



FRAMEWORKS
Culture Change
Project

By and For the People? Cultural Mindsets of Democracy and the US Political System

A Culture Change Project Report

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Introduction

We live in a time of democratic uprisings and authoritarian threats. In the United States, movements from Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter have not only challenged the injustice of existing systems but also demanded the sharing of decision-making power across our economic, social, and political institutions. Around the world, popular movements from the Rose Revolution to the Arab Spring demanded the creation of basic democratic political institutions we've long taken for granted in the United States. Yet these popular democratic movements have been met by an authoritarian backlash in countries with nondemocratic institutions, and with rising authoritarianism in the United States, coalescing into a coup attempt on January 6, 2021.

In the United States, there's an urgent need to protect basic democratic rights while transforming our political system to better respond to popular demands. While democratic reformers have different views of what is needed to protect and strengthen US democracy, there's widespread agreement that this must be a priority.

Democratic reform depends on public support and action, which in turn depends on how people think about and make sense of our political system, our Constitution, and democracy itself. Public thinking about these issues is shaped by available cultural mindsets—the deep, taken-for-granted ways of thinking that determine whether people recognize threats to democracy for what they are, and which steps they see as critical for protecting and strengthening our democracy.

As part of our Culture Change Project, the FrameWorks Institute has been conducting deep research to map the cultural mindsets that shape how the US public thinks about our political system, the Constitution, and democracy. We hope that the map of cultural mindsets that we sketch below can be an asset for those working in different ways to protect and strengthen our democracy.

Key takeaways from this research include:

- While many understandings of government are highly individualistic, a *System Is Rigged* mindset offers opportunities for communicators to tap into a more structural understanding of our political system.
- Dominant understandings of democracy are focused on protection of individual rights and liberties or on voting, though there are other mindsets that offer fuller understandings of popular self-government and representation.
- Mindsets around the US Constitution fluctuate between seeing the Constitution as a solid and *Stable Foundation* and as a changeable *Product of its Time*, creating both challenges and openings for constitutional reform.

We begin with a brief explanation of cultural mindsets and then review mindsets of the political system, the Constitution, and democracy. We focus on how these mindsets shape thinking and enable or obstruct efforts to protect and strengthen our democracy. More information on methods is available in an appendix.

What Are Cultural Mindsets and Why Do They Matter?

Cultural mindsets (or mindsets, for short) are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we understand the world and how we make decisions.¹ In shaping how we think, mindsets structure and produce our beliefs and attitudes.

The mindsets that we hold can normalize or problematize aspects of the existing social order and, in turn, shape whether and what sorts of social change we support. For example, individualistic mindsets make public policies that support the community good seem off base, unnecessary, and misguided. When people assume that life outcomes are the result of individual choice and willpower, they conclude that the proper solution to adversity is for people to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Individualism makes it difficult to see how broader structures and systems affect our lives and lead people to oppose the structural changes needed, for example, to address wealth and income inequalities.

We all have multiple mindsets that we can use to think about a given issue. For example, while Americans often think individualistically, we also have access to more systemic mindsets. When these mindsets are activated, they bring into view social systems and the ways that environments shape outcomes alongside individual choices. They also lead us to recognize the need for changes to systems, including via policy change.

Cultural mindsets are highly durable. They emerge from and are tied to cultural and social practices and institutions with deep historical roots. In our research, we focus on cultural mindsets that emerge from

common, national social practices and institutions—mindsets that are shared across our national culture. It is important to recognize, however, that different people and groups will engage with these common mindsets in different ways. For example, a mindset can be more salient—more frequently drawn upon and more consistently used in thinking—for one group than for another. In addition, cultural subgroups within society also have access to distinctive mindsets that emerge from institutions and practices specific to these groups.

How Does Cultural Mindsets Research Differ from Public Opinion Research?

Public opinion research examines the explicit attitudes and preferences that people hold about specific issues. Cultural mindsets research explores the deeper, underlying ways of thinking that *shape* and *explain* these patterns in public opinion. Where public opinion research examines *what* people think, cultural mindsets research examines *how* people think. For example, public opinion research might demonstrate that people support health education programs more than they support policies that support access to healthy housing. Cultural mindsets research explains *why* this is, revealing the role that the mindset of health individualism plays in driving these opinions and preferences.

For more on cultural mindsets and mindset shifts, see [Mindset Shifts: What Are They? Why Do They Matter? How Do They Happen?](#)

Cultural Mindsets of the US Political System, the Constitution & Democracy

This section of the report describes the cultural mindsets that members of the US public use to think about the US political system, the Constitution, and democracy. These are shared, commonly available ways of thinking that are drawn upon across partisan, racial, and other identities. These common ways of thinking stem from mutual participation in a common set of political and social institutions, and exposure to widespread discourses and narratives that cut across groups within US society.

There are undoubtedly differences in the relative salience of mindsets by group. In other words, some mindsets will be more consistently drawn upon by some groups than others. This is something we will explore in upcoming quantitative research, which will allow us to gauge more precisely the salience of different mindsets and how salience does and doesn't vary by group.

FINDING #1

People widely see the political system as rigged, but they trace the problem to bad people in power, not bad institutions.

As we have noted, the *System Is Rigged* mindset has become increasingly dominant in US culture.² It is held across ideological and demographic groups, and shapes thinking across an increasingly wide set of issues, as people now draw on this mindset not only to explain economic inequality—the mindset's traditional focus—but also social and political problems that people don't think of as economic issues. It is unsurprising, then, that this mindset shapes people's thinking about our political system.

While the *System Is Rigged* mindset opens space for thinking about the systemic nature of problems with government and the need for systemic reforms, people tend to trace problems to people in power rather than institutions of government. This is the result of two other foundational mindsets, which sit alongside *System Is Rigged* and constrain how it is applied: *Personalism* and *Government as "Them."* These two mindsets focus attention on the *people* in government rather than the *institutions* of government. Even when people draw on the idea that the political system is rigged, they tend to fall back on these other mindsets to explain how and why, concluding that that the problem must be those in power and their willful misuse of that power. These latter mindsets thwart a fully systemic understanding of government.

The System Is Rigged cultural mindset

When drawing on this mindset, people assume that the political system is rigged by the powerful few for their own benefit at the expense of everyone else.

This mindset is flexible and fuzzy. It doesn't include clear, consistent articulations of who is manipulating the system, *in what way, to what end, and at whose expense*.⁵ While the mindset itself doesn't provide a clear answer to these questions, it can be mobilized in profoundly different ways, as communicators fill in these blanks very differently for very different purposes. Those on the left (e.g., Warren and Sanders) make corporations the villain and leverage the mindset to criticize capitalism and its effects on our political system, while those on the right (e.g., Trump) claim leftist elites are rigging the system to favor immigrants over “hardworking” (coded as white) Americans. This mindset is critically important contested cultural terrain: whichever interpretation of *how* “the system is rigged” becomes dominant will shape US politics in deep and durable ways.

This mindset was pervasive in our interviews about the US political system. Participants sometimes talked about the influence of money in politics as a way that corporations rig the system to work for them (e.g., pharmaceutical companies manipulating health policy). At other times, participants talked about politicians rigging the system for their own benefit (e.g., to procure high salaries and good health care for themselves). Sometimes, participants drew on conspiratorial and antisemitic tropes to talk about how the powerful are rigging the system (e.g., George Soros shaping US foreign policy to serve his “globalist” agenda).

With the pharmaceuticals, we shouldn't be paying so much for all this medicine, you know what I mean? But somebody in Con ... somebody somewhere is getting rich for it. Those people who rally for the higher cost I think are part of the problem. And yeah, they got elected in by a democracy, but I don't think that's what “we the people” wanted, you know what I mean?

Latina, woman, Republican, age 50

Participant: It's just moneyed people and moneyed organizations that determine international policy.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little more about that?

Participant: Well, there are a couple of public figures, George Soros and Schwab, that have made no secret about their intent to instill a one-government world. While our country as a governmental concept is actually quite young, it's all we know is our independence. We're resistant, but it's difficult to battle money and all the influence it carries.

Native American, man, Republican, age 63

The *Personalism* cultural mindset

In this way of thinking, government is implicitly equated with the individual leaders in charge. When people think with this mindset, they see governmental action as the direct and exclusive product of the character of people in power. Drawing on this way of thinking, people understand governmental failures as a direct result of leaders' preferences or character; they conclude that since the government is not serving the public, leaders must not care about regular people.

Right now, we are at a point in our history where people are very—it's very polarizing and I think that the politicians care more about getting reelected, having their bills passed, and staying in line with what their party believes. In order for our country to really heal, I think we need to meet in the middle more.

White, woman, leans Democratic, age 38

I think changes [to make the political system work better] would have to come from the people themselves. I think the Framers, the job that they prepared for us is already in tip-top shape. It's a matter of whether or not we want to work together as one big happy society, or do we want to break off into our own little counterparts and screw everything up and just keep fighting over words. I think that the only thing that can change is people themselves.

Black, woman, Democrat, age 61

When people think with this mindset, they assume that problems with US democracy result from people—politicians and wealthy people—and not from the way the system itself is designed or its basic rules and norms. The mindset places institutions entirely out of mind, as people assume that outcomes flow directly and immediately from leaders' preferences, and that the way to improve things is therefore to persuade leaders to care more about the people or replace them with new ones who do.

The *System Is Rigged* and *Personalism* mindsets are often combined. When this happens, people focus almost exclusively on *who* is rigging the system and treat system riggers as puppet masters who easily and perfectly control outcomes. As a result, people pay little attention to how institutions distribute power or how system riggers' actions are mediated by institutions.

The Government as “Them” cultural mindset

When people think with this mindset, they treat government as a body apart from the people. The government is assumed to stand in opposition to what the people want or need.

In interviews, participants often talked about the government as “they” or “them,” juxtaposed against “we” or “us” (the people). This way of thinking sets government up as separate from and opposed to the people. The government is assumed to have separate and competing interests from citizens or constituents and to be motivated to achieve its own interests at the expense of the people’s.

Interviewer: What about the role of people like you and me? What kind of role do we play?

Participant: We got to push our voice, you know? I feel like we have to fight for what we want. It’s like “the people against the government” type thing, you know?

Black, woman, leans Republican, age 41

Interviewer: If I say the words “political system,” what comes to mind for you?

Participant: Terrible. They don’t work for the people, they work for themselves ... It’s run by the Congress, not run by the people. People don’t have much voice when the elected politicians make all the choices.

White, woman, Republican, age 61

This opposition between “us” and “them” figures the relationship between people and government as a struggle in which the people must fight to be heard and to have a say. In interviews, participants sometimes used combat metaphors (e.g., “battle”) to talk about this relationship.

This is similar to the *System Is Rigged* mindset in understanding governmental decisions as structured by opposition and the imposition of the will of some on others. It is different, however, as it doesn’t involve any sense of a system. Like the *Personalism* mindset, the *Government as “Them”* mindset models government as people, rather than a system or set of institutions. And because there’s no system in play, there’s also no sense of a system being rigged.

How do these mindsets obstruct or enable democratic reform?

- ***The System Is Rigged* mindset brings inequalities in political decision-making into view, but leaves people unclear about needed institutional reforms.** This mindset enables people to see that some people hold an outsized share of power within our political system, and that this power is used to advantage the few to the detriment of the many. However, because people don't have a clear sense of *how* the political system gives some people and groups undue power, the mindset falls short of helping people identify reforms that would equalize power (e.g., through revisions to the regulatory process or changes to our representative institutions).⁴
- ***The System Is Rigged* mindset can be interpreted and mobilized in progressive or regressive directions.** As we discussed above, this mindset is highly contested within our political space. In a related piece of research, we are finding that while individuals' use of the mindset is, of course, shaped by their political and ideological commitments, people's understanding of the mindset is malleable. Communicators must fill in the blanks of the mindset to inoculate against regressive interpretations and point the way toward progressive reforms. We will have more to say about *System Is Rigged* framing soon, but we know for sure that providing clear, accessible explanations of how the system is rigged and offering concrete solutions for unrigging it is critical.
- ***The Personalism* mindset puts the focus on elections while making institutional reforms hard to think about.** Because the *Personalism* mindset attributes problems with government to the character of individual politicians, as opposed to the design of political institutions, it leads people to conclude that the only way to fix problems with government is by picking better leaders. The positive side of this is that it allows people to immediately see that who we elect matters and to recognize the real and vital stakes of elections. However, this way of thinking leads people to blame individual leaders for problems created by our institutions. When the government fails to enact popular policies, for example, people assume, relying on the *Personalism* mindset, that leaders simply don't care about people's wants and needs, when in reality our institutions empower minorities, and the veto points in our system of government make enactment of popular policies difficult.
- ***The Government as "Them"* mindset undercuts faith in government without providing a productive way forward.** There are many good reasons for people to have lost faith in the US system of government, but the *Government as "Them"* mindset leads people away from engaging with these problems. This mindset produces fuzzy cynicism. *The System Is Rigged* mindset admits the possibility that, if the system is unrigged, it might be useful or good, whereas the *Government as "Them"* mindset relegates government to perpetual opponent status; it is unclear what might ever make government a partner or extension of "us." Advocates and activists must be careful about triggering this mindset with "them" language, as it is likely to undercut faith in government without providing a sense of what changes would warrant a renewal of trust. Communicators must even be careful about talking about "the government," since this is likely to cue the idea of government as a single body apart from the people.

Partisanship: A Perceived Problem, Understood in Multiple Ways

Interview participants frequently complained about political parties. There's a widespread sense that parties currently prevent compromise and social problems from being solved. People think the antagonism between parties is a major contributor to social division in the United States and a threat to democracy.

People make sense of the idea of party division using the mindsets discussed above—*the System Is Rigged*, *Personalism*, and *Government as "Them"*:

- ***System Is Rigged***: When using this mindset, people think of the parties as mechanisms for rigging the system. Democrats and Republicans are assumed to have a common interest in retaining power and using it to benefit themselves rather than their constituents. At a few points, participants suggested that politicians from both parties conspire to advance the agenda of those with real power—corporations and wealthy people—and that they use partisan rhetoric that villainizes the other side to distract the public from what's really happening.
- ***Personalism***: When applying the *Personalism* mindset, people see partisan conflict as the product of leaders who care more about winning than about doing what's best for people. In this understanding, parties aren't understood as institutions, but as groups of unprincipled politicians focused on their personal interests. In other words, parties are simply teams of lousy politicians; the rules and structures through which these teams come to be and by which they exercise their power—and that shape which interests they are and aren't responsive to—are invisible.
- ***Government as "Them"***: When drawing on this mindset, people think of parties as part of government. They're seen as the way that candidates and elected leaders organize themselves to advance their interests rather than the people's interests. Within the *Government as "Them"* mindset, parties are the way that elected leaders come together to stand apart from and against the people.

While different mindsets lead to somewhat different understandings of parties, what is common across these understandings is a sense that partisanship is a problem. In interviews, participants rarely, if ever, depicted parties as positive channels for action or as a means through which people's political preferences can be negotiated or expressed.

FINDING #2

People’s thinking about the US political system, the Constitution, and democracy itself is shaped by an individualistic, rights-based mindset.

We asked participants about the United States’ system of government, the Constitution, democracy, and authoritarianism. Across these topics, people focused on individual rights and liberties.

Below, we describe first the foundational *Personal Liberty* mindset, and then describe the specific versions of this mindset that arise in thinking about the Constitution and democracy. These mindsets are not the only mindsets that people can access to think about these topics—there are alternative mindsets that people can draw upon. Yet rights-based mindsets on these topics are deeply entrenched and woven together in ways that reinforce and strengthen one another.

The *Personal Liberty* cultural mindset

This mindset assumes that the purpose of government is to protect individual rights, which are understood as personal liberties—prototypically, civil liberties like freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. According to this mindset, government exists to protect people’s freedoms of choice and action. The law, it is assumed, should only restrict individuals’ freedom when this is needed to protect other individuals’ freedom. Because government itself is assumed to infringe on individuals’ freedom, the law must, according to this way of thinking, set strict limits on governmental power.

This focus on rights and freedom surfaced repeatedly during discussions about the purpose of government and our political system. When drawing on this mindset, participants talked immediately and almost exclusively about freedom and rights.

In the United States it was grounded upon freedom, religious freedom, personal freedom. I believe that’s what it’s grounded on. It’s grounded on people being free and not making people do what they don’t want to do or putting them into where they’re being oppressed, and putting them in forms of slavery, because we still have that going on today where people are trafficked for sex, they’re trafficked to go out and pick fruit out of the fields for 15 cents an hour.

White, man, Republican, age 63

Within this mindset, rights are understood as personal liberties—freedom to do as one chooses, without constraint or interference. This understanding of rights excludes social and economic rights that entitle people to have their needs provided in some way by society or the state.

The *Constitution = Rights* cultural mindset.

The *Personal Liberty* mindset, when applied to the Constitution, leads to an understanding of the Constitution as wholly and solely intended to secure the protection of individual rights. When thinking with this mindset, people implicitly—and immediately and exclusively—equate the Constitution with the Bill of Rights.

I think the Constitution is written pretty good. [...] The way it should be. To give us rights. I think if they go to change it, our rights are going to be gone. That's going to be right out the window. [...]. They trying to strip our rights.

Black, woman, Republican, age 50

I would say [the Constitution] is basically documentation of basic rights and freedoms that every person should have access to or should be treated with so that way you know we can have a fair and civil society.

White, man, Democrat, age 41

When people draw on the *Constitution = Rights* model, they reason that the Constitution protects people—and does a good job of protecting people—from government infringement of basic individual rights and liberties. People don't think institutionally about how this happens (i.e., they aren't thinking about the institutions designed to prevent government overreach). Instead, they assume that the Constitution protects rights directly simply by stipulating them in the Bill of Rights.

This mindset often led participants to be conservative about constitutional change. When the possibility of changes to the Constitution were raised, participants assumed that, because the Constitution currently does a good job of protecting basic liberties, anyone trying to change it must be trying to enable the government to encroach on these liberties in ways it currently can't. They reasoned that the Constitution must be protected in its current form in order to protect against government overreach.

The *Individual Liberty Model of Democracy*

The *Personal Liberty* mindset also generates a specific understanding of democracy. In this way of thinking, democracy is equated with a political order that protects fundamental civil and political rights. Just as participants often answered questions about the Constitution by talking exclusively about the Bill of Rights, participants frequently answered questions about democracy by focusing on individual freedom and rights.

Interviewer: If you had to describe democracy to someone who has never heard of it before, how would you describe it? How would you explain it?

Participant: I think it would be, you had the freedom to live your life as you want as long as it stays within the laws. As long as you don't break any laws in the process.

White, man, Democrat, age 47

Interviewer: What “responsibilities or privileges” do the people in a democracy have?

Participant: They're free to do what they want. They're free to come and go as they please. They have the life they want to live whatever way they want to live it.

White, woman, Republican, age 61

In this mindset, “democracy” simply is a political order that protects civil and political liberties. When participants drew on this mindset to contrast democratic regimes with authoritarian ones, they focused on whether or not the regime protects basic liberties. Here, the contrast with authoritarianism is understood not in terms of the means of selecting leaders or passing laws, but in terms of the presence or absence of basic liberties: authoritarian regimes are understood as ones where people lack basic liberties, democracies as ones in which these liberties are granted and protected.

When applying this mindset, participants tended to assume that the United States is relatively democratic because our Constitution protects and upholds basic liberties and rights. However, some participants (generally conservative) drew on this mindset to suggest that the United States is in danger of succumbing to authoritarianism or losing its democracy due to what they viewed as increasing encroachments on individual rights (e.g., public health measures during COVID-19).

How do these mindsets obstruct or enable democratic reform?

- **The *Personal Liberty* mindset strengthens understanding of the importance of civil and political liberties while obscuring other dimensions of a just society.** On one hand, this mindset quickly leads people to recognize the importance of liberties that are essential for a legitimate and just society. On the other hand, the mindset makes it difficult for people to see beyond these liberties toward other goods or needs, such as a just distribution of power and resources. It also obscures the conditions necessary for popular self-government and the realization of political equality, such as an inclusive, pluralistic political culture, electoral procedures and institutions that allow for fair and widespread representation, and active civic participation. The *Personal Liberty* mindset can help people see the value of democratic reform efforts centered on protecting civil and political rights (e.g., efforts to protect free speech or the right to vote), yet this narrow focus blocks thinking about other aspects of democratic reform (e.g., Supreme Court reform or efforts to advance proportional representation).
- **The *Constitution = Rights* mindset obscures issues of institutional design.** In narrowing the focus to rights, this mindset makes it difficult for people to see how the Constitution sets up a particular structure for governmental institutions (e.g., establishing Congress and the presidency and the rules for how representatives are elected). Without an understanding that the Constitution involves a set of intentional and potentially changeable choices about how the political system is structured—that is, that the Constitution solidifies a particular and distinctive design for our system—it is hard for people to see that many of our government’s problems result from these initial constitutional decisions. This mindset obscures the possibility of changes to our Constitution that could improve how our system of government functions.
- **The *Individual Liberty Model of Democracy* produces a cramped understanding of what democracy requires.** By backgrounding ideas like collective self-government, popular sovereignty, political equality, authorization, and representation, this mindset limits people’s understanding of what democracy involves and what US democracy could and should be. This mindset is a barrier to support for democratic reform efforts that aim to expand access to political power, foster broad-based civic engagement, create more representative institutions, or otherwise strengthen constituent power and involvement in government.

Democracy and Authoritarianism: Mirror Concepts

There are several discrete ways of thinking about democracy available within US culture, but our research shows clearly that this isn't an issue about which people are comfortable speaking in depth or at length. When pushed to explain what democracy is and how it works, interview participants often struggled, and interviewers had to come at the topic from different angles to elicit people's views.

Understandings of authoritarianism are even fuzzier. When asked about authoritarianism, participants consistently perceived it negatively, yet struggled to say much about it. When people *did* explain authoritarianism, they explained it as the opposite of democracy. Different understandings of democracy, in turn, entailed different understandings of authoritarianism. For example, the *Individual Liberty Model of Democracy* generated a particular understanding of authoritarianism as a regime that denies basic liberties. Below, as we introduce alternative mindsets for thinking about democracy, we'll show how each one leads to a corresponding understanding of authoritarianism.

It is worth noting that "fascism" is even less familiar to most people. Interview participants either said they were unfamiliar with the term "fascism" or had only the vaguest sense of what it means. Like authoritarianism, participants generally had a sense that fascism was bad—a few participants associated the term with Hitler and Nazi Germany—but beyond this, they generally had little understanding of it as a distinctive political and social order.

Interviewer: Have you ever heard the term "fascism"?

Participant: I have heard [of] "fascism."

Interviewer: Can you tell me what that is?

Participant: I cannot tell you what that is. I honestly don't know. I've heard it. I'm sure if I'd seen a description of it maybe I could explain it, but I don't have it off the top of my head.

Latina, woman, Republican, age 50

Interviewer: What about the word "fascism"? Do you have any associations with it?

Participant: No. I've heard that word before. And I've heard it a lot when it comes to political people—like political terms and political debates and stuff like that. But I don't really know what it means.

Native American, man, Democrat, age 30

FINDING #3

Members of the public fluctuate between understanding the Constitution as an enduring foundation and as an outdated product of its time.

During the interwar period, political and legal elites intentionally cultivated “constitutional faith”—public belief in the wisdom and goodness of the Constitution.⁵ These efforts successfully built broad-based public trust in the Constitution and a sense that the constitutional order is well crafted and stable.

Our research suggests this constitutional faith is cracking. While people still do, at times, see the Constitution as a wise or even sacred foundation for our country that should not be changed, the same people, at other moments, also frequently see the Constitution as outdated and ill-suited for our country today.

It’s important to note and acknowledge the limitations of people’s knowledge of the Constitution. While people *do* have ways of thinking about and making sense of the Constitution, people typically didn’t have a lot of specific knowledge about its ins and outs.

Most knowledge of the Constitution centers on the Bill of Rights, which reinforces and reflects the *Constitution = Rights* mindset discussed earlier. People widely recognize that the Constitution protects basic rights like freedom of speech and religion. Conversations about the Constitution included little discussion of political institutions, with rare mention even of Congress or the presidency.

People also had limited knowledge about the ways in which the Constitution has been amended. Some participants asserted that the Constitution hasn’t changed at all, while others suggested it has changed, but often weren’t sure exactly how.

While this finding is consistent with decades of research finding uneven political and civic knowledge across the general public, it is important to underscore as it complicates attempts to engage and shift thinking about the Constitution.⁶ Communicators should not assume a great deal of knowledge about the Constitution; if their efforts require it, they need effective ways of conveying it.

The *Constitution as Stable Foundation* cultural mindset.

This mindset assumes that the purpose of the Constitution is to create a stable political order. This mindset brings together two related but distinct assumptions: First, that the purpose of the Constitution is to set up a system of government. Second, that it's important for this system to be stable and unchanging.

When drawing on this mindset, participants sometimes specifically referenced history, talking about the founding as a process of setting up a system of government and appealing to the authority of the “Founding Fathers” and “Framers” to explain why this foundational document is binding upon us today. In these participants' minds, “straying” from the Constitution is a problem because the Constitution was meant to provide a stable foundation for our political order. In other words, people assume that the stability of our political order depends on the permanence of the Constitution.

The US Constitution should be the foundation of how [our political system] works. Basically, that's what it is. [We] should [make] decisions with the guidance of the Constitution. It's like, don't try to read more into it than what's there and just do what the Framers said. And stop trying to add to it, it's what they said.

Black, woman, Democrat, age 61

I think [the Constitution is] written the way that it should be. I think that it is the way that our laws of the land should be. It runs our whole political system. And it tells our court how we should run our political system. It could be tweaked, but it can't be changed.

White, woman, Republican, age 61

Foundation wasn't the only metaphor that participants used to explain how the Constitution sets up our system of government. Other metaphors included *blueprint*, *rulebook*, and *backbone*. These metaphors convey the idea that the Constitution determines how the government works and that it should be enduring so it can ensure a stable political system. There was little discussion about what these rules *are* or how they constitute the government, yet this basic notion that the Constitution consists of rules that establish a stable political order recurred again and again.

The *Constitution as a Product of its Time* cultural mindset

In this way of thinking, the Constitution is seen to reflect the norms and beliefs that were in place at the time of its creation. These norms and beliefs are understood as fundamentally different and out-of-step with current views. This thinking brings people to the view that the Constitution is outdated. When people think with this mindset, they assume that—at least in theory—society should evolve and adapt to reflect the ideas of the time.

Participants talked about the Constitution as outdated in two slightly different ways. At times, they highlighted the country's exclusionary and oppressive past, specifically mentioning slavery and the exclusion of women from public and political life. They didn't have a strong understanding of how the Constitution embodies this history (e.g., there was no discussion of how slave state compromises shaped representation and apportionment), but people assumed that our exclusionary past must somehow shape the Constitution. At other times, people focused on technology, suggesting that our Constitution is premised on old technologies and ill-suited for the technological present (e.g., our Constitution wasn't written with cell phones and current firearms in mind).

With time, everything should evolve. But I am not the most politically savvy person by any means, so I would never feel comfortable going out and saying we should definitely be able to go in and change certain things in the Constitution. However, there are certain things in the Constitution that, if they are not working for our country and our society anymore, then I feel like they should be reassessed. Like, there should never be anything based on sexism, racism, homosexuality, you know, like anything that is discriminating against people in that sense.

White, woman, leans Democratic, age 38

I understand where people come from that are like, "[the Constitution] is a sacred document and nobody should ever question it," but it was written so long ago in a different time, with different situations, different technology, different world, different problems ... We were just in the infancy of being a country. It's still a pretty good document that holds up well, [but] I don't think anybody that was there and participated in its creation could have guessed or seen into the future ... When the Constitution was written, you could have talked to them about cell phones or information technology or data stealing and identity theft and nobody would even know what you were talking about. So there could be situations where things could be rewritten or added, deleted, etc., from the original document, I feel, because of how times are so much different now.

White, man, Democrat, age 41

The mindset is grounded in the deeper and more general assumption that societies do and should evolve over time. In contrast with the idea that social order depends on permanence, this mindset prioritizes change and flexibility and assumes that change is necessary and desirable. While participants tended not to talk explicitly about progress, there is a conception of progress (not as inevitable, but as desirable) built into this mindset.

This mindset includes a rough understanding of the Constitution as having some sort of organizing purpose—it arranges society in some fashion—though the focus of the mindset is less on this organizing function and more on how the Constitution reflects the ideas of the founding era.

How do these mindsets obstruct or enable democratic reform?

- **The *Constitution as Stable Foundation* mindset strengthens attachment to the status quo, but the idea of *constituting rules* is an opening for change.** The mindset's orientation toward permanence and stability results in opposition to constitutional change. If political stability is seen as an overriding goal and is assumed to require a constitution that remains unchanged, it is difficult to mobilize support or create openings for people to consider fundamental changes to our democratic system. It's important to recognize, however, that the other part of this mindset—the idea that the Constitution sets up the rules of our political system—is not inherently tied to this idea of immutability and permanence. While the metaphors that people use to talk about the function of the Constitution in setting up our political system suggest some degree of permanence, they don't exclude the possibility of redesign or re-founding (e.g., along the lines of Jefferson's famous idea that every generation should write its own Constitution). The idea that the Constitution sets up the rules for our political system opens the door for editing or rewriting these rules—coming up with a new blueprint or rulebook.
- **The *Constitution as a Product of Its Time* mindset opens space for constitutional change.** This mindset opens space for the constitutional politics that some scholars and reformers have begun calling for—from abolishing the Electoral College to reimagining representation and Senate apportionment.⁷ This mindset suggests that people are open, in principle, to the idea that the Constitution could and should be changed to better reflect contemporary commitments to an equitable and just society. This mindset, in its current form, does not lead people to call for constitutional change, as people have neither a clear sense of what should be changed or how such changes could happen. Yet, if advocates and activists can fill in these blanks and expand this mindset, there is an existing basis within American culture to build popular support for significant constitutional change.

FINDING #4

Public thinking about democracy centers on voting. Other forms of participation are largely missing.

While there are a few strongly-held models of democracy, most participants struggled with the topic—they weren't always sure what they were being asked or didn't have much to say—and some were generally unfamiliar with the term “democracy.”

Voting was the most common and central concept in participants' talk about democracy. At times they wholly equated democracy with voting. At other times, they drew on fuller conceptions of democracy, yet even in these cases, voting was understood as the central feature of democracy. Participants occasionally mentioned other forms of participation, such as speaking out on social media, calling or writing members of Congress, or protesting, but these mentions were rare.

People spoke very little about mass demonstrations, which is surprising in light of the many demonstrations in recent years. We also didn't see much talk about local, community-level meetings. Given that people are aware of both mass demonstrations and community meetings, their absence in talk about democracy indicates that people's mindsets of *democracy* largely don't encompass these forms of collective action.

Below, we describe the *Voting Model of Democracy* and then lay out mindsets that offer more robust understandings of democracy and that provide potential alternatives to the *Voting Model and the Individual Liberty Model* discussed previously.

The *Voting Model of Democracy*

At times, people don't just highlight voting as a key form of democratic participation but actually equate democracy with voting. In this way of thinking, democracy is voting—typically, voting for leaders in elections, though people occasionally think instead of direct voting on policies (e.g., through referenda).

Participants drawing on this mindset would often answer questions about democracy by talking immediately and solely about voting. The implicit assumption that democracy is voting was clear throughout our interviews.

Interviewer: Can you tell me how democracy is different from other systems or ways of making decisions?

Participant: A lot of people, some countries, some places, their people don't get to vote at all, their people don't get a say at all.

Black, woman, leans Republican, age 22

Interviewer: What kinds of conditions need to be in place for a country to be a democracy?

Participant: Well, obviously you have to have voting, for people to vote for people. You know, I'm not 100 percent sure how somebody would make it a democracy aside from having people be able to elect an official. Other than that, I don't know what's required.

Latine, woman, Republican, age 50

While this mindset is typically applied to voting in elections, it does not include a notion of representation as an *ideal*. Unlike mindsets described below, which lead people to think about whether elected officials successfully (or “truly”) represent constituents—whether or not they meet the ideal of representation—under the *Voting Model*, representation simply means being elected and serving in office. Voting in elections is understood as a means by which citizens *select* their leaders, but election doesn't establish obligations about what elected leaders owe their constituents or create expectations about how they should behave.

People Often Equate “Democracy” with the US System of Government

When we asked interview participants about “democracy,” there was a tendency to speak immediately and exclusively about the US political system. In these instances, they treated democracy as nothing more or less than what we do in the United States.

Interviewer: If you had to explain democracy to somebody who’d never heard of democracy, or somebody from another planet, how would you explain what democracy is?

Participant: Democracy is the way [...] that they run the country in the United States. Their agendas, how everything’s supposed to work out. You know, everything they have in place.

Black, woman, leans Republican, age 41

Interviewer: In your mind, what values is democracy grounded in?

Participant: I think it all goes back to the Constitution. Even though the Constitution was made by a set of laws that were put into place, we still have that freedom there to do and live as we want.

White, man, Democrat, age 47

We can understand this as a definitional mindset—the *Democracy = US System of Government* mindset—yet this mindset functions differently than others discussed in this report. On its own, it doesn’t explain democracy *or* the US system. Yet it leads to distinctive patterns of reasoning and talk that are important for advocates and organizers.

When people draw on the *Democracy = US System of Government* mindset, arguments that the US system is insufficiently democratic don’t make sense. When democracy and the United States are equated, democracy simply is what the United States does. This means the United States can’t be criticized for being undemocratic. Rather, problems with the US system are understood as weaknesses of democracy.

It’s likely that some of the polling that shows a decline in support among Americans for democracy is a result of this equation of democracy and the US system. As a result of this mindset, disaffection with the US system is understood as disaffection with democracy itself. This likely doesn’t explain *all of* the decline in support for democracy, as polling also shows increases in support for authoritarianism.⁸ It might explain, however, at least some of the apparent disaffection with democracy among younger people and openness to alternative forms of government.

How do these mindsets obstruct or enable democratic reform?

- **The centrality of voting in people’s thinking about democracy makes it easy for people to see why voter suppression and fraud are a problem.** Because people see voting as essential to democracy, they can quickly recognize that any manipulation of the voting process is a problem. While participants didn’t generally raise issues of voter suppression or fraud on their own, when they were asked about these, they immediately understood why they would pose problems for democracy. There was no shared view among participants about whether voter suppression or fraud are happening (though, unsurprisingly, participants tended to think that one or the other was the real problem, with different participants stressing suppression and fraud). The centrality of voting to people’s thinking about democracy means that voting rights advocates can take for granted that Americans see distortions of the voting process as problematic and can focus attention on establishing the reality of voter suppression and the general absence of fraud.
- **The *Voting Model of Democracy* could lead people to see social movements as undemocratic.** Because this mindset leads people to think of democratic participation as exhausted by the act of voting, it creates expectations of a passive public. When voting is understood as the form of democratic participation, more robust forms of citizen engagement, such as mass demonstrations and other forms of social movement activity, will, at best, be seen as unnecessary and, at worst, actually undemocratic. If democracy is, in people’s minds, reduced to formal voting procedures, then public pressure outside of these procedures might be thought to violate democracy. If the majority’s vote is supposed to determine outcomes, then attempts outside of elections by smaller segments of the public to pressure leaders to change their behavior could be seen as illegitimate. This is, to be clear, merely a hypothesis that follows from the logic of the mindset. Further research is needed to explore whether the Voting Model leads people to oppose nonelectoral public pressure from movements.

FINDING #5

Mindsets grounded in ideas of popular self-government and representation are productive alternatives to other models of democracy.

As we discussed above, members of the American public sometimes rely on understandings of democracy that narrow expectations for democratic institutions and participatory practices. While the *Individual Liberty Model of Democracy* and *Voting Model of Democracy* bring into view specific steps needed to protect or enhance our democracy, such as protecting and strengthening voting rights and safeguarding the exercise of civil and political liberties, they obscure key aspects of democratic life and institutions and limit our vision of what could and must change for the United States to become more democratic.

The good news is that there are a couple of broadly shared alternative models of democracy that offer more robust understandings of what democracy is and how it can and should work. These mindsets provide an existing basis for efforts to not only protect existing institutions and practices but also to strengthen, invigorate, and improve democracy in the United States.

The Popular Model of Democracy

In this mindset, democracy is understood as government by the people. It is thought of as a political system in which the government does what the people want. In this way of thinking, democracy is a process through which the people express their wishes and expectations and have the power or influence to make the government carry these out.

This mindset doesn't provide a clear understanding of *how* popular will should be mediated or expressed, nor a clear sense of what popular control over government involves. In interviews, participants sometimes gestured toward "participation" as a way in which the people express their will and influence outcomes, but there wasn't a clear understanding of *how* the people express or effect their will through this participation. Within this mindset, voting remains the paradigmatic form of participation, though participants occasionally talked about other ways in which citizens express their will and influence decisions, such as writing or calling members of Congress. Despite this fuzziness about institutions and forms of participation, the mindset provides a clear understanding that democracy means rule by and for the people, in line with popular will.

Interviewer: When I say "democracy," what comes to mind for you?

Participant: A government by the people, for the people, that's governed by the people. And where everybody's vote counts.

White, man, Republican, age 63

I think democracy is how we work out the popular will. How we honor it, and this is what the most amount of people want to do. But we also work it—like, okay, the most amount of people want this, their will, but we have to temper it a little bit, [so we don't] railroad or abuse the rest of the population.

Latino, man, Republican, age 35

This leads to a specific understanding of authoritarianism as government by a dictator or unelected leader who rules without the input of the people. Whereas the *Individual Liberty Model* leads people to see authoritarianism as denial of civil and political liberties, the *Popular Model* leads people to see authoritarianism as lack of popular control or influence over government.

In interviews, this mindset was often applied to distinguish between true democracy and what is currently happening in the United States. According to this way of thinking, in a true democracy, the government reflects the will of its citizens and the people have the power. Yet in our current situation,

participants suggested democracy is being subverted by powerful politicians and corporations who are rigging the political system for their own benefit, instead of doing what their constituents have told them to do. (We can think of *the Popular Model of Democracy* as providing the ideal behind the *System Is Rigged* mindset's critique, or at least the ideal behind its applications to the political system. The former mindset's ideal of a government that is controlled by and responsive to popular will provides the implicit ideal against which "rigging" is judged as illegitimate.)

This mindset leads people to suggest that the people should have greater control over government, although what this looks like is often hazy. In a couple of cases, participants suggested that the president should have greater power so he or she can carry out the people's will without interference from Congress or the Court. Given the history of popular leaders claiming greater power in the name of the people and ultimately destroying democratic institutions, it's important to note that this mindset can be used to justify strengthening executive power in ways that could result in authoritarianism.

The Representation Model of Democracy

In this way of thinking, democracy is understood as the representation of the people by elected leaders. Elected officials are understood as having an obligation to *actually* represent their constituents, and they can succeed or fail to meet that obligation. In other words, representation is thought of as an *ideal* against which elected officials' actions can be judged. What it means for officials to "actually" represent constituents can vary, as discussed below.

The idea that democracy is representative is not unique to this mindset. Participants widely took for granted that democracy involves electing officials, while using different mindsets to make sense of this (e.g., the Voting Model assumes that voting is for leaders, and the Popular Model assumes that government "by the people" happens through elected officials).

What is distinctive about the *Representation Model* is not the idea that democracy happens through elected officials, but its understanding of democracy as a system of government in which elected officials have obligations to *successfully*—"truly" or "really"—represent their constituents.¹⁰

What is representation within this mindset? What does representation obligate elected officials to do? Generally, representation is understood as acting on the people's behalf. Interviews indicate that people have access to several distinct ways of thinking about representation. In any given moment, people will have in mind one of the following specific understandings of what it means for representatives to act on the people's behalf, though people can and do move between these understandings at different moments:

Representation = acting in constituents' best interests

According to this understanding, elected officials successfully represent constituents when they do what's in constituents' interests. Representation is seen as *unsuccessful* when officials act without constituents' best interests in mind.

For the average, everyday person, I know from talking to my friends, people in my community, that there seems to be a feeling right now of, like, no one really represents what's best for the people.

White, woman, leans Democratic, age 38)

Representation = carrying out the people's will

In this way of thinking, constituents are represented when elected officials carry out their wills or preferences. This understanding of representation is closely connected to the *Popular Model of Democracy*, combining the latter mindset's focus on popular will with the notion of representation as an ideal.

[Politicians] are the ones that are supposed to take what the people want ... and create laws. [...] The people put them there to do a job, to represent them as a whole.

White, man, Democrat, age 41

Ordinary people elect the politicians and then they make the decisions based on what the people want. They're supposed to, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're going to.

White, woman, Republican, age 61

Representation = promise keeping

In this understanding, elected officials successfully represent constituents when they do what they promised to do before they were elected. This is often bound up with language about accountability.

Democracy and representation? I would think it would be the person that we put into the position—what they've said they were gonna do is getting done. I think that's a democracy, and representation is to see and make sure that the person you put in there is actually doing what they say they were gonna do.

Latina, woman, Republican, age 50

Representation = reflecting people's experiences and identities

This understanding was less common, but in some cases, participants talked about representation as elected officials having common experiences or sharing identity with constituents (e.g., women being represented by women, working class people being represented by working class people). In this way of thinking, shared identity or experience enables officials to understand and respond to the needs of constituents.

I think it's so important that we acknowledge that there are differences out there and just because I experience something one way doesn't mean that someone else does. If they are telling me that "I don't feel represented," I just think right now we have so many old white men in power. [...] I think that right now, our democracy is failing our minorities and it's not accurately being there to represent and support them. Until we can do that, we don't have a true democracy.

White, woman, leans Democratic, age 38

Participants frequently applied the *Representation Model* and its specific versions to argue that the people aren't truly or fully represented in the United States today. These criticisms drew on the different specific conceptions of representation discussed above. When drawing on the best interest conception of representation, participants complained that elected officials do what's in their own interests rather than those of their constituents. Drawing on the popular will conception, they argued that US elected officials don't actually represent people because they carry out the wishes of powerful actors like corporations rather than the people. The promise-keeping conception appeared in complaints that representatives lie or ultimately don't do what they say they will. The experience- and identity-based conception was implicit in complaints that elected officials are "out of touch" because they don't share the lived experience of most Americans, or apparent in comments about how elected bodies consist mostly of old white men.

How do these mindsets obstruct or enable democratic reform?

The *Popular Model of Democracy* helps people see greater democracy as a solution to a rigged society.

This mindset is the positive mirror of a rigged system: a society in which the people, rather than the powerful, rule. The *Popular Model* enables people to see democracy as a not-yet-realized positive ideal to strive toward and to make sense of their own dissatisfactions and frustrations. The mindset can potentially help members of the public see the need for steps ranging from policies that restrain corporate influence over politics to Supreme Court reforms to proposals to institute rank choice voting or proportional representation.

The *Popular Model* can, at times, be used to justify authoritarianism, often through exclusionary definitions of "the people" (e.g., "real" Americans). Demagogues often claim to speak for the people and justify unlawful claims to power on this basis. While the *Popular Model* provides a potentially powerful basis for progressive reform, further research is needed to learn how communicators can effectively leverage this mindset while inoculating against authoritarian distortions.

The *Representative Model of Democracy* offers a robust ideal to strive toward, yet critiques of representation can potentially lapse into criticisms of people rather than institutions.

The idea that elected officials can fail to truly represent their constituents not only provides a powerful basis for criticizing the status quo but offers an accessible ideal that reformers can use to explain the need for change. Given the strength of *Personalism*, there is a danger that failures of representation will

be understood as personal failings of representatives rather than as institutional problems. Advocates and activists pushing for reform should explain the systemic and institutional roots of problems with representation (e.g., campaign finance or gerrymandering) to help people see the need for reforms, rather than simply replacing the individuals in elected positions by voting them out of office.

Voice: A Dominant Metaphor for Participation

Voice is a common and dominant metaphor for democratic participation. In interviews, participants frequently talked about democratic participation as “having a say” or “making your voice heard.” Being represented was framed as being “listened to.” Inclusion within a democracy was “having a voice.” Challenging the system was talked about as “asking questions” or “speaking up.” Political repression was described as “being silenced.” People make sense of the complex and abstract concept of political participation in terms of more embodied, concrete, and intersubjectively available experiences of verbal communication.

The metaphor takes on distinctive meanings when applied with different mindsets:¹¹

Individual Liberty Model of Democracy: When paired with this mindset, the voice metaphor is used as a way of talking about liberty. The metaphor is often used negatively—being “silenced” is a way of talking about the suppression of basic liberties. The voice metaphor sometimes leads to a literal focus on *speech*, and a preoccupation with freedom of speech as *the* liberty that needs to be protected.

Popular Model of Democracy: Participants frequently used the voice metaphor to discuss the idea of citizens or constituents communicating their wills and preferences. Voting was talked about as a way for people to make their “voice heard”—a way of expressing preferences and exercising influence. The voice metaphor was also sometimes used to talk about other forms of participation (e.g., writing members of Congress is a way in which people can “have a say”).

Representation Model of Democracy (popular will conception): When participants talked about the importance of “being listened to” or “being heard,” they were using the voice metaphor to convey the idea of communicating their will to elected officials. In these applications, representation is “listening” to the people, which means taking the people’s direction and doing what they want.

The metaphor provides an accessible and familiar way of surfacing key elements of democracy and—critically—a way of talking about participation. As we note above, people’s talk about participation is usually thin and their language for describing it sparse. The voice metaphor is arguably the sole exception to this: a way of talking about participation that is rich and multilayered, and that opens up different ways of thinking about participation.

Yet the metaphor comes with a downside: it sometimes slips from figurative to literal usage. Because speech is an important form of freedom and integral to democratic participation and representation, the use of the metaphor can easily lead people to focus on *actual speech*. A preoccupation with speech can take attention away from genuine influence or the exercise of power. Thinking of a protest as “speaking up” can lead to the sense that the goal is simply expression rather than *also* exerting influence to achieve change.

While advocates and activists can use the voice metaphor to explain the importance of participation, it’s vital, when using this metaphor, to explicitly highlight that democracy is not just about speech but also shared power, and that democratic reform itself requires building and leveraging power in addition to “speaking up.” Otherwise, literal interpretations of the metaphor could undercut the ultimate goals of democratic reform.

FINDING #6

There aren’t widely shared mindsets for thinking about the relationship between race or gender and US democracy today.

When thinking about issues ranging from policing to housing, substantial portions of the American public are increasingly thinking about racism and doing so from a systemic perspective. As we’ve discussed in recent research, there are different systemic models of racism that people can draw upon that sit alongside an interpersonal view of racism.¹² While the salience of systemic thinking about racism varies significantly across groups, there’s no doubt that most people can recognize that racism goes beyond individual bias and discrimination and has a systemic dimension.

However, in our interviews about democracy and the US political system, we found little evidence of these systemic models of racism being applied to think about US democracy. Across our sample, participants simply didn’t have much to say about how racism is built into and perpetuated by our political system.

In comparison to thinking about racism, we’ve seen less evidence of systemic thinking about sexism and gender inequalities in past research. And in our interviews on US democracy, we saw no evidence that people understand how patriarchy is built into or perpetuated by our political institutions.

Below, we explain the patterns in what people had to say—and what they didn’t say—about the relationship between race and democracy in the United States, and gender and democracy in the United States, respectively.

In interviews, we specifically asked about these topics, though these portions of the interviews were brief. We share these initial (and admittedly high-level) findings because they have important implications for advocates and activists. We plan to dig more deeply into these issues in subsequent research.

People don't connect racism and contemporary US democracy.

In interviews, there was remarkably little discussion of the ways in which racism shapes or undermines democracy in the United States today. Race rarely came up until participants were asked explicitly about its relationship with democracy in the United States, and even then, discussion focused largely on the past.

When interviewers brought up the topic, participants responded in one of two ways:

1. *They occasionally brought up historical formal legal exclusion of Black Americans.* In a few instances, participants brought up slavery as an example of what's undemocratic, as a clear violation of Black people's political and civil rights. In these cases, political exclusion of Black people was treated as lying in the past.

Interviewer: I asked, "Has the US always been a democracy," and you said "no ..."

Participant: No, I don't think. Even after British rule. I mean, after we won. No. I don't feel like, how can we be a democracy when we have people that [are] enslaved? I just don't feel like until everybody is free and equal, I don't see it as a democracy until then.

Latina, woman, Republican, age 45

At times, this focus on the past appeared to be driven by familiar racism-denial mindsets (generally in talk among white participants).¹⁵ Here, the emphasis on the past was intended to make the point that racism *isn't* a current problem in our political processes or society more broadly.

I personally don't believe that we have a serious problem with racism in this country. [...] I know there's people that are racist in the country. There's people that are racist in every country. I've run into that everywhere I've ever went. But I don't believe it's such a level that it used to be back during the Civil War and before then.

White, man, Republican, age 63

2. *Many participants did recognize that racism remains a major problem in the United States and sometimes drew on systemic understandings of it, but did not connect racism and democracy.* In cases where people talked about racism, democracy tended to fall out of the conversation. The below quote is a good example. When asked to talk about race and democracy in the United States, the participant started thinking and talking about racism but *stopped* talking about democracy.

Interviewer: I want to get your thoughts about the relationship between race and democracy in the United States. What comes to mind for you when I mention race and democracy together?

Participant: All I can think of is, well, [...] it's the equality, it's not fair. I think, obviously, I think race, we have freedom, obviously and whatnot. We can gather, we have rallies and stuff like that. But I think the equality [...] it's just not fair. I mean, my brother-in-law can go to a bank and he probably won't get a loan because he's a person of color, but my husband could go get one. You know what I mean? It's just not fair.

Latina, woman, Republican, age 50

Across these reactions to being asked about race and US democracy, we see a striking pattern: people struggle to connect these issues. While people, at times, recognize how racism violated democratic principles in the past or see how racism continues to shape issues like employment, housing, the criminal legal system, and education, there are not readily available pathways for connecting racism and US democracy today.

People generally associate gender-based political exclusion with the past or deny that gender inequality structures are perpetuated by our institutions.

As with race, gender was largely absent from participants' talk until they were explicitly asked about it. Even when they were asked about the relationship between gender and democracy in the United States, participants had little to say, and talk of gender-based political exclusion largely focused on the past.

There were a few patterns in participants' responses:

1. *When asked about gender, democracy, and US history, participants occasionally brought up that women didn't always have the right to vote.* Because, as we discussed previously, people widely see voting as central to democracy, the denial of the right to vote is easily and quickly understood as undemocratic. However, because people's understanding of gender inequalities was limited to suffrage, people took for granted that these inequalities have been fixed.

Interviewer: If we think a bit about history, there was a point until the twentieth century where only men could vote. And actually, only some men. Does that bring anything to mind for you about the relationship between gender and democracy in the US?

Participant: Oh, yeah. I remember when women couldn't vote, and then finally they started voting. [...] I guess it was wrong. If you're old enough, you should be able to vote. [...] It's like the men was making the decision. [...] No, I don't think that was right.

Interviewer: Do you think it has any impact still today, that history?

Participant: No. Because I think everybody votes. Everybody votes.

Black, woman, Republican, age 50)

2. *At times, participants simply denied any relationship at all.* The following quote pulls together gender-blind and color-blind thinking to claim that gender doesn't and shouldn't matter within US democracy. Just as with racism, the denial that sexism is a problem in the United States short-circuits any consideration of the ways in which gender inequality structures our institutions or is perpetuated by them.

Interviewer: What about gender and democracy in the United States?

Participant: I don't see where that has any influence at all. It shouldn't matter whether a person's, you know, male or female, white, Black, whatever. It shouldn't make any difference.

White, man, Republican, age 63

3. *People occasionally noted that political representation remains skewed.* As we discussed earlier under the *Representation Model*, participants occasionally brought up that many of our elected officials are older white men, suggesting that women and people of color aren't adequately represented.

While suffrage and representation were occasionally touched upon, these exhausted participants' sense of how gender and democracy in the United States are related. As with race, people struggled to think broadly and deeply about the connection between the two.

How does the lack of clear mindsets connecting race, gender, and US democracy obstruct democratic reform?

- **People's difficulty in connecting democracy with race and gender makes it hard to see how racism and sexism shape our institutions and how democratic reforms could, in turn, advance racial and gender justice.** The absence of clear mindsets for linking democracy and race and gender make it hard to see, for example, how our institutions give white people more voting power than people of color, or how the many "veto points" in our political system (e.g., the filibuster, judicial review, presidential veto power) thwart changes to the status quo of racial and gender injustice.
- **Connecting the dots will be critical for bringing race and gender into conversations about democracy.** People struggle to think about the relationship between *democracy* and race and gender. But as we noted earlier, there *are* systemic ways of thinking about racism (and to a lesser extent sexism). And people *do* sometimes recognize that the Constitution reflects the racism and sexism of our history. People don't connect the dots because: (1) Dominant mindsets around the Constitution don't focus on its role in setting up institutions, and (2) *Personalism* and other mindsets make it hard for people to think about institutions and why they matter. Communicators can bring race and gender into the center of thinking about democracy by cuing systemic models of racism and sexism and explaining how they are built into our political institutions just as they are built into our legal or employment systems. Moreover, starting with the idea that the Constitution reflects the prejudices of the past provides an opening for explaining how that past continues to be reflected in our institutions, though communicators must explain *how* this works in order to effectively connect the dots for people.

FINDING #7

There's a gap between people's sense of the scale of the problems and their ideas about how to fix them.

People widely think that the US system has massive problems. Drawing on the mindsets above, here are some of the major problems people see:

- The US political system is rigged against most people.
- The government stands apart from and works in opposition to the people.
- The Constitution is outdated, reflecting historical assumptions and prejudices that our society has moved beyond.
- Basic rights and liberties essential to democracy are in danger.
- Members of the public are poorly represented.
- The government consistently fails to reflect and act on the will of the people.

Despite these serious critiques of the system, we found that people had few ideas about what could be done to fix it. The solutions that emerged either didn't involve changes to the system at all, or the changes were quite small.

Solution #1: Better Leaders

Participants sometimes assumed that the only way to solve problems with our democracy or political system is by electing better leaders. This follows directly from the *Personalism* mindset. If people assume that political decisions and outcomes directly flow from leaders' characters, then it follows that changing leaders is the best and only way to fix things.

Interviewer: What should be done to respond to [authoritarianism in the United States] now?

Participant: Better leaders. Some better leaders with more common sense. [...] I think it starts at the top. Starts at the top, like the head ... it starts at the head. So, I think a bunch of new leaders.

Black, woman, Republican, age 50

In order for our country to really heal, I think we need to meet in the middle more. Both politicians and Americans in general [need to] be open to truly listening to the other side and be like, "I can see your viewpoint on that," and be okay with changing your viewpoint too. [...] I think that we can [move forward] if we come together and we understand that we are never going to completely agree with each other, but each side has really valuable things they bring to the table.

White, woman, leans Democratic, age 38

Solution #2: Term Limits

Terms limits came up frequently. This solution stems from both *Personalism* and *System Is Rigged* thinking. In one way, this is a variation on the “better leaders” solution: If the people in power are the problem, then we need better ways of getting them out of office at scale. Yet the reasoning that leads people to land on term limits also mixes in more systemic thinking, as people reason that tenure in office allows politicians to entrench their power, which enables them to better pursue their own interests rather than advancing the public good. Term limits are, thus, sometimes seen as a response to a rigged system.

I think that there should be term limits, particularly for US senators. Because it seems like there's a lot of senators that get into that position and then once they're there they have garnered so much political power that they can do whatever they want at that point. They can vote however they feel like, they can spin it however they feel like, and they can stay there for 20 years because it's very hard to gain the popularity and momentum for somebody to run against some of these senators.

Latino, man, Republican, age 35

Interviewer: Are there any changes that you would make to the US to make it more democratic?

Participant: The only changes I would do is term [limits]. I think we need to cycle those people through. I think we need change.

Latina, woman, Republican, age 50

Solution #3: Campaign Finance Reform

Because participants saw corporate influence on politics as a major problem, drawing again on the *System Is Rigged* mindset, they often viewed campaign finance reform as a solution. Along with term limits, this is probably the most frequent political reform we hear across projects from participants in our research. Participants reasoned that “taking money out of politics” would strengthen our democracy by helping to unrig the system and making it more responsive to the people. Just as this solution depends on the *System Is Rigged* mindset for its diagnosis of the problem, it draws on the *Popular Model of Democracy* as the ideal it would help us realize.

Get some of this campaign financing, campaign donations, get that stuff out of there. [...] It seems like you should be able to go out there, state your message and then people can vote for you. It doesn't seem like it needs to be this huge money deal where it's ripe for corruption and shady business and such. [...] I think maybe [that] would get some of the poison out of the pot.

White, man, Democrat, age 41

I'd make limits on how much people could donate. Maybe \$100 or something like that to where you don't have this overwhelming ... like, where General Motors has a million employees, and they get them all to give \$100 to a certain person to get their view on things.

White, man, Republican, age 63

What does solutions thinking mean for democratic reform?

People rarely recognize the need to address threats to the functioning of our *institutions*.

Participants rarely, if ever, brought up voter suppression, gerrymandering, efforts at the state level designed to disempower popularly elected leaders, and other anti-democratic efforts undermining the proper functioning of democratic processes. Even when interviewers brought up voter suppression, only a few participants recognized this as a problem, and for these participants it was not top of mind. While people widely see the political system as rigged, there is relatively little understanding of the specific anti-democratic steps being taken to undermine democratic institutions.

The *System Is Rigged* mindset creates both an opening and danger for democratic reformers trying to build understanding of these threats. On the one hand, this mindset gives people a readily available framework for making sense of anti-democratic efforts. Voter suppression and other anti-democratic tactics can easily be framed and understood as attempts to “rig” the political system. On the other hand, this mindset also leaves people susceptible to the bogus claims made by those engaged in anti-democratic efforts. Claims of voter fraud, for example, are often advanced using the rhetoric of “rigging,” and purges of voter rolls are justified as necessary to thwart rigging. Advocates and organizers working toward pro-democracy reforms must be careful when cuing *System Is Rigged* thinking. FrameWorks is currently completing research on different forms of *System Is Rigged* framing, which will yield concrete recommendations about how to, and how not to, engage this mindset.

Imagination about solutions doesn't match the scale of the public's sense of the problem.

People struggle to imagine solutions that would truly fix the problems they see. They have limited vision for a future that *isn't* rigged, in which democracy is properly representative or the people truly rule. People recognize that the solutions they suggest don't truly address the problems they have identified, but they struggle to come up with ones that would. If reformers want to convince people that such a future is possible, a key part of the work will be offering a vision of that future and a path to get there that includes solutions adequate to address the problems people recognize.

Conclusion

Understanding the cultural mindsets that members of the US public use to think about our political system, the Constitution, and democracy is critical for efforts to combat authoritarianism and strengthen our democracy. By mapping the cultural terrain, we gain the ability to better navigate our way toward a democratic future.

In the coming months, we will follow up this research with further investigation into these mindsets. Specifically, we will field surveys to understand the relative strength with which different groups hold these mindsets and to explore how these mindsets relate to foundational understandings that people draw upon to think about other social issues. By continuing our exploration of cultural mindsets around democracy and the US political system as part of the Culture Change Project, we hope to equip all advocates and activists concerned with our democracy with the tools to develop effective strategies and narratives in the critical years ahead.

Appendix:

Research Methods

Below, we describe the research that informs the current research report.

Literature Scan and Research Design

In later 2022–early 2023, FrameWorks’ researchers conducted a scan of existing research literature on mindsets and public opinion research on government, democracy, and authoritarianism. This review covered past FrameWorks’ research, as well as academic and gray literatures on these topics. This review informed the design of our original research.

As part of our design process, FrameWorks’ staff members also engaged the [Culture Change Project Advisory Board](#), soliciting guidance during a board meeting from this group of social change leaders about what to explore and how to ensure the utility and relevance of this work for those working on democratic reform, as well as for advocates and activists working across movements and fields toward progressive change. This engagement included a discussion with the whole board during the December 2022 Advisory Board meeting, as well as follow-up conversations with specific board members. These conversations shaped the focus and scope of the research.

Cultural Mindsets Interviews

To identify the cultural mindsets that the public uses to think about the US political system, the Constitution, democracy, authoritarianism, and democracy and authoritarianism in the United States, FrameWorks’ researchers conducted 20 cultural mindsets interviews from January to February 2023 with people across the United States. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and were recorded with participants’ written consent.

All participants were recruited by a professional marketing firm and selected to represent variation along several dimensions: race and ethnicity, age, gender, educational background, income, political views (as self-reported during the screening process), residential location, and family situation (married or single, with or without children). Among participants, nine participants identified as white, four as Black/African American, four as Latino/Hispanic, two as Native American, and one as Asian American. Three participants were 18–29 years old, five were 30–44, five were 45–59, and seven were 60 or older. The sample included nine men and 11 women. Seven participants had high school degrees, seven had some college, three had undergraduate degrees, two had postgraduate degrees, and one had attended vocational school. Four participants reported income of \$39,999 or less, four participants reported income of \$40,000–\$69,999, seven participants reported income of \$70,000–\$99,999, four participants reported income of \$100,000–\$149,999, and one participant reported income of \$150,000 or over. Nine participants self-identified as Democrats, seven as Republicans, and four as independent (with three

leaning Republican and one leaning Democratic). Nine participants reported living in urban areas, seven in rural areas, and four in suburban areas. Eleven participants reported being married or in a civil union, while nine participants had never married. Sixteen of the participants had children, with five of those participants having only adult children (18+), and four participants had no children.

Cultural mindsets interviews are one-on-one, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately two hours. They are designed to allow researchers to capture broad sets of assumptions, or cultural mindsets, that participants use to make sense of a concept or topic area—in this case, issues related to the US political system, the Constitution, democracy, authoritarianism, and democracy and authoritarianism in the United States. Interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions covering participants' thinking on those topics in broad terms. Researchers approached each interview with a common set of topics to explore but allowed participants to determine the direction and nature of the discussion.

To analyze the interviews, researchers used analytical techniques from cognitive and linguistic anthropology to examine how participants understood issues related to the US political system, the Constitution, democracy, and authoritarianism.¹⁴ First, researchers identified common ways of talking across the sample to reveal assumptions, relationships, logical steps, and connections that were commonly made but taken for granted throughout an individual's dialogue. The analysis involved discerning patterns in both what participants said (i.e., how they related, explained, and understood things) and what they did not say (i.e., assumptions and implied relationships). In many cases, participants revealed conflicting mindsets on the same issue. In such cases, one conflicting way of understanding was typically found to be dominant over the other in that it more consistently and deeply shaped participants' thinking (i.e., participants drew on this mindset with greater frequency and relied more heavily on it in arriving at conclusions). To ensure consistency, researchers met after an initial round of coding and analysis, comparing and processing initial findings, then revisited transcripts to explore differences and questions that arose through the comparison. As part of this process, researchers compared emerging findings to the findings from previous cultural mindsets research as a check to ensure that they had not missed or misunderstood any important mindsets.

Analysis centered on ways of understanding that were shared across participants, as cultural mindsets research is designed to identify common ways of thinking that can be identified across a sample. While there was no fixed rule or percentage used to identify what counts as *shared*, mindsets reported were typically found in a large majority of interviews. Mindsets found in a smaller percentage of interviews were only reported if there was a clear reason why they only appeared in a limited set of interviews (e.g., the mindset reflected the thinking of a particular subgroup of people).

We primarily rely on large-sample surveys to explore variations between groups, rather than looking at variation within our interview sample, as generalizations based on small numbers of participants would be inappropriate. However, in analyzing cultural mindsets interviews, researchers attended to the identities and social positions of participants and the ways in which mindsets might vary in salience or be differently applied depending on participants' life experiences. We plan to conduct follow-up quantitative research that will allow us to rigorously examine and report on commonalities and differences in thinking between groups within US society.

Endnotes

1. To avoid over-repetition of the word “mindsets,” we sometimes use terms like “thinking” or “view” (e.g., “systemic thinking” or the “structural view of racism”) to describe patterns in thought. In these cases, we are talking about thinking or views *grounded* in the mindsets we are discussing.
2. FrameWorks Institute. (2023). *Research update: Findings and reflections from our second year studying culture change*. FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/findings-and-reflections-from-our-second-year-studying-culture-change/>
3. FrameWorks Institute. (2023). *Culture change project findings and methods: Spring 2023*. FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Findings-and-Methods-Report-Spring-2023.pdf>
4. For a broad discussion of how US political institutions support political inequality in the current moment, see Levistky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2023). *Tyranny of the minority: Why American democracy reached the breaking point*. New York: Crown. On how our political institutions undermine civic engagement and perpetuate economic inequality, see Rahman, K. S. (2017). *Democracy against domination*. New York: Oxford University Press. As an example of proposed reforms to our representative institutions, see the recent discussion of proportional representation in the Fall 2023 issue (no. 70) of *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*.
5. Levinson, S. (2011). *Constitutional faith* (new ed.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
6. For a quick overview of the concepts of political and civic knowledge, see Torney-Purta, J., & Amadeo, J. (2017). Civic and Political Knowledge and Skills. In F. M. Moghaddam (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of political behavior*.
7. See, e.g., Levistky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2023). *Tyranny of the minority: Why American democracy reached the breaking point*. New York: Crown.
8. For a recent poll on attitudes toward democracy, see Voice of the Voter survey, Center for Politics, University of Virginia, <https://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/VoV-Presentation-FINAL.pdf>; for an earlier deep dive into attitudes on democracy and authoritarianism, see Drutman, L., Goldman, J., & Diamond, L. (2020, June). *Democracy maybe: Attitudes on authoritarianism in America*. Democracy Fund Voter Study Group. <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publication/democracy-maybe>; on long-term trends in youth support for authoritarianism, see Mounk, Y., & Foa, R. S. (2016, December 8). Yes, people really are turning away from democracy. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/12/08/yes-millennials-really-are-surprisingly-approving-of-dictators/>
9. This is a familiar pattern in right-wing populism, articulated in canonic form by the Weimar era and later Nazi legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt.

10. It is worth noting that, when using this mindset, participants sometimes described poor representation as “undemocratic,” but they didn’t tend to use this mindset to explain what “authoritarianism” is. That term tends to bring to mind regimes that completely fail to honor basic liberties and/or regimes in which the people have no input, rather than being inadequately or imperfectly represented.
11. The voice metaphor is generally not applied when people are using the *Voting Model*, as that model understands voting as a procedural act of selection rather than as a form of expression.
12. See Volmert, A., Lyew, D., John, J., Vierra, K., & Moyer, J. (2023). *The terrain of spatial justice: Cultural mindsets of race and place in the United States*. FrameWorks Institute.
13. For more on these mindsets, see Volmert, A., Lyew, D., John, J., Vierra, K., & Moyer, J. (2023). *The terrain of spatial justice: Cultural mindsets of race and place in the United States*, 37-42. FrameWorks Institute.
14. Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. Palgrave Macmillan.



About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit 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, multidisciplinary 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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By and For the People? Cultural Mindsets of Democracy and the US Political System

A Culture Change Project
Report

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