



How Is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval?

Findings from the Culture Change Project

May 2022

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Culture Change
Project

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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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Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, many thought that it would expose systemic inequities in American society, making it impossible for the public to ignore the need for change. History has shown that major social upheavals like the Great Depression, the World Wars, and 9/11 can challenge broadly shared cultural mindsets—the mental models that people use to make sense of the world. **Have the social, economic, and political upheavals of the past two years led to similar mindset shifts among the American public?**

The recent upheavals haven't stopped with the pandemic. The economic disruptions that stem from the pandemic, the widespread racial justice uprisings of summer 2020, and the insurrection of January 6, 2021 all have the potential to disrupt and destabilize culture. But is culture shifting? And if so, how? For whom? And with what effects on people's thinking about public policy and solutions?

In spring of 2020, the FrameWorks Institute launched the Culture Change Project to explore these questions. Since then, FrameWorks has been tracking cultural mindsets through focus groups, a first-of-its-kind nationally representative tracking survey, and in-depth interviews (for more on methods, see Appendix A). The research has explored changes to mindsets that shape thinking across social issues—like individualistic versus systemic thinking—as well as the more specific mindsets that people use to think about the economy, health, government, democracy, and racism.

This report builds on preliminary findings we shared in April 2021.¹ It confirms the persistence of some of the trends that emerged earlier in the project, including the expansion of systemic thinking, as well as its unevenness across issues and groups. The report also outlines some important changes in the salience and dominance of particular mindsets over time, in addition to new findings on how people think about work and the state of our political system.

The shifts in cultural mindsets documented in this report are changing the terrain on which our social and political lives take place, opening up new possibilities while limiting others. By understanding how the ground is shifting, progressives can more effectively navigate toward change.

The report covers a lot of ground, discussing mindsets across a wide range of issues, yet it is, in fact, a summary of highlights from the research. To provide an overview of all major findings, we are only able to touch on the nuances of the qualitative research and to present a select set of survey results. (We focus on forced choice items for simplicity of presentation, but the survey includes a wealth of additional data that we are only able to briefly mention.) We will follow up this report with additional products that dig into specific issues, and we are happy to provide additional results to interested partners and organizations.

What Are Cultural Mindsets?

Cultural mindsets (or mindsets, for short) are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we understand the world and how we make decisions.² The mindsets that we hold can normalize or problematize aspects of the existing social order. For example, a mindset rooted in individualism makes public policies that support the community good seem off base, unnecessary, and misguided. Individualism focuses our attention on measures that help individual people make better decisions (e.g., health education) and takes our attention off of the ways that broader structures and systems affect our lives (e.g., the ways that housing affordability, toxins in our water, or access to quality food affect our health).

Cultural mindsets are highly durable. They emerge from and are tied to cultural and social practices and institutions with deep historical roots. At the same time, in moments of social upheaval, mindsets can be pushed into flux and become destabilized, leading to fairly rapid changes in thinking.

It's also important to acknowledge that 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 ecological and systemic mindsets. When these mindsets are active, they bring into view social systems and the ways that environments shape outcomes alongside individual choices.

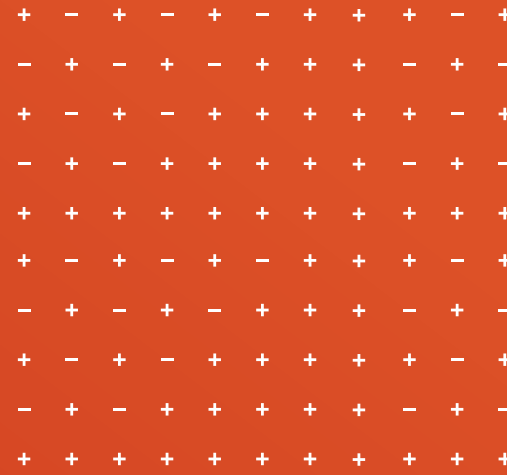
What Does It Mean for a Mindset to Shift?

Mindsets can shift in multiple ways. They can become more or less dominant over time (e.g., mindsets about the power of the free market became more dominant in the second half of the 20th century, while mindsets around the value of collective labor action grew weaker). The boundaries of a mindset can also stretch as people apply existing ways of thinking to make sense of new realities (e.g., the contours of established mindsets about marriage have stretched to encompass same-sex marriage). And new circumstances can introduce entirely new ways of thinking (as was the case in the mid-20th century when mindsets about the dangers of smoking emerged and the maleficence of tobacco companies took hold).

How Does Cultural Mindsets Research Differ from Public Opinion Research?

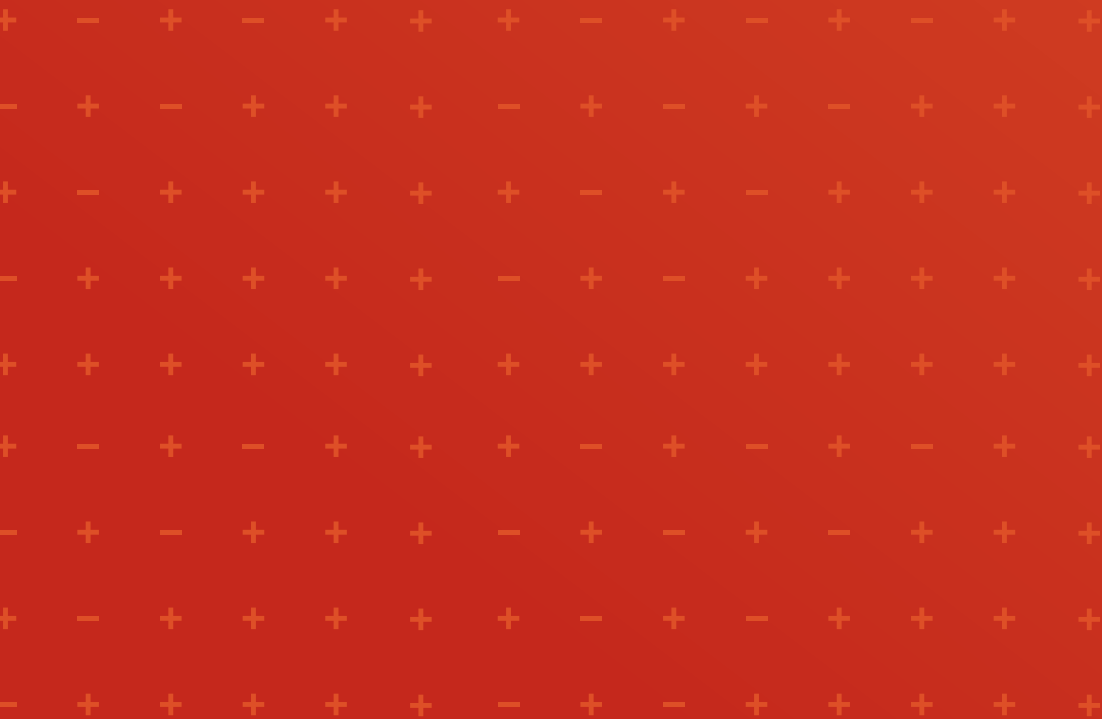
Public opinion research examines the explicit attitudes and preferences that people hold on specific issues. Cultural mindsets research explores the deeper, underlying ways of thinking that shape and explain these patterns in public opinion. Where public opinion research examines *what* people think, 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?*



SECTION TWO

Findings



FINDING #1

Individualism remains a dominant American mindset.

America has long been a deeply individualistic society. 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.

Individualism shapes how people attribute responsibility and leads people 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 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 obscures the role of circumstances, systems, and structures in shaping outcomes. It is arguably the American cultural mindset that poses the most significant barrier to those working for progressive change.

Our research reveals that Americans are drawing from this mindset to make sense of the pandemic. In peer discourse sessions in May and June 2020, we heard that staying safe from the virus was primarily a matter of making smart, responsible individual choices to limit our own risks.³ 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 do what's needed to take care of themselves. In thinking about financial hardships that people faced due to the pandemic, participants suggested that as long as individuals saved responsibly before the pandemic, they should be okay. 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. This pattern has persisted in subsequent peer discourse sessions, as talk about the pandemic has tended to revolve around individual choices rather than government decisions or policies.

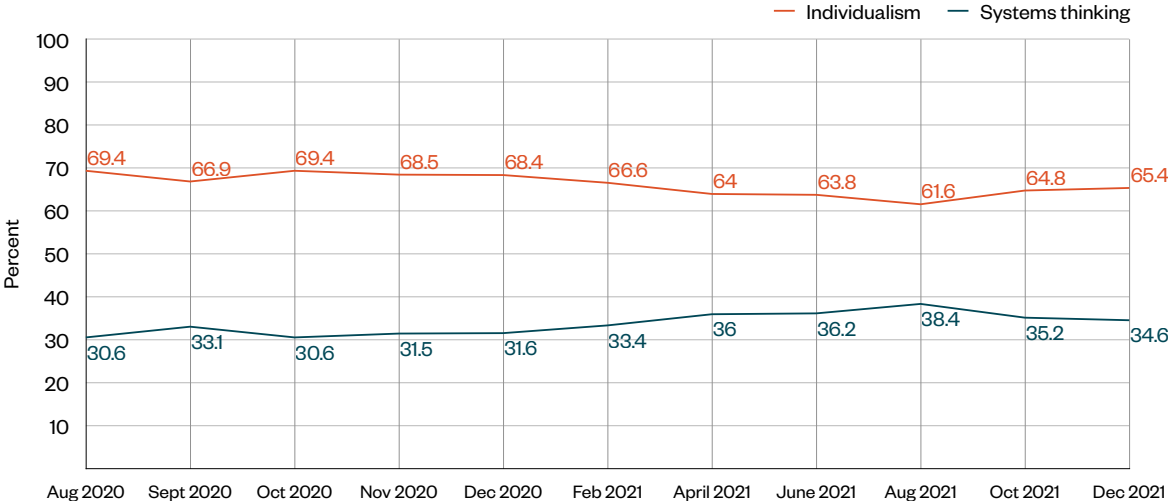
FINDINGS

The results of the Culture Tracking Survey confirm 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, and were asked which comes closer to their opinion—a measure of the relative dominance of one mindset over the other:

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

As Figure 1 shows, in every survey we have fielded, at least 62 percent of participants have endorsed individualism over systems thinking. As we discuss below, there are signs that systemic thinking may be gaining ground, but it is clear that individualism remains dominant.

Figure 1
Individualistic vs. systemic thinking (whole sample)



With few exceptions, across the months that we have been fielding the survey, every group has leaned toward individualistic over systemic thinking. The balance has shifted for certain groups, with a slight majority of African-American respondents and participants with lower levels of education tipping toward systemic views in some months of the survey. These results suggest that for these groups, systemic thinking is relatively strong and people are roughly balanced in their individualistic and systemic thinking.

Taken together, these findings show that the upheavals of 2020–2022 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.



Multiple Mindsets That Differ in Dominance

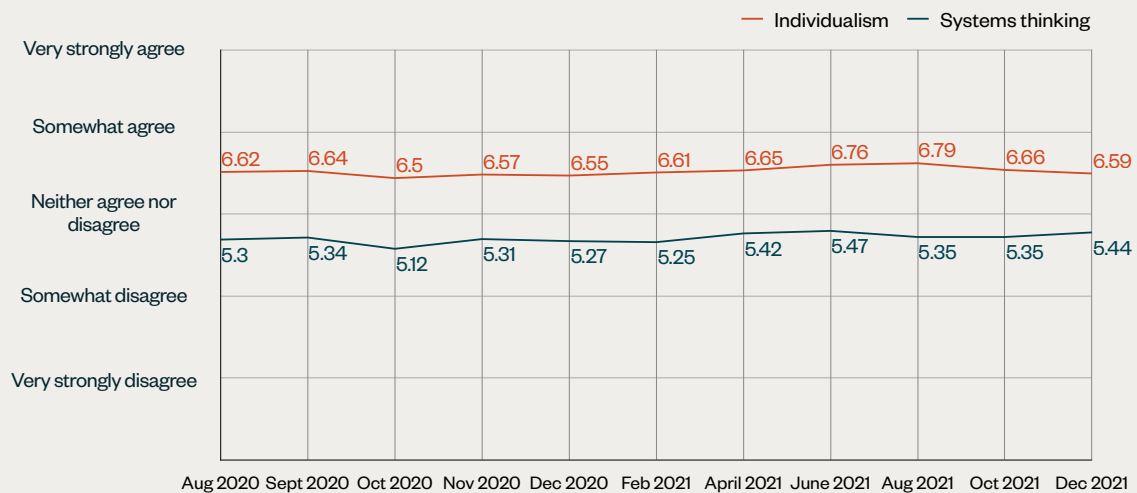
The forced choice questions in the tracking survey might seem to suggest that people hold one mindset or another, but this isn't true—we all hold multiple mindsets simultaneously. If a mindset is more dominant for a person or group, that simply means that mindset is more top of mind and likely to shape their thinking and beliefs more consistently. It does *not* mean that they *only* think with that mindset. Take, for example, the balance of individualism and systemic thinking. While one mindset or another may be more dominant for a given person or group, we all have access to both of these ways of seeing the world. While the relative strength of these models may differ, no individual or group is *only* an individualistic or systemic thinker.

We can illustrate this point by looking at items from the survey that don't pit one mindset against another but ask participants the extent to which they agree with an articulation of a mindset on its own. As noted above, at one point in the survey, we ask people to choose between the following statements:

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

Earlier in the survey, we ask participants how much they agree or disagree with each statement, taken on its own. Figure 2 below shows the results for each statement.

Figure 2
Individualistic & systemic thinking



These results reflect the reality that people hold *both* of these mindsets simultaneously, to different degrees. Agreeing with one statement does *not* mean disagreeing with the other. On average, people slightly endorse systemic thinking while more strongly endorsing individualism, which reflects the dominance of individualism *and* the relative balance between these two mindsets.

These results help us understand what to—and not to—take away from forced choice questions. The forced choice questions tell us *which mindset is dominant for what percent of people within a group*. These results do not mean that some people in the group hold one mindset, and some hold the other. To the contrary, the fact that roughly half of Democrats choose individualism and half choose systemic thinking is an indication that Democrats typically have access to *both mindsets* and have a hard time choosing between them. In other words, this can best be understood as a proxy for the relative dominance of the mindset within the group as a whole.

The forced choice questions provide a clear picture of relative dominance, which is why we focus on results from these questions throughout this report. But it is important to keep in mind throughout that *all of the mindsets discussed in this report are widely accessible*, if drawn from to varying degrees in different cases and in different groups.

Three ideas related to multiple mindsets are important to remember for this and other research:

1. Relative dominance of mindsets differs between people and groups of people. For example, some people or groups may be, on balance, more individualistic than systemic in their orientation as compared with other individuals or groups.
2. Relative dominance of mindsets differs for the same person based on context. For example, a person might be more individualistic in their thinking about obesity than they are in their thinking about air or water pollution. That is, an individualistic mindset might be more dominant than a systemic one on a particular issue for the same person.
3. Relative dominance differs over time. The relative balance between mindsets—their relative dominance—for a person, group, or culture writ large may change and shift over time. For example, the balance between market naturalism and economic design—two foundational mindsets that Americans use to think about the economy—shifted over the course of the 20th century. Market naturalism was dominant to start, then economic design became more dominant during and after the New Deal, before the balance switched back in the Reagan era. But throughout the century, both ways of thinking remained available and played a role in shaping Americans' thinking.

FINDING #2

Systemic thinking is on the rise, although unevenly across groups.

While individualism remains a dominant American mindset, our research points toward 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 creating more balanced thinking about the role of individual and contextual factors in influencing issues and shaping outcomes.

Our research suggests that the initial jolt of the pandemic and the racial justice uprisings of summer 2020 sparked a rise in systemic thinking that has endured and perhaps gained additional strength. This trend, while highly promising, is uneven across groups and issues.

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 clearly 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 typically apply to how 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.

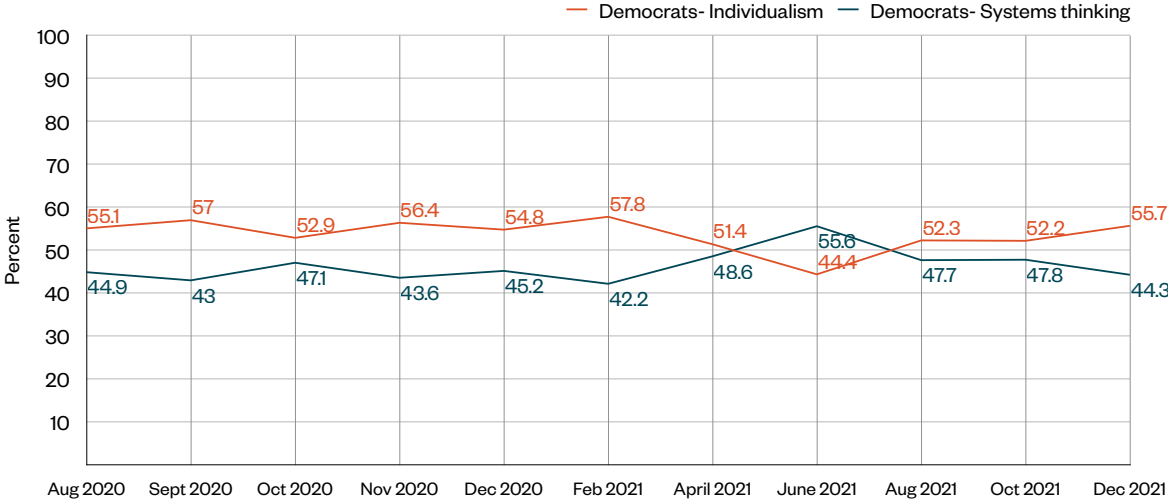
In peer discourse sessions conducted in May and June 2020, we began to see more systemic talk than in previous research. Importantly, people were applying a systemic perspective across social issues. Participants talked about how social systems—including the education system, economic system, and criminal 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 and class backgrounds.

Based on over 20 years of research on Americans' cultural mindsets, it appears that there was a rise in systemic thinking in spring–summer 2020. In comparison with similar research we conducted prior to the pandemic, we saw a striking increase in the volume of systemic talk in May–June 2020. This increase in systemic discussions has persisted through more recent peer discourse sessions.

The Culture Tracking Survey, which began in August 2020, confirms that systemic thinking is a widely available mindset that, for some groups, has come into balance with more individualistic mindsets. While Figure 1 above shows the dominance of individualism, it also shows that systemic thinking is preferred by roughly a third of respondents—a substantial portion of the public. Moreover, there has been an increase in systemic thinking from August 2020 to December 2021.

Demographic breakdowns make clear that systemic thinking is stronger in some groups than others. As Figure 3 shows, support for systemic thinking among Democrats hovers around 45 percent and challenges the dominance of individualism.⁴ By contrast, the systemic view is endorsed by a small minority of Republicans, as support for this view never breaks 28 percent (see Figure 4).

Figure 3
Individualistic vs. systemic thinking (Democrats)



The gap in support for systemic thinking between younger and older people is similarly wide. Among 18-29 year-olds, support for individualism and systemic thinking is roughly balanced. For the youngest demographic, systems thinking strongly counterbalances individualism. By contrast, among people aged 60 and over, the systemic view is preferred by around only 20 percent of participants. (See Appendix B for graphs for other age groups.)

Figure 4
Individualistic vs systemic thinking (Republicans)

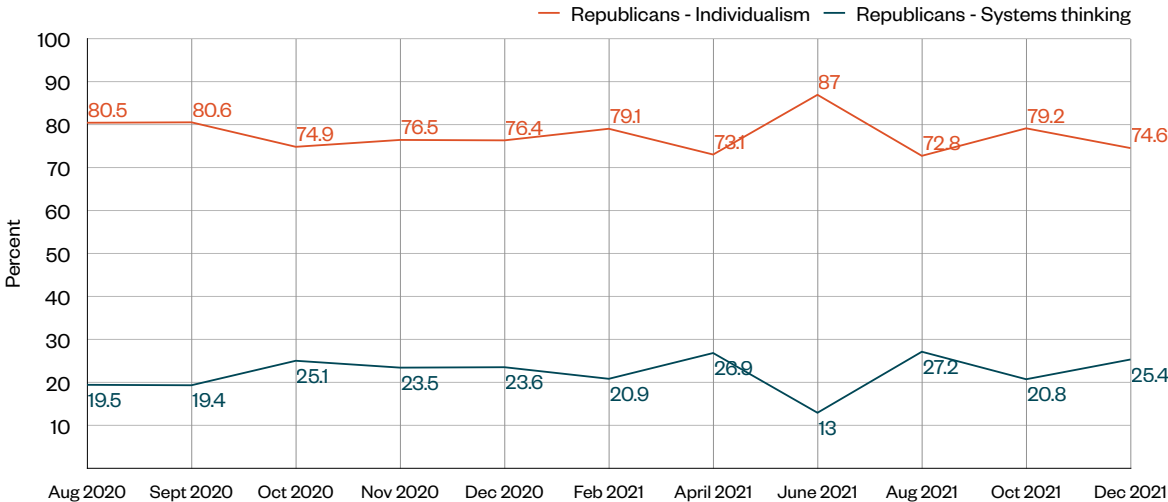


Figure 5
Individualistic vs systemic thinking (18–29 year olds)

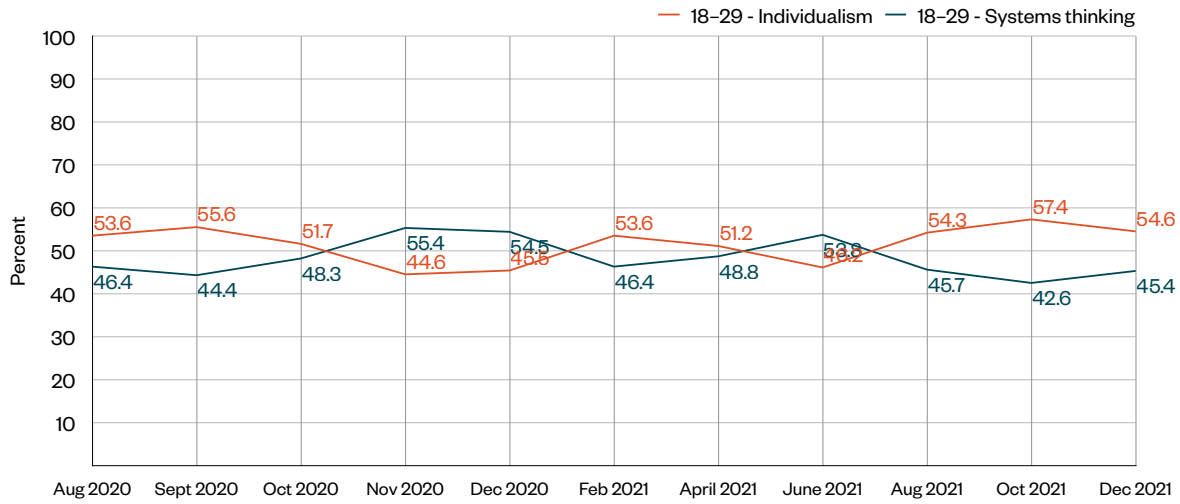
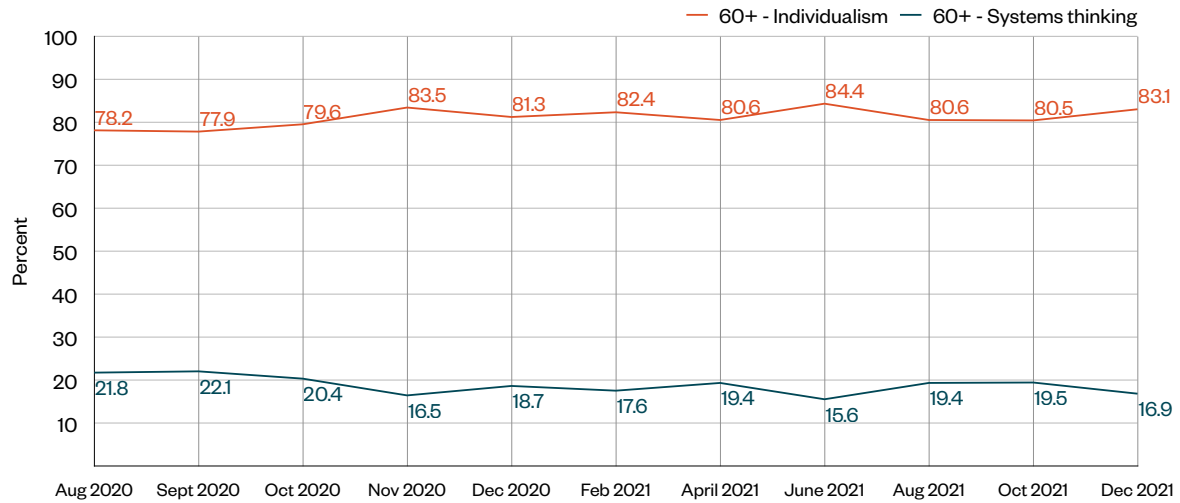


Figure 6
Individualistic vs systemic thinking (60+ year-olds)



The rise of systemic thinking presents an opening for a variety of progressive changes. If Americans more consistently view social issues from a perspective that recognizes systemic dimensions, the need for fundamental systemic changes ranging from the rebalancing of economic power to race-forward policies across social domains becomes easier to see and support.

FINDING #3

Racial justice uprisings boosted structural thinking about racism in some groups, which has persisted since summer 2020.

In April 2020—shortly before the protests that began in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other Black Americans—we conducted peer discourse sessions on race, racism, and racial equity as part of a separate project on racial equity, half with Black participants and half with white participants. Across these sessions, discussions of issues related to structural racism were rarely if ever present.

Both Black and white participants 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 (e.g., 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 not to give Black people loans. There were some differences in the ways that Black and white participants talked about racism, but both groups consistently adopted an interpersonal view, with little talk about how racial discrimination is built into our institutions and systems in ways that transcend the decisions and biases of specific individuals.

When the racial justice uprisings began in May 2020, we were just beginning the first set of peer discourse sessions for the Culture Change Project. The protests began to come up in group discussions, and it was clear that the public conversation around the protests was having an impact on people. We quickly adapted the plan and used the last five of this first round of peer discourse sessions to explore what was happening in public discourse and thinking about race and racism as a result of these events.

In contrast to the sessions from just two months earlier, we saw a substantial amount of structural talk about racism. Participants across racial groups talked about how policies, laws, and systems create and perpetuate racial inequality and discrimination. Participants gestured toward history, noting the deep historical roots of these policies. While participants continued, in many cases, to talk about racism in interpersonal terms, this interpersonal talk was now accompanied by structural ideas and considerations. This was a major change from what we had seen just months earlier and from what we have seen in research on racism conducted over the past 20 years.⁵ In the year and a half since these initial sessions, we have continued to see elevated attention to structural factors in discussions about racism.

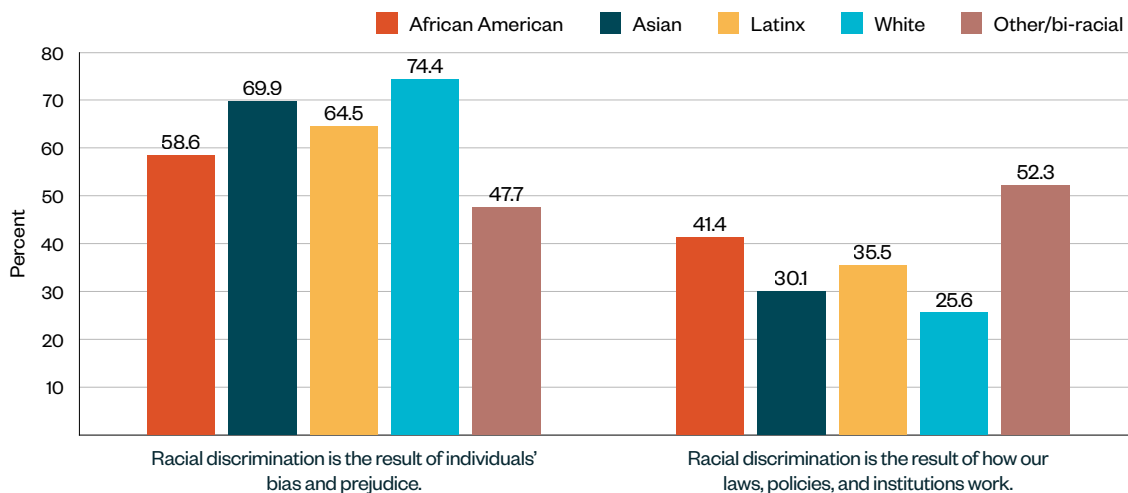
Although we do not have Culture Tracking Survey data from before the uprisings, the survey does provide strong evidence that (1) a structural view of racism is present among Americans, and (2) this view has persisted even as the intensity of protests has decreased.

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

- Racial discrimination is the result of individuals’ bias and prejudice. (Interpersonal mindset)
- Racial discrimination is the result of how our laws, policies, and institutions work. (Structural mindset)

Across the months of the survey, with a few exceptions, a majority of participants from all racial groups endorse the interpersonal view.⁶ Figure 7, which shows results from the October 2021 survey, shows this pattern—the interpersonal view was preferred by all racial groups, even as there were interesting and important differences in strength of endorsement across groups.⁷ In October 2021, 41 percent of Black participants and 35 percent of Latinx participants endorsed the structural view. In most months, the percent of participants from these groups who select the structural view is closer to 50 percent.

Figure 7
Interpersonal vs structural views of racism (race)



Across all other groups, including gender, political affiliation, age, income, and education levels, a clear 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 8 and 9 illustrate, in October 2021, the structural view was endorsed by 43 percent of Democrats and 47 percent of people aged 30–44.⁸ By contrast, the structural view of racism was endorsed by only 21 percent of Republicans and only 18 percent of people aged 60 and over.

Figure 8
Interpersonal vs structural views of racism (party)

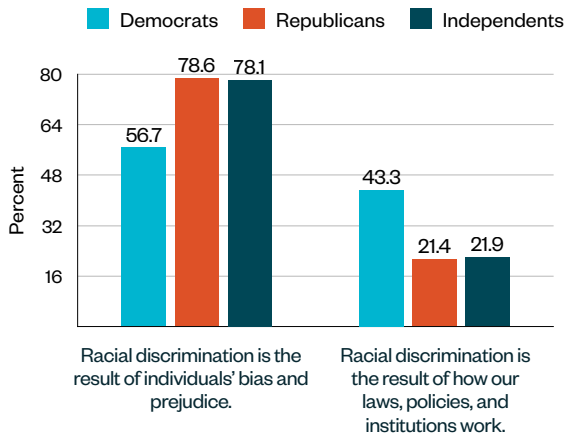
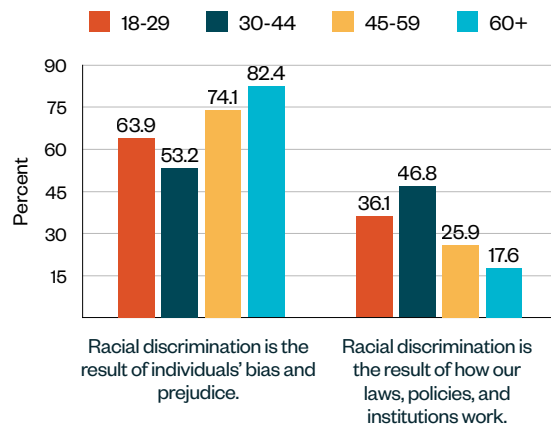


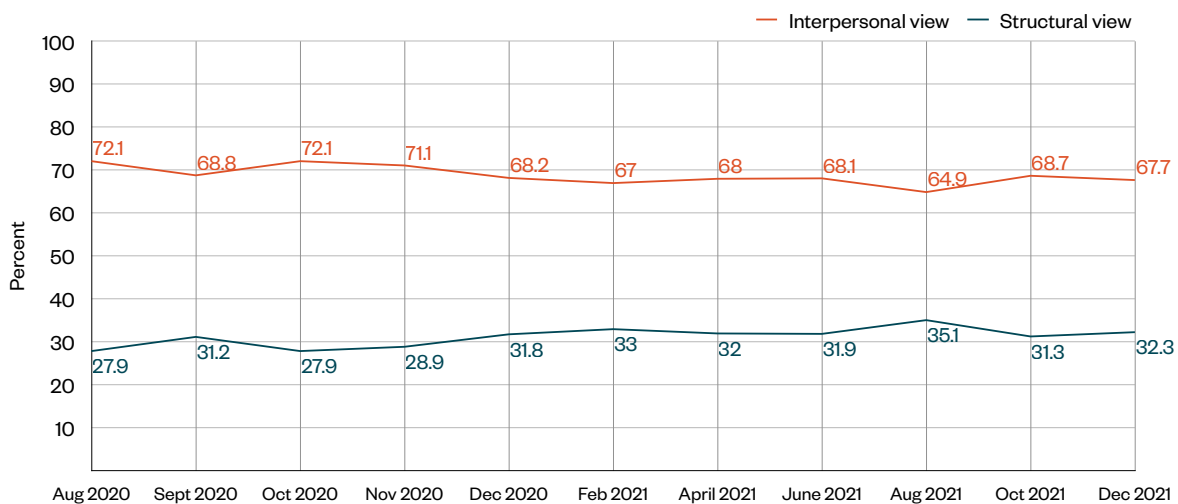
Figure 9
Interpersonal vs structural views of racism (age)



These results confirm that a structural view of racism is a meaningful alternative to interpersonal views among some groups.

Survey results indicate that structural thinking about racism has persisted after the initial burst of widespread public discourse that accompanied the uprisings of 2020. Levels of endorsement for the structural view of racism have not dropped between August 2020 and December 2021 (see Figure 10). If anything, structural thinking seems to be gaining ground. For the first four surveys (August, September, October, and November 2020), an average of 29 percent of participants endorsed the structural view. In the most recent four surveys (June, August, October, and December 2020), an average of 32.7 percent of participants did.

Figure 10
Interpersonal vs structural thinking about racism (whole sample)



Qualitative research conducted over the past year and a half has deepened our understanding of the character and limits of structural thinking about racism among the public. In interviews conducted in August–September 2020, we found that while participants sometimes located racism in policies, institutions, or systems rather than in individuals, they tended not to recognize the pervasiveness of racism across all parts and aspects of social systems. Typically, explanations of structural racism were limited in focus. For example, people might recognize the need to change training practices for police officers but still struggle to see the myriad ways in which structural racism shapes law enforcement and the criminal justice system and leads to different forms of violence against people of color.

Peer discourse sessions in December 2020 and April 2021 confirmed the continuing availability of structural thinking about racism but also showed that this thinking can easily get crowded out by considerations of *economic* inequality. This was particularly true for systems *other* than the criminal justice system, including health care, education, housing, and food, where participants' conversations focused on how differential wealth is the key driver of outcomes. In these areas, structural racism took a back seat to thinking about poverty, wealth, and class inequality. While there was some discussion about the connections between racial and class inequalities, the focus on class often pushed race and racism out of the conversation. This shows that while emerging thinking about structural racism is promising, it is not typically connected to thinking about economic inequality.

The April 2021 peer discourse sessions showed how strategies for pushing back against claims of structural racism are changing and adapting. On several occasions, when a structural perspective on racism was articulated, one or more participants countered by describing that we just need to stop “seeing race.” Increasingly, such calls for colorblindness are not simply protestations of individual perspective (“I don’t see color”), but rather prescriptions for society as a whole (“*we* need to stop focusing on race”). This talk is most common among conservative participants but not exclusive to them. As we discuss below (finding #7), this pattern is tied to a broader emerging mindset that sees social conflict as a result of differences that aren’t real but are instead products of our collective imagination that can be addressed by talking differently rather than making material changes in how society works.

In peer discourse sessions, we have also continued to see the familiar, racist mindset that problems in Black communities result from a “culture of dysfunction.”⁹ Some participants (mostly but not exclusively white) drew on this way of thinking in criticizing Black Lives Matter protests, focusing on the violence of these “riots.” It is important to acknowledge that while there seems to be a rise in a structural perspective on racism, familiar racist cultural mindsets and narratives for resisting claims of racial justice persist and are adapting to counter our changing discourse around racial justice.

FINDING #4

The rise of systemic thinking does not extend to health.

While systemic thinking may be on the rise, our research finds that when it comes to health, the role of social environments and economic systems remain almost invisible.

In past research, we have consistently found health individualism—the idea that people's health is determined by lifestyle choices (especially diet and exercise)—to be overwhelmingly dominant in people's thinking. The current research finds that this continues to hold true and that it remains hard to see the effect of systems and places on health.

In the tracking survey, we ask participants to choose between statements that encapsulate health individualism and more ecological/systems thinking:

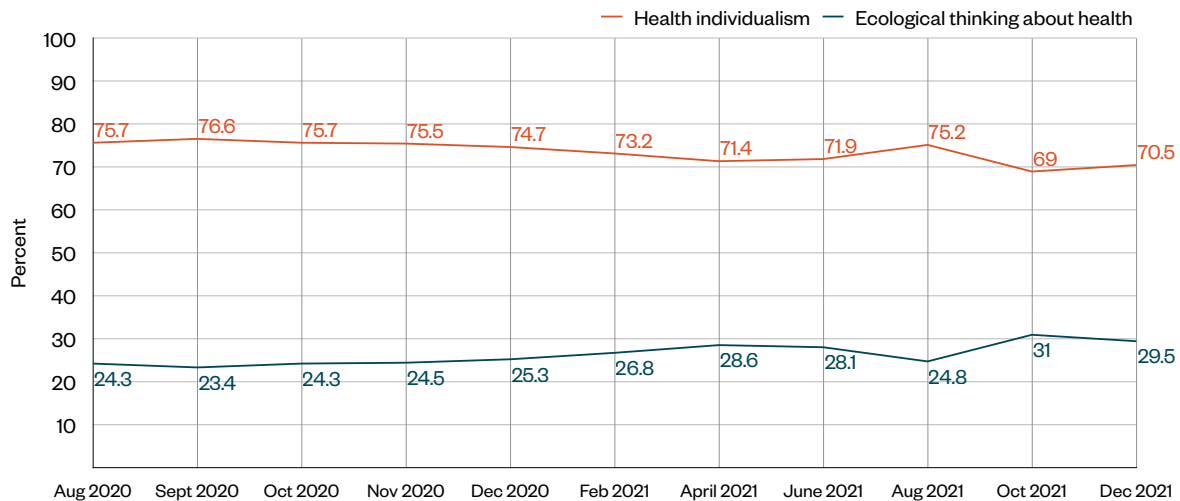
- *Individuals' lifestyle choices, including diet and exercise, determine how healthy they are. (Health individualism)*
- *The neighborhood people live in determines how healthy they are. (Ecological thinking)*

More than 70 percent of participants have chosen individualism in every month of the survey, with the sole exception of October 2021 (see Figure 11). While these numbers vary slightly across groups, health individualism has consistently remained dominant, even for groups that tend to think more systemically on issues like the economy, education, or criminal justice. In every month of the survey, more than 60 percent of Democrats endorsed individualism over ecological thinking on health. Numbers for African Americans, Latinx people, 18–29-year-olds, and 30–44-year-olds fluctuate more significantly due to smaller sample sizes for these groups, but in every month that the survey was fielded, a majority from each group endorsed health individualism (see Appendix B, Figures 31–42, for results for specific demographic groups).

While ecological thinking has some strength among these latter groups, peer discourse sessions and cultural models interviews confirmed the idea that such thinking about health is very recessive. Participants in these discussions consistently explained health outcomes as a function of individual lifestyle choices, even as they thought more systemically about other issues.

In peer discourse sessions in May–June 2020, December 2020, April 2021, and September 2021, participants generally did not talk about the social systems and environments that shape health. On occasion, participants brought up the food system, acknowledging the ways in which food deserts and the availability of sugary foods shape diet and, in turn, health. But other than these occasional comments, we found, across sessions, that the ways in which economic and social systems shape health—from housing and transportation to urban infrastructure and employment—are not on people's radar. This finding cuts across demographic and ideological lines.

Figure 11

Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (whole sample)

The one system that people *do* consistently recognize affects health is the health care system. Due to our long-standing public discourse on health care, people recognize that inequalities in access to health care lead to differences in health outcomes. In December 2020 and April 2021 peer discourse sessions, we saw an increase in talk about the health care system and concern about how health care does not work for many people. We suspect this was prompted by surges in COVID-19 cases that were happening or had recently happened, which led to lots of news coverage about hospitalization. The recognition that health care matters is not new, and people are attuned to inequalities in access to health care. But it's important not to mistake recognition that the health care system matters for a broader understanding of how social systems and environments shape health.

The relative lack of systemic thinking about health contributes to difficulty in explaining how racism affects health outcomes. In one-on-one interviews conducted in August–September 2020 and in the December 2020 and April 2021 peer discourse sessions, we asked questions designed to gauge the ways that people connected health outcomes and racism. We found that it was difficult to come up with explanations for disparities in health outcomes across racial groups. This is due to a limited understanding of both racism and the role of social determinants in shaping health outcomes. Even when people recognize how social systems and structures discriminate against people of color—how they produce differences in employment opportunities or housing situations, for example—these factors don't come to mind in explaining health disparities.

It might seem surprising that the pandemic has not fostered greater ecological thinking about health. After all, the pandemic has placed health at the top of the news for the last two years. Yet this news coverage has focused on topics that actually align with dominant individual mindsets rather than challenging them. Much of our public discourse has focused on individual behavior—masking or getting vaccinated, for example—and has framed these issues in terms of individual choice. The other focus of coverage has been

on health care issues, such as the development and administering of vaccines and hospitalization rates and treatment for COVID-19. This reinforces health individualism and a medical model of health. Public health has been in the news, but often with a focus on guidance for individual behavior and surveillance, rather than a broader ecological focus. This is admittedly a partial picture—there certainly have been stories that bring ecological factors more clearly into view, including discussions of the risks faced by essential workers. But the fact that this health crisis hasn't done much to shift mindsets around health can likely be contributed to a general focus of attention around individual health factors.

FINDING #5

People recognize that policy shapes economic outcomes but see inequality as inevitable.

The idea that economic and political systems are rigged to benefit the wealthy is familiar. 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. However, the mindset does not include a clear explanation of how this works. This leaves the mindset open to manipulation by political actors—to different diagnoses of *who* is rigging the system, how they are rigging it, and to what end. Right-wing, white nationalist populists fill in the blanks by pointing the finger at Latinx immigrants, Black people, Jews, and socialists, suggesting that they influence liberal elites to benefit them at the expense of white Americans. Progressive accounts highlight corporate power and the ways that business and political elites protect and reinforce their power to disenfranchise and exploit Black and brown communities.

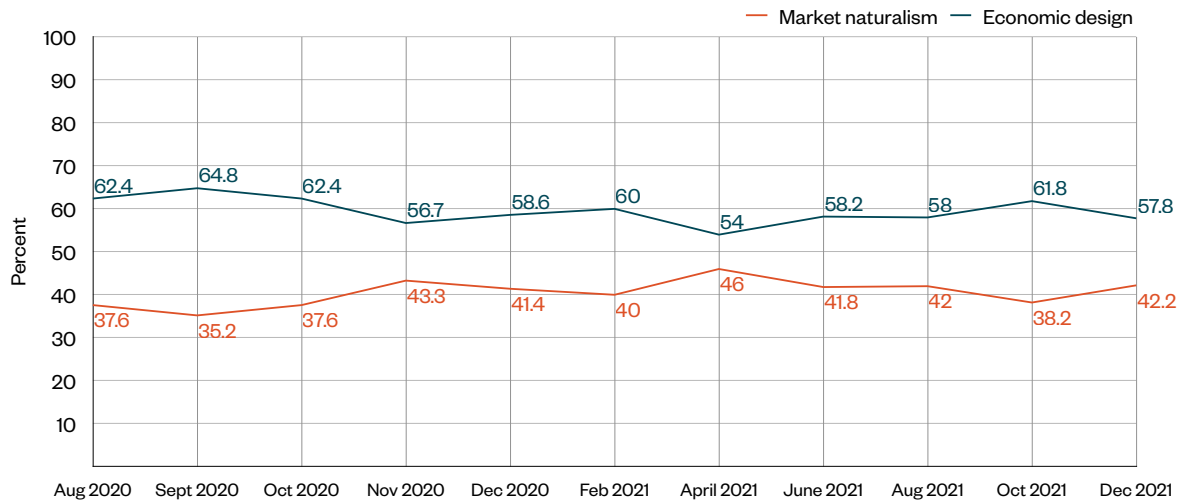
Because the “system is rigged” mindset is both powerful and open to different interpretations and uses, it is a critical site of contestation in American politics.

The current research confirms that Americans recognize that policy choices shape economic outcomes—a key premise of system is rigged thinking—while also confirming that there is limited understanding of how this works. This lack of mechanism fuels the assumption that economic inequality is inevitable because it's impossible to see or imagine how we could change the system to address it. Without an understanding of the cause, it's difficult to see or imagine a solution.

Our survey research shows that people 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. (Market naturalism)*
- *Policy choices determine how the economy works and who it benefits. (Economic design)*

Figure 12

Market naturalism vs economic design (whole sample)

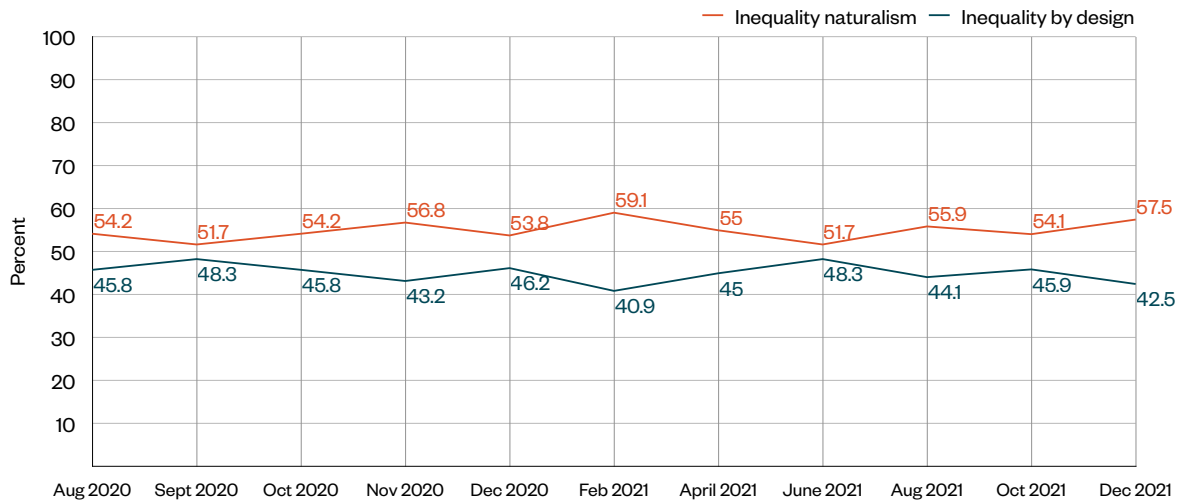
As Figure 12 shows, the idea that policy shapes who benefits in the economy is dominant for roughly 60 percent of participants. Even though there are differences in the degree of dominance (e.g., this model is dominant for about half of Republicans, while it's dominant for 60–70 percent of Democrats), people across groups recognized that policy plays a major role in shaping economic outcomes.

Despite this, 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. (Inequality naturalism)*
- *Economic inequality exists because of choices our society has made about how our economy will work. (Inequality by design)*

As Figure 13 shows, since we began the research, the first statement has been endorsed by a majority of participants, with numbers approaching 60 percent in some months. While market naturalism—the idea that how the economy works is a function of natural market forces—is not the dominant mindset, naturalism about inequality is dominant. Put another way, people see the economy as a designed system but see inequality as something natural that we don't have control over.

Figure 13
Inequality as natural vs designed (whole sample)



A deeper dive into the data revealed a more nuanced view of this paradox—particularly in how it has changed for different groups over time. While there have been some fluctuations, there has been a general decrease in “inequality by design” thinking and a corresponding increase in naturalistic thinking among Democrats. In August 2020, inequality by design thinking was preferred by Democrats by almost 20 points, while in December 2021 it was overtaken by naturalist thinking as the dominant mindset among Democrats.

Figure 14
Inequality as natural vs designed (Democrats)

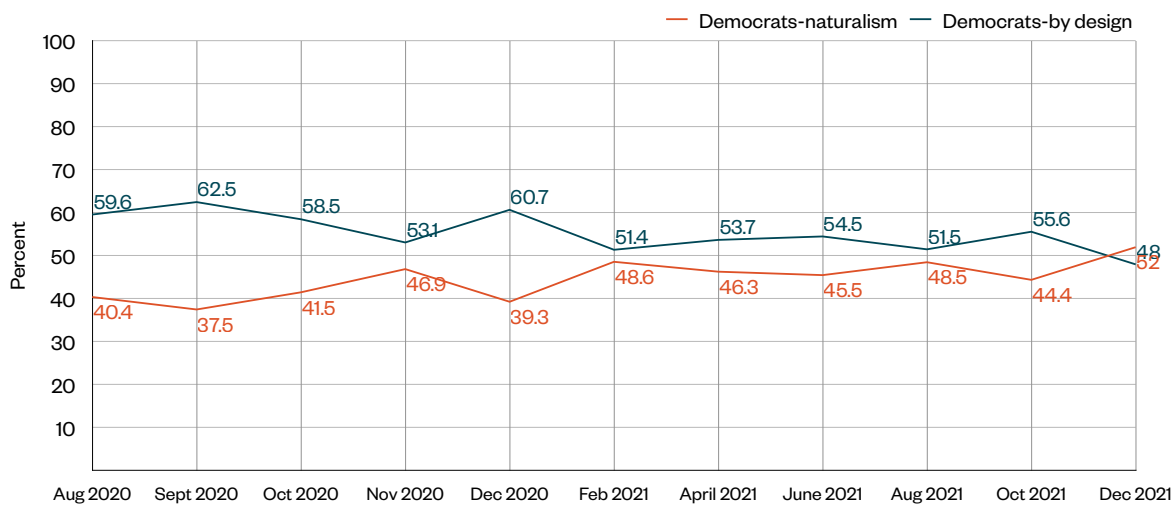
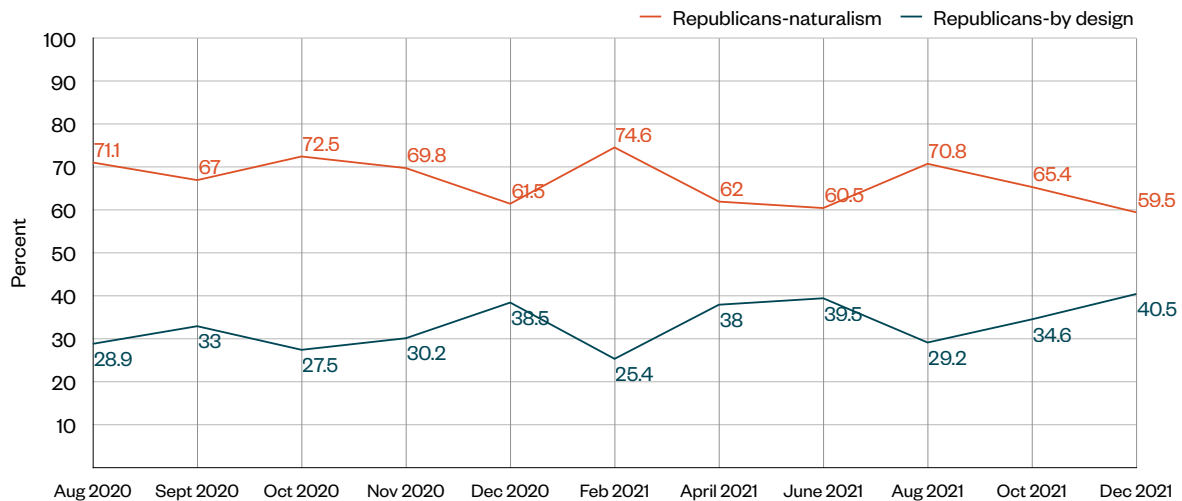


Figure 15

Inequality as natural vs designed (Republicans)

The trend among Republicans has worked in the opposite direction. In August 2020, naturalist thinking was preferred by Republicans by over 40 points, while in December 2021 it was preferred by less than 20 percentage points.

There are a few important takeaways from these results. First, naturalism about inequality dominates among Republicans, while design thinking is stronger among Democrats. Second, even among Democrats, the mindset that inequality is natural is strong, despite the dominant belief that markets are designed. Third, naturalism seems to be strengthening among Democrats and weakening among Republicans.

This brings us back to the puzzle of how people can simultaneously recognize that systems are designed but see inequality as natural.

Peer discourse sessions and one-on-one interviews help solve the puzzle. 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 unclear. People recognize that government can and does intervene in the economy, but the specific ways that government policies shape economic relations and foster some types of economic activity while discouraging others is not well understood. People think of government as something outside and apart from the economy that can push or nudge it in particular directions, but they don't see government as writing the rules as to, fundamentally, how the economy works. As a result, many of the ground rules of our 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. That is, government can influence things around the edges but not rewrite the core operating code that determines how the economy works.

FINDING #6

Naturalistic mindsets dominate thinking about work.

One of the clearest and most consistent patterns in our research over the years is that people widely equate a good economy with the availability of good jobs. This has been the case throughout the pandemic, from the early months when millions of people were losing their jobs to today's tight labor market.

Given this association, we might expect that larger patterns in thinking about the economy—as a designed system that can (at least to some extent) be redesigned—would transfer to people's thinking about jobs. However, we find—to a striking degree—that this is not the case. While people recognize that public policy shapes the economy as a whole, this thinking is generally not applied when people think about work and jobs. Instead, people see jobs and pay as determined by a naturally functioning market that's outside of government control.

In September 2021, we asked peer discourse participants a series of questions to better understand how people think about work and jobs. There was a clear finding: when asked what work is, why people end up in specific types of work, and what determines pay, participants consistently evoked “the market,” suggesting that these things are determined by “supply and demand.” When asked about government's role in shaping work and labor, they struggled to come up with answers, ultimately suggesting a set of neoliberal actions and policies that tinkered at the edges of the current economic system. Participants suggested, for example, that local governments can try to attract businesses through tax incentives, which can lead to jobs in a region, or they can reduce regulation on businesses to make it easier for businesses to turn a profit and, in turn, hire more employees.

In more general conversations about the economy in earlier peer discourse sessions (April 2021), minimum wage was the only mechanism that regularly came up as a way that government shapes pay and the quality of jobs. But it was clear that minimum wage laws weren't understood within a broader model of government's influence on work. People are familiar with and generally supportive of minimum wage laws, but this seems to be an isolated idea rather than a sign of an underlying mindset that links policies and government decisions to the structure of work and labor.

Our September 2021 peer discourse sessions also found that gender essentialism is, not surprisingly, still prevalent in thinking about work. When asked how gender and work are related, participants frequently drew on the idea that men and women are naturally inclined toward different types of work. We found little talk about how gender norms shape work opportunities and no mention of how sectors like care, domestic, and service work are rooted in racism and sexism.

While these findings indicate deep challenges, there is some good news: the discourse around essential workers seems to be spawning a new, more productive mindset around the value of work. In contrast to

the market naturalism understanding, which sees the value of work as a function of natural market forces, this mindset views the value of work through the lens of social function. Thinking in this way, people see that the value of work depends, or should depend, not on the market but on what a job contributes to society. The core assumption of this mindset is that work is valuable if it is useful to society.

At the moment, this mindset remains recessive and limited in application. We have found that it does not consistently translate into thinking about pay and working conditions. That is, in talking about essential work, people sometimes distinguish between the social value of work and its market value, suggesting that our society should value essential work more (in the sense of lauding essential workers or recognizing their importance) without suggesting that essential workers should be paid more.

For this mindset to motivate support for restructuring markets to rebalance power, increase pay for low-wage work, and improve working conditions for exploited workers, this mindset must be expanded. Going forward, this means reinforcing the social value mindset and extending it so that people recognize that socially valuable work should be better compensated and that workers in socially valuable jobs (“essential jobs”) are owed fair working conditions. More research is needed to understand how this can be done, as well as to determine how dangers that accompany this model could be addressed. For example, while people readily recognize the social value of care work in a global pandemic, we anticipate that people underappreciate the value of many hospitality and retail jobs. This is a crucial area for further research.

FINDING #7

A new mindset, which sees social divisions as a product of our collective imagination, is emerging.

In our research, we are finding a new mindset crystallizing. It views social relations—specifically, social divisions—as a product of how we think about ourselves and others. When people draw on this mindset, they assume that our social divisions are figments of our collective imagination—they’re “in our heads”—and can, in turn, be solved by changing how we think and talk as a society. This mindset is especially salient among conservatives, though in connecting to widely familiar notions of “social construction,” it attaches to broadly accessible ideas and has the potential to spread beyond conservative circles.

This mindset frequently appears in talk about media as the source of our problems. In these accounts, the media create division in American society by portraying Americans as fundamentally different from each other. These divisions are sometimes described as “socially constructed,” in the sense that they are not real divisions but collective fictions. The solution to our current divisions is to stop spreading and believing these fictions. In other words, we can make our problems and divisions disappear by not perpetuating the idea that we have problems or are divided. This mindset helps explain the resonance in the conservative push to censor educational curriculum through anti-critical race theory legislation. Schools, like the media, are seen a source of these purported fictions of our collective imagination.

This way of thinking appears to grow out of and expand long-standing “colorblind” thinking about race (see finding #3 above). We’re seeing this pattern more broadly, as some peer discourse session participants are applying this way of thinking to other identities as well. This has become a broader response to identity politics, to suggest that we need to “see through” our differences and recognize our common citizenship or humanity and that if we do so, the problems that grow from the collective fiction of our differences will disappear.

This mindset and the language that cues it are used to counter the rise of systemic thinking. When confronted with claims about systemic problems and the need for systemic changes, some people (often conservatives) counter with criticism of discourse and media, suggesting that we just need to talk and see differently. This is a plausible counter to systemic talk because, like systemic thinking, it operates above the level of individuals, at the societal level, and limits criticism to one social institution (media). This allows people to acknowledge that we do have collective problems without acknowledging a need for structural or institutional changes that affect people’s material wellbeing and experience.

FINDING #8

People desire unity but have competing mindsets about how it can be achieved.

Across peer discourse sessions from May–June 2020 through September 2021, participants across ideological and demographic lines have consistently lamented our country’s divisions and talked about the need for greater unity. This is one thing everyone agrees on. Yet deeper analysis reveals two competing mindsets that lead to very different understandings of how unity can be achieved.

One mindset is nostalgic and backward-looking, looking for a restoration of the (imagined) past in which the country was socially and politically united. This way of thinking obscures the ways in which prior moments of political consensus (e.g., the postwar period) were grounded in the exclusion and marginalization of many groups (e.g., Black Americans). This mindset, which often, though not exclusively, was drawn on by white participants—especially men—is tied to the idea that our current social divisions are figments of our collective imagination (see finding #7 above). When thinking in this way, people see critiques of American society as divisive and the path to greater unity lying in fewer people rocking the boat.

Our research has found another, more inclusive and forward-looking mindset. According to this way of thinking, our lack of unity is the result of historic and current injustices. The exclusion and marginalization of groups is what splits our country. Protests and criticisms aren’t the source of division but a sign that changes need to be made. When drawing on this inclusive model of unity, the way to achieve unity is by moving forward on addressing economic and racial inequalities that have previously been ignored.

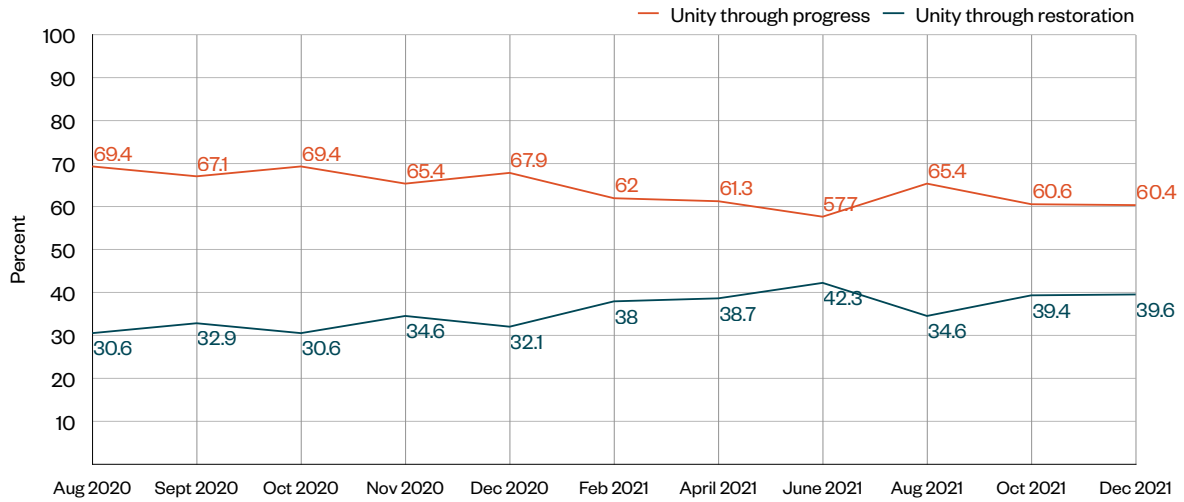
In the Culture Tracking Survey, we explore the relative salience of these two ways of understanding unity, asking people to choose between the following two statements:

- Moving past our divisions as a country means that people from different groups need to find new ways of working together. (Unity through progress)
- Moving past our divisions as a country means returning to our old ways of working together. (Unity through restoration)

In most months that we’ve conducted the survey, more than 60 percent of people chose the forward-looking view. There has, however, been a noticeable shift in the balance between the two views, with the restorative mindset gaining significant ground between August 2020 and December 2021.

Figure 16

Unity through progress vs. unity through restoration (whole sample)



In most months, a higher percentage of Democrats than Republicans endorsed the forward-looking mindset over the restorative one. However, partisan differences on these mindsets are smaller than for many of the other mindsets discussed above. A majority of both Democrats and Republicans generally prefer the forward-looking view, and a substantial minority of Democrats endorse the restorative view (see Appendix B, Figures 43 and 44).

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 restorative and inclusive mindsets has 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’ preference for “new” ways of doing things compared to “old” ways of doing things may be driving some of the preference for the forward-looking statement of unity in the survey.

FINDING #9

Demand for responsive government is rising.

In past work, we have found that Americans are generally skeptical of 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 and diminishes support for a range of public services and solutions.

In peer discourse sessions May and June 2020, we were thus surprised by the amount of positive talk about government's role. We heard 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.

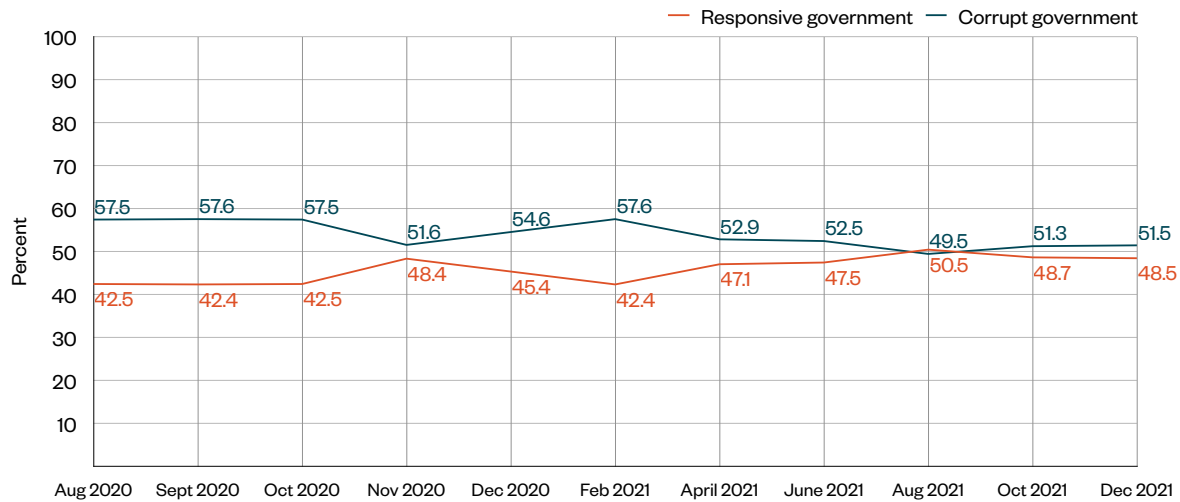
Survey results confirm substantial agreement with the idea that responsive government is desirable and possible. In the tracking survey, we ask participants to choose between statements that capture two different mindsets that people use to think about government:

- It is realistic to expect the government to be responsive to the needs and desires of ordinary people. (Government as responsive)
- It's inevitable that politicians will serve their own interests rather than the interests of the general public. (Government as corrupt)

In every month that the survey was fielded, at least 42 percent (and as much as 51 percent) of participants suggested responsiveness is possible (see Figure 17). And the trend over time suggests that the responsive mindset may actually be getting stronger. 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.

Figure 17

Responsive government vs. corrupt government (whole sample)



While a slightly greater percentage of Democrats than Republicans tend to endorse the responsive view, differences between these and other groups are generally small, indicating that a positive mindset around responsive government is available across the political spectrum.

December 2020 and April 2021 peer discourse sessions provided further evidence of shifting understandings of government. In comparison with past research and previous peer discourse sessions for this project, characterizations of government as an enemy or unwelcome outsider that should be kept out of people’s lives as much as possible were significantly less pronounced. People may frequently understand government as “them,” but they see that it could and should belong to “us.” While the mindset that government is inherently corrupt remains strong—it came out strongly, for example, in September 2021 peer discourse sessions—we are seeing, alongside it, the mindset that government can and should be responsive even if it often isn’t.

What might explain this? While we can’t provide a conclusive answer to what is behind the strengthening of this responsive mindset, we suspect several factors may be in play. To start, the rise in systemic thinking that we describe above may be bringing the importance of government into clearer focus. As people increasingly recognize the role of systems in social problems, they may see more of a need and role for government in the remediation of these issues.

In addition, though government has failed in some remarkable ways over the past couple of years—nearly a million people have died of COVID-19 in the United States to date—the government has also been active during this time, from lockdowns and mask mandates to economic recovery packages to parents’ rights and anti-trans legislation. While people will inevitably disagree with some or many of these actions, the government has acted in significant ways to respond to people’s concerns and needs. This visibility of government action may have helped us see that government can be responsive even if some of its actions are ineffective or wrong.

FINDING #10

Personalistic understandings of government and institutions are barriers to democratic reform.

While a responsive model of government seems to be strengthening, there is nonetheless a strong assumption that our political system is broken. While people increasingly think government can be responsive, they also see our political system as dysfunctional. Yet assumptions about how and why the political system is broken lead people to underestimate the scale of the problem and obscure the types of reforms that could actually fix it.¹⁰

Americans' dominant mindset of how government works is highly personalistic. People assume that what determines the quality and character of our government is the character of our leaders and that the problems with our democracy lie in the politicians in government.

We saw this mindset clearly in April 2021 peer discourse session conversations about the January 6, 2021, insurrection. Participants explained the insurrection as a result of Donald Trump's distinctive character, rather than underlying issues in our politics or system of government. While participants widely condemned the event, they felt that this type of attack on our democracy is unlikely to be repeated because people assume that most politicians—while self-interested—aren't like Trump.

This personalistic model of government obscures the way in which institutional and structural problems are responsible for government dysfunction and strains on our democracy. In peer discourse sessions, participants consistently assumed that our institutions are well-designed but are being perverted by the bad people who run for office. By blaming leaders' character, people retain faith in our constitutional design and don't see the need for deep structural reform. This creates a terrain in which thinking about democratic reform centers primarily on campaign finance reform and voting rights—critical steps that nonetheless leave core institutions like the Senate, first-past-the-post voting, and judicial review untouched.

While the events of recent years have reinforced political disaffection and created a sense of alarm about the state of the country, the mindsets that people are using to think about our political system are preventing deep political reform. Putting more radical reform on the agenda requires shifting the terrain of our current debate, likely by filling in current understandings of how the political system works and is rigged. Seeing how our existing institutions—and not just our leaders, or even political elites as a class—are to blame for government dysfunction is necessary to build demand for fundamental institutional reform.

FINDING #11

Young people are questioning principles of democracy.

As part of our exploration of public thinking, we have, since October 2020, included tracking survey questions designed to measure fundamental mindsets around democracy, representation, and voting. The survey suggests that antidemocratic strands may be gaining traction with young people in particular.

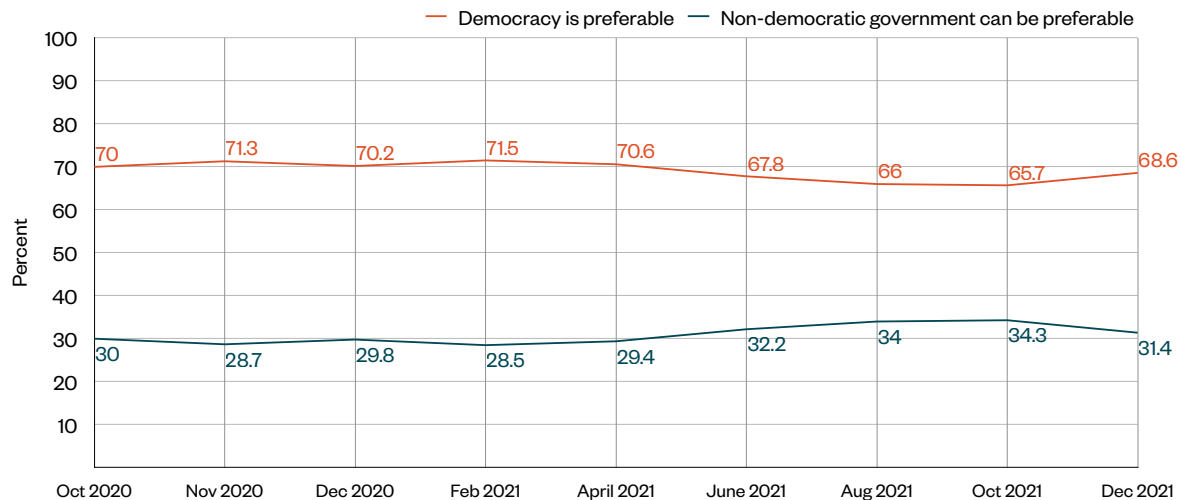
In the tracking survey, we ask participants to choose between two statements that encapsulate democratic and authoritarian mindsets:

- Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government. (Democratic mindset)
- In some circumstances, a nondemocratic government can be preferable to democracy. (Authoritarian mindset)

Our results are generally consistent with other research, finding that roughly 70 percent of Americans generally say democracy is always preferable.¹¹ Despite the increase in antidemocratic discourse from political elites in the wake of the January 6th insurrection, these numbers have remained relatively stable (see Figure 18).

Figure 18

Democracy vs. non-democratic government (whole sample)



What is notable are the striking differences when we separate the results by ages. While older Americans overwhelmingly endorse democracy, a large percentage of younger Americans appear to be less sold.

The four figures below (Figures 19-22) show that with each step down in age, nondemocratic sentiments rise. Among the oldest group (60+), support for the view that democracy is always preferable is overwhelming, with over 80 percent of participants choosing this statement in every survey fielded. By contrast, a large segment of the younger group (18–29) say that nondemocratic government can sometimes be preferable, with a majority of participants endorsing this claim in October 2021. The intervening age groups show intermediate levels of support for democracy. This confirms the amplification of a trend previously identified by scholars in this area—that support for democracy appears to be waning among younger Americans.¹²

Figure 19

Democracy vs. non-democratic government (18–29 year-olds)

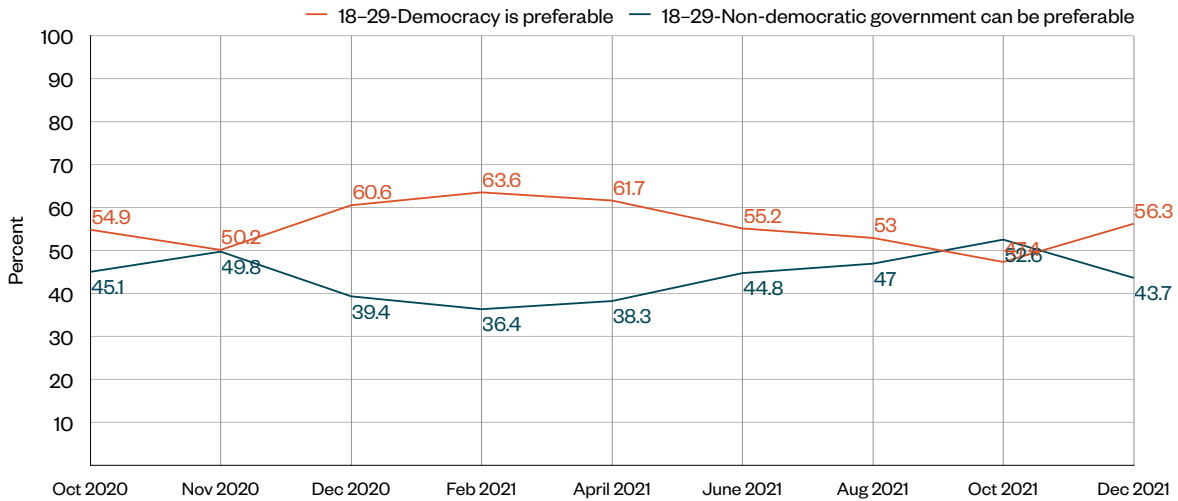


Figure 20

Democracy vs. non-democratic government (30–44 year-olds)

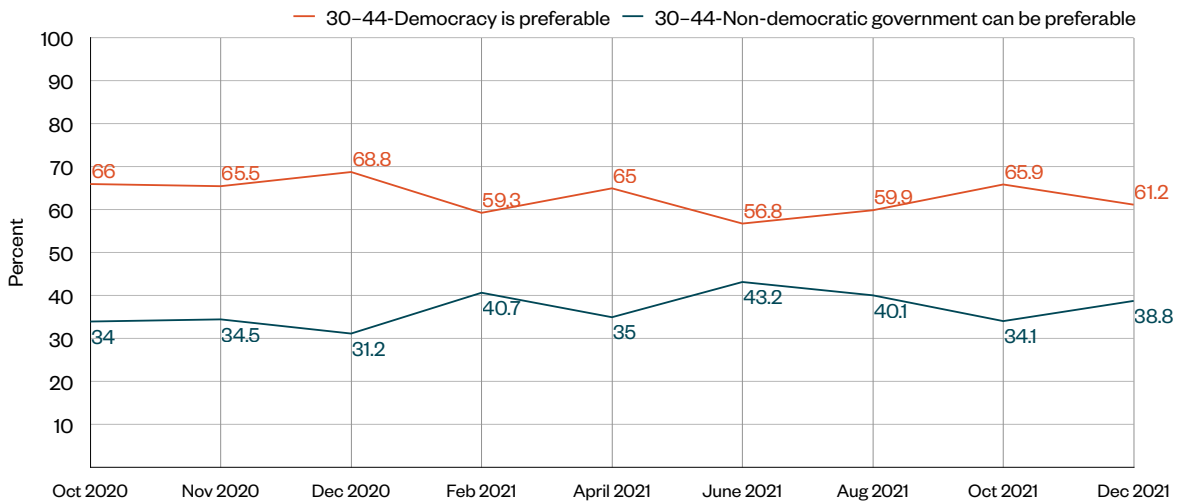


Figure 21

Democracy vs. non-democratic government (45–59 year-olds)

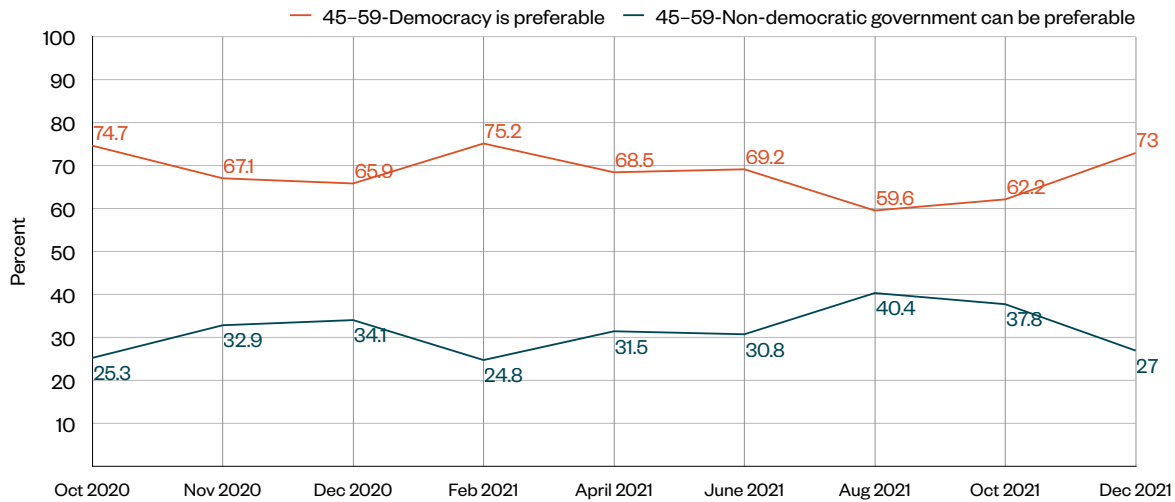
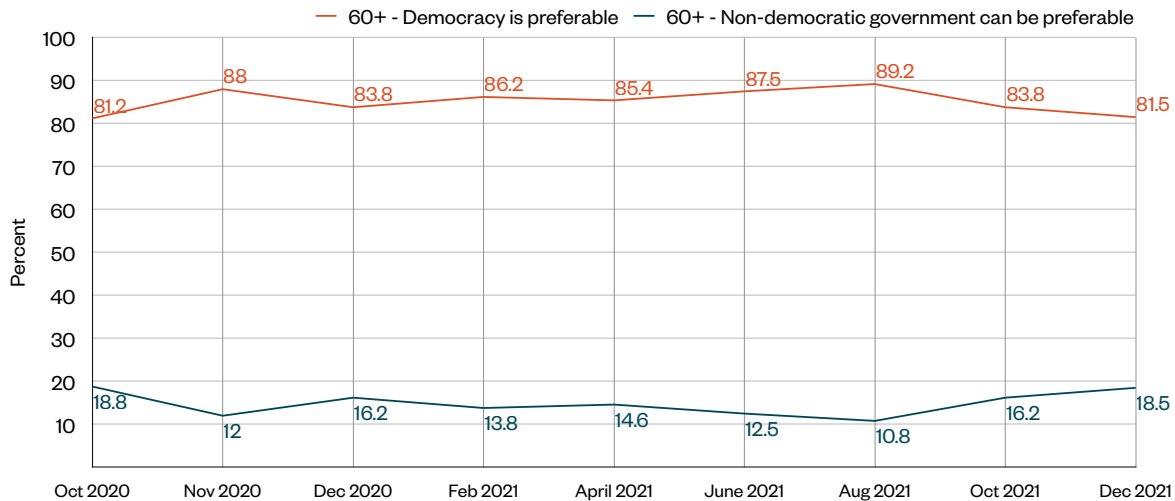


Figure 22

Democracy vs. non-democratic government (60+ year-olds)



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 antidemocratic 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. Yet the survey finds that a surprising number of young people reject this view.

In the tracking survey, we ask participants to choose between two views of representation:

- The job of elected representatives is to advance the interests and views of everyone in their district or state, not just the people who voted for them. (Representation of all)
- The job of elected representatives is to advance the interests and views of the people who voted for them, not the people who didn't vote for them. (Representation of voters only)

In each survey we have fielded, between 24 and 38 percent of 18–29-year-olds and between 22 and 36 percent of 30–44-year-olds endorsed the view that representatives' job is to represent only the people who voted for them, not those who didn't (figures 23 and 24). By contrast, the percent of participants 60 years and over who endorse this view has never risen above 12 percent (Figure 43).

Figure 23

Representation of all constituents vs. voters only (18–29 year-olds)

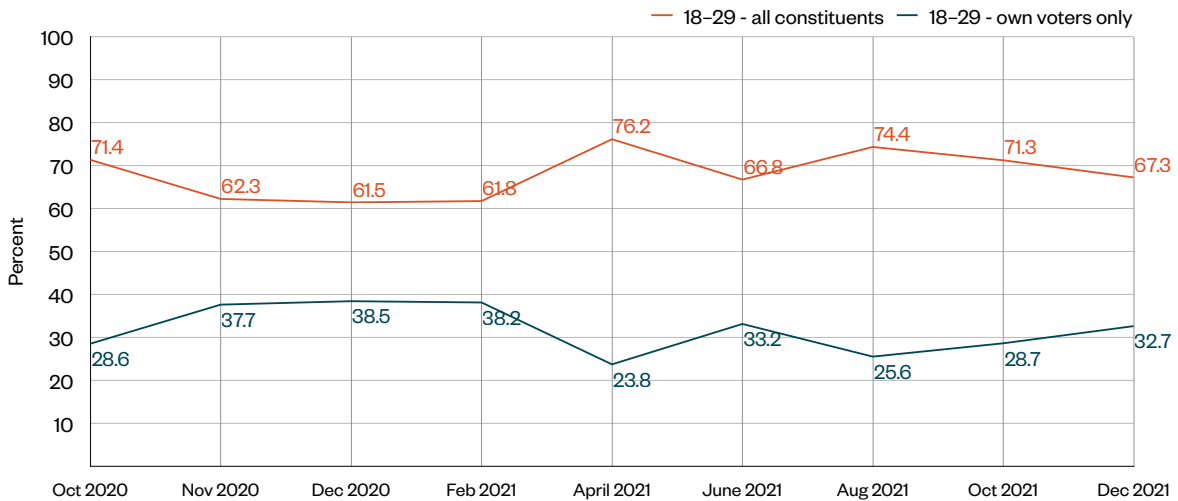


Figure 24

Representation of all constituents vs. voters only (30–44 year-olds)

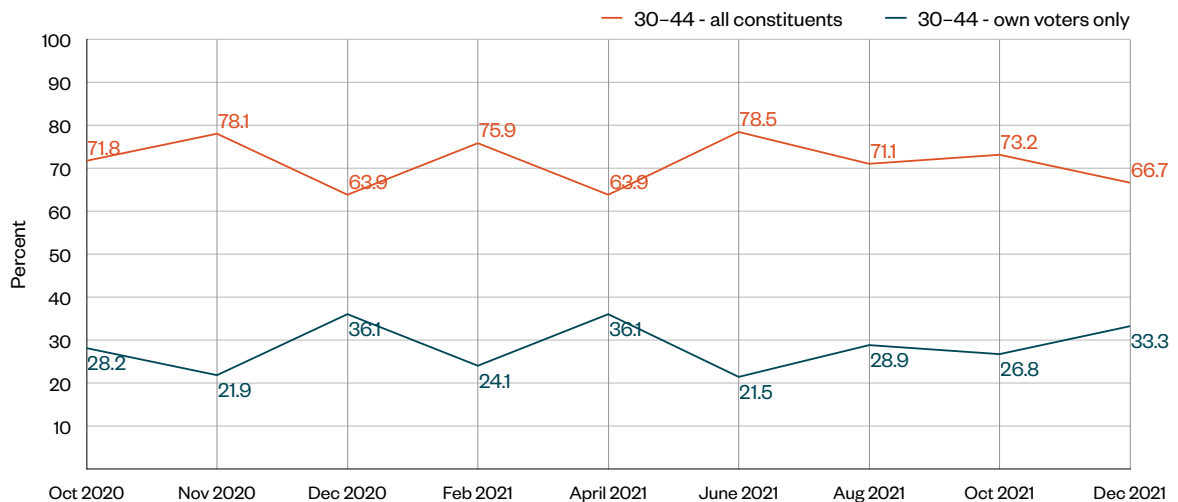


Figure 25

Representation of all constituents vs. voters only (45–59 year-olds)

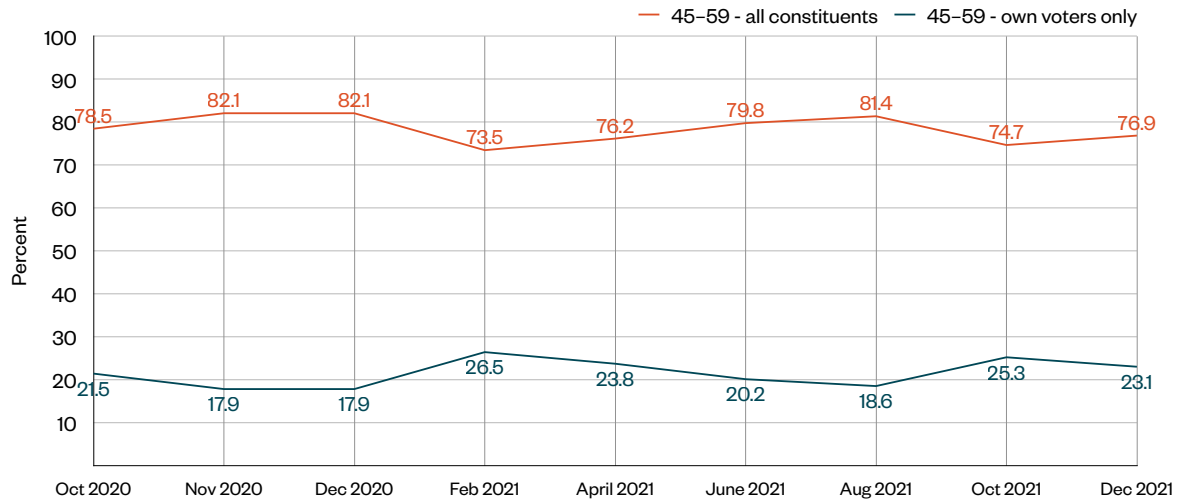
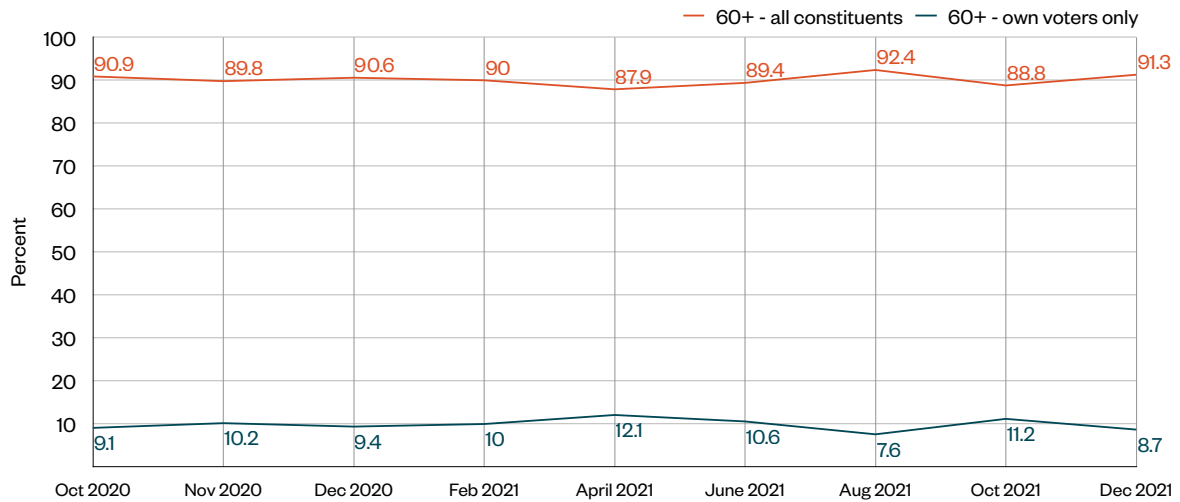


Figure 26

Representation of all constituents vs. voters only (60+ year-olds)



These results raise more questions than answers. 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?

These results 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 the recent period, it is possible that something new is happening in public thinking about democracy that is not reflected in older research. We believe this makes these results—while admittedly limited—critically important.

What's Next?

For the next year and a half—and, we hope, beyond—we will continue conducting research to understand how culture is shifting in response to upheavals of the moment and ways we can frame salient issues to leverage cultural openings and advance progressive change. The next phase of the project will extend and expand our work in several ways:

- We will explore whether the shifts in culture we are seeing are durable or whether they stagnate or recede. As the upheavals that have destabilized established mindsets fade or we become used to the social changes they have introduced, will culture fall back into older patterns?
- We will explore thinking about issues that are politically salient to understand how broader mindsets are being applied within current debates. For example, how are economic mindsets being mobilized or stretched in the current discourse around inflation? How are cross-cutting mindsets around race and racism being used in the face of rising crime rates?
- We will begin to test framing strategies and ways of communicating about key issues in ways that open space for public debate and catalyze productive changes in culture.

Throughout this effort, we will work closely with progressive leaders to shape the lines of inquiry, identify locations in culture and discourse that are key sites of intervention, and put findings from the research to use in advancing social justice.

Appendix A: Methods

We are using a mix of a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to understand whether and how cultural mindsets are shifting.

Peer Discourse Sessions

We conducted 13 peer discourse sessions (a form of focus group) in May–June 2020 and 9 sessions each in December 2020, April 2021, and September 2021. These sessions explored participants' thinking about major issues in American society, including health, the economy, government, democracy, and racism.

In the sessions conducted in May and June, we asked participants to think about these issues in the past, present, and future to collect information about broader mindsets rather than just thinking about the pandemic.¹ The sessions then turned to 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 that began in May, while the sessions were underway, to understand how participants were making sense of the protests and the issues at stake.

In subsequent sessions (December 2020, April 2021, and September 2021), 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 these sessions to questions we had asked in the first round of sessions in May–June 2020. 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 these sessions, we designed activities to deepen our understanding of emerging findings. For example, in December 2020, we explored thinking about the connection between health and racism in the context of COVID-19, about the idea that the economic system is “rigged,” and about the meaning of democratic representation. In April 2021, we revisited thinking about the racial justice protests of the previous summer and explored more deeply how people think about unity and division in the United States. In September 2021, we explored how people think about the American political system and needed reforms, investigated thinking about work and jobs, and probed understandings of the media to better understand the frequent complaints about the media that had appeared in previous peer discourse session conversations.

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 people's 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), allowing us to look at the relationship between the strength with which people hold certain mindsets and their support for specific policies. In October 2020, 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. This report covers survey results through the December 2021 survey.

In presenting survey findings, we focus on results from forced choice questions, though it is important to note that the survey also asks questions that measure endorsement of cultural mindsets taken on their own. The forced choice questions ask people to choose between statements embodying the core ideas 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 include graphs that illustrate trends over time as well as graphs that focus on results from a recent month (October or December 2021) to more clearly illustrate demographic breakdowns. These survey results are interpreted in combination with qualitative analyses, both from this project and from pre-pandemic research. Qualitative research conducted before the pandemic and the racial justice protests and external polling provide useful bases of comparison in drawing conclusions about shifts in mindsets that appear to have started or occurred before we began fielding our tracking survey.

Cultural Models Interviews

To deepen our understanding of how mindsets might be evolving in response to the upheavals of 2020, we conducted 20 in-depth one-on-one interviews with participants from diverse backgrounds. (See Peer Discourse Sessions above for 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 the initial round of 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.

Appendix B: Additional Graphs

Figure 27
Individualistic vs systemic thinking (30–44 year olds)

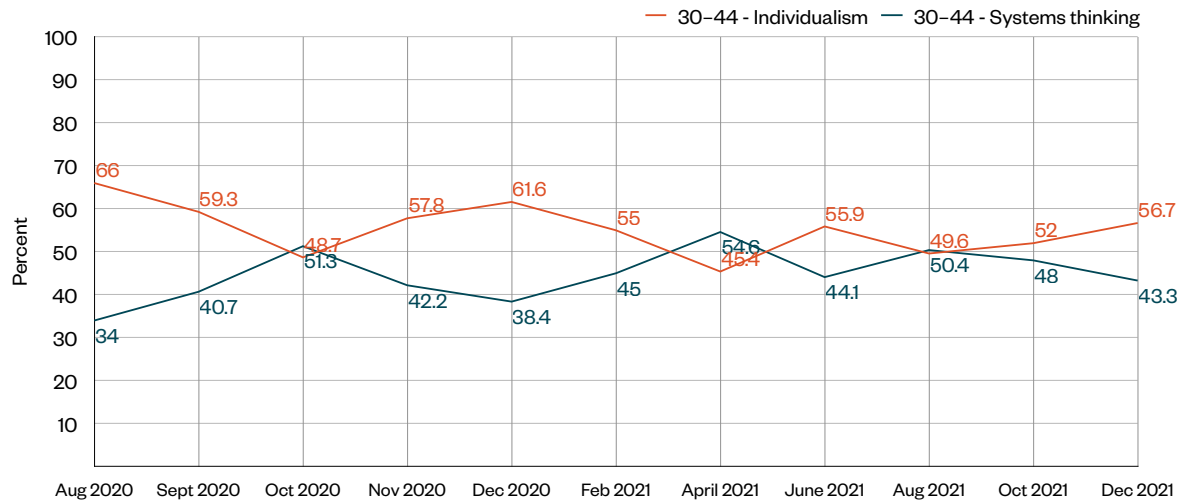


Figure 28
Individualistic vs systemic thinking (45–59 year olds)

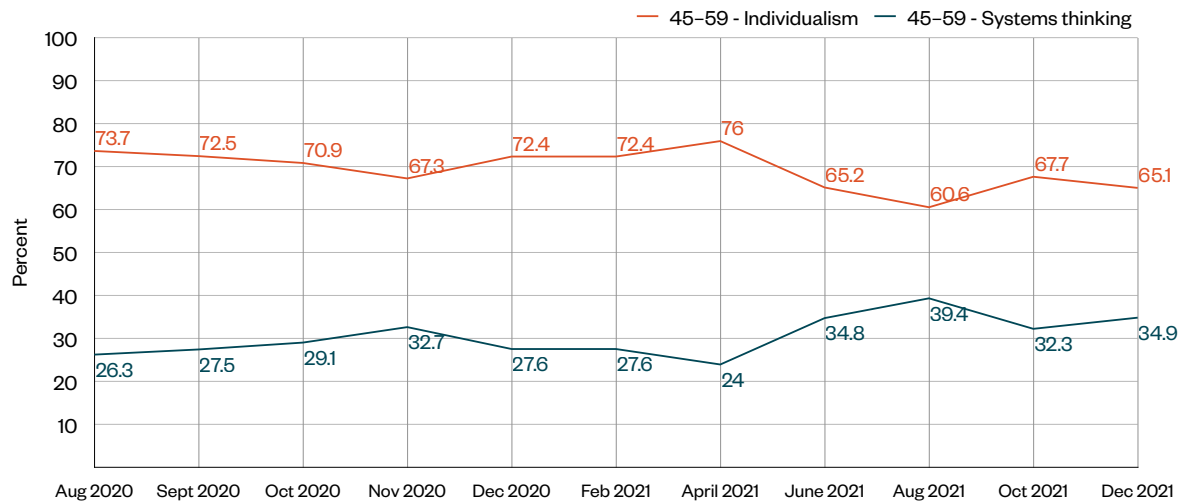


Figure 29
Market naturalism vs economic design (Democrats)

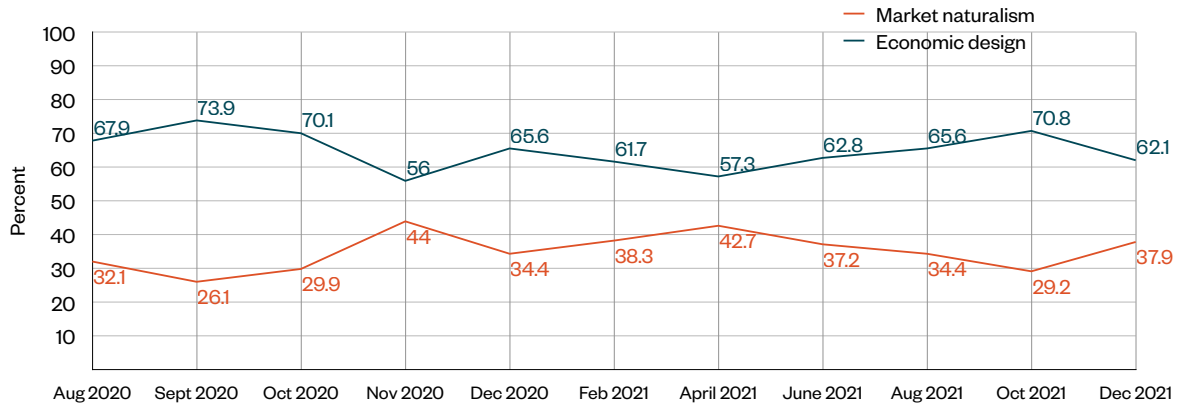


Figure 30
Market naturalism vs economic design (Republicans)

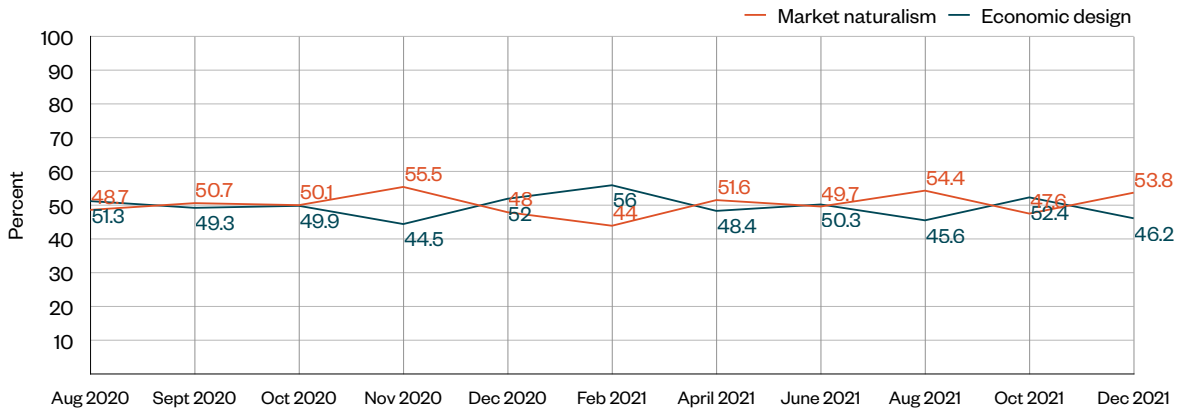


Figure 31
Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (Democrats)

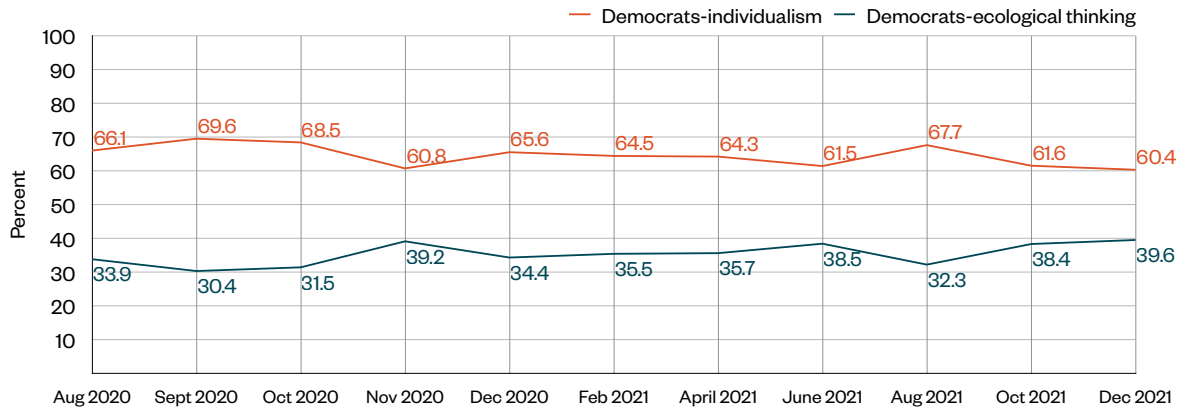


Figure 32

Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (Republicans)

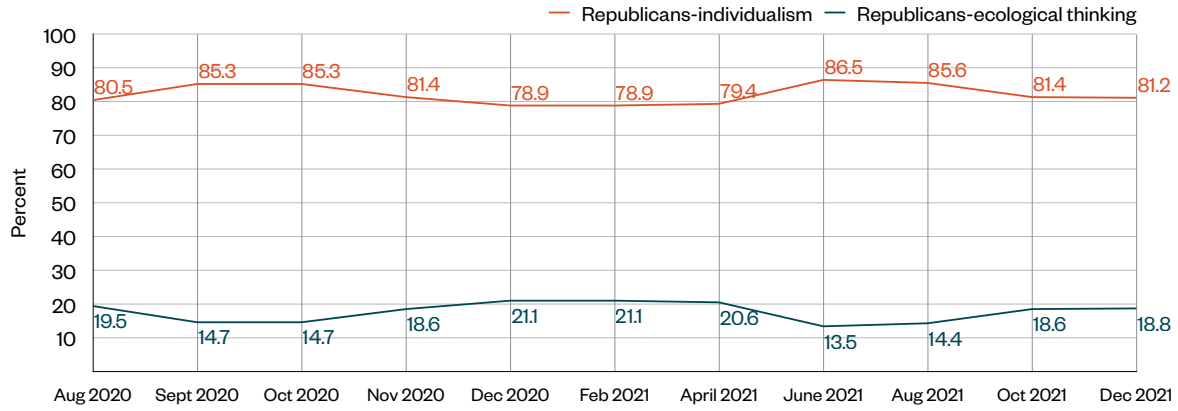


Figure 33

Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (Independents)

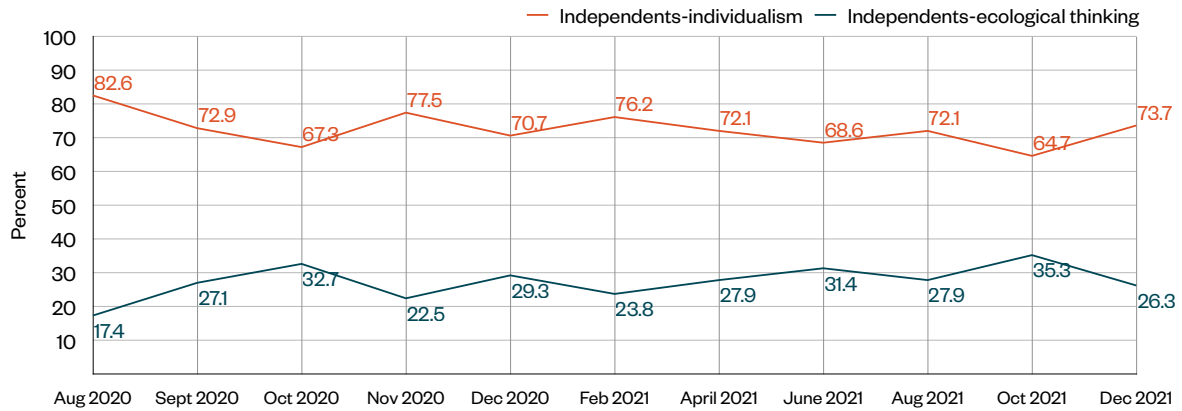


Figure 34

Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (Latinx)

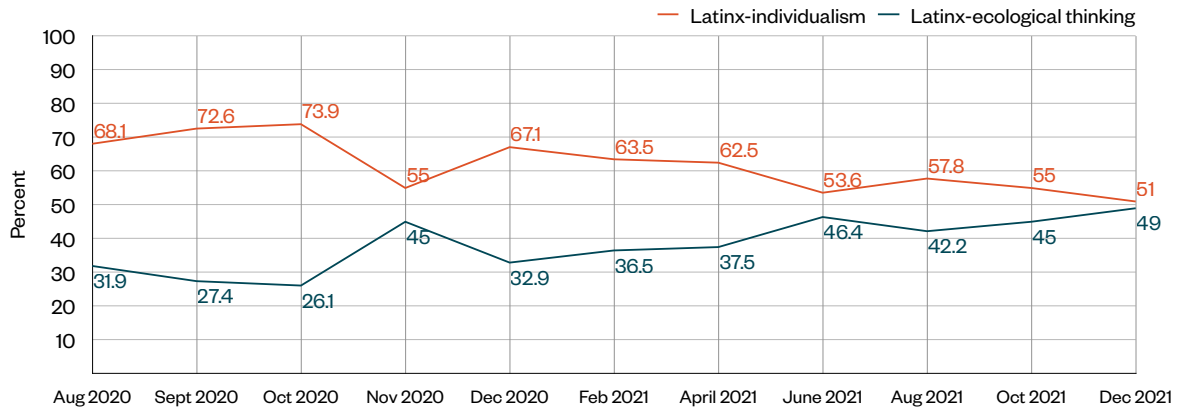


Figure 35
Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (White)

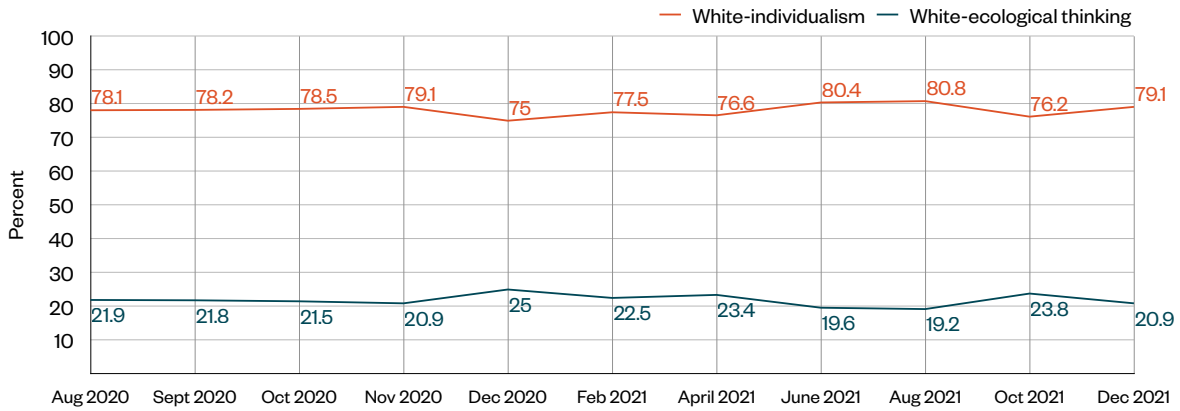


Figure 36
Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (African-American)

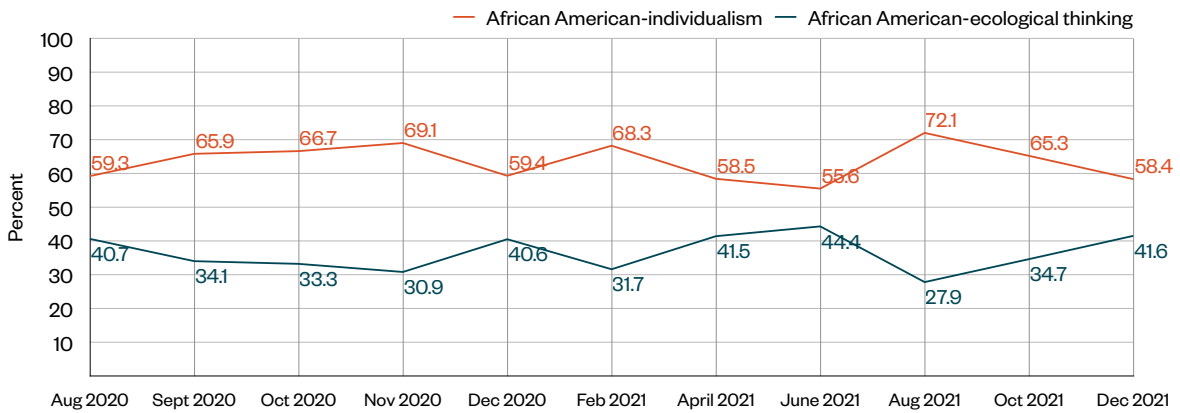


Figure 37
Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (Asian-American)

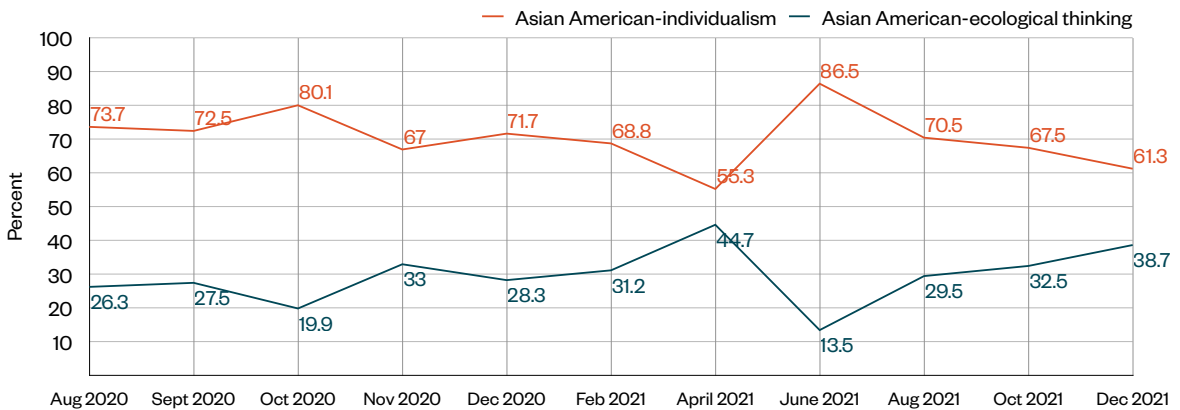


Figure 38

Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (Bi-racial/Other)

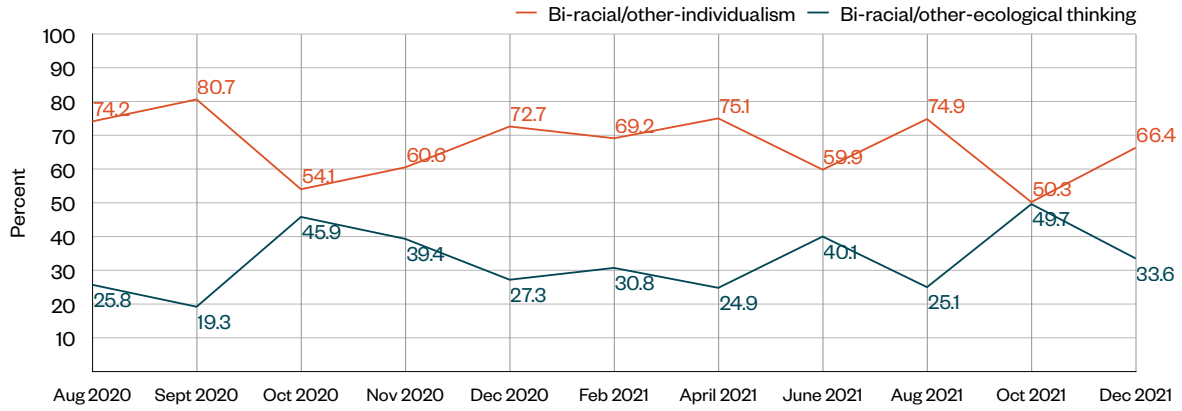


Figure 39

Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (18–29 year-olds)

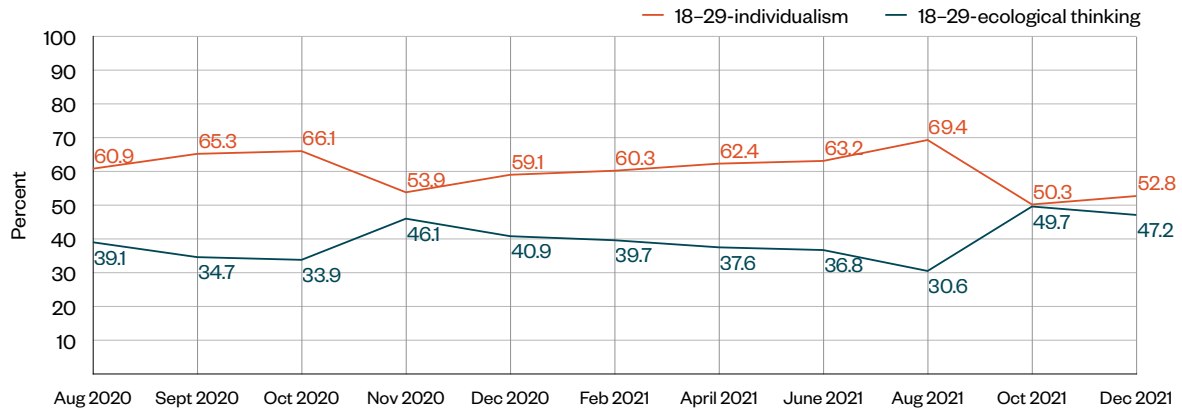


Figure 40

Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (30–44 year-olds)

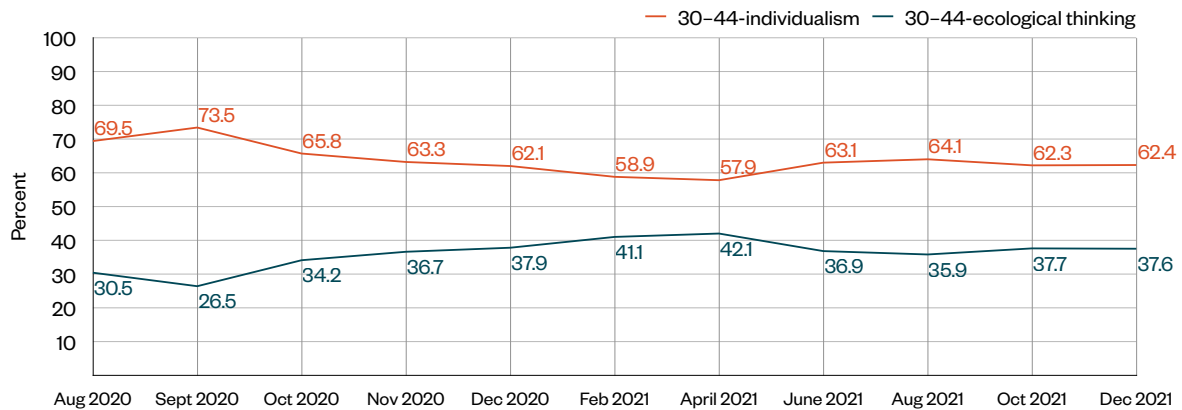


Figure 41
Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (45–59 year-olds)

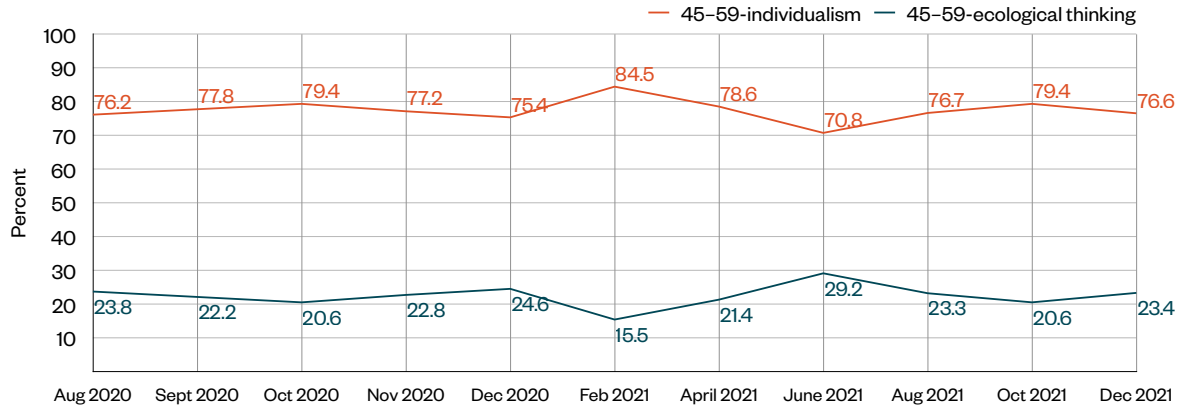


Figure 42
Health individualism vs. ecological thinking (60+ year-olds)

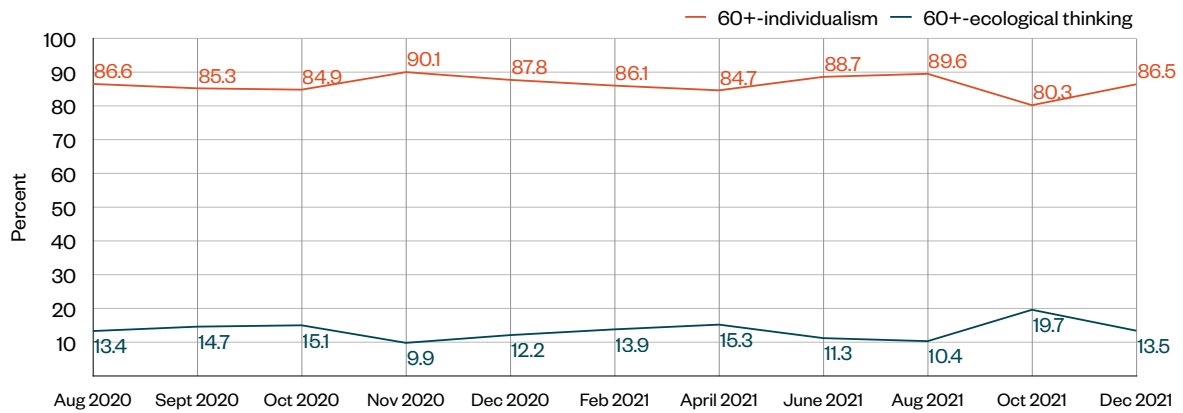


Figure 43
Unity through progress vs. unity through restoration (Democrats)

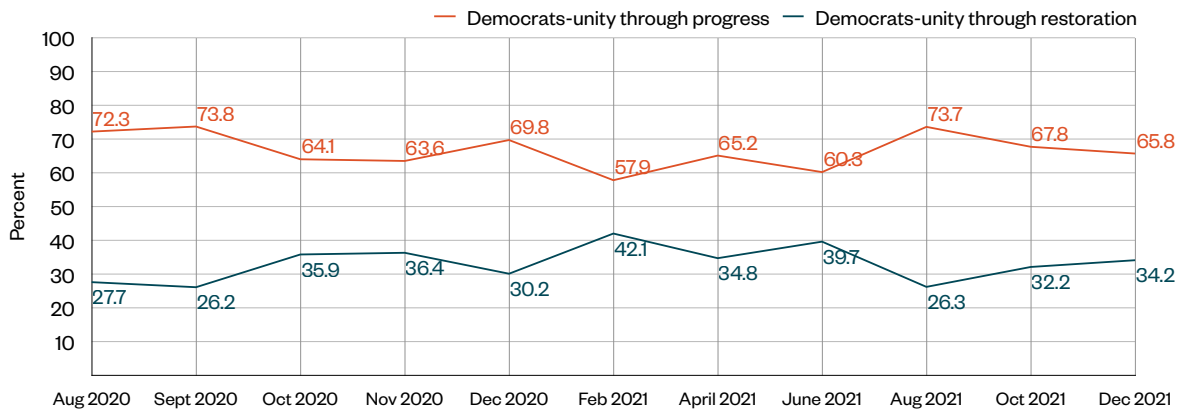
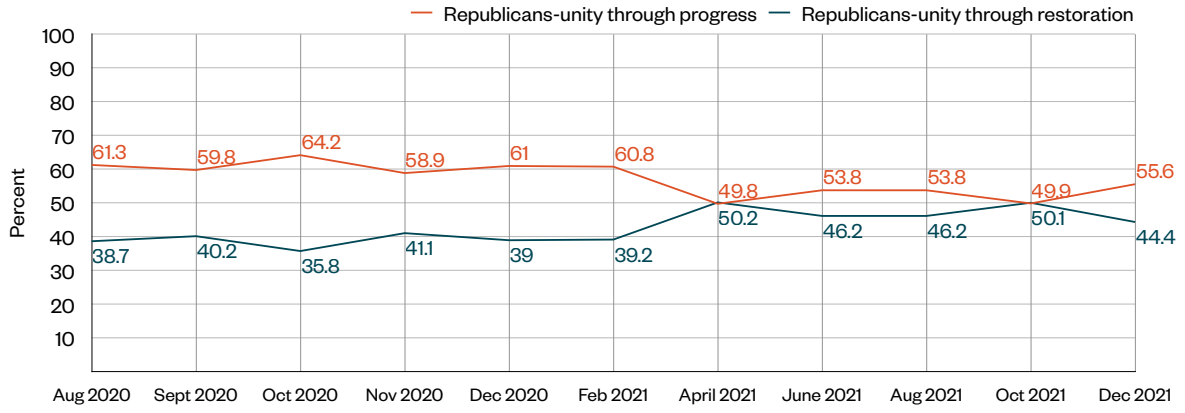


Figure 44

Unity through progress vs. unity through restoration (Republicans)



Endnotes

1. FrameWorks Institute. (2020, April 23). Is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval? Preliminary Findings from the Culture Change Project. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/is-culture-changing-in-this-time-of-social-upheaval-preliminary-findings-from-project-culture-change/>
2. To avoid excessive 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.
3. Peer discourse sessions are focus groups designed to understand how cultural mindsets are being applied in talk and how group dynamics affect public conversations. For more on this method, see Appendix A.
4. 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.
5. See, for example: Volmert, A., O’Neil, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., & Sweetland J. (2016, October 29). Mixing It Up: Reframing Neighborhood Socioeconomic Diversity. FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/mixing-it-up-reframing-neighborhood-socioeconomic-diversity>
6. In October 2020 and December 2021, a slight majority of Black participants chose the structural view. In April and October 2021, a small majority of participants who identified as biracial or “other” preferred the structural view. In August 2021, a slight majority of Latinx participants endorsed the structural view.
7. To illustrate typical patterns for this survey item, we’ve chosen to share data from the October 2021 survey rather than the December 2021 survey (the month generally used for single-survey results in this survey). We’ve done this because December is one of only two months in which a majority of Black participants chose the structural view. We believe this is almost certainly due to measurement error rather than a real shift in this group’s views. (The relatively small sample for this group results in substantial fluctuation in these numbers between surveys as a matter of chance.) To avoid creating the impression that the structural view of racism is dominant among Black Americans, which we don’t believe is accurate, we’ve selected a more typical month.
8. In most months, the two youngest groups—18–29-year-olds and 30–44-year-olds—are closer together, though it is not unusual for a larger percent of 30–44-year-old participants to embrace the structural view compared to 18–29-year-olds.
9. See “The Pathology of Black Urban Poverty Narrative” in: Miller, T., Volmert, A., Rochman, A., & Aassar, M. (2021, September 27). Talking about Poverty: Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Telling Effective Stories. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/talking-about-poverty-narratives-counter-narratives-and-telling-effective-stories/>

See also: Lindland, E., Callen, A., Volmert, A., & Rochman, A. (2021, April 30). Communicating about Intergenerational Urban Poverty and Race in America: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations. FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/communicating-about-intergenerational-urban-poverty-and-race-in-america-challenges-opportunities-and-emerging-recommendations>

10. One familiar application of this mindset is disdain for political parties, which people frequently treat as impediments to authentic personal leadership. When thinking with a personalistic mindset, people assume that our politics should be designed to enable a simple assessment of the personal character of leaders without interference from parties.

11. 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>

See also: Albertus, M., & Grossman, G. (2021). The Americas: When Do Voters Support Power Grabs? *Journal of Democracy*, 32(2), 116–131.

12. 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/>



How Is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval?

Findings from



FRAMEWORKS
Culture Change
Project

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