

Culture, Mindsets, and Democracy: Navigating a Changing Landscape

Talking about Threats to
Elections

August 20, 2026



FRAMEWORKS
Culture Change
Project



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

Here's how we'll share space today:

- We are recording today's session.
- We will share the recording with registrants as soon as we can.
- We will remove any AI note-takers.
- There will be time for Q&A at the end of the presentation. To bring a question or comment to the presenters' attention, use the Q&A function. Note that others in the meeting will be able to see your question.
- Presenters probably won't see the chat. The chat is open for participants to interact with each other or respond to content in real time. FrameWorks may also post links there.
- NB: FrameWorks is a 501(c)(3) organization.



Guest speaker:
Liz Wester

Today's session

Executive Override: Understanding federal threats to the 2026 election

The FrameWorks approach

How the public thinks about election integrity

How to effectively frame threats to election integrity

What we can do: Our role in safeguarding free and fair elections

Q & A



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Our approach:

■ Mindset research vs. polling

- How people think vs. what people think
- Mindset research helps us understand what's driving polling numbers

■ Framing vs. messaging

- Framing: big-picture choices (values, metaphors, issues to foreground), flexible in application
- Messaging: specific wording, targeted application

Our research base:

- Six focus groups (June 29–July 7, 2026). Diverse sample, oversampling of Black participants (46%).
- Experimental survey (fielded June 26–July 8, 2026) to test different ways of framing threats to election integrity. Nationally representative sample with oversample of participants of color.

This builds on research since 2022 on mindsets and framing around democracy and authoritarianism (interviews, surveys, focus groups).

Framing objectives:

- Increase concern about genuine threats to election integrity, such as voter intimidation, refusal to certify legitimate votes.
- Help people distinguish between real threats and fabricated ones (e.g., voter fraud).
- Motivate public action to resist attempts to interfere with or overturn elections.
- Increase salience of threats to elections without decreasing intent to vote.

How the public thinks about election integrity



Baseline level of concern about threats to “free and fair elections” varies widely.

Baseline concern varied widely

- Focus group participants expressed widely varying levels of concern about threats to free and fair elections.
- As scenarios about possible interference were introduced, conversations tended to become more concerned and critical.



People have a broad view of what threatens free and fair elections and what election integrity involves.

Conversations moved easily between

- Threats to election administration — voter intimidation, access to voting, voter fraud, vote rigging, and vote counting
- Broader concerns with the electoral process — misinformation, money in politics, and political corruption

While widespread recognition of barriers to fair representation is encouraging, it can lead people to downplay new and distinctive threats.



Sometimes, people exceptionalize the issue by personalizing the problem.

Personalizing the problem

- Leads people to see the threat as lying only with a few individuals
- Insulates institutions from concern
- Leads people to assume that the system will hold and attempts to manipulate elections will fail



Thinking about resistance is thin.

People struggle to imagine what they could do in response to attempts to overturn results.

They suggested

- Posting on social media
- Calling representatives
- “Making your voice heard”
- “Protesting” (but what this meant was limited)



The idea of ICE deployment at the polls was widely and strongly condemned.

Reactions to ICE deployment at the polls

- Immediately provoked widespread condemnation
- Elicited worries about “voter intimidation”
- Were much more consistent than reactions to other actions (including voter roll purges, certification challenges, deployment of National Guard)

How to effectively frame threats to election integrity

Two-part framing strategy

- **VALUE:** Use the value of Freedom from Domination to help people recognize the danger of authoritarian interference and motivate action.
- **EXAMPLE:** Invoke the example of Resistance to ICE in Minnesota to convey the character of the threat and foster an understanding of what can be done.

Value: Freedom from Domination

Appeal to Freedom from Domination to help people recognize the danger of authoritarian interference and motivate action.

What this looks like:

Being free means not having to live according to the whims of powerful people. It means not being under the thumb of those in power. When the government acts like it's above the law, it takes away our freedom.

When the government interferes with elections, it places us under their thumb. If the government makes it harder for people to vote or intimidates voters who don't agree with them, this takes away our freedom. If the government throws out votes it doesn't like or tries to overturn election results, our elections aren't really free.

Key ideas

- Don't just talk about “freedom” — what threatens freedom is being subject to the whim of powerful people
- The values lexicon
 - Being “free from the arbitrary whim” of people in power
 - They're putting us “under their thumb”
 - The government is “acting outside the law”
 - They're “out of control”

Example: Resistance to ICE in Minnesota

Invoke the example of resistance to ICE in Minnesota to convey the character of the threat and foster a belief that we can push back.

What this looks like:

We don't have to let this happen. We can and must stand up for our freedom. The people of Minnesota showed us this is possible. When ICE threatened, kidnapped, and killed the people of Minnesota, regular people came together. They protested, boycotted, and demanded action from their leaders — and won.

The people of Minnesota proved that when the government puts itself above the law, ordinary people can push back. If the government tries to put us under their thumb by interfering with elections, we must take action to ensure our freedom.

Key ideas

- Standing up for our freedom
- Resistance is possible
- Taking concrete actions — protesting, boycotting, and demanding action from leaders
- ICE is an example of the government acting outside the law

Do	Don't
DO clarify the source of the threat (e.g., the federal government and its allies at the state and local levels).	DON'T talk generally about the possibility of "election interference," which leaves the door open to fabricated threats.
DO describe the threat in broad terms – as a concerted effort involving multiple actors and levels of government.	DON'T focus only on specific individuals. This is likely to lead to underestimation of threats from government institutions broadly.
DO emphasize concrete steps that people can take.	DON'T talk vaguely about "speaking out." This is likely to prompt people to post on social media or talk to friends, but to stop there.
DO connect freedom to power. Talk about those in power putting us "under their thumb" to clarify the character of the danger.	DON'T talk generally about "freedom." This is likely to individualize thinking and background collective power.
DO emphasize resistance to ICE in Minnesota as a powerful example of what it looks like to stand up and resist government overreach.	DON'T ignore the pitfalls of centering the threat of ICE deployment at the polls, which may discourage some voters from turning out.

The framing strategy:

- Is highly effective with Democrats
- Does not backfire with Republicans
- Does not decrease intention to vote

With the Democratic sample, the frames significantly increased:

- Worries about voter intimidation
- Worries about altered ballots
- Worries about refusal to accept election results
- Support for automatic voter registration
- Support for election day registration
- Intention to resist attempts to overturn the election

With the Republican sample, the frames did not significantly:

- Decrease concern about election interference
- Increase support for policies that limit voter access (e.g., voter ID laws) or that might intimidate voters (e.g., deploying ICE at the polls)
- Decrease support for policies to expand voter access

The framed message had no effect on intention to vote

- This was true for both Democrats and Republicans
- While effects were not statistically significant, effects for both groups were positive, suggesting no signs of a backfire effect.



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Join us next time

Culture, Mindsets, and Democracy
Thursday, October 22
1pm ET/10am PT

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