

ON CULTURE



ICE and Authoritarianism

FEBRUARY 2026



Friends and Partners,

So far, 2026 has filled me with both dismay and hope. Amidst ongoing violence and attempts to terrorize communities, the work of organizers on the ground in places like Minnesota has been inspirational. I am starting to see real reasons to be hopeful that people across the political spectrum are noticing, and not standing for, the rise of authoritarianism in the United States—including in our research.

What We're Seeing

This past month, we conducted a series of focus groups looking into how people are thinking about the government's use of force, with a particular focus on ICE and immigration enforcement ramp ups across the country. Here are some of the findings that I find most striking—and encouraging:

1. People across demographic groups and political affiliation see ICE as acting lawlessly—and while they may not be using the phrase, they are pointing to the idea that the “rule of law” is being violated in significant ways.
2. People are thinking about what law is and does in ways that we haven't seen in previous research—even as recently as research from summer 2025. We are seeing people's

understanding shift from the idea that law is used to keep people from doing bad things, to an understanding that laws determine how our society works and is organized.

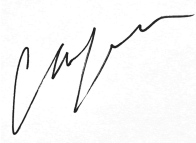
3. With careful framing, this emerging way of thinking about law can be an opening not only to push back against rising authoritarianism, but also to seed conversations about ways our laws need to *change* to set up a more just society.

Check out our new framing guide to see four recommended strategies for countering authoritarian encroachment and building support for immigrant justice.

SHOW ME THE FRAMING STRATEGIES

We think we might be seeing mindsets shift in real time—and in ways that could strengthen pushback against authoritarian actions. We will continue to monitor shifts in thinking about what that means for how we talk about things like power, law, and democracy. In the meantime, we remain (cautiously!) optimistic that people in this country are open to meaningful change.

In solidarity,



Clara Blustein Lindholm

*Director of Research Interpretation, Culture Change Project
(she/her)*



NEW FROM FRAMEWORKS



BRIEFING RECORDING

Responding to ICE and Countering Authoritarianism

ICYMI: This briefing was part of our *Culture, Mindsets, and Democracy* series. We shared real-time research on how Americans are thinking about ICE and protests, and framing strategies for making connections between ICE and a rise in authoritarianism.

[PLAY ME THE RECORDING](#)



OP-ED

The Minneapolis Protesters Are Showing What It Takes to Change Minds

ICYMI: This briefing was part of our *Culture, Mindsets, and Democracy* series. We shared real-time research on how Americans are thinking about ICE and protests, and framing strategies for making connections between ICE and a rise in authoritarianism.

[SHOW ME THE OP-ED](#)



UP NEXT!

Talking About Democracy: Takeaways from the Culture Change Project

Coming Soon

This report will synthesize insights and recommendations from our last two years of research on democracy. The report will lay out an emerging framing strategy that can be used to counter authoritarianism in the moment and build support for changes to democratize our political system over the long term.

Annual Research Update: Lessons from Five Years of the Culture Change Project

Coming Soon

This year's research update will look back over the first five years of the Culture Change Project, offering a bird's eye view of the biggest and most important shifts in cultural mindsets over the past half-decade and what those shifts tell us about the state of American culture.



SPOTLIGHT ON CULTURE CHANGERS

DEMOCRACY NOTES 2025 TRENDS | Gabriel Lerner

Democracy Notes has released its 2025 Trends report examining how the 2024 election and the early actions of the Trump administration have reshaped the U.S. democracy ecosystem. Drawing on interviews from across the field, the report highlights themes including burnout, fear, strategic tensions, and renewed interest in local work. It surfaces a growing call for clearer collective vision and stronger coordination across the democracy space.

[LEARN MORE](#)

MAKING DEMOCRACY INTERESTING: TIPS FROM TV, PODCASTS, SCIENCE FICTION, AND ONLINE CREATORS | The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation

This event, hosted by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, explores how to move beyond narratives about democratic decline and instead tell hopeful, compelling stories that resonate with young people. Moderated by Danielle Allen, Director of the Allen Lab, the conversation brings together voices from journalism, research, digital media, and science fiction, including Renee DiResta, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Baratunde Thurston, to discuss creative approaches to engaging the public in democracy.

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