values.

Framing Strategies for *Fairness, Stability, and Freedom*

When appealing to *Fairness*, emphasize power and explain the systemic sources of injustice.

We can draw on *Fairness* to build support for a different and more inclusive society. This is a value that can powerfully and consistently boost structural thinking and increase support for progressive policies.

How to use *Fairness*:

- Foreground system design by talking about how systems are created and maintained through laws and policies.
- Talk about power in terms of who has too much power and who should have more.
- When using *Fairness* to talk about inequitable race and class impacts, include an explanation of the causes of inequity.

What to watch out for: Without good framing, the word “fairness” is often interpreted as meaning fair outcomes—and usually in terms of equality (everyone should get the *same* treatment, regardless of circumstance) rather than equity (everyone should have the resources and support appropriate to their level of need). When people focus just on fair outcomes, they can miss important contextual factors like the distribution of power within

the system. In our framing strategy, we can avoid reinforcing a “flat equality” reading of *Fairness*, instead bringing power into the picture and explaining the cause of inequities.

Pair *Stability* with a clear articulation of the need for transformative change through system redesign.

Compared to *Fairness*, *Stability* is less powerful and consistent in its ability to boost structural, collective thinking. However, with good framing, it has the potential to increase support for progressive change. *Stability* does not backfire as easily as *Freedom*, and it works particularly well when used to make the case that the political system should be designed to deliver widespread stability.

How to use *Stability*:

- Frame *Stability* as the *goal* of system change rather than a reason to *avoid* change.
- Describe people’s role in bringing about the changes needed to create *Stability*.

What to watch out for: Without good framing, the word “stability” can bring to mind the importance of preserving the status quo in society and keeping conditions consistent over time—rather than making the big changes we need. Our frames must actively direct people away from this interpretation of *Stability* as a lack of change.

Avoid quick references to *Freedom*. Instead, pair *Freedom* with the need for system redesign and explain how our freedoms are threatened.

With careful framing, *Freedom* can be a powerfully motivational value and help build a sense that we can collectively solve society’s problems. However, compared to *Fairness* and *Stability*, *Freedom* can backfire much more easily, reinforcing unhelpful individualistic thinking. This can happen even when we are trying to steer *Freedom* in a more structural direction. For this reason, *Freedom* should ideally be tested for specific uses.

How to use *Freedom*:

- Unpack what *Freedom* means rather than just using the word.
- Always stress system design. Talk about how systems can be redesigned so we all have more freedom.
- When talking about *Freedom from Domination*, offer an explanation of how systems currently subject us to the rule of a powerful and wealthy few.

What to watch out for: The word “freedom” is easily associated with individualistic mindsets like the idea that people make their own success; naturalistic mindsets like the idea that the economy is a natural system that works best when left to its own devices, and (sometimes) racist mindsets like the idea that Black communities are more likely to be poor because they don’t value hard work. This is because when people hear “freedom,” they can focus on individuals in a vacuum without taking wider factors into account, like the way systems are designed to constrain or enable the freedom and success of different groups. We can mitigate these traps by putting *Freedom* firmly in a *system* context rather than an individualistic context.

THE PROJECT TO RECLAIM FREEDOM

In the United States, *Freedom* is consistently ranked as one of the most important values to people.⁷ It is also firmly associated with being a core *American* value. For many working in values-based communications, *Freedom* is considered to have a particular emotional, motivational pull because it’s central to how people see themselves. Its special salience in US culture means it’s a value that must be fought for by progressive communicators. Ceding *Freedom* to a ruthless vision of liberty—where individuals must fend for themselves in a so-called “free” market with minimal support from each other or the government—would mean ceding core, collective aspects of American identity.

Many on the progressive left have made the case to reclaim *Freedom*—from the long-standing messaging work of [ASO Communications](#) to [Next River’s](#) work on liberatory, collective understandings of *Freedom*. In this research, we find that it’s possible to leverage the value of *Freedom* to build more structural thinking and motivate collective action to change our systems, but it can be challenging because of its strong associations with individualism.

In the long term we must contest *Freedom*, but in the short term we should handle it with care.

Core Concepts: Values, Mindsets, and Frames

What Are Values?

We can understand values in two distinct ways. One is as a guiding principle in our lives, and the other is as a framing device. These are connected because when we draw on values in our communications, we can shape how important these values are to people and therefore how important these values are in our society.

Values as Guiding Principles

Values have often been defined by social psychologists as core beliefs about what is important and how we should live.⁸ They are understood to be the motivations that inform our attitudes and shape our actions.⁹ There are several other key features of values¹⁰ that have important implications for how we communicate about them:

- **Values transcend specific actions and situations.** For instance, we can value *Freedom* in an abstract sense as well as in connection with a wide number of issues. This is in contrast to norms and attitudes, which are usually specific to certain actions, objects, or situations.
- **Values are held across people and cultural contexts.** For instance, most of us in the United States value *Freedom*. We just differ in how much we value *Freedom* and how we might connect *Freedom* to the issues we care about.
- **Values are fluid—their importance can rise and fall in different situations and in response to different frames.** For instance, we might generally value *Freedom* highly, but in a situation where we are very concerned about *Safety* and *Security*, our value of *Freedom* might temporarily drop in priority as our value of *Security* rises. This fluidity is important when it comes to framing. Frames have the power to cause our values to rise and fall in importance, as well as to shape how we use values to think about the issue at hand.

Values as a Framing Device

Values also function as frames. The features of the values mentioned previously mean that good value frames, repeated over time and at scale, can strengthen the importance of particular values in society and the mindsets associated with those values. Crucially, this can be done across an entire society, even if people vary in how much they tend to care about those values. The transcendental nature of values also means that we can strengthen the same values even if we work on different issues.

As a framing device, values help us make the case for why an issue matters and why we should collectively work to address it. Values tap into people's shared commitments and aspirations; therefore, they have a particular power to build the belief that we collectively can, and should, make big changes in our society.

Most communications draw on values in some way, whether explicitly or implicitly, and whether or not this is intentional. As communicators, we need to be conscious about which values we are appealing to and how.

What Are Cultural Mindsets?

Mindsets are deep, durable patterns of thinking that shape our attitudes, feelings and actions. Cultural mindsets are those patterns of thought that are broadly available to people living within a shared context, like American society.

Cultural mindsets can lead us to take for granted or call into question the status quo. So, for example, a mindset like *Health Individualism*, which holds that people's health results from lifestyle choices like diet and exercise, leads people to place responsibility for health on individuals, not society. By contrast, more systemic mindsets about health, which understand health as a result of the environments and systems we live in, lead people to ask how society needs to change to support health for everyone.

An important feature of cultural mindsets is that we all hold multiple, sometimes competing mindsets. Members of the US public have access to both individualistic and systemic mindsets about health at the same time. What matters is the relative strength of these mindsets and how they are brought to bear on the issue at hand.

How Does Cultural Mindsets Research Differ from Public Opinion Research?

Public opinion research examines the explicit attitudes and preferences people hold about specific issues. Cultural mindsets research explores the deeper, underlying ways of thinking that shape and explain these patterns in public opinion. Where public opinion research examines *what* people think, cultural mindsets research examines *how* people think. For example, public opinion research might demonstrate that people support health education programs more than they support policies that promote access to healthy housing. Cultural mindsets research explains why this is, revealing the role that the mindset of *Health Individualism* plays in driving these opinions and preferences. Our [2020 report on mindsets shift](#) contains more on what cultural mindsets are and why they matter.¹¹

How Are Values Connected to Cultural Mindsets?

People have different ways of thinking about values like *Freedom* and *Fairness*, and we can understand these as different *mindsets of values*. For instance, people sometimes draw on the mindset of *Freedom as a Zero-Sum Game*, where it's assumed that freedom is something some people lose as other people gain. People also draw on the mindset of *Freedom as a Consumer Choice*, where freedom is primarily thought of in terms of the ability to choose and buy products. These are distinct ways of thinking about the value of *Freedom* that are both available to people.

Values are also *associated* with a wide variety of cultural mindsets. For instance, *Freedom* can be associated with mindsets about government, like the mindset that government inherently tends to be oppressive and should play a limited role in our lives.

Value frames can strengthen particular mindsets *of values*, as well as mindsets *associated with* those values.

What Is Framing and How Does it Differ from Messaging?

Frames are interpretive packages. They involve choices about how an issue is presented—what is and isn't emphasized, how it is explained, what connections are made, and which commitments are invoked.¹² Metaphors and values are examples of frames. The same frames can be used again and again in different contexts with different audiences. Frames are designed to shift thinking in a general direction and can be used across communications with different goals.

Messages, on the other hand, contain specific words and phrases and are intended for use in a certain context with a particular audience. Messaging typically varies across different audiences and settings. The goal of messaging is to drive action in a specific and measurable way, usually with a particular short-term goal in mind.

Framing and messaging can work well in concert, with the general framing strategies providing some of the grounding for the tactical wording choices that come with messaging.

How Does Frame Testing Differ From Message Testing?

When we test frames at FrameWorks, we look for their potential to shift mindsets over time as well as their potential to shift key attitudes and support for policy changes. These metrics of success are distinct from metrics typically used in message testing, which tends to focus on emotional responses to messages (e.g., whether people relate to the message, agree with it, or feel warm or cold toward it) and targeted, short-term political outcomes like voting intention. While there can be overlap between frame testing and message testing, they often yield different judgments about what “works” due to the focus on different types of outcomes. For instance, a frame might be strongly disliked but move mindsets in productive directions.

Methods Note

In this section we briefly describe the methods we relied upon for this report. For more detail on all methods, see the [Methods Supplement](#) accompanying this brief.

- **Interviews with partners and experts.** At the outset of this project, in November 2023, we interviewed eight people with expertise in values-based communications. These conversations informed which values we focused on and helped us understand the challenges in the field. We're grateful for the perspectives of Tom Crompton at the Common Cause Foundation; Jay Marcellus at ASO Communications; Susan Nall Bales, founder of FrameWorks; Jeff Parcher at Community Change; Rinku Sen at the Narrative Initiative; Abigail Stahl at the Global Fund for a New Economy (previously at Groundwork Collaborative); Tracy Williams, previously of the Omidyar Network, and Felicia Wong at the Roosevelt Institute. The findings and opinions expressed in this report, including any mistakes, belong to FrameWorks and do not necessarily mirror the views and positions of these experts or their affiliated organizations.
- **Literature review.** In preparation for our exploration of *Fairness, Stability, and Freedom*, we cataloged 25 years of previous FrameWorks research on these and other values, and we conducted a brief review of academic and gray literature about *Freedom* value frames.
- **Cultural mindsets research.** In April 2024, we conducted in-depth, two-hour one-on-one interviews with 45 members of the US public, 15 of which were focused on the value of *Freedom*; 10 on the value of *Fairness*; 10 on the values of *Stability, Security, and Safety*; and 10 on the value of *Benevolence* (including *Family, Love, and Community*). We recruited participants to reflect a cross-section of American society, with variation according to several demographic variables, including political affiliation, educational level, race, age, and gender. These interviews were primarily designed to explore how people think about values—the different cultural mindsets of values and the wider mindsets associated with those values. During these interviews, we also introduced several short “value phrases,” including “fair opportunity,” “fair outcomes,” “fairness across places,” “freedom from domination,” and “freedom to thrive.” We explored these phrases briefly, asking what came to mind in association with the words.
- **Frame development and testing.** Based on the cultural mindsets findings and our interviews with partners, we decided to focus on the contested values of *Freedom, Fairness, and Stability*. We identified variants of *Freedom* and *Fairness* that were of greatest interest to advocates or seemed most promising for building systemic thinking. We tested these different ways of iterating values across three survey experiments in December 2024, May 2025, and July 2025. The surveys included demographic quotas to ensure representativeness of the US public, including quotas for race, gender, age, political party affiliation, education, and income. Alongside the nationally representative sample, we also oversampled participants of color so we could run stratified analyses by racial identity. In each experiment, we measured how much people endorsed mindsets of interest and supported a range of policies following exposure to a frame. This enabled us to ascertain the effects of the value frames on thinking.

METRICS OF SUCCESS: WHAT OUTCOMES ARE WE TRYING TO MOVE WITH THESE VALUE FRAMES?

In our survey experiments, we evaluated whether a value frame worked by paying attention to how that frame moved thinking compared to a control group that read nothing at all. In the following table we illustrate the types of outcomes we were trying to strengthen or weaken. For a full list of the outcomes we tested our frames against, see the [Methods Supplement](#).

Key Outcomes to Strengthen	Key Outcomes to Weaken
<p>⬆️ Economy as Designed. The mindset that the economy is a human-made system that is governed by laws and policies.</p>	<p>⬇️ Market Naturalism. The mindset that the economy exists and functions naturally, beyond human control.</p>
<p>⬆️ Racism as Systemic. The mindset that racism is built into the design of our laws, policies, institutions, and cultural practices.</p>	<p>⬇️ Self-Makingness. The mindset that individuals make their own success in life through hard work rather than external factors.</p>
<p>⬆️ Collective Efficacy. The perception that we have a collective ability to make changes to political and economic systems.</p>	<p>⬇️ Pathologization of Black Culture. The mindset that blames Black families and Black culture for the racism that Black communities experience—for instance, by attributing poverty to a poor work ethic.</p>
<p>⬆️ Moral Expansiveness. A measure of who is worthy of people's moral concern—going from narrow spheres (e.g., family and friends) to more expansive spheres (e.g., immigrants and people with different religious beliefs).</p>	<p>⬇️ Limited Government. The mindset that the government should have minimal involvement in people's lives and shouldn't provide for needs like housing and food.</p>
<p>⬆️ Progressive Policies. Support for a range of political and economic reforms, like raising the minimum wage, making all state and federal elections publicly funded, and banning racially biased AI products.</p>	

What This Research Does and Doesn't Tell Us

This research gives us a good sense of how specific ways of talking about *Freedom*, *Fairness*, and *Stability* can shift thinking in productive and unproductive ways. In an experiment, when we see significant statistical movement on a helpful mindset, like the idea that racism is a systemic problem, it indicates that the frame can strengthen that way of thinking in the real world if the frame is mobilized effectively and repeated over time. When we see a backfire effect, where a frame entrenches unhelpful thinking, like the idea that racism is no longer a problem in society, it indicates that the frame might instead be harmful on this front.

However, survey experiments don't tell us whether it might be possible to overcome such backfires over a longer period of time. For some frames—particularly frames that challenge deeply entrenched ideas and aim to stretch thinking in fundamental ways—immediate backfires might diminish and even disappear over time if that frame is repeated and becomes a more familiar way of talking about the issue.¹³ This should be kept in mind when making sense of the results on *Freedom*. *Freedom* is a highly contested value, and appealing to it can easily backfire in the short term. This research tells us about the traps that come with *Freedom* frames and how we can mitigate them. It doesn't tell us that we cannot reclaim *Freedom* through concerted, long-term efforts.

Fairness

How Does the US Public Think about *Fairness*?

The dominant mindsets of *Fairness* are often collective and structural, centering on the distribution of opportunities and outcomes for groups of people in society. However, *Fairness* can also be unhelpfully associated with the idea that everyone should get the same treatment regardless of circumstance and the idea that the onus is on individuals to make the most of fair opportunities. With the framing strategy outlined in the section below, communicators can activate the more productive understandings of *Fairness* and background the less productive ones, steering thinking toward equity rather than equality and toward collective concerns rather than individualism.

***Fairness* is widely understood as equality of opportunity but can also be understood as equity.**

Fairness is most commonly thought of in terms of equality of opportunity, where everyone gets the same treatment. But it is also thought of in terms of equity, where a person's specific needs are taken into account. In our interviews, it was much less common for people to think about *Fairness* in terms of equity, but when they did, they often talked about how the government is responsible for making sure that people have resources and assistance tailored to their needs. This reading of *Fairness as Equity* is productive for communicators trying to advocate for more equitable laws and policies.

***Fairness* can be thought of structurally, in terms of how institutions discriminate against marginalized groups.** *Fairness* is often thought of in terms of unfair patterns in society rather than, say, the way individuals treat each other. When participants spoke about *Fairness* in connection with certain issues, like work and the justice system, they would sometimes draw on the concept of institutional discrimination—the idea that institutions in society discriminate against different groups through their routine procedures and process. This way of thinking is helpful because it offers a more systemic understanding of *Fairness*.

The idea of “fairness between places” is associated with inequities of opportunity and resources across geographies. When our participants heard the phrase “fairness across places,” they would frequently interpret this in terms of race and class differences between neighborhoods. Sometimes this was connected to unhelpful stereotypes about groups of people. For instance, people might talk about “good neighborhoods” and “bad neighborhoods,” implying that a “good” or “bad” neighborhood depended on the race and class of the people living there. But often it was understood productively, in terms of disparities of resources and opportunities between places. For instance, people spoke about kids from low-income Black communities having fewer opportunities than richer white kids in a different area of the same city. Communicators can build on this perception of *Fairness* to deepen people's understanding of the causes of such disparities and the need for redistributing resources.

***Fairness* can be associated with the mindset that individuals are primarily responsible for their success in life regardless of their experience of racism.** Both “fairness” in the abstract and the phrase “fair opportunity” are strongly associated with the meritocratic idea that it’s up to the individual to make the most of the opportunities they have and to succeed based on their own talents and hard work. The idea of fair opportunity can also be associated with colorblind thinking about equality (i.e., that everyone should be treated the *same* regardless of skin color, background, and circumstances). For instance, when thinking like this, people can reason that affirmative action in college admissions is unfair because it preferences one racial group over another. This obscures the need for equitable solutions.

The idea of “fair outcomes” is associated with the justice system and “an eye for an eye” punishment. In our past research on criminal justice, we have found that *Fairness* can be understood as a need for uniform punishments (i.e., everyone getting the same punishment for the same crime).¹⁴ Similarly, in the present research, people often understood the phrase “fair outcomes” in the context of criminal justice—where the punishments should match the crime (“an eye for an eye”). Both of these ways of thinking can inhibit people’s ability to see the need for sentencing that is responsive to the contextual factors surrounding a crime. Outside the context of the criminal justice system, people interpreted “fair outcomes” more broadly as the karmic principle that you get what you give. This way of thinking of *Fairness* is limited to a simple logic of comeuppance and doesn’t admit the nuances associated with other ways of thinking of *Fairness*, like *Fairness as Equity*.

Framing Strategies for *Fairness*

Pair *Fairness* with articulations of where power lies in systems and explanations of inequities in society.

Of the three contested values we explored, *Fairness* did the most consistent and powerful work to move thinking in helpful ways. With the framing strategy detailed here—no matter what variant we tested or what issue we paired it with—we found that fairness easily boosted *designed systems thinking* (e.g., the mindset that the economy is designed), expanded *people’s sphere of concern* to include immigrants and people of different religions, and increased *support for progressive policies* (like making all state and federal elections publicly funded and enforcing bans on racially biased artificial intelligence [AI] products).

Fairness is less effective in cultivating a sense of collective efficacy—the idea that we can solve society’s problems. This is one key attitude that is more consistently moved by the value of *Freedom* than *Fairness*.

FOUR VARIANTS OF FAIRNESS

We tested four variants of fairness, summarized briefly here. For the exact language we used in the experiment, see the [Methods Supplement](#).

- 1. Fair Distribution of Power.** This variant of *Fairness* emphasizes how the system is currently designed in ways that privilege the already privileged and penalize those who have less. Distributing power in society fairly would give currently disempowered groups of people more power and more voice.
- 2. Fairness as Reciprocity.** This variant of *Fairness* emphasizes the reciprocal, supportive relationship between people and society. All of us make valuable contributions to our communities and society in different ways—through taking care of people, doing our jobs, or helping out in the community. In return, we should be treated fairly by society, with social policies that look out for us in the way we look out for each other. This idea of reciprocation is not just about money but about support and resources more generally.
- 3. Fairness as Equity.** This variant of *Fairness* focuses on how everyone should have the opportunities and resources that fit their level of need (equity) rather than simply getting the same (equality). Fair systems are systems that are responsive to the different starting places of different groups of people. In our articulation of this variant of *Fairness*, we talk about the concept of equity without using the word “equity”—following our past research on how the word “equity” is inaccessible and often misunderstood.¹⁵
- 4. Fairness across Race and Place.** This variant of *Fairness* focuses on the principle that our systems should be designed for all of us, whatever our race and wherever we live in the country. Here, race and place are understood as being intimately connected because the places that get left behind tend to be places where communities of color live. *Fairness* means distributing resources such that each neighborhood has the resources it needs.

RECOMMENDATION #1:

Foreground system design by talking about how systems are created and maintained through laws and policies.

What To Do

When appealing to the value of *Fairness*, connect it to the wider systems we live in and interact with—whether that’s the economic system, the political system, or the health care system—by talking about how these systems are designed, governed, and actively maintained through laws and policies.

Why It Works

Talking about system design is important because otherwise people can lean on more individualistic ways of thinking about fair opportunities and fair outcomes in life, like the idea that it’s up to people to work hard and make the most of opportunities. If we want to use *Fairness* to talk about the big problems in society and the changes we need, we must emphasize how systems have been designed in ways that undermine *Fairness* through political decisions and institutional

practices. This also helps to reinforce the idea that change is possible through redesign. Without this element of the frame, there's a risk that we reinforce the fatalistic idea that life isn't fair and there's nothing that can be done about it.

In our testing, we talked about system design across all flavors of *Fairness*, finding a general pattern that these frames tended to increase people's endorsement of the mindset that the economy is designed, as well as support for a range of progressive policies. This indicates that foregrounding systems in *Fairness* frames can boost systemic thinking.

What it looks like:

Example 1

"Today, unfair policies and practices make health care unaffordable and out of reach for too many people. We can design a fairer system by putting laws and policies into place that ensure everyone gets the care they need."

Example 2

"Most of us believe in fairness, but our economy is designed in ways that limit many people's ability to make decisions about their own lives. A fair economy requires laws and policies that give everyone the chance to participate and access the resources they need. By redesigning policies that expand access to resources like a living wage, affordable housing, and free child care, we can ensure our economy is more fair."

Example 3

"The laws and policies we make determine how our political system works and who benefits. Right now, our political system isn't designed to be fair because not everyone has a say in policy decisions that shape their lives. It prioritizes a wealthy few while many of us—particularly those in lower income communities and communities of color—face obstacles to voting and other forms of participation. We need to redesign our political system so everyone has a say."

- Tip: These examples and those that follow are not prescriptive but illustrations of how the framing recommendations could be applied in communications. You should adapt language to match your tone, style, platforms, and audience.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Talk about power in *Fairness* frames—in terms of who has too much power and who should have more.

What To Do

Talk about where wealth and power go in society and which groups are unfairly benefiting. Connect this with the concept of system design by talking about how the system is designed to prioritize or benefit a wealthy, powerful few. This analysis can be incorporated into any *Fairness* frame, but the variant of *Fairness* that emphasizes power—*Fair Distribution of Power*—is one of the strongest and most consistently effective variants of *Fairness* across issues.

Why It Works

Talking about power helps people zoom out and think about *Fairness* structurally. As in Recommendation #1, this can prevent more individualistic readings of *Fairness*. Talking about power can also steer people away from the assumption that everyone should get the *same* treatment because it's clear that we are not currently on the same footing. Providing a critique of power paves the way for big government-led solutions to support the people who need it most.

In rigorous testing, we found that *Fair Distribution of Power* was a strong frame across issues, but it did particularly well when it was paired with solutions that materially improve people's lives. For instance, when we used this variant of *Fairness* to talk about the economy, we included solutions like living wages and affordable housing, and when we used it to talk about technology, we called for the need to make technology affordable and accessible for everyone. These frames did well, particularly at increasing support for policies like raising the minimum wage, prohibiting gerrymandering, and enforcing bans on racist AI products. We didn't see as much good movement when using *Fair Distribution of Power* to talk about the political system, where the solutions focused more on the process of democracy than material outcomes for people (e.g., calling for more options for people to participate in local and national decisions). Grounding in solutions that materially benefit people can help make issues of power more concrete.

What it looks like:

Example 1

"Right now, our system of government is designed to give a small group of wealthy corporations too much power over everyone else's lives. We need to create a fairer political system where working people have a real say in the decisions that shape our future. This means making voting easier and developing more options for participation in local and national decisions so we all have a real say over our own lives."

Example 2

"A fair economy is one in which power is shared so everyone has a say, not just the wealthy few. This means giving people a fair chance to weigh in on policy decisions on the economy. It means putting into place policies that make housing, health care, and child care affordable. With these and other policies we can ensure that all of us—regardless of background or circumstances—have more power over our lives."

Example 3

"New technologies should benefit everyone. But because power is unevenly distributed, only a few enjoy the rewards while many are harmed by biased systems like facial recognition and discriminatory banking algorithms. With stronger, fairer laws and policies, we can ensure technology benefits all of us, not just those already at the top."

RECOMMENDATION #3

When using *Fairness* to talk about inequitable race and class impacts, include an explanation of the causes of inequity.

What To Do

When using the value of *Fairness* to highlight inequities of opportunity and outcome by race and class, always explain the causes of such disparities. This echoes recommendations from past research on *Equity* and *Fairness* frames at FrameWorks. For instance, in [Framing Racial Equity in Adolescence](#), we recommend avoiding talking about inequities without naming the cause. Similarly, in the [Place Matters](#) project, we recommend using *Fairness across Places* alongside explicit and consistent communication about the causal effects of racism on place (e.g., “opportunities and risks are unfairly distributed across our city due to structural racism”) and including concrete examples of what is unfair (e.g., linking policy choices and lack of investment to adversity in Black and Latine communities, such as lead contamination in homes). Instead of simply *stating* that communities of color or low-income families are being harmed or aren’t getting the resources and opportunities they need, we must explain *how* these inequities come from policy decisions and system design.

Why It Works

If we explain the causes of inequities, we can locate the problem firmly in our systems and make the case for more equitable laws and policies. Without this explanation, there is a risk that people fill in the gaps with racist stereotypes, like the idea that Black communities are poor because they don’t value hard work.

In our testing, we found that the two variants of *Fairness* that emphasized inequities between groups—*Fairness as Equity*, and *Fairness across Race and Place*—were both powerful in moving thinking. Like other variants of *Fairness*, they could boost the mindset that the economy is designed, extend moral concern to immigrants, and (sometimes) shift thinking helpfully on race. However, they both carried some risk of backfiring when they lacked a causal explanation of the inequity. They could inadvertently reinforce stereotypes that blame Black communities for their experiences. While in the present research this backfire risk was generally small, our past research on equity shows that explanation can go a long way to mitigating this risk. For communicators talking about material issues of affordability and resources (e.g., affordable housing, access to new technologies), it’s particularly important to explain why inequities exist. Otherwise, such disparities can be perceived as stemming from the attitudes and behaviors of the affected communities.

What it looks like:

Example 1

“In our country, the place you live helps determine whether you do well or not. This is because of policy choices that unfairly favor some communities over others. For instance, communities of color are more likely to face crumbling infrastructure due to a long history of discriminatory policies and disinvestment. Our ZIP code should not unfairly dictate whether we have what we need to thrive.”

Example 2

“Families in lower income and Black and Latine communities often face higher health risks, not because of personal choices but because policy decisions have allowed toxic industries and unsafe housing to concentrate in their neighborhoods. Fairness means changing the policies that created these unequal conditions.”

Example 3

“Many communities in our country lack safe housing and good schools—but this didn’t happen by accident. Decades of discriminatory policies and disinvestment created these unfair conditions, and we can redesign our systems to reverse that harm.”

- Tip: Explain “how it happens” before talking about “who” it happens to. Signpost cause-and-effect relationships by using words and phrases like “because” or “as a result.”
- Tip: Frame data by explaining why racial and other disparities exist rather than simply presenting disparities.

SPOTLIGHT ON *FAIRNESS AS RECIPROCITY*: A HELPFUL WAY TO MAKE THE CASE THAT WE ALL DESERVE GOOD TREATMENT IN SOCIETY

While the framing strategy described here applies to the value of *Fairness* in general and should always be used, communicators also have the option of framing *Fairness* in terms of *reciprocity* between people and society. This variant of *Fairness* does good work across issues to boost designed systems thinking, expand the moral sphere of concern, and build support for political reforms.

The core of this variant is the idea of contribution to, and return from, society. But this isn’t about a narrow, transactional monetary relationship in terms of taxes paid to and resources given out by the state. It’s broader and more inclusive, acknowledging the valuable contributions we all make to society, whether we work, care for our families, or contribute to our communities in other ways—and the need for laws and policies that treat us well, protect us, and benefit us in different domains of life. By celebrating the wide diversity of contributions we all make, it makes the case that we *all* deserve good treatment. This avoids a more narrow reading of deservingness that can shrink concern for people who are perceived to deserve less because they contribute less. It also draws implicitly on the idea of a social contract and puts the onus on the wealthy few in power to honor their side of this contract by giving back instead of profiting off of us.

Communicators can use the variant of *Fairness as Reciprocity* across issues, but it works best on issues where the contributions, benefits, and harms to people are concrete. For example, in our testing, it worked exceptionally well when paired with the issue of technology. This frame galvanized support for a wide range of policies connected to AI, labor, and political reform, and, importantly, boosted the belief that we can collectively change systems. In this frame, we made a clear argument that we all play a part in creating and supporting the society that produces technological innovations, but we don’t all benefit from them—and, worse, some of us are harmed (e.g., by biased crime prediction software and unfair banking algorithms). In other words, this variant of fairness works well when we are clear what people put in and what they do (or don’t) get out in return.

What it looks like:

Example 1

"We all play a part in the society we live in, and we should be treated well by society in return."

Example 2:

"Our society is strong because everyone contributes—through work, caregiving, and community support. Fairness means ensuring that our policies protect and benefit everyone, not just a privileged few."

Example 3:

"We all help create the society that makes technological innovation possible, but only a few reap the rewards, while many—especially low-income communities and communities of color—are harmed by biased tools like facial recognition and discriminatory banking algorithms. If we want a fair society, our laws and policies must ensure that technology gives back to all of us, not just the wealthy few."

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: A WINNING FAIRNESS FRAME

"As a society, we believe in fairness. A fair economy is one where power is shared so that everyone has a real say in the decisions that shape their lives. But in our country, where you live too often determines whether you do well or not. This is because policy choices have unfairly favored some communities over others through decades of discriminatory practices and disinvestment that have limited economic resources and opportunities in low-income and Black and Latine neighborhoods.

We need new policies that change these unfair conditions and ensure that everyone has a genuine chance to shape and participate in our economy, regardless of background or circumstances. It means putting in place policies that invest in every community and that make housing, health care, child care, and other essentials affordable. Fairness requires redesigning our economy so it benefits all of us."

- Open with a clear appeal to *Fairness* as a shared value.
- Provide a brief explanation of what is unfair in the way our systems work with reference to the distribution of power in society.
- Show how we can have fairer systems through new laws and policies.

Stability

How Does the US Public Think about *Stability*?

People often understand *Stability* as being about conservatism, in the sense that we should preserve the status quo. It's associated with concepts like balance, moderation, neutrality, and compromise—all of which can obscure the need for change. However, people also think of *Stability* in terms of individuals having the resources they need to be stable and well with the support of the government. Communicators can leverage this more productive understanding of *Stability* but must clearly articulate the need for *change* to achieve it, as we explore in the framing strategy section that follows.

Stability is strongly associated with consistency and is often understood as the opposite of change. People often understand *Stability* as a principle of consistency. In this understanding, *Stability* involves being able to make informed decisions in life because conditions are reliable and predictable. In our interviews, participants sometimes talked about *Stability* in terms of a lack of change over time. This way of thinking about *Stability* lends itself to the idea that we should preserve the status quo rather than seek big changes.

Stability is often thought of in terms of having needs (and comforts) met. The idea of consistency also appears in a quite different mindset: that *Stability* means a consistent and reliable supply of the resources we want and need. Sometimes this was thought of in terms of basic needs, but often it was more aspirational than that, extending to our comfort and wellbeing. When thinking in this way, participants sometimes put the responsibility on the state to provide everyone with *Stability*. Crucially, this mindset comes with an acceptance that change might be needed to bring about widespread stability.

Stability is sometimes thought of in terms of individuals or families being self-sufficient. While participants could point to politicians and the state as being responsible for ensuring *Stability*, they sometimes put the responsibility on individuals to look after themselves—for instance, through their jobs. People also spoke of supportive relationships as being the key to *Stability*. When thinking in this way, the onus was on networks of families and friends looking after each other, even if they weren't particularly wealthy. These understandings can unhelpfully deflect from the necessity of care structures beyond the nuclear family, including government support.

Stability in politics and decision-making is associated with compromise and “meeting in the middle.” When we asked participants what came to mind when they thought about *Stability* in connection with different issues, such as government, climate change, and reproductive rights, people often equated *Stability* with compromise. Participants talked about *Stability* as being the result of politicians and/or members of the public on opposite sides of the political spectrum working to overcome their differences and build consensus on contentious issues, even if that meant sacrifices on both sides. Compromise was often understood as the solution to extremism and political polarization. When thinking about *Stability* like this, the idea of meeting in the middle was seen as inherently good, whatever the actual outcome. As such, this way of thinking is essentially about moderation and can obscure the need for transformative change.

When people think about *Stability* as compromise, this leads to the idea that racism should be downplayed because it's “divisive.” When asked about *Stability* in connection with racism, participants sometimes argued that we should stop talking about racism because that in itself is polarizing and creates conflict and division. This argument rests on the idea that *Stability* means compromising on contentious issues. As mentioned earlier, this way of thinking justifies maintaining the status quo, even if the status quo is deeply unjust. In connection to race, this reading of stability can obscure the realities of structural racism and dismiss the need for action on racism.

Framing Strategies for *Stability*

Pair *Stability* with a clear articulation of the need for transformative change through system redesign.

Stability is a value that people tend to associate with preserving the status quo in society. Given this, it's perhaps surprising that it can be leveraged to advocate for transformative change. With the framing strategy that follows, we can use *Stability* to boost support for a range of progressive policies and even help people think more structurally about racism. However, across issues, *Stability* is not as powerful or consistent as *Fairness* in moving thinking.

RECOMMENDATION #1:

Frame *Stability* as being the *goal* of system change (rather than a reason to *avoid* change).

What To Do

Whatever the issue at hand, be sure to emphasize the need for big changes to achieve widespread *Stability*. We can do this most effectively alongside clear language about system design—talking about the role of laws and policies in governing how things work and the need for redesigning those laws and policies to provide *Stability*. If we frame *Stability* as an outcome of change, we can avoid reinforcing the idea that *Stability* means a lack of change.

Why It Works

We know from our interviews that *Stability* can be thought of as a continuation of how things are now. That's why we need to be clear and explicit about the big changes we need. Without that, there's a risk that talking about *Stability* will reinforce regressive thinking.

In our testing, our *Stability* frames always emphasized the need for change through system redesign. When doing this, we avoided cuing unhelpful mindsets, like the idea that we don't need to make change in society. In one frame about *Stability* and the political system, we modestly increased collective agency (a willingness to work with others to change systems and institutions). We also boosted people's understanding of racism as a systemic problem and reduced the pathologization of Black culture. This was a frame where we were particularly explicit about the need for big change.

What it looks like:

Example 1

“Together we can redesign our economy so everyone has the stability they need to live well.”

Example 2

“Real stability takes real change—like redesigning our economy so it works for everyone. By reforming laws and policies that serve only the few, we can create lasting stability where all people have what they need to thrive.”

RECOMMENDATION #2

Describe people’s role in bringing about the changes needed to create *Stability*.

What To Do

Call for people to have a meaningful say in big political decisions as the mechanism by which we can achieve widespread *Stability*. This can be offered as a response to the problems created by a political system that prioritizes the wealthy and powerful. In other words, we can talk about the *Stability* that comes from people having a say versus the instability that comes from being at the whim of a powerful few.

Why It Works

We know from our work on communicating about [rigged systems](#) that the idea of being at the whim of a powerful few is highly resonant with people and that talking about collective self-governance can help boost the sense that system change is possible. Here, we find these frame elements also work well if they are housed within *Stability* frames.

In our testing, we paired *Stability* with different issues—the economy, political system, and technology. All of these frames connected instability to being at the whim of a powerful few, but the political system frame focused on collective self-governance as the response to this problem (e.g., “Having a say in major decisions would give us the stability we need to plan our lives and thrive”). This frame did much better than the other two. It moved thinking on racism in helpful directions, boosted support for a range of policies and, consistent with the System Is Rigged research, it marginally increased people’s motivation to work with others to make change. This frame likely works well because it offers a compelling democratic mechanism for achieving *Stability*. It also keeps *Stability* firmly as a collective project rather than reinforcing ideas of individuals being solely responsible for their own *Stability* in life.

What it looks like:

Example 1

“We get lasting stability when people—not just the wealthy and powerful—have a say in how our country is run. When decisions reflect all of us, we all benefit.”

Example 2

“Stable societies are built on broad participation, not concentrated power. When everyone has a meaningful voice in major political decisions, we can design our systems to deliver lasting stability.”

Example 3

“Stability comes when everyone has a real say in the big decisions that shape our lives. Right now, too many of us are shut out while a powerful few call the shots. By redesigning our political system so all voices count equally, we can build the kind of lasting stability where everyone can thrive.”

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: A WINNING STABILITY FRAME

“Most of us believe in the importance of stability. Stable societies are built on broad participation in our political system, not concentrated power. Real, lasting stability comes when we make real change so everyone has a meaningful voice in the major decisions that shape our lives. Yet too many people are currently shut out while a powerful few rig the system. We need to keep large corporations and the wealthy from influencing politics and develop more options for people to participate in political decisions and the local, state, and national levels. By redesigning our political institutions so all voices count, we can create the kind of durable stability where everyone has the chance to thrive.”

- Open with a clear appeal to the value of *Stability*.
- Provide a brief explanation of how instability is a product of how our systems work.
- Call for collective self-governance as the mechanism needed to achieve widespread stability—and be explicit that big changes are needed to bring about stability.

Freedom

How Does the US Public Think about *Freedom*?

Freedom is overwhelmingly associated with individual choice and the idea that people should get to say and do what they like without constraint. When *Freedom* is understood in this way, government is usually thought of negatively, as a constraint. Another prominent way to think about *Freedom* is as a zero-sum game, such that *Freedom* for one person or group will inevitably impinge on someone else's *Freedom*. These ways of thinking about *Freedom* make it difficult for people to see a role for structural changes to *increase* people's *Freedom*. Despite this pattern of thinking, communicators can leverage the sense of agency that comes with *Freedom* and motivate people for system change. This requires a framing strategy to offer a more collective and structural understanding of what *Freedom* means—pointing to the way our systems are designed to threaten our freedoms and how they can be redesigned to counter corporate power and other forms of domination.

***Freedom* is usually understood as meaning individual liberty, and this is sometimes associated with rights.** *Freedom* is most commonly thought of in terms of individuals having the ability to exercise their will without limits. This understanding of *Freedom* can bring to the fore the need for rights that protect our civil and political liberties. However, people usually aren't thinking about this in terms of collective rights built into our systems. When thinking about individual liberty, the focus is instead on the individual doing and saying what they want, and external factors (such as the government) are often viewed as constraints. People do not automatically go to the role of our laws, policies, and institutions in enabling and protecting our *Freedom*. This way of thinking about individual liberty presents a challenge for communicators who want to talk about the government having a role in providing for our needs.

***Freedom* is often thought about in competitive, zero-sum terms.** *Freedom* is thought to be something some people lose as others gain. With this line of thought, the idea of unfettered *Freedom* for everyone is impossible. Sometimes our interview participants drew on this mindset to pit some groups against other groups competitively, as if there can be no common cause and no win-win solution. However, people also drew on the zero-sum idea sensitively, reasoning that we can't consider an individual's *Freedom* in a vacuum, and we have to consider the impacts of that person's *Freedom* on other people. In this sense, the zero-sum mindset can be productive and can help people use a wider lens to see how *Freedom* for one group might harm another. But it's an unhelpful mindset if it prevents people from seeing the interrelatedness between struggles for *Freedom* among different groups of oppressed people.

The phrase “freedom from domination” is associated with *Freedom* from an oppressive person or group—and sometimes the government. When we asked participants what came to mind with the phrase “freedom from domination,” people often talked about oppression in terms of an individual or group oppressing another individual or group. This was typically understood relationally and

interpersonally as taking the form of how people talk, joke, and act toward one another, rather than being understood systemically. Like the individual liberty mindset above, this mindset was also associated with the idea that government is oppressive. When participants thought in this way, *Freedom from Domination* meant freedom from oppressive political leaders and dictators. So, while *Freedom from Domination* is helpfully associated with oppression and can bring relationships of power into view, it is rarely understood in terms of *systems* of oppression.

Freedom is sometimes understood to be in our heads—a question of personal attitude rather than external circumstance. Participants sometimes assumed that *Freedom* is subjective in the sense that a person's worldview shapes whether they are free. When thinking like this, it's also assumed that oppressed people can change their perspective, or in other words, think themselves free. This way of thinking about *Freedom* is unhelpful because it obscures the need to fight for real, material changes.

Freedom is thought of as the ultimate American value and is often associated with American exceptionalism. Attitudes of American exceptionalism—the notion that the United States is morally, politically, and economically superior to other nation-states—sometimes came up in association with the value of *Freedom*. Participants spoke of the United States as “the best country” where people enjoy unparalleled personal freedoms and boundless political, social, and economic opportunities—in contrast with other countries, particularly in the Global South. This association between *Freedom* and American exceptionalism can come with racist undertones and colonial notions of “civilization.” Interview participants sometimes assumed that countries in the Global South were places where people's freedoms are constrained by inferior internal cultures and corrupt political leaders. For communicators, this raises challenges for using the value of *Freedom* to talk about foreign affairs. Another key limitation of understanding *Freedom* as an exceptional American value is that it obscures the ways in which many people in American society are not free.

Framing Strategies for *Freedom*

Avoid quick references to *Freedom*. Instead, pair *Freedom* with the need for system redesign and explain how our freedoms are threatened.

Freedom can be a powerfully motivating value. When framed well, it can boost people's belief that we can achieve systems change—an outcome that fairness and stability do not so easily shift. We have found this to be a strong and productive effect of *Freedom*, both in our research on how to talk about [rigged systems](#), and here in connection with a variety of different issues. This is key because a truly effective value needs to energize people to take action as well as shift thinking.

However, it is challenging to shift thinking in a more collective and structural direction with *Freedom*. We find that *Freedom* can easily backfire in ways that are harmful to progressive causes—for instance, reinforcing the idea that government should be small, the economy should be left to run its own course, and individuals are responsible for their own success in life. This makes *Freedom* a contested value that comes with bigger risks than fairness and stability—and it should

ideally be tested before use. As we note earlier, the measure of whether *Freedom* “works” depends on the outcomes it is tested against. In this research, we are looking at the potential of *Freedom*, across issues, to strengthen key structural mindsets, like the mindset that the economy is designed and that racism is systemic, as well as the perception that we can collectively change our systems. These are the kind of long-term mindset shifts we want to attend to when we test *Freedom*—even if *Freedom* might shift other useful outcomes on single-issue messaging campaigns.

THREE VARIANTS OF FREEDOM

The three variants of *Freedom* we tested are outlined below:

- ***Freedom to Thrive.*** This variant of *Freedom* focuses on the freedom that we all have to live well, flourish, and reach our potential as human beings. Thriving means being healthy and well, in both body and mind, and being able to grow, develop, and express our aptitudes and interests.
- ***Freedom from Domination.*** This variant of *Freedom* focuses on the relationship between those in power and those subject to power. It asserts that no one has a natural right to rule over anyone else and no group of people is above or below any other—whether that’s on the basis of class, race, gender, or any other form of oppression. Being free from domination means not being at the whim of others.
- ***Freedom as Liberty.*** This frame differs from the other two by not qualifying the term “freedom” as being a particular type of “freedom to” or “freedom from.” Instead, the word “freedom” is used on its own. Then the frame explains how our personal liberties do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped and guaranteed by the systems we live in. The idea with this frame is to rely on the familiar equation of *Freedom* with personal liberties but consciously move it from a narrow understanding of individual choices to a wider understanding of how systems enable our freedoms.

RECOMMENDATION #1:

Unpack what *Freedom* means rather than just using the word.

What To Avoid

Don’t drop the word “freedom” into communications without offering a careful articulation of what *Freedom* means. As we explore further in this section, *Freedom* needs to come with a strong articulation of system design to avoid reinforcing unhelpful thinking, like the idea that individuals are wholly responsible for outcomes in life and to blame for their struggles.

Why This Is Needed

Freedom frames very easily backfire because the word “freedom” carries strong, unproductive associations with the freedom of individuals to do what they want without the interference of government.

When we tested *Freedom without a strong emphasis on system design*, we had pronounced backfires for Republican participants,¹⁶ who became more likely to endorse the following mindsets:

- **Market Naturalism.** The idea that if the economy is left to work on its own, it will naturally produce what we need.
- **Self-Makingness.** The idea that anyone can succeed if they just work hard enough.
- **Limited Government.** The idea that government should play a limited role in our lives and be hands-off when it comes to meeting people's needs.
- **Pathologizing Black Culture.** The attitude that blames Black families and Black culture for the racism Black communities experience.

We found this pattern across different variants of *Freedom* and across different issues, including the economy, the political system, racial justice, and reproductive justice. What this suggests is that the word “freedom” and the value of *Freedom* can cue existing unproductive understandings of *Freedom* and connected mindsets—particularly with people who lean Republican. These mindsets are individualistic and naturalistic: individualistic because of the focus on individual responsibility for outcomes in life, including racist outcomes, rather than the opportunities and adversities built into our systems; and naturalistic for carrying assumptions about systems, such as the economy, as functioning naturally, beyond human control. To avoid cueing these mindsets, we need the framing strategy that follows to unpack what we mean by *Freedom*.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Always stress system design. Talk about how systems can be redesigned so we all have more *Freedom*.

What To Do

Freedom needs to come with a clear and strong articulation of the concept of system design, as well as a call for redesign through new laws and policies. The idea of systems being actively governed is important to emphasize. So too is the idea that these systems can either help or hinder our *Freedom*, depending on how they are designed. While it is important to stress system design and redesign across the three contested values of *Fairness*, *Stability*, and *Freedom*, it is particularly critical with *Freedom* and helps prevent *Freedom* frames from backfiring in the ways we've described.

Why It Works

If we make it clear that public policies and government choices design our social systems, we prevent *Freedom* frames from cueing the mindset that the economic system is shaped by forces outside the government's control. Pointing to the impact of these systems on our *Freedom* also steers people away from assuming that individuals are solely responsible for what happens to them in life.

In our testing, we addressed some of the initial backfires we found by pairing *Freedom* with a stronger articulation of system design and redesign. For instance, in a frame about *Freedom* and the political system, we emphasized this by talking about the impact of system design on people whose voices aren't heard—and by calling for new laws and policies to restrict the power of a wealthy few in politics. When we added this emphasis, the backfire pattern we had previously seen for Republican-leaning participants—on *Market Naturalism* and *Self-Makingness*—disappeared. Instead, the frame increased people's sense that racism is a systemic problem, and it built support for changing the political and economic systems to work better for everyone.

We had similar success in a frame where we paired *Freedom from Domination* with the issue of technology. Here, we emphasized the need for designing new laws and policies that restrict the power of large corporations. Again, we averted the pattern of backfires we saw initially with *Freedom*, across variants and across issues, in Republican-leaning participants. This frame didn't backfire for Republicans, and in the full sample it strengthened the mindset that the economy is a designed system, and it increased support for policies, like the policy to enforce bans on racially biased AI products.

This shows the importance of pairing *Freedom* with a strong articulation of system design and redesign, regardless of the issue we're talking about, if we want to build structural thinking rather than individualistic, naturalistic thinking.

How to do it:

Example 1

“Right now our political system is designed so many of us—especially in low-income and communities of color—face barriers to political participation. If we want to be free, we need to redesign our political system so no one is prevented from participating.”

Example 2

“Our freedom depends on how the economy is designed. When laws and policies concentrate decision-making and limit people's ability to shape their working and living conditions, it becomes harder to live free from domination. By rewriting these laws and policies to strengthen worker voice, address racial discrimination, and ensure needs like affordable housing, we can build an economy where everyone has real freedom.”

Example 3

“Most of us believe no one should dominate anyone else, yet big tech now shapes our lives without our permission. We need strong laws and policies that ensure technology expands our freedom instead of concentrating power in a few hands.”

RECOMMENDATION #3

When using *Freedom from Domination*, offer an explanation of how systems subject us to the rule of a powerful and wealthy few.

What To Do

When drawing on *Freedom from Domination*, it's important to be explicit about *who* is actively dominating us and *how*. To help people think about the need for system change, this should be a group or a class of people, like “the powerful and wealthy few,” or big segments in society, like “large corporations,” who are designing the system in their favor—rather than particular individuals. In addition to naming the dominating forces, it's important to offer an explanation of how they exert their dominance in ways that violate our freedom. These explanations can point to the role of government, for instance, by talking about how the government helps corporations profit at the expense of our freedom, but it's important to talk about how we can change laws and policies to counter domination and free us all.

Why It Works

When we locate problems in a segment of society, it can help people think more structurally about power and oppression. Conversely, if we point the finger at specific billionaires, we risk personalizing the problem, as if it's only a case of replacing “bad people” with “better people” in leadership roles. We initially identified this recommendation in connection with the [System Is Rigged](#) frame. In that work, when we talked about “large corporations” rigging the system, we boosted collective efficacy for systems change (i.e., the belief that change is possible). But when we named specific billionaires, the frames backfired on several key outcomes—decreasing support for systemic change while increasing market naturalism and support for limited government.

In the current research, we confirmed this need for emphasizing the active role of a dominating group in taking away our freedom. For instance, when we first tested *Freedom from Domination* in connection with the economy, we talked about how it's hard for us to be free from the influence of the powerful, but we didn't use the active voice to describe what the powerful are doing. In the second test, we made the actions of the powerful clear (e.g., “A wealthy few have designed the economy in their favor. They hoard wealth and limit our freedom.”) When we talked about the powerful, wealthy few in the active voice like this, *Freedom from Domination* did not cue the idea that the economy is a natural system, out of human control. The active voice is likely to be important in showing human agency in designing and redesigning systems. When we aren't clear about this, people can fall back on the assumption that systems like the economy are out of our control and therefore can't be changed.

Freedom from Domination also shifts thinking much more effectively when the domination is explained. When we tested this value in connection with [system rigging](#), we found that explaining how the system was rigged against the public interest was an essential part of the framing strategy. Frames with this explanation boosted support for a range of progressive policies and marginally reduced exclusionary attitudes like xenophobia and authoritarianism. We didn't include such an

explanation in the present project, and this might explain the relative lack of positive movement on *Freedom from Domination* frames. As we've seen, the concept of *Freedom* is strongly associated with unproductive mindsets. That's why explanation is particularly needed here. When we explain how our freedoms are threatened by a powerful, wealthy few, we lower the risk of reinforcing these unproductive associations.

How to do it:

Example 1

“Right now the wealthy sway political decisions while many of us—especially low-income communities and communities of color—struggle to make our voices heard. If we want to be free, we need to design laws and policies that restrict the power of the wealthy few and create a political system where all of us have the freedom to participate regardless of background, income, or race.”

Example 2

“Today, a wealthy few dominate our economy by designing rules that allow them to hoard wealth and steer public decisions without our permission. This leaves the rest of us with fewer choices and less control over our lives. When we change these laws and policies, we can curb this domination and expand everyone's freedom.”

Example 3

“Freedom means no group should control society without our say, but big tech develops powerful tools that shape people's lives while a wealthy few get the benefits. Biased algorithms and unregulated AI systems limit opportunities and harm many communities. By designing laws that check this power and protect workers and consumers, we can ensure technology supports rather than undermines our freedom.”

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: A WINNING *FREEDOM* FRAME

“As a society, we believe in freedom from any form of domination. No one should have the power to control others, yet big tech now influences how we work, communicate, and move through the world—often without our consent. While these companies design technologies that shape major parts of our lives, a wealthy few collect the benefits. Meanwhile, many communities, especially those already marginalized or disadvantaged, are harmed by biased algorithms, surveillance tools, and unregulated AI systems. When technology is designed to benefit the wealthy, it limits people’s choices, narrows their opportunities, and concentrates power in ways that undermine our freedom.

“To protect our freedom, we need strong laws and policies that hold big tech accountable and protect us from the whims of the powerful few. That means putting into place policies that check concentrated power, protect workers and consumers, and ensure new technologies expand our opportunities instead of restricting them. Together, we can build a future where technology supports—not threatens—our freedom to shape our own lives.”

- Open with a clear appeal to the value of *Freedom*, unpacking what *Freedom* means.
- Provide a brief explanation of how our freedom is currently being undermined or violated in the way our systems are designed.
- Be explicit about who is taking away our freedom, using the active voice. Explain what they are doing.
- Show how system redesign, through new laws and policies, can enable our freedom.

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About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit 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®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary 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®, 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.

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