



The State of American Culture

250 Years In



Introduction

Two hundred fifty years ago, the Declaration of Independence was adopted. It is a document that asserts certain truths to be “self-evident:” “That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The Declaration uses these self-evident truths to upend a long-established political order, launch a new era, and found a nation.

Over our history, we have grappled with and contested the meaning of those truths. Who do those rights apply to, and who is excluded? While the Founders limited those rights to white, property-holding men, movements from the abolitionists and suffragists to the civil rights, women’s, LGBTQIA+, and immigrant justice movements have expanded them. Other movements, including workers’ and Indigenous movements, have called into question not just the meaning of but the focus on individual rights.

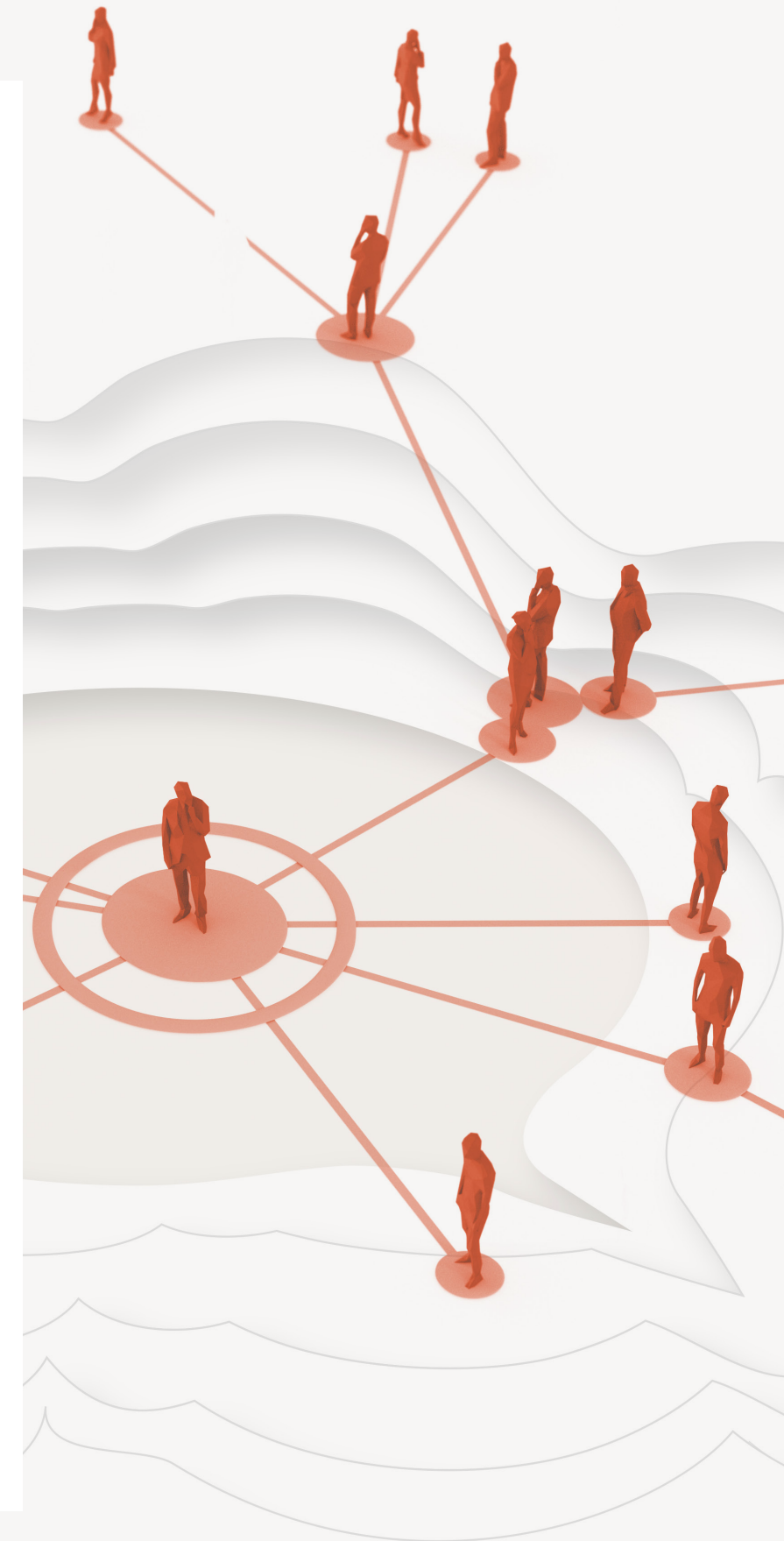
These contests over the truths we hold to be self-evident are contests over the character of our social and political order. The taken-for-granted assumptions that are widely shared at a given time influence how we make sense of and evaluate the world around us. They both reflect and shape the society we build whether in 1776 or 2026.

What truths do we the people of the United States hold to be self-evident now?

At the FrameWorks Institute, we study these self-evident truths or, as we call them, cultural mindsets—the deep assumptions and implicit understandings that shape how people think and act. In American culture, there are (and always have been) multiple, often contradictory mindsets that people can draw on to think about the same issues. Yet among the different mindsets we have available to us at any given time, some mindsets are more dominant than others. Those dominant mindsets constitute the cultural common sense of a given era.

When a society is in a period of crisis or transformation, mindsets—which are generally quite durable—are sometimes placed in question. In these periods, assumptions about society become highly contested, mindsets can shift in dominance, and cultural common sense evolves.

America is currently in such a period—a time of immense social, political, and economic upheaval. FrameWorks launched the Culture Change Project to understand and support our partners in navigating the contests over our cultural common sense in this era of crisis and transformation. When the project began in



the spring of 2020, we were in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, our country has experienced ongoing authoritarian encroachment, a skyrocketing cost of living, and violence against immigrants and people of color. It has also experienced the racial justice uprisings of 2020, massive protests against authoritarianism, and widespread discontent with corporate power.

As a result of these upheavals, we are seeing the self-evident truths of the recent past placed in question. This has opened doors simultaneously to repression, exclusion, and injustice on a massive scale and to the possibility of transformative changes that would bring our country closer to the promise of justice and democracy than it has ever been. The stakes are high. Understanding these contests is critical for organizers, campaigners, advocates, and storytellers looking to shape what comes next.

What cultural contests do we need to navigate today?

Five key contests we can't afford to lose:

- 1.** People believe “the system is rigged”—but who’s rigging it, who’s benefiting, and who’s being left behind is up for debate. On one hand, this opens space for **racist, anti-immigrant, and authoritarian** thinking. On the other, it creates space for a critique of corporate power and failures of representation and opens a path toward **equalization of power** across systems in society.
- 2. Bootstraps and meritocratic thinking** is waning but still persists. Increasingly, people see our economy and **inequality as the products of collective design**. We’re in the middle of a contest over fundamental assumptions about the economy.
- 3.** People don’t feel like our government works for them—but what to do is unclear. We’re seeing a contest over whether that dissatisfaction will be channeled toward **authoritarianism or democracy**.
- 4.** People want a more unified country—but what that unity might look like or require can go in very different directions. The contest over the idea of unity will impact whether we **look back or look ahead** to find a vision for our country’s next 250 years.
- 5.** Gender has become increasingly salient in culture, yet there’s a basic contest over gender’s role in our society—between the idea that a **social order stratified by gender is natural** and the view of gender hierarchy as a product of unjust social design.



Update on Key Cultural Contests



01

KEY CONTEST: WHAT DOES “THE SYSTEM IS RIGGED” MEAN?

People agree the system is rigged against them—but sometimes understand this in racist, anti-immigrant, and authoritarian terms, and sometimes in terms of corporate power and insufficient democracy.

Our society is set up to benefit the powerful few while leaving the rest of us behind—and Americans can see that. Across groups, people overwhelmingly see systems in our society as rigged against them. Yet what this means is highly contested.

The *System Is Rigged* mindset, at its core, is relatively simple. People in power rig “the system” such that “some people” benefit and “regular” people get a raw deal. Yet people can and do fill in the blanks of the mindset—*Who* is rigging the system? *Who* is benefiting? *Who* is getting left behind?—in profoundly different ways. Compare these two very different manifestations of the mindset:



“Who is paying for all of this? Ultimately, it’s us. It’s not the upper class. It’s not the millionaires, the billionaires. The people that are paying for it, it’s just a regular guy. [...] If there’s more richer people now, then as a country, should we be flourishing more? And the real answer is no, because the more money you make, the less taxes you pay.”

Research participant, February 2025

“[The immigration system is] very grossly unmanaged. We’re having immigrants come over from other countries, and they are being housed and fed before our disabled vets are.”

Research participant, December 2022

People have a shared, lived experience of the system being rigged against them, but they don’t always have a clear sense of *how*. This lends the mindset tremendous malleability, opening space, alternatively, for a powerful critique of power and inequality in our economic and political systems, or for anti-immigrant and racist narratives that fuel exclusion and convince people that the only way to change a rigged system is to give a strongman complete control.

The *System Is Rigged* mindset is so dominant and top-of-mind that there’s simply no question of *whether* we should activate and engage with it. No matter what we do, people *will* draw on the mindset to make sense of what’s happening in our society.

If progressives don’t tell a story about what it means for our systems to be rigged, we cede this vital cultural terrain to right-wing populists who consistently fill in the blanks in ways that justify hate and repression. The question is *how* to tell a compelling, sticky story about how our system is rigged in ways that inoculate against xenophobia, racism, and authoritarianism, and that channel this mindset to build demand for the changes needed to make our society more democratic and just. The good news—[research tells us not only that this is possible, but how to do it.](#)

LEARN MORE

To find an effective framing strategy for contesting the *System Is Rigged* mindset, read our full report: [Filling in the Blanks: Contesting What “the System Is Rigged” Means](#). If you need guidance fast, we also have a [quick-start guide](#).



02

KEY CONTEST: BOOTSTRAPS MERITOCRACY VS. AN UNEQUAL ECONOMY BY DESIGN

Bootstraps thinking and faith in meritocracy are fading, while the idea that our economy is designed—and designed to be unequal—is growing.

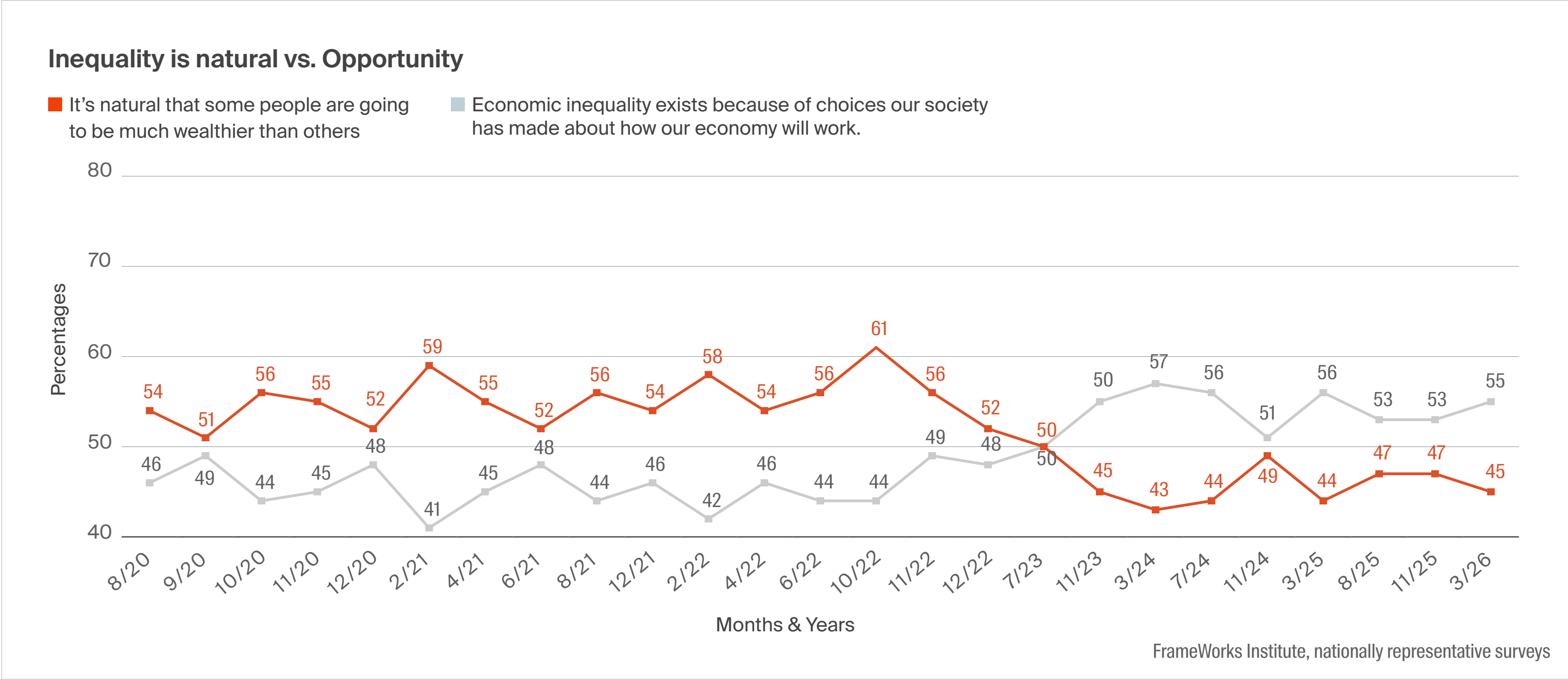
Bootstraps narratives about financial success are a well-established part of American culture. Ever since the Reagan era, bootstraps thinking, in combination with “market naturalism”—the idea that economic markets are driven by natural forces and work best when left to their own devices—has been central to our economic common sense.

Yet now, belief in meritocracy and the assumption that inequality is a product of natural market forces have been placed in question. In fact, for years, these mindsets have been on the decline, as people have come to see the economy as a designed system and to recognize that economic inequality is the result of choices our society makes.

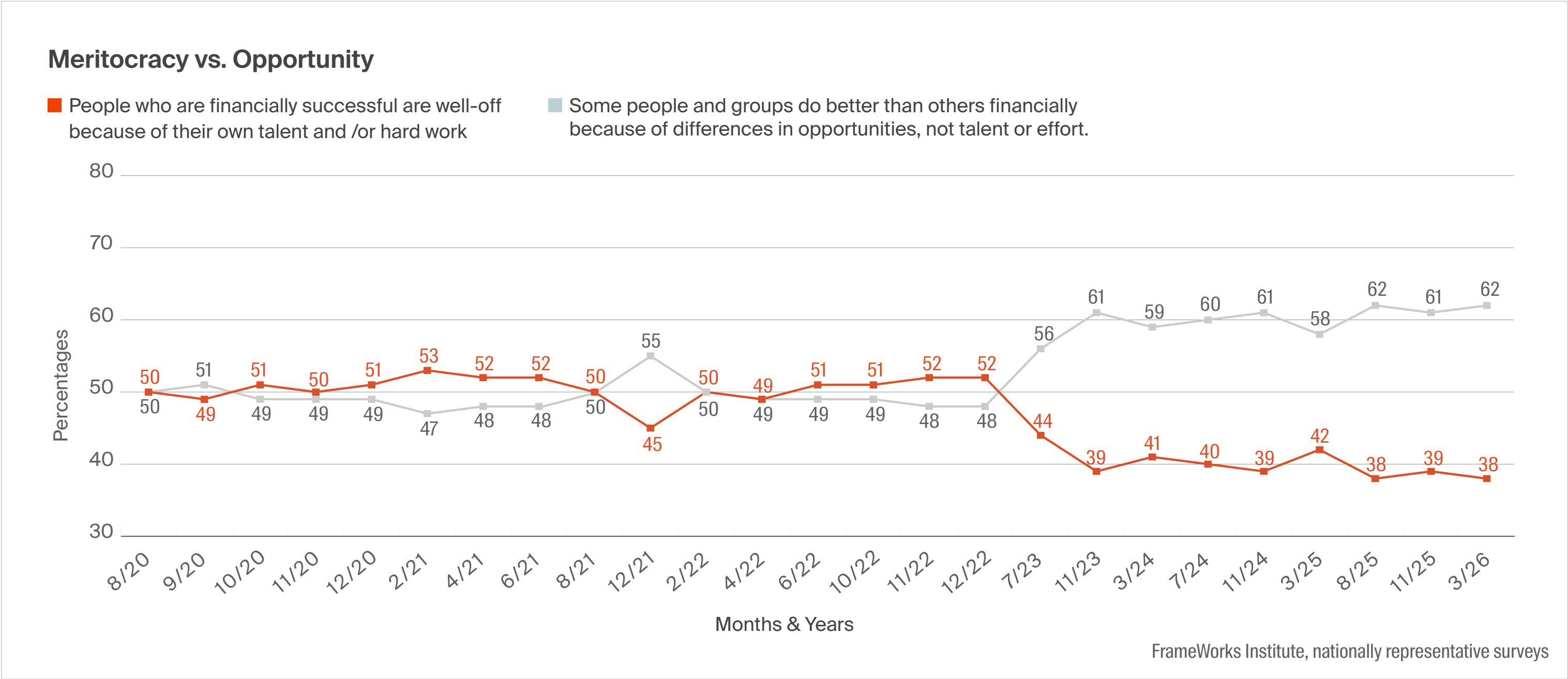


This trend isn't new. From Occupy Wall Street to the Fight for \$15, movements have been fighting against this old orthodoxy. In the current era, we see this shift accelerating. In our Culture Tracking Survey, we have tracked this shift in real time. At the outset of

the Culture Change Project, a majority of people still saw inequality as natural. Now, a majority see **economic inequality as the result of choices our society has made** about how our economy will work:



Similarly, since 2022, a large majority has come to see **financial success as due to differences in opportunity, not hard work**:



These shifts in thinking about the economy are undoubtedly driven by people’s experiences of the economy, including inflation. People recognize inflation as out of their control and see government as responsible for it, which backgrounds bootstraps thinking. Yet these shifts are also deeper, tied to the broader sense that “the system is rigged” and the sense that society generally has been set up in ways that unfairly benefit the powerful few.

The contest over the economy is already tilting in the right direction. This suggests that we can—and should—not only acknowledge people’s real struggles but respond to people’s desire for meaningful change by offering solutions that would genuinely transform the economy.

LEARN MORE

If you’re working at the intersection of economic justice and work and labor, check out [Reframing Work, Rebalancing Power: Three Framing Strategies That Connect Jobs with Economic Justice](#).

03

KEY CONTEST: AUTHORITARIANISM VS. DEMOCRACY

People don't feel like our government works for them—and that dissatisfaction can either fuel authoritarianism or be channeled toward building a stronger democracy.

Americans are massively dissatisfied with our political system. In August 2025, we found that 71 percent of survey participants believed our political system needs either major changes or to be completely reformed.

Americans have long held negative views of their government. That's not new. Previously, those views were grounded in the idea that government is inefficient or that, due to the nature of politicians, it is inherently corrupt. With the rise of *System Is Rigged* thinking, people have come to understand problems with government and the political system in a new way. Drawing on this mindset, they recognize that our political system is *set up* and being *manipulated* at its core to benefit powerful people. This goes beyond familiar, long-standing dissatisfaction with politicians. Now, people see the system itself as fundamentally unfair.

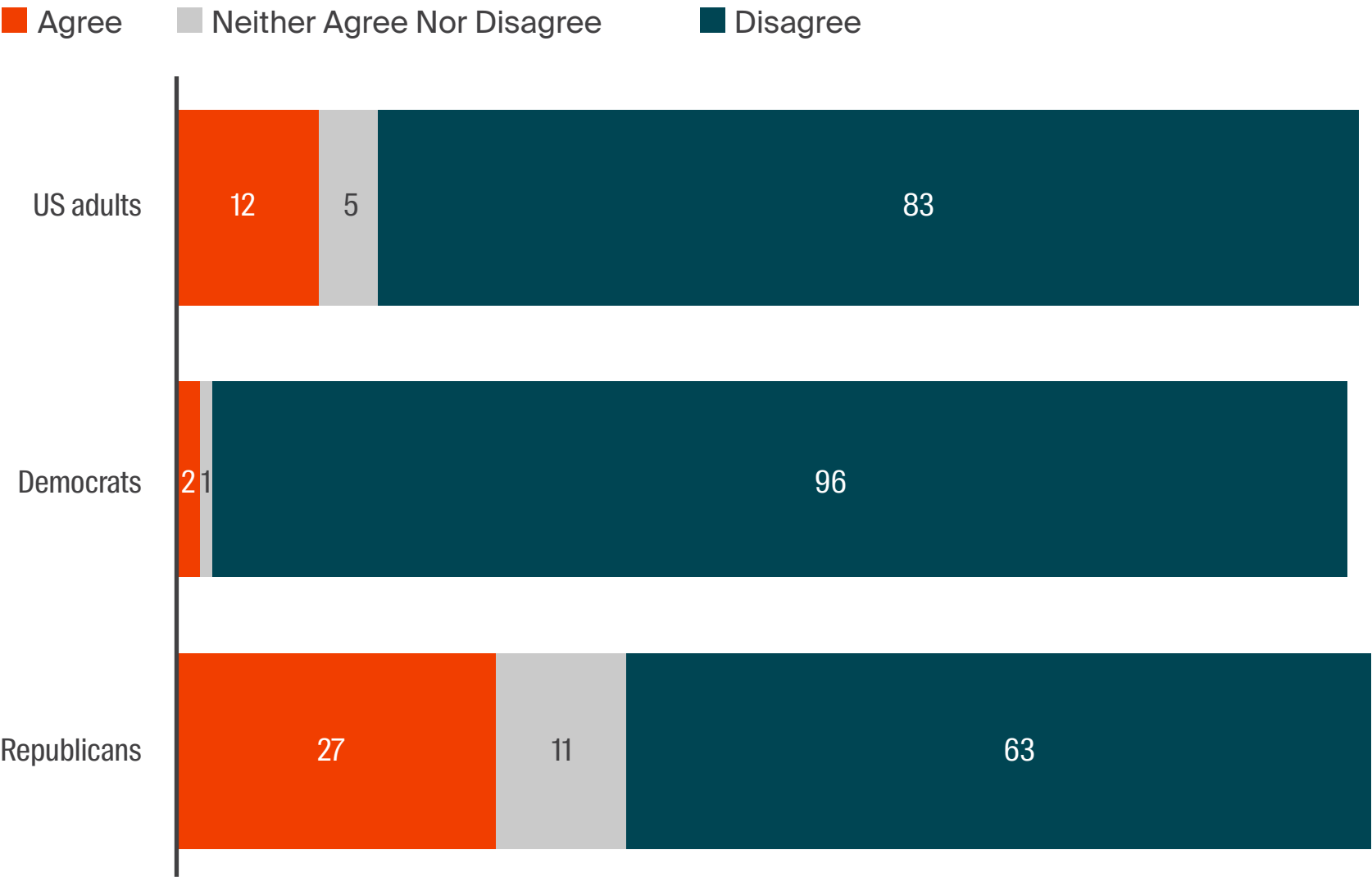


This way of thinking brings into view the ways in which the current system is fundamentally unrepresentative and unresponsive. Yet the *System Is Rigged* mindset can also fuel support for authoritarian consolidation of power. That’s because if our political system is truly rigged, people reasonably struggle to imagine how we could change it through our existing system. If people cannot see another path to change, people can turn to a strongman who promises to bring about change through whatever means necessary.

While the sense that the political system is rigged *can* fuel support for authoritarianism, it can also fuel support for the changes to our system needed to address the long-standing problems that have *always* prevented it from being fully democratic. And the good news is that when actually presented with the alternatives, people *don’t* mostly support expanding authoritarian control.

Americans, including Republicans, overwhelmingly oppose expanding presidential power.

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



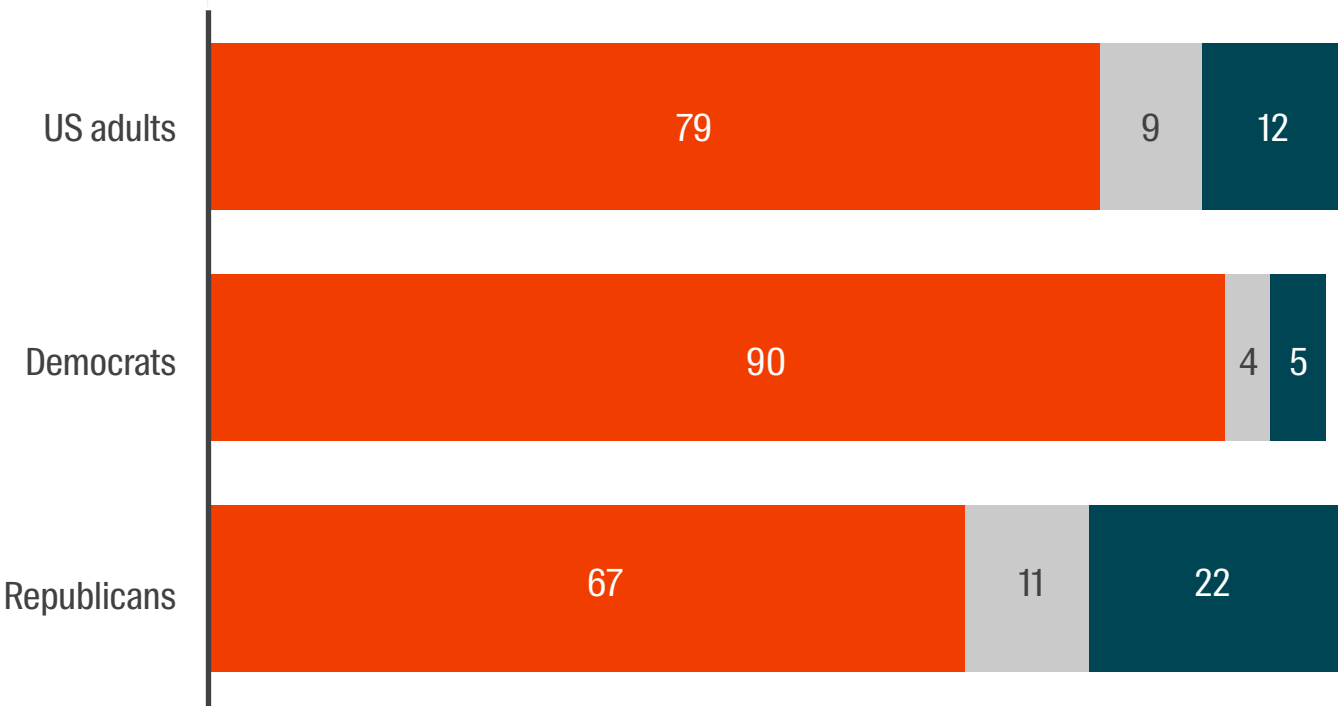
FrameWorks Institute, nationally representative survey, August 2025, N = 300

And there *is* widespread support for reforms that would actually democratize our system, like establishing term limits for Supreme Court justices and abolishing the electoral college:

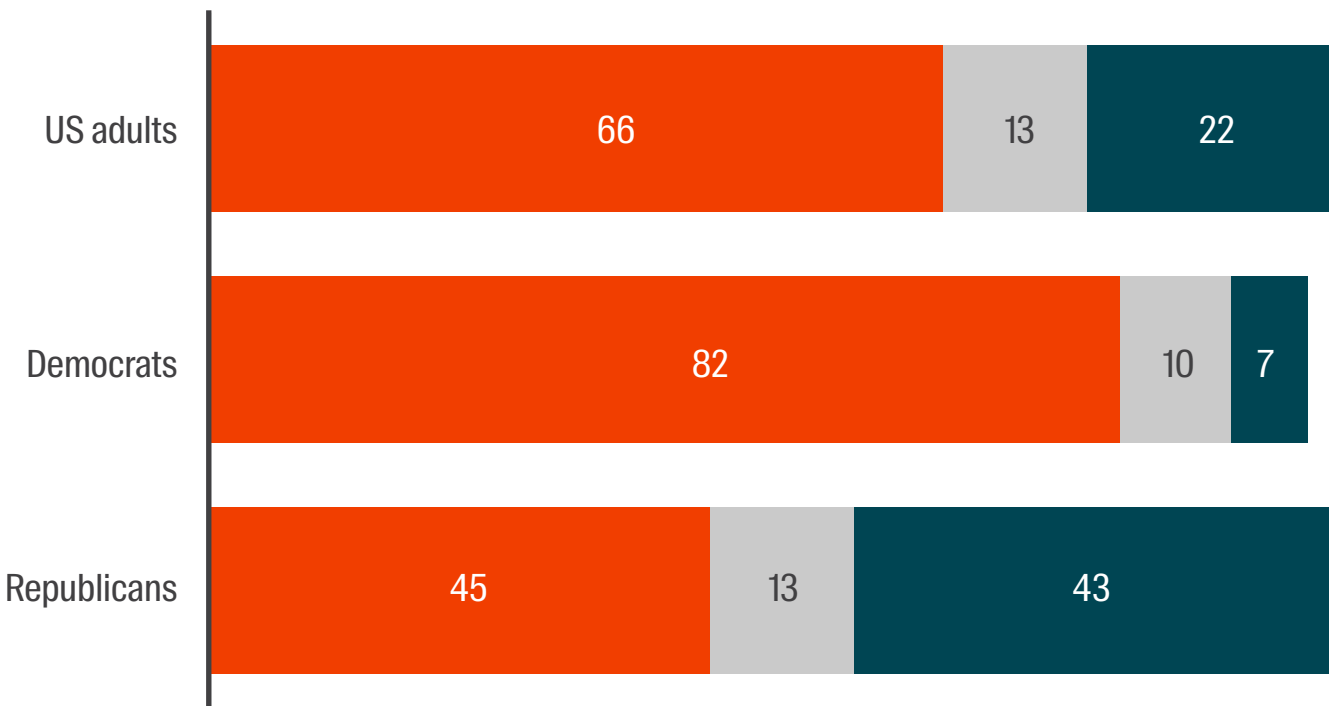
There is broad support for democratic reforms.

■ Agree ■ Neither Agree Nor Disagree ■ Disagree

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.”



Also encouraging is the rapid evolution of people’s thinking about authoritarianism over the course of 2025 and 2026.

Over the course of the last year we have seen the development of a burgeoning understanding of the rule of law. This began with concerns about the arbitrary and out-of-control character of government actions. Now, people are starting to connect this to acting *lawlessly*. This came through most clearly in focus groups conducted at the start of 2026 focusing on ICE. In these groups, participants didn’t just critique how ICE was conducting immigration enforcement—they consistently characterized ICE as acting outside the law.

“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.”

Research participant, February 2026

In the midst of everything that has happened since January 2025, these rapid developments in public thinking are a reason for hope. People’s lived experiences of the past year seem to be directing them away from authoritarianism.

We must make the most of this moment. People are fed up with our political system and want change. We can’t cede that desire for change to authoritarians. We must offer strong, democratic alternatives that show a path to unrigging the system and making the promise of government by and for the people a reality.

LEARN MORE

For a deep dive into everything we know from four years of research into public thinking and effective framing about democracy and authoritarianism, read our report [From Protecting the Status Quo to a Vision for Change: Framing Democracy in a Time of Authoritarianism](#). For a highly usable narrative on political system change, turn to [Reviving Our Democracy: A Narrative for the New Political System We Need](#), a toolkit we produced in partnership with the Democracy Revival Center and The Bloc. And for more on our research into public thinking about ICE and the rule of law, check out our framing guide [Responding to ICE and Countering Authoritarianism](#).



04

KEY CONTEST: LOOKING BACK VS. LOOKING AHEAD

People want a more unified country—
but what unity would look like or require
can mean very different things.

When the Culture Change Project began, unity was already a salient issue in people’s minds. But our researchers noted something surprising at the start of the project in the spring of 2020: Focus group participants were shockingly optimistic about our country’s ability to come together and address the issues it faced. Shared experiences of lockdown were fostering a sense of solidarity.

By 2021, the hope borne from the shared crisis had faded. Reactions against public health mandates, backlash against the summer’s racial justice uprisings, and the January 6 attempted coup made plain the depth of the country’s divisions and led to a sense of despair about the country ever being able to come together.



In the face of that despair, unity and division became more and more salient. It also became increasingly clear in our research that people have two competing (and conflicting) ways of thinking about unity.

- **Unity through Progress:** When people use this mindset, they understand unity as something that can only happen if we address long-standing injustices and move forward together.
- **Unity through Restoration:** When people use this mindset, they understand unity as something that can be achieved if we return to a mythical past when there was, supposedly, social harmony. Unity, according to this way of thinking, rests on the restoration of racial, gender, and other hierarchies. This mindset understands attempts to address injustice as a *cause* of division—a deviation from the unity that can be achieved when everyone stays in their assigned place.

Concerns about division have only increased in 2025 and 2026. Many focus group participants now worry that a civil war may be imminent, as they believe people have no other way of resolving division.

“Looking forward, where do you think the country is headed? What’s in the future for the US?”

Researcher

“I feel like it’s a civil war. [...] It just seems like there’s a lot of people who feel one way and are very extreme about those feelings. And the same can be said for the other side. And I really don’t think that this is gonna be solved any time soon.” (February 2026)

Participant

As fear of division and longing for unity continue to grow, it is becoming increasingly important for us to be attentive to what people *mean* when they say they want unity and what they think it will take for us to get there. This means not only strengthening the *Unity through Progress* mindset but helping people imagine more inclusive and expansive social relationships—from cross-racial solidarity to fluid and egalitarian gender practices to genuine welcoming of immigrants.

LEARN MORE

More research is needed to know the most effective ways of navigating conversations around unity. In the meantime, for more on these competing mindsets see our report: [Which Unity? Whose Diversity? Cultural Mindsets around Pluralism in the United States](#).



05

GENDER HIERARCHY AS NATURAL VS. AS A RESULT OF UNJUST DESIGN

There's a contest over gender's role in society—between the idea that organizing society around gender roles is natural and the idea that it's the product of unjust social choices.

Americans can think about gender roles in society in fundamentally different ways—as part of the natural order or as the result of social design. The latter view brings into sight how gender has been constructed and used to justify the subordination of women in society.

These different ways of thinking about gender's role in society are grounded in fundamental assumptions about what gender is. Over the course of the Culture Change Project, we've identified three core mindsets that structure Americans' thinking about gender:



- **Gender Is a Fixed Binary:** The assumption that everyone’s gender is either “man” or “woman,” and that gender is assigned at birth and remains unchanged throughout a person’s life.
- **Gender Essentialism:** The idea that biological sex determines character and behavior.
- **Gender Is Constructed:** The idea that differences between genders are the result of what society expects.

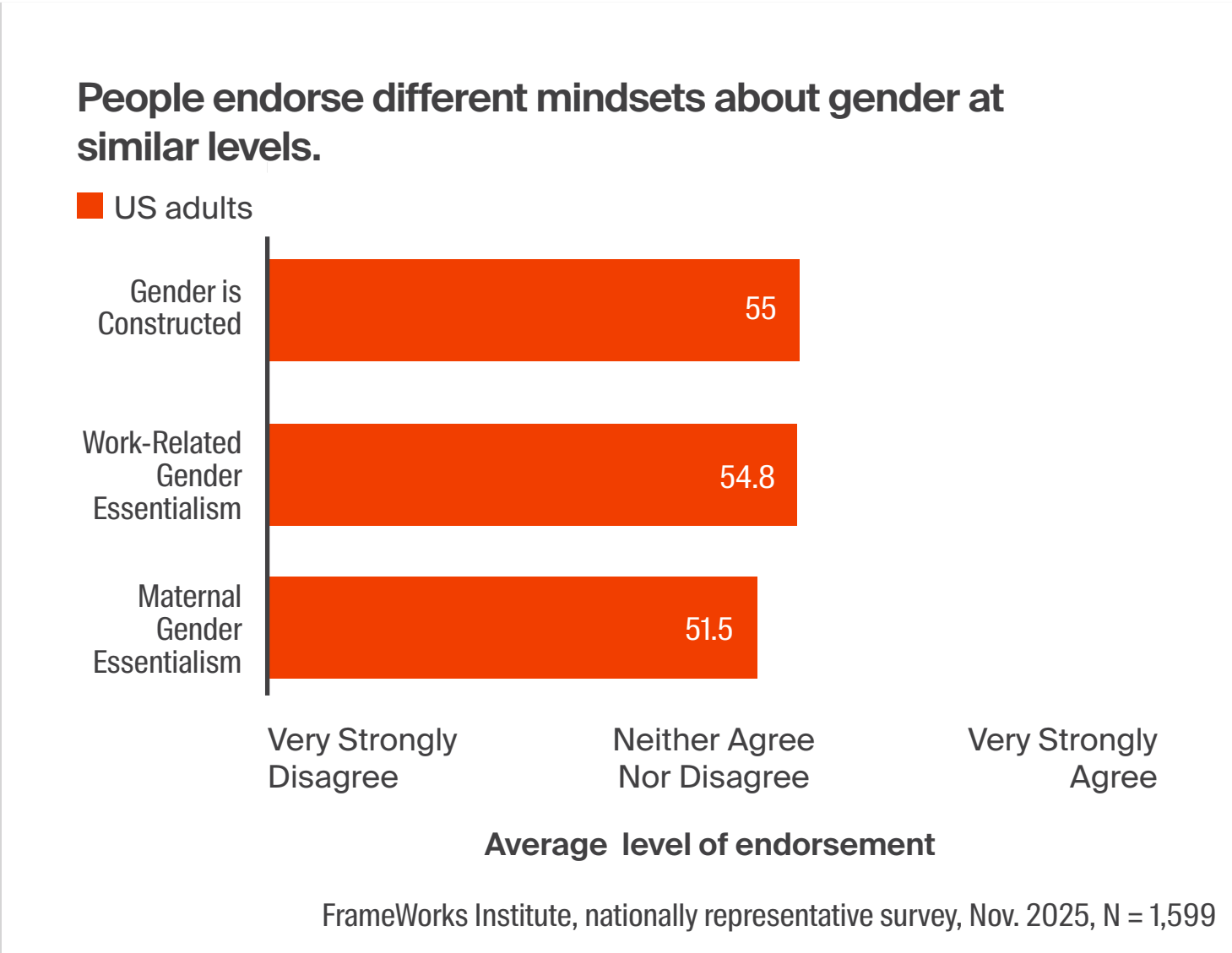
Gender has become increasingly salient over the course of the Culture Change Project. In our early focus groups in 2020, gender was rarely brought up by participants unless researchers explicitly asked about it. Now, gender comes up regularly, unprompted, in our focus groups—and often through the *Gender Is a Fixed Binary* mindset. We first noted in 2023 that when gender is the topic of conversation, “trans issues” quickly dominate. “Gender” is often discussed in the context of transphobic arguments about “what’s wrong with the world today”:

“Now, you can even identify yourself as an Apache helicopter because this world is going crazy. If I say I’m a cow, I wanna be a cow, I can identify as a cow. What is that? I don’t find that normal.”
Research participant, March 2024

The “now” in the above quote is crucial to understanding the lens through which many people are thinking about gender in this moment. They rely on the idea that *Gender Is a Fixed Binary* while either implicitly or explicitly comparing a present they don’t like to a past where things were “normal.”

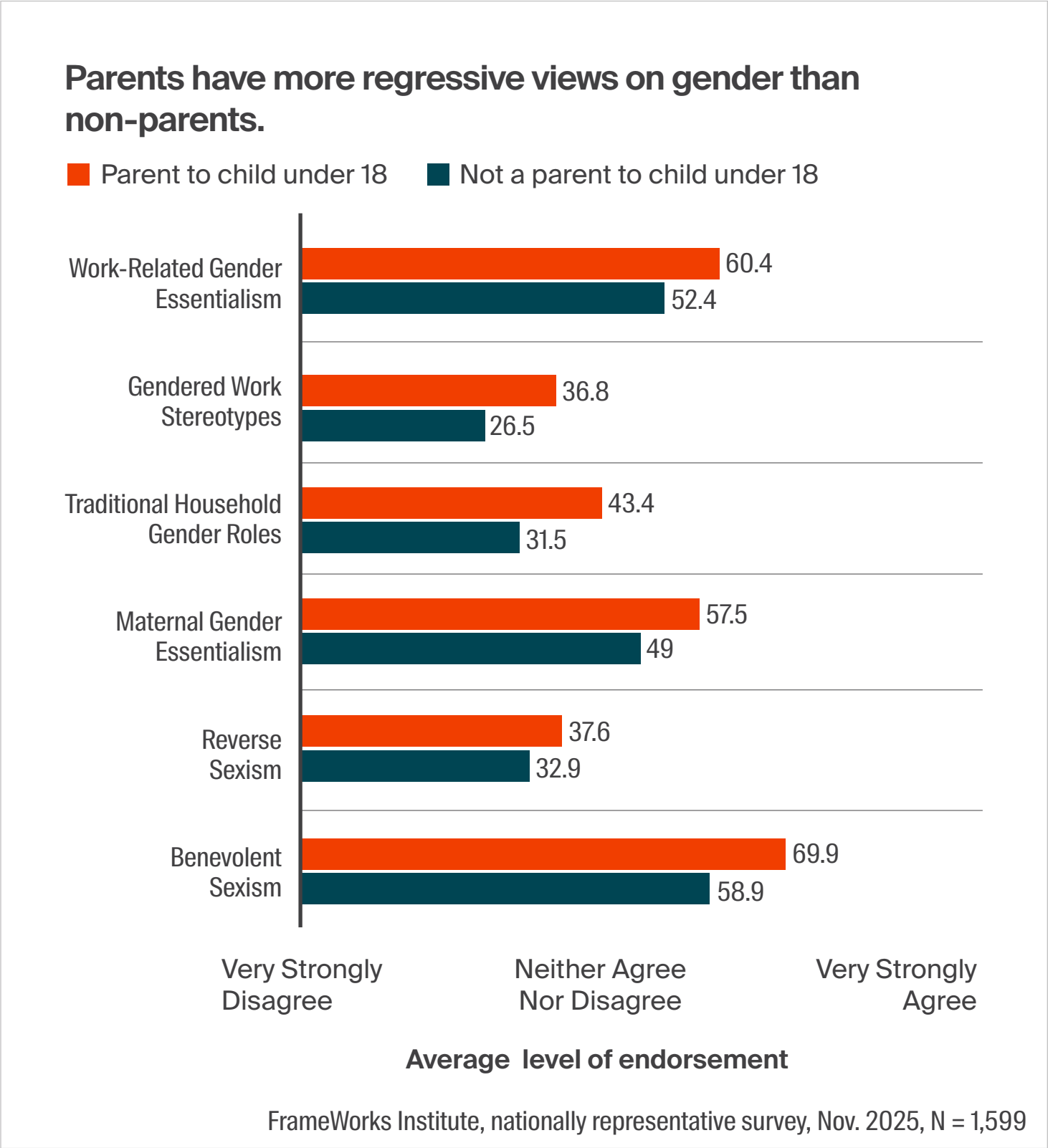
This is the result of a coordinated narrative strategy that deploys harmful and dehumanizing language against trans people to make the case that our country is going in the wrong direction.

The Gender Essentialism and the Gender Is a Fixed Binary mindsets persist alongside the idea that Gender Is Constructed. Data from a survey fielded in November 2025 show that people endorse these essentialist and constructed mindsets to nearly identical extents:



These new survey findings align with what we consistently hear in our focus group research. While in one moment, participants might suggest that there are natural differences between women and men due to innate biological and personality differences, in another moment, the same people push back against the concept of traditional gender roles.

One of the most striking findings to emerge from our research into the current cultural contest over gender is that parents to children under 18 hold sexist and gender essentialist views at higher rates than people who are not. While we might expect that parenting would make people more likely to reject traditional gender roles, the data paint a very different picture:



This result is not just a result of age. Millennial parents hold gender essentialist views more than Millennial non-parents. We suspect that tradwife and manosphere narratives, coupled with burnout and the difficulty of parenting in today’s society, may be driving these patterns. More research is needed to understand the intersection of current arental status and mindsets around gender.

Gender is being weaponized to sow division and roll back the progress our country has made over the past 250 years. If we want a more democratic and just country, we can’t cede the issue of gender to those peddling transphobic and sexist narratives.

While people can, at times, see gender as constructed—and recognize how society’s collective approach to gender has been used to subordinate women and LGBTQIA+ people—they often struggle to envision what a flexible, egalitarian, and inclusive approach to gender would look like. To win this contest, we need to advance narratives that help people imagine what gender would look like in a just social order.

LEARN MORE

For previous findings on how people are thinking about gender, see [3 Things to Know about How Americans Are Thinking about Gender in 2024](#) and [Three Things to Know about How Americans Are Thinking about Gender in 2023](#). We will be publishing new research into gender, including findings from a series of in-depth cognitive interviews with members of the public, over the coming months. Make sure you are [subscribed to On Culture](#), the Culture Change Project newsletter, to get research as soon as it is released.

To stay up-to-date on findings from the FrameWorks Institute's *Culture Change Project*, please follow us on Instagram (@frameworksinstitute), LinkedIn, and subscribe to our monthly *On Culture* newsletter here.

