

Three Things to Know about How Americans are Thinking about Gender

What's going on:

Over the past year, gender-based issues have been thrown into the middle of our public discourse. The Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision created an opening for anti-abortion governors and legislatures across the country to severely limit access to abortion, despite the fact that a majority of Americans support abortion rights. Meanwhile, we've seen a rise in attacks on trans people and transgender rights as politicians have worked to ban everything from gender-affirming care for young people to drag queen story hours in libraries. These debates seem to be just warming up and will continue to shape our political discourse for the foreseeable future.

What our research is showing:

Making progress on these issues requires a better understanding of the cultural mindsets—the deeply rooted, broadly shared assumptions that inform how we see the world—that Americans use to think about gender. With an understanding not just of what, but *how* people think about gender, we can better understand how to communicate about it in ways that build support for change.

Although cultural mindsets are highly durable, history shows that they become destabilized in moments of social upheaval—like what we've been experiencing of late. This can lead to fairly rapid changes in thinking.

In the second half of 2022, we investigated Americans' cultural mindsets about gender in a series of focus groups as part of our Culture Change Project. This research revealed three big takeaways about how people are thinking about gender in our volatile and highly charged political environment.



#1: The term “gender” has become tightly linked with transgender issues and transphobia.

In focus groups, open-ended discussions of gender came to focus quickly and overwhelmingly on transgender identity and transgender issues. Although some participants expressed transphobic views while others argued for transgender rights, conversations about gender tended to revolve around transgender identity and issues regardless of ideology.

The mainstream and right-wing discourse about trans people has created space for a moral panic that positions trans people as a threat to our nation's children and values. This manufactured panic is rooted in longstanding, deeply held cultural mindsets about gender.

The first of these mindsets is *Gender Essentialism*—a set of interrelated assumptions about the relationship between gender, sex, and behavior that position biological sex as the primary (or only) determinant of gender:

- Gender equals biological sex.
- Sex is binary.
- Sex determines your character and behavior.

Trans people and gender fluidity directly challenge these assumptions. Given the dominance of *Gender Essentialism* in American culture, even participants who expressed support for transgender rights voiced confusion about the need to specify pronouns and how to do so.

In addition to the presence of *Gender Essentialist* thinking, researchers also noted the general *absence* of a readily available alternative model of gender for many people—one that did not revolve around essentialist thinking. Although alternative models certainly exist—particularly within queer communities, activist networks, academic scholarship, and ethnic and cultural subgroups—these models remain inaccessible for many people. Some participants were supportive of trans rights but seemed to lack a model of gender that was consistent with their sentiments.

The second, overlapping mindset is *Zero-Sum* thinking—the assumption that if one group of people benefits, it comes at the expense of others. Many participants suggested that recognizing the rights of trans people would negatively affect others, i.e., cisgender people. People drew on this mindset when they spoke about sports, in particular, but there was also a more general concern that trans people are receiving special attention or privileges that come at the expense of other groups.

Rhetoric that plays on *Gender Essentialist* and *Zero-Sum* mindsets has put trans issues at the top of people's minds and, in many cases, has led to support for policies that limit the rights of trans people. Responding to these concerning trends requires us to understand how these mindsets are shaping our thinking and find ways to navigate them to create a more productive conversation.

#2: The *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision is viewed as divisive, but not just because it's about gender.

Discussions about the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision, which overturned *Roe v. Wade*, revealed a surprising interplay between cultural mindsets about gender and those that shape our thinking about political institutions. This interplay has important implications for communications about reproductive rights moving forward.

In particular, we found that *System-Is-Rigged* thinking, which is becoming pervasive across social issues in American life, was being applied to thinking about the *Dobbs* decision. After *Roe v. Wade* was decided in the 1970s, the anti-abortion movement created a moral panic around women leaving motherhood behind in favor of careers. Anti-choice activists accused women of using abortion to avoid the responsibilities of their natural gender roles at the expense of “fetal rights.” This argument set the terms of the debate for decades.

The *System-Is-Rigged* mindset is becoming more central to this debate. In focus group discussions, the conversation was less about when life begins and women's responsibilities as mothers, and more about whether the *Dobbs* decision was a tactic being used to divide and distract us. Drawing on this mindset, people assumed that some combination of wealthy elites and corrupt politicians—sometimes simply articulated as “they”—used the decision to deflect attention from their accumulation of wealth and power at the expense of the rest of us.

The application of the *System-Is-Rigged* mindset to make sense of the *Dobbs* decision doesn't entirely replace *Gender Essentialism* or discussions of bodily autonomy. It does, however, draw on the widely held assumption that the foundations of American society and democracy are cracking due to the breakdown of American institutions at the hands of powerful interests and deliberate efforts to distract us from it. The implications of this shift in perceptions are not yet clear, but the collapse in trust in the Supreme Court's impartiality and the success of the explicitly pro-reproductive rights candidate in the Wisconsin Supreme Court race in April 2023 suggest that the terms of the debate are shifting in important ways.

#3: People think about gender and “work” in different ways, depending on the context.

People often disavowed *Gender Essentialism* when talking about domestic responsibilities, but affirmed essentialist assumptions when talking about work outside the home. For example, when asked to talk about gender roles, research participants almost universally insisted that labor in the home should be equally divided and that it has, in fact, become so. Given the reality of unequal domestic division of labor, we understand this proclamation of egalitarianism in the home to be an indication of a social norm. In other words, social desirability may lead many people to feel like they need to express affirmation of gender egalitarianism in the home even if it conflicts with their own thoughts or the reality of how labor is currently divided within American homes.

By contrast, when discussing work outside the home, participants widely, frequently, and explicitly applied *Gender Essentialism*, explaining that men and women are suited for different types of work. For example, many people were comfortable expressing that women naturally gravitate toward caring professions because they are more caring. People also saw gender as a natural predictor not just of what people will do for a living, but what people will earn. While there seems to be a social norm that constrains the explicit expression of essentialist ideas about domestic labor, such norms do not seem to extend to labor outside of the home.

This tendency to think that men and women are naturally inclined to do different types of jobs is consistent with how people think about work in general—with a *Naturalistic* mindset. Research from the *Culture Change Project* has shown that, although people recognize that public policy shapes the economy as a whole, this thinking is generally not applied when people think more specifically about work and jobs. Instead, people have a *Naturalistic* mindset in which work and pay are determined by what is seen as natural forces outside of our control. This *Naturalistic* thinking goes hand in hand with *Gender Essentialism* to justify the status quo of exploitation and oppression: People have the jobs they have because that’s their natural place.

In the coming months, we will have more research on how people think about work through a forthcoming project on Reframing Work and Labor, which will allow us to identify framing strategies that help activate more systemic ways of thinking and talking about work that move us toward gender and economic justice.