

Culture, Mindsets, and Democracy: Navigating a Changing Landscape

Connecting democracy to
kitchen table issues

April 16, 2026



FRAMEWORKS
**Culture Change
Project**



Here's how we'll share space today:

- We are recording today's session.
- We will share the recording with registrants as soon as we can.
- We will remove any AI note-takers.
- To bring a question or comment to the presenters' attention, use the Q&A function. Note that others in the meeting will be able to see your question.
- Presenters probably won't see the chat. The chat is open for participants to interact with each other or respond to content in real time. FrameWorks may also post links there.
- There will be time for Q&A at the end of the presentation.

We study how to build **public resistance** to the rise of authoritarianism in the United States and **public demand** for a better, stronger democracy.

We are committed to navigating this moment with you.

- These briefings are a way for us to share new research in real time.
- We won't always have all the answers, but we want to get this to you now—we know the stakes are high and there's great urgency to move these conversations forward.

Word cloud

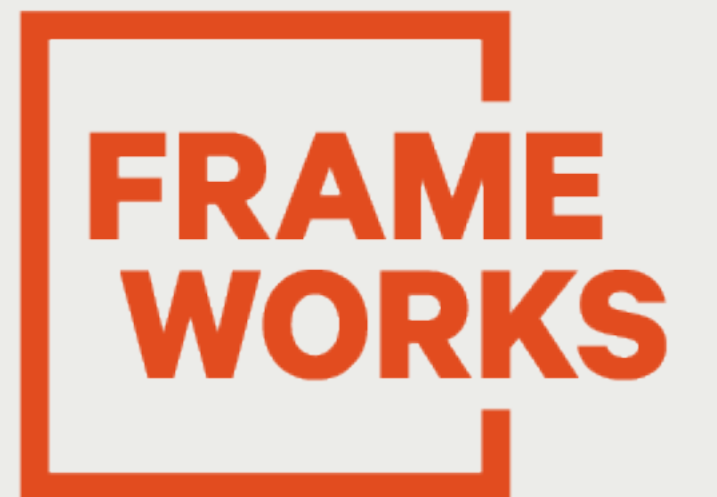
What gives you hope
when thinking about
the future of
democracy in the US?



Follow the link in the chat or the QR code
Answer in one or two words, please

Today:

**Connecting democracy to
kitchen table issues**

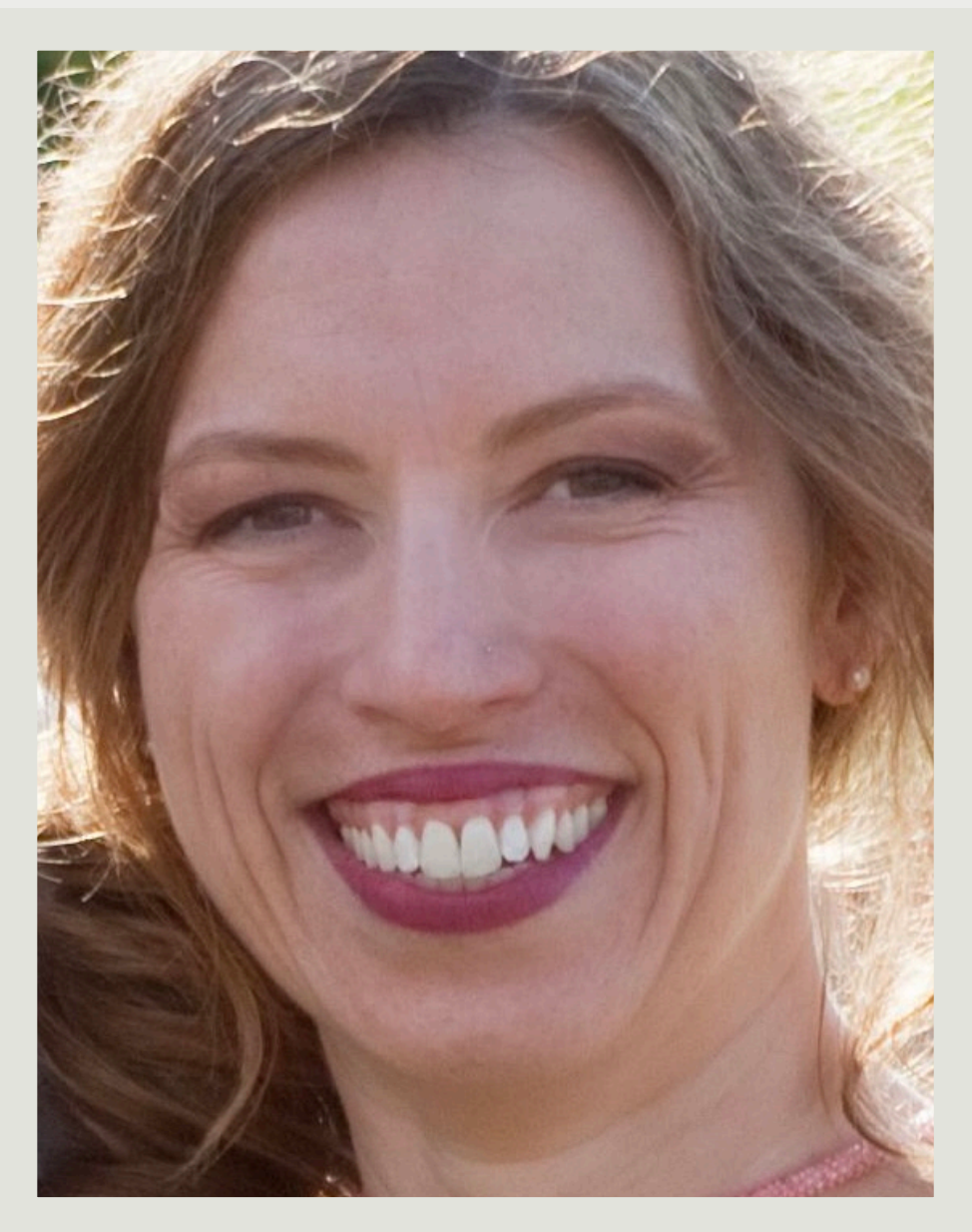




Andrew Volmert
FrameWorks Institute



Clara Blustein Lindholm
FrameWorks Institute



Elizabeth Buchanan
Union communications expert

Today's session

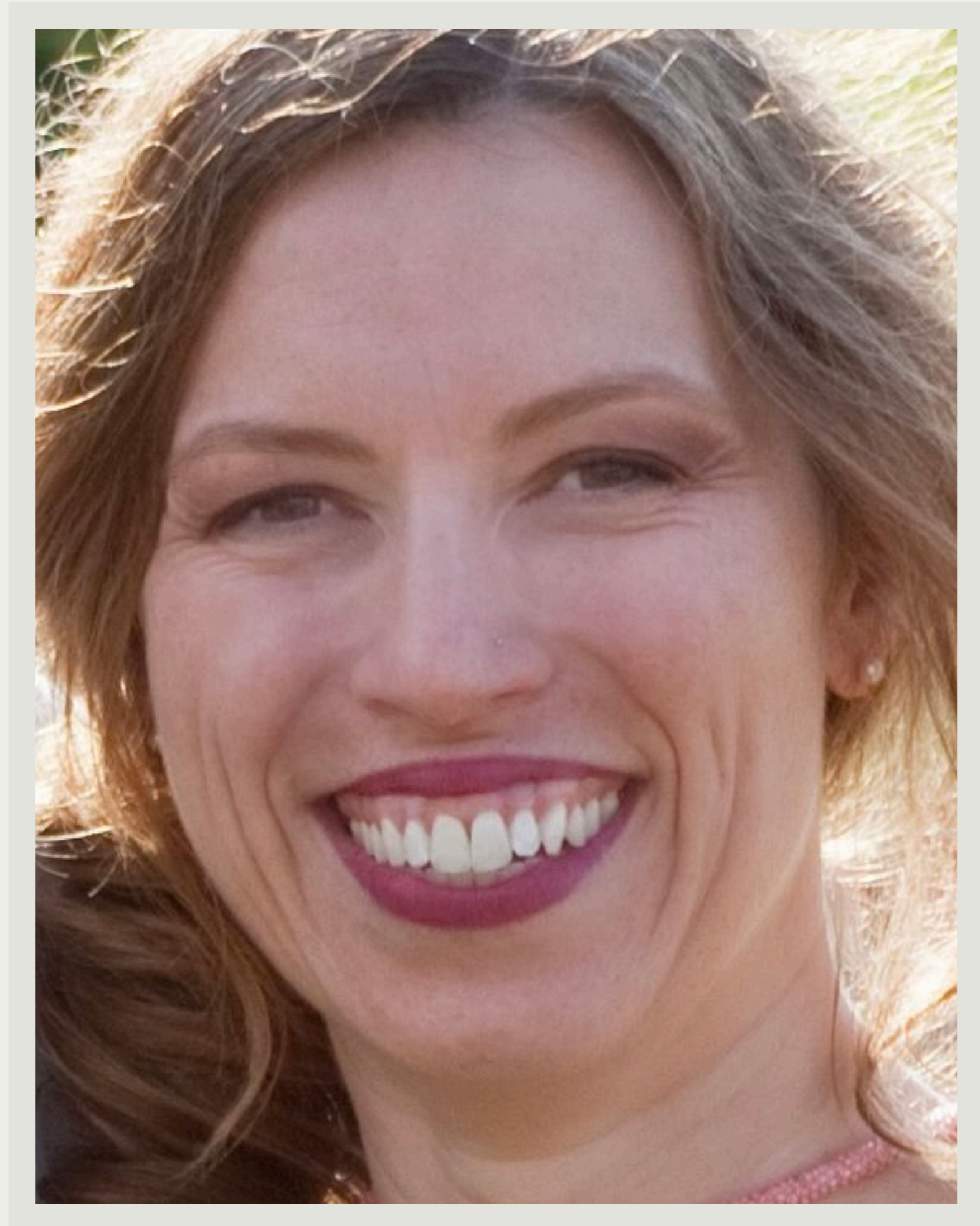
We need a compelling story about how economic realities are shaped by our political system.

Where is public thinking right now? Why does it matter?

Framing recommendations

Remarks by Elizabeth Buchanan

Guest speaker:
Elizabeth Buchanan



**We've worked closely with partners
to identify what we need to tell a
compelling story about:**

The use of power in the political system—and who our system gives power to—shapes our everyday economic realities:

- Political decisions have weakened worker power and privileged large corporate actors.
- Our political system gives corporations undue political influence—not only through money in elections but through veto points in the system and influence over the court.
- The way our political system is set up allows leaders to act to benefit themselves and their friends and avoid being held accountable for abuses of power.
- Because our political system insulates people in power from being held accountable, they also don't feel like they have to address popular demands to lower the cost of living, tax wealth, raise the minimum wage, etc.
- Unconstitutional, expansive uses of presidential power are further eroding our institutions' responsiveness to people's everyday concerns.

Our research base for today:

- Deep-dive mindsets interviews on democracy, authoritarianism, the political system, and the Constitution (2023) and on work and labor (2023)
- Tracking survey data (November 2024–February 2026)
- Quarterly focus groups on topics including the economy, authoritarianism, and the rule of law (May 2020–February 2026)
- 4 survey experiments into using “system is rigged” framing (2022-2024, total sample size of 14,428)
- 4 survey experiments into framing work and labor (2025, total sample size of 15,185)

**Choices in How
We Present Ideas**

The diagram consists of two circles connected by an arrow. The left circle is white with an orange border and contains the text 'Choices in How We Present Ideas'. An orange arrow points from the right side of this circle to the left side of a larger, solid orange circle on the right. This second circle contains the text 'How People Think / Feel / Act'.

**How People
Think / Feel / Act**



Mindsets research allows us to:

- See not just what people think, but how they think
- Understand what's driving polling numbers and how to change them
- Understand why certain issues or messages may resonate, and be attentive to potential backfires
- Identify cognitive pathways for shifting thinking and building demand for change

Where is public thinking right now?

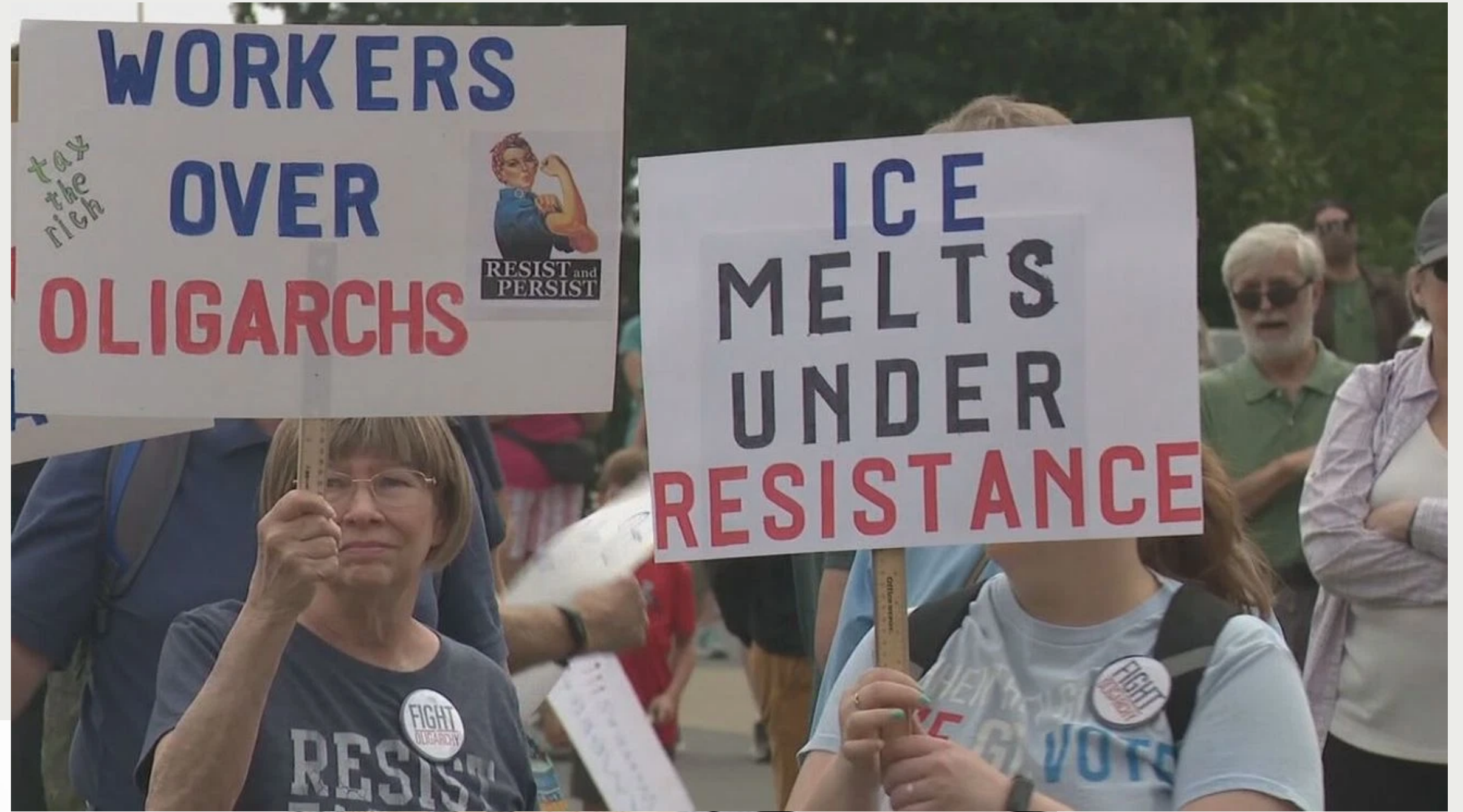
Some ways of thinking are ones we can leverage to build demand for change:

- Structural thinking about the economy
- System is rigged
- Representation model of democracy
- Popular model of democracy



It seems like Americans do not have a say in anything anymore, even when having the right to vote. No matter who you vote for, they still do not represent anything that the people actually want.

Research participant
August 2025



Some ways of thinking are ones we need to navigate:

- Self-makingness around work
- Political institutions = ???
- Personalism
- Fatalism

To tell a more compelling story about democracy and authoritarianism, we can connect to people's everyday economic realities.

4 key framing recommendations:

- **VALUE:** This goes against our core values.
- **PROBLEM:** The economy doesn't work for us.
- **EXPLANATION:** The way executive power is being abused—and the way our political system is set up—means that our government refuses to be responsive to our needs.
- **SOLUTION:** We have power in numbers. We need to resist what's happening and demand changes to our system.

These recommendations can be used to resist in the **immediate** term AND be used to lay the ground work for **long-term** structural change.



Value:

This goes against our core values.

Appeal to core democratic values:

- Freedom from domination
- Government by and for the people
- Real representation

When working to counter authoritarianism:

Cue the value of freedom from domination.

What this might look like:

It's time for our leaders to stop acting as if they're above the law. We need to hold them accountable to us and refuse to live according to their whims.

Language you can use to leverage “freedom from domination”:

- Being under the thumb of the rich and powerful
- Free from the control of the rich and powerful
- No one has a natural right to rule over others
- No kings

When working towards longer-term change:

Cue the values of government by and for the people and real representation.

What this might look like:

In a democracy, the people should have the power. We demand a government that works for us, not for corporations.

Language you can use to leverage “government by and for the people” and “real representation”:

- We the people
- Power lies with the people
- Our government should be accountable to us
- Responding to our needs
- Carrying out our wishes

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Problem:

The economy doesn't work for us.

When working to counter authoritarianism:

Leverage the idea that **our leaders are benefitting themselves and their friends at our expense.**

What this might look like:

Every day, we see how those at the top are doing whatever they think will benefit them. While they use their power to make sure they and their wealthy friends benefit, we get left behind. Food gets more and more expensive. Childcare stays out of reach. Our wages don't go up. When it comes to what we need to make our lives better, our leaders don't respond.

Language you can use to leverage the idea that our leaders are benefitting themselves at our expense:

- Our leaders are doing whatever they want
- They're acting to benefit themselves—not us
- They refuse to respond to our needs
- They don't think they have to listen to us

When working to lay the groundwork for longer-term change:

Show how **our system has been rigged to benefit large corporations and the powerful few.**

What this might look like:

Large corporations and wealthy CEOs have rigged the economy to funnel money straight to the top. They keep our wages low while their own pay skyrockets. They fight unions that would give workers bargaining power. They lobby for tax breaks that let them hoard even more wealth. And the whole time, they're pocketing the profits from our labor. They've deliberately designed the system to benefit themselves.

Situating villains within systems is key to building this kind of thinking:



+



It's not just about individuals
(specific leaders, greedy
elites, bosses, etc.)

It's about how our system lets
those individuals benefit at our
expense.

!! To use a system is rigged frame effectively, always include answers to these questions:

- Who is rigging the system?
- How?
- Against whom?

Language you can use to lay the groundwork for longer-term systems change:

- The system is rigged by the richest and most powerful
- They design the system so that...
- The system gives some people more power than others
- The system makes it easy for corporations to...

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EXPLANATION:

The abuse of executive power—and the way our political system is set up—is why the government isn't meeting our day-to-day needs.

When working to counter authoritarianism:

Show how leaders acting outside the law and without accountability harms people's day-to-day economic reality.

What this might look like:

Right now, some of our leaders are acting as if they're above the law. They refuse to be accountable to us. They choose to ignore us when we say we need things like affordable groceries or childcare. And our political system isn't stopping them the way it should.

When laying the groundwork for longer-term change:

Explain how our political system **thwarts responsiveness to economic needs.**

What this might look like:

If our government worked for us, we could change our laws and policies to put people over profit. But right now, our political system makes it hard for the government to do things we want, like raise taxes on the rich. Sometimes a popular law actually passes, despite all the hurdles built into the process. But then the Supreme Court strikes it down.

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SOLUTION:

We have power in numbers. We need to resist what's happening and demand changes to our system.

Language you can use to build agency and efficacy:

- We have power in numbers
- Power lies with the people
- We can force change
- We can come together and demand change
- Our power as the 99%

When working to counter authoritarianism:

Focus on **holding our leaders accountable now**—and gesture towards **changing our system in the future** so that this can't happen again.

What this might look like:

We have power in numbers. When our leaders act like kings and abuse their power, we need to hold them accountable. And we need to insist on changing the system so that this can't happen again in the future.

When working towards longer-term change:

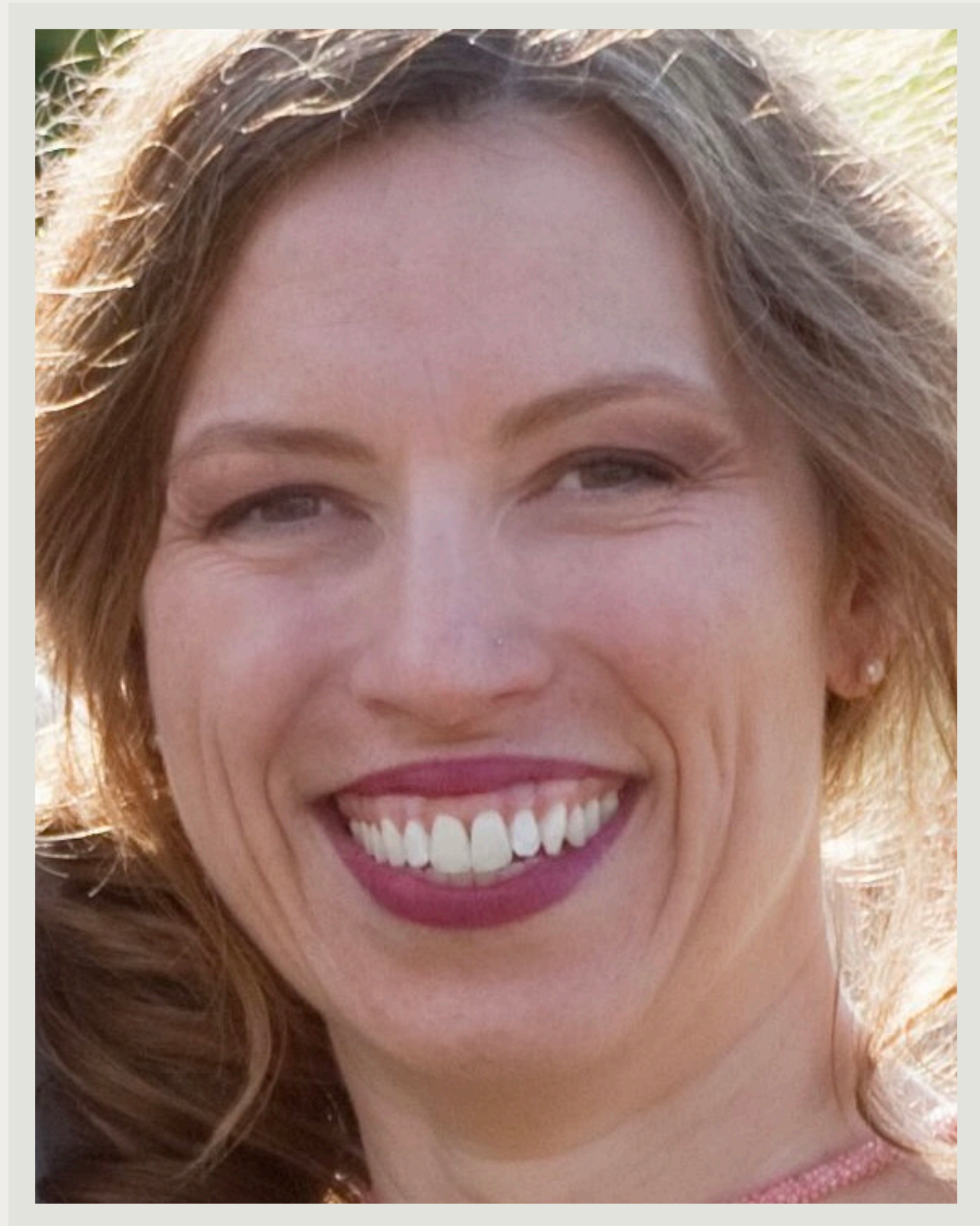
Make the case that an economy that works for the people requires a political system that works for the people.

What this might look like:

To build an economy that actually works for us, we need to make changes to our political system. We can start by demanding changes like putting term limits on the Supreme Court. That's a big change, but it can happen if we leverage our collective power as the 99%.

Together, our calls for action are louder. We must force the government and those in power to reshape the rigged system.

Guest speaker:
Elizabeth Buchanan



Q & A

We want to stay connected with you:

Join us next time

Culture, Mindsets, and Democracy
Thursday, June 18
1pm ET/10am PT

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