Culture, Mindsets, and Democracy:

Navigating a Changing Landscape

Public Thinking Ahead of the 2026 Midterms

October 22, 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.

What we'll be covering today:

How the "system is rigged" mindset undergirds the anger and discontent animating this year's election

How demand for changes to the political system explains voter engagement and messaging resonance

Why voters see "affordability" as a key election issue

How understanding public thinking about threats to election integrity can help us navigate the coming weeks

Questions from you

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 for today:

- Focus groups featuring 72 participants from July-September 2026.
- Ongoing, nationally-representative mindsets tracking survey data from August 2020–August 2026.
- 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).

The anger, anti-incumbent sentiments, and anti-system attitudes animating the election are fueled by Americans' belief that our systems are rigged.

THE HILL SUBSCRIBE SIGN IN NEWSLETTERS

SENATE

Anti-incumbent mood sweeping country in troubling sign for GOP majorities

158 BY ALEXANDER BOLTON - 07/06/26 6:00 AM ET

Updated Aug 17, 2026 - Politics & Policy

Older Democrats walloped by midterms anti-establishment revolt



Andrew Solender

Add Axios on Google

Oct 18, 2026 - Politics & Policy

Anti-party, anti-politician candidates surge in midterms



Hans Nichols

Add Axios on Googl

Anti-establishment wave hits US midterms as outsiders ditch party labels to win over angry voters

From pastors and former military officers to sports personalities and workers, unconventional contenders are presenting themselves as alternatives to traditional politicians

OPINION

DAVID MARCUS: MAGA voters trigger anti-incumbent earthquake, and it's little wonder why

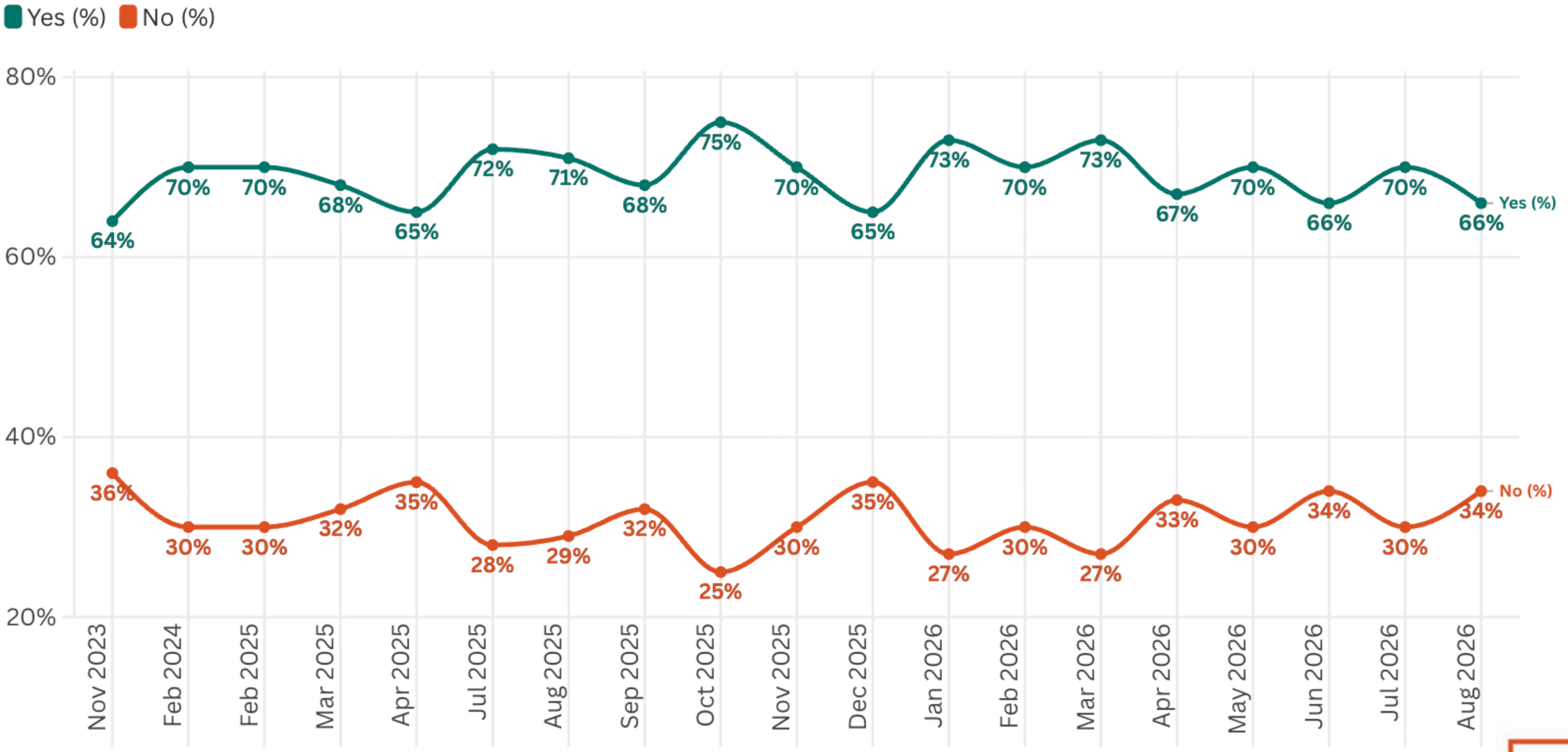
Cassidy, Massie, Crenshaw ousted while Cornyn faces runoff and Capito drops 20 points from her 2020 margin



OPINION By David Marcus · Fox News

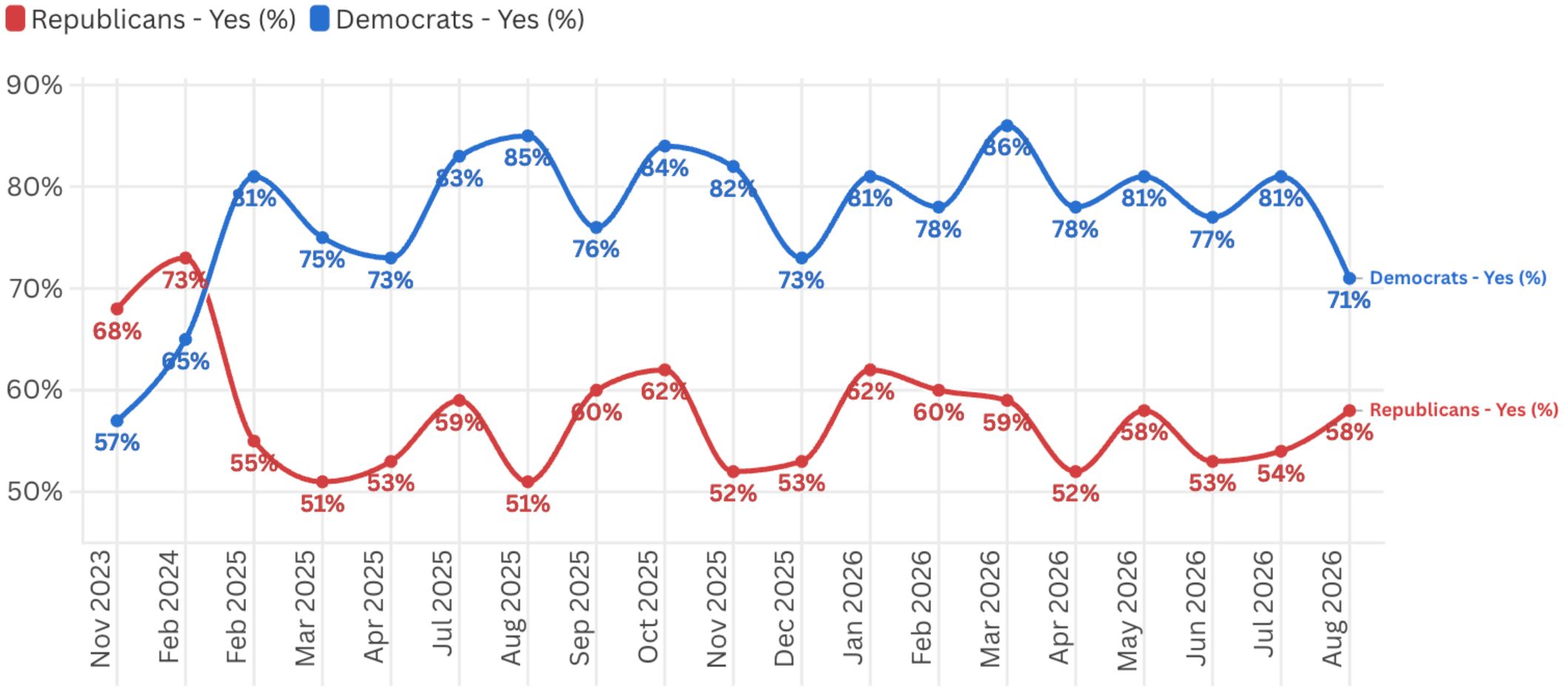
Published May 20, 2026 11:25am EDT

Most Americans agree that 'the system is rigged' in America



Source: FrameWorks Institute, 2026: n = 19,325. Credibility Intervals across waves range from +/- 3.0 to +/- 6.9.

The majority of both Democrats and Republicans believe that 'the system is rigged'



Source: FrameWorks Institute, 2026. Democrats n = 9,496. Credibility intervals for Democrats across waves range from + / - 3.6 to + / - 10.3. Republicans n = 7,612. Credibility intervals for Republicans across waves range from + / - 5.0 to + / - 9.9.

Key takeaway:

People are not merely unhappy with specific policy choices or government actions. They experience the entire system as rigged against them. We can’t ignore this experience.

“System is rigged” thinking extends to every branch of the federal government, including the Supreme Court.

“

Moderator: What if I ask about individual Supreme Court justices—the members that sit on the Court right now. What comes to mind for you?

Participant 1: Sellouts. *(Black, woman, independent, age 55)*

Participant 2: I was gonna say corruption. (White, man, leans Democrat, age 43)

Participant 3: I was gonna say party tools. (Asian American, man, leans Republican, age 25)

Focus Group
September 2026

“

The other two branches are already reflective of the tilted system. How you appoint the third one [the Supreme Court], who’s supposed to be the highest form, is a continuum of a rotten system.” (*Asian American, woman, independent, age 49*)

Research participant, Asian American, woman, independent, age 49
September 2026

“

[The Court is] being bought out and catering to people with billions of dollars or a certain amount of power that have some other nefarious things over them.

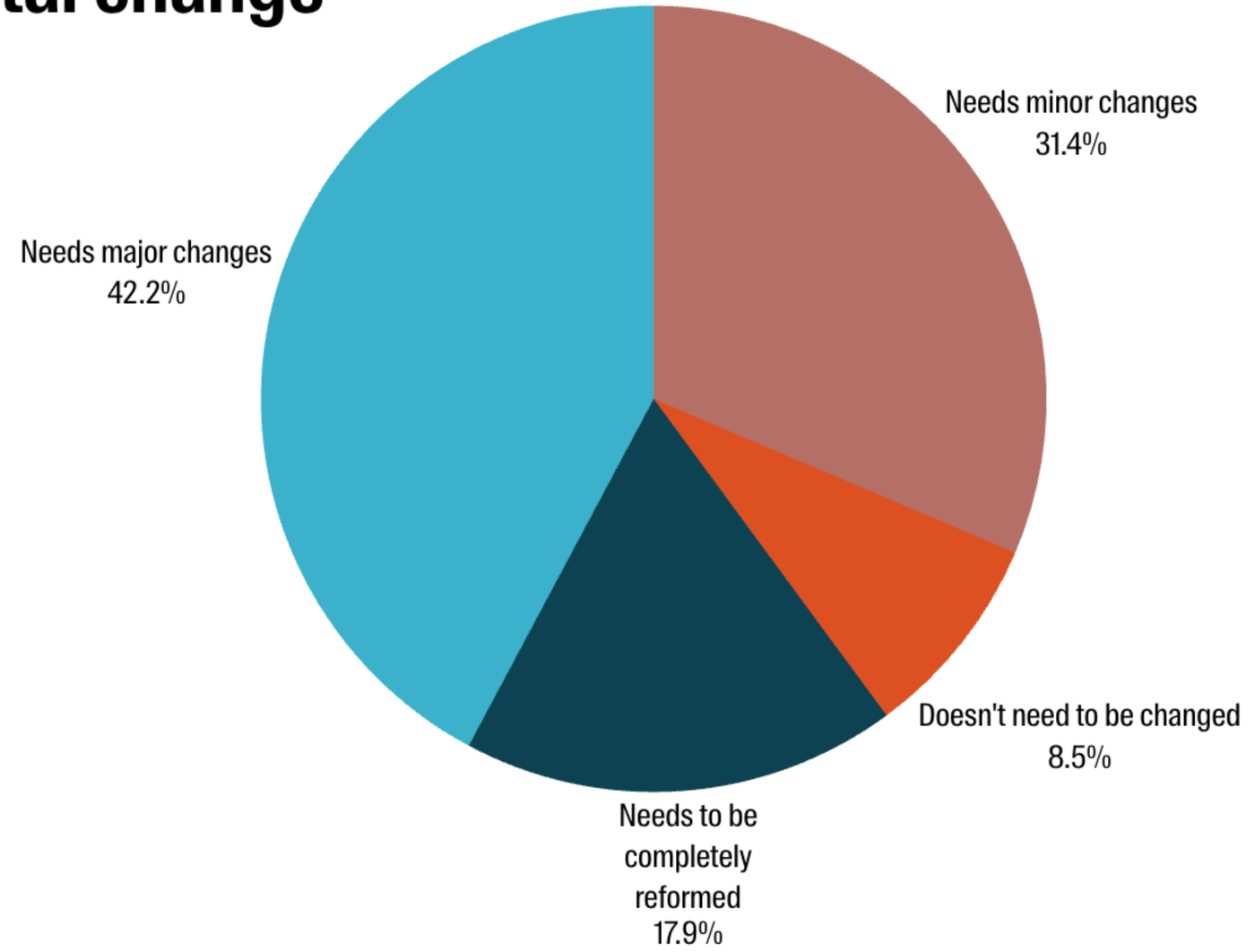
Research participant, White, man, leans Democrat, age 43
September 2026

Key takeaway:

If elections are legally contested and questions go to the Court, this view of the Court will shape the public's responses to and reception of their decisions.

Voters’ desire for changes to the political system itself helps explain engagement and message resonance.

6 in 10 Americans think the political system in the US requires fundamental change



Source: FrameWorks Institute, July 2026. n = 1,019. The credibility interval ranges from +/- 2.3 to +/- 4.0.

Key takeaway:

People want fundamental changes to the system, not "bandaids." This helps explain why some messages are resonating with voters more than others.

Voters’ anger about the cost of living is grounded in deep discontent with our political and economic systems.

As they work harder than ever but can’t get ahead, Americans are questioning “bootstraps” narratives.

“

We’re meant to live. We’re not meant to work and work and work and work, and not have anything, and life not be enjoyable. You just work, and you’re still miserable in life, because you can’t afford to live...

Research participant, white, woman, leans Republican, age 46
September 2026

“

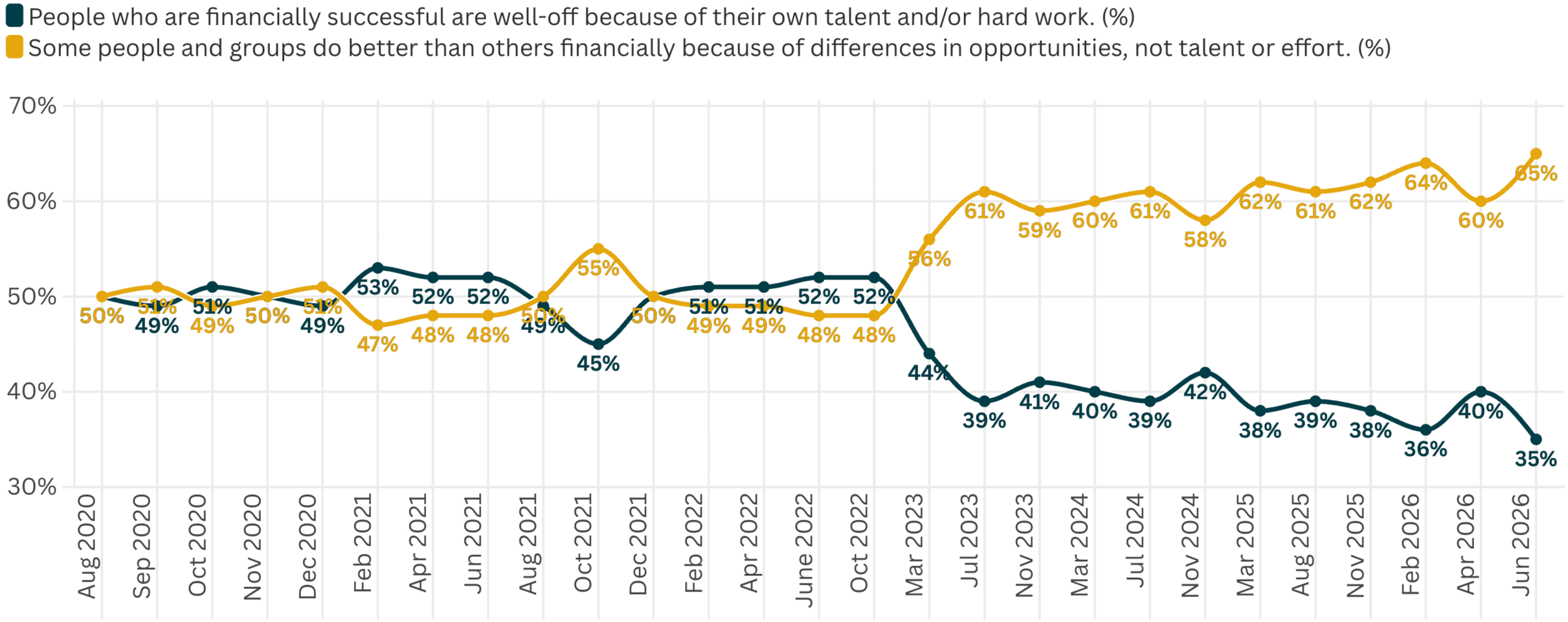
The things that you could afford back then, you can’t afford now. We’re seeing it with the food and stuff like that, but even the things we can’t see, like the chips that go into your phone and stuff, like, things are being tariffed and taxed in a way that we’ve never seen before. So the dollar is worth less than it has ever been in the past, and inflation just keeps changing the gap between poor and rich... People don’t see themselves living long lives anymore. They see themselves living in poverty and dying in poverty. No one sees a way out, because it’s almost like a mountain that you can’t even climb, you know what I mean?

Research participant, Black, man, Democrat,

age 18

September 2026

Americans increasingly believe success is the result of unequal opportunities rather than hard work.



Source: FrameWorks Institute, 2026: n = 28,257. Credibility Intervals across waves range from +/- 3.0 to +/- 5.6

Americans blame unresponsive and unrepresentative government for the cost of living crisis.

“

We’re not doing well. Prices are increasing pretty dramatically, wages are not keeping track with that, depending upon where you are in the country. Housing costs are going up astronomically. And we’ve just got a Congress and an administration that seems to say, hey, let’s do everything we can to fight and obstruct the other guy, and let’s not care about improving the lives of our constituents.

Research participant, White, man,
Republican, age 62
August 2026

Key takeaway:

People don’t (only) want lower gas prices and different leaders. They want political and economic systems that work for them, not just a powerful few.

The public has an uneven grasp of the threats to this year's elections.

How the public thinks about election integrity:

- Baseline level of concern about threats to “free and fair elections” varies widely.
- People have a broad view of what threatens free and fair elections and what election integrity involves.
- Sometimes, people personalize the problem in ways that exceptionalize the issue.
- People largely assume electoral institutions will hold when threatened.
- Thinking about resistance is thin.
- The idea of ICE deployment at the polls is widely and strongly condemned.

Key takeaway:

With the right framing, we can build understanding of the threats and galvanize action.

5 strategies for communicating about election integrity:

- Clarify the source of the threat (e.g., the federal government and its allies at the state and local levels)
- Describe the threat in broad terms—as a concerted effort involving multiple actors and levels of government.
- Talk about election interference as an attempt by those in power to take away our freedom and put us “under their thumb.”
- Use the example of resistance to ICE in Minnesota to show what it can look like to stand up and resist government overreach.
- Emphasize concrete steps that people can take to resist.

FULL GUIDE AVAILABLE:

Framing Threats to Election Integrity

The framing guide will also be distributed as a follow-up to this briefing.

4 things to know about public thinking ahead of the midterms

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- The anger, anti-incumbent sentiments, and anti-system attitudes shaping this year's election dynamics are fueled by Americans' belief that **our systems are rigged.**

- **Voters want fundamental changes to our political and economic systems.** Simply changing leaders or applying bandaid solutions won't satisfy them. This helps us understand why some messages are resonating and others aren't.

- "Affordability" is a high priority issue for voters, but their **concerns go far beyond the price of gas.** Foundational assumptions about our economic and political systems—such as the belief that hard work is key to getting ahead—are being challenged like never before.

- While the public recognizes threats to election integrity, **people usually assume that our electoral institutions will hold.** If downside scenarios happen, the right frames can help motivate a public response.

Q&A

We want to stay connected with you:

Join us next time

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

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