

How American Culture is Changing: 5 Trends to Watch

In times of great turmoil—periods like the Great Depression, or the aftermath of the attacks on 9/11—the ways in which we see and make sense of the world tend to shift. In 2020—as a global pandemic shook the world, racial justice uprisings became widespread, and economic disruptions began to affect millions—the FrameWorks Institute asked: are we in one of these periods of cultural change?

Are the social and political upheavals of the last two years leading to shifts in foundational American mindsets? If so, how, and what opportunities and challenges do those shifts present for those working to advance progressive social change?

The *Culture Change Project* is an ongoing investigation by the FrameWorks Institute designed to uncover shifts in the tacit assumptions and understandings that Americans are drawing on to think about social and political issues. As progressives have struggled to find broadly compelling messaging, it is critical to understand how current events are shaping Americans' underlying mindsets and how those mindsets inform how we think, feel, and act on key issues. Findings from the Culture Change Project can aid progressive leaders, communicators, researchers, and movement builders as we work to effectively communicate about societal problems and solutions that can advance meaningful change.

Thus far, our research is yielding important findings about how American mindsets are and are not shifting—from underlying assumptions about health to how we think about race and racism. A detailed report on those findings and our research methodology can be found [here](#).

As we continue the project, we will begin to explore the relationship between particular mindsets and support for key progressive policies, and how people's thinking shifts in response to *how* key social issues are framed. With this information, we will be releasing strategic framing guidance to aid communication for progressive movements. Until then, here are five important trends in mindsets to better inform your narrative strategies.



TREND #1

Individualism remains a dominant American mindset, but systems thinking is on the rise.

What We're Finding

Individualism is the assumption that individual outcomes—both positive and negative—are a function of a person's will, drive, and choice. This mindset has been foundational in American culture since before the founding of our country, shaping default assumptions about topics as wide-ranging as education, health, poverty, and aging. *Systems thinking*, on the other hand, recognizes how the structures and institutions around us can shape outcomes in favor of some over others.

In both qualitative and quantitative research, we find that members of the public across all subgroups continue to look first to individuals' choices to explain societal problems. However, based on more than 20 years of research on Americans' cultural mindsets, we saw that there was a rise in systemic thinking in spring-summer 2020, which has persisted over time. This systemic perspective does not seem to be displacing individualism but rather, for some people, is creating more balanced thinking about the role of individual and structural factors in influencing outcomes. It is important to note that the rise of systemic thinking does not extend to health. Across political affiliations, people continue to view health as a function of individual choices more so than a product of our environments, access to resources, and/or policies.

So What?

Although individualism won't be fully replaced by systemic thinking, if Americans more consistently view societal issues from a perspective that recognizes how environments and policies shape us, the need for fundamental changes—from the rebalancing of economic power to policies that advance racial equity—becomes easier to see and support.

TREND #2

People are increasingly acknowledging the systemic components of racism, along with individual biases.

What We're Finding

Consistent with the findings about individualism, Americans overwhelmingly attribute racial disparities to people's individual biases as opposed to fundamental problems that exist within our systems and institutions. However, our research indicates that a structural view of racism is increasingly present among Americans, and that this view has persisted even as the intensity and prevalence of racial justice protests has decreased. Levels of endorsement for a structural view of racism did not drop between August 2020 and December 2021. If anything, structural thinking seems to be gaining a durable foothold.

So What

The *persistence* of the recognition of systemic racism is critically important, potentially signaling that the uprisings and national conversations about race may have led to lasting cultural shifts in how Americans think about race and racism. This trend also speaks to people's ability to hold multiple mindsets at once, meaning that even while interpersonal racism exists and *can* be used as a reason to avoid examining systems and structures, people are increasingly balancing that mindset with a more comprehensive one. This is an important opportunity for progressive communicators to continue to tap into that systemic mindset without needing to invalidate the individual one.

TREND #3

People recognize that policy shapes economic outcomes but, paradoxically, see the job market and inequality as outside of government control.

What We're Finding

According to our research, the pandemic seems to have consolidated the recognition that public policy can affect who benefits in the economy. Even though this mindset is slightly more prominent among Democrats than Republicans, the majority of people *across* groups recognize that policy plays a major role in shaping economic outcomes. However, the specific ways that the government can shape economic realities is not well understood. People think of government as something outside and apart from the economy that can push or nudge it in particular directions, but they don't see government as writing the rules as to, fundamentally, how the economy *works*.

Although the majority of people see the economy as a designed system, many aspects of the economy are assumed to be outside of the government's capacity to influence. Specifically, inequality is seen as something that is naturally occurring, particularly among Republicans. Even among Democrats, the mindset that inequality is natural is strong, despite the dominant belief that policy can shape outcomes. Similar thinking is also applied to work and jobs—people see jobs and pay as determined by a naturally functioning market that's outside of government control.

So What?

Absent a full understanding of how policy shapes economic outcomes, people assume that both the job market and economic inequality are inevitable because it's impossible to see how we could change the system to address inequality at a foundational level. This is both a challenge and an opportunity for progressives. Because people struggle to understand how government structures the economy, it limits people's ability to see that things like jobs and inequality can be addressed by government changing basic policy choices.

TREND #4

“System is rigged” thinking has become an even more dominant part of American culture.

What We’re Finding

Discourse about how the “system is rigged” has become increasingly common. But what system are we talking about? Who is rigging it, why, and how?

Over the past decade, we’ve seen this mindset increasingly dominate thinking about economic and political issues, and the past two years have reinforced this trend. Americans across ideological and demographic groups widely draw upon this mindset to explain real and perceived injustices in American society. However, there is a lack of explanation as to *who* is pulling the strings, *what* systems are being rigged, and *how* this is happening.

This lack of specificity leaves the mindset open to multiple uses and interpretations, meaning it can be cued and manipulated in different ways by political actors to serve their own interests. Conservatives often fill in the blanks by pointing the finger at Latinx immigrants, Black people, Jews, and socialists, suggesting that liberal elites are rigging the system to benefit these groups at the expense of white Americans. Progressive accounts highlight corporate power and the ways that business and political elites protect and reinforce their power to stack the deck against working families and exploit marginalized groups.

So What?

The prevalence *and* contestation of this mindset leaves progressives with a couple of important opportunities. “System is rigged” thinking is open to being activated by both progressives and conservatives, which presents an urgent opportunity for progressives to activate this mindset in ways that build understanding and ultimately support for progressive systems change.

Additionally, because people don’t have a clear sense of how the system is rigged, it becomes difficult for people to understand how it might become *not* rigged. This can leave people in a fatalistic place, with a sense that the problem is too great or entrenched to be solved. It is therefore important to avoid describing the problem in ways that activate a sense of fatalism around these “rigged systems.”

Putting meaningful systems change on the agenda will require shifting the terrain of our current debate, likely by filling in current understandings of which systems are rigged, how, and by whom, while avoiding the common traps of fatalism that can stall or prevent actions that lead to change.

TREND #5

Across the political spectrum, people believe that government can and should be responsive to people's needs—but that it often isn't.

What We're Finding

While Americans tend to differ along ideological lines in their thinking about the proper role and function of government, we have found that across parties, people tend to think of government as inept and corrupt. This mindset has typically led to fatalism about what government can realistically accomplish and can diminish support for a range of public services. However, we have been surprised by the amount of positive talk about government's role throughout our research, with clear evidence emerging that people believe that government *can* and *should* be responsive to people's needs and concerns.

Despite the strengthening of the belief in a responsive government, we still see a general belief that even though our government can and should be responsive, it generally isn't. This points to the notion of the "submerged state"—the idea that people don't always recognize when the government is acting responsively. For instance, although government has failed in some remarkable ways over the past couple of years—roughly a million people have died of COVID in the US to date—the government has also been active during this time. Last year, President Biden signed the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan (ARP). While many people likely associated \$1,400 relief checks with a government initiative, many other elements of the ARP, such as programs to reduce healthcare costs and expand housing relief, have gone largely unnoticed. This may be because they are federally funded but locally administered—an observable benefit from an invisible source.

So What?

This leaves us with a paradox. The rise in systemic thinking described above may be bringing the importance of government into clearer focus. As people increasingly recognize the role of systems in social problems they may see more of a need and role for government in the remediation of these issues. On the other hand, even though people believe government action is possible they often don't see when it's happening.

The good news is that, in the context of previous research showing the overwhelming dominance of pessimistic thinking about government, this substantial degree of optimism hints at the possible development of a more balanced way of thinking about government. Building support for much-needed policy interventions may require progressive leaders to make stronger connections between the actions the government is taking and the benefits people are feeling closer to home.

Whats Next?

The Culture Change Project represents a new approach to understanding taken-for-granted American mindsets, offering a potentially powerful resource for progressive change-makers. Although our research is ongoing, we are already seeing indications that culture may be shifting in some important ways. As mindsets are often more elastic in times of social, economic, and political crisis than in times of relative stability, we will continue to monitor these shifts as global and national turmoil continues to affect our daily lives.

In this continued research, we will explore people's thinking about issues that are politically salient to understand how broader mindsets are being applied within debates. For example, how are economic mindsets being mobilized or stretched in the current discourse around inflation? How are cross-cutting mindsets around race and racism being used in the discourse around crime rates? We will also begin to test frames—or ways of talking about these topics—that have the capacity to intervene in these debates and catalyze productive changes in culture.

Throughout the process, we will work closely with progressive leaders and advocates to better understand how our research can help movements leverage the emerging changes in mindsets to create meaningful change.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org/culturechange