

Is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval?

Preliminary findings from the Culture Change Project

April 2021



**Sponsored by the Ford Foundation, Robert Wood
Johnson Foundation, Ralph C. Wilson, Jr.
Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and
Square One Foundation**

Contents

Introduction	2
Methods	4
Peer Discourse Sessions (May–June 2020 and December 2020)	4
Culture Tracking Survey	5
Cultural Models Interviews (August–September 2020)	6
Preliminary Findings	7
Individualism remains dominant.	7
Systemic thinking appears to be on the rise, although unevenly.	9
The racial justice protests boosted structural thinking about racism among at least some groups.	12
The public recognizes that policy shapes economic outcomes yet assumes that inequality is inevitable.	16
While systemic thinking is rising on many issues, it appears to be lagging on health.	20
Positive models of government seem to be on the rise.	21
There is a shared desire for greater social and political unity but competing understanding of what this means.	23
Young people seem to be questioning basic principles of democracy.	25
What's Next?	28
Appendix (additional graphs)	29
Endnotes	31
About FrameWorks	32

Introduction

The upheavals of 2020–2021 rival major past shocks to society—events like the 1918 flu pandemic, the Great Depression, the World Wars, and 9/11. History has shown that serious social and political upheavals can challenge our cultural assumptions and bring about fundamental changes in how we think about the world.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, many commentators suggested that the reality we were suddenly facing was creating openings for progressive change by exposing the inadequacy of many of American culture’s dominant mindsets. The murder of George Floyd similarly led to suggestions that Americans were finally being forced to grapple with the realities of structural racism in a way that was leading to culture change. More recently, the January 6th attack on the Capitol has raised questions about whether political conflict is undermining support for democracy.

With each of these upheavals, we have been interested in these possibilities while being cautious about claims that culture was changing in fundamental ways. Cultural mindsets are highly durable with deep historical roots. They emerge from and are tied to social practices and institutions that are woven into the very fabric of society. They tend to change slowly. For example, *bootstraps* thinking—the idea that if individuals have enough drive and grit, they can overcome obstacles and succeed—is deeply entrenched in American culture and society. At the same time, in moments of social upheaval, these calcified components of culture *can* destabilize and become mutable, leading to fairly rapid changes in mindsets. It seemed plausible that events of 2020–2021 might, for example, highlight how our circumstances shape our outcomes—illustrating the limitations of *bootstraps* thinking and putting pressure on this previously rock-solid feature of our culture.

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

Are the upheavals of the past year shifting fundamental American cultural mindsets? If so, which mindsets are moving? And in what ways are they shifting? These are not questions of

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

As social scientists, we see culture change as an empirical question, and we set about to design a program of research capable of exploring it. Since May 2020, we have been conducting original qualitative and quantitative research to understand if and how culture is changing. While we are less than a year into an ongoing research program, we have initial results that we think have real value for social issue communicators. This preliminary report outlines these findings and lays out questions for the next phases of the project.

Methods

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

Peer Discourse Sessions (May–June 2020 and December 2020)

We conducted 13 peer discourse sessions (a form of focus group) in May and June 2020 and nine sessions in December 2020. These sessions explored participants' thinking about major issues in American society, including health, the economy, government, and racism.

In the sessions conducted in May and June, we asked participants to think about these issues in the past, present, and future in an attempt to collect information about broader mindsets rather than just thinking about the pandemic.¹ The sessions then turned to lengthy discussions about a specific topic—the economy, government, or health. In the final five of the 13 sessions, we added a dedicated set of questions on the racial justice protests, which were just beginning to happen at this time following the murder of George Floyd, to understand how participants were making sense of the protests and the issues at stake in them.

In the sessions conducted in December, we revisited the same issues, with three sessions focusing on the economy, three on government, and three on health. We wove questions about racism throughout all sessions. We dedicated the first half of the sessions to questions we had asked back in May and June. This allowed us to look at whether the same questions were eliciting similar conversations or whether different patterns were emerging. In the second half of the sessions, we designed activities to deepen our understanding of findings that were emerging in the project. Specifically, we explored thinking about the connection between health and place in the context of COVID-19, about health and racism in the context of COVID-19, about the idea that the economic system is “rigged,” about racism and the economy, about the meaning of democratic representation, and about elections and the American voting system. The sessions concluded with a brief discussion of lessons that people are drawing from the pandemic.

All sessions were held virtually using Zoom, with six participants per session, and were recorded with the consent of participants. The participants were recruited to represent variation across demographic characteristics, including race/ethnicity, gender, age, political identification, residential location (urban/suburban/rural), geographical location (city/region), and education. Sessions were demographically mixed, including participants from different groups in the same sessions.

Culture Tracking Survey

Since August 2020, we have conducted a regular, nationally representative tracking survey to quantitatively measure and track cultural mindsets—both foundational mindsets (e.g., individualism) as well as mindsets on specific issues (economy, health, race and racism, government). The survey asks a series of questions to gauge levels of endorsement of specific mindsets. It also includes questions to gauge support for key policies (e.g., a jobs guarantee, Medicare for All, paid family leave, reparations, etc.), allowing us to look at the relationship between the strength with which people hold certain mindsets and their support for specific policies. In October, we added a set of questions to measure mindsets around representation, democracy, and voting. The survey was conducted monthly from August through December 2020, then bimonthly beginning in February 2021. (The April survey is in the field as this report is being published.)

In this preliminary report, we report on results from “forced choice” questions, which ask people to choose between statements embodying the core idea of competing mindsets. In interpreting these results, it is important to emphasize that this should *not* be understood to suggest that some people hold one mindset while others hold the other mindset. In reality, people hold multiple, contradictory ways of thinking at the same time. In practice, people toggle back and forth between different mindsets, sometimes using one to make sense of information and experiences, sometimes drawing on another. The choice of one mindset over the other can be seen as an indication of the *relative salience* or *dominance* of these mindsets for individuals. The fact that people choose one mindset over another suggests that they are likely to more consistently and frequently draw upon that mindset. It does *not* mean that they reject or never draw upon the competing mindset.

In this report, we focus on results from the February 2021 survey. As we note, survey results have been relatively stable across time, so for convenience and simplicity, we use the February results to illustrate patterns. That said, there are a few issues in which we do see differences in responses over time. We discuss these changes where they appear. In subsequent reports, as we collect data from surveys over a longer period of time, we will devote more space to the analysis of patterns over time and to identifying shifts in mindsets.

In this report, the main shifts we discuss are not within the time frame of the current research but between pre-upheaval thinking and current thinking. We rely on qualitative research conducted before the pandemic and the racial justice protests, as well as external polling on thinking about democracy, as a basis of comparison in drawing conclusions about apparent shifts in mindsets.

Cultural Models Interviews (August–September 2020)

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

Preliminary Findings

FINDING #1

Individualism remains dominant.

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

The grip of individualism in American culture is well established. In our own work over the past 20 years, we have consistently found individualism to be salient in Americans' thinking across social issues. This confirms a large and well-established body of scholarship. Members of the public consistently assume that it is the choices individuals make that determine how they fare. This deep cultural mindset shapes attributions of responsibility, as people tend to hold individuals themselves responsible for their outcomes. Individualism also shapes thinking about solutions, as people reason that social problems can only be fixed if the individuals causing the problem decide to make better choices. This mindset applies across issues, shaping how Americans think about health, the economy, children and families, education, the environment, criminal justice, housing, and many other issues.

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

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

In peer discourse sessions in May and June 2020, for example, participants suggested that staying safe from the virus is primarily a matter of making smart, responsible individual choices to limit our own risks. Some participants noted that shelter-in-place rules can make it harder for people to take care of their physical and mental health but that it's up to individuals to adapt and maintain their exercise routines and to do what's needed to take care of themselves. In thinking about financial hardships that people face due to the pandemic, participants suggested that as long as individuals saved responsibly before the

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

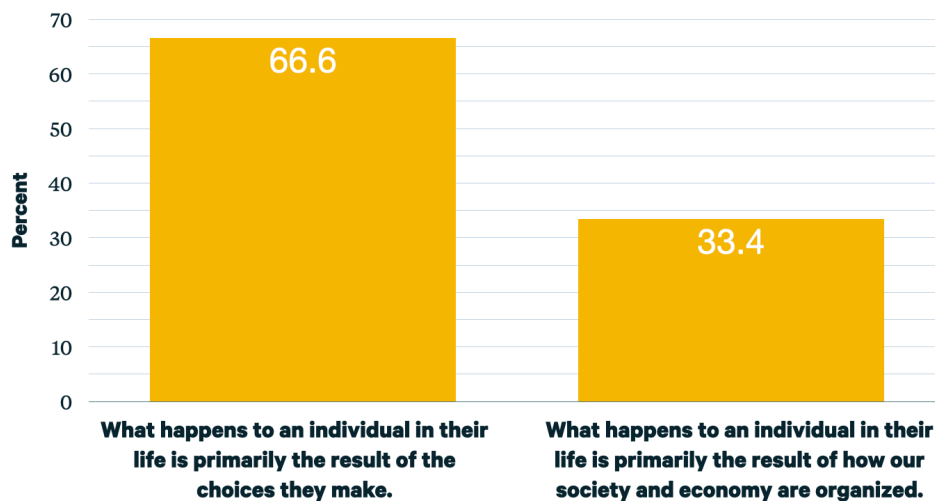
In the second round of peer discourse sessions conducted in December 2020, individualism was apparent even at moments when people were expressing concern for community. In these sessions, there was a lot of talk about how the pandemic has elicited generosity on the one hand and selfishness on the other. Some participants talked about how the pandemic has brought out generosity toward others while other participants bemoaned people’s selfishness—for example, in being unwilling to wear masks to protect others’ health. At one level, this talk reflects an orientation toward community, but on another level, it remains deeply individualistic, as people assumed that community welfare was the product of individual rather than collective action. In these conversations, talk about the pandemic tended to revolve around individuals’ choices rather than government decisions or policies.

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

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

In February 2021, two-thirds of respondents (67%) chose the individualistic statement, which is consistent with earlier months of the survey.²

Figure 1: Individualistic vs. systemic thinking (whole sample)



It is important to note that, with few exceptions, across the months that we have been fielding the survey, every group has endorsed individualism over systemic thinking. Across age, gender, political party, race, income, and education, individualism tends to be endorsed over systemic thinking. On occasion, the survey results indicate a *very* slight majority of respondents within a specific group choosing the systemic view (e.g., a slight majority of people aged 30–44 and African Americans endorsed this view in October). But in most other months, a majority of these same groups endorsed individualism, suggesting that for these two groups, either individualistic thinking slightly dominates or, at most, there’s a rough balance between individualistic and systemic thinking. In summary, survey results indicate that for the vast majority of Americans, individualistic thinking dominates systemic thinking, and even among groups where individualism is weakest, it stands in equal balance with a more systemic perspective.

As we discuss below, there *are* important differences in the relative salience of individualism for different demographic groups. In other words, individualism is not dominant *to the same degree* across these demographic groups. But individualism is dominant for almost every group.

Taken together, these findings provide strong support for the idea that the upheavals of 2020–2021 have not displaced individualism from its position as one of the most dominant and fundamental mindsets influencing how Americans think about social problems and solutions.

FINDING #2

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

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

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

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

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

In the context of this past research, we were struck by the nature of the conversations we heard when we began conducting research for this project. In peer discourse sessions conducted in May and June 2020, we saw more systemic talk and, importantly, people were applying a systemic perspective *across* social issues in ways that we had not seen before. Participants talked about how social systems—including the education system, economic system, and criminal justice system—lead to different opportunities for success and wellbeing for different groups of Americans. They were especially focused on how systemic differences affect people from different race or class backgrounds. This trend has continued in more recent qualitative research. In the December 2020 peer discourse sessions, participants were particularly focused on how lower-paid jobs create challenges with housing and child care and how workers in these jobs tend to have higher risks of getting COVID-19 because of where they work and who they interact with. In other words, people recognized at least some of the inequalities created by the employment system and how these effects spill over into other social issues.

In our initial qualitative research, we noticed that systemic talk was unevenly expressed across participants. Our analysis from peer discourse sessions in May and June 2020 suggested that systemic thinking was coming largely from younger and perhaps better educated participants.

While these sessions included 78 participants—a significant sample for qualitative research—we were careful in generalizing these findings. If, for example, we happened to have a few participants in a session who articulated a clear and persuasive systemic view, it could have been echoed or endorsed by others in ways that didn't necessarily reflect the

thinking of those members of the group. The culture tracking survey offered a way to check these findings and better understand who was endorsing this systemic mindset and its relative strength.

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

A closer look at these data (see Figures 2 and 3) shows that over 40 percent of Democrats and younger people endorsed systemic thinking over individualism.¹ For these groups, the systemic mindset actually challenges the dominance of individualism. By contrast, the systemic view is endorsed by only a small minority of Republicans and people aged 60 and over.

Figure 2: Individualistic vs. systemic thinking (political party)

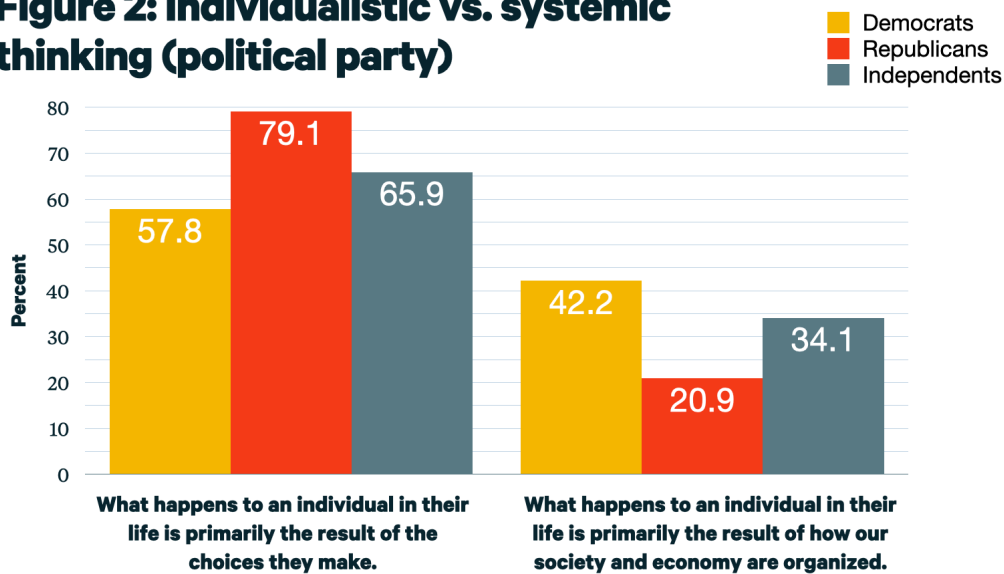
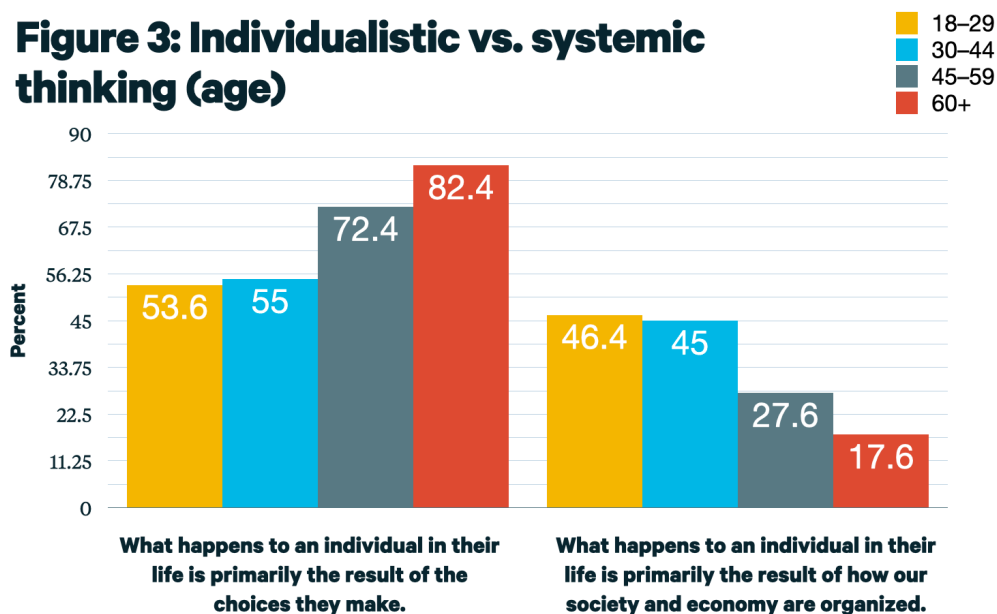


Figure 3: Individualistic vs. systemic thinking (age)



While systemic thinking seems, at the moment, to be available to some groups of Americans in ways that we have not seen in previous research, this thinking is often underdeveloped. People recognize that systems shape outcomes but frequently struggle to explain *how* this works. In our analysis of cultural models interviews and peer discourse sessions, we found that when people apply a systemic perspective, they are often able to make a one-step connection between a particular social system and a particular outcome. For example, they might recognize that policing systems disproportionately arrest Black people, that health care systems offer differential access to quality care, or that economic systems lead people in certain types of jobs to be underpaid. But they struggle to understand exactly *how* these systems lead to these outcomes—what it is about them that leads to these results. Moreover, people struggle to understand how systems interact, which makes it hard to recognize, for example, the sources of racial disparities in health, which have their roots in a set of interlocking systems such as the economy, health care, urban development, housing, water and air quality management, and many others.

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

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

FINDING #3

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

In April 2020, shortly before the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing protests, as part of a separate project on racial equity, we conducted peer discourse sessions on race, racism, and racial equity, half with only Black participants and half with only white participants.³ Across these sessions, discussions of structural racism were rare.

Black and white participants alike tended to see racial discrimination in interpersonal terms, as the result of the personal biases and prejudice of individual people. While participants talked about racism in different institutions—for example, banks, housing, and the workplace—they viewed this racism as the result of the bias of individuals within these

institutions. For example, discrimination in hiring was attributed to hiring managers who responded negatively to Black names on resumes or to Black applicants in interviews; denials of loans by banks were explained as the result of specific loan officers deciding, because of their own conscious or unconscious bias, not to give Black people loans. There were, to be sure, some differences in the ways that white and Black participants in the sessions tended to talk about racism, but both groups consistently adopted an interpersonal view of racism. In both Black and white groups, there was little talk about how racial discrimination is built into our institutions and systems in ways that transcend the decisions and biases of specific individuals.

We were just beginning to conduct the peer discourse sessions for the current project in late May 2020, when George Floyd was murdered. George Floyd and the protests that followed his murder began to come up in group discussions, and it was clear that the public conversation around the protests was having a major impact on people, so we quickly adapted the plan for these sessions and used the last five sessions of this first round of qualitative research to explore what was happening in public discourse and thinking as a result of these events.

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

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

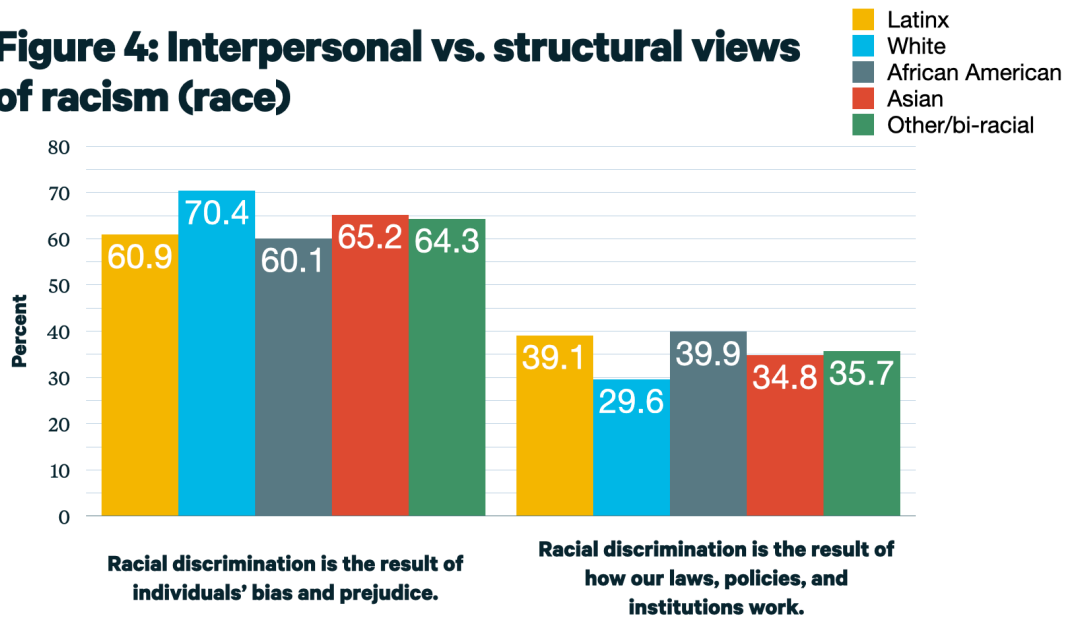
In the survey, we asked participants to choose which of the following two statements came closer to their opinion:

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

For every month of the survey, a majority of all racial groups endorsed the interpersonal view, with a single exception—in October 2020, among Black participants, the structural view was slightly preferred (56% to 44%). This could reflect a temporary shift in views but more likely is the result of a slight measurement error, which is to be expected with a survey of this kind. Figure 4 below, which shows results from the February 2021 survey, shows the typical pattern—the interpersonal view was preferred by all racial groups. However, there

are differences in strength of endorsement. Across months, over 70 percent of white people endorsed the interpersonal view while a significant minority of Black and Latinx people typically endorsed the structural view.

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



Across all other groups, including men and women, Democrats and Republicans, younger and older people, and people of all income and education levels, a majority consistently endorsed the interpersonal over the structural view. However, for some groups, namely, Democrats and younger people, the structural perspective received substantial support. As Figures 5 and 6 illustrate, in February 2021, the structural view was endorsed by 45 percent of Democrats, 42 percent of people aged 18–29, and 43 percent of people aged 30–44. By contrast, the structural view of racism was endorsed by only 27 percent of Republicans and only 22 percent of people aged 60 and over.

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

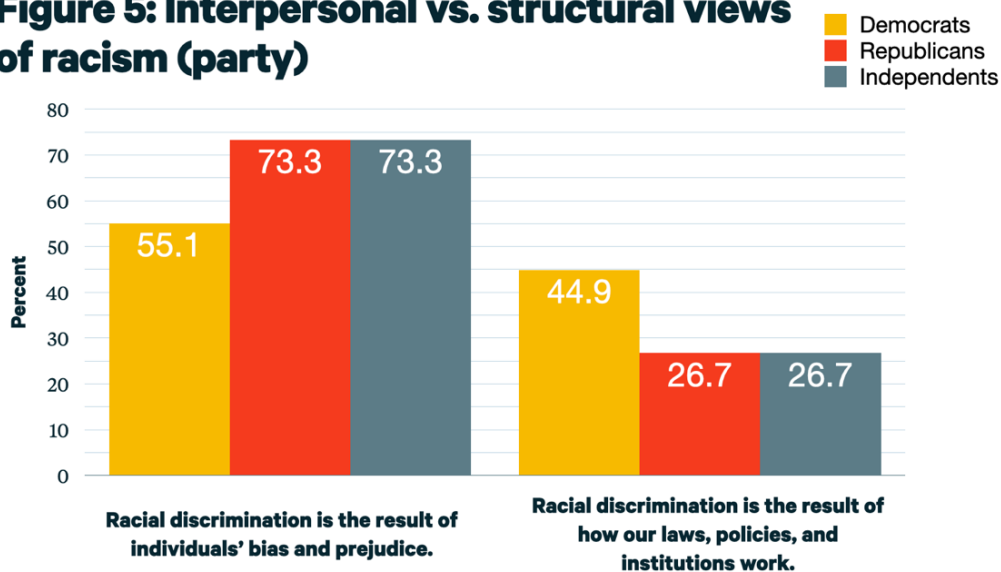
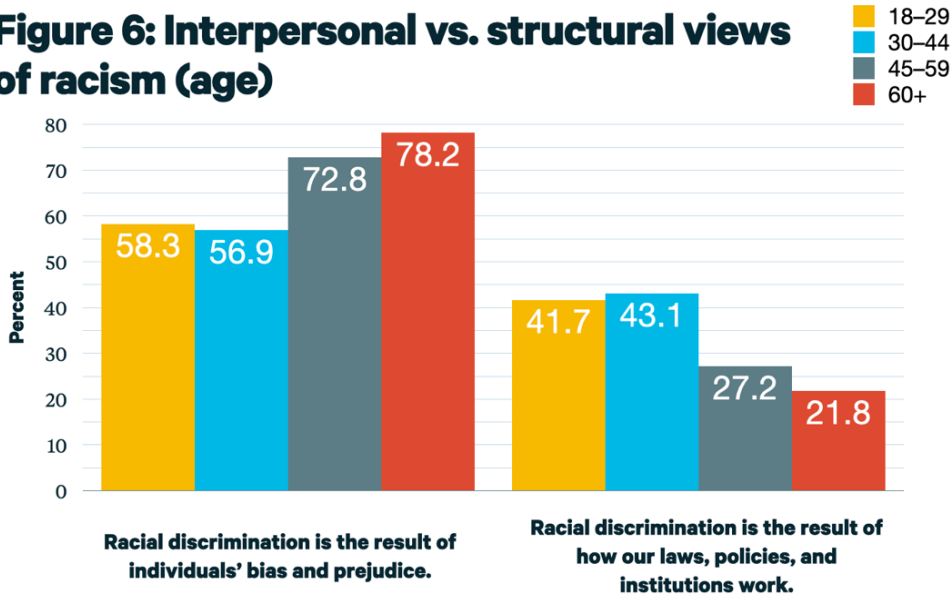
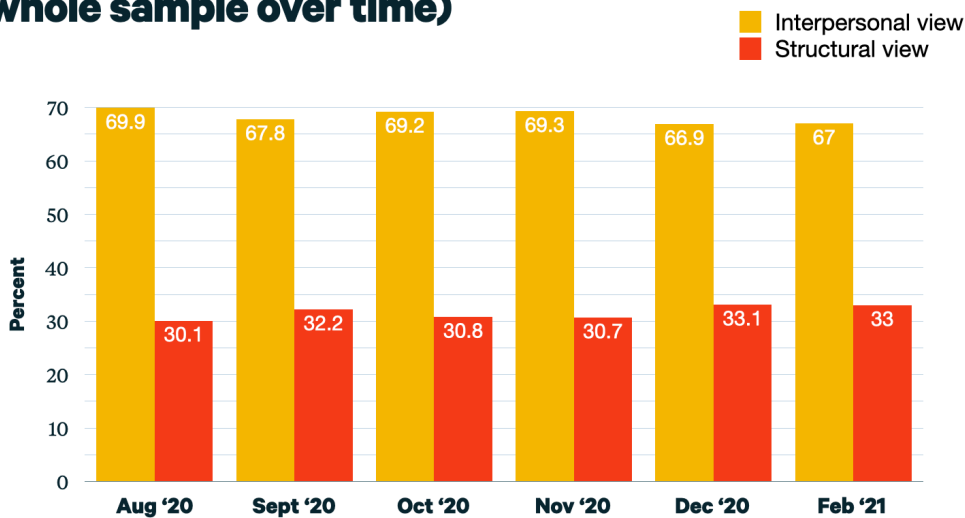


Figure 6: Interpersonal vs. structural views of racism (age)



These survey results confirm that a structural view of racism is a meaningful alternative to the interpersonal view among some groups but less so among others. When compared with our focus group work conducted prior to the murder of George Floyd, it appears that this structural perspective on racism is increasing. We will continue to track individual and structural views on racism in subsequent surveys, which will allow us to see whether a structural perspective is, in fact, increasing, whether it proves durable, and whether it spreads to other groups. It is important to note, though, that relative levels of endorsement for the structural view of racism have not dropped over the time the survey has been fielded—from August 2020 to February 2021 (see Figure 7). This suggests that the structural perspective has endured even though racial justice protests declined in size and frequency toward the end of the summer of 2020.

Figure 7: Interpersonal vs. structural views of racism (whole sample over time)



Cultural models interviews conducted in August and September 2020 provided still more nuance and perspective on the structural view of racism. These interviews indicated the presence of structural thinking but suggested that it was narrow and underdeveloped. In these interviews, participants sometimes located racism in policies, institutions, or systems rather than in individuals, but they tended not to recognize the pervasiveness of racism across all parts and aspects of social systems. Typically, explanations of structural racism were limited in focus—for example, people might have recognized the need to change training practices for police officers but still struggled to see the myriad ways in which structural racism shapes law enforcement and the criminal justice system and leads to many different forms of violence against Black and brown people.

Peer discourse sessions in December 2020 confirmed the continuing availability of structural thinking about racism, but they also suggested that this thinking can get crowded out by thinking about economic inequality. In these sessions, participants focused on the financial struggles people are facing during the pandemic. Participants sometimes talked about how the pandemic has burdened some classes more than others. While some participants in these sessions were able to recognize how racial and class inequalities are connected, the focus on class sometimes pushed race and racism out of the conversation. This confirms that emerging thinking about structural racism, while highly promising, is underdeveloped. Even when people are thinking systemically or structurally, there appear to be limits in most people's ability to connect structural racism and economic inequality.

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

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

FINDING #4

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

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

The lack of mechanism in *system is rigged* thinking leaves this mindset open to manipulation—to different diagnoses of *who* is rigging the system, how they are rigging it,

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

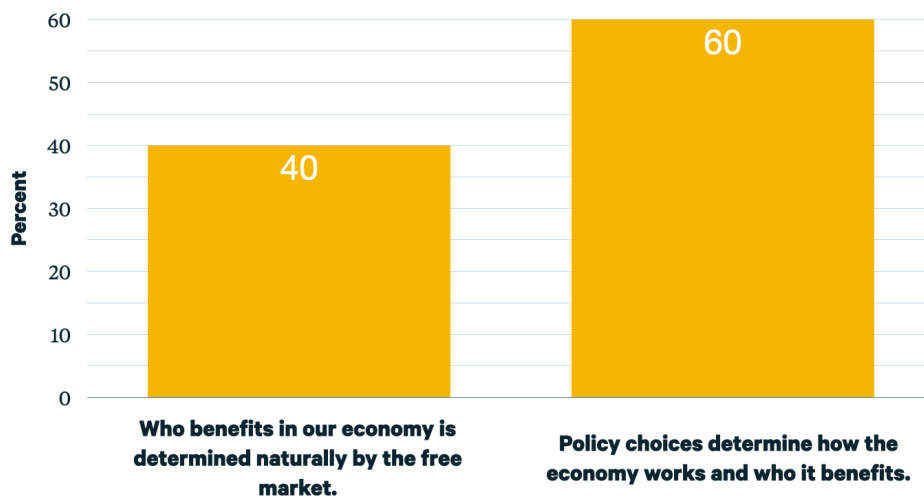
The current research confirms that Americans recognize that policy choices shape economic outcomes while also confirming that people’s understanding of *how* this happens is limited. People recognize that policy matters and contributes to inequality, but they don’t have a clear sense of the specific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

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

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

As Figure 8 shows, in February 2021, 60 percent of participants chose the second statement, recognizing the role of policy in shaping economic wellbeing. In earlier surveys, this statement was endorsed by similar percentages of participants. Even among Republicans, about half of participants typically preferred this statement. For all other demographic groups, clear majorities generally preferred the second statement. Across groups, people recognized that policy plays a major role in shaping economic outcomes.

Figure 8: Market naturalism vs. influence of economic policy (whole sample)



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

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

As Figure 9 shows, 59 percent of participants chose the first statement, though there were important differences between subgroups in the degree of endorsement. Seventy-five percent of Republicans endorsed the statement that inequality was natural compared to 49 percent of Democrats (Figure 10). There was also a notable difference by income, as 70 percent of participants making \$150,000 or more a year endorsed the naturalist statement compared to only 47 percent of those making less than \$25,000 (Figure 11).

Figure 9: Naturalism vs. systemic thinking on inequality (whole sample)

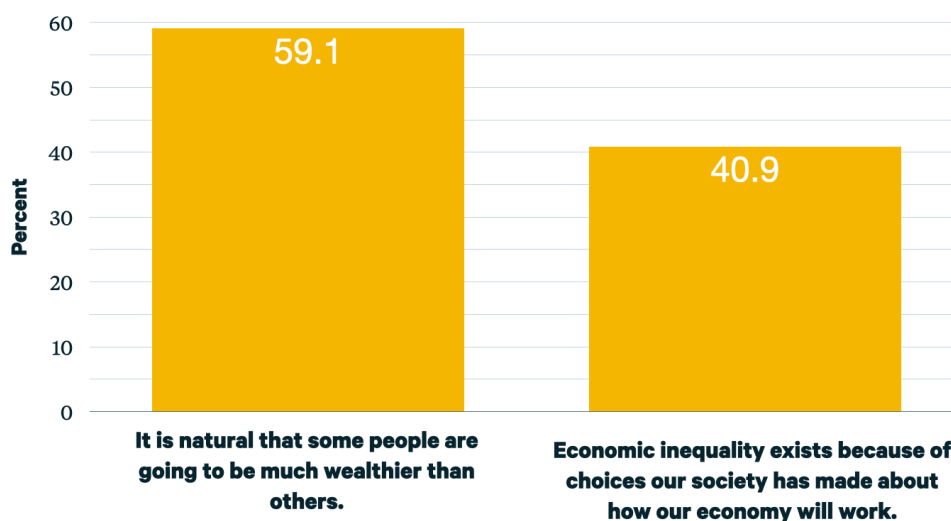


Figure 10: Naturalism vs. systemic thinking on inequality (party)

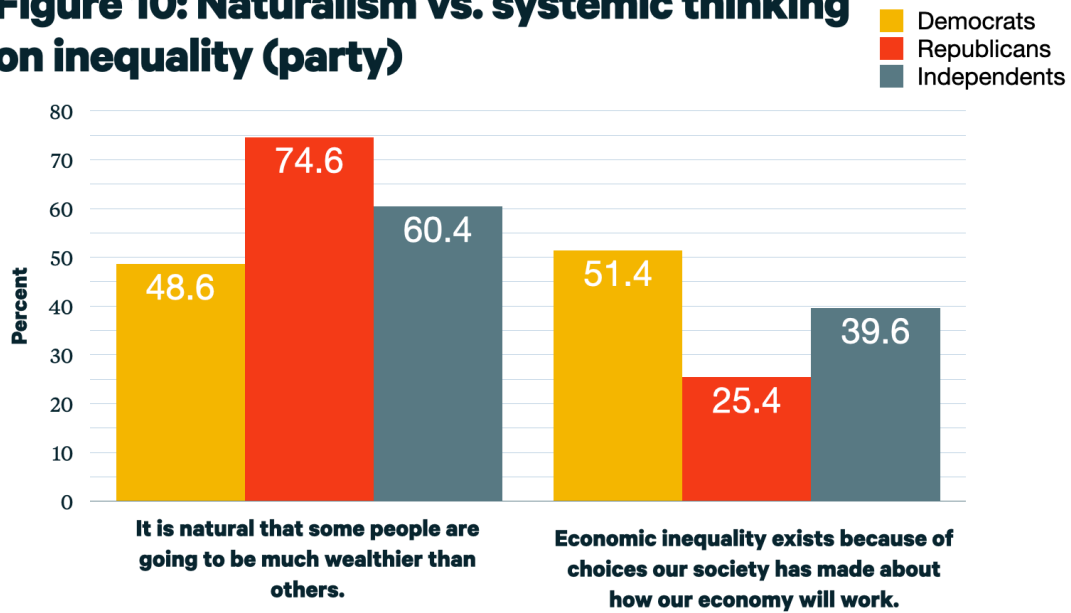
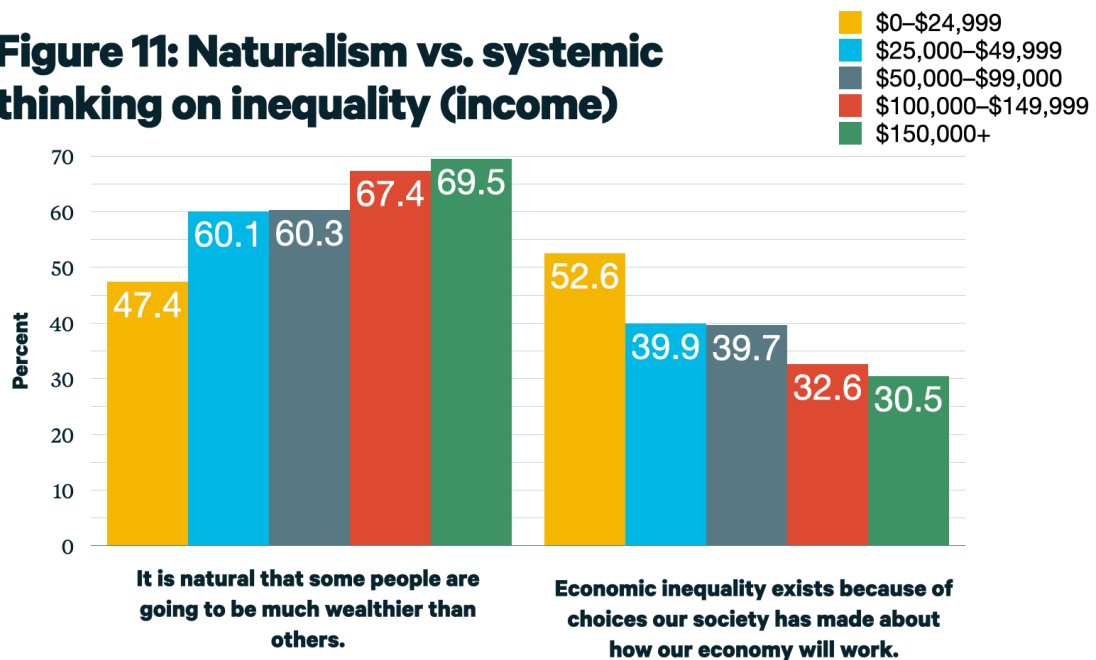


Figure 11: Naturalism vs. systemic thinking on inequality (income)



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

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

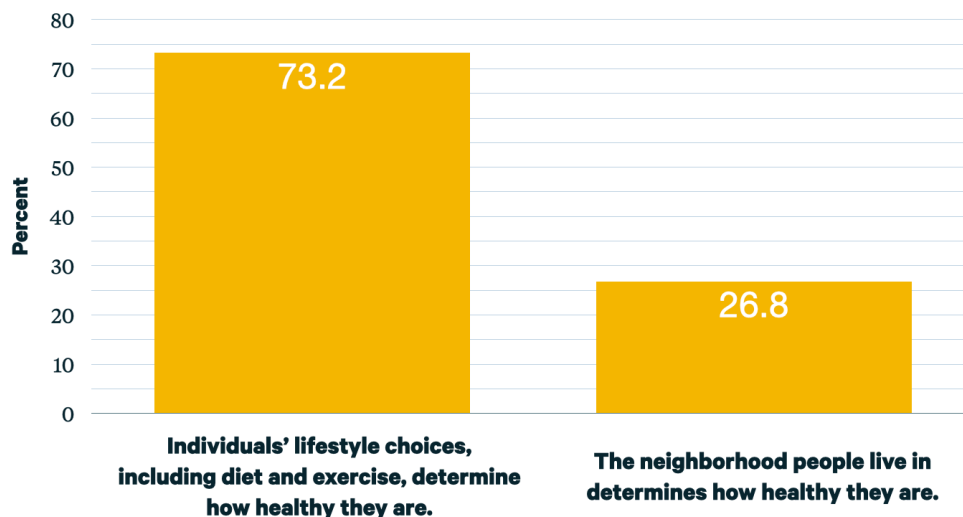
FINDING #5

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

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

In past research, we have consistently found health individualism—the idea that people’s health is determined by lifestyle choices (especially about diet and exercise)—to be overwhelmingly dominant. The current research finds that this continues to hold true and shows that people still struggle to see how systems and places shape health. In the tracking survey, when asked to choose between health individualism and ecological/systems thinking—the idea that the neighborhood where people live determines their health—participants overwhelmingly choose individualism. In February 2021, 73 percent chose individualism compared to 27 percent for ecological/systems thinking. While these numbers varied slightly across groups, it is important to note that health individualism was dominant even for groups that tend to think more systemically on issues like the economy, education, or criminal justice. In February, health individualism was endorsed over ecological/systems thinking by 65 percent of Democrats, 68 percent of African Americans, 64 percent of Latinx people, 60 percent of people aged 18–29, and 59 percent of people aged 30–44 (see appendix, Figures 13–15).

Figure 12: Health individualism vs. neighborhood matters (whole sample)



While ecological thinking has some strength among these latter groups, peer discourse sessions and cultural models interviews suggest that systemic thinking about health is particularly thin. Participants consistently and overwhelmingly explained health outcomes as a function of individual lifestyle choices. The systemic thinking that we saw on other issues was largely absent in conversations about health.

In peer discourse sessions in May and June 2020, we found that participants generally did not talk about systems. In the rare cases when systems did come up, discussions focused narrowly on the health care system and, in a few cases, the food system. Talk about food systems focused specifically on the availability of sugary foods. As for health care, people have long recognized that access to health care matters for health while failing to see the impact of other systems. Due to our long-standing public discourse on health care, people recognize inequalities in access to health care as a determinant of health. In December 2020 peer discourse sessions, we saw more systemic talk about health care than in the earlier sessions, but other systems that create health inequities remained out of view. Across sessions, participants lacked an understanding of the myriad ways in which other economic and social systems—from housing and transportation to urban infrastructure and employment—shape health.

In one-on-one interviews conducted in August–September 2020 and the December 2020 peer discourse sessions, we further explored people’s ability to connect health outcomes and racism. We found that participants struggled to come up with explanations for disparities in health outcomes across racial groups. Our analysis found that this is an outgrowth of a general difficulty in thinking systemically about health and recognizing the role of social determinants. Because people don’t understand how social factors affect health, differences that they see in these factors by race—for example, differences in employment opportunities or housing situations—don’t come to mind as relevant in explaining health disparities.

FINDING #6

Positive models of government seem to be on the rise.

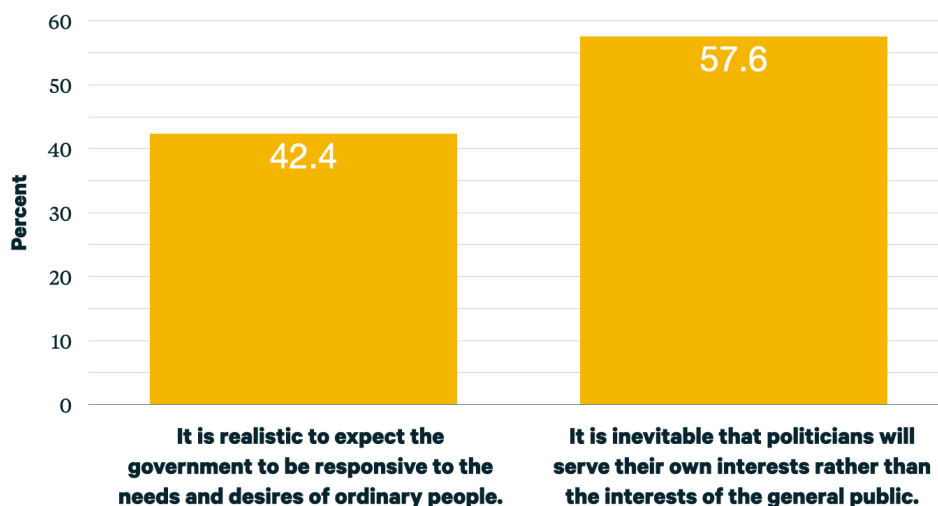
In past work, we have found Americans to be generally skeptical about the ability of government to solve problems and address social issues. While Americans differ along ideological lines in their thinking about the proper role and function of government, we have found that across parties, people tend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

We went into peer discourse sessions in May and June 2020 expecting to see negative thinking about government expanding in people’s thinking, given that the inept government response to COVID-19 was front and center. We were struck by a surprising amount of positive talk about government’s role and saw clear evidence that people were

assuming that government not only should but can realistically be expected to be responsive to people’s needs and concerns. This idea came up dramatically more frequently and clearly in our May and June peer discourse sessions than it has in past FrameWorks research.

Survey results confirm substantial agreement with the idea that responsive government is possible. In the survey, we asked participants to choose between the idea that responsiveness is realistic and the idea that it’s inevitable that politicians will promote their own interests first. In every month that the survey was fielded, at least 42 percent (and as much as 49 percent) of survey participants suggested responsiveness is possible (see Figure 16 for February 2021 results). In the context of previous research showing the overwhelming dominance of pessimistic thinking about government, this substantial degree of optimism hints at the possible development of a more productive way of thinking about government, in which responsiveness is expected and seen as possible.

Figure 16: Responsive government vs. corrupt government (whole sample)



There were not many significant differences between groups on this question. Most notably, while Democrats seemed to be slightly more optimistic about responsive government, differences between the groups were small, indicating that a positive mindset around responsive government seems to be available across the political spectrum.

December 2020 peer discourse sessions provided further evidence that Americans’ thinking about government may be shifting. While participants frequently expressed dissatisfaction with government as it exists, in comparison with past research, we saw much less “othering” talk about government—that is, characterization of government as an enemy or unwelcome outsider that should be kept out of people’s lives as much as possible. People tended, instead, to think of government as something that could and should be theirs, even if it doesn’t function that way right now. People seem to be shifting from thinking of

government as *inherently* “them” to government as potentially belonging to “us” but, in reality, too frequently acting like a “them.”

Given just how inept and corrupt government has been over the last several years, what might explain this apparent rise in positive thinking about what we can expect from government? Why aren’t we seeing anti-government mindsets being reinforced?

While we can’t provide a conclusive answer to this question, we suspect that the degree of incompetence we saw from the Trump administration may be leading people to reassess past administrations and appreciate that they were, in fact, reasonably competent and responsive. Similarly, federal incompetence may be highlighting the good work that state and local governments do. In other words, the degree of government breakdown may be illuminating that true ineptitude and corruption is the exception rather than the rule. If this is true, then it *is* realistic to expect government to do better—it typically *does* do better. And it is, of course, possible that the Biden administration might be affecting these shifts, though we don’t yet know from research conducted to this point. Peer discourse sessions that we are holding in April 2021 should help us begin to answer these questions.

FINDING #7

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

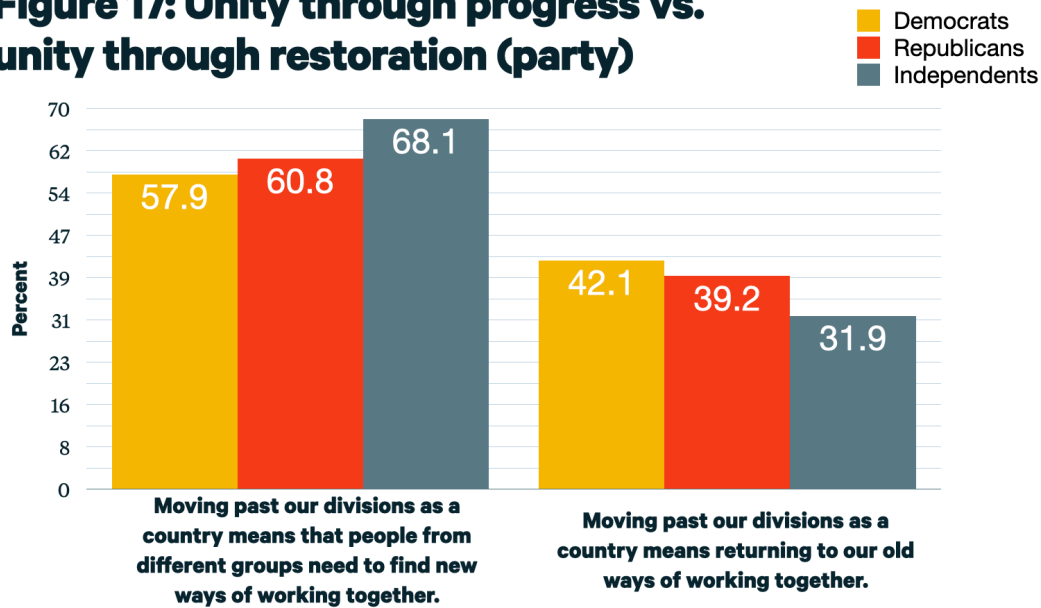
In peer discourse sessions in May–June and December 2020, participants bemoaned our country’s current divisions and talked about the need for greater unity. Deeper analysis has revealed that this common call for more unity actually stems from two conflicting ways of thinking.

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

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

In the culture tracking survey, we explored the relative salience of these two ways of understanding unity. We found that, when asked to choose between statements reflecting these two ways of thinking, about 65 percent of all participants typically chose the more forward-looking understanding (ranging from 68 percent in August 2020 to 62 percent in November 2020 and February 2021, with other months in between the two numbers). In most months, a higher percentage of Democrats than Republicans endorsed the forward-looking understanding over the regressive one, though in February, 61 percent of Republicans endorsed this view compared to 58 percent of Democrats (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Unity through progress vs. unity through restoration (party)



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

In peer discourse sessions that we are currently conducting (in April 2021), we are directly exploring these competing ways of thinking about unity and how they are playing out in the current context. We are using these sessions to confirm the finding that there are, in fact, two different understandings of social unity in circulation and to deepen our understanding of these mindsets and their relative salience.

In addition to exploring these understandings of what unity *means*, these sessions will examine how people think about the sources of current division. Earlier sessions suggest

that people see the current media ecosystem as part of the problem. They sometimes blame politicians for fueling division for electoral purposes. And when people rely on the more inclusive understanding of unity, they sometimes recognize our racist history and systems as sources of current divisions. The sessions we are conducting now will enable us to better understand these views and their prevalence as well as other understandings of sources of division.

FINDING #8

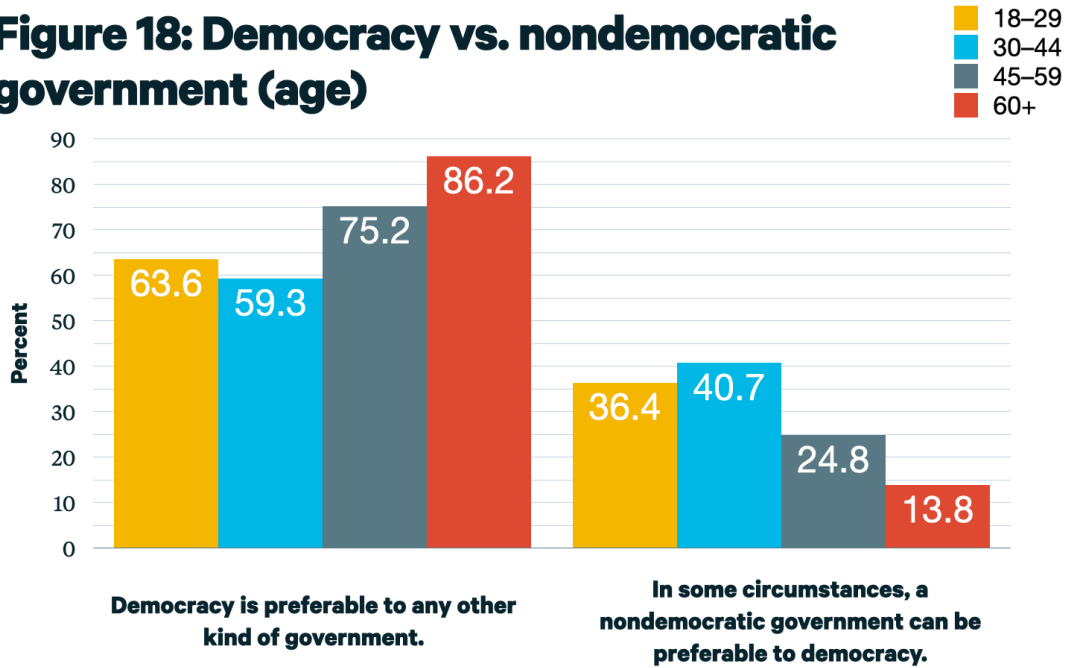
Young people seem to be questioning basic principles of democracy.

Given clear authoritarian strains in current American politics—strains that reinvigorate anti-democratic strands of the American political tradition²—we decided, in October 2020, to explore mindsets around democracy, representation, and voting, in advance of November elections. We added questions on these topics to the October tracking survey and have continued asking these questions in every survey since. We also asked about these topics in peer discourse sessions conducted in December 2020.

This initial research suggests that young people are questioning democracy and its core principles. In the tracking survey, we asked participants to choose between two statements—one saying that democracy is always preferable, the second that nondemocratic government is sometimes preferable. The results are generally consistent with research that others have conducted, finding that 72 percent of Americans said democracy is always preferable.³ Yet when we split the results by age, we find clear differences. While older Americans overwhelmingly endorsed democracy, a large percentage of younger Americans appeared less sold on democracy.

In our February 2021 survey, 36 percent of people aged 18–29 and 41 percent of people aged 30–44 endorsed the idea that nondemocratic government is sometimes preferable to democracy. By contrast, only 25 percent of people aged 45–59 and 14 percent of people aged 60 years and over endorsed this idea (Figure 18).

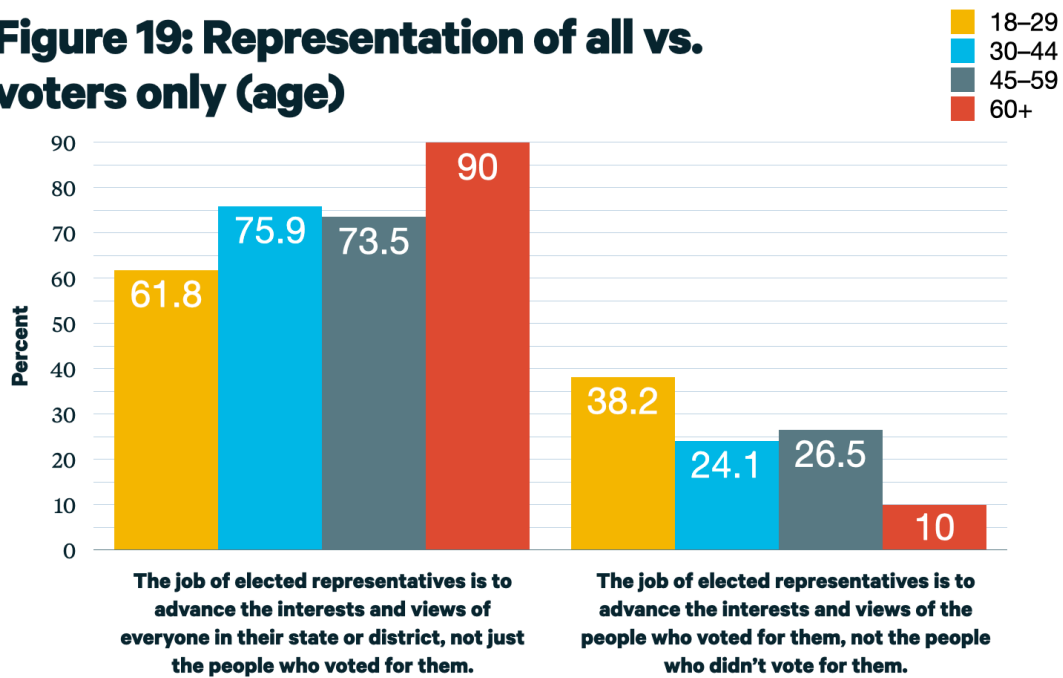
Figure 18: Democracy vs. nondemocratic government (age)



On its own, this question, which was adapted from recent Voter Study Group (VSG) surveys, provides a very limited picture of views on democracy. The VSG itself has asked a larger series of questions about democracy, providing a fuller overall picture, though the group hasn't published results that capture thinking from the past year. In addition, due to the longitudinal nature of the study, the VSG leaves out the youngest voters, making our survey an important contribution.⁴ Our survey confirms the amplification of a trend previously identified by scholars in this area—that support for democracy appears to be waning among younger Americans.⁵

Other results from the tracking survey are useful in making sense of this finding. The survey shows that young people are also much more inclined to adopt anti-democratic understandings of representation. We take it to be a fundamental premise of democracy that elected representatives should represent all citizens, not just the people who vote for them. The latter view threatens democratic conceptions of political membership—that *all* citizens (and, potentially, residents) are equal members of the political community and representatives are, in turn, accountable to all constituents. Yet the survey finds that a surprising number of young people reject this view. In February 2021, 38 percent of people aged 18–29 endorsed the view that representatives' job is to represent the people who voted for them, not the people who didn't. By contrast, only 10 percent of people 60 years and over endorsed this view (Figure 19). This pattern is consistent with earlier months' results, though people aged 30–44 tend to fall in between the age groups on either side, with a lower percentage of people endorsing the anti-democratic view than among people aged 18–29 but a higher percentage than among people aged 45–59.

Figure 19: Representation of all vs. voters only (age)



These results raise more questions than they answer. While they suggest there is a breakdown of support for or faith in basic democratic principles among at least some younger people, it's not entirely clear how people are interpreting these questions. Are young people interpreting the question about democracy differently than older people? What do people think about when this question is asked? When people say it's the job of representatives to represent their voters but not others, do they think this is how representatives *should* act, or are they saying this is how representatives *do* (but maybe shouldn't) act?

We share these results now because they suggest a critical area for further inquiry. Many researchers have studied public perceptions of and support for democracy. But given the events of January 6th and the upheavals of this year, it is possible that something new is happening in public thinking about democracy that is not reflected in prior research. We believe this makes these results—while admittedly limited—critically important. They suggest the need for continuing research that expands the scope of the investigation and couples survey research with deeper qualitative study.

What's Next?

For at least the next couple of months—and, we hope, beyond—we will continue conducting research to understand how culture may be shifting in response to the upheavals of the moment. We will continue to use a mix of qualitative and quantitative research to provide a rigorous and deep understanding of how cultural mindsets are shifting.

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

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

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

Appendix (additional graphs)

Figure 13: Health individualism vs. neighborhood matters (race)

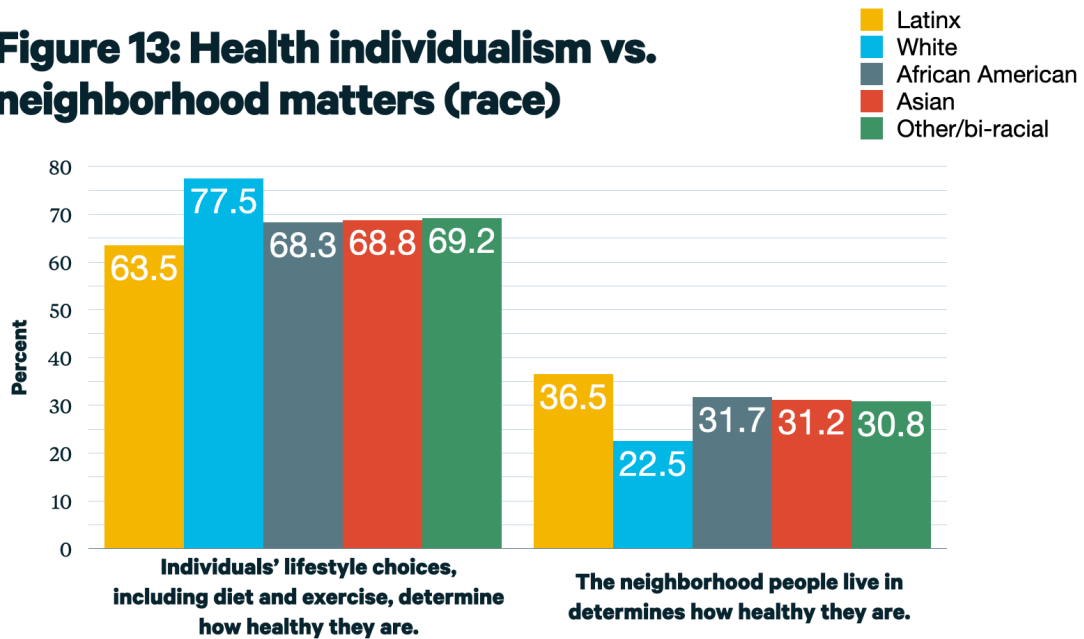


Figure 14: Health individualism vs. neighborhood matters (age)

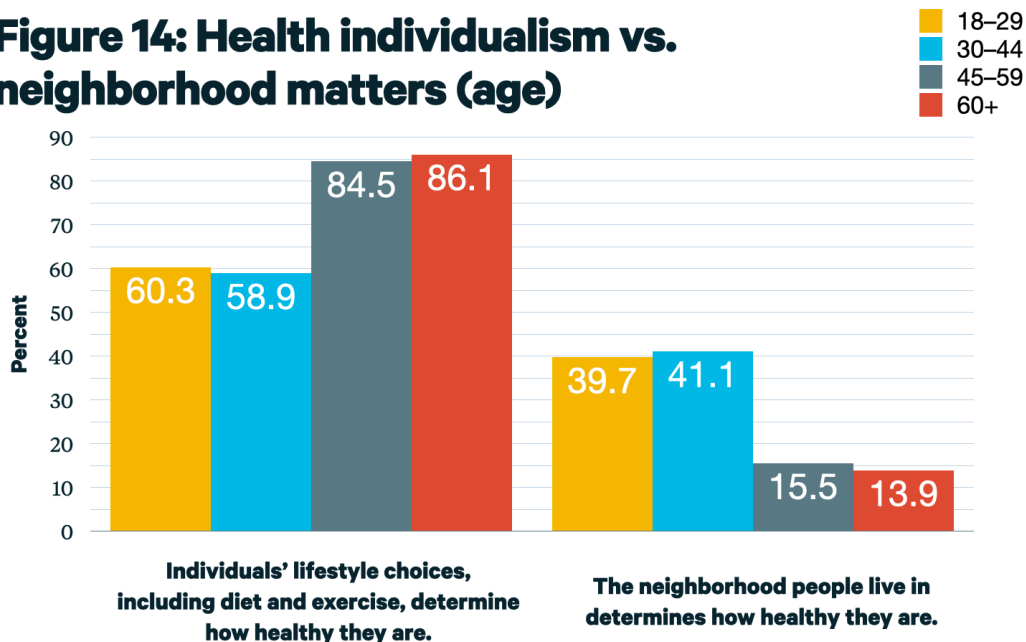
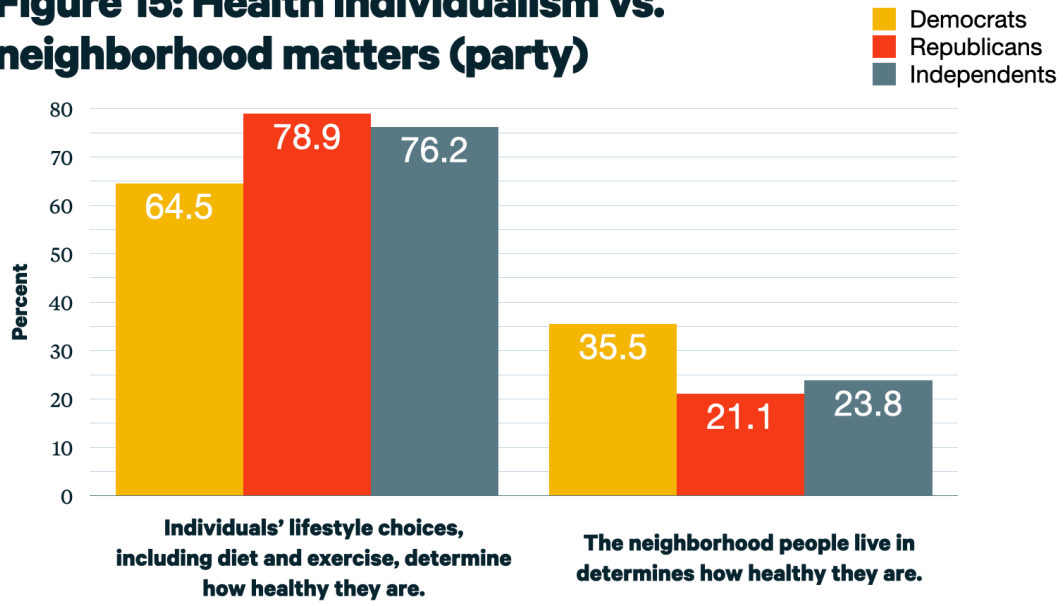


Figure 15: Health individualism vs. neighborhood matters (party)



Endnotes

- 1 In some months, levels of endorsement for systems thinking are somewhat higher for these groups, with over half of people aged 18–29 endorsing systems thinking and almost half of Democrats doing so. These numbers fluctuate slightly from month to month. As we move forward with the survey, we will be able to get a better handle on levels of endorsement among these groups and the extent to which they are changing by averaging across months and attending to changes in these averages over time.
- 2 For one discussion, see:
Parker, C.S. & Towler, C.C. (2019). Race and Authoritarianism in American Politics. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 503–519.
- 3 Drutman, L., Goldman, J., & Diamond, L. (June 2020). Democracy Maybe: Attitudes on Authoritarianism in America. Democracy Fund Voter Study Group.
<https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publication/democracy-maybe>

Albertus, M. & Grossman, G. (2021). The Americas: When Do Voters Support Power Grabs? *Journal of Democracy*, 32(2), 116–131.
- 4 Drutman, L., Goldman, J., & Diamond, L. (June 2020). Democracy Maybe: Attitudes on Authoritarianism in America. Democracy Fund Voter Study Group.
<https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publication/democracy-maybe>
- 5 Mounk, Y. & Foa, R.S. (2016, Dec. 6). Yes, People Are Really 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/>

About FrameWorks

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

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the FrameWorks Institute.

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with the FrameWorks Institute as publisher.

FrameWorks Institute. (2021). *Is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval? Preliminary Findings from the Culture Change Project*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

© FrameWorks Institute 2021