



# From Protecting the Status Quo to a Vision for Change

Framing Democracy in a Time of Authoritarianism

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# Introduction

Democracy in the United States has always been an incomplete project. The country has become more democratic in fits and starts. Over time, basic civil and political rights were extended to Black people, women, and other oppressed and disenfranchised groups. The direct election of senators gave citizens greater control over their representatives, and Progressive Era and New Deal reforms checked corporate power over government.

Yet, other undemocratic features of the system have never been fixed. The country has long denied representation to many areas under its control, and it continues to deny full representation to the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and other territories. Malapportionment results in unequal representation across states. Veto points in the system, from bicameralism to the presidential veto to judicial review, prevent the enactment of popular legislation. The two-party system leaves people consistently choosing between candidates they don't like. The Supreme Court wields unaccountable power. These are only some of the failures that prevent our national government from truly being government by and for the people.

Today, instead of moving toward greater democracy, we're in danger of losing the democracy we have. In recent years, the gains of the past have been rolled back as voting rights have been curtailed and corporate influence expanded. Now, even basic democratic principles like the rule of law, free and fair elections, and the freedom to dissent are under attack. The institutions that embody these principles—however imperfectly—are being torn down.

We need effective frames to counter authoritarianism now and to build support for a more democratic system in the future. It's easy to think of these as separate goals that should be taken in turn: We need to sound the alarm *now* and can make the case for democratic reforms *later*. Our research suggests that, rather than taking them in turn, our framing can and should speak to both goals at the same time.

Over the past four years, as part of the [Culture Change Project](#), the FrameWorks Institute has conducted deep-dive research to understand how the public is making sense of democracy, authoritarianism, our political system, and the Constitution in this time of upheaval. We have developed frames focused on both goals: countering authoritarianism and building support for democratic reforms. What we have learned is that these efforts can—and probably should—be connected.

Members of the US public are profoundly dissatisfied with the status quo. They experience the system as rigged against them. It's unresponsive to their needs, gives them little say over their lives, and leaves them shut out of power. These system failures open the door to authoritarianism. When people can't see any path to meaningful change within the existing system and no one is proposing the kinds of big changes that might actually *fix* it, the situation can feel hopeless. It can then seem like the only way out—the only real option for change—is a strongman promising to tear it all down.

To counter authoritarianism in the present, we must focus on what's wrong right now, but this doesn't mean we should ignore long-needed changes. We strengthen our critique of what's happening by offering people a vision of a better, more democratic system. This helps people see that they don't have to choose between a status quo that wasn't working for them and acceding to authoritarianism. And by giving people a vision of a better, more democratic system, we bring into relief what's so very wrong with authoritarianism.

On the flip side, to build support for fundamental changes to the structure of the political system, we need to connect to people's lived experience, including the very real and present experience of authoritarianism. Without connecting to people's immediate concerns, structural reforms may feel like unnecessary distractions.

In this report, we review the extensive, ongoing research we have conducted on democracy and authoritarianism over the past four years and lay out the framing strategy that emerges from this research. The report is organized as follows:

- **Research Base and Methods.** This section outlines the research base for this report and describes the methods used. A fuller description of methods is offered in the appendix.
- **Goals.** We briefly introduce the twin goals of this research: countering rising authoritarianism and building support for reforms to make the political system more democratic.
- **Overview of the Emerging Framing Strategy.** We briefly introduce the framing strategy that has emerged from our research. Our hope in previewing the strategy at the beginning of the report is that this will enable readers to engage with the research with an eye toward the recommendations we offer.
- **Research Findings.** This section reviews findings from multiple sets of research:
  - *Cognitive interviews to identify cultural mindsets about democracy, the political system, and the Constitution.* We discuss the key mindsets—the deep assumptions and implicit understandings—that members of the US public use to think about these issues.
  - *Mindset tracking survey.* We review findings on strength of mindset endorsement among the US public generally and across groups, and we examine stability and shifts in endorsement over time.
  - *Survey on support for democratic reforms.* We briefly discuss findings from an August 2025 survey on support for changes to the political system.
  - *Research on System Is Rigged thinking and framing.* Reviewing findings from a multiyear study, we examine how the idea that the system is rigged shapes public thinking about the political system and review findings on effective framing about rigged systems.
  - *Ongoing focus groups.* We examine what focus group research tells us about how thinking is shifting in an evolving context and, specifically, how people are making sense of rising authoritarianism.

- **An Emerging Framing Strategy.** This section provides a deep dive into the framing strategy that has emerged from the multiple streams of research. We can use the strategy to cultivate understanding of and resistance to authoritarian actions now while building support for changes to the political system in the future.
- **Questions for Future Research.** We highlight specific areas that warrant further research, including the ongoing research needed in a constantly evolving context.

# Research Base and Methods

This report discusses findings from iterative research conducted over the past four years. This research was shaped by conversations with the Culture Change Project’s advisory board, including deep collaboration with the Democracy Revival Center in designing and interpreting key parts of the research.<sup>1</sup>

We have continually adapted our research agenda in response to events in the world, ongoing conversations with partners in the anti-authoritarian and pro-democracy movements, and questions from participants in our regular webinar series, [Culture, Mindsets, and Democracy: Navigating a Changing Landscape](#).

This report discusses findings from five overlapping sets of research:

**1. Cognitive interviews on democracy, the political system, and the Constitution.** FrameWorks conducted 20 in-depth, two-hour interviews with members of the US public in January–February 2023 to understand how members of the public think about democracy, authoritarianism, the political system, and the Constitution. Interviews were analyzed to identify the *cultural mindsets*—the tacit assumptions and understandings—that people use to think about these topics. We recruited a diverse sample of participants and oversampled participants of color to ensure that any patterns identified were held across racial groups.

**2. Cultural mindset tracking survey.** As part of the Culture Change Project, FrameWorks fields regular surveys to do the following:

- Examine the strength of cultural mindset endorsement among the US public.
- Explore differences in thinking across groups.
- Track shifts in the strength of mindsets over time.
- Evaluate the relationship between mindsets and support for reforms.

Beginning in 2022, FrameWorks began incorporating mindsets around democracy, the political system, and the Constitution into the tracking survey. Surveys are conducted online and typically involve a nationally representative sample of around 1,000 participants, with an additional oversample for race and age. Mindsets are measured using multi-item scales.

**3. Survey on support for democratic reforms.** In addition to regular tracking surveys, FrameWorks researchers field occasional stand-alone surveys on democracy-related issues. In August 2025, we fielded a survey to measure people’s desire for changes to the political system and support for structural reforms to make the system more democratic.

**4. Research on *System Is Rigged* thinking and framing.** Beginning in 2022, FrameWorks has conducted extensive research into the *System Is Rigged* mindset—the idea that the powerful few rig *the system* to benefit themselves at the expense of the many. Through focus groups and a series of five experimental surveys, FrameWorks has developed effective ways of talking

about *rigged systems*, yielding findings on how to talk about the political and economic systems and the need for systemic change. For focus groups, we used quotas to ensure demographic variation, with oversampling of participants of color. For experimental surveys, we used quotas to ensure a nationally representative sample, with the exception of the fifth survey, which was designed for organizing contexts and was fielded with a sample of movement-aligned participants, a majority of whom were young (18–34), lower income, and nonwhite.

In the survey experiments, we tested frames by comparing treatment and control groups, to which we randomly assigned participants. Treatment groups read a framed message, while control groups received no message. Participants in all conditions answered a set of survey questions to measure attitudes, policy support, and mindset endorsement. Researchers used multiple regression analysis to determine whether there were significant differences on the outcomes between each of the experimental frame conditions and the control condition.

**5. Ongoing focus groups.** In regular focus groups within the Culture Change Project, researchers explore how members of the public are drawing on mindsets to make sense of issues of the moment. Over the past three years, these focus groups have explored topical issues related democracy, including the following:

- Assessments of the state of the country
- Views of the future (including [the ability to envision positive futures](#))
- The [Supreme Court](#)
- Responses to [anti-“woke” narratives](#)
- The Department of Government Efficiency ([DOGE](#))
- The [rule of law and immigration](#)
- US Immigration and Customs Enforcement ([ICE](#))
- The [deployment of troops in US cities](#)
- The branches of government.

The focus groups were all conducted virtually. Quotas were used to ensure demographic variation, with oversampling of participants of color.

The appendix to this report includes fuller descriptions of these methods, as well as the survey measures and the full tested language for the frames discussed in this report.

# Goals

We have conducted this research with two goals in mind:

**1. Build public resistance to rising authoritarianism.** How, through our framing, can we build public opposition to authoritarian actions? How do we cultivate a shared recognition that these actions violate core democratic principles and ideals?

**2. Build demand for the changes needed to make our political system more democratic.**

The framing strategy is intended to foster support for the wide range of changes needed to give regular people more power within the system and to ensure that all members of the public are truly represented. This would entail fundamental changes to our electoral and party systems and to our system of government. The framing strategy isn't designed to promote any *specific* reforms, but it can be used to make the case for any reforms that shift power toward the people and make the system more representative.

The framing strategy discussed in this report covers both goals. For applied messaging guidance focused specifically on political system reform, see [\*Reviving Our Democracy: A Narrative for the New Political System We Need\*](#)—a narrative toolkit jointly created by the Democracy Revival Center, FrameWorks, and the Bloc. The toolkit draws on the same research base, offering highly usable guidance for reformers and campaigners.

# Overview of the Emerging Framing Strategy

Below, we offer a quick preview of the framing strategy presented later in the report. We provide this here so that readers can have it in mind as they review findings from our multiple streams of research in the next section.

## **RECOMMENDATION 1.**

Appeal to the animating ideals behind democracy, rather than making democracy the value.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2.**

Affirm the need for a fundamentally different system that better realizes democratic ideals.

## **RECOMMENDATION 3.**

To expose what's wrong with the unconstrained use of power, draw on core values—especially *freedom from domination*.

## **RECOMMENDATION 4.**

Bring institutions into view and explain how they shape outcomes. Situate leaders in institutional context.

## **RECOMMENDATION 5.**

Explain how the political system—or the use of power outside the law—shapes everyday economic realities.

## **RECOMMENDATION 6.**

Talk about history to bring design into view and raise the possibility of redesigning the system.

## **RECOMMENDATION 7.**

Emphasize people's power to say no (now) and to change the system (later).

## **RECOMMENDATION 8.**

Offer (systemic) solutions that match the scale of the (systemic) problem.

# Research Findings

In this section, we look at multiple intersecting bodies of research conducted over the past four years, which provide a deep understanding of the following:

- The underlying mindsets that members of the US public use to think about democracy, authoritarianism, the political system, and the Constitution
- How these mindsets differ across groups and are shifting over time
- Attitudes toward the political system and democratic reforms
- How, by affirming widespread frustrations with the system and appealing to core democratic values, we can foster collective efficacy and build support for change
- How people are making sense of the evolving landscape and the rise of authoritarianism in the United States

We have presented some of these findings elsewhere. Where appropriate, we link to other resources for fuller discussions. Here, we provide an overview of and synthesize findings across methods and studies. This body of research provides the basis for the emerging framing strategy presented later in this report.

## A. Cognitive Interviews on Democracy, the Political System, and the Constitution

In our cultural mindsets interviews conducted in January–February 2023, we identified several critical patterns in public thinking that communicators must attend to.<sup>2</sup> Our mindset tracking survey, discussed in the next section, has confirmed the validity and ongoing relevance of these mindsets into the present. Quotes in this section are from the original interviews, unless otherwise indicated.

### FINDING 1

#### ***Democracy means many different things to people.***

People have a range of ways of making sense of *democracy*, moving back and forth between different understandings at different times. Analysis of the cognitive interviews identified five distinct ways that people think about democracy:

1. ***Voting Model of Democracy.*** When using this mindset, people understand voting as the essence of democracy. In this way of thinking, democracy is understood as the *same as and nothing more than* the act of voting.
2. ***Democracy = Individual Liberty.*** When using this mindset, people equate democracy with a political order that protects basic civil and political rights.

3. **Popular Model of Democracy.** In this way of thinking, democracy is understood as a political system in which the government does what the people want. This mindset does not provide a clear explanation of how this works, only a strong understanding that democracy means rule by and for the people.
4. **Representation Model of Democracy.** When using this mindset, democracy is understood as representation of the people by elected leaders. This representation can be more or less successful depending on whether elected officials *actually* represent their constituents. *Real representation* is understood as an ideal for a democracy to strive toward. Representation is alternately understood as acting in constituents' best interest, carrying out their will, keeping electoral promises, or simply sharing common life experiences and identities with constituents.
5. **Democracy = the US System of Government.** In this way of thinking, people think of democracy as nothing more or less than what we do in the United States. Democracy is assumed to be equivalent to the inherited system of government in the United States.

It's easy for communicators to assume that when they say *democracy*, people will understand this idea in the way they intend it. Yet this is not guaranteed—when we say *democracy*, we may activate any of these different models in people's minds.

## FINDING 2

### **The Popular Model of Democracy and the Representation Model of Democracy open space for democratic reform.**

These two mindsets are frequently used to criticize the status quo. In interviews, participants drew on the ideals of *popular self-government* and *real representation* to criticize our existing system:

For the average, everyday person, I know from talking to my friends, people in my community, that there seems to be a feeling right now of, like, no one really represents what's best for the people.

**White, woman, leans Democratic, age 38—interview January–February 2023**

—

Ordinary people elect the politicians and then they make the decisions based on what the people want. They're supposed to, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're going to.

**White, woman, Republican, age 61—interview January–February 2023**

By offering robust ideals against which existing systems can be judged, these mindsets open space for democratic reforms. These mindsets give people a sense of what the system *should* be like. Changes that would allow people to be *really or truly* represented, or that would ensure that the people's will is more reliably carried out, would, in these ways of thinking, make the system more democratic.

These mindsets do not automatically generate support for any particular reforms. At worst, they can make people susceptible to the autocratic idea that presidents should be able to exercise unconstrained power because they represent the people. The following quote illustrates this danger:

**Researcher:** What things would you change about the US political system? What would you change about it?

**Participant:** Honestly, I would just for a moment, just for one term, I would like to take all the Senate and just tell them to go away and just let the president solely, the person that we voted for, I would just like him to make all of the decisions. I want it on his shoulders, nobody else, let him make the rules, don't veto it, don't do anything. Just let him make all the rules.

**Latina, woman, Republican, age 45—interview January–February 2023**

In addition, who “the people” are is highly contested. Authoritarians in the United States today are trying to restrict who counts and who doesn't. So, while these mindsets *can* bring into view undemocratic features of the current system, they don't *automatically* lead people to the reforms needed to actually make the system more democratic.

### **FINDING 3**

#### **The *Democracy = Individual Liberty* mindset makes the problems with repressive actions clear, but it doesn't facilitate systemic change.**

In a time of rising authoritarianism, the equation of democracy with individual liberties has obvious benefits. It helps people quickly see how the repressive actions of an authoritarian regime are undemocratic.

This benefit is real and shouldn't be understated at a time when resistance to authoritarianism is the immediate and primary concern. It is important to note, however, that this mindset provides a narrow understanding of democracy that doesn't bring into view questions about who gets to decide what the government does and how decisions are made. When people draw on this mindset, structural issues like unequal representation, veto points, and corporate influence over government remain out of sight. As a result, so does the need for changes to the system.

### **FINDING 4**

#### **People widely see the political system as rigged and want fundamental changes to it.**

Across demographics and political affiliation, members of the US public believe that the system in the United States is rigged. When people draw on this *System Is Rigged* mindset, they see the political system as rigged by the powerful few at the expense of everyone else.

This mindset leads to a profound desire for changes to the status quo, including fundamental changes to the political system. **In an August 2025 survey, 71 percent of participants said our political system needs either major changes or to be completely reformed.**

As we discuss at greater length below, the *System Is Rigged* mindset is at the heart of the contests happening in US culture right now. It brings the political system into view, along with its connections to other systems in US society, especially the economic system. It helps people see how power works in these systems and the fact that they are designed and can be redesigned. At its best,

this mindset can motivate resistance to authoritarianism and demand for the structural changes needed to strengthen democracy. Yet, if steered in the wrong direction, this mindset can lead to xenophobia, racism, fatalism, or the impression that we need a strongman to unrig the system.

This mindset is ground zero for any attempt to engage a broad public at the current moment. We cannot develop an effective strategy without grappling with the dominance and intensity of this way of thinking and acknowledging the depth of current dissatisfaction with the existing system.

For these reasons, we conducted a multiyear study to understand this mindset and how best to engage with it. We discuss findings from this research on *System Is Rigged* thinking and framing below.

## FINDING 5

### Leaders are visible. Political institutions are not.

People overwhelmingly equate government with individual leaders. In turn, they assume that what the government does is a direct outgrowth of leaders' preferences and character. When people draw on this **Personalism mindset**, they reason that government failures must happen because leaders simply don't care what people want or need.

*Personalism* enables people to quickly see the importance of removing bad leaders, as illustrated by the following quote:

**Researcher:** What should be done to respond to [authoritarianism in the United States] now?

**Participant:** Better leaders. Some better leaders with more common sense. [...] I think it starts at the top. Starts at the top, like the head ... it starts at the head. So, I think a bunch of new leaders.

**Black, woman, Republican, age 50—interview January–February 2023**

This is an obvious asset in an autocratic moment. However, the mindset places political institutions in the background. Although, as we discussed above, people widely support changes to the political system, the *Personalism* mindset can easily distill dissatisfaction with the system down to dissatisfaction with individual leaders.

This tendency is reinforced by people's lack of knowledge about specific institutions. Without understanding how institutions distribute power and enable or constrain decisions, it's hard to identify the specific institutional problems that thwart a representative, responsive democracy and have enabled the rise of authoritarianism in the United States.

*Personalism* makes it easy to see the need to change leadership but also makes it easy to stop there. It also means that ongoing dissatisfaction with the status quo tends to get pinned on *whoever* is in power.

## FINDING 6

### People sometimes see the Constitution as an enduring foundation, sometimes as outdated.

Members of the US public draw on two competing mindsets to think about the Constitution:

- **The Constitution as Stable Foundation.** This mindset assumes that the purpose of the Constitution is to create a stable political order and that, in turn, we shouldn't stray from the Constitution or the intention of the framers.
- **The Constitution as a Product of Its Time.** In this way of thinking, the Constitution is seen to reflect the norms and beliefs that were in place at the time of its creation. These norms and beliefs are understood as fundamentally different from and out-of-step with current views.

The constitutional faith reflected in the *Stable Foundation* mindset is unsurprising and familiar. In recent decades, unwavering veneration of the Constitution has muted constitutional politics. It is notable, then, that in these interviews, we saw constitutional skepticism alongside constitutional faith, as illustrated by the following quote:

There are certain things in the Constitution that, if they are not working for our country and our society anymore, then I feel like they should be reassessed. Like, there should never be anything based on sexism, racism, homosexuality, you know, like anything that is discriminating against people in that sense.

**White, woman, leans Democratic, age 38—interview January–February 2023**

Public knowledge about the Constitution is generally limited, so even when people think that the Constitution must be outdated, they typically aren't sure *how* it reflects the view of an earlier era. Most often, they assume it must somehow reflect the racist and sexist beliefs of the past or be ill-suited to today's technology.

## FINDING 7

### Fatalism is widespread and people struggle to imagine a positive future.

While people are deeply dissatisfied with the status quo, they struggle to imagine how it can be changed. Unriggering the system often seems impossible.

In focus groups conducted in January 2024, we asked participants representing a cross section of the US public to imagine a positive future. The scenario: it's 2050, and things have gone as well as they realistically could have. What, we asked, does the world look like, and how did we get there?

Participants struggled with the exercise, ultimately settling on two possible paths toward a positive future. In the first, participants envisioned a future where artificial intelligence (AI) has taken over the government and runs the country for us:

As time goes on, people are starting to realize that less government involvement is needed—as well as corporation involvement—with emergent technology and AI. [In this imagined future,] science people decided to come together and use these tools for their benefit. Voting was soon abolished ... and people were becoming more and more inclusive with their close-knit communities.

**Latino man, age 49, leans Republican—focus group, January 2024**

In the second path toward a positive future, participants envisioned the emergence of a strong, charismatic leader who could bring the country together:

We the people, we're going to elect The Rock to the office [of president]. He is very well liked by the majority of the nation. And he's going to help mend the social divide, and all by the [pause] ... you know, mental and physical muscle.

**Latino man, age 28, Democrat—focus group, January 2024**

While charismatic leadership does not necessarily tilt into dictatorship, its appeal opens the door for it.

The exercise reveals the difficulty participants had in coming up with positive futures. They could not imagine how the country's dysfunctions could be fixed without appealing to a savior outside of the system—technological or human. The presentation of dystopian visions in the guise of positive futures shows just how hard it currently is for most people to imagine positive change.

## B. Cultural Mindset Tracking Survey—Mindset Endorsement across Groups and Over Time

Our mindset tracking survey has revealed key patterns in the endorsement of mindsets about democracy and the US political system, looking across groups and over time.

The survey uses multi-item scales to measure strength of endorsement. In developing these scales, researchers used factor analysis to check reliability of the survey measures, periodically checking factor loading to make sure the measures remained reliable. Table 1 shows sample items from each scale. The full set of survey items for each scale is listed in the appendix.

**TABLE 1: SAMPLE ITEMS FROM MINDSET SURVEY MEASURES**

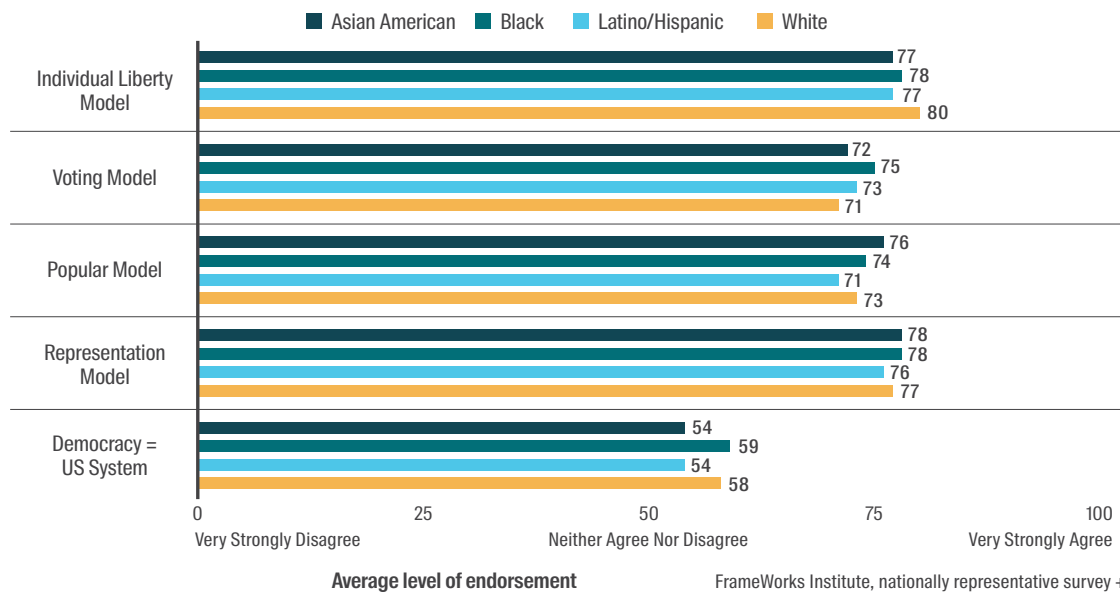
Cultural Mindset	Sample Survey Item <i>All items use a 9-point Likert scale from “Very strongly disagree” to “Very strongly agree.”</i>
Voting Model of Democracy	Voting is what makes a country a democracy.
Democracy = Individual Liberty	The main feature of democracies is that they uphold people’s individual liberties.
Popular Model of Democracy	Democracy is government by the people.
Representation Model of Democracy	If people aren’t <i>truly</i> represented, then a country isn’t <i>really</i> democratic—even if there are elections.
Democracy = US System of Government	Democracy is what we do in the United States—nothing more and nothing less.
Personalism	When government doesn’t work well, it’s because bad people are in charge.

**FINDING 1**

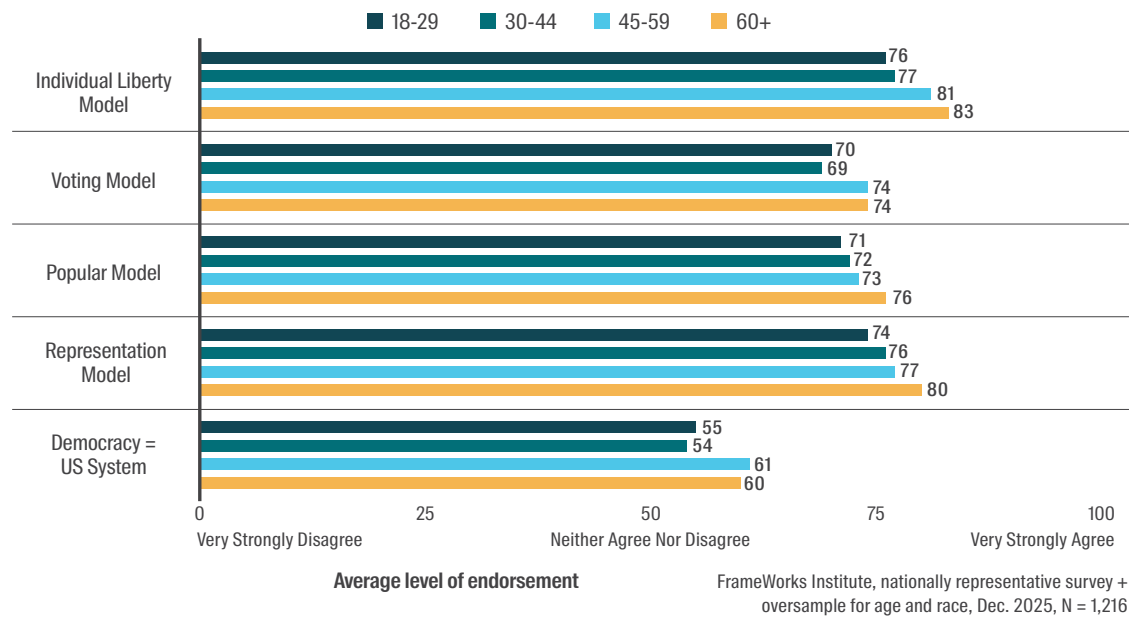
**There are minimal demographic and partisan differences in endorsement of mindsets about democracy.**

There is little demographic variation in endorsement of democracy mindsets. The figures below show *average endorsement* for the five mindsets about democracy discussed above. These means are from our December 2025 survey, though the pattern of minimal differences across race and age has borne out across surveys fielded since 2024.

**Figure 1. Across racial groups, people hold mindsets about democracy at similar levels.**



**Figure 2. Across age groups, people hold mindsets about democracy at similar levels.**

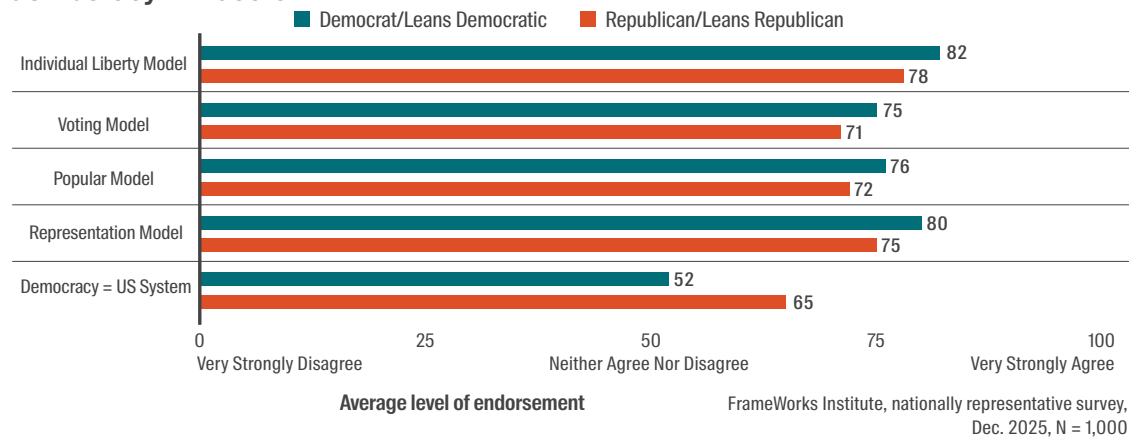


Although strength of endorsement differs somewhat by demographic group, these differences are quite small. The largest differences in means by age or race are 7-percentage-point differences. For comparison, in our research on mindsets about race and racism, we see differences over 30 percentage points. Means are also similar across other demographic groups—gender, education, and income—with only small variation by group.

This illustrates the key takeaway: Demographics don't substantially affect people's deep, underlying ways of thinking about democracy.

Similarly, differences in endorsement of democracy mindsets by political party are minor, as the figure below shows.

**Figure 3. There are few differences by political party in level of endorsement of democracy mindsets.**



The only mindset for which we see a substantial difference in endorsement between Democrats and Republicans is the *Democracy = US System of Government* mindset. As we discuss below, this difference has only emerged since November 2024, likely reflecting the change in presidential administration.

The relatively small demographic and partisan differences in endorsement of democracy mindsets indicate that, unlike for many salient contested issues, foundational thinking about democracy is quite similar across key segments of US society.

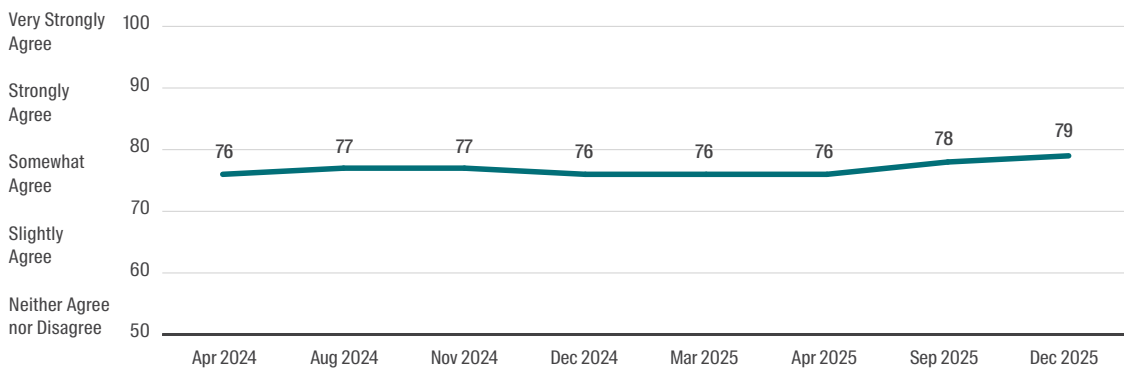
**FINDING 2**

**Strength of endorsement of democracy mindsets has remained stable throughout 2024 and 2025.**

Despite major shifts in the state of US democracy over the past couple of years, we do not see major shifts in how people are thinking about what democracy is. As we discuss below, we have seen shifts in how people are making sense of the evolving landscape. But to do so, they're drawing on a set of foundational mindsets whose strength has not changed.

The figures below show average levels of endorsement for the five key mindsets about democracy that we have tracked in our survey since 2024. Endorsement of the *Individual Liberty*, *Popular*, and *Representation* models has remained remarkably consistent.

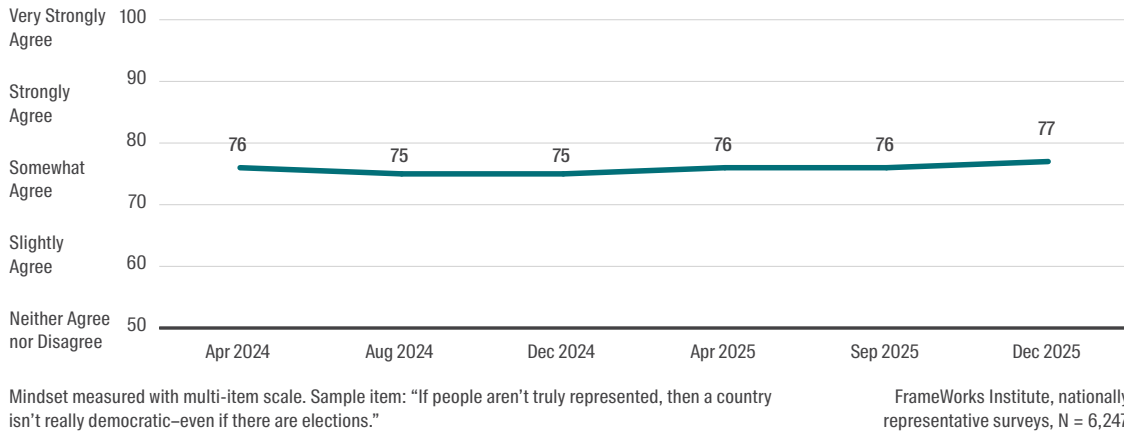
**Figure 4. Average endorsement of the *Individual Liberty Model of Democracy* has remained stable.**



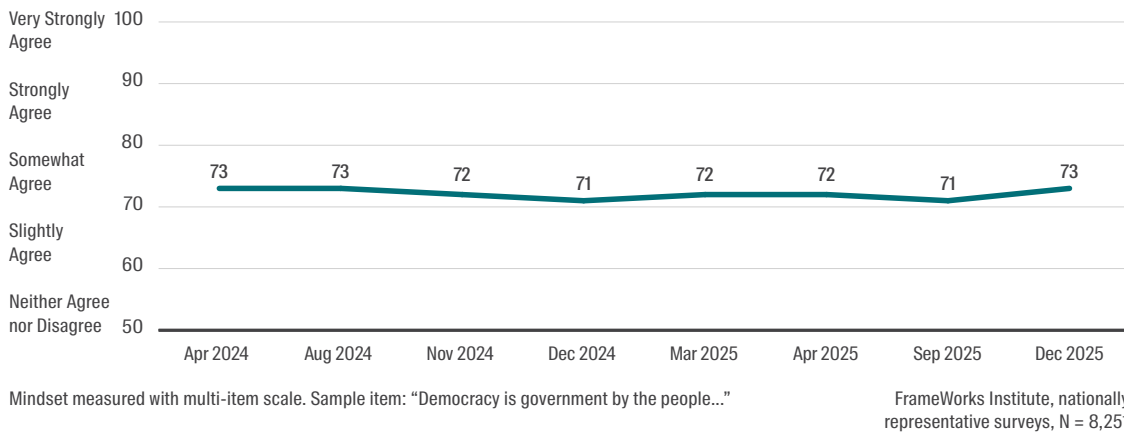
Mindset measured with multi-item scale. Sample item: "The main feature of democracies is that they uphold people's individual liberties"

FrameWorks Institute, nationally representative surveys, N = 8,251

**Figure 5. Average endorsement of the *Representation Model of Democracy* has remained stable.**

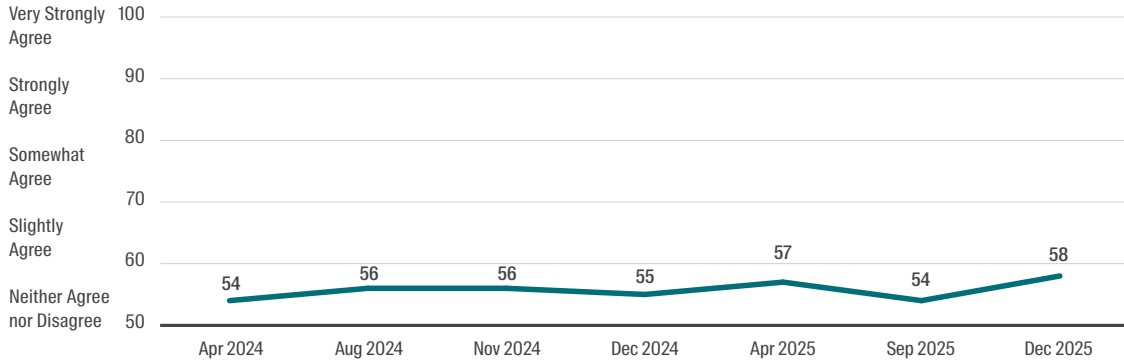


**Figure 6. Average endorsement of the *Popular Model of Democracy* has remained stable.**



Average endorsement of the *Democracy = US System of Government* mindset has remained similarly stable, although at a lower level of agreement. In qualitative research, participants consistently drew on this mindset, indicating greater strength than is reflected in the survey. We suspect that this difference is a result of format. While people consistently, *tacitly* treat democracy as synonymous with the US system, when confronted with explicit statements claiming these are identical, people are more likely to think about other democratic systems.

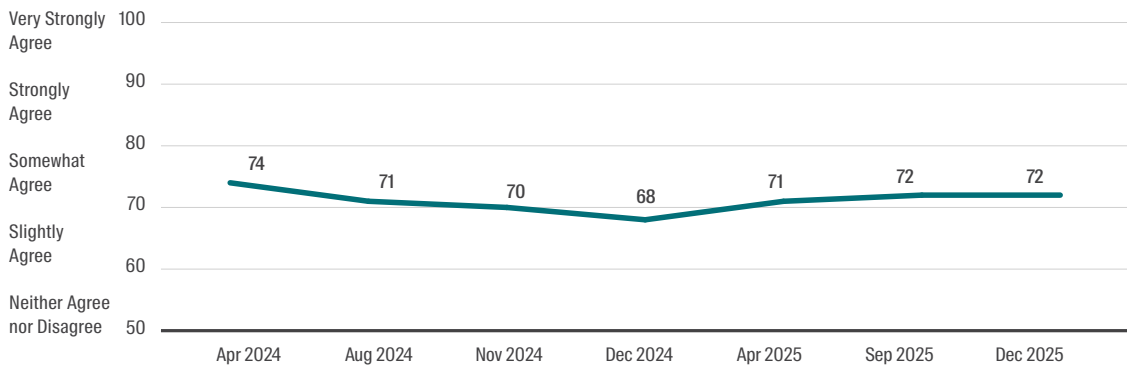
**Figure 7. Explicit endorsement of the *Democracy = US System* mindset has remained stable at a relatively low level.**



Mindset measured with multi-item scale. Sample item: “Democracy is what we do in the United States – nothing more and nothing less...” FrameWorks Institute, nationally representative surveys, N = 7,249

Endorsement of the *Voting Model of Democracy* has remained relatively stable as well. It dipped briefly around the presidential election in late 2024, but even this was only a small decrease in strength. We suspect that this small dip was related to the lived experience of the election. If people were unhappy with the candidates they were choosing between, the idea that voting alone defines democracy may have seemed less satisfactory.

**Figure 8. Average endorsement of the *Voting Model of Democracy* dipped briefly but has generally remained stable.**



Mindset measured with multi-item scale. Sample item: “Voting is what makes a country a democracy” FrameWorks Institute, nationally representative surveys, N = 7,249

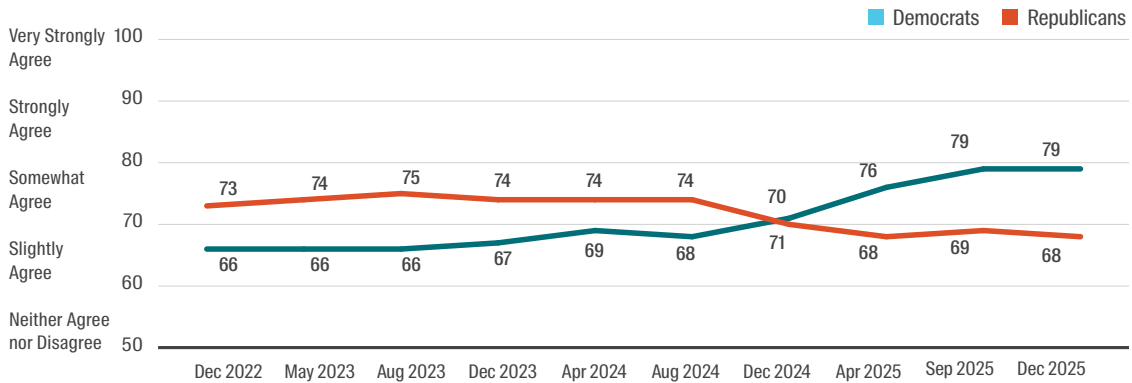
**FINDING 3**

**The strength of the *Personalism and Democracy = US System of Government* mindsets is sensitive to party identity and who holds power in government.**

We see shifts in the strength of partisan endorsement of the *Personalism and Democracy = US System of Government* mindsets around the 2024 election.

In December 2024, following the election, Democrats and Republicans flip-flopped in their endorsement of *Personalism*. Prior to this survey, Republicans more strongly endorsed this mindset, while after the survey, Democrats have more strongly endorsed it.

**Figure 9. Mean endorsement of *Personalism* varies by party depending on who is in power.**

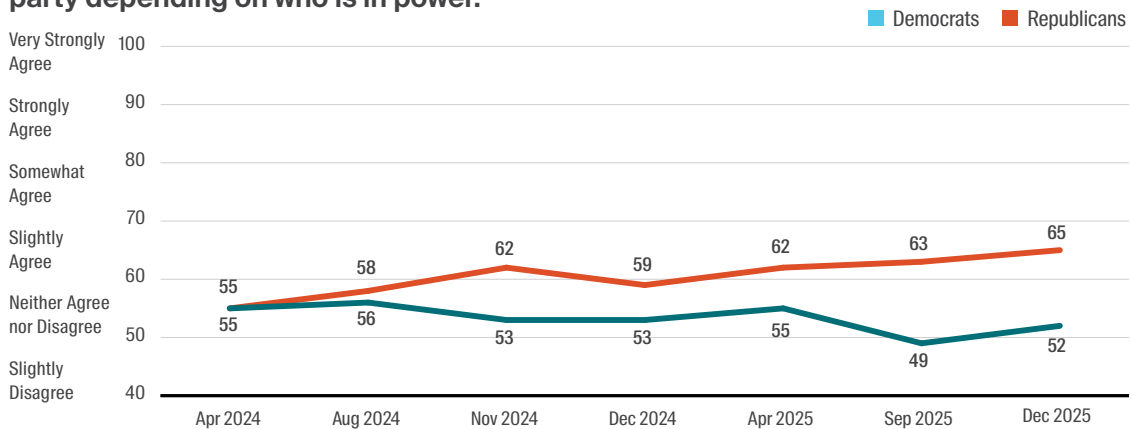


Mindset measured with multi-item scale. Sample item: "When government doesn't work well, it's because bad people are in charge."

FrameWorks Institute, nationally representative surveys, N = 10,527

We see a similar pattern with the *Democracy = US System of Government* mindset. Prior to the election, Democrats and Republicans endorsed the mindset at similar levels. Beginning with the November 2024 survey, Republicans have more strongly endorsed this mindset in every survey.

**Figure 10. Mean endorsement of *Democracy = US System* mindset varies slightly by party depending on who is in power.**



Mindset measured with multi-item scale. Sample item: "Democracy is what we do in the United States – nothing more and nothing less."

FrameWorks Institute, nationally representative surveys, N = 7,249

It makes sense that these ways of thinking are sensitive to who is in power. While the *Democracy = US System of Government* mindset is about the system, it is not surprising that people’s thinking about the system is colored by who represents the government in a given moment. Democracy tends to have positive associations, and when people like a new government, it makes sense that they would be more inclined to associate democracy with *that* government.

Similarly, while *Personalism* is a way of thinking about leaders and government generally, it makes sense that its application is colored by which leaders are in power. This mindset is often used to think about the *problems* with government. As a result, when people are unhappy about the leaders in power, they’re more likely to see leaders as the main or sole source of problems.

## C. Survey on Support for Democratic Reforms

In a survey in August 2025, we explored support for various structural reforms, including expansions of presidential power. We knew that people wanted to see changes to the system, and we wanted to understand what *type* of changes people support.

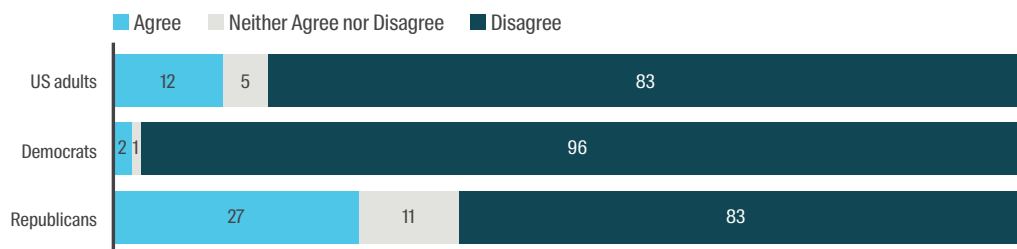
### FINDING 1

#### People overwhelmingly oppose expanding presidential power.

In the survey, we gauged participants’ support for increasing presidential power and removing constraints on it, and we found widespread opposition to this.<sup>3</sup>

#### Figure 11. Americans, including Republicans, overwhelmingly oppose expanding presidential power.

**Survey item:** “We should make it easier for presidents to do what they want without interference.”



FrameWorks Institute nationally representative survey, August 2025, N=300

While it is not surprising that Democrats opposed this, it is striking that such a large majority of Republicans—63 percent—also opposed it.

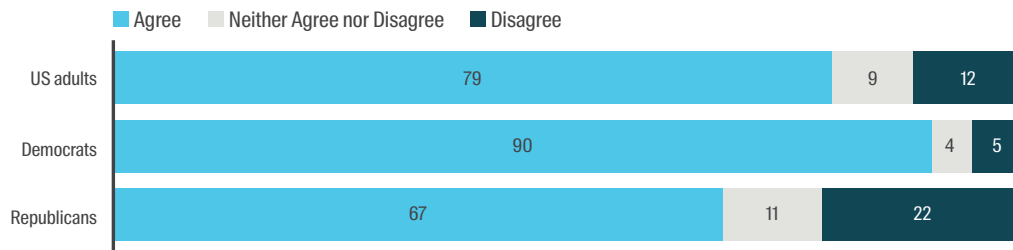
**FINDING 2**

**There is widespread support for reforms that would help democratize the system, including substantial—though not always majority—support from Republicans.**

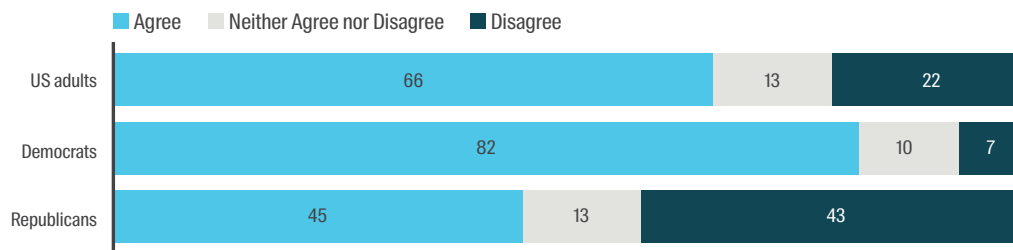
In the survey, we asked about a range of structural reforms that would make the system more democratic. We found that large majorities support reforms like term limits for the Supreme Court and electoral reforms to enable a multiparty system.

**Figure 12. There is broad support for democratic reforms.**

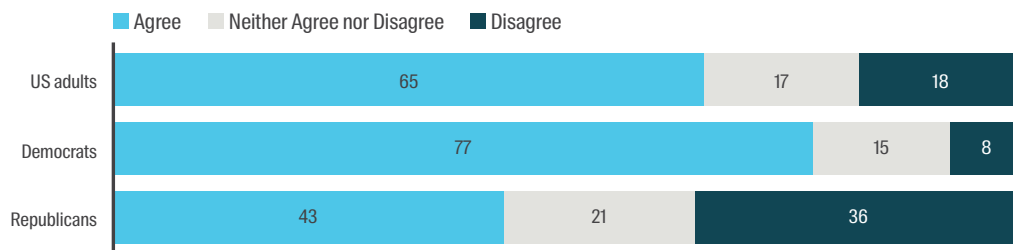
**Survey item:** “We should establish term limits for Supreme Court justices.”



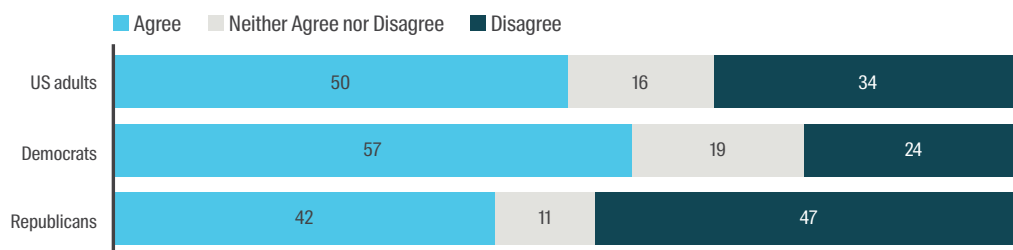
**Survey item:** “We should change how we elect presidents so the candidate with the most votes in the country as a whole wins.”



**Survey item:** “We should change the electoral system to make it possible for more parties to be represented in Congress and state legislatures.”



**Survey item:** “We need to update the Constitution to meet the needs of today.”



FrameWorks Institute, nationally representative survey, August 2025, N = 300

These results reinforce the finding that people want fundamental changes to the political system. They also indicate that people favor changes that would make the system more representative and responsive, rather than strengthening executive power. The desire for truly fundamental change is perhaps best reflected by the substantial support for *constitutional* change, which has not been meaningfully on the table for decades.

## D. Research on *System Is Rigged* Thinking and Framing

In a multiyear study, FrameWorks conducted deep-dive research to understand the *System Is Rigged* mindset and to test different ways of talking about rigged systems. This research provides foundational insights about framing the political system, problems with it, and needed solutions. It also offers insights into how to talk about connections between the political system and other systems in US society, especially the economic system.

### Research on *System Is Rigged* Thinking

#### FINDING 1

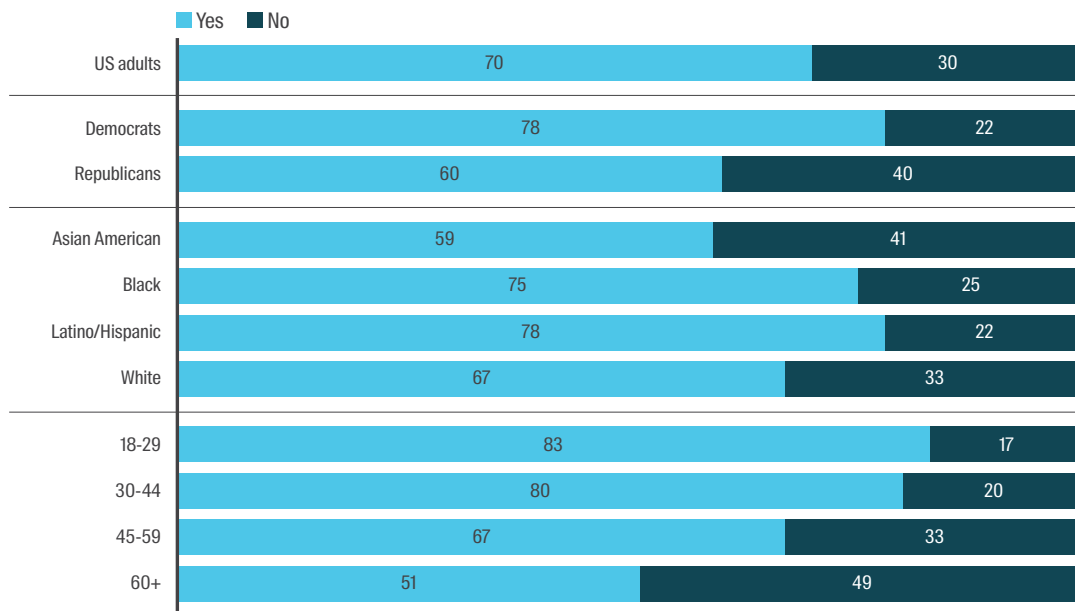
#### ***System Is Rigged* thinking is dominant across groups.**

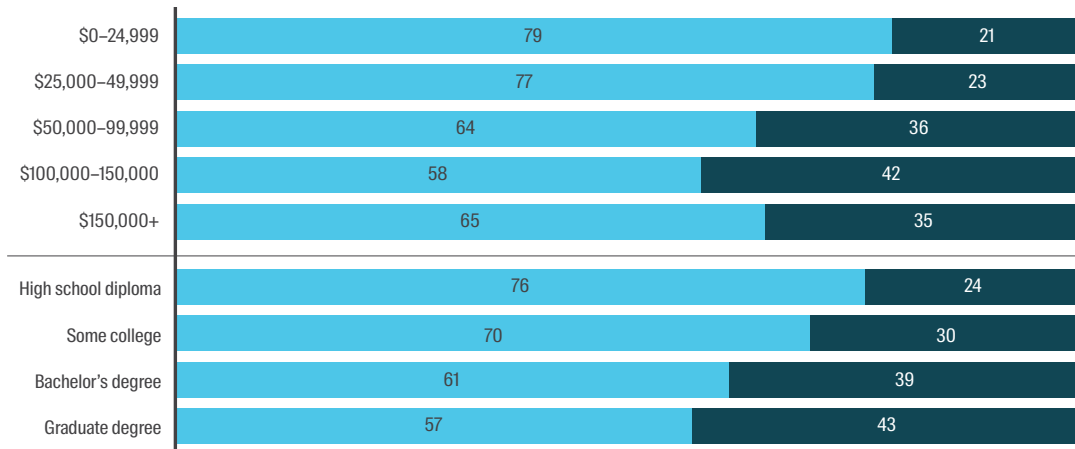
In the Culture Change Project’s regular focus groups, we have found ever-growing reliance on the *System Is Rigged* mindset. Participants across groups use the mindset to make sense of every system in US society.

The mindset is dominant across demographic groups and ideology, as results from a February 2026 survey indicate.

**Figure 13. Across groups, members of the US public agree that the system is rigged.**

Responses to the question “Do you think the system is rigged in America?”



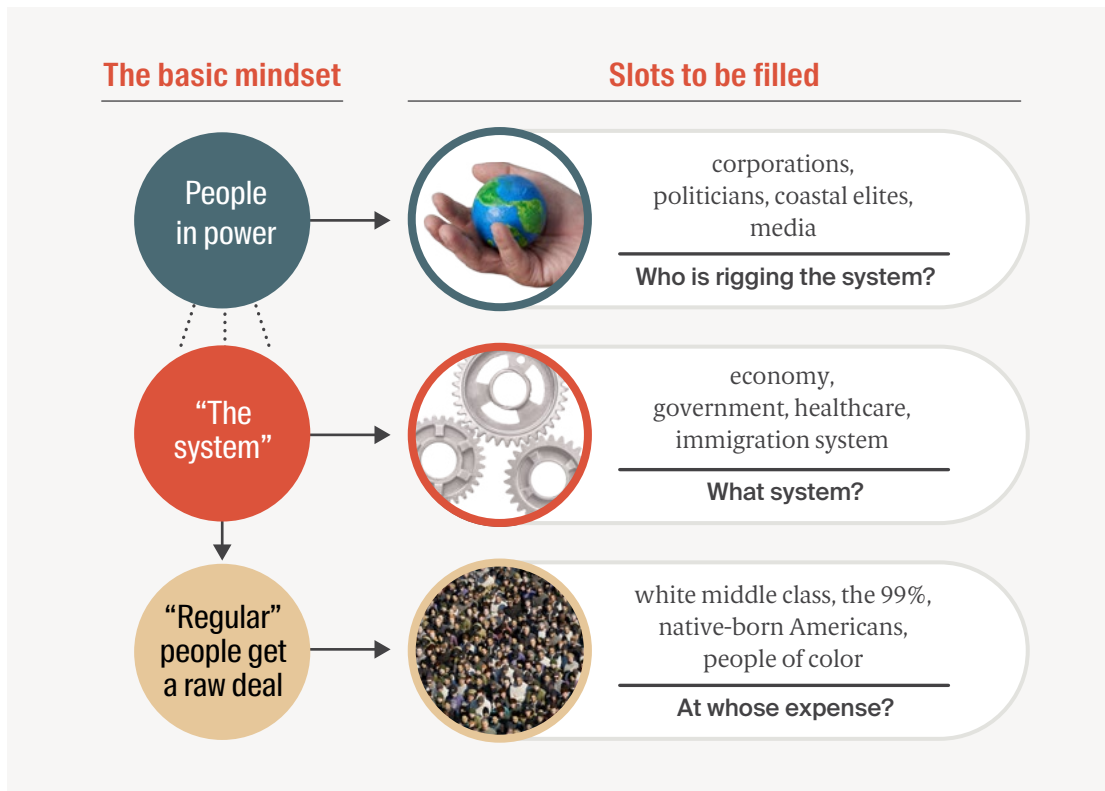


FrameWorks Institute, nationally representative survey + oversample for age and race, February 2026, N = 1,336

## FINDING 2

### The mindset is highly malleable.

The mindset is grounded in a clear assumption: The powerful few rig the system at the expense of regular people. Yet the slots in the mindset—Who is rigging the system? What system are we talking about? At whose expense?—can be, and frequently are, filled in different ways.



The powerful few are sometimes envisioned as corporations or wealthy people, while at other times they could be politicians, media or cultural elites (e.g., Hollywood), or social elites (e.g., professors). People alternately think of the regular people against whom the system is rigged as working people, the white middle class, native-born Americans, or Black people, among other options:

They're rigging our government, starting from the smallest—say, mayors—up to the president. The whole system, just from bottom to top, is rigged.

**Latina, woman, leans Republican, age 33—focus group, December 2022**

—

The system right now is entirely built to keep those tax-dodging billionaires [as] billionaires, and the rest of us can get two jobs and die in the gutter.

**White, man, Democrat, age 44—focus group, December 2022**

The mindset does not provide ways of understanding how the system is rigged—what those in power do to rig this system, how this affects the way the system works, and how this leads to disadvantage for regular people. This black-boxing of mechanisms contributes to the mindset's malleability. Because it's not clear how the system works or is influenced, the mindset itself does not constrain how the blanks can be filled in.

### FINDING 3

#### ***System Is Rigged* thinking opens space for critiques of undemocratic features of the political system. But it can also foster fatalism and create openings for authoritarianism.**

The *System Is Rigged* mindset brings systems and power into view more strongly and clearly than other dominant mindsets in American culture. The mindset helps people recognize that the political system is not only designed but also continually shaped by powerful groups with specific interests, like corporations. Although people don't have a strong sense of *how* specific institutions work, they use the mindset to think about different parts of government, like the [Supreme Court](#) and Congress:

With the pharmaceuticals, we shouldn't be paying so much for all this medicine, you know what I mean? But somebody in Con ... somebody somewhere is getting rich for it. Those people who rally for the higher cost I think are part of the problem. And yeah, they got elected in a democracy, but I don't think that's what we the people wanted, you know what I mean?

**Latina, woman, Republican, age 50—interview, January–February 2023**

While people don't always have a clear sense of how the system works, this mindset opens space for thinking about the system itself as the problem and can foster demand for democratic reforms.

Yet this mindset also opens space for fatalism, authoritarianism, and scapegoating. If the system is truly rigged, it is hard to imagine how we could *un-rig* it. Change *through* the system seems impossible, leaving people feeling disempowered and demotivated. Or worse—fatalism can open the door to authoritarianism. The recognition that those in power are entrenching a status quo that benefits themselves and thwarting needed changes can lead people to believe that the only path to

change is to give a strongman the power to remake society. In exposing the importance of power, the mindset can—when coupled with fatalism—lead people to want to bestow power on those who promise change, through whatever means.

In addition, the mindset is often used to scapegoat marginalized groups. Current right-wing narratives portray the system as rigged to benefit undocumented immigrants over “deserving” Americans or immigrants. This use of the mindset is echoed in the quote below from focus groups conducted in 2024:

We're spending a lot of our taxpayer dollars on [...] government aids and services for those people, and I think that some people might feel better because they're coming in here so freely, whereas other people had to wait 10 plus years and go through a process that everyone else had to go through to make it fair.

**Asian American, man, Republican, age 40—focus group, July 2024**

#### **FINDING 4**

### **The ambition-feasibility paradox is a key hurdle.**

The *System Is Rigged* mindset's ability to build support for structural change is complicated by the *ambition-feasibility paradox*: Solutions that are ambitious enough to unrig the system don't seem feasible, while solutions that are feasible don't seem ambitious enough to unrig the system.

While people see system rigging as a major problem, they struggle to envision how the system could be *unrigged*. The ambition-feasibility paradox short-circuits imagination about, much less support for, the kinds of transformative, structural solutions needed to actually unrig the political system.

## **Research on *System Is Rigged* Framing**

While the mindset is highly malleable, certain ways of *talking* about rigged systems can steer thinking toward its constructive potential and away from its dangers. *System Is Rigged* framing can—*when done well*—be a highly effective way to talk about political and economic systems.

It can be used to foster a sense of collective efficacy around system change, build understanding of how systems advantage some groups while disadvantaging others, counter scapegoating, decrease authoritarian attitudes, and build support for systemic change.

Research identified three core elements of effective *System Is Rigged* framing:

1. An effective value—*popular self-government* or *freedom from domination*<sup>4</sup>
2. An explanation of how the system is rigged that focuses more on *how* it's rigged and less on who rigs it
3. Solutions that match the scale at which the problem is explained

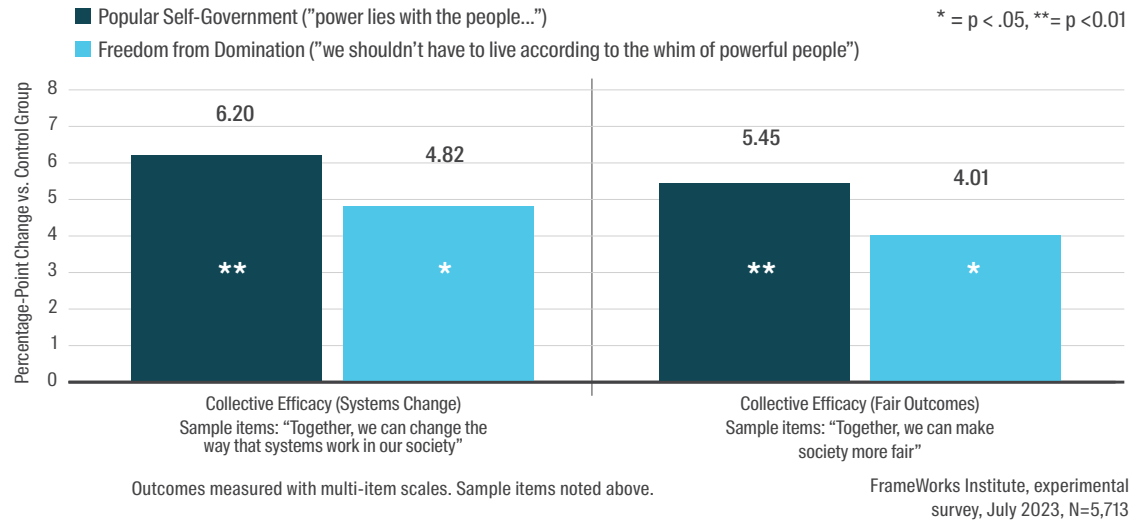
These recommendations emerge directly from extensive qualitative and quantitative research. We have provided a comprehensive discussion of research findings in a separate [report](#). Here, we briefly review these findings, highlighting key pieces of evidence that are critical for anti-authoritarian and political system reform efforts.

## FINDING 1

### The core democratic values of *popular self-government* and *freedom from domination* build collective efficacy around systems change.

In a survey experiment, we found that messages that coupled the values of *popular self-government* or *freedom from domination* with a critique of rigged systems avoided fatalism and actually boosted collective efficacy relative to the baseline of public opinion.

**Figure 14. Appealing to core democratic values increases people’s feeling that we can change systems and make them fairer.**



These messages began by appealing to these values, which reflect core democratic ideals. The first paragraphs of the messages read as follows:

**Popular self-government.** “As a society, we believe that the power lies with the people. We have the right to govern ourselves collectively, and nothing can happen without our consent. This means that what happens in society is up to us.”

**Freedom from domination.** “As a society, we believe that no one has a natural right to rule over others. We should all be free from domination by the powerful. This means that we shouldn’t have to live according to the whim of powerful people and do what they tell us to do.”

The messages then offered a critique of how our economic system and system of government are set up and called for taking back “economic and political power” and “the power to shape our own lives.”

Both values increased people’s sense of collective efficacy—the feeling that we, as a society, can solve our problems. They increased participants’ feelings of efficacy about our ability to *change systems*, as well as our ability to make society fairer. In a subsequent experiment, we tested two other values: *fairness* and *common good*. We found that *fairness* did not increase efficacy (though it did move some other outcomes) and *common good* did not move efficacy as much as the above values.<sup>5</sup>

## FINDING 2

### It's critical to fill in the blanks through explanation and to focus more on explaining how the system is rigged and less on who rigs it.

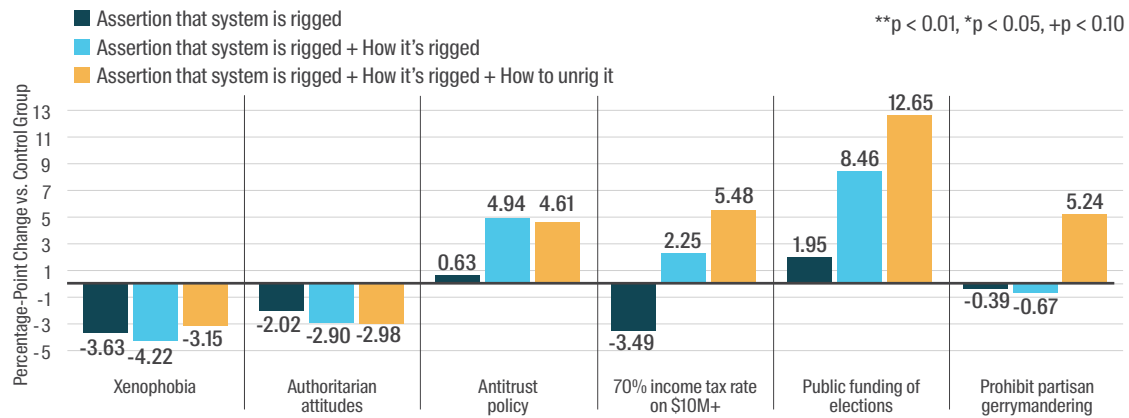
Because the *System Is Rigged* mindset is malleable, it's essential to fill in the slots in the mindset in specific ways. Left unfilled, people may fill in these blanks in problematic ways—for example, by suggesting that liberal elites are rigging the system to benefit immigrants at the expense of middle-class white people.

Our research shows that to productively channel this mindset, communicators need to make clear *who is rigging* the system, *what the system is*, and *what is happening as a result* of the system being rigged.

But filling in these blanks is not enough. Communicators must also provide a sense of *how* the system is rigged. We found that a message briefly explaining how our system of government enables corporations to exercise undue influence—and how it can be unrigged—was highly effective. The message connected the dots, showing how a rigged system undercuts worker power and lets employers avoid paying decent benefits, and called for solutions to unrig the system. The details of the message illustrated the broader point—that our political and economic systems are rigged to favor the powerful few at the expense of most people, but we can take steps to change the system.

In the experiment, we tested messages that layered on different components. The base message asserted simply that the system is rigged. The other messages layered on additional elements—a brief explanation of how systems are rigged and a short explanation of how systems can be unrigged.

**Figure 15. Explaining how the system is rigged decreases xenophobia and authoritarian attitudes and increases support for system reforms.**



FrameWorks Institute, experimental survey, October 2022, N=2,712

As the figure above shows, the message that combined a simple assertion that the system is rigged with explanations of both the problem and the solution decreased xenophobia and authoritarian attitudes. These attitudes are common targets of right-populist *System Is Rigged* narratives, which often scapegoat immigrants and justify authoritarian repression. This message also increased

support for policies that can begin to unrig the system, such as public funding for elections and prohibiting partisan gerrymandering.

Filling in the blanks and connecting the dots prevents people from reaching for alternative explanations they may have heard elsewhere. The populist right is telling a clear and coherent story that hinges on immigrants as the problem and repressive authority as the solution. To prevent people from reaching for this story to make sense of their experience of the system being rigged against them, communicators must provide an alternative story that fills in the blanks in a different way and makes the story stick with careful explanation. When we do this, it builds support for progressive change.

### **FINDING 3**

#### **Matching the scale of the problem and solution helps overcome the ambition-feasibility paradox.**

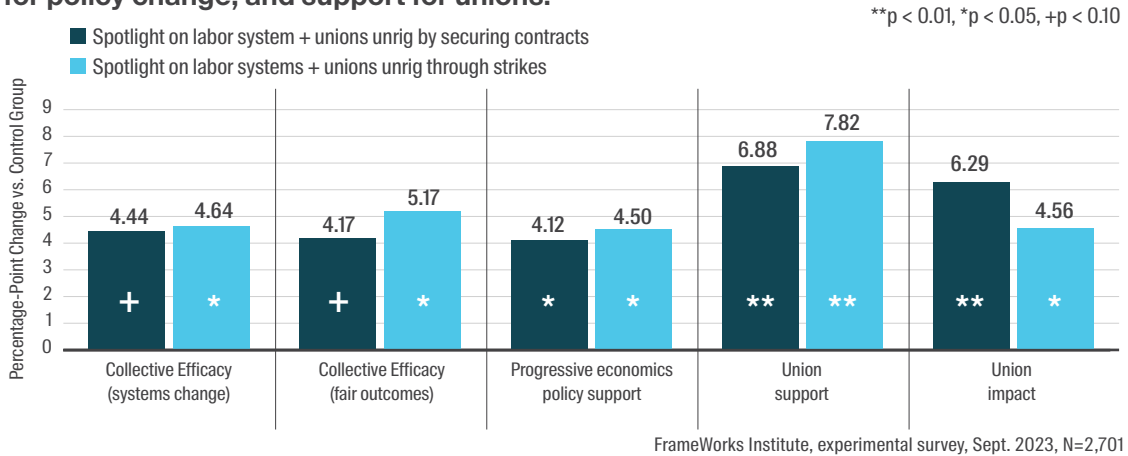
Our research indicates that we can address the ambition-feasibility paradox by matching the scale of the problem and solution. Communicators can do this in two ways:

1. *Spotlight* a specific aspect of a rigged system, explain how it works, and connect the dots to actions that can be taken to unrig that particular part of the system.
2. *Zoom out* and explain rigged systems on a broader scale and how transformative structural solutions could unrig the whole system.

The spotlight strategy has proven effective in a couple experiments: one on the labor system and the other on the tax system. In the experiment on the labor system, we tested two different messages that used the spotlight strategy. Both began by talking about how corporations rig the system against workers, and then explained how, by joining together in unions, working people can counter this power. One explanation focused on how unions help workers secure favorable contracts. The second focused on how strikes can help workers counter the power of corporations, using recent strikes at UPS and in Hollywood to illustrate.

As the figure below shows, both explanations increased collective efficacy about fixing problems in society and support for progressive policies, including pro-union and other economic policies (e.g., antitrust policies and raising the minimum wage). Both explanations also increased support for unions and understanding of unions' positive impacts.

**Figure 16. Spotlighting how unions can help unrig the system builds efficacy, support for policy change, and support for unions.**



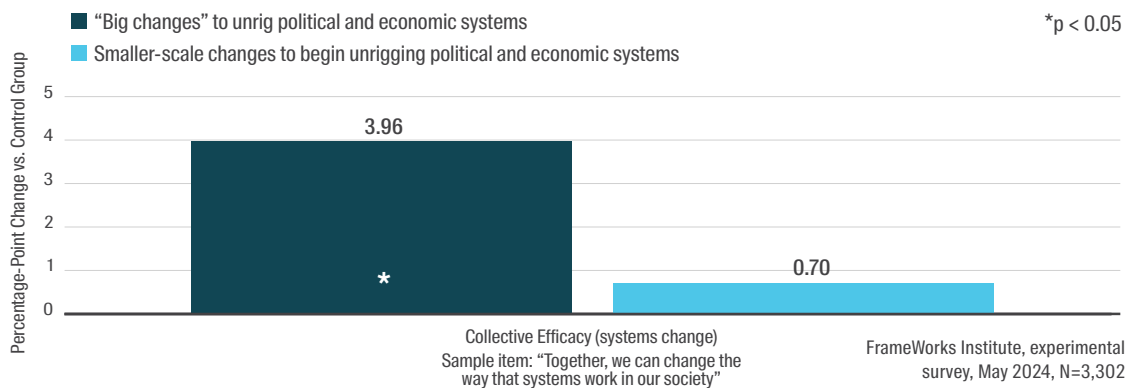
These messages overcame the ambition-feasibility paradox by spotlighting a specific aspect of “the system” and explaining how it is rigged and can be unrigged. We found similar results in the experiment on [unrigging the tax system](#), demonstrating the generalizability of the spotlight strategy.

Similarly, the zoom out strategy has proven effective in multiple experiments. In our original *System Is Rigged* research, we compared a message offering “big changes” to unrig political and economic systems with a message offering “changes that are in reach now.” The “big changes” mentioned in the message included two major structural changes to the political system:

- “Changing our electoral system so more political parties can win congressional seats would give everyone the power to be represented in government.”
- “Term limits for the Supreme Court would stop unelected judges from overturning popular policies.”

As the figure below illustrates, the message that zoomed out and talked about big changes to unrig the whole system increased participants’ sense of collective efficacy around changing systems, while the message focused on changes that are in reach now did not.

**Figure 17. Talking about how big, bold solutions can unrig systems increases people’s feeling that we can change systems.**



In the context of communicating about political system reform, it is notable that the message about big structural changes to the political system was more effective than the message about familiar, small-scale reforms, such as campaign finance reform and enforcing voting rights laws (see the appendix for tested messages).

As we discuss next, a later experiment on unrigging the tax system also found that the zoom out strategy worked, strengthening the evidence behind the strategy and indicating generalizability.

#### **FINDING 4**

### **The zoom out strategy is strengthened by emphasizing our power in numbers to demand and force change.**

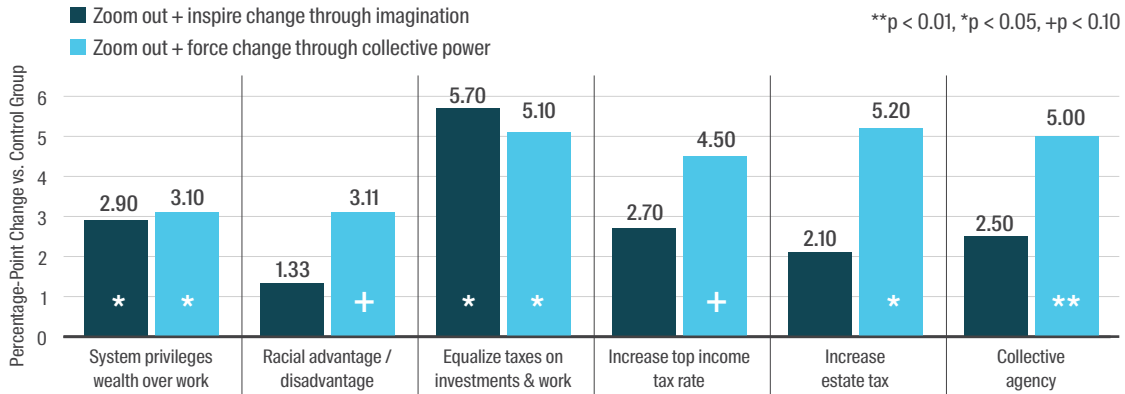
In our experiment on unrigging the tax system, we built on the research described in finding 3. We further refined the zoom out strategy by testing messages that offered different explanations of how big, transformative changes can happen. We know from qualitative research that people struggle to see *how* big changes can come about, and we hypothesized that providing a brief but clear answer to this might help.

The experiment, which was designed in collaboration with Liberation in a Generation, was designed for organizing contexts. It focused specifically on how organizers can engage movement-aligned people in target communities—especially young people, working people, Black people, and other people of color. It examined the ability of frames to increase people's sense of *collective agency*—the feeling that people can and want to contribute to collective efforts to reform the tax system.

We tested two messages offering different explanations of how change can come about. Both messages offered broad, overarching critiques of the tax system, explaining the various ways it is rigged, and major changes to the system that would transform how it works (from changing how we tax investments to baby bonds). The first message suggested that we can achieve change by developing and spreading a vision of a different system, inspiring change through imagination. The second suggested that we can achieve change by leveraging the power of the 99 percent to force those in power to change the system, forcing change through collective power.

As the figure below shows, we found that emphasizing our ability to force change through power in numbers was highly effective. It not only increased support for fundamental system reforms but also increased participants' sense of collective agency.

**Figure 18. Emphasizing that we can force change through power in numbers builds demand for making big changes to the tax system and fosters collective agency.**



FrameWorks Institute, experimental survey, March-April 2025, N=2,712 (sample constructed to look like organizers' target communities)

The experiment from the original research (discussed under finding 3) demonstrated the utility of the zoom out strategy for talking about political system change. While the follow-up experiment focused on the tax system, it provides general evidence about how to most effectively execute the zoom out strategy: emphasize our power through numbers.

#### **FINDING 5**

### **A historical explanation of racism as a rigged system builds collective efficacy around systems change and support for a more inclusive, multiracial democracy.**

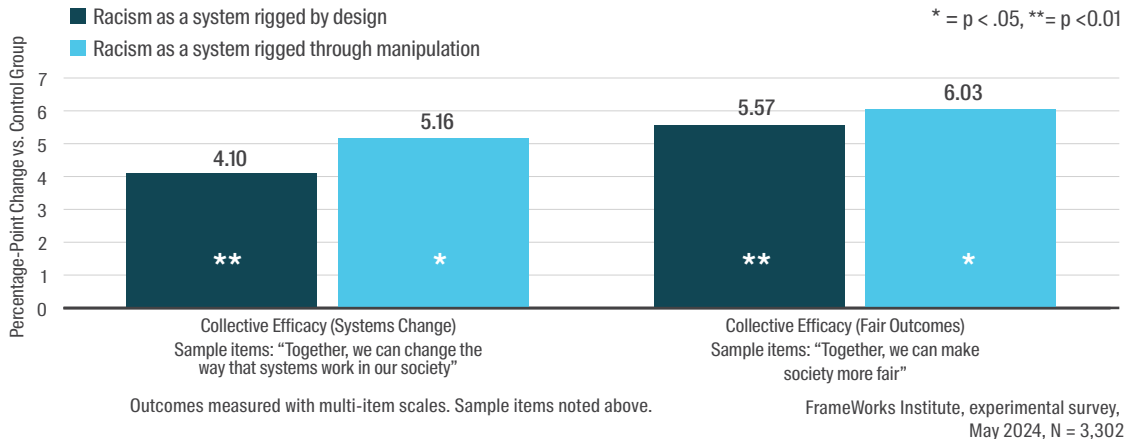
In a survey experiment, we found that a historical explanation of racism as a rigged system was highly effective. It increased collective efficacy around changing systems and making society fairer, increased support for inclusionary policies that would rebalance power, and decreased support for exclusionary policies.

We tested two messages about racism as a rigged system. Both led with a core democratic value and then talked about how our society is rigged “to give wealthy white people power over Black, Native, and other people of color.” One message characterized society as rigged “by design,” while the other talked about how wealthy white people are “twisting” and “manipulating” the system to benefit themselves.

The core of both messages was a short paragraph that traced how systems have been rigged throughout history, from a Constitution written by and for slaveholders and the stealing of land from Native Americans to employment systems and natural resource extraction. This explanation wove together the rigging of the political and economic systems.

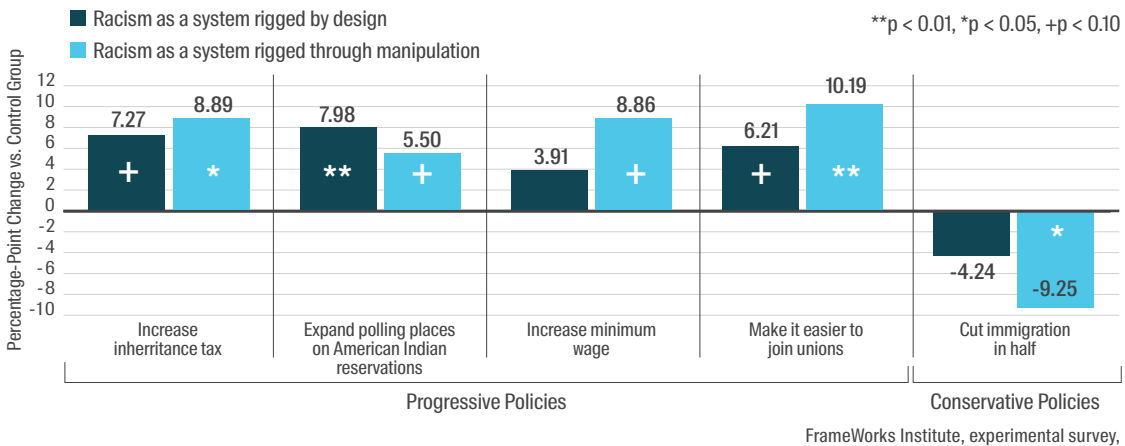
The figure below shows that both messages increased collective efficacy around systems change and creating a fairer society.

**Figure 19. Historical explanation of racism as a rigged system increase people's feeling that we can change systems and make them fairer.**



The messages were also effective on policy support, particularly with Republicans, as the figure below shows. Among Republican participants, both messages increased support for inclusionary policies while decreasing support for exclusionary ones.

**Figure 20. Historical explanation of racism as a rigged system increases Republicans' support for inclusionary policies and decreases support for**



These results indicate the power of historical explanation. They also suggest that highlighting the country's founding, as the explanations did, may be especially useful in making clear that systems were designed and can be redesigned.

This echoes findings about the power of historical explanation in other recent work. In a recently concluded [multiyear project on reframing work and labor in the United States](#), we found that providing a historical explanation of occupational segregation counters people's tendency to naturalize jobs—to explain differences in work as the result of supposed natural preferences, especially gender differences. Bringing history into the picture fosters a more systemic understanding of gendered and racialized aspects of work, helps people see how exploitation of workers results from how systems are designed, and builds support for strengthening labor unions. (For a full discussion, see [Reframing Work, Rebalancing Power: Three Framing Strategies that Connect Jobs with Economic Justice](#).)

## E. Ongoing Focus Groups—How Thinking Is Shifting in an Evolving Context

As part of the Culture Change Project, we conduct regular focus groups to understand how members of the US public are making sense of the evolving social, economic, and political context. Since 2020, we have regularly explored thinking about key developments and events in US society. Over the past year, we have deeply explored how people are understanding different aspects of rising authoritarianism. These groups have yielded several key findings.

### FINDING 1

#### **Concern about the *arbitrariness* of government action has pervaded public thinking since DOGE.**

In focus groups conducted since January 2025, we have found a regular and rising concern with the arbitrariness of the federal government's decisions and actions.

In February 2025, focus group participants articulated concern about and discomfort with DOGE's activities. Specifically, many expressed feelings of uncertainty, concerns about the unpredictability of government actions, and feelings of powerlessness and fear, as the following two quotes illustrate:

I've never been in America in a time where everyone, whether rich or poor, is uncertain. Even people who have the means to move to another country or to live a substantial, a good life, are still worried about it ... Another thing that worries me is not being able to do anything to change these things and being powerless to an extent ... You know, that kind of scares me. That uncertainty, that level of uncertainty.

**Black, man, Democrat, age 33—focus group, February 2025**

—

We're talking about millions, tens of millions of people affected by this. I feel like they're just kind of doing things a little bit too fast ... How much is it going to affect, because they might press a button and we can't go back, you know?

**White, man, independent, age 38—focus group, February 2025**

Here, we see participants grappling with the experience of domination under authoritarian actions. Although they did not explicitly talk about authoritarianism in February 2025, in expressing discomfort with the unpredictable use of executive power and feelings of powerlessness upon being subjected to this, they put their finger on a key feature of authoritarianism.

## FINDING 2

### By early 2026, a burgeoning understanding of the rule of law is emerging.

In focus groups conducted in February and June 2025, participants expressed discomfort with arbitrary government action, but they did not tie this discomfort to the government acting *outside the law* or *lawlessly*. By January–February 2026, participants were making this connection explicitly.

In the focus groups conducted in June 2025, we explored how people thought about the rule of law and due process in the context of immigration enforcement and the mobilization of troops and federal agents in California. We found that not only were most people, unsurprisingly, largely unfamiliar with these terms, but people talked little about the *government* violating the law. Participants were concerned about *how* immigration enforcement was being conducted. Many were uncomfortable with masked agents grabbing people off the street. But their associations with *the law* had little to do with the *rule* of law. On the contrary, when thinking about the law, participants tended to equate the law with criminal law and assumed that the only people who violate law are ordinary criminals.

**Researcher:** When someone mentions “the law,” what kinds of things come to mind?

**Participant 1:** Police. (Latino, man, independent, age 20)

**Participant 2:** I would say it’s all about, you know, punishing citizens.

**White, woman, Republican, age 46—focus group, June 2025**

In January–February 2026, we conducted another round of focus groups, focusing on ICE. In these sessions, participants talked not merely of uncertainty and unpredictability but of ICE being “out of control.” They compared the agency to the Mafia or the Gestapo and highlighted that the it was acting outside the law:

**Researcher:** What’s your view on what’s happening in Minnesota?

**Participant:** It’s out of hand. [...] We have the Stasi, the Gestapo, actions that are underway. Heavy-handed. I’m not anti-immigration laws. I think they should be enforced. Respectfully, lawfully. What we don’t need is a bunch of gangsters beating up on innocent people that have not committed crime. And that seems to be the target right now.

**Latino, man, Democrat, age 69—focus group, February 2026**

Increasingly, members of the public are finding words to talk about violations of the rule of law, tying this to everyday experiences of subjection to arbitrary power under authoritarianism.

### FINDING 3

## A more systemic understanding of authoritarianism may be emerging.

One of the challenges in cultivating understanding of the authoritarian threat is the tendency to individualize problems at *every* level. For example, people tend to understand problems with law enforcement as problems with individual officers. Historically, people have mostly understood violence by law enforcement as the result of a few bad apples, rather than as a systemic problem.

In our new research on ICE, we are seeing a different model emerge. While authoritarianism is personalized *at the very top*—individuals in power are understood as the ultimate problem—the *effects* of government directives are being understood systemically. ICE is primarily understood as an agency that, as a whole, has been ordered to act lawlessly, not as a group of individuals that includes some bad apples. This is a critically important development, as it opens space for recognizing the ways in which the government as a whole is being transformed. Comparisons to organized groups like the Mafia or the Gestapo, for example, indicate an attribution of *collective, systemic* action that we have not seen previously.

**Researcher:** I'm curious what [you] think about ICE's purpose. What is ICE for?

**Participant:** For me, it's immigration control. But I don't think that's what they're doing. It's more like a Mafia or something was going on. Like a mob.

**White, man, Republican, age 54—focus group, February 2026**

The public has a limited understanding of specific features of political institutions such as Congress, the presidency, and the courts. As a result, more systemic understanding of lawless government does not automatically generate opposition to practices such as the Supreme Court's use of the shadow docket or executive orders that have no constitutional basis. Yet this idea that the government as a whole, or whole parts of it, are acting lawlessly likely makes it easier to draw these connections than it was before.

### FINDING 4

## People often trace cost-of-living challenges and other daily economic problems to a lack of government responsiveness.

In the focus groups we've conducted over the past few years, participants have consistently expressed widespread concern about the cost of living and the economy. Focus on the cost of living became salient at the height of inflation and has remained so. Participants frequently complain about the economy and difficulty affording housing, health care, and other critical goods and services.

This, of course, echoes findings from a large body of polling and public opinion research (for example, see this [New York Times/Siena poll](#)). While much has been made of Americans' concerns about affordability, the widespread sense that the government *could and should* be doing something about it is often left out of the conversation. People frequently see the government's failures to address their needs either as a sign that leaders simply don't care or that the system is rigged against them. The following quote typifies this line of thinking:

The president we have now, the politicians protecting the rich—they're not taking care of us. They're not taking care of the middle class. They're not taking care of the poor. They're taking care of their own people. So yeah, they're going to have all these tax cuts and tax breaks. But what about us? What breaks are we getting? You know, our pay is going higher, but look at our food. I don't know where you guys are at, but eggs out here, it's like \$10 for a carton of eggs.

**Latina, woman, Democrat, age 52—focus group, February 2025**

The link people draw between their daily economic concerns and lack of government responsiveness creates an opening to make the case *for* democracy: A more responsive, representative system would deliver what people need. It also creates an opening to make the case *against* authoritarianism: A government that is not accountable to the people stops worrying about what people need, as leaders act to benefit themselves and their friends instead.

# An Emerging Framing Strategy

The research findings described above provide the foundation for a new strategy for framing democracy in a time of rising authoritarianism. This strategy can build understanding of and resistance to authoritarian actions now while also building support for changes to the political system in the future.

This strategy is grounded in the deep research base reviewed above. The core elements of the strategy have been thoroughly tested in our research on talking about rigged systems. We have tailored and adapted the strategy using our deep research on mindsets about democracy and the political system and our findings of how thinking is evolving and adapting in response to the changing context.

The strategy laid out below—like any framing strategy—relies on interpretation of findings and judgment in their application, as we bring together insights from different streams of work. In light of the ever-evolving context and the need for further research in certain areas, we consider this to be an emerging framing strategy. Yet its deep grounding in research is clear.

## **We Can Connect Resistance to Political System Change**

It's easy to think of resistance to authoritarianism and changes to the political system as separate concerns. Our research suggests that we can—and probably should—use the same frames to talk about authoritarianism and the need for a better political system. Because common mindsets undergird people's thinking about existing problems with the political system and the misuse of governmental power right now, we can use the same frames to talk about both, including the relationship between them.

Using common frames to talk about authoritarianism and political system reform has two key benefits. First, if the narratives of the anti-authoritarian and democracy reform movements echo one another, it will amplify their effects, as people consistently hear the same refrain. Second, drawing links between resistance and longer-term reform strengthens each effort.

Countering authoritarianism in the present requires focusing on what's wrong right now, but it's critical to help people see that they don't have to choose between a status quo that wasn't working for them and acceding to authoritarianism. By giving people a vision of a better, more democratic system, we respond to their deep desire for change while giving them a democratic alternative to achieving change through the violent, arbitrary, and unconstrained exercise of power.

Building support for changes to the political system means focusing on long-standing problems with the system, but connecting to people's lived experience—including the very real and present experience of authoritarianism—is critical. By connecting to people's immediate concerns and drawing through lines from resistance to system change, we can motivate engagement and prevent structural reforms from seeming like a distraction from the pressing business of the moment.

# Framing Recommendations

Below, we outline a set of framing recommendations for democracy that can be used in both anti-authoritarian resistance and structural democracy reform. For each recommendation, we describe what to do, explain why it works (briefly noting key connections to research findings), and provide guidance about how to do it, highlighting how the frames can be flexed differently for anti-authoritarian efforts and structural democracy reform.

## RECOMMENDATION 1

### Appeal to the animating ideals behind democracy, rather than making democracy the value.

**What to do.** Appeal to the values of *popular self-government*, *freedom from domination*, and *real representation*:

- **Popular self-government.** We, the people, have a right to govern ourselves.
- **Freedom from domination.** We shouldn't have to live according to the whims of powerful people.
- **Real representation.** We deserve a government that truly represents us.

Appeal to these animating ideals that articulate what democracy is about, rather than appealing to *democracy* as the value to be promoted.

When talking about *the people*, make sure to paint an expansive, inclusive picture. Excluding some groups from the shared *we* is a familiar authoritarian strategy. It's critical to make clear that "we, the people" are diverse and that all members of the political community are equally included.

#### *The values lexicon: words and phrases that cue these values*

We can use a wide range of words and phrases to articulate these values. We don't need to use the terms *popular self-government*, *freedom from domination*, or *real representation* at all if they don't feel right for the audience or context.

Here's a starter list of language we can use to convey key aspects of these ideals:

<i>Popular self-government</i>	<i>Freedom from domination</i>	<i>Real representation</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ We, the people</li><li>■ Power lies with the people.</li><li>■ The right to govern ourselves</li><li>■ What happens in society is up to us.</li><li>■ Consent</li><li>■ Popular will</li><li>■ Self-government</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Free from arbitrary whim</li><li>■ Living according to the whims of powerful people</li><li>■ Being under the thumb of the powerful</li><li>■ No one has a natural right to rule over others.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ We all deserve to be represented.</li><li>■ We're not genuinely being represented.</li><li>■ Accountable to our needs and wishes</li><li>■ Carrying out our wishes</li><li>■ Responding to our needs</li><li>■ The government should truly represent us.</li></ul>

**Why it works.** If we appeal to democracy as the value that we're looking to promote or advance, we inevitably activate a range of ideas. That is because, as we identified in our research, people can understand *democracy* in a range of ways. If we simply appeal to the value of *democracy*, people will inevitably interpret what we're saying in different ways that may or may not be what we intend.

By appealing to the ideals that animate democracy—such as *popular self-government*, *freedom from domination*, and *real representation*—we ground our communications in specific understandings of democracy. By invoking the right values, we prevent free-floating associations, channeling thinking toward more robust models of democracy—the *Popular* and *Representation* models identified in our research—which move us beyond a focus on the simple existence of elections or inherited institutions and point us toward the deeper ideals that our system should realize.

These values connect to specific experiences and felt aspirations identified in the research. They bring democracy out of the clouds, helping people recognize it as a concrete, pressing need, not an abstraction. *Freedom from domination* connects to the widespread experience of being subject to the whims of those in power. *Popular self-government* connects to people's ongoing experience that the government imposes decisions on them rather than responding to what they want or need. The ideal of *real representation* contrasts with people's ongoing experience of elected leaders not really or truly representing them because these leaders don't act to advance their interests, share their identities, or carry out their wishes. In different ways, these values speak to people's long-standing experiences with a flawed political system and their current experiences of authoritarian uses of power.

The research shows that by appealing to values grounded in ideas of collective power, we build a sense of collective efficacy around changing this reality. Tapping into the idea that the people have the power can help people see that *we* can change the systems that are not currently working for us. The idea that we shouldn't be subject to the whims of powerful people reminds people that we don't have to accept what's happening and can stand up and reclaim the power to shape our own lives.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

### **Affirm the need for a fundamentally different system that better realizes democratic ideals.**

**What to do.** Acknowledge the failure of our political system to realize the values of *popular self-government*, *freedom from domination*, and *real representation*. Validate people's sense that the system isn't working—and has not been working—the way it should. Position yourself as a proponent of change, not a protector of the status quo.

Explain failures as *system* failures, rather than reducing all problems to failures of political leadership. It's important, of course, to criticize leaders, but if we focus *only* on leaders, this places the system out of view. Responding to rising authoritarianism and building support for structural change requires bringing the system into the story.

### How to do it:

- Affirm the need for a better system.
- Position yourself as a proponent of change, not a defender of the status quo.
- Use the core democratic values of *popular self-government*, *freedom from domination*, and *real representation* to explain how the system has failed us.
- Point toward a better system as a third option. We don't have to choose between a system that isn't working and placing ourselves at the whim of an autocrat.
- Start with the need to change the system and bring in specific reforms as a second step (see recommendation 4 below).

**Why it works.** Positioning ourselves as proponents of change is critical to avoid seeming out of touch. The research shows a widespread desire for fundamental changes to the political system and systems in society generally. If people don't see us offering a path to meaningful change, we risk alienating them. As our research has found, when people see the system as rigged but don't see any path to changing it, this can open the door for authoritarianism. If the unconstrained use of executive power seems like the only way to change a system that's not working, people may acquiesce to it, even if they don't like specific actions.

Making *the system* the object of change is important for both anti-authoritarian efforts and structural democracy reform:

- **Anti-authoritarian efforts.** It might seem misguided for anti-authoritarian framing to talk about long-standing problems with our political system. Shouldn't we instead focus on the illegitimate actions of leaders *right now*? This is a false choice. We can and should do both.

If we leave long-standing problems with the system out of the picture, we run into two problems. First, if we call out leaders' actions as violations of existing norms and laws *without* offering an alternative vision of change, we risk being seen as defenders of a status quo that people do not like. Second, if we make the problem all about leaders, this will activate the *Personalism* mindset described above, leading people to assume that government actions are a direct outgrowth of leaders' preferences. This risks a self-defeating cycle: Authoritarian leaders are voted out, and pro-democracy leaders come to power. Because of problems with the system, these pro-democracy leaders cannot deliver on their promises. But people assume that they are not delivering because they don't want to and conclude that they were lying all along. This leaves space for authoritarian leaders to come back to power. As authoritarians consolidate power, this cycle becomes a spiral. Making *the system* the problem offers another way.

If we keep the focus only on leaders, we leave people with unappealing choices: They either make do with leaders who always fall short on their promises or accede to authoritarianism. Focusing on the system points toward a third alternative: changing the system to actually realize our values.

- **Structural democracy reform.** Starting with the need to reform the political system as a whole, rather than focusing immediately and narrowly on specific reforms (e.g., the filibuster or jurisdiction stripping), is critical for two reasons.

First, it connects to people's dissatisfaction with the system as a whole. People are unhappy with the system, but, as we discussed in the research findings section of this report, most people don't have a clear sense of what's wrong with specific institutions. Starting with problems with the system as a whole is a way to connect to people's feelings and shared experience that the system is letting them down.

Second, focusing on the system makes it easier to bring in animating ideals, rather than getting stuck in details of institutional design. Our research on talking about rigged systems shows the power of starting with a clear and plain diagnosis of how *the system as a whole* fails to realize the core values it is supposed to embody. As we discuss in recommendation 4, we can bring specific reforms and institutions into the picture as a second step.

### RECOMMENDATION 3

#### **To expose what's wrong with the unconstrained use of power, draw on core values—especially *freedom from domination*.**

**What to do.** After affirming the need for change, explain why the unconstrained exercise of power isn't the right way to bring it about. Use core democratic values to bring into relief what's wrong with these uses of power:

- **Freedom from domination.** When the government acts like it's above the law, this places us under the thumb of those in power. This needs to stop. We shouldn't be at the whim of anyone.
- **Real representation.** In acting outside the law, our leaders have stopped even trying to represent us. They're doing what they want, not acting on our behalf. We need to hold them accountable by making clear that they need to represent us.
- **Popular self-government.** When those in power do whatever they want, they're ignoring what the people want. We need to take back our power. We, the people, decide what happens. They don't get to decide for *us*.

The value of *freedom from domination* is particularly well suited to addressing the problems with unconstrained power, though other values may be useful in particular contexts. For example, when the [National Guard is mobilized](#) against the wishes of local or state leaders, it makes sense to draw on the ideal of *representation*.

### How to do it:

- Draw on the lexicon of values language to articulate what’s wrong (see recommendation 1 above).
- Use the value that best matches your needs:
  - When talking about violations of the rule of law and actions outside of authority, appeal to *freedom from domination*: “We’re at the whim” of the government. They’ve placed us “under their thumb.” Their “unpredictable” uses of power make it impossible to know what to expect.
  - When talking about the imposition of policies over the objections of communities and states, appeal to *popular self-government* and *representation*: The government is “acting against our will.” We “aren’t being represented.” The government is acting “unaccountably” and “without regard to what we want.”
- Talk about authoritarianism as acting outside or above the law. This taps into the increasing sense that the government is acting lawlessly, without feeding into familiar law and order thinking and concerns about criminals. (See our [guide on framing ICE](#) for more on this.)

**Why it works.** These core democratic ideals provide a through line. They help people understand the problems with the political system and envision what a better system should aspire to. They also help put into words what is so terrible about the present.

As we discussed above, in the focus groups we have conducted since January 2025, we have found widespread dissatisfaction with *how* the government is acting. Even when people support specific policies, many are unhappy with the way the government is exercising power. Sometimes this reflects genuine horror and sometimes mere discomfort. Yet a large majority of people share the sense that *how* power is being used is problematic.

People sometimes struggle to articulate what, exactly, is wrong. They frequently draw on language related to the arbitrariness of decisions—those in power are acting unpredictably or chaotically, they’re out of control, we don’t know what they’ll do next. In using this language, they’re reaching for the concept of domination—being subject to the whim of someone in power.

Echoing and expanding on this language resonates with people’s experience of the moment while connecting to a fundamental democratic value: In a democracy, we should be free from the domination of others, not subject to arbitrary power. And by naming that this experience is due to the government acting “outside” or “above” the law, we connect to the burgeoning understanding of the rule of law recently identified in focus groups.

The values are thus useful in two ways. First, they provide language that helps people make sense of what they are experiencing and why it is wrong. Second, they offer a through line connecting people’s long-standing frustrations with the political system and their aspirations for a better one. By connecting resistance to the hope for a better future, they help overcome fatalism and foster action.

#### RECOMMENDATION 4

### Bring institutions into view and explain how they shape outcomes. Situate leaders in institutional context.

**What to do.** After highlighting problems with the political system as a whole, bring specific institutions into view and explain why they're not working the way they should. If the main goal is countering authoritarianism, this means unpacking how institutions are being manipulated, destroyed, or used in violation of core democratic values. If the main goal is structural reform, this means unpacking how existing institutions violate these values.

When talking about individual leaders, make sure to situate them within their institutional context, highlighting their roles and positions within the system.

#### How to do it:

- Talk about specific institutions—but only after talking about the broader violation of *popular self-government, freedom from domination, or real representation*.
- In making the case for structural reforms, talk about problems with specific institutions as examples of the political system's general failure to realize these values.
- In countering authoritarianism, frame any specific institutional abuse, manipulation, or destruction as an example of more general, systematic violations of democratic values.
- When criticizing leaders, highlight how institutions have enabled bad actions or prevented good ones whenever possible.

**Why it works.** While people are deeply dissatisfied with *the system*, specific political institutions remain largely out of view. As we discussed in the research findings section above, most people have a thin understanding of specific institutions. As a result, the specific ways the system—or authoritarian abuses of it—violate democratic values are not readily apparent.

As discussed above, people increasingly recognize the problems with the unconstrained exercise of power at the community level (e.g., ICE's actions), but they have a harder time recognizing more distant abuses of power, like unconstitutional executive orders. Similar challenges apply in building support for specific structural reforms. People have lost faith in the Supreme Court and increasingly [see it as part of a rigged system](#). Yet people lack a strong sense of the Court's powers and procedures—from judicial review to the use of the shadow docket—which makes it hard to see the rationale for specific reforms. When we get to the level of specific institutions, it's easy for reforms to feel abstract, technical, or disconnected from people's concerns.

We avoid these problems by starting with the system as whole and then introducing specific institutional failures as examples of these broader issues. By appealing to core democratic values and starting with problems with the system as a whole, we create an architecture in which specific institutional issues can be seen as symptoms of a broader problem. Given people's thin understanding of institutions, if we start with specific institutional failures, we're likely to lose people because these problems will seem disconnected from people's lived experience. But after setting the broader frame, discussions of specific institutions become *illustrations* of problems

people understand and can relate to. Once we've set this broader frame, connecting the dots is all that's needed. Our research on talking about rigged systems shows that a quick explanation of how institutions are working and how they violate core values suffices.

By connecting the dots and explaining how institutions violate core values, we also counter efforts to scapegoat marginalized groups. As our research shows, we can decrease xenophobia—which current right-wing narratives are trying to foment—by affirming people's sense that the system is working against them and then explaining how, in reality, the system advantages the powerful few at the expense of most people. This explanation punctures bogus narratives that pin widely felt problems on immigrants.

Situating leaders in institutional contexts keeps the systemic character of problems in view. When criticizing authoritarian actions, highlighting how institutions are being manipulated and how the design of institutions enables such manipulation helps us escape the spiral of *Personalism* discussed earlier (see recommendation 2). When making the case for structural reform, tracing leaders' unpopular actions to institutional incentives and constraints helps people see the need to change those institutions.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 5**

### **Explain how the political system—or the use of power outside the law—shapes everyday economic realities.**

**What to do.** Trace everyday economic struggles, like low wages and the high cost of living, to the political system's failure to realize the values of *popular self-government*, *freedom from domination*, and *real representation*.

When making the case against authoritarian encroachment, draw connections between the arbitrary and unconstrained use of power and the cost-of-living concerns that are at the front of most people's minds. Highlight how leaders who act outside the law and without accountability harm people's day-to-day economic reality. Explain that when leaders stop being accountable to us, they have little reason to address pressing concerns like the cost of living.

In making the case for structural democracy reform, highlight how the existing system—even when leaders abide by its rules—fails to respond to what we want and need. Explain how, in blocking popular policies, the current system fails to address people's everyday economic needs. Talk about how the system, because it too often represents corporations rather than regular people, does what corporations need but fails to deliver what *we* need.

#### **How to do it:**

- Trace economic hardships to systemic failures to realize core democratic values.
- When talking about rising authoritarianism, explain how lack of accountability means that leaders act to benefit themselves and their friends, rather than meeting people's needs.
- When talking about the need for structural reform, explain how the system thwarts responsiveness to economic needs.

- Explain how the system's design leads to disregard for widespread economic concerns—for example, by blocking popular policies, giving powerful interests too much influence, or leaving too many of us without meaningful representation of our views and interests.

**Why it works.** Helping people see the material impact of democracy is motivating. As described above, in focus groups, participants frequently complain about the economy and difficulty affording housing, health care, and other critical goods and services. This echoes findings from a large body of polling and public opinion research. Linking democracy with these pressing economic concerns prevents it from seeming like an abstract or esoteric issue and brings home its day-to-day stakes.

There is currently a lot of talk about affordability and a debate about whether to talk about economic issues *or* democracy. Yet we don't have to choose between talking about democracy and the price of eggs or gas.

In fact, our research indicates that people readily connect the political and economic systems. People widely recognize that the powerful few wield power across both systems. And they often recognize that their daily economic struggles are the result of the fact that the government helps those in power rather than responding to what they want and need.

Whether we're talking about authoritarianism or making the case for changes to the political system, linking democracy to everyday economic challenges ensures connection to the daily concerns that are at the top of many people's minds.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 6**

### **Talk about history to bring design into view and raise the possibility of redesigning the system.**

**What to do.** Invoke moments from our history—moments of founding, re-founding, and fundamental reform—to help people see that our political system was created and that it can be changed. Highlight how people created or changed the system during these periods to help people see that we made and can remake the system today.

Frame the current system as outdated and in need of updating. Highlight how our system's features are the product of the time when they were created. Talk about the need to update them to reflect the society we are today and the society we want to be.

#### **How to do it:**

- Use moments of founding and major changes to the political system to highlight that we, the people, designed the system and can redesign it.
- Frame the current system as outdated and talk about how it doesn't meet the needs of society today.
- Name specific ways the system reflects the ideas and circumstances of earlier times—from social norms to technology.

**Why it works.** When people think about the creation of our system—particularly at the founding of the country—it brings into view the fact that the system was *designed*. This helps to puncture the assumption that the system simply and inevitably is as it is—that it’s immutable and set in stone. Our research suggests that historical explanations highlighting the country’s founding can increase people’s sense of efficacy about changing systems—their sense that our systems *can* be redesigned—and build support for reforms that would make the system more inclusive and just.

Talking about history illuminates how the political system fails to realize our values. While people tend to think positively about constitutional *ideals*, they sometimes see the Constitution as outdated, as discussed above. While people don’t understand exactly *how* the norms of the founding era are reflected in the system, they can, at times, recognize that the system must somehow reflect the biases of a society that practiced slavery and didn’t recognize women as equals.

### RECOMMENDATION 7

## Emphasize people’s power to say *no* (now) and to change the system (later).

**What to do.** Stress that *we* have the power to decide what happens to us. We can say no and stand up to authoritarianism now. And we have the collective power to change the system.

Tie collective action to the values of *popular self-government* and *freedom from domination*. We have the right to rule ourselves, and what happens is up to us. When our government isn’t doing what we want, we can change how it operates. And when the powerful put us under their thumb, we should stand up and take back our power.

### How to do it:

- Emphasize our collective power to make change. We can change our circumstances and systems.
- Talk about how this power lies in our strength in numbers. By coming together, we can force change.
- Invoke history to help people see the possibility of change. People before us stood up to domination and changed the system, and we can too (see recommendation 6).

**Why it works.** It’s easy to feel fatalistic about our situation. As we discussed above, the widely shared view that the system is rigged often leads to pessimism because problems seem too big to fix. On top of these long-standing problems, we’re now seeing sweeping changes to society despite their unpopularity. With troops and masked agents in the streets, it’s easy to despair.

Emphasizing our collective power reminds people that what happens in our society—including the very systems we live in—is within our control. Our research indicates that this reminder fosters a spirit of collectivity and solidarity and that emphasizing our power in numbers builds a sense of collective agency.

Here, too, values provide a through line. The ideals of *popular self-government* and *freedom from domination*, which emphasize collective power in different ways, help articulate what’s wrong with current systems, make clear our power to act now, and envision the future we want.

## RECOMMENDATION 8

### Offer (systemic) solutions that match the scale of the (systemic) problem.

**What to do.** Provide solutions that are adequate in scale to match the problems you've identified. It's easy to *not* do this. Too frequently, communicators highlight big problems and then suggest small-scale solutions that don't suffice to solve them.

You can match the scale of problem to solution by going big or by spotlighting a specific aspect of the broader problem:

- 1. Spotlight strategy.** When you've homed in on a specific problem—a specific institution within the system that's not well designed or that's being bent or destroyed by the misuse of power—all that's needed is a solution that fixes this specific problem. Make sure to connect the dots to help people understand how the solution fixes the specific problem you've focused on. Frame this solution as a step toward solving bigger problems with the system.
- 2. Zoom out strategy.** When you've kept the focus on the whole system, offering multiple examples of how the system violates core democratic values, make sure to offer bold, transformative solutions. Don't be shy—if you're going to talk about a big problem, you need to offer bold solutions. This means offering solutions that will prevent authoritarianism and, ultimately, transform the system to be more democratic.

#### How to do it:

- When using the spotlight strategy:
  - Identify a particular part of the political system.
  - Explain what's wrong with it—how it violates core democratic values.
  - Offer a solution that genuinely solves that specific problem.
  - Talk about this solution as a first step toward solving broader problems.
- When using the zoom out strategy:
  - Stay at the level of the whole system.
  - Explain what's wrong with the system as a whole—how it violates core democratic values.
  - Offer bold, transformative solutions that solve the problem at scale.
  - Give people concrete steps they can take to help us move in this direction.

**Why it works.** When we don't offer a solution that matches the scale of the problem we've identified, we fuel fatalism. Too often, communicators unwittingly play into the ambition-feasibility paradox identified in our research: Solutions that are ambitious enough to fix rigged systems don't seem feasible, while solutions that seem feasible aren't ambitious enough to fix the problem. Too often, communicators talk sweepingly about massive problems—corporate capitalism, structural racism, authoritarianism—while offering solutions that, quite clearly, will at best only make a dent in the problem they've identified. In the democracy space, communicators frequently denounce profound

problems such as threats to election integrity, corporate control of government, or the state-sponsored creation of a paramilitary organization, only to offer solutions such as voter registration drives, calls for transparency around corporate giving, or body cameras. This reinforces people's fatalism—their sense that the problems we face are too big to solve—which leads to disengagement and saps motivation to act. If the solutions we're supposed to fight for won't fix anything, why bother?

Our research shows that matching the scale of the solution we're offering to the scale of the problem we're talking about fixes this problem. To mobilize people, we ultimately need to offer big solutions that are adequate for the big problems we face. Our research has found that people want to see fundamental changes to the political system, and they support major democratic reforms. Moreover, frame testing bears out the possibility and power of going big. When we used the zoom out strategy to make the case for major changes to the political and economic systems, we found that it built a sense of collective efficacy around changing systems.

But framing can help us make the case for smaller-scale solutions as well. If, for strategic or circumstantial reasons, we can't or don't want to make the case for big solutions, the spotlight strategy gives us a way of talking about smaller ones that research has shown to be highly effective. By focusing on *specific* aspects of the problems we face and showing how the solutions we're offering fix them, we can give people a sense of the tangible, meaningful impact their actions can have. By being honest about what our solutions accomplish, we build trust and help people see a trajectory of progress. We don't have to solve the problem all at once to counter fatalism, we just need to show there are steps we can take that make a difference.

# Questions for Future Research

The framing strategy laid out in this report emerged from years of deep research. Of course, further research is needed in some areas. Below, we outline some of these areas and key questions about them:

- 1. How should we frame specific institutions?** The above strategy provides a cohesive, effective way of talking about democracy—both what’s wrong with authoritarian encroachment now and the need for changes to the political system to better realize democracy later. Within both types of efforts is a need for effective ways of framing specific institutions. We have published framing guides on [ICE](#) and the [deployment of troops in US cities](#), but research is needed for other institutions. How should we talk about the Supreme Court’s use of the shadow docket or unconstitutional executive orders? How do we make an effective case for jurisdiction stripping? How can we talk about malapportionment in accessible and compelling ways? How do we build support for proportional representation? Further research is needed to identify the most effective ways of moving down a level and talking about specific reforms within the general framing strategy presented in this report.
- 2. What are the most effective ways of bringing founding and re-founding into the conversation?** As we discussed above, talking about history helps people see that our political system was designed and can be redesigned. Further research could identify the best ways to bring history to bear. When and how should we invoke the Constitution? How should we invoke historical moments of founding, re-founding, and reform, from the original founding to Reconstruction to the Progressive Era?
- 3. How can we most effectively cultivate a broad and inclusive understanding of “we, the people”?** This question is a deep and complex one. It touches on a wide range of issues, including race and racism, immigration, geographies within and beyond US borders, class, and power across systems. It’s connected to issues of identity and belonging that intertwine and overlap with mindsets and narratives but also involve other aspects of thinking, emotion, and experience. Framing and narrative research cannot address all of this, but it can explore parts. Which frames and narratives can help to promote more inclusive understandings of peoplehood and most effectively counter exclusionary ones?
- 4. When and how should we use language around “rigging”?** The language of system rigging is powerful and resonant, though associations with election rigging pose obvious challenges when discussing the electoral system. In the framing strategy outlined above, we draw on the *concept* of rigging without, for the most part, recommending the language of rigging for these reasons. We know we can use this language safely—and with good effect—when talking about the relationship between the political and economic systems. Further research is needed to identify the precise boundary of when to use and not to use the language of “rigging.”

5. **How can we shift people's thinking about political parties?** Political parties are key vehicles for representation. Many of the structural changes that would make our system more representative, like proportional representation, depend on parties as central institutions in the relationship of representation. Yet members of the US public tend to associate parties with partisanship, which they see as a problem.<sup>6</sup> Building support for needed changes to the electoral system will require people to see parties as vehicles for representation. Research is needed to identify frames capable of cultivating this view.
6. **How can narratives around democracy and gender justice be woven together?** The rise of authoritarianism and attempts to impose and reinforce gender hierarchy are related. A large body of research has examined the links between authoritarianism and attacks on feminists, “gender ideology,” and LGBTQ people. Research is needed to identify the most effective ways of addressing these connections through framing.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these specific questions, ongoing research is needed to identify the most effective ways of applying and adapting our framing in the ever-evolving cultural and political terrain.

# Conclusion

To ensure a positive future for democracy in the United States, we need frames that can help promote resistance to authoritarianism now and build support for a more democratic system in the future. The framing strategy outlined in this report, which emerged from four years of iterative research, ties these goals together. It provides a way of connecting resistance now to political system change over the longer term.

A framing strategy that connects people's experiences of rising authoritarianism with hopes for a different system can help both anti-authoritarian and structural democracy reform efforts. Talking about the possibility of a better system can help people see that they don't have to choose between going back to a system that wasn't working for them and being subject to the whims of a strongman. Helping people see links between what's wrong with the moment and the need for a better system anchors system change in the urgency of the present and illuminates the day-to-day stakes of reforms that can otherwise feel abstract.

The strategy outlined in this report identifies specific ways to weave together what's at stake in authoritarian encroachment and structural reforms:

- Appeal to core democratic values rather than relying on *democracy* as a value.
- Use these values to articulate what's wrong with the existing system *and* with authoritarian actions.
- Connect these systemic issues to people's lived experience of arbitrariness and economic hardship.
- Offer people solutions that match the scale of the problem and give them a sense of how we can get there.

These and the other framing moves described in the report can help people see different democracy efforts as part of a broader contest, rather than as discrete issues or disconnected concerns.

This strategy will need ongoing refinement as the landscape continues to change. We look forward to continuing to expand and refine the strategy through our continuing research in the Culture Change Project.

# Appendix

Below, we provide additional information about research methods and samples, the message language used to test frames, and survey items for measures discussed in this report. For some of the research studies discussed in this report, we have already provided full descriptions of and information about methods and sampling in other reports. In these cases, we review the most pertinent methodological information for the findings discussed in this report. Where appropriate, we refer to other reports for additional information.

## Appendix A: Research Methods

### Cultural Mindsets Interviews

To identify the cultural mindsets that the public uses to think about the US political system, the Constitution, democracy, authoritarianism, and democracy and authoritarianism in the United States, FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 cultural mindsets interviews from January to February 2023 with people across the country. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and were recorded with participants' written consent.

All participants were recruited by a professional marketing firm and selected to represent variation along several dimensions: race and ethnicity, age, gender, educational background, income, political views (as self-reported during the screening process), residential location, and family situation (married or single, with or without children). For complete demographic information on participants, see the appendix to [\*By and For the People? Cultural Mindsets of Democracy and the US Political System\*](#).

Cultural mindsets interviews are one-on-one, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately two hours. They allow researchers to capture broad sets of assumptions, or cultural mindsets, that participants use to make sense of a concept or topic area—in this case, issues related to the US political system, the Constitution, democracy, authoritarianism, and democracy and authoritarianism in the United States. Interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' thinking on those topics. Researchers approached each interview with a common set of topics to explore but allowed participants to determine the direction and nature of the discussion.

To analyze the interviews, researchers used analytical techniques from cognitive and linguistic anthropology to examine how participants understood issues related to the US political system, the Constitution, democracy, and authoritarianism.<sup>8</sup> First, researchers identified common ways of talking across the sample to reveal assumptions, relationships, logical steps, and connections that were commonly made but taken for granted throughout an individual's dialogue. The analysis involved discerning patterns in both what participants said (i.e., how they related, explained, and understood things) and what they did not say (i.e., assumptions and implied relationships). In many

cases, participants revealed conflicting mindsets on the same issue. In such cases, one conflicting way of understanding was typically found to be dominant in that it more consistently and deeply shaped participants' thinking (i.e., participants drew on this mindset with greater frequency and relied more heavily on it in arriving at conclusions). To ensure consistency, researchers met after an initial round of coding and analysis, comparing and processing initial findings, then revisited transcripts to explore differences and questions that arose through the comparison. As part of this process, researchers compared emerging findings to the findings from previous cultural mindsets research as a check to ensure that they had not missed or misunderstood any important mindsets.

Analysis centered on ways of understanding that were shared across participants, as cultural mindsets research is designed to identify common ways of thinking across a sample. While no fixed rule or percentage was used to identify what counts as "shared," mindsets reported were typically found in a large majority of interviews. Mindsets found in a smaller percentage of interviews were only reported if there was a clear reason why they only appeared in a limited set of interviews (e.g., the mindset reflected the thinking of a particular subgroup of people).

We primarily rely on large-sample surveys to explore variations between groups, rather than looking at variation within our interview sample, as generalizations based on small numbers of participants would be inappropriate. However, in analyzing cultural mindsets interviews, researchers attended to the identities and social positions of participants and the ways in which mindsets might vary in salience or be differently applied depending on participants' life experience. Follow-up quantitative research (the cultural mindset tracking survey discussed below) allowed rigorous examination of commonalities and differences in thinking between groups within US society.

## **Cultural Mindset Tracking Survey and Attitudinal Surveys**

### **Cultural Mindset Tracking Survey**

Since August 2020 we have conducted a regular, nationally representative tracking survey to quantitatively measure and track cultural mindsets. The survey measures endorsement of foundational mindsets (e.g., *Individualism*, *System Is Rigged*) as well as mindsets on specific issues (the economy, work, race and racism, government, democracy, and gender).

The mindsets about democracy and the political system discussed in this report were added to the survey in stages, following their identification in qualitative research. We added measures for *Personalism* in December 2022, and we added the five key mindsets about democracy in April 2024.

Beginning in December 2022, to increase the number of questions we can ask, we split the tracking survey into three discrete surveys, each of which is fielded three times per year. Mindsets about the political system and democracy are usually included in the same survey.

Target quotas for the tracking surveys are set according to national benchmarks for age, gender, household income, education level, race/ethnicity, and political party affiliation. All data are also weighted to match these benchmarks. Starting in 2024, we have oversampled for racial/ethnic groups and age to support subgroup analyses, with a minimum target of  $n = 200$  for each racial/

ethnic group and the 18–29 age group. All analyses regarding race/ethnicity and age were conducted using the nationally representative sample and the oversample to ensure adequate power for stratified analyses. Full sample analyses were conducted using only the nationally representative sample.

Mindset endorsement is measured using multi-item scales. For each mindset included in the survey, we have developed a battery of survey items that articulate the core assumption(s) of the mindset. Each battery consists of multiple questions designed to get at the concept at the core of the mindset. Mindset endorsement is measured primarily through Likert-type items with nine-point response scales. Survey items can be found in Appendix C.

Over the past six years, we have conducted a series of psychometric tests to reduce the number of items used to measure endorsement of each mindset, as well as ensure that the items retained to measure each mindset are adequate and reliable. For all new scales, we conduct exploratory factor analyses (EFA) using oblique promax rotation to establish the psychometric robustness of each scale. Items with rotated factor loadings below  $|.40|$  are dropped from each battery. Once finalized, Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) is used to assess internal consistency among the items in each battery. Given that there are various heuristics for determining acceptable internal consistency, we determined that batteries with internal consistency scores of .60 or above would be considered acceptable. For scales that have been previously used or tested, we conduct a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA), once or twice per year, to test the expected dimensionality of our outcome scales and ensure it remains a good fit to the survey data over time. During this process, survey items are specified to load onto their intended factors, with correlations among factors estimated freely using the marker method approach. We use Maximum Likelihood Estimation with Robust Standard Errors (MLR) to account for potential deviations from normality and model misspecifications. For model fit evaluation, we adopt an inclusive approach that considers multiple fit indices. Recognizing that chi-square is overly sensitive to sample size and minor model misspecifications, we use four approximate fit indices: the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), with thresholds of  $< .050$  for close fit and  $< .080$  for reasonable fit; the Comparative Fit Index (CFI); and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI<sup>3</sup>), with thresholds of  $> .900$  for acceptable fit and  $> .950$  for excellent fit, and the Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR) with a threshold of  $< .08$  for good fit.

After assessing internal consistency, items within each battery are combined into composite scores that indicate participants' average endorsement of the cultural mindset measured by each battery. These composite scores are then rescaled such that a composite of 0 indicates strongest disagreement with the mindset, 50 indicates neutral feelings about the mindset, and 100 indicates strongest endorsement of the mindset.

In this project and this report, survey results are always interpreted in combination with qualitative analyses, both from this project and from past research. Qualitative research that FrameWorks and others conducted before the project began, as well as external polling that extends beyond the time frame of the survey, provide critical context for interpreting results from the tracking survey.

## Survey on Support for Democratic Reforms

In August 2025, we conducted a small survey (N = 293) on support for democratic reforms. Target quotas were set according to national benchmarks for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and political party affiliation. Data were not weighted.

Participant recruitment was completed through Prolific, and the survey was hosted via Qualtrics. All participants opted in to complete the survey. After providing consent to participate, participants were asked a series of questions about the US political system and support for democratic reforms. Survey items can be found in Appendix C. Items were measured using multiple choice or Likert-type items with seven-point response scales.

Each democratic reform item was rescaled such that 0 indicates strongest opposition to the reform, 50 indicates neutral feelings about the reform, and 100 indicates strongest support for the reform.

## System Is Rigged Research—Survey Experiments

FrameWorks has conducted five online experimental surveys on *System Is Rigged* framing, involving a total sample of 17,140 adults in the US. The first, second, and fourth surveys were conducted as part of our overarching *System Is Rigged* research. The third survey focused on the labor system and was designed in collaboration with union partners. The fifth survey focused on the tax system and was designed in collaboration with Liberation in a Generation.

The first survey was conducted in October 2022 (N = 2,712). The second survey was conducted in July 2023 (N = 5,713). The third survey was conducted in September 2023 (N = 2,701). The fourth survey was conducted in May 2024 (N = 3,302). The fifth survey was conducted in March–April 2025 (N = 2,565).

For the first four surveys, target quotas were set according to national benchmarks for age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, education level, and political party affiliation. Data were not weighted. For full demographic information about these four survey samples, see the appendix to [\*Filling in the Blanks: Contesting What “the System Is Rigged” Means.\*](#)

The fifth survey was designed to measure frames' effectiveness for organizing in particular communities. To construct a sample similar to these communities, researchers used specific target demographics: all participants identified as Democrats or as leaning Democratic, and the majority of the sample was young (18–34), lower income, and nonwhite. In addition, participants were screened for community or movement engagement. To be included in the sample, participants had to say they had recently engaged in, or considered engaging in, one of the following activities: “Volunteering with a grassroots organization,” “Attending a protest,” “Donating to or volunteering with a large activist organization,” “Volunteering at a local polling location,” “Canvassing your community for a social or political issue,” “Attending a town hall meeting to advocate for an issue,” or “Other similar activities.” For full demographic information about this survey, see the appendix to [\*Unrigging the Tax System: A Framing Strategy for Organizers.\*](#)

For all surveys, participant recruitment and survey hosting were completed by Dynata. All participants opted in to complete the survey. After consenting to participate, participants were randomly assigned to one of several experimental conditions. Treatments were framed messages that offered specific ways of talking about rigged systems. Tested frames discussed in this report can be found in Appendix B. Each experiment also included a null control condition. Participants assigned to the null control conditions did not read any message, instead moving immediately to the survey questions.

Participants assigned to treatment conditions were asked to read a short message, which they were required to view for at least 30 seconds, before answering survey questions. These questions were designed to measure specific outcomes of interest. Each battery consisted of multiple questions, and responses were primarily measured using Likert-type items with seven-point response scales. Survey items can be found in Appendix C.

Prior to any inferential analysis, we conducted randomization checks. Chi-square analyses indicated that all target demographics were evenly distributed across conditions. To determine the psychometric qualities of our outcome scales, we used the same psychometric processes described in our discussion of the cultural mindset tracking survey. After an assessment of internal consistency, where possible, items within each battery were combined into composite scores that indicated participants' average ratings of the attitudes or stereotypes measured by each battery. These composite scores were rescaled such that a composite of 0 indicates the strongest negative evaluation, 50 indicates neutral feelings, and 100 indicates strongest positive evaluation.

After conducting the preliminary analyses described above, we used multiple regression analysis to determine whether there were significant differences on the outcomes between each experimental frame condition and the control condition. A threshold of  $p < .05$  was used to determine whether the experimental frame conditions had any significant effects. Significant differences were understood as evidence that a frame influenced a particular outcome. We also consider  $p < .10$  to determine whether the experimental frame conditions had any marginal effects. Though we don't typically make recommendations on marginal effects, we do consider these effects as part of a holistic approach to understanding broader patterns across results.

For a more detailed discussion of recruitment, fielding, and data analysis, see appendix to [\*Filling in the Blanks: Contesting What "the System Is Rigged" Means\*](#).

## **Ongoing Focus Groups—Peer Discourse Sessions**

Within the Culture Change Project, researchers conduct peer discourse sessions (a form of focus groups) 3–4 times per year. The sessions explore how members of the public are using mindsets to make sense of issues of the moment.

Sessions typically include six participants each. All sessions are conducted virtually, using Zoom, with participants giving their consent to be recorded.

All sessions discussed in this report began with an open-ended conversation among participants about the state of the country. Participants were asked what it means for the country to do well,

when it has done well in the past, how it is doing now, and where they think the country is headed in the future. After this initial, general conversation, focus groups dove into specific issues.

This report discusses focus groups that focused on the following issues:

- **December 2022: *System Is Rigged* thinking and framing (nine sessions).** The sessions involved conversations about what it means to say that the system is rigged, explored how people think about the villains (who is rigging the system?), and examined how people think about solutions (how can we unrig the system?). The sessions explored specific ways of talking about villains and solutions. Participants were also asked to respond to a right-wing *System Is Rigged* message, to understand how they made sense of this message.
- **January 2024: Future visioning (six sessions).** These sessions included the future visioning activity discussed in this report. Participants were asked to imagine it's 2050 and things have gone as well as they plausibly could have. What does the United States look like, and how did we get there? Participants brainstormed these futures in breakout groups, and then came together to discuss the futures the groups came up with.
- **July 2024: Immigration and American identity (six sessions).** These sessions engaged participants in conversations about the United States' approach to immigration. Participants were asked to reflect on what it means to be American, including what our handling of immigration says about American identity.
- **February 2025: Retrospective comparison/new administration (DOGE) (nine sessions).** These sessions paralleled the format of the Culture Change Project's early peer discourse sessions, conducted in 2020, to enable researchers to understand how thinking has changed or remained the same over the interim period. Each session involved a deep exploration of thinking about the economy, government, or health. All sessions also involved a brief retrospective discussion about the racial justice uprisings of 2020. Researchers left space for thoughts about the actions of the new administration, eliciting substantial discussion of DOGE, which was at the forefront of many participants' thinking at the time.
- **June 2025: Rule of law, due process, immigration, and the branches of government (six sessions).** These sessions explored how people think about the rule of law and due process in the context of rising deportations and the deployment of National Guard troops and federal agents to Los Angeles. The sessions also explored people's thinking about the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.
- **January 2026: ICE (six sessions).** This round of sessions focused on US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the context of the surge in Minnesota and in the wake of the shootings of Renée Good and Alex Pretti. Discussions explored the purpose of ICE; the agency's recent activities, including the use of violence; and protests against ICE. The sessions also included discussion, more broadly, about the government's use of force at home and abroad.

Participants were recruited to represent variation across demographic characteristics, including race/ethnicity, gender, age, political identification, residential location (urban/suburban/rural), geographical location (city/region), and education. For the July 2024 sessions, standard quotas were used for 75 percent of the sample; the other 25 percent of the sample was composed of immigrants who had lived in the US since they were 12 or younger.

Most sessions mixed all participants across demographic categories. The December 2022 sessions, however, were split by political affiliation: we conducted three sessions with participants who identified as Republican or leaned Republican; three sessions with participants who identified as Democratic or leaned Democratic; and three sessions with a mix of Democrats, Republicans, and independents.

## Appendix B: Tested Frames

Below, we list message treatments for the frames discussed in this report.

### **System Is Rigged Research— Frames Tested in Main Survey Experiments**

#### **Popular Self-Government**

##### **We Must Reclaim Popular Power and Unrig the System**

As a society, we believe that the power lies with the people. We have the right to govern ourselves collectively, and nothing can happen without our consent. This means that what happens in society is up to us.

We need to take back our collective decision-making power and change our rigged system. Right now, in America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Our economic system allows corporations to set the terms under which we live and work, and our system of government allows the powerful few to buy influence to protect their wealth and power. The system undermines our collective power by pitting us against each other, fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live.

To unrig the system, we must reclaim our power to govern ourselves from those who are working to keep us down. To make collective self-government a reality, we must reduce the economic and political power of the few and take back the power to shape our own lives.

#### **Freedom from Domination**

##### **To Be Free from Domination, We Must Unrig the System**

As a society, we believe that no one has a natural right to rule over others. We should all be free from domination by the powerful. This means that we shouldn't have to live according to the whim of powerful people and do what they tell us to do.

We need to reject the illegitimate rule of the few and change our rigged system. Right now, in America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Our economic system allows corporations to set the terms under which we live and work, and our system of government allows the powerful few to buy influence to protect their wealth and power. The system undermines our collective power by pitting us against each other, fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live.

To unrig the system, we must resist the domination of the few. To be free from domination, we must reduce the economic and political power of the few and take back the power to shape our own lives.

## **Fairness**

### **To Give Everyone a Fair Chance, We Must Unrig the System**

As a society, we believe in fairness. Our outcomes in life should depend on what we do, not who we are or where we come from. This means that how we do in life shouldn't be determined by the circumstances we're born into.

We need to give everyone a fair chance and change our rigged system. Right now, in America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Our economic system allows corporations to set the terms under which we live and work, and our system of government allows the powerful few to buy influence to protect their wealth and power. The system pits us against each other, undermining our chances of success in life while fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live.

To make fairness a reality, we must unrig the system. To give us all a fair chance, no matter who we are or where we come from, we must change how the system works.

## **Common Good**

### **To Advance the Common Good, We Must Unrig the System**

As a society, we believe in the common good. We should prioritize the good of society as a whole, not our own self-interests. This means that our collective decisions should advance the common good, not private interests.

We need to advance the public interest and change our rigged system. Right now, in America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Our economic system allows corporations to set the terms under which we live and work, and our system of government allows the powerful few to buy influence to protect their wealth and power. The system pits us against each other, undermining our chances of success in life while fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live.

To advance the common good, we must unrig the system. To pursue the public good over private interests, we must change how the system works.

### **Assertion That System Is Rigged (Base Message)**

In America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Our system concentrates power and wealth in the hands of the few, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them.

### **Assertion That System Is Rigged + How It's Rigged (Base + Problem)**

In America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Our system concentrates power and wealth in the hands of the few, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them.

The system is rigged in many ways. For example, our campaign finance system works against the public interest by allowing a small number of people to buy influence over elected officials. As a result, the government helps corporations profit at the expense of the rest of us by cutting taxes for people at the top, weakening labor unions, and letting employers avoid paying decent benefits. As wealth is concentrated in a few hands, there's even less of a check on the powerful. This leaves the rest of us without a real say over our own lives and without a fair shot in life.

### **Assertion That System Is Rigged + How It's Rigged + How It Can Be Unrigged (Base + Problem + Solution)**

In America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Our system concentrates power and wealth in the hands of the few, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them.

The system is rigged in many ways. For example, our campaign finance system works against the public interest by allowing a small number of people to buy influence over elected officials. As a result, the government helps corporations profit at the expense of the rest of us by cutting taxes for people at the top, weakening labor unions, and letting employers avoid paying decent benefits. As wealth is concentrated in a few hands, there's even less of a check on the powerful. This leaves the rest of us without a real say over our own lives and without a fair shot in life.

We can rebalance power in American society and transform the system so it works for all of us. We can publicly fund political campaigns so candidates can't be bought. By taxing the ultra-rich and breaking up corporate monopolies, we can make sure no one has so much money that they can bend the rules in their favor. And we can strengthen the power of the many by protecting the right to vote and strengthening labor unions. By changing the system, we can take back control over our lives and make sure everyone has a fair shot.

### **"Big Changes" to Unrig Political and Economic Systems**

#### **We Need to Make Big Changes to Unrig the System**

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others, but we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Corporations set the terms under which we live and work and the powerful few use the government to protect their wealth and power. To free ourselves from domination and gain the power to shape our own lives, we need to make fundamental changes to society.

Big changes would rebalance power in fundamental ways:

- A maximum wage that caps income and a heavy tax on wealth would do away with extreme wealth and the power that comes with it.
- Changing our electoral system so more political parties can win congressional seats would give everyone the power to be represented in government.
- Creating “baby bonds” that give all children a large nest egg at birth would give people the power to shape their own lives and reduce the racial wealth gap.
- Term limits for the Supreme Court would stop unelected judges from overturning popular policies.

By making big changes, we can get out from under the thumb of the powerful few and claim the power to shape our own lives. Going big is important if we truly want to change things.

### **Smaller-Scale Changes to Begin Unrigging Political and Economic Systems**

#### **We Can Start to Unrig the System through Changes that Are in Reach Now**

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others, but we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Corporations set the terms under which we live and work and the powerful few use the government to protect their wealth and power. To free ourselves from domination and gain the power to shape our own lives, we need to make achievable, realistic changes *now*.

Realistic changes would begin to rebalance power:

- Raising taxes on the highest incomes and increasing taxes on inherited wealth would put some limits on extreme wealth and the power that goes with it.
- Public funding for political campaigns would make it possible for anyone to run for office.
- Raising the minimum wage would give people more of an ability to shape their own lives.
- Enforcing anti-discrimination laws and voting rights laws would limit racial discrimination.

By making realistic changes that are in reach now, we can begin to get out from under the thumb of the powerful few and claim the power to shape our own lives. Doing what is possible *now* is important if we truly want to change things.

### **Racism as a System Rigged by Design**

#### **Our Society Is Designed to Let Wealthy White People Rule**

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others. Yet our society is rigged, by design, to give wealthy white people power over Black, Native, and other people of color. We need to come together to build a new social system where all of us are free from domination and have the power to shape our own lives.

Our society was designed to let wealthy white people rule and to limit the power of people of color. Our Constitution was written by and for slaveholders, and our economic system still depends on

paying Black people and immigrants of color low wages for essential work like child care and home care. The United States was built on land stolen from Native Americans, and the US continues to let corporations profit from this land by taking natural resources like oil. From its founding, our political system denied Black and Native people political rights, and it continues to deny them equal representation.

We must come together across our differences to resist domination and demand a new social system. We can start by enforcing anti-discrimination and voting rights laws, heavily taxing inherited wealth, and creating “baby bonds” that give all children a nest egg at birth. This will lay the groundwork for a new system in which all of us, including Black, Native, and other people of color, have the power to shape our own lives.

### **Racism as a System Rigged through Manipulation**

#### **Our Society Is Being Twisted to Let Wealthy White People Rule**

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others. Our society is built on the promise of freedom from domination. Yet right now, wealthy white people are rigging the system to maintain power over Black, Native, and other people of color. We need to come together to fix our social system so it lives up to its promise and we all have the power to shape our own lives.

Wealthy white people are manipulating society to keep power and to limit the power of people of color. Slavery violated our society’s basic promises and was abolished, yet our economic system still depends on paying Black people and immigrants of color low wages for essential work like child care and home care. By stealing land from Native Americans, the United States violated our core principles, yet corporations continue to profit from this land by taking natural resources like oil. The Founders promised equal freedom, but fell short by denying Black and Native people political rights. And today, wealthy white people continue to prevent equal representation in order to maintain power.

We must come together across our differences to resist domination and demand that society lives up to its promises. We can start by enforcing anti-discrimination and voting rights laws, heavily taxing inherited wealth, and creating “baby bonds” that give all children a nest egg at birth. This will help fix our society so that all of us, including Black, Native, and other people of color, have the power to shape our own lives.

### **System Is Rigged Research—Frames Tested in Survey Experiments on Unrigging the Labor System**

#### **Spotlight on Labor Systems + Unions Unrig by Securing Contracts**

In America, most of us, no matter our skin color, faith or where we come from, want to have a good job and live a good life. But, at the moment, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Corporations have too much influence in this country. They rig the system against workers by keeping wages low and by threatening to fire workers who try to change things. They do their best to make it more difficult to form or join unions, lobby against rules they

don't like—often at the expense of workers—and deliberately outsource key operations in order to sidestep their responsibilities as an employer.

It doesn't have to be this way. By joining together in unions, working people win the right to negotiate a contract with their employer to secure better pay, benefits and working conditions. The contract is legally binding and employers can't change things without negotiating with union members. When union members win better contracts, other employers have to match those contracts in order to keep up, which raises standards across an entire industry. And, when we take part in contract negotiations, we can then leverage the power we have through the union to demand bigger changes that benefit everyone—such as improved wages, better healthcare and retirement, and holding corporate employers to account. When working people unite in organizations like unions, we can use our strength in numbers to shift the balance of power so that all of us have what we need.

### **Spotlight on Labor Systems + Unions Unrig through Strikes**

In America, most of us, no matter our skin color, faith or where we come from, want to have a good job and live a good life. At the moment, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many, but it doesn't have to be this way. When we come together we can make huge changes.

That's why so many union members are going on strike. People working in some of the biggest industries in the country—from UPS drivers to writers in Hollywood—are demanding improved wages, benefits and safer working conditions. They know that striking is the most powerful tool working people have, because their work is what makes our country run. When they join together to bring our country's industries to a standstill, the wealthy and powerful have to listen. When working people unite in organizations like unions, we can use our strength in numbers to shift the balance of power so that all of us have what we need.

## **System Is Rigged Research—Frames Tested in Survey Experiments on Unrigging the Tax System**

### **Zoom Out + Inspire Change through Imagination**

#### **We Can Unrig the Tax System by Imagining a New System that Can Work for All of Us**

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

To unrig the system, we need to reimagine the tax system and how it can work for all of us instead of just the wealthy few. If we taxed inheritances and unearned income at higher rates, we could expand

and increase the child tax credit, putting money in the pocket of every family. We could also create a “nest egg” of money for all children at birth, to be accessed when they turn 18. And, if we increased the top corporate tax rate, the government could provide essential public services and other things that support us all—like guaranteed jobs, healthcare, and housing.

These changes might seem far off, but they’re doable if we have a vision of what’s needed. When we take seriously that the tax system could be fundamentally different and share this vision with one another, we put change on the table. When people protecting the rigged system are forced to defend it and explain why we can’t make it better, we shift the debate and make change possible. By demanding a new tax system, we can make it a reality.

### **Zoom Out + Force Change through Collective Power**

#### **We Can Unrig the Tax System by Leveraging the Power of the Many**

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

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

These are big changes, but they’re doable if we leverage the collective power of the 99% to do what’s needed. When we come together with the strength of the many, our calls for action are louder and force the government and those in power to reshape the rigged system. If we want fundamental and bold change, we must come together now and exercise our collective power. By demanding a new tax system, we can make it a reality.

# Appendix C: Survey Items

Below, we include survey items for the cultural mindset tracking survey, the survey on support for democratic reforms, and the experimental surveys on rigged systems framing. Only items and scales discussed in this report are included in this appendix.

## Cultural Mindset Tracking Survey

*Instructions:* On the next few pages, we'll ask you how much you agree or disagree with each of a series of statements. There are no right or wrong answers; rather, we are simply interested in better understanding the beliefs that people such as yourself hold on a wide range of issues. Please take the time to consider each statement in its own right.

All items for the mindset batteries listed below use a 9-point Likert scale: “Very strongly disagree”; “Strongly disagree”; “Somewhat disagree”; “Slightly disagree”; “Neither agree nor disagree”; “Slightly agree”; “Somewhat agree”; “Strongly agree”; “Very strongly agree.”

### The Individual Liberty Model of Democracy

1. The main feature of democracies is that they uphold people's individual liberties.
2. What makes a society a democracy is that it protects civil and political rights.
3. The top priority of any democracy is protecting individual freedoms and rights.
4. Protecting individual liberties is the key to any democracy.

### Democracy = US System of Government

1. Democracy and the US system of government are one and the same.
2. Democracy is what we do in the United States—nothing more and nothing less.
3. The United States is the model of democracy.
4. There is no country more democratic than the United States.

### The Voting Model of Democracy

1. Voting is what democracy is all about.
2. The main feature of democracies is that they make decisions through voting.
3. If a country has free and fair elections, it's a democracy.
4. Voting is what makes a country a democracy.
5. If a country allows its citizens to vote, it's a democracy.

### **The Popular Model of Democracy**

1. Democracy is government by the people.
2. Democracy is a political system in which the government does what the majority of people want.
3. In a democracy, decisions reflect the will of the people.
4. If a government doesn't do what the people want, then the political system isn't really a democracy.

### **The Representation Model of Democracy**

1. If people aren't truly represented, then a country isn't really democratic—even if there are elections.
2. Representation of the people's will and interests is the hallmark of democracy.
3. In order for a country to be a democracy, elected leaders must actually represent the people, rather than doing what's in their own interest.
4. The key feature of democracies is that the leaders represent the people.
5. What it means for a country to be a democracy is that the leaders do what they promised to do when they were elected.
6. Democracy requires that elected leaders share the experiences and backgrounds of the people they represent.

### **Personalism**

1. When government doesn't work well, it's because bad people are in charge.
2. If we replaced our current leaders with better people, the government would work well.
3. What the government does is a direct reflection of the character of our leaders.
4. Problems with how our government works are solely the result of the character of our leaders.

### **System Is Rigged (forced choice)**

Do you think the system is rigged in America?

- Yes
- No

# Survey on Support for Democratic Reforms

## Evaluation of US Political System

1. The political system in the United States...
  - a. Doesn't need to be changed.
  - b. Needs minor changes.
  - c. Needs major changes.
  - d. Needs to be completely reformed.

## Political System Reforms

All statements about reforms were rated using a 7-point Likert scale: “Strongly disagree”; “Disagree”; “Somewhat disagree”; “Neither disagree nor agree”; “Somewhat agree”; “Agree”; “Strongly agree.”

1. We need to update the Constitution to meet the needs of today.
2. We should change the electoral system to make it possible for more parties to be represented in Congress and state legislatures.
3. We should give states with more people more senators, rather than having two senators for every state.
4. We should change how we elect presidents so the candidate with the most votes in the country as a whole wins.
5. We should make it easier for presidents to do what they want without interference.
6. We should establish term limits for Supreme Court justices.
7. We should abolish the presidency and instead have a prime minister chosen by the party that gets the most votes.
8. We should deport all immigrants who are here illegally.

## System Is Rigged Research—Main Survey Experiments

Several adjustments were made to survey items between surveys to improve measures, but the set of outcomes was generally consistent across surveys.

### Collective Efficacy—Systems Change

1. In your opinion, how realistic is it for our society to change for the better? [7-point Likert scale: “Not at all realistic”; “Slightly realistic”; “Somewhat realistic”; “Moderately realistic”; “Very realistic”; “Extremely realistic”; “Totally realistic”]
2. How confident are you that our political system can be changed for the better? [7-point Likert scale: “Not at all confident”; “Slightly confident”; “Somewhat confident”; “Moderately confident”; “Very confident”; “Extremely confident”; “Totally confident”]
3. How confident are you that our economic system can be changed for the better? [7-point Likert scale: “Not at all confident”; “Slightly confident”; “Somewhat confident”; “Moderately confident”; “Very confident”; “Extremely confident”; “Totally confident”]

### **Collective Efficacy—Fair Outcomes**

1. In your opinion, how realistic is it for us to have a society in which everyone has the opportunity to do well in life? [7-point Likert scale: “Not at all realistic”; “Slightly realistic”; “Somewhat realistic”; “Moderately realistic”; “Very realistic”; “Extremely realistic”; “Totally realistic”]
2. How optimistic or pessimistic are you that we can have a society where all people are treated fairly? [7-point Likert scale: “Very pessimistic”; “Pessimistic”; “Somewhat pessimistic”; “Neither pessimistic nor optimistic”; “Somewhat optimistic”; “Optimistic”; “Very optimistic”]
3. How confident are you that our society can work well for everyone? [7-point Likert scale: “Not at all confident”; “Slightly confident”; “Somewhat confident”; “Moderately confident”; “Very confident”; “Extremely confident”; “Totally confident”]

### **Support for Policies**

To what extent do you support or oppose the following policies? [7-point Likert scale: “Strongly oppose”; “Oppose”; “Somewhat oppose”; “Neither oppose nor favor”; “Somewhat favor”; “Favor”; “Strongly favor”]

#### **SUBSCALE 1: PROGRESSIVE POLICIES**

1. Break up big corporations that hold monopolies.
2. Raise the federal minimum wage to \$20 per hour.
3. Change labor laws to make it easier for workers to form or join a union.
4. Limit corporate contributions to political candidates.
5. Establish term limits for members of the US Supreme Court.
6. Invest a “nest egg” of money for all children at birth, to be accessed when they turn 18.
7. Increase the tax on inheritances of over \$2 million to a 70% rate.
8. Expand the number of polling places on American Indian reservations.

#### **SUBSCALE 2: CONSERVATIVE POLICIES**

9. Cut the corporate tax rate by 20%.
10. Add work requirements to government programs like food stamps and Medicaid.
11. Reduce government regulations on businesses.
12. Ban public schools from teaching about gender identity.
13. Cut the rate of total immigration to the US in half.
14. Make it easier for employers to punish employees who participate in strikes.

## Xenophobia

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. [7-point Likert scale: “Strongly disagree”; “Disagree”; “Somewhat disagree”; “Neither disagree nor agree”; “Somewhat agree”; “Agree”; “Strongly agree”]

1. Immigrants are a burden on American taxpayers.
2. Immigrants are a threat to our national security.
3. There are too many immigrants in the US.
4. Immigrants should be given the same rights as native citizens. (reverse coded)

## Authoritarian Attitudes

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. [7-point Likert scale: “Strongly disagree”; “Disagree”; “Somewhat disagree”; “Neither disagree nor agree”; “Somewhat agree”; “Agree”; “Strongly agree”]

1. Our country needs a powerful leader who can destroy the radical and immoral currents in society today.
2. If we want to uphold law and order, we need strong leaders to crack down on crime and immorality.
3. What our country really needs instead of more “civil rights” is a good stiff dose of law and order.
4. We need strong leaders who can eliminate all the troublemakers that are causing trouble in our society.
5. Our leaders are justified in using strong force against people who are a threat to authority.

## System Is Rigged Research—Survey Experiments on Unrigging the Labor System

### Support for Unions

1. Imagine two candidates are running for office. Candidate A has a record of supporting policies that make it easier to form labor unions. Candidate B does not have a record of supporting these policies. How likely would you be to **vote for Candidate A over Candidate B**? [7-point Likert scale: “Extremely unlikely”; “Unlikely”; “Somewhat unlikely”; “Neither likely or unlikely”; “Somewhat likely”; “Likely”; “Extremely likely”]
2. Suppose you learned that a candidate for Congress was actively trying to pass policies that would make it easier for corporations to stop their workers from unionizing. Knowing this information, how likely would you be to support this candidate? [7-point Likert scale: “Extremely unlikely”; “Unlikely”; “Somewhat unlikely”; “Neither likely or unlikely”; “Somewhat likely”; “Likely”; “Extremely likely”] (reverse coded)

3. When you hear about a dispute between management and a labor union, which side do you generally tend to favor? [7-point Likert scale: “Side much more with management”; “Side more with management”; “Side somewhat more with management”; “Side with neither”; “Side somewhat more with the union”; “Side more with the union”; “Side much more with the union”]
4. In general, do you support or oppose labor union strikes when they occur? [7-point Likert scale: “Strongly oppose”; “Oppose”; “Somewhat oppose”; “Neither oppose nor support”; “Somewhat support”; “Support”; “Strongly support”]

### **Union Impact**

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below: [7-point Likert scale: “Strongly disagree”; “Disagree”; “Somewhat disagree”; “Neither disagree nor agree”; “Somewhat agree”; “Agree”; “Strongly agree”]

1. Unions have a positive impact on the economy.
2. Unions balance out the power of big corporations.
3. Unions improve wages and benefits for their members.
4. All working people benefit from labor unions.
5. Unions cause more trouble than they’re worth. (*reverse coded*)
6. Unions were needed in the past, but are less relevant today. (*reverse coded*)
7. Unions make things worse for workers. (*reverse coded*)

### **System Is Rigged Research—Survey Experiments on Unrigging the Tax System**

Please rate how true or false you believe the following statements are: [5-point Likert scale: “Definitely false”; “Probably false”; “Possibly”; “Probably true”; “Definitely true”]

#### **The tax system privileges assets and wealth over work and income**

1. Income from investments—like stocks and bonds—is taxed at a lower rate than income from wages.
2. Our tax system favors taxpayers with assets—like home mortgages, stocks, and bonds—over those who don’t have assets.
3. Wealth from unearned income, like inheritances, is taxed at lower rates than income earned from jobs.
4. Income from wages is taxed at a lower rate than income from investments—like stocks and bonds. (*reverse coded*)
5. Our tax system benefits everyday working people more than it benefits large corporations and their shareholders. (*reverse coded*)

## **The tax system advantages white people/disadvantages people of color**

1. Black and other taxpayers of color are not as likely to benefit from tax breaks as white Americans are.
2. Our tax system favors white taxpayers at the expense of non-white taxpayers.
3. Black and other taxpayers of color are more likely to get audited by the IRS than white taxpayers.

## **Policies**

How much do you oppose or support the following tax policies? [7-point Likert scale: “Strongly oppose”; “Oppose”; “Somewhat oppose”; “Neither support nor oppose”; “Somewhat support”; “Support”; “Strongly support”]

1. Increase the top tax rate to 50% for incomes above \$626,350 (\$751,600 for couples).
2. Apply a 2% annual tax on wealth over \$50 million, plus an additional 1% surtax for wealth over \$1 billion.
3. Restore gradual estate tax rates, reaching up to 55% tax for estates above \$28 million.
4. Increase the maximum corporate tax rate from 21% to 46%, restoring corporate tax levels seen in the mid-1980s.
5. Tax profits from buying and selling stocks (currently 0-20%) at the same rate as wages and salaries (10–37%).
6. Lower the estate tax exemption from \$13.9 million (\$27.98 million for couples) to \$1.2 million (\$2.4 million for couples).

## **Collective Agency**

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements: [7-point Likert scale: “Strongly disagree”; “Disagree”; “Somewhat disagree”; “Neither disagree nor agree”; “Somewhat agree”; “Agree”; “Strongly agree”]

1. I can cooperate with others who want tax reform in order to advance our shared goals.
2. I enjoy contributing to collective efforts on issues like tax reform.
3. I feel like I can personally help to change the tax system by working with the people around me.
4. I see value in contributing to large, collective efforts to change our tax system.
5. I am willing to work with others to promote tax reform because it is the right thing to do.

# Endnotes

1. For a list of Culture Change Project advisory board members, see <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/what-we-do/key-initiatives/culture-change-project/>
2. For a fuller discussion of findings from these interviews, see Volmert, A., Pineau, M. G., & Cohen, E. (2023). *By and for the people? Cultural mindsets of democracy and the US political system: A Culture Change Project report*. FrameWorks Institute. [https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2023/12/FWI\\_CCP-2023-Democracy-v2c-12.15.pdf](https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2023/12/FWI_CCP-2023-Democracy-v2c-12.15.pdf)
3. Numbers for the graphs in this section may not add up to 100 due to rounding.
4. The research found that the values of *solidarity* and *fairness* can also be useful when talking about rigged systems in some contexts. In the context of talking about democracy and authoritarianism, the values of *popular self-government* and *freedom from domination* are a better fit, as they speak to the mindsets and concerns around collective decision making and arbitrariness that animate public thinking about democracy and rising authoritarianism.
5. For more information on these results, see Volmert, D., & Lindholm, C. B. (2024). *Filling in the blanks: Contesting what “the system is rigged” means*. Frameworks Institute.
6. For more on people’s assumptions about political parties and partisanship, see Volmert, A., Pineau, M. G., & Cohen, E. (2023). *By and for the people? Cultural mindsets of democracy and the US political system: A Culture Change Project report*. FrameWorks Institute. [https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2023/12/FWI\\_CCP-2023-Democracy-v2c-12.15.pdf](https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2023/12/FWI_CCP-2023-Democracy-v2c-12.15.pdf)
7. For a recent discussion, see Juan-Torres, M., Livingston, L., & Chandra, T. (2025). *(En)Gendering authoritarianism: A six-strategy framework examining how political and cultural leaders weaponize gender in ways that advance authoritarianism*. Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley and Over Zero. <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/engendering-authoritarianism>
8. Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Palgrave Macmillan.

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# From Protecting the Status Quo to a Vision for Change

Framing Democracy in a Time  
of Authoritarianism

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