Is Culture Changing in this Time of Social Upheaval?

Preliminary findings from Project Culture Change

December 2020

FRAME WORKS

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Introduction

The upheavals of 2020 rival major past shocks to society—events like the 1918 flu pandemic, the Great Depression, the World Wars, and 9/11. History has shown that serious social and political upheavals can challenge our cultural assumptions and bring about fundamental changes in how we think about the world.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March, many commentators suggested that the reality we were suddenly facing was creating openings for progressive change by exposing the inadequacy of many of American culture's dominant mindsets. The murder of George Floyd similarly led to suggestions that Americans were finally being forced to grapple with the realities of structural racism in a way that was leading to culture change.

We were interested in these possibilities while being cautious about claims that culture was changing in fundamental ways. Cultural mindsets are highly durable with deep historical roots. They emerge from and are tied to social practices and institutions that are woven into the very fabric of society. They tend to change slowly. For example, bootstraps thinking—the idea that if individuals have enough drive and grit, they can overcome obstacles and succeed—is deeply entrenched in American culture and society. At the same time, in moments of social upheaval, these calcified components of culture *can* destabilize and become mutable, leading to fairly rapid changes in mindsets. It seemed plausible that events of 2020 might, for example, highlight how our circumstances shape our outcomes—illustrating the limitations of bootstraps thinking and putting pressure on this previously rock-solid feature of our culture.

Mindsets can shift and change in different ways. They can change in salience—some mindsets can become less dominant and less powerful in shaping thinking, while others grow in strength and come to shape thinking in stronger ways (e.g., mindsets about the power of the free market gained greater purchase in the second half of the 20th century while mindsets around the value of collective labor action weakened). The boundaries of a mindset can stretch as people apply existing ways of thinking to new realities (e.g., the contours of established mindsets about marriage stretched to encompass same-sex marriage). It's even possible that new circumstances can introduce entirely new ways of thinking (e.g., through the introduction of new science, as in the case of tobacco in the mid-20th century).

Are the upheavals of 2020 shifting fundamental American cultural mindsets? If so, which mindsets are moving? And in what ways are they shifting? These are not questions of merely academic interest. The mindsets people use to make sense of

our social and political reality shape their judgments and behavior, and influence individual and collective decisions. Shifts in cultural mindsets shift the terrain on which our social and political life takes place, opening up new possibilities while foreclosing others. In short, understanding if and how mindsets are shifting—and which ones are changing--can help inform and improve the strategies of social justice advocates and movement leaders. By understanding how the ground is shifting, advocates and activists can more effectively navigate the way forward.

As social scientists, we see culture change as an empirical question, and we set about to design a program of research capable of exploring it. Since May, we have been conducting original qualitative and quantitative research to understand if and how culture is changing. While we are only partway through a research program that will last at least a year, we have initial results that we think have real value for social issue communicators. This memo outlines these findings and lays out questions for the remainder of the project.

Methods

To understand whether and how cultural mindsets are shifting, we have used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Peer Discourse Sessions (May/June)

We conducted thirteen peer discourse sessions (a form of focus group) in May and June 2020, to explore participants' thinking about major issues in American society, including health, the economy, government, and racism. We asked participants to think about these issues in the past, present, and future in an attempt to collect information about broader mindsets, rather than just thinking about the pandemic.[1] In the final five sessions, we added a dedicated set of questions on the racial justice protests, which were just beginning to happen at this time following the murder of George Floyd, to understand how participants were making sense of the protests and the issues at stake in them.

Sessions were held virtually using Zoom, with six participants per session, and were recorded with the consent of participants. 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. Sessions were demographically mixed, including participants from different groups in the same sessions.

Culture Tracking Survey

Beginning in August, we have conducted a regular, nationally representative tracking survey to quantitatively measure and track cultural mindsets—both foundational mindsets (e.g., individualism) as well as mindsets on specific issues (economy, health, race and racism, government). The survey asks a series of questions to gauge levels of endorsement of specific mindsets. It also includes questions to gauge support for key policies (e.g., a jobs guarantee, Medicare for All, paid family leave, reparations, etc.), allowing us to look at the relationship between the strength with which people hold certain mindsets and their support for specific policies.

In this memo, we report on results primarily from "forced choice" questions, which ask people to choose between statements embodying the core idea of competing mindsets. In interpreting these results, it is important to emphasize that this should *not* be understood to suggest that some people hold one mindset while others hold the other mindset. In reality, people hold multiple, contradictory ways of thinking in

mind at the same time. In practice, people toggle back and forth between different mindsets, sometimes using one to make sense of information and experiences, sometimes drawing on another. The choice of one mindset over the other can be seen as an indication of the *relative salience* or *dominance* of these mindsets for individuals. The fact that people choose one mindset over another suggests that they are likely to more consistently and frequently draw upon that mindset. It does *not* mean that they reject or never draw upon the competing mindset.

We report here on findings from the October survey only. In subsequent memos, as we collect data from surveys over a longer period of time, we will be able to track shifts in mindsets. Given the short time horizon of our current data, in this memo we rely on qualitative research conducted before the pandemic as a basis of comparison in drawing conclusions about apparent shifts in mindsets.

Cultural Models Interviews (August/September)

To deepen our understanding of how mindsets might be evolving in response to the upheavals of this year, we conducted 20 in-depth, one-on-one interviews, with participants from diverse backgrounds (see peer discourse sessions above on demographic factors we made sure to vary). Interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom and were recorded with the consent of participants. These interviews allowed us to dig more deeply into how people are applying cultural mindsets in this moment. We asked similar questions as in peer discourse sessions but, in the one-on-one context, were able to probe more fully to understand the ways in which mindsets are shifting and to develop some ideas about how the current social reality might be prompting such shifts.

Preliminary Findings

FINDING #1

Individualism remains dominant.

America has long been a deeply individualistic society. As we discuss below, there are signs that less individualistic, more systemic thinking is increasing, but it is important to acknowledge up front that individualism has not lost its dominance in American culture. In both qualitative and quantitative research and across subgroups, we find that members of the public continue to look first to individuals' choices to explain how social problems come about and how they can be solved.

The grip of individualism in American culture is well established. In our own work over the past twenty years, we have consistently found individualism to be salient in Americans' thinking across social issues. This confirms a large and well-established body of scholarship. Members of the public consistently assume that it is the choices individuals make that determine how they fare. This deep cultural mindset shapes attributions of responsibility, as people tend to hold individuals themselves responsible for their outcomes. Individualism also shapes thinking about solutions, as people reason that social problems can only be fixed if the individuals causing the problem decide to make better choices. This mindset applies across issues, shaping how Americans think about health, the economy, children and families, education, the environment, criminal justice, housing, and many other issues.

Individualism makes it difficult for people to recognize the role of circumstances, systems, and structures in shaping outcomes. It is arguably the American cultural mindset that poses the most significant and consistent barrier to those working for progressive change.

In the current project, we found that Americans continue to draw from the well of individualism to think about the pandemic, health more broadly, the economy, and other major social issues.

In peer discourse sessions in May and June, for example, participants suggested that staying safe from the virus is primarily a matter of making smart, responsible individual choices to limit our own risks. Some participants noted that shelter-in-place rules can make it harder for people to take care of their physical and mental health, but that it's up to individuals to adapt and maintain their exercise routine and to do what's needed to take care of themselves. In thinking about financial hardships that people face due to the pandemic, participants suggested that as long as individuals saved responsibly before the pandemic, they should be okay now.

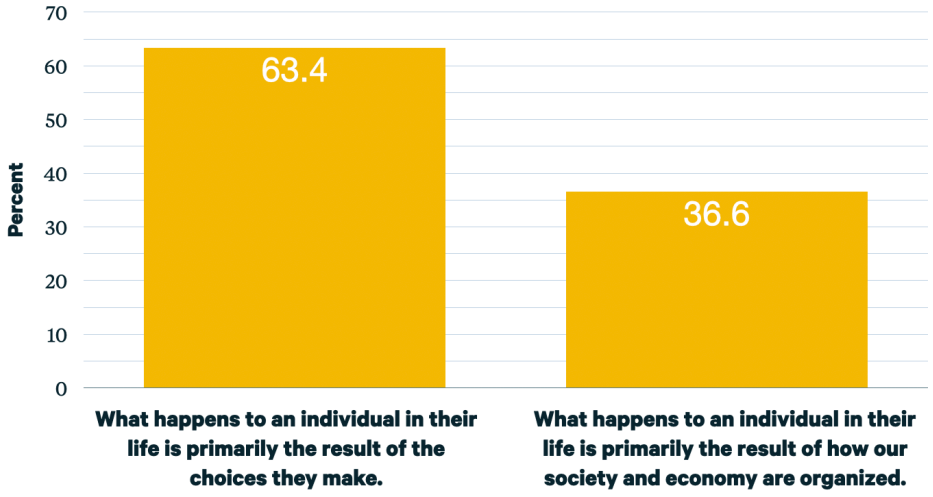
Individualism also surfaced in thinking about threats to businesses, as participants suggested that it is up to businesspeople to weather the pandemic by using ingenuity, discipline, and hard work to adapt to changing circumstances.

The culture tracking survey confirms the enduring dominance of individualism in Americans' thinking. Survey participants were presented with the following two statements, which express the competing mindsets of individualism and systemic thinking respectively, and were asked which comes closer to their opinion:

- *What happens to an individual in their life is primarily the result of the choices they make.*
- *What happens to an individual in their life is primarily the result of how our society and economy are organized.*

Almost two-thirds of respondents (63%) chose the individualistic statement.[2]

Figure 1: Individualistic vs systemic thinking (whole sample)



It is important to note that, with very few exceptions, across age, gender, political party, race, income, and education, individualism was consistently endorsed over systemic thinking. As we discuss below, there *are* important differences in the relative salience of individualism for different demographic groups. In other words, individualism is not dominant *to the same degree* across these demographic groups. But individualism is dominant for almost every group.

There were two subgroups (30-44 year-olds and African Americans) for which a *very* slight majority of respondents chose the systemic view. This systemic preference was within the margin of error, meaning that, for these two groups, preference between individualistic and systemic thinking was basically split. In

summary, survey results indicate that, for the vast majority of Americans, individualistic thinking dominates systemic thinking, and even at its weakest, it stands in equal balance with a more systemic perspective.

Taken together, these findings provide strong support for the idea that the upheavals of 2020 have not displaced individualism from its position as one of the most dominant and fundamental mindsets influencing how Americans think about social problems and solutions.

FINDING #2

Systemic thinking appears to be on the rise, although unevenly.

Our research suggests that while individualism remains a dominant American mindset, there are signs of a rise in systemic thinking. It is important to note that this systemic perspective does not seem to be displacing individualism, but rather, for some people, is providing an *additional* way of thinking that people can draw on—a counterbalance to individualism.

This is a trend of vital importance to progressive advocates. The ability to look at things not *just* through the lens of individual choices and behaviors but through one of systems and institutions enables people to see the social roots of problems and the need for systemic changes to address them. If the trend continues and expands, it has the potential to create a significant shift in the social and political landscape.

While promising, our research shows that this trend is uneven and underdeveloped. The systemic mindset appears to be emerging as an alternative to individualism among Democrats and young people, but remains weak among Republicans and older people. And even where people recognize *that* systems matter, they struggle to articulate *how* systems shape individual and collective outcomes or how they could be changed to address social problems.

In our past research, evidence of systemic thinking has been rare, and has not included a deep understanding of how systems work or can be changed. When we have seen systemic thinking, it has been limited to a narrow set of issues. For example, in our research on education in the US, we have found that some people are able to recognize that where children live shapes the quality of the schools they attend and, in turn, how well they do in school and life. Yet this systemic explanation is isolated to thinking about education and does not apply to the way people think about other issues—health for example. This suggests that it is a particular mindset about education rather than a broader systemic way of thinking.

The ability to look across social issues and recognize the role of economic and social systems in shaping outcomes is something we have only rarely seen among participants in our research.

In the context of this past research, we were struck by what happened in peer discourse sessions conducted in May and June. We saw more systemic talk and, importantly, people were applying a systemic perspective *across* social issues in ways that we had not seen before. Participants talked about how social systems—including the education system, economic system, and criminal justice system—lead to different opportunities for success and wellbeing for different groups of Americans. They were especially focused on how systemic differences affected people from different race or class backgrounds.

We noticed, however, that systemic talk was unevenly expressed across participants. Our analysis from peer discourse sessions suggested that systemic thinking was coming largely from younger and perhaps better educated participants.

While the peer discourse sessions included 78 participants—a significant sample for qualitative research—we were careful in generalizing these findings. If, for example, we happened to have a few participants in a session who articulated a clear and persuasive systemic view, it could have been echoed or endorsed by others in ways that don't necessarily reflect the thinking of these members of the group. The culture tracking survey offered a way to check these findings and better understand who was endorsing this systemic mindset and its relative strength.

While figure 1 above demonstrates the dominance of individualism, it also shows that systemic thinking is preferred by over a third of people. This suggests that the systemic thinking we saw in peer discourse sessions wasn't merely the contribution of a handful of participants but instead represents a meaningful alternative to individualism for at least a portion of the public.

A closer look at these data (see figures 2 and 3) shows that, roughly half of Democrats and younger people endorse systemic thinking over individualism. For these groups, the systemic mindset actually challenges the dominance of individualism. By contrast, the systemic view is endorsed by only a small minority of Republicans and people over 60.

Figure 2: Individualistic vs systemic thinking (political party)

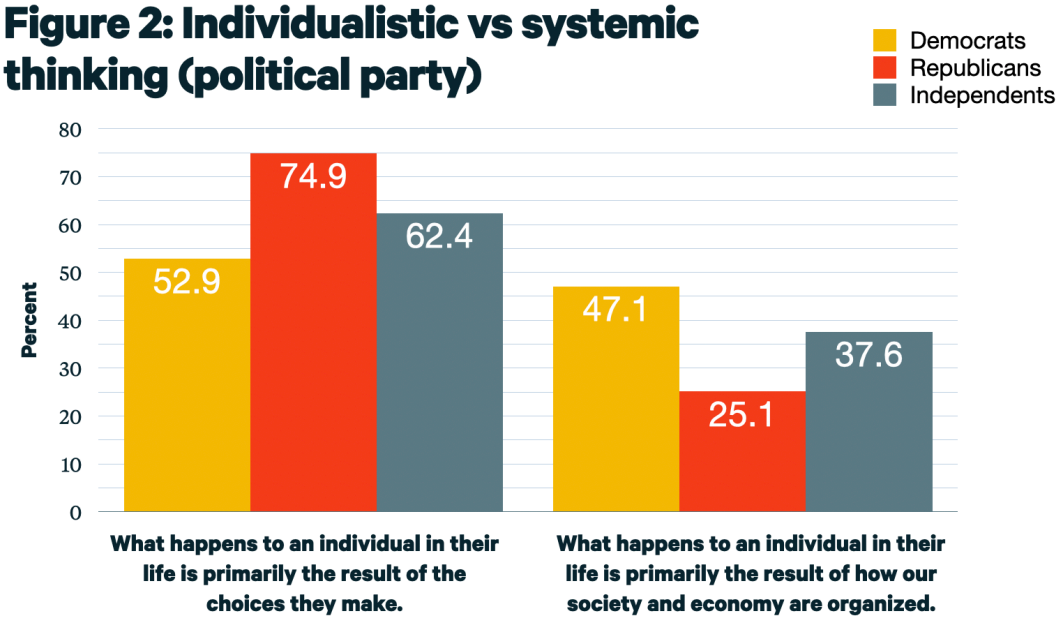
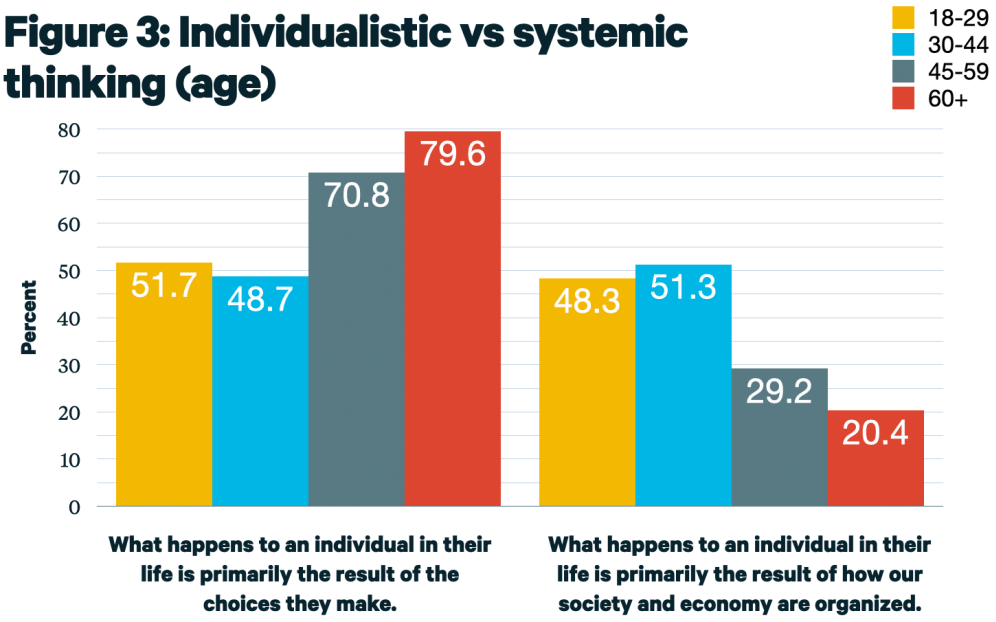


Figure 3: Individualistic vs systemic thinking (age)



While systemic thinking seems, at the moment, to be available to some groups of Americans in ways that we have not seen in previous research, this thinking is often underdeveloped. People recognize that systems shape outcomes but frequently struggle to explain *how* this works. In our analysis of cultural models interviews, we found that when people apply a systemic perspective, they are often able to make a one-step connection between a particular social system and a particular outcome. For example, they might recognize that policing systems disproportionately arrest Black people, that healthcare systems offer differential access to quality care, or that economic systems lead people in certain types of jobs to be underpaid. But they

struggle to understand exactly *how* these systems lead to these outcomes—what it is about them that leads to these results. Moreover, people struggle to understand how systems interact, which makes it hard to recognize, for example, the sources of racial disparities in health, which have their roots in a set of interlocking systems such as the economy, healthcare, urban development, housing, water and air quality management, and many others.

The rise of systemic thinking presents an opening for a variety of progressive changes. If Americans more consistently view social issues from a systemic perspective, they will more easily see the need for fundamental systemic changes ranging from the rebalancing of economic power to shifts in metropolitan governance to race-forward policies across social domains. While it is important not to overstate the breadth or depth of this trend—there would have to be significant additional expansion and deepening of this perspective to change the political context—this is a finding of considerable promise for progressive advocates.

Upcoming research for this project will allow us to continue to track the development of systemic thinking and to see whether it spreads to additional parts of the public or deepens in the groups where it already has a foothold.

FINDING #3

The racial justice protests boosted structural thinking about racism among at least some groups.

In April, shortly before the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing protests, as part of a separate project on racial equity, we conducted peer discourse sessions on race, racism, and racial equity, half with only Black participants and half with only white participants.[3] Across these sessions, discussions of structural racism were rare.

Black and white participants alike tended to see racial discrimination in interpersonal terms, as the result of the personal biases and prejudice of individual people. While participants talked about racism in different institutions—for example, banks, housing, and the workplace—they viewed this racism as the result of the bias of individuals within these institutions. For example, discrimination in hiring was attributed to hiring managers who responded negatively to Black names on resumes or to Black applicants in interviews; denials of loans by banks were explained as the result of specific loan officers deciding, because of their own conscious or unconscious bias, not to give Black people loans. There were, to be sure, some differences in the ways that white and Black participants in the sessions

tended to talk about racism, but both groups consistently adopted an interpersonal view of racism. In both Black and white groups, there was little talk about how racial discrimination is built into our institutions and systems in ways that transcend the decisions and biases of specific individuals.

We were just beginning to conduct the peer discourse sessions for the current project when George Floyd was murdered. George Floyd and the protests that followed his murder began to come up in group discussions, and it was clear that the public conversation around the protests was having a major impact on people, so we quickly adapted the plan for these sessions and used the last five sessions to explore what was happening in public discourse and thinking as a result of these events.

In contrast to the sessions from just two months earlier, there was extensive discussion in the culture change sessions about racism at a structural level. Participants across racial groups talked about how policies, laws, and systems create and perpetuate racial inequality and discrimination. Participants sometimes gestured toward history, noting the deep historical roots of these policies. There was even talk about the history and current manifestation of white supremacy in our country.

We wondered whether the rise in structural talk and thinking about racism might be a reflection of our sample rather than a generalizable finding. We explored this question in subsequent survey and interview research, which suggested that a structural view of racism does have real—albeit uneven—strength among Americans.

In the survey, we asked participants to choose which of the following two statements came closer to their opinion:

- *Racial discrimination is the result of individuals' bias and prejudice.*
- *Racial discrimination is the result of how our laws, policies, and institutions work.*

Across almost all groups, the interpersonal view was more strongly endorsed, with one critical exception—among Black participants, the structural view was slightly preferred (56% to 44%). Across all other groups, including all other racial groups, men and women, Democrats and Republicans, younger and older people, and people of all income and education levels, a majority endorsed the interpersonal over the structural view. However, for some groups, namely, Democrats and younger people, the structural perspective received substantial support. As figures 4, 5, and 6 illustrate, 40 percent of Democrats endorsed the structural view, 39 percent of people age 18-29 did, and nearly 50 percent of people age 30-44

endorsed it. By contrast, the structural view of racism was endorsed by only 24 percent of white people and Republicans, and by only 15 percent of people over 60.

Figure 4: Interpersonal vs structural views of racism (race)

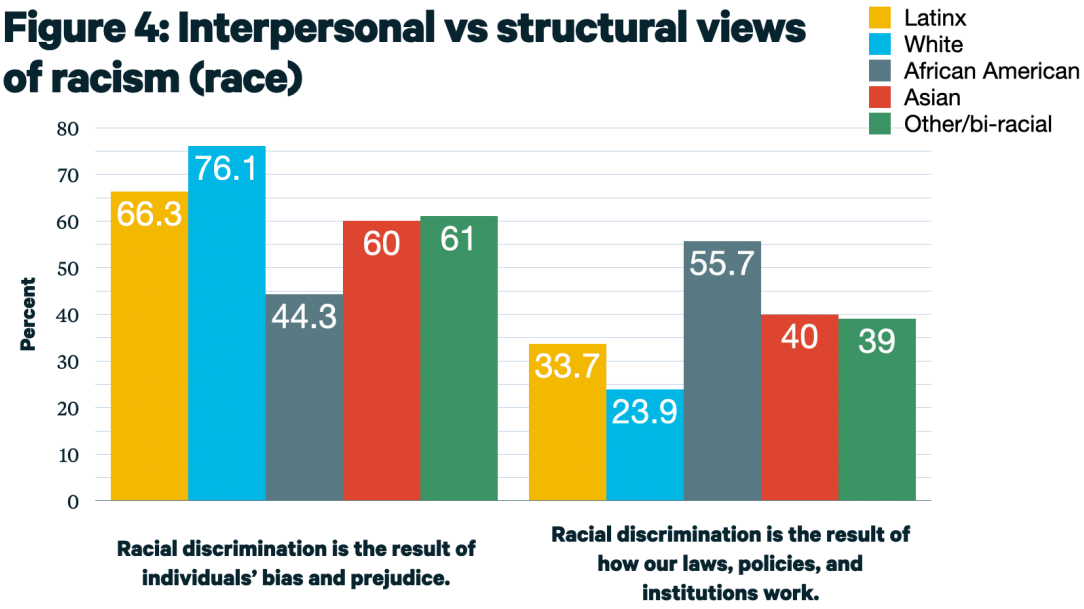


Figure 5: Interpersonal vs structural views of racism (party)

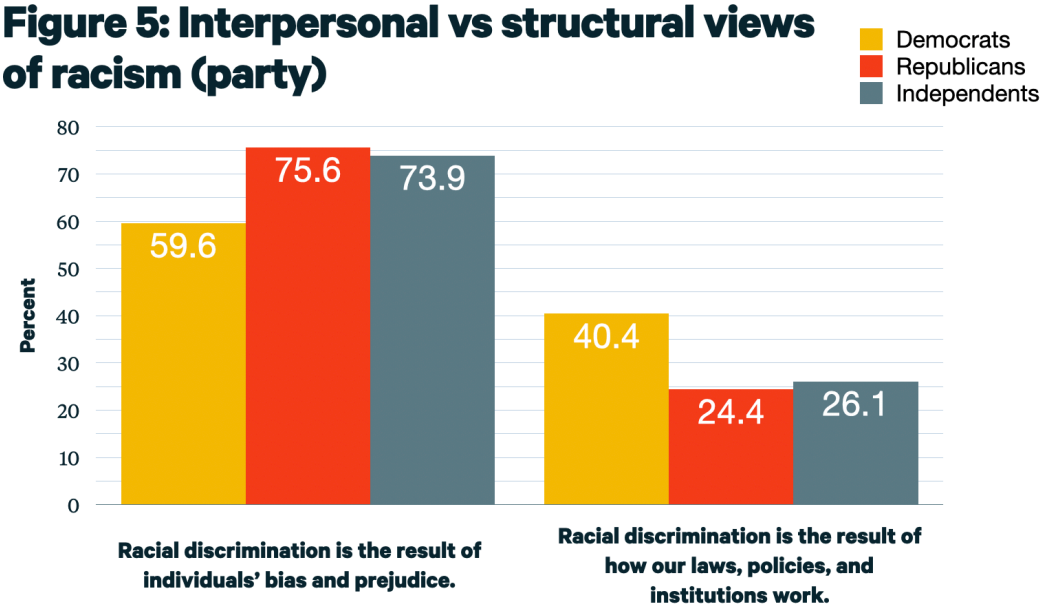
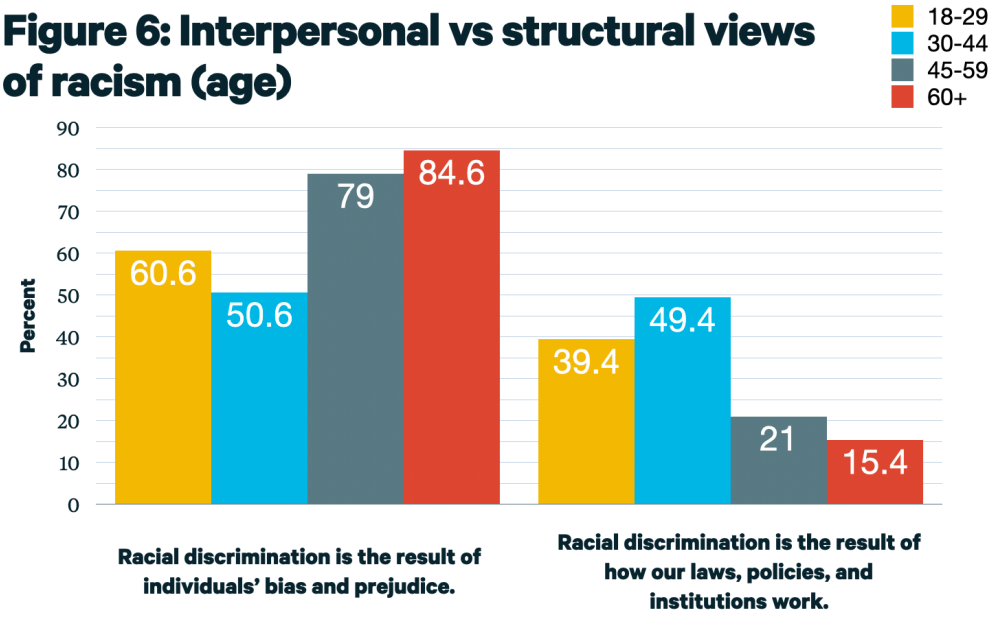


Figure 6: Interpersonal vs structural views of racism (age)



These survey results confirm that a structural view of racism is a meaningful alternative to the interpersonal view among some groups but not others. When compared with our focus group work conducted prior to the murder of George Floyd, it appears that this structural perspective on racism is increasing. We will continue to track individual and structural views on racism in subsequent surveys, which will allow us to see whether a structural perspective is, in fact, increasing, whether it proves durable, and whether it spreads to other groups.

Cultural models interviews conducted in August and September provide still more nuance and perspective on the structural view of racism. These interviews indicated the presence of structural thinking, but suggested that it was narrow and underdeveloped. In these interviews, participants sometimes located racism in policies, institutions, or systems rather than in individuals, but they tended not to recognize the pervasiveness of racism across all parts and aspects of social systems. Typically, explanations of structural racism were limited in focus—for example, people might recognize the need to change training practices for police officers but still struggle to see the myriad ways in which structural racism shapes law enforcement and the criminal justice system and leads to many different forms of violence against Black and brown people.

While more research is needed to map what looks to be an emerging understanding of structural racism, it is clear that among some groups, there is an increasing ability to recognize that racism is embedded in social systems and is more than just personal prejudice.

It is also clear that for most groups, the interpersonal understanding continues to dominate thinking about racism.

FINDING #4

The public recognizes that policy shapes economic outcomes, yet assumes that inequality is inevitable.

The idea that economic and political systems are rigged to benefit the wealthy is a familiar one. When thinking in this way, people recognize that wealthy people have inordinate political power and that they use their power to tilt the playing field in their own direction. People generally struggle to explain, in specific and concrete terms, how this works—how the system is actually rigged—but are unequivocal in their thinking that it is.

The lack of mechanism in system-is-rigged thinking leaves this mindset open to manipulation—to different diagnoses of *who* is rigging the system, how they are rigging it, and to what end. Right-wing populist accounts fill in the blanks by pointing the finger at Latin American immigrants, Black people, Jews, and socialists, crossing populist anger about what feels like an uneven playing field with racism, xenophobia, and a desire to protect white supremacy. Progressive accounts, by contrast, highlight corporate power as well as the ways in which business and political elites are protecting and reinforcing white supremacist institutions to disenfranchise and exploit Black and brown communities. In other words, because the system-is-rigged mindset is both powerful and open to different interpretations and uses, this mindset is a critical site of contestation in current American politics. Progressive advocates must be careful in cuing this way of thinking, as it can easily be hijacked for toxic and regressive ends, but there is also a danger in ceding this terrain to the right. One of our ongoing interests and concerns—and a question that we think further research can help answer—is how this mindset can most effectively be engaged or addressed to advance progressive ends.

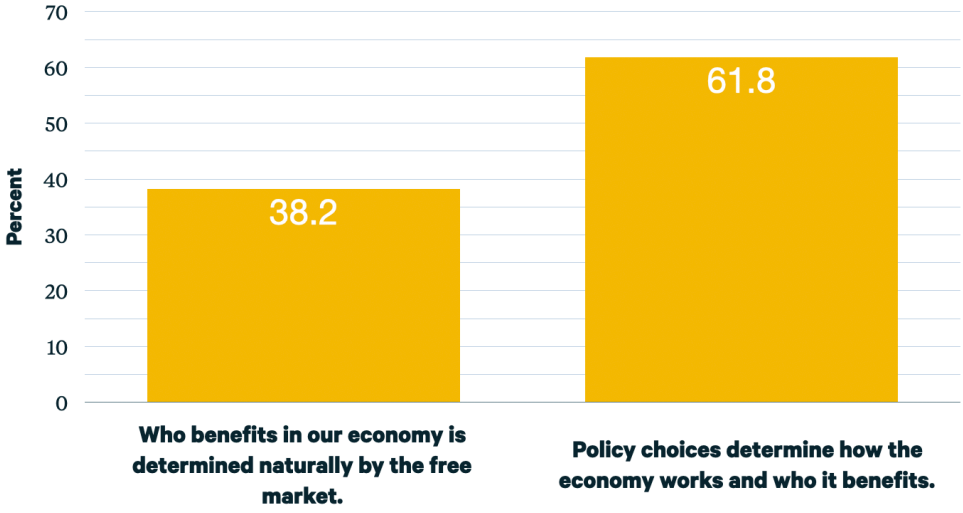
The current research confirms that Americans recognize that policy choices shape economic outcomes while also confirming that people's understanding of *how* this happens is limited. People recognize that policy matters and contributes to inequality, but they don't have a clear sense of the specific ways in which policy structures economic outcomes for people and how exactly it creates and perpetuates inequality. Absent a full understanding of how policy shapes economic outcomes, people assume that substantial economic inequality is inevitable, because it's impossible to see or imagine how we could change the system to address inequality at a foundational level.

Our survey research shows that people both think policy matters *and* assume that inequality is inevitable. Survey participants were asked to choose which of the following statements comes closer to their opinion:

- *Who benefits in our economy is determined naturally by the free market.*
- *Policy choices determine how the economy works and who it benefits.*

As figure 7 shows, 62 percent of participants chose the second statement, recognizing the role of policy in shaping economic wellbeing. Even among Republicans, about half of participants preferred this statement. For all other demographic groups, a clear majority preferred the second statement. Across groups, people recognize that policy plays a major role in shaping economic outcomes.

Figure 7: Market naturalism vs influence of economic policy (whole sample)



Despite this recognition, the sense that inequality is inevitable remains dominant. The survey asked people to choose between the following statements:

- *It's natural that some people are going to be much wealthier than others.*
- *Economic inequality exists because of choices our society has made about how our economy will work.*

As figure 8 shows, 56 percent of participants chose the first statement, though there were important differences between subgroups in the degree of endorsement. Seventy-three percent of Republicans endorsed the statement that inequality was inevitable compared to only 42 percent of Democrats (figure 9). There was also a notable difference by income, as 74 percent of participants who make $150,000 or more a year endorsed the inevitably statement compared to only 50 percent of those making less than $25,000 (figure 10).

Figure 8: Naturalism vs systemic thinking on inequality (whole sample)

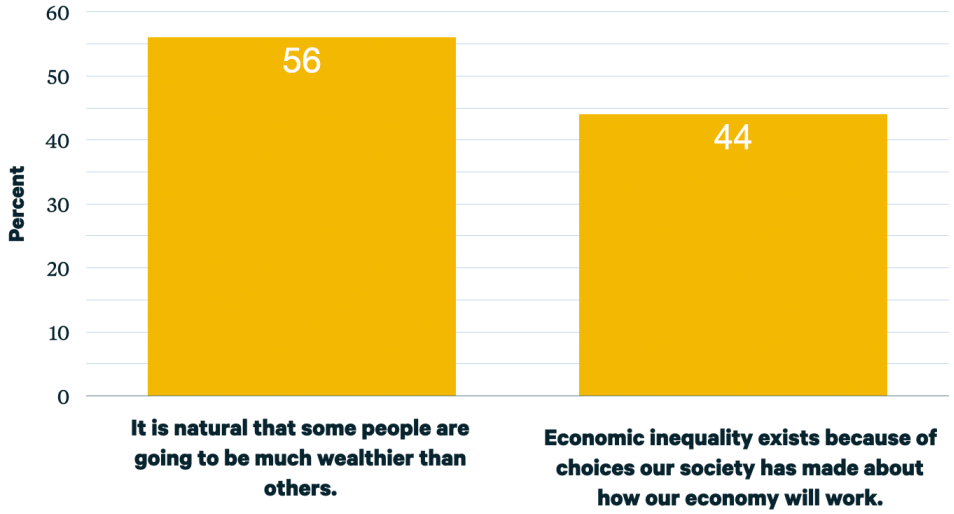


Figure 9: Naturalism vs systemic thinking on inequality (party)

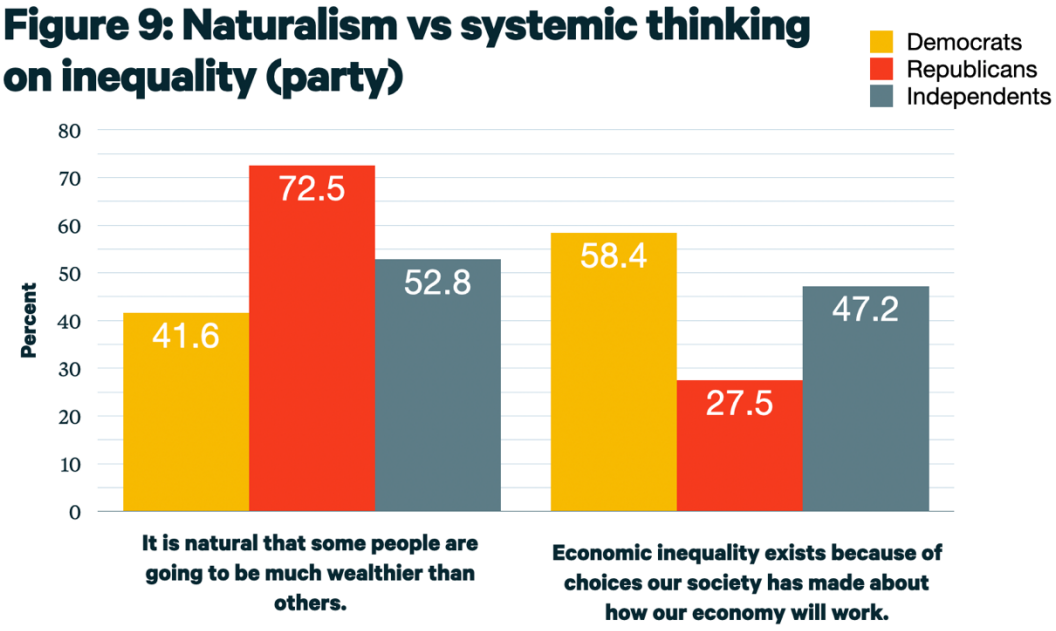
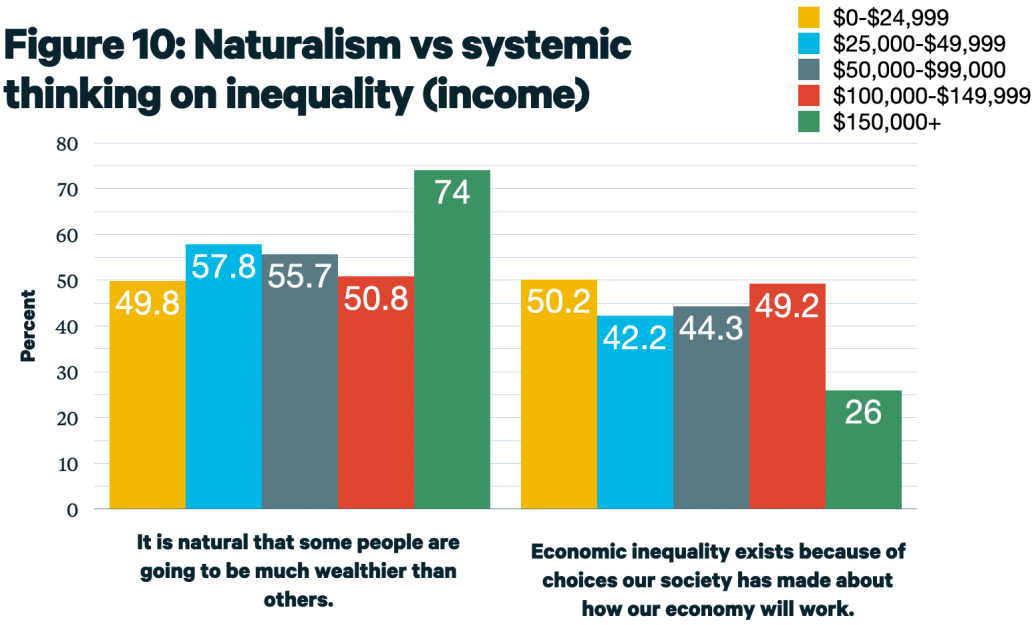


Figure 10: Naturalism vs systemic thinking on inequality (income)



Peer discourse sessions and one-on-one interviews help explain these survey results. We have found that people consistently assume that government has a strong influence over the economy, but that the exact way that this influence works remains, in many ways, a black box. People recognize that government can and does intervene in the economy, but they struggle to understand the ways in which specific government policies and decisions shape economic relations and foster some types of economic activity while discouraging others. People think of government as something outside and apart from the economy that can push or nudge it in particular directions, rather than as the constitutive body that determines how it works. As a result, many of the ground rules of our current economy are taken for granted and assumed to be outside government's capacity to influence. This explains how people can simultaneously recognize that government influences who benefits *and* think that inequality is natural.

The pandemic seems to have consolidated the recognition that the government rigs the economy and shapes who benefits in it. Yet people continue to struggle to understand how government structures the economy, which limits people's ability to see that economic inequality can be addressed by government changing basic policy choices.

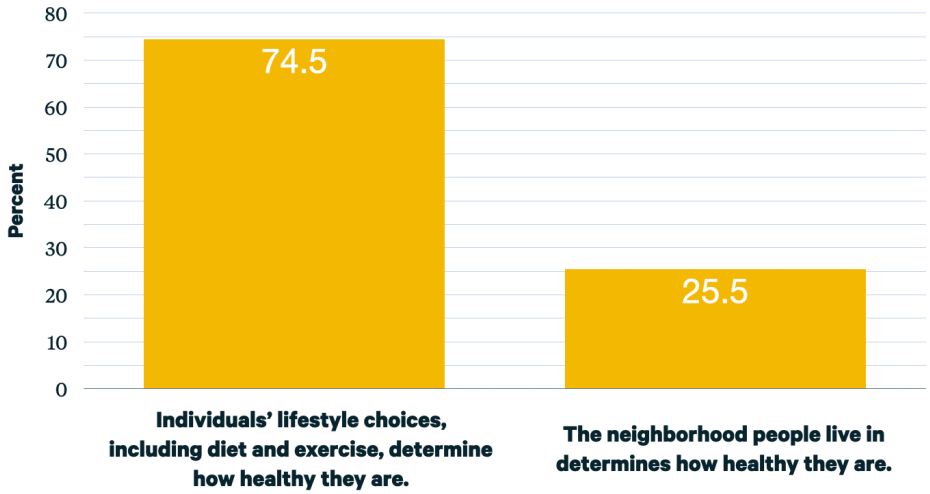
FINDING #5

While systemic thinking is rising on many issues, it appears to be lagging on health.

While systemic thinking may be on the rise, our research finds that when it comes to health, people continue to struggle to see how social environments and economic systems shape health.

In past research, we have consistently found health individualism—the idea that people's health is determined by lifestyle choices (esp. about diet and exercise)—to be overwhelmingly dominant. The current research finds that this continues to hold true and shows that people still struggle to see how systems and places shape health. When asked to choose between health individualism and ecological/systems thinking (the idea that the neighborhood where people live determines their health), participants overwhelmingly chose individualism—75 percent compared to 25 percent. While these numbers varied slightly across groups, it is important to note that health individualism is dominant even for groups that tend to think more systemically on issues like the economy, education, or criminal justice. When it comes to health, individualism was endorsed over ecological (systemic) thinking by 68 percent of Democrats, 67 percent of African Americans, and 66 percent of people age 18-29 and of people 30-44 (see appendix, figures 12-14).

Figure 11: Health individualism vs neighborhood matters (whole sample)



Peer discourse sessions and cultural models interviews confirmed the ongoing dominance of health individualism and the continuing weakness of systemic thinking when it comes to health. Participants consistently and overwhelmingly explained health outcomes as a function of individual lifestyle choices. The systemic

thinking that we saw on other issues was largely absent in conversations about health.

In peer discourse sessions in May and June, we found that participants generally did not talk about systems. In the rare cases when systems did come up, discussions focused narrowly on the healthcare system and, in a few cases, the food system. People have long recognized that access to healthcare matters for health while failing to see the impact of other systems. Talk about food systems focused specifically on the availability of sugary foods. Participants lacked an understanding of the myriad ways in which various economic and social systems—from housing and transportation to urban infrastructure and employment—shape health.

In interviews, we further explored people's ability to connect health outcomes and racism. We found that participants struggled to come up with explanations for disparities in health outcomes across racial groups. We suspect that this is an outgrowth of a general difficulty in thinking systemically about health and recognizing the role of social determinants. Because people don't understand how social factors affect health, differences that they see in these factors by race—for example, differences in employment opportunities or housing situation—don't come to mind as relevant in explaining health disparities.

In upcoming research, we will further explore this hypothesis that people's struggle to connect health and racism is the result of lack of understanding of the social determinants of health generally.

FINDING #6

Positive models of government seem to be on the rise.

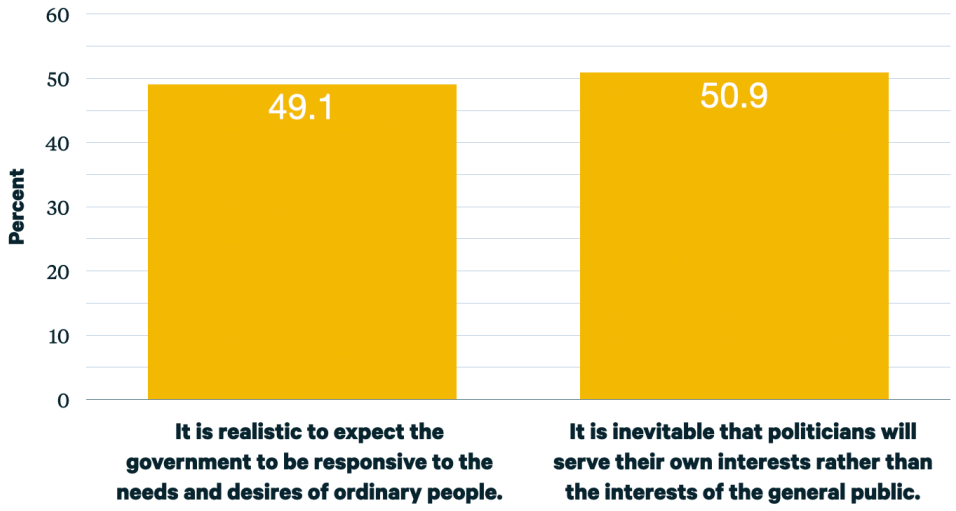
In past work, we have found Americans to be generally skeptical about the ability of government to solve problems and address social issues. While Americans differ, along ideological lines, in their thinking about the proper role and function of government, we have found that, across parties, people tend to think of government as inept and corrupt. This makes people fatalistic about what government can realistically accomplish.

We went into peer discourse sessions in May and June expecting—given that the inept government response to COVID was front and center—to see negative thinking about government expanding in people's thinking. We were struck by a surprising amount of positive talk about government's role, and saw clear evidence that people were assuming that government not only should but can realistically be

expected to be responsive to people's needs and concerns. This idea came up dramatically more frequently and clearly in our May and June peer discourse sessions than it has in past FrameWorks research.

Survey results appear to confirm this finding, showing a surprising degree of faith in the possibility of responsive government. When asked to choose between the idea that responsiveness is realistic and the idea that it's inevitable that politicians will promote their own interests first, participants were almost evenly split, with 49 percent suggesting responsiveness is possible and 51 percent expressing resignation about self-interested politicians (see figure 15). In the context of previous research showing the dominance of pessimistic thinking about government, the almost even split between pessimism and optimism hints at the possible development of a more productive way of thinking about government, in which responsiveness is expected and seen as possible.

Figure 15: Responsive government vs corrupt government (whole sample)



There were not many significant differences between groups on this question. Most notably, there were no significant differences between Democrats and Republicans, indicating that a positive mindset around responsive government seems to be available across the political spectrum.

Given just how inept and corrupt government has been of late, what might explain this apparent rise in positive thinking about what we can expect from government? Why aren't we seeing anti-government mindsets being reinforced?

While we can't provide a conclusive answer to this question, we suspect that the degree of incompetence we have seen from the current administration may be

leading people to reassess past administrations and appreciate that they were, in fact, reasonably competent and responsive. Similarly, federal incompetence may be highlighting the good work that state and local governments do. In other words, the degree of government breakdown may be illuminating that true ineptitude and corruption is the exception rather than the rule. If this is true, then it *is* realistic to expect government to do better—it typically *does* do better. While we can't say for sure whether this interpretation is correct, we will explore it further in upcoming research.

FINDING #7

There is a shared desire for greater social and political unity, but competing understandings of what this means.

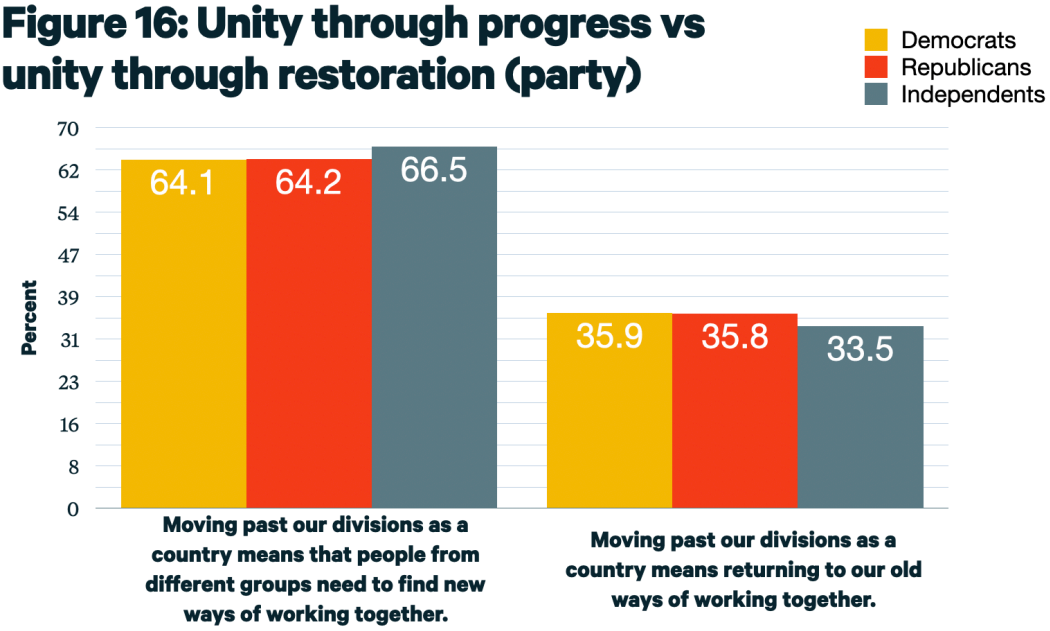
In peer discourse sessions, participants consistently bemoaned our country's current divisions and talked about the need for greater unity. Deeper analysis revealed that this common call for more unity actually stemmed from two conflicting ways of thinking.

Some participants—who tended to be but were not exclusively white men—adopted a nostalgic view, assuming that unity meant a restoration of an imagined past in which the country was socially and politically united. To the extent that unity existed in the past, it was premised on centering white men and was based on the exclusion and marginalization of others. This nostalgic model of unity is essentially a regressive model of restoration of this social order.

Other participants envisioned a future in which our society embraces new ways of working across difference. When drawing on this inclusive model of unity, participants sometimes explicitly talked about achieving unity by addressing economic and racial inequalities that have previously been ignored.

In the culture tracking survey, we explored the relative salience of these two ways of understanding unity. We found that, when asked to choose between statements reflecting these two ways of thinking, 65 percent of all participants chose the more forward-looking understanding. Moreover, 64 percent of both Democrats and Republicans endorsed the forward-looking understanding over the regressive one (figure 16).

Figure 16: Unity through progress vs unity through restoration (party)



The level of endorsement of the forward-looking understanding of unity is higher than we would have expected based on peer discourse sessions, where the balance between the regressive and inclusive mindsets appeared more even. This may be a product of the way the survey question was worded—specifically the phrase "new ways of working together." Americans have long valued progress as an ideal, and we suspect that Americans' generic preference for "new" ways of doing things compared to "old" (i.e., outdated) ways of doing things may be driving some of the preference for the forward-looking statement of unity in the survey. It is possible to endorse the survey's formulation of the forward-looking understanding of unity without having in mind a truly inclusive society that challenges and disrupts central parts of our existing social order.

In upcoming research, we will look to better understand these competing ways of thinking about unity and how they are playing out in the current context. We will seek to confirm the finding that there are, in fact, two different understandings of social unity in circulation and to deepen our understanding of their relative salience.

What's Next?

In the coming months, we will continue conducting research to understand how culture may be shifting in response to the upheavals of the moment. We will continue to use a mix of qualitative and quantitative research to provide a rigorous and deep understanding of how cultural mindsets are shifting.

As we move forward, we will be focusing on some specific questions:

- How is culture shifting over the course of the pandemic? As we move into the vaccination phase and the end of the pandemic is in sight, how does this shift public thinking?
- Are the emerging shifts we identify above durable? Will systemic thinking continue to occupy a meaningful place in public thinking—or even expand or deepen its reach? Or, as "normal" life comes back into sight, will people's thinking start to revert back to its pre-pandemic state? As we accumulate more months of data in our culture tracking survey, we will be able to quantify these trends.
- Are the hypotheses and more tentative interpretations we present above correct? For example, are there, in fact, two understandings of social unity, and if so, what is their relative salience? And does our theory about why people struggle to connect health and race hold?

Answering these questions and deepening our understanding of how culture is changing will provide critical information to advocates and activists and allow them to respond strategically to openings that are emerging in this unprecedented time.

Appendix (additional graphs)

Figure 12: Health individualism vs neighborhood matters (race)

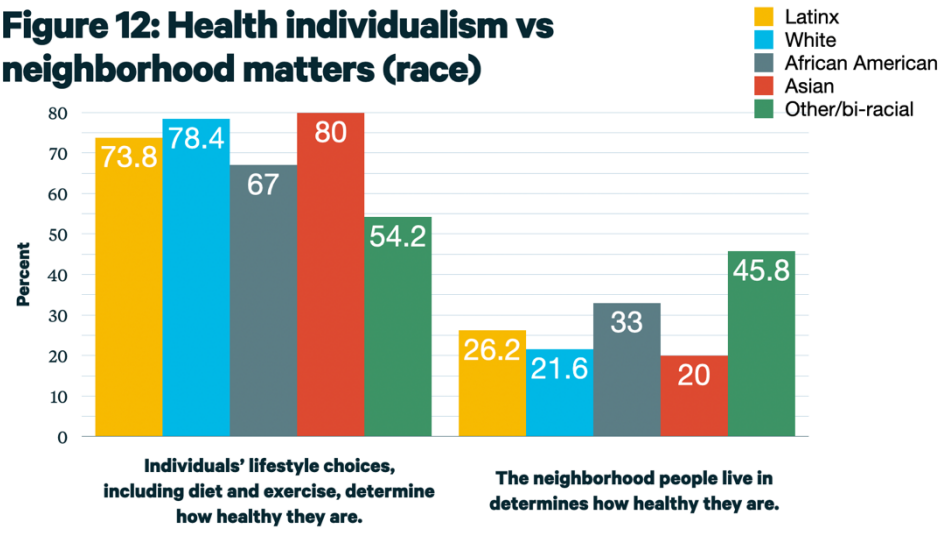


Figure 13: Health individualism vs neighborhood matters (age)

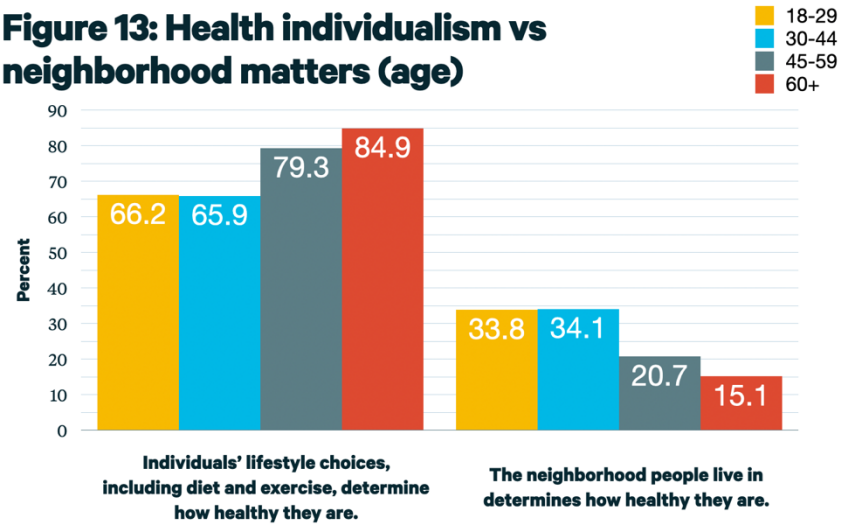
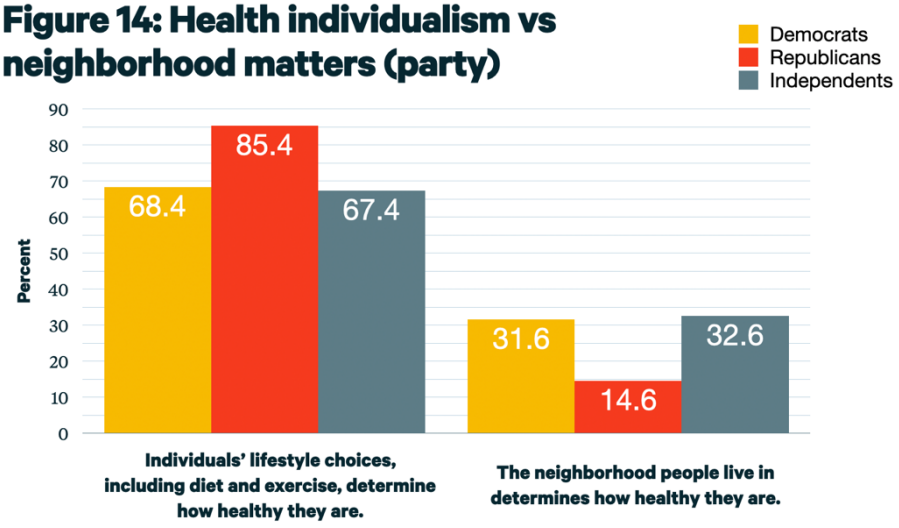


Figure 14: Health individualism vs neighborhood matters (party)



Endnotes

1 The pandemic did, of course, color and shape participants' thinking about a range of topics, which isn't a problem—we are interested in how the current context is affecting thinking. But we wanted to ascertain how the context is affecting thinking about broader issues, rather than just thinking about the pandemic itself. By asking about past, present, and future, we were able to avoid conversations that focused simply on stay-at-home orders, vaccine development, masks, and other pandemic-specific issues.

2 All graphs are taken from the October 2020 tracking survey.

3 These sessions were funded by the Ford Foundation. Results from this research have not yet been published.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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