



FRAMEWORKS

Culture Change  
Project

# Culture Change Project Findings and Methods: Spring 2023

APRIL 2023

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# Introduction

The Culture Change Project explores whether and how American culture is shifting in response to the social and political upheaval of the past three years. Since the spring of 2020, FrameWorks has been conducting qualitative and quantitative research to track shifts in cultural mindsets and working with partners to understand implications for those working for progressive, systems-level change.

In this report, we share findings from our recent research, building on and adding to [findings from earlier stages of the project](#). In the pages below we will:

1. revisit the fundamental mindsets that we have been tracking throughout the project to gauge if and how mindsets are moving, and
2. explore the mindsets people are using to make sense of current issues in the news—things like gender, the Constitution, and the Supreme Court.

These findings have strategic implications for progressive movements. Some point to strategic openings that help make the case for structural changes, while others pinpoint challenges and suggest ways of countering them. Although we briefly discuss these implications in this report, our focus is on laying out the findings and presenting the evidence behind them. We are creating additional resources that more fully explore implications and recommendations, and will share those resources in the spring of 2023.

## 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. The mindsets 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 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 mindsets of health individualism and housing market naturalism play 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?](#)

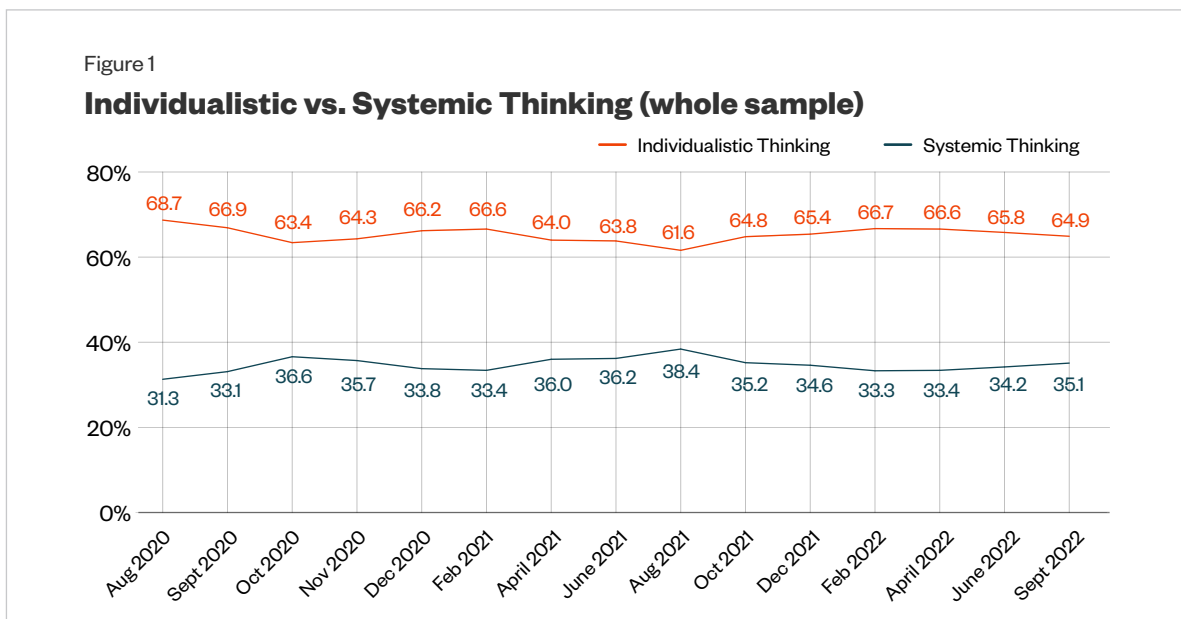
# Findings

## FINDING #1

The balance between individualistic and systemic thinking appears to be stabilizing at a new equilibrium, but the picture varies by issue.

As we reported in summer 2022, we saw a rise in systemic thinking, relative to individualistic thinking, in 2020 and 2021 in response to the social and political upheavals of this period. While individualism remained dominant throughout this period, we saw signs in both qualitative and quantitative research that systemic thinking was on the rise. In our qualitative research, participants were increasingly adopting a systemic perspective, looking to our environments and social systems to explain what was happening in the world. Our quantitative cultural mindsets tracking survey confirmed this, showing an increase in systemic thinking between August 2020 and December 2021 (with the most pronounced increase taking place between August 2020 and August 2021).

Based on survey data from 2022, it appears that the balance of individualistic and systemic thinking is stabilizing. As Figure 1 shows, endorsement of systemic thinking peaked in August 2021. After decreasing slightly, endorsement appears to have stabilized at a level slightly above the level measured at the outset of the survey. It looks like there may be, at least for the moment, a new equilibrium between individualistic and systemic thinking in American culture.

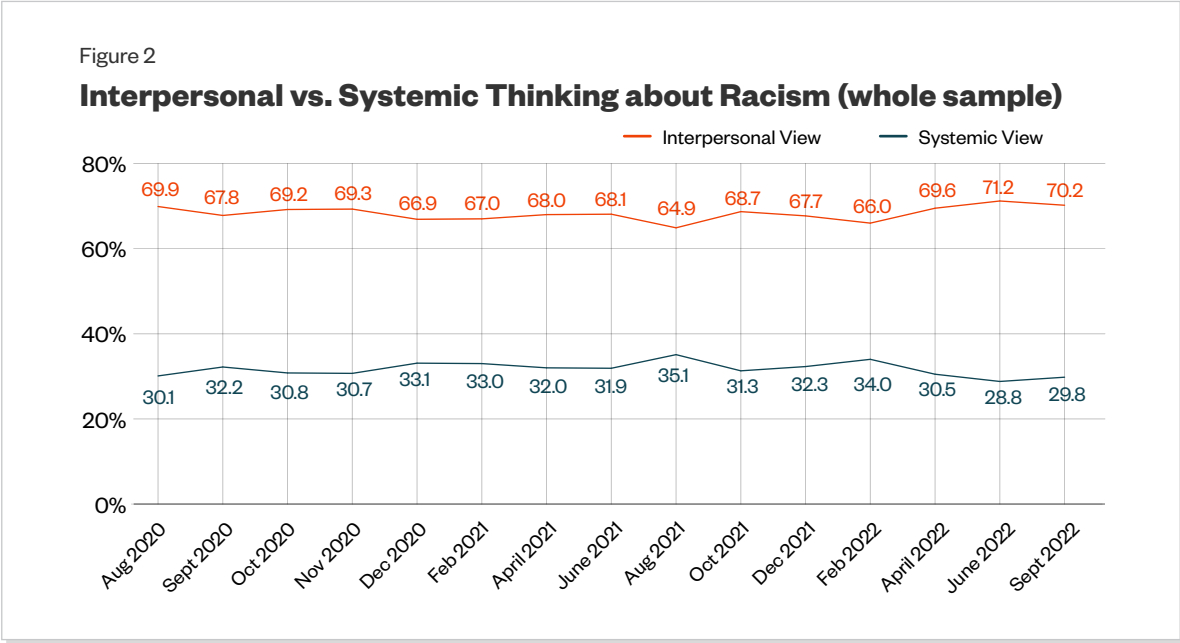


On the one hand, this is encouraging for those working to change systems to increase justice, equity, and inclusion. Several years after the beginning of the pandemic, gains in systemic thinking seem to be consolidating, establishing a cultural terrain that is more conducive to the desired changes in systems and structures at the center of the progressive movement. On the other hand, the fact that systemic thinking isn't *continuing* to strengthen and that individualism remains dominant means that, unless progressives can find ways to catalyze further shifts in this balance, arguing for systemic change will remain an uphill battle.

Underneath this general trend, the picture on individualistic and systemic thinking looks different across specific social issues.

— **Previous gains in systemic thinking about racism appear to be fading to some extent.** In the summer of 2022, based on a mix of qualitative and quantitative findings, we reported that the racial justice uprisings of 2020 boosted structural thinking about racism. The public conversation about George Floyd’s murder led to more systemic talk about racism among research participants than we had seen in the past. Our survey research found that, in the first year and a half following the uprisings (August 2020–December 2021), this increased salience of structural thinking about racism persisted and even seemed to be gaining ground.

Survey data from 2022 suggest a drop in endorsement of structural thinking about racism relative to an interpersonal understanding. Endorsement of the structural view peaked in August 2021, just like endorsement of more general systemic thinking. However, whereas the general systemic mindset appears to have stabilized, structural thinking about racism has dropped back to and slightly below August 2020 levels.

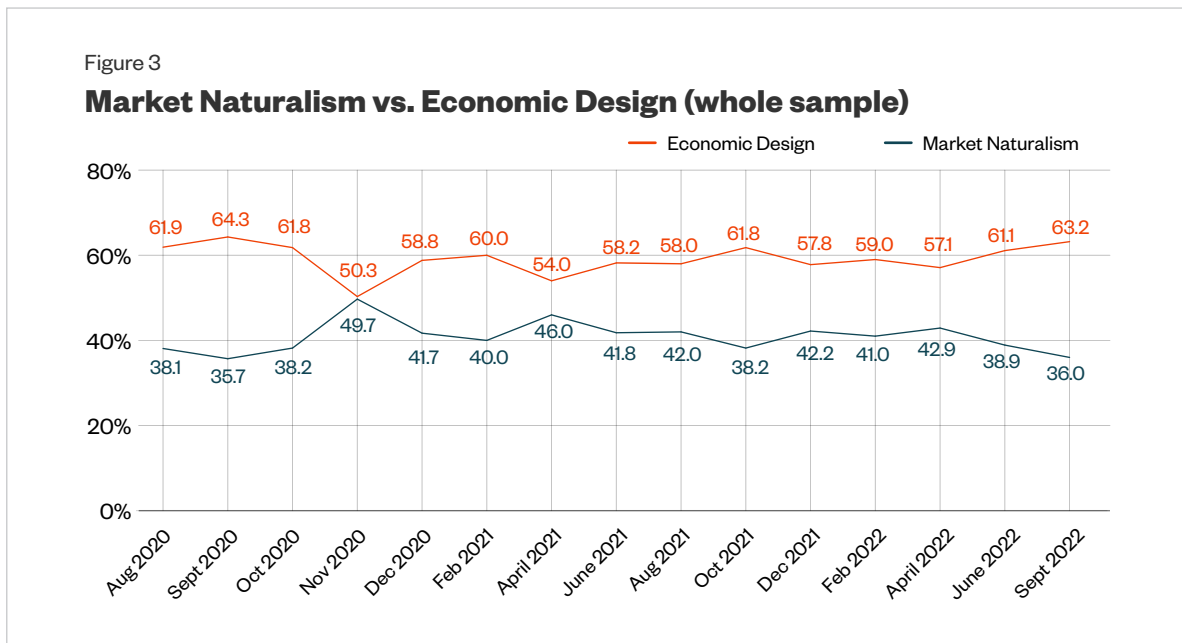


It is important to note that survey results do not suggest that the balance of interpersonal and structural thinking about racism has returned to pre-uprising levels. August 2020 results already reflect the initial rise in structural thinking about racism that happened during the initial period of May–July 2020.

The apparent precarity of the structural mindset about racism suggests a need to actively reinforce this view, though this will admittedly be difficult without the type of mass mobilization that prompted the initial shift in thinking

- **The understanding of the economy as a designed system remains strong but fluctuates more than systemic mindsets about other issues.** As we reported last summer, people widely understand the economy as a designed system. There are limits to this way of thinking—namely, there is a limited understanding of *how* policies structure the economy and a still-dominant assumption that a significant degree of inequality is inevitable and natural. Nonetheless, we see considerably more reliance on the *economic design* mindset than systemic mindsets in other issue areas.

Our survey data from 2022 indicate that the understanding of the economy as a designed system remains strong. When asked to choose between this mindset and market naturalism—the idea that the economy is a natural force beyond our collective control—the majority of research participants have consistently, across all surveys fielded from August 2020 to December 2022, chosen the economic design mindset (see Figure 3). The level of endorsement in our final survey of 2022, in September 2022, is comparable to the highest level of endorsement previously recorded (September 2020).



While the continuing strength of systemic thinking about the economy is clear, the relative strength of this mindset fluctuates more than other systemic mindsets we are tracking. We see more movement between surveys in Figure 3 than for Figures 1 and 2, for example. Whereas the trend lines for Figures 1 and 2 are clear and consistent, in Figure 3 we see the relative support for the economic design mindset go up and down and back up multiple times over the course of the two-and-a-half-year period over which we have been fielding surveys.

It is hard to know for sure why we see this greater fluctuation. Economic issues have real and perceived importance for all members of the public, and the last several years have seen substantial fluctuations in the economy itself—in employment, wages, and prices, as well as repeated government interventions in the economy. We suspect that this rapidly changing economic news has created an environment in which economic mindsets are less well-anchored and entrenched than mindsets in other areas. The movement in November 2020 around the presidential election suggests that uncertainty about the next administration affected the salience of these ways of thinking.

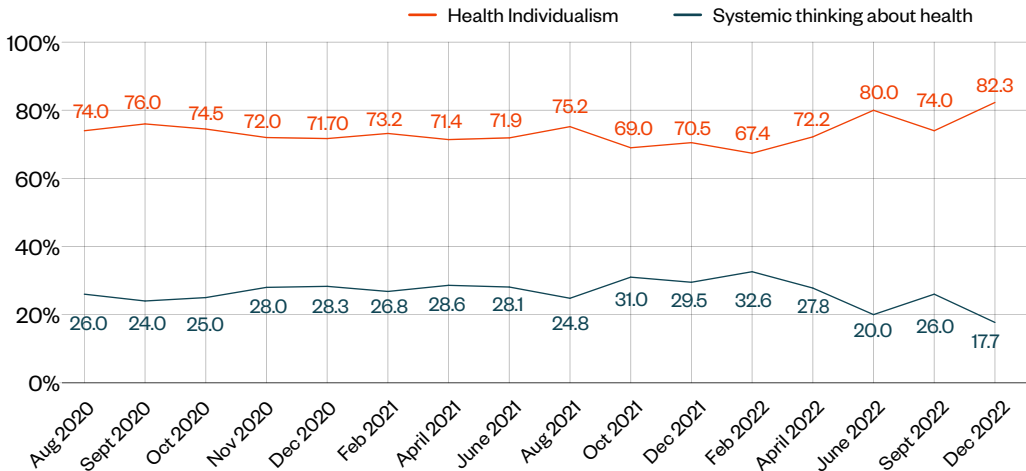
The fluctuation in these mindsets suggests that the economy is an area in which progressives can have substantial effects on mindsets through communications, policy changes, and other levers. Because these mindsets appear to be currently more susceptible to shifts in salience than mindsets in other areas, active efforts to strengthen and deepen the economic design mindset are, we think, especially likely to bear fruit.

- **Systemic thinking about health remains weak—and might even be getting weaker.** In our summer 2022 report, we noted that the pandemic had not loosened the grip of health individualism on public thinking. (In other words, people consistently attribute health outcomes to people's individual choices.) Throughout 2020–2021, the rise in systemic thinking we saw in other areas did not extend to health.

Unfortunately, research from 2022 doesn't change this picture. In our focus groups, we have consistently found health individualism to be overwhelmingly dominant, with relatively little talk about how social systems or environments shape people's health. Survey data from 2022 confirm this impression (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

### Individualistic Thinking about Health vs. Systemic Thinking about Health (whole sample)



When we look at survey data from the past two and a half years, we see that endorsement of systemic thinking about health peaked in the winter of 2021–22. Even at this point, systemic thinking was quite recessive, but it looked like briefly, perhaps, systemic thinking was strengthening. Unfortunately, this hasn't persisted, and systemic thinking about health has dropped back down to earlier levels. In fact, survey data from December 2022 show that only about 18 percent of respondents endorsed a systemic view of health over an individualistic one—the lowest number we've seen since we started the tracking survey in August 2020.

This indicates that, despite an unprecedented health crisis that illustrated and amplified existing health disparities, Americans continue to understand health as an individual issue. This finding also suggests that advocates, policy professionals, and community activists fighting for systems that promote health equity might have better luck leading with other issues, including economic justice and perhaps racial justice. Opening conversations with a focus on health is, unfortunately, still likely to cue individualism.



## FINDING #2

# Gender has become tightly linked with transgender issues and transphobia in public consciousness.

In focus groups, open-ended discussions of gender came to focus overwhelmingly on transgender identity. When asked what comes to mind when they think about gender, participants across demographic groups quickly raised debates over transgender rights. Some participants made overtly transphobic comments, repeating widely publicized right-wing worries—for example, about the unfairness of transgender athletes competing with other (i.e., cisgender) athletes and how allowing transgender children into bathrooms or locker rooms based on their gender identity opens the door for sexual violence. Other participants argued for transgender rights and countered these transphobic claims. But across all of these comments and discussions, a clear finding emerged: participants strongly associated “gender” with transgender issues.

This was especially striking because the sessions were conducted in July–August 2022, about a month after the *Dobbs v. Jackson* Supreme Court decision, which overturned *Roe v. Wade*. We anticipated that, in the wake of *Dobbs*, open-ended questions about gender would have provoked discussion of reproductive rights and other familiar women’s rights issues. We expected that these sessions might include discussion of transgender issues, but were surprised at how transgender issues *dominated* these conversations. And while reproductive rights and familiar women’s rights issues such as equal pay were raised, they were clearly secondary both in sequence (when they were introduced into discussion) and emphasis (how much participants focused on them).

The focus on transgender issues signals the success of the anti-trans movement in shaping the terms of our current debate and moving transphobia to the center of our discourse. Yet the rapid uptake of these ideas is likely due, in significant part, to the anti-trans movement’s ability to leverage established cultural mindsets about sex and gender. In other words, while the shape of the current discourse is new, it is undergirded by a set of familiar cultural mindsets.

When we dig below the surface, we find that much of the conversation about transgender identity is grounded in gender essentialism. Gender essentialism is a familiar idea and one that many feminists and other scholars have extensively explored. Here, we lay out how gender essentialism appears as a set of widely shared, tacit assumptions that together form a cultural mindset of gender that many people use to think about gender across social domains. In our data, gender essentialism appeared as the following set of interrelated assumptions:

- *Gender = sex*. Participants equated gender with biological sex.
- *Sex = binary*. Participants assumed that biological sex is binary and, in turn, treated gender as binary.
- *Sex determines character and behavior*. Participants assumed that men and women are fundamentally different—that sex-related physical differences lead to differences in what people are like (e.g., women are more caring) and how they behave (e.g., men are more violent).

Gender essentialism is, of course, behind patriarchy’s traditional justification of differential treatment of men and women. Traditionally, this was used to explicitly justify gender hierarchy (i.e., men are suited to be heads of households and women are suited to serve them) and continues to justify hierarchy under the guise of “different but equal” thinking (i.e., men aren’t better than women, but it just so happens that women’s “caring” nature leads them to caring professions that just so happen to pay less). Gender essentialism also grounds public and scientific rationalizations of sexual violence (e.g., men are more likely to commit violence because they are “naturally” more aggressive and less emotional).

Transgender identity directly challenges the assumption that *gender = sex*. Among participants who drew upon gender essentialism, responses ranged from outright rejection to discomfort. Some participants treated transgender identity as a nefarious ideological attempt to undermine important social roles (this perspective was embedded in Kari Lake’s appeal to the threat of “transgenderism”). Others echoed this more softly, saying they were “confused” by the need to specify your pronouns (this response may have been sincere for some, while others may have used this language because they didn’t want to sound bigoted). Both strident and more delicate responses share the assumption that gender is a biological fact, treating denial of that fact as dangerous or nonsensical.

We also saw that conversations about transgender rights were shaped by *zero-sum* thinking. Many participants suggested that recognizing transgender identity or the rights of transgender people would come at the expense of others (i.e., cisgender people, though this term was not generally used). It’s not obvious why this would be the case. Why would recognition of transgender identity and rights be experienced as coming at the expense of cisgender people?

This zero-sum thinking is, arguably, a form of social identity protection. Social science has found again and again that **people prioritize social identity over other interests**. But in order for this explanation to hold, we need to understand *why* transgender issues are modeled as a zero-sum contest over status. This comes back to gender essentialism. Gender essentialism not only structures the basis of traditional gender identities but also is at the root of the social status accorded to people with these identities. Gender essentialism obviously accords men high social status. And while gender essentialism places women at the bottom of the gender hierarchy, at the same time, “essential” gender characteristics are a source of status and recognition within a patriarchal society—women are socially recognized for being caring mothers, for example. By disrupting gender essentialism, transgender identity undercuts these existing, gendered social statuses and sources of recognition.

It is important to note that while gender essentialism was dominant, there was another model of gender that appeared, at times, in participants’ talk. When drawing on this alternate mindset, participants tended

to assume a looser connection between sex and gender, seeing gender identity as something that can, at times, differ from gender assigned at birth. For many participants, this seemed like an opinion in search of a mindset—participants wanted to affirm transgender rights and identity, yet they lacked a coherent model of what gender is that comports with transgender identity. They insisted that transgender identity isn't wrong or confused, but often struggled to make sense of transgender identity and frequently fell back on essentialist assumptions. In other words, some participants' talk indicated an *openness* to a non-essentialist model of gender, but didn't include a coherent mindset to underpin this opinion. This suggests a potentially receptive audience for alternative, feminist theories and understandings of gender.

### FINDING #3

## Gender essentialism is often disavowed when talking about domestic responsibilities but affirmed when talking about work outside the home.

When asked to talk about gender roles, participants almost universally insisted that labor in the home should be divided equally and suggested that it is, in fact, relatively evenly divided. Given the reality of unequal domestic division of labor, we understand this proclamation of egalitarianism in the home as an indication of a social norm. While many of our participants undoubtedly have unequal divisions of labor by gender in their own homes, we believe they felt like they needed to *express* affirmation of gender egalitarianism in the home.

If this interpretation is correct, the men in our sample didn't feel like they could or should, as they might have in the past, suggest that women are responsible for domestic labor. And the women in our sample wanted to affirm the principle of egalitarianism even if they didn't experience it. Participants made a point to *not* distinguish between men's and women's roles in the home. In other words, they did not explicitly affirm gender essentialism when talking about domestic labor. This does not mean, of course, that people don't *implicitly* draw on gender essentialism when thinking about domestic labor. Given the strength of gender essentialism and continuing inequality in domestic labor, there's no doubt that this mindset continues to shape thinking and behavior in the home. It is nonetheless noteworthy that people don't feel like they can explicitly affirm this view when it comes to domestic labor.

By contrast, when discussing work *outside* the home, participants widely, frequently, freely, and explicitly applied gender essentialism, explaining that men and women are suited for different types of work. When discussing work outside the home, many participants—men and women—were comfortable explicitly espousing essentialism, suggesting, for example, that women naturally gravitate toward caring professions because they are more caring. Here, we see no sign of a social norm against affirming gender essentialism—people felt comfortable expressly endorsing this way of thinking.

In short, while there seems to be social norm that constrains the expression of essentialist ideas in relation to domestic labor, such norms do not seem to extend to labor outside of the home, where gender essentialism continues to be explicitly expressed in talk about work. While more egalitarian discourse in relation to domestic labor may seem a promising development, the social norm bias active in these sessions and the clear expression of essentialism around work outside of the home should temper optimism to some degree.

#### FINDING #4

## “System is rigged” thinking is being applied across a wider range of social and political issues.

As noted in the aforementioned June 2022 report, the “system is rigged” mindset has become increasingly dominant in recent years as a way to reason about political and economic problems. Our research shows that the upheavals of the past three years have further strengthened this mindset.

The core (and generally correct) assumption of the mindset is that “the system” is being rigged by those in power at the expense of “ordinary” people—in short, that the few are manipulating how society works to benefit themselves and hurt the many.

Despite the dominance of this mindset, people are often fuzzy on the details, leaving unclear what “the system” is, how it works, who is rigging it, how and why they’re doing it, and who exactly is being harmed. This lack of specificity allows the mindset to be interpreted and applied in a range of ways—from xenophobic and racist applications to leftist critiques of corporate control of politics.

**Due to its salience and potential to be mobilized in very different ideological directions, this mindset is arguably *the* central terrain on which our politics will be contested in coming years.**

In recent research, we have found that this mindset is being applied to an increasing range of issues—namely, beyond issues that are typically understood as “economic” to include a broader range of cultural issues. In our research over the past decade, we have seen participants apply this mindset when thinking about issues that stand at the nexus of the economy and politics. For example, people might talk about how corporations rig “the system” so government helps them rather than ordinary people, or about how politicians are rigging the system to give “illegal immigrants” jobs and benefits at the expense of “law-abiding Americans.”

In recent political discourse, we’re seeing the “system is rigged” mindset applied to elections as well, from “Stop the Steal” claims on the right to criticisms of gerrymandering and voter restrictions on the left.

The mindset is being cued to make the point that elections are being manipulated so that (alternately) Republicans or Democrats can help their constituencies at the expense of the other side.

In our work, we're seeing the continuing expansion of "system is rigged" thinking and its application to unexpected issues that are traditionally thought of as cultural rather than economic. The most notable example of this was in focus groups about the *Dobbs* decision conducted in July–August 2022. When we asked participants to reflect on the decision, we were struck by the extent to which they applied the "system is rigged" mindset. A common sentiment, heard from participants with views across the political and ideological spectrum, was that the decision was an attempt by those in power to divide ordinary people in ways that would allow them to benefit at the expense of the rest of us. Participants suggested that:

- People in power ("they") are able to manipulate Supreme Court decisions just as they manipulate other aspects of the "system."
- They manipulated the *Dobbs* decision to serve their own interests at the expense of ordinary people—interests that have nothing to do with abortion.

The fuzziness of the "system is rigged" mindset remains, as participants generally did not explain who, exactly, were the people in power pulling the strings behind the *Dobbs* decision nor did they explain *why* the powerful made this move or how it helped them. They knew that those in power were trying to divide the public to help themselves, even if they weren't sure how it helped the powerful—or even how, exactly, it hurt ordinary people.

There were occasions in which participants got a bit more specific or their comments suggested something about the *who* or *why*. At times, comments went in a more progressive direction, as participants suggested that the people pulling the strings are the super-rich and corporations, who are looking to fuel the culture wars so people are divided and distracted and their ability to profit goes unchecked. At other times, comments were more consistent with right-wing ideology that suggested participants might have had QAnon-related or other anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about global elites in mind, though details were slim.

Most of the time, the *why* was simply unknown. Participants suggested that those in power have some sort of hidden agenda that goes beyond what the case is purportedly about (abortion). The "system is rigged" mindset has become so dominant that it seems that people now conclude that *any* major decision must be something elites are manipulating for their own benefit. People assume that *Dobbs* of course isn't an impartial legal decision because "they" rig *all* the key decisions. And it must *somehow* benefit them, because why else would the decision have been made?

We suspect that, in recent decades, the mindset gained strength across ideological and demographic groups because it helps people across groups make sense of increasing economic inequality and financial and status insecurity. In other words, people experienced precarity in their own position, knew that there were people with immense power and wealth who were thriving, and drew on the mindset to make sense of that gap. Now, the mindset is sufficiently dominant that it's taken for granted across *all* collective decision-making, such that people assume decisions must be designed to help elites at their expense—even when they can't figure out who, exactly, is benefitting or how.

## FINDING #5

# Supreme Court justices are assumed to be political actors.

Contrary to the traditional discourse around the Supreme Court as a neutral body, the public sees Supreme Court justices in the same light as elected officials—as untrustworthy politicians.

In focus group conversations, participants took for granted that the court's actions could be explained by the same motives as elected officials'—moving an agenda for their personal financial or political gain. They sometimes thought that the court's strings were being pulled by elected officials and sometimes treated them more like politicians with their own agendas, but in either case, they modeled justices as political actors rather than “neutral” legal ones.

Participants applied conventional critiques of government and politicians to the court, suggesting that they are corrupt and self-interested rather than committed to the public good. Equating Supreme Court justices to elected officials helps explain why “system is rigged” thinking is so readily applied to court decisions: if members of the court are politicians, then we assume that they, like other political elites, are interested and complicit in rigging the system.

Participants did *not* understand members of the court to be impartial and disinterested umpires calling “balls and strikes,” to use Justice Roberts' phrase. The current weakness of an impartial understanding of the court was evident in the *complete* absence of this idea in sessions. Participants did not *deny* the idea that the court is impartial—it simply never came up.

This pattern in our recent sessions aligns with [polling data](#) showing that confidence in the Supreme Court is at an all-time low. In a poll in June 2022, only 25 percent of respondents said they had a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the Supreme Court, compared to 50 percent twenty years ago.

At some level, a decrease in confidence in the court is unsurprising. Fights over Supreme Court nominations have become increasingly partisan, puncturing the idea that the court is above the fray. What is more surprising is the complete and total absence of a nonpolitical understanding of the court in focus groups. Participants simply took for granted that members of the court are political actors. The idea of the justices as impartial arbiters of the law was wholly missing from conversation.

## FINDING #6

# People increasingly see our Constitution and system of government as outdated.

In earlier periods of American history, basic institutions of national government have been challenged and contested through lively constitutional politics, including the Reconstruction Amendments and the reforms of the Progressive Era, which fundamentally changed how people were treated under the law, the relationship between state and federal governments, how representatives are elected and by whom, and how the federal government raises revenue. Although periods of debate around state constitutions have continued, the structure of our basic institutions at the national level has become uncontested and beyond the pale of politics.

Americans routinely complain about the *effects* of a dysfunctional and unrepresentative system, like gridlock and discordance between what politicians promise and what they achieve, yet we tend to attribute these problems to our leaders while our institutions remain out of view. As we discussed in our June 2022 report, this results from a *personalistic* mindset of government that equates government with individual leaders and a lack of a readily accessible alternative *institutionalist* mindset.

In recent decades, the absence of constitutional politics flowed not simply from the lack of *institutionalist* understanding but also a strong degree of faith in the Constitution—a belief in the wisdom of our Constitution and system of government and veneration of the Constitution as part of our civic religion. As Sanford Levinson and other scholars **have long argued**, this faith has not always existed but was cultivated intentionally during the interwar period, taking root among political and legal elites as well as among the general public.

Our recent focus group research suggests that this constitutional faith is fading. Our research participants recognized the Constitution as foundational to American society, but did not treat it as a sacred object of veneration. To the contrary, we detected—somewhat to our surprise—an alternative mindset in which the Constitution was understood as outdated.

This mindset is thin on details—there was only a hazy sense of what is in the Constitution and, in turn, what might be outdated about it. Yet there was an assumed mismatch between the time in which the Constitution was created and our current context. This was most apparent in participants' recognition that the Constitution was created at a time when women and Black people lacked basic rights and a sense that the Constitution reflects this racist and sexist social context in some way. While there was a general lack of a specific understanding of how the Constitution codifies undemocratic principles (e.g., malapportionment in the Senate), this mindset provides a framework for making sense of such details.

Alongside this openness to critical discussion about the Constitution and a recognition of its shortcomings, we found that participants *did* take the Constitution and system of government as *set*. In other words, participants took for granted that our system of government simply is what it is and

didn't seriously consider the possibility of changing the Constitution. There does *not* appear to be an understanding of the Constitution as changeable or contestable. Therefore, constitutional politics is not currently on the table and remains out of mind.

Yet the model of the Constitution as outdated opens space for people to consider and recognize shortcomings of our basic institutions and—in principle if not yet in practice—creates space for the idea that the Constitution should be updated.

We are currently conducting deep-dive research to understand the mindsets that people use to think about our political system, the Constitution, democracy, and current threats to democracy. In the coming months, we will have much more to share about public thinking on these issues.

#### FINDING #7

## There has been a steady rise, and then fall, in zero-sum thinking about society in general.

Zero-sum thinking thwarts support for progressive change. When thinking with this mindset, people assume that the amount of good things in society is set, so any more for one person or group means less for another. People assume that any change to the status quo involves winners and losers and that the people who gain are benefitting at the expense of others who lose out. This mindset frequently undercuts support for policies aimed at increasing equity, justice, and inclusion as it leads people to think that gains for others might result in losses for themselves.

The good news is that members of the American public can and frequently do draw on an alternative, *positive-sum* mindset. When thinking in this way, people see the possibility of changes to benefit everyone. This mindset opens people up to the idea that social or policy changes that benefit others won't necessarily hurt themselves.

We have been tracking the relative balance of these mindsets among members of the public. In each survey fielded, we have asked participants which of the following two statements comes closer to their opinion:

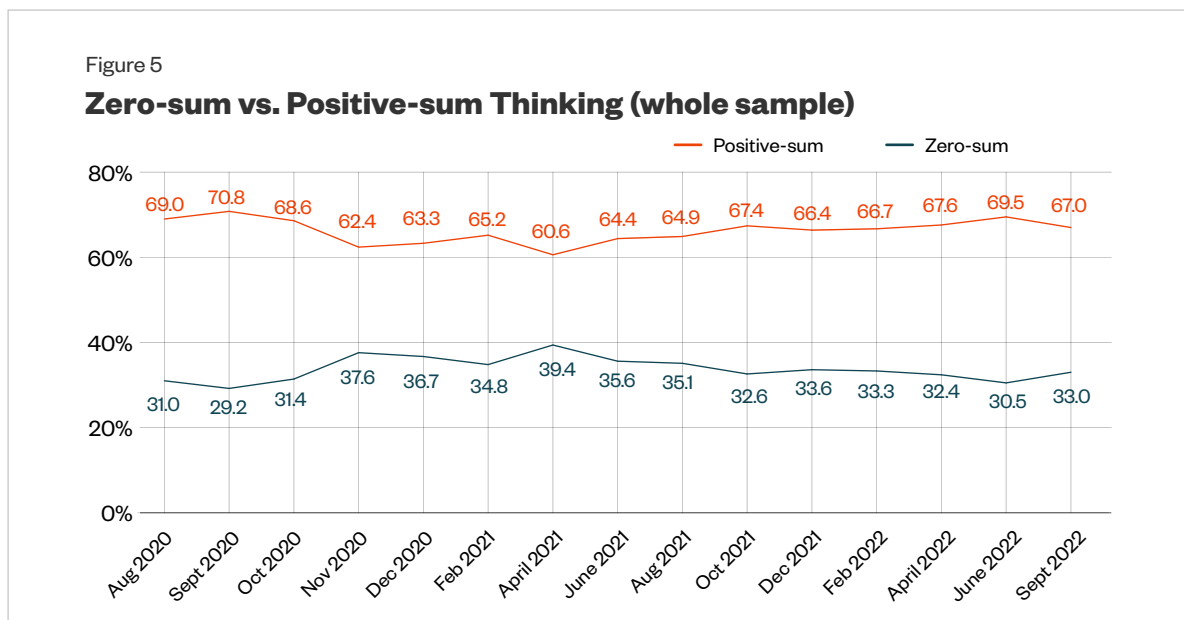
- When one group within society receives help, it necessarily takes away from or hurts other groups. (*Zero-sum thinking*)
- It is possible to provide help to one group within society without taking away resources from other groups. (*Positive-sum thinking*)

In every survey, over 60 percent of participants chose the *positive-sum* statement over the *zero-sum* statement (see Figure 5). Based on our qualitative research over the past 20 years, we believe this result likely understates the true strength of *zero-sum* thinking. We suspect that this is, in part, a byproduct of the



way this question activates a form of demand bias; it seems more socially acceptable, and perhaps more in line with people's own self-images, to choose the hopeful statement than the pessimistic one, so people choose the *positive-sum* statement even if, implicitly, they more frequently rely on *zero-sum* thinking.

What is clear is that the relative balance of these mindsets appears to have changed over time. There was a relatively steady rise in endorsement of zero-sum thinking (and a corresponding drop in endorsement of positive-sum thinking) from August 2020 until April 2021, then a steady fall of zero-sum thinking until June 2022. (The most recent survey shows a small uptick in zero-sum endorsement, though it is too soon to know if this is a measurement issue, a blip, or the start of a new trend.)



One possible explanation for this rise and fall in zero-sum thinking involves the pressures of the pandemic and government response: As the pandemic persisted through the fall of 2020 and into 2021, people's livelihoods and lives were continually at risk. After an initial bipartisan package to provide emergency assistance (the CARES Act), further assistance was contested and came in smaller increments (namely, the COVID-19 relief package passed in December 2020). The precariousness of the collective response left people feeling like they were in competition for limited jobs and resources. Then, in March 2021, Congress passed, and the president signed, the American Rescue Plan, which provided direct help to individuals and families in the form of cash payments (including the expanded child tax credit) and rental and homeowner assistance and help for small businesses, continuing and substantially expanding the assistance provided by previous measures. As people received this direct assistance and saw similar benefits go to others, they recognized that government policies *can* support everyone—that resources don't have to be fought over. The slight uptick we're seeing in zero-sum thinking more recently may be a response to the decline in government assistance which, coupled with inflation, may be heightening a sense of insecurity and precarity.

If correct, this interpretation suggests a clear lesson: bold action and government spending can reinforce and strengthen the mindsets that progressives need to cultivate. By demonstrating that spending and bold action is not only possible but has positive effects on people's lives, progressives can undercut the idea that the pie is limited and can make it less likely that people will feel pitted against one another. The link between policy and mindsets also suggests the promise of strategies that work in the other direction—increasing the availability and dominance of a positive-sum mindset can make it easier to enact public policies premised on the assumption of abundance and common benefits.

Moving forward, we will look to further explore the connection between this mindset and current events in order to explain the link between zero-sum thinking and our changing context.

# Appendix A: Methods

We are using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to understand whether and how cultural mindsets are shifting and to explore how mindsets are being used to make sense of salient issues.

## Peer Discourse Sessions

This report includes findings from two rounds of peer discourse sessions (a form of focus group). We conducted nine sessions in March 2022 and another nine sessions in August 2022. These sessions consisted of two main parts. The first part of each session included standard questions that we have been asking throughout the Culture Change Project to explore mindsets on major issues in American society—health, the economy, the government, and race and racism. The second part of these sessions was used to explore issues salient in the news and the underlying mindsets that people were using to think about them. In March 2022, this part of the sessions was devoted to the topics of inflation and crime. In August 2022, this part of the sessions was devoted to the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision, the Constitution, gender, and the relationships between these topics.

We held these sessions virtually, using Zoom, with six participants per session, each of whom gave their consent to be recorded. 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. In March 2022, we conducted three sessions with participants who identified as Republican or leaned Republican; three sessions with participants who identified as Democratic or leaned Democratic; and three sessions with a mix of Democrats, Republicans, and independents. These sessions were otherwise demographically mixed. In August 2022, all sessions were demographically mixed, including by partisan identity.

## 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. The survey was fielded monthly from August 2020 through December 2020 and bimonthly from February 2021 through June 2022, and then again in September 2022. Beginning in December 2022, in order to increase the number of questions we can ask, we split the survey into three discrete surveys, each of which will be fielded three times per year. We are happy to provide more information about the fielding schedule upon request.

This report covers survey results through the end of 2022, reporting on an additional year of data compared to our last research report, which covered survey results through the end of 2021. This extra year of research covers five new surveys conducted in February 2022, April 2022, June 2022, September 2022, and December 2022. (The December survey did not include all survey questions so the most recent measurement for some survey items is September 2022.)

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 project and this report, survey results are always interpreted in combination with qualitative analyses, both from this project and from past research. Qualitative research that FrameWorks and others conducted before the project began, as well as external polling that extends beyond the time frame of the survey, provide critical context for interpreting results from the tracking survey.

## Survey Questions

The graphs in this report are based on forced-choice survey questions. Each of these questions asks people to choose which of two statements they agree with more, with each statement representing a mindset. The competing statements represented in each graph are listed below, with the mindsets the statements represent indicated in parentheses:

### **Figure 1: Individualistic vs. systemic thinking**

- 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)

### **Figure 2: Interpersonal vs. structural thinking about racism**

- 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)

**Figure 3: Market naturalism vs. economic design**

- 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)

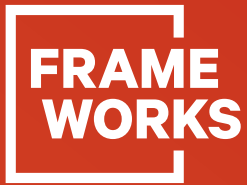
**Figure 4: Health individualism vs. systemic thinking**

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

**Figure 5: Zero-sum vs. positive-sum thinking**

- When one group within society receives help, it necessarily takes away from or hurts other groups. (Zero-sum thinking)
- It is possible to provide help to one group within society without taking away resources from other groups. (Positive-sum thinking)

Learn more at [www.frameworksinstitute.org/culturechange](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/culturechange)



# Culture Change Project Findings and Methods: Spring 2023

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