Filling in the Blanks

Contesting What "the System is Rigged" Means

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FRAME WORKS

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Introduction

We live in a society rigged by the powerful few to serve their interests at our expense.

This idea—the core assumption of the *system is rigged* mindset—is widely shared across demographic groups and the ideological spectrum. In recent years, it has become increasingly dominant and pervasive in public thinking, used consistently and frequently to make sense of what's happening on almost every social issue we investigate at FrameWorks, from the economy to education, from elections to the Dobbs decision. And this isn't an accident—at its core, this idea is true. It's also the case that many uses of this mindset lead in toxic, divisive, and dangerous directions. Depending on how people fill in the blanks—*Who rigs the system? In what way? For and against whom? With what outcomes?*—the mindset can either support a powerful critique of an unjust and under-democratic society, or it can justify hate and exclusion.

Over the past two years, FrameWorks has conducted in-depth qualitative and quantitative research to deepen our understanding of this mindset and to explore how progressives can best engage it. As we explain below, we're convinced that progressives can't and shouldn't avoid the mindset but rather must engage in the contest over its meaning.

In the first section, we describe what the mindset is, how it works, the opportunities and dangers it poses, and why it can't be avoided. In the second section, we share a set of findings about how progressives can talk about rigged systems that leverage this mindset's strengths while inoculating against its dangers. In other words, we offer insights about how progressives can shape what it means to say that the *system is rigged* in our society. In the third and final section, we discuss what these findings tell us about how progressives should respond to our current populist moment and some key questions that remain in relation to *system is rigged* thinking.

The Mindset

The *System Is Rigged* Mindset and Populism

There has been a great deal of commentary about rising populism in the United States, alongside many other societies.[1] This commentary often gets stuck in different understandings of populism as commentators talk past one another or, at times, slip and slide between different meanings or forms of populism in ways that lack analytical clarity. Attempts at clarity, like typologies of populism,[2] miss its dynamic and shifting character, its genuinely slippery nature.

Our research offers a way into understanding the impulse driving populism in the United States without getting into debates about what populism is and isn't. Key features of populism that analysts and commentators typically highlight—the opposition of "the people" and morally bankrupt "elites" and the ideological flexibility of populism—can be understood by exploring the *system is rigged* mindset. This mindset animates and structures populist responses to the status quo.

This mindset helps us to see what's shared by populist movements across the political spectrum. Rather than getting bogged down in debates about the concept of populism, a mindset analysis helps us understand the thinking that underlies discourse and movements often described as populist. Understanding the structure of the mindset and the different ways it gets filled in also clarifies why it is malleable and susceptible to being mobilized in vastly different ways. This helps us understand the dangers it poses for progressives, but also the opportunities it opens up. And, as we suggest below, this analysis suggests why progressives can't ignore this mindset and shouldn't try to avoid it.

WHAT ARE CULTURAL MINDSETS, AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

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

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

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

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

HOW DOES CULTURAL MINDSETS RESEARCH DIFFER FROM PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH?

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

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

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE *SYSTEM IS RIGGED* MINDSET: RESEARCH METHODS

FrameWorks' understanding of the *system is rigged* mindset has grown out of research on a range of issues over the past decade. We first identified this mindset in cultural mindsets interviews conducted and analyzed in 2015 as part of our research on racial and economic integration (or "socioeconomic mixing").[3] This report focuses on findings from the Culture Change Project that reveal the current role of this mindset in US culture and the ways it is applied across groups and issues. This research used three methods to understand the mindset:

- **Cultural mindsets interviews.** FrameWorks researchers conducted two sets of cultural mindsets interviews within the Culture Change Project. The first set was exploratory interviews in August 2020 to understand how mindsets were being applied in the first year of the pandemic to US society generally and to think about health, the economy, race and racism, and government.[4] The second set was conducted in January–February 2023 to identify the mindsets people use to think about democracy, the US political system, and the Constitution.[5] Both sets of interviews were demographically mixed, including variation by age, gender, political party, income, education, residential location, and race (with an oversample

of people of color). All interviews were conducted by Zoom. Analysis involved identifying patterns in what people said (and didn't say), looking beneath these patterns to identify the underlying assumptions that explain them. Both sets of interviews yielded findings about how people were using the *system is rigged* mindset.

■ **Focus groups.** Researchers have conducted focus groups 2–3 times per year within the Culture Change Project, beginning with 13 focus groups in May–June 2020, with the most recent set conducted in July 2024. These sessions vary in format but are used to understand how people are using cultural mindsets to make sense of the world at the moment. Conversations often combine exploration of broad issues (e.g., how people think about the economy, health, or race and racism) with deep dives into salient issues of the moment (e.g., inflation, the labor market, crime rates).

Sampling for focus groups varies slightly by set (e.g., we sometimes split sessions by political party and in a recent set oversampled immigrants), though we always ensure variation across demographics, as with cultural mindsets interviews, and oversample people of color. All sessions have been conducted by Zoom.

Researchers use mindset analysis to understand how mindsets are being used in conversations and, in focus groups, explore how mindsets are negotiated through group conversations. *System is rigged* thinking and talk has been a strong and consistent feature of these focus group conversations across time and across issues and groups.

■ **Culture tracking survey.** Since August 2020, FrameWorks has conducted a regular, nationally representative online tracking survey to quantitatively measure and track cultural mindsets— both foundational mindsets (e.g., individualism) and mindsets on specific issues (economy, health, race and racism, government). The survey included a couple of items on the *system is rigged* mindset from the beginning. As qualitative research revealed the dominance of this mindset, researchers built out a composite scale to better measure the mindset, which we began fielding in March 2023. Survey results are interpreted in combination with qualitative analyses. For more information on the tracking survey, see The State of American Culture: 2023–2024, Research Evidence and Methods.

The Structure of the Mindset

The mindset is grounded in a core assumption: There are a powerful few (elites) who use their power to rig "the system" to benefit themselves at the expense of "regular people." Each of these slots—Who are the "powerful few"? What is "the system"? Who are the "regular people" who get a raw deal?—can be filled in different ways. And different ways of filling in the mindset lead people's thinking in dramatically different directions.

Illustrated graphically, the structure of the mindset looks like this:
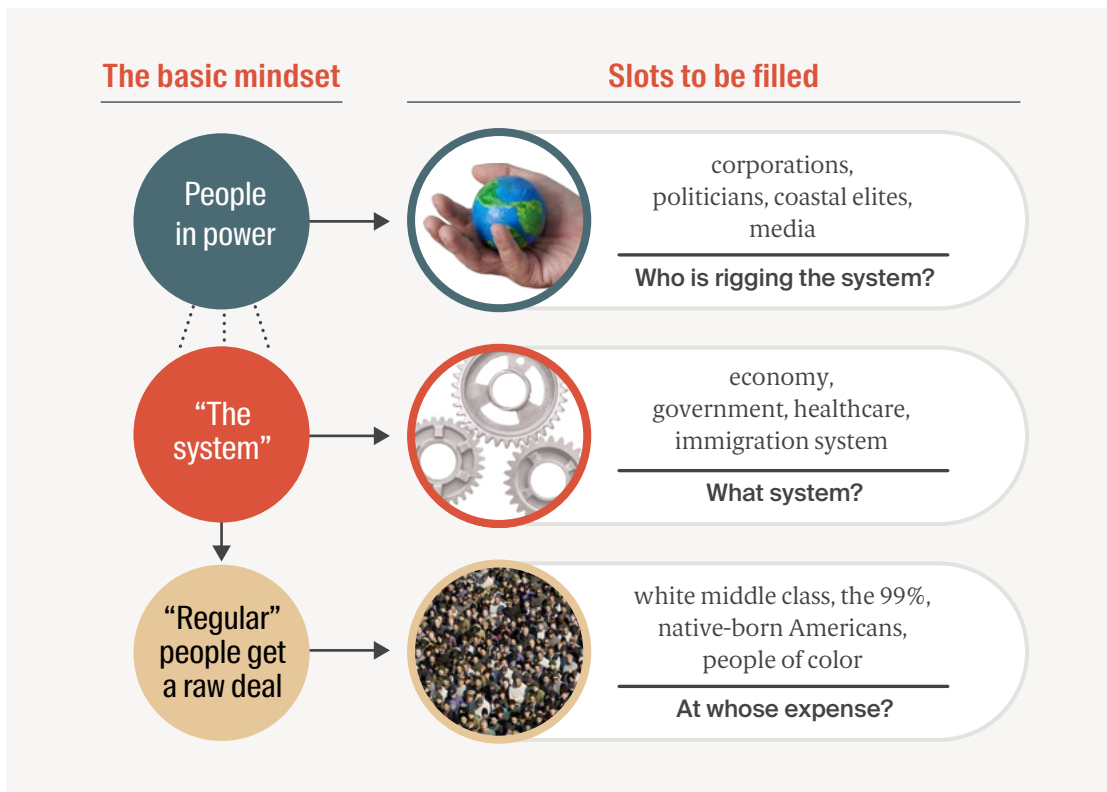
The powerful few are sometimes envisioned as corporations or wealthy people, while at other times this could be politicians, media or cultural elites (e.g., "Hollywood"), or social elites (e.g., professors). The "system" can be everything from the economy to government or education to health care. And people alternately think of the "regular people" against whom the *system is rigged* as working people, the white middle class, native-born Americans, or Black people, among other options.

> *They're rigging our government, starting from the smallest—say, mayors—up to the president. The whole system, just from bottom to top, is rigged, and they're just pushing their narrative on us, and as soon as people get together and see what they're trying to do... [...] The left, right, they call each other names. [...] As soon as people start opening their eyes and getting together and seeing what's going on, it's just shut down.*
>
> **Latina, woman, leans Republican, age 33**

> *The system right now is entirely built to keep those tax-dodging billionaires [as] billionaires, and the rest of us can get two jobs and die in the gutter.*
> **White, man, Democrat, age 44**

> *Everybody that has money is rigging the system. Everybody with money. Politicians, businessmen, real estate moguls, even criminals—everybody's rigging the system. They buy the politicians that they need to buy in New York. We have plenty of politicians that are being bought by people with money.*
> **Asian American, man, Democrat, age 61**

It's important to highlight what is excluded from this basic structure. The mindset does not provide ways of understanding *how* the system is rigged—what those in power do to rig this system, how this affects the way the system works, and how this leads to disadvantage for regular people. The mindset is, thus, a black box—it is grounded in the assumption *that* the system is rigged, but how the rigging happens is not part of the mindset.

This black-boxing of mechanism is a big part of what makes the mindset so malleable. Because it's not clear how the system works or is influenced, the mindset itself does not constrain how the blanks can be filled in. Instead, the plausibility of different answers about who is rigging the system against whom is only constrained by people's perceptions of these groups and their experiences in the world.

Increasing Dominance Across Issues and Groups

In the past few years, this mindset has become increasingly dominant in people's thinking. In past research, participants largely used this mindset to think about economic inequality and the relationship between the economic and political systems. We are now seeing participants draw on it to make sense of virtually every social issue—everything including education, health care, immigration, the criminal legal system, and even the *Dobbs* decision.

This mindset is widely endorsed across demographic and ideological groups but is especially strongly endorsed by younger people, Black people, Republicans, and people with less education. Yet even among the groups that least strongly rely on the mindset, a majority agree that "the *system is rigged* in America."

Table 1: Survey responses to the question, "Do you think the *system is rigged* in America?" by group[6]

Gender	Men	Women
Yes, it's rigged	65%	74%
No, it's not rigged	35%	26%

Race/ethnicity	Asian American/ Pacific Islander	African American/Black	Latino/Hispanic	Non-Latino white
Yes, it's rigged	72%	75%	71%	65%
No, it's not rigged	28%	25%	29%	35%

Political party	Democrat/Leans Democratic	Republican/Leans Republican
Yes, it's rigged	65%	72%
No, it's not rigged	35%	28%

Age	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Yes, it's rigged	81%	69%	73%	58%
No, it's not rigged	19%	31%	27%	42%

Income	$0– $24,999	$25,000– $49,999	$50,000– $99,000	$100,000– $149,999	$150,000+
Yes, it's rigged	78%	69%	67%	69%	61%
No, it's not rigged	22%	31%	33%	31%	39%

Our research can't directly answer the question about why the mindset has become so dominant. What our research does tell us is that people across groups have a shared experience of living in a world in which social, political, and economic systems feel unresponsive to their needs. People reason that society must be responding to *someone else's* needs, as it isn't responding to their own. This shared experience is grounded in reality—the economic and political systems *are* increasingly unresponsive to people's needs. The economic system gives large corporations more and more power over people's lives and the political system fails to channel popular will and interests.

The mindset's dominance may be explained, in part, by its ability to make sense of this experience, though the ways in which it is applied and its power in sensemaking are shaped by the stories we tell each other and that are repeated in our politics, people's positionality and the way this shapes their perspectives, and other ways that mindsets interact with experience.[7]

Dangers and Openings

This mindset simultaneously creates opportunities for progressives *and* presents serious dangers.

On the positive side, this mindset enables people to see how social systems and structures shape outcomes for individuals and groups. The mindset moves people beyond the individualistic assumption, which so commonly dominates thinking, that how people do in life is wholly the result of their own choices, effort, and will. *System is rigged* thinking enables people to recognize the way that systems advantage some and disadvantage others and thus the role systems play in shaping outcomes and explaining disparities between groups.

The mindset also brings power into view more clearly than other dominant mindsets we have identified in American culture. When thinking with this mindset, people recognize that the system is not only designed, but it is designed by specific people with specific interests. The mindset allows people to see not only that some people are advantaged and some disadvantaged by our systems, but that this flows from the power and control that some people have and exert over how the system works. The below quote illustrates how the mindset supports thinking about how wealth and race intersect in existing systems of power:

> *I am an African American woman, and I can see just watching documentaries and doing a lot of research—this system was not designed for us to have anything. And it's frustrating because, as much education or work or skills as I build, it seems like nothing is going to work. And that's for sure because I don't come from money. So how am I ever going to build a better life for me and my kids?*
> **Black, woman, Democrat, age 30**

By providing ways of thinking about systems and power, the mindset opens space to consider how systems would need to be redesigned and power would need to be redistributed for society to be just. In other words, the mindset opens up the possibility to create support for foundational social change. This doesn't automatically lead to support for progressive change, but it's a critical precondition for this support—and one that's often elusive in our individualistic culture.

The *system is rigged* mindset also poses a set of dangers. To start, it fosters fatalism. The idea that the *system is rigged* can generate a sense that the problem is too big to solve. And because the system is designed to make it easier for those in power to get their way, change *through* the system feels impossible and leaves people feeling disempowered and demotivated. While the mindset leads to clear *criticism* of the status quo, it can also lead to the conclusion that little can be done to change this status quo. In short, if the problem is in a system and people understand systems as impossibly large, complex, opaque, and intractable, then they will be immediately inclined to see the problem as unsolvable.

> *The 99 percenters—you have to deal with your bills, your home, you have to deal with work. You barely have any discretionary funds left after dealing with all the necessities. You don't have the time or the resources to even try to figure out how to change the system. The 1%, they have that money to have lawyers on retainers. How can I change the system? How can I make it [so] that the banks will give more loans to people of color?*
> **Black, woman, Democrat, age 50**

This fatalism can also open the door to authoritarianism. The recognition that those in power are entrenching the status quo and thwarting change can lead people to believe that the only path to change is by giving a strong man the power to remake society. In exposing the importance of power, the mindset can—when coupled with fatalism—lead people to want to bestow power on those who promise change.[8]

In addition, the mindset is often used to scapegoat marginalized groups—a danger that accompanies the opposition of "us" ("the people") and "them" (elites and those they serve). In right-wing populism, the form this thinking takes is that liberal elites are rigging the system against good (white, middle class, rural) Americans in favor of immigrants, Black people, or other marginalized groups. The notion of elites rigging the system also opens the door for antisemitism, with the familiar antisemitic notion that rich Jews are manipulating a wide range of systems behind the curtain.

The quotes below from recent focus groups show how the immigration system can be understood as supposedly rigged to benefit undocumented immigrants over "deserving" Americans or immigrants:

> *We're spending a lot of our taxpayer dollars on [...] government aids and services for those people, and I think that some people might feel better because they're coming in here so freely, whereas other people had to wait 10 plus years and go through a process that everyone else had to go through to make it fair.*
> **Asian American, man, Republican, age 40**

> *[The immigration system is] very grossly unmanaged. We're having immigrants come over from other countries, and they are being housed and fed before our disabled vets are.*
> **White, woman, Republican, age 56**

Depending on how the mindset is applied, it can build support for structural changes needed to make society more just or to justify exclusion and hate.

The Ambition-Feasibility Paradox

The *system is rigged* mindset's ability to build support for structural change is complicated by the ambition-feasibility paradox: Solutions that are ambitious enough to unrig the system don't seem feasible to people, while solutions that are feasible don't seem ambitious enough to unrig the system.

This paradox was clearly evident in focus group conversations when participants were discussing *solutions* to a rigged system. These conversations followed an earlier discussion about a message that primed the *system is rigged* mindset.[9] We asked participants to consider big, ambitious solutions that would unrig the system, as well as more feasible solutions that would help. What we found is that when participants imagined solutions that they thought would genuinely unrig the system, they didn't believe these were feasible. Because the *system is rigged*, these changes wouldn't realistically be enacted *within* the system—those who control it wouldn't allow it. The solutions they thought *could* potentially happen might help around the edges, but participants didn't think these would be ambitious enough to actually unrig the system.

This paradox explains why the fatalism generated by the mindset is so difficult to overcome. Even when people get past knee-jerk fatalism and seriously consider what could be done to address system rigging, they go in a circle: The ambitious solutions that would fix the problem won't happen, and the solutions that could actually happen won't fix the problem, leading back to the judgment that nothing can be done.

Or, perhaps more troubling, they search for a solution that can, improbably, change the system from the outside—a strong leader or powerful technology capable of displacing the system entirely. When people struggle to imagine how we could get to a better future from *within* society as it exists, they turn to magical thinking: a power outside the system that could save us from it.

When asked to envision a 2050 scenario where things have gone as well as they could have, focus group participants imagined that Dwayne "the Rock" Johnson became president and charismatically overcame our divisions or that AI ruled the United States in place of political parties. The twin appeals to authoritarianism and techno-optimism stem from the ambition-feasibility paradox and people's difficulty seeing a way out of it.

Why We Can't Ignore the Mindset

If we activate this mindset by reinforcing the idea that the *system is rigged* in an attempt to lean into the openings it creates, we also open space for its dangers and may inadvertently cue fatalism or exclusionary thinking. Given the dangers of this mindset, why activate it? Why not, instead, focus on activating mindsets that are more straightforwardly productive in relation to progressive goals?

The answer is that *system is rigged* thinking has become so dominant that failing to engage with it means ceding it to those who would aim it in exclusionary directions and use it to fuel support for xenophobia, authoritarianism, and racism. People *will* draw on this mindset—our research clearly shows this. If progressives don't contest the meaning of this mindset by explaining how the *system is rigged* in ways that align with a progressive diagnosis and vision, this lets those

advancing oppression and injustice fill in the blanks. In the past, it was reasonable and realistic to hope that this mindset might be displaced by other, more consistently productive ones, such as *systemic thinking* (i.e., the assumption that systems and structures shape outcomes) and *expansive government* (i.e., the idea that government should have an expansive role in providing for needs). But the increase in the prevalence of *system is rigged* thinking across groups and issues has taken this option off the table. The question is no longer *whether* people will draw on the *system is rigged mindset*, but how they apply this mindset and the directions that it drives their thinking and actions.

The only viable option for progressives is to contest the meaning of the *system is rigged* mindset. This means figuring out effective ways of filling in the blanks that inoculate against xenophobic, racist, and antisemitic understandings of rigged systems and nihilistic or authoritarian reactions to them and that build an understanding of rigged systems that is inclusionary and advances justice. By providing a coherent, consistent, sticky story about how systems are rigged, we can—over time—ensure that this is the form the mindset takes.

This analysis leads to an important question, which has prompted and guided 18 months of mixed-methods research:

How can we talk about rigged systems in ways that cultivate collective efficacy and build support for systemic changes that advance justice while inoculating against exclusionary and authoritarian thinking?

How to Talk about Rigged Systems

Through focus groups and quantitative survey experiments and in consultation with the Culture Change Project Advisory Board, FrameWorks has engaged in iterative research to answer the above question and determine whether there are productive ways of talking about rigged systems and, if so, what they are.

Our research found that there *are* ways of talking about rigged systems that foster collective efficacy and support for just structural change while not only guarding against but actually decreasing exclusionary thinking and authoritarian attitudes.

We can understand these ways of talking about rigged systems as *framing choices. The system is rigged* is itself a frame—a way of packaging ideas and information—but within this broad frame there are many specific framing choices, including the values we invoke, the types of explanations we offer, and the ways we talk about who is responsible for problems (villains). Our research finds that these framing choices have profound impacts on how *system is rigged* messages are received.

RESEARCH PROCESS, METHODS, AND OUTCOMES

- **Research design and frame generation.** FrameWorks engaged the Culture Change Project Advisory Board to identify outcomes, brainstorm framing ideas, and make sense of results. The research was informed by Advisory Board members' reflections on the promises and perils of *system is rigged* framing as well as challenges and possibilities around usability of possible frames. The Advisory Board includes members who work across issues, including health equity, economic justice, democracy, and racial justice and who engage in policy advocacy and/or organizing.

- **Focus groups.** Researchers conducted nine sessions in December 2022 to deepen understanding of the *system is rigged* mindset and to explore the how members of the public respond to different ways of talking about rigged systems. To account for the widely varying ways in which *system is rigged* thinking is expressed ideologically, sessions were divided by partisan affiliation, with three sessions composed of Democrats and participants who lean Democratic; three sessions with Republicans and participants who lean Republican; and three sessions mixed across Democrats, Republicans, and independents. Sessions were mixed along other demographics, including age, gender, income, education, and residential location, and oversampled people of color. All sessions were conducted by Zoom.

  The sessions began with open-ended discussion of the state of the country to elicit top-of-mind thinking. Researchers then introduced a short statement priming the *system is rigged* mindset, which cued the idea that the *system is rigged* to benefit the few at the expense of the many, and facilitated a conversation about this idea, what people think about it, and how, if it's true, the *system is rigged* in America. This was followed by an activity about possible *villains*—corporations and politicians—and then a discussion about possible solutions that would unrig

the system, including larger- and smaller-scale solutions. The sessions concluded with a brief conversation about a message drafted to capture right-wing populist talk about rigged systems to understand how participants made sense of and responded to it. Analysis included cultural mindsets analysis to identify the ways which the mindset was applied and combined with other mindsets, as well as frame analysis to understand patterns in participants' responses to different ways of talking about rigged systems.

- **Survey experiments.** Researchers conducted four quantitative survey experiments to test different ways of talking about rigged systems—in October 2022, July 2023, September 2023, and May 2024. The surveys included demographic quotas to ensure representativeness, including quotas for race, gender, age, political party affiliation, education, and income (see Appendix A for detailed demographic information). In the fourth survey experiment (May 2024), which included messages focused on race and racism, we oversampled participants of color to enable us to stratify analysis by racial identity (i.e., to analyze how different racial groups responded to frames).

Each experiment included survey items to measure attitudes, policy support, and mindset endorsement. In each experiment, a null control group received no message and only answered these survey items. Treatment groups in each experiment read one of a set of framed messages and then answered the same set of survey items as the control group. Quantitative analysis compared the ways in which participants in the control groups and the treatment groups responded to survey items. Significant differences between these groups on an outcome were understood as frame effects—that is, we inferred that the frame led to a change in thinking on that outcome. Where sample size allowed, analysis explored effects by demographic, including by political party affiliation and, in the fourth experiment, by racial identity.

SURVEY OUTCOMES

In the survey experiments, we measured a range of outcomes to understand the effects of different ways of talking about rigged systems on how people think. Most outcomes were measured using sets of questions, or batteries, although for policies individual survey items were sometimes used. Survey items generally included statements accompanied by Likert-type scales (e.g., a seven-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree").

The surveys included five types of outcomes:

1. Collective efficacy (i.e., do participants believe change is possible?)

2. Policy support and systems change (support for progressive and conservative policies across issues, including the economy, racial justice, and political reform; support for systems change; support for unions)

3. Exclusionary/inclusionary attitudes (xenophobia, attitudes toward immigrants)

4. Authoritarian attitudes

5. Cultural mindset endorsement (how strongly do people endorse relevant mindsets?)

The table below lists the outcomes included in the experimental surveys.[10] For each outcome, we provide a sample survey item for illustration. Outcomes are grouped under the categories listed above. The full set of survey items is included in the Appendix C. Unless otherwise indicated, all items are on a seven-point Likert-type scale *(Strongly disagree, Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither disagree nor agree, Somewhat agree, Agree, Strongly agree).*

Type 1: Collective Efficacy

Outcome	Sample Items
Collective efficacy (systems change)	In your opinion, how realistic is it for our society to change for the better? *(7-point Likert scale: "Not at all realistic"; "Slightly realistic"; "Somewhat realistic"; "Moderately realistic"; "Very realistic"; "Extremely realistic"; "Totally realistic")*
Collective efficacy (fair outcomes)	How optimistic or pessimistic are you that we can have a society where all people are treated fairly? *(7-point Likert scale: "Very pessimistic"; "Pessimistic"; "Somewhat pessimistic'; "Neither pessimistic nor optimistic"; "Somewhat optimistic"; "Optimistic"; "Very optimistic")*

Type 2: Policy Support And Systems Change

Outcome	Sample Items
Progressive policy support	To what extent do you support or oppose the following policies? *(7-point Likert scale: "Strongly oppose"; "Oppose"; "Somewhat oppose"; "Neither oppose nor favor"; "Somewhat favor"; "Favor"; "Strongly favor")* ■ Break up big corporations that hold monopolies ■ Establish term limits for members of the US Supreme Court
Collective efficacy (fair outcomes)	How optimistic or pessimistic are you that we can have a society where all people are treated fairly? *(7-point Likert scale: "Very pessimistic"; "Pessimistic"; "Somewhat pessimistic'; "Neither pessimistic nor optimistic"; "Somewhat optimistic"; "Optimistic"; "Very optimistic")* ■ Reduce government regulations on businesses. ■ Cut the rate of total immigration to the U.S. in half
Support for societal change	Our society needs to be radically restructured.
Support for economic systems change	We need to change our economic system from the ground up.
Support for political systems change	We need to make major changes to our political system.
Support for unions (survey 3 only)	In general, do you support or oppose labor union strikes when they occur? *(7-point Likert scale: "Strongly oppose"; "Oppose"; "Somewhat oppose"; "Neither oppose nor support"; "Somewhat support"; "Support"; "Strongly support")*
Union impact (survey 3 only)	All working people benefit from labor unions.

Type 3: Exclusionary/Inclusionary Attitudes

Outcome	Sample Items
Attitudes toward immigrants	Xenophobia (surveys 1–2) - Immigrants are a burden on American taxpayers. Positive attitudes toward immigrants (survey 4) - Immigrants make our country a better place to live.
Antisemitism	Jewish people have too much power in the business world.

Type 4: Authoritarian Attitudes

Outcome	Sample Items
Authoritarian attitudes	Our country needs a powerful leader who can destroy the radical and immoral currents in society today.

Type 5: Mindset Endorsement

Unproductive Mindsets

Outcome	Sample Items
Pathologizing Black culture	Black inner-city communities would do better if they took responsibility for their lives rather than relying on welfare.
Market naturalism	Jewish people have too much power in the business world.
Limited government	Private individuals and organizations, such as businesses, generally produce better outcomes for society than the government does.
Personalism (about government)	What the government does is a direct reflection of the character of our leaders.

Productive Mindsets

Outcome	Sample Items
Economic design	The laws and policies we make determine how our economy works.
Expansive government	Government should play a large role in shaping how our economy works.
Institutionalism (about government)	Our government has problems because of the way our political system is set up.

Core Elements and Context-Specific Additions

The research has identified **three core elements** of effective *system is rigged* framing that must be included in all messages about rigged systems in order to channel thinking in productive directions:

1. An effective value—*Popular Self-Government, Solidarity, Freedom from Domination*, or *Fairness.*

2. An explanation of how the *system is rigged* that focuses more on how it's rigged and less on *who rigs it.*

3. Solutions that match the scale at which the problem is explained.

The research also found several **ways of talking about rigged systems that are important in specific contexts:**

1. When the situation calls for naming villains, messages should focus on groups of villains rather than individual villains.

2. When communicating with politically diverse audiences, explaining systemic racism as a rigged system is highly effective.

3. When talking about the economy, it's critical to explain the role of government decisions in rigging the economic system.

We begin by discussing the findings about the core elements of any *system is rigged* message and then proceed to the findings on additional ways of talking about rigged systems in specific contexts. For each finding, we describe the framing move, review the evidence behind it, and explain why it works.

The findings below are not plug-and-play messages, but they can be used—along with an understanding of context, target issue, and audience—to develop messages. These findings provide a critical foundation for progressive engagement with the *system is rigged* mindset across issues.

Core Elements of Effective *System is Rigged* Framing

The first two findings in this section explain the important work values do—and the slightly different work done by different values. Depending on the context, communicators can choose a different value, but including one of the values is important to orient people in productive directions. The third and fourth findings address the other core elements—effective ways of explaining how systems are rigged and can be unrigged.

Values that center collective power flip fatalism on its head.

Three values—*Popular Self-Government, Solidarity*, and *Freedom from Domination*—help people to envision the possibility of unrigging the system. In our second survey experiment, we found that messages that coupled these values with a critique of rigged systems avoided fatalism and actually *boosted* collective efficacy relative to the baseline of public opinion.

Here's the message we tested, framed with the value of *Popular Self-Government*.

> **We Must Reclaim Popular Power and Unrig the System**
>
> *As a society, we believe that the power lies with the people. We have the right to govern ourselves collectively, and nothing can happen without our consent. This means that what happens in society is up to us.*
>
> *We need to take back our collective decision-making power and change our rigged system. Right now, in America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Our economic system allows corporations to set the terms under which we live and work, and our system of government allows the powerful few to buy influence to protect their wealth and power. The system undermines our collective power by pitting us against each other, fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live.*
>
> *To unrig the system, we must reclaim our power to govern ourselves from those who are working to keep us down. To make collective self-government a reality, we must reduce the economic and political power of the few and take back the power to shape our own lives.*

The other value messages were similarly structured. They began by articulating the value. They then offered the same brief explanation of how our economic and political systems are rigged. The messages concluded by explaining that in order to unrig the system and realize the value, we need to "reduce the economic and political power of the few and take back the power to shape our own lives."

Here are the headlines and first paragraphs for the other two messages, which illustrate how the values of *Solidarity and Freedom from Domination* were used:

> **We Must Come Together Across our Differences to Unrig the System**
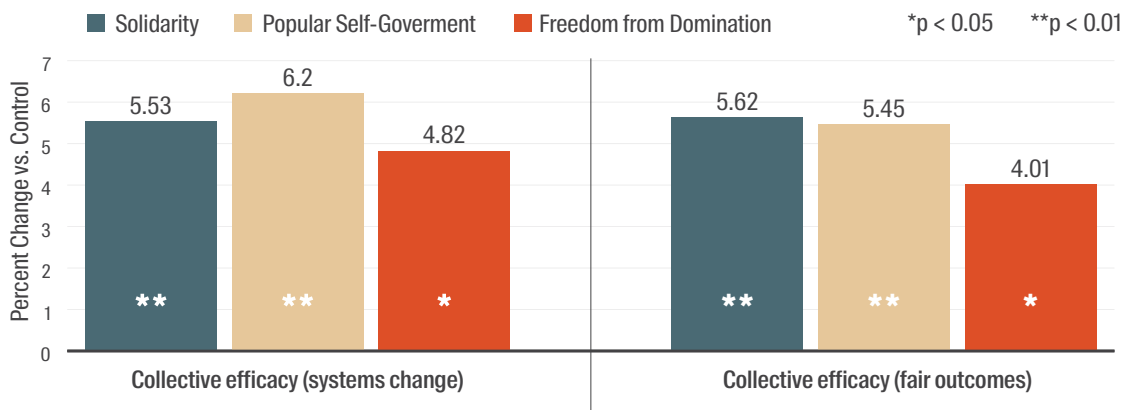> *As a society, we know that the only way to create the world we want is by coming together across our differences. When we run into challenges or people try to keep us down, it's by acting together that we can change things. This means recognizing what we have in common and also our different needs, and coming together to do right by all of us and each of us.*

> **To Be Free from Domination, We Must Unrig the System**
> *As a society, we believe that no one has a natural right to rule over others. We should all be free from domination by the powerful. This means that we shouldn't have to live according to the whim of powerful people and do what they tell us to do.*

All three values—*Popular Self-Government, Solidarity*, and *Freedom from Domination*—increased people's sense of collective efficacy, the sense that we, as a society, can solve our problems. We looked at two slightly different flavors of collective efficacy, both of which were positively moved by all three values. The first is a sense that systems in our society can be changed for the better (labeled "Collective Efficacy (Systems Change)" in figure 1). The second is a sense that society can be changed to be fairer (labeled "Collective Efficacy (Fair Outcomes)"). Relative to a control group that received *no* message, the groups that received these three values showed a significant increase in both senses of efficacy. This was true across the political spectrum, generating similar gains among Democrats and Republicans.

Figure 1: Effects of collective power values on collective efficacy (full sample)

Legend: Solidarity, Popular Self-Government, Freedom from Domination; $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$

Collective efficacy (systems change): Solidarity 5.53 (**), Popular Self-Government 6.2 (**), Freedom from Domination 4.82 (*)

Collective efficacy (fair outcomes): Solidarity 5.62 (**), Popular Self-Government 5.45 (**), Freedom from Domination 4.01 (*)

Y-axis: Percent Change vs. Control

As noted above, the *system is rigged* mindset tends to reinforce fatalism and lead people to believe there's little that can be done to solve problems and improve society. Yet these values have the opposite effect. Not only did they not reinforce fatalism in the experiment, but they actively increased efficacy. This suggests that leading with these values can turn an apparent weakness of *system is rigged* thinking into a strength.

This leads to a critical question—why do these values, when coupled with *system is rigged* talk, boost collective efficacy?

The answer seems to be that all three values focus on collective power. There are two key elements that run across these three values: collective action and power.

Collective action is central to the idea of solidarity—it means coming together to act in concert. The very notion of a *people* is, similarly, about the collective rather than the individual, and popular self-government is collective action—it is what we, the people, do together to govern our affairs. When we consider freedom from domination, the focus on collective action is more indirect, but it's real—we are collectively subject to the domination or illegitimate rule of the few, and throwing off this rule is a collective act.

The notion of power is also explicit across these three values. Solidarity involves the power of coming together; by working across our differences, we have power that none of us has on our own. The "power of the people" to rule ourselves is central to the notion of popular self-government; as the message we tested puts it, "what happens in society is up to us." Domination means being subject to the whims of the powerful, and freedom from domination involves taking back power from those who exercise it over us.

The two other values we tested—*Fairness and Common Good*—were less effective in increasing collective efficacy. As we discuss below (finding #2), *Fairness* has other positive effects. And the value of the *Common Good* slightly boosts efficacy (see figure 2 below)—likely because it foregrounds *collectivity*—but because it does not highlight power, it is less effective in fostering efficacy than *Solidarity, Popular Self-Government*, and *Freedom from Domination*. Taken together, this research suggests that values that center collective power are distinctive in their effectiveness in cultivating a sense of efficacy.

Values that center collective power bring into view the potential power of the collective to unrig the system. They increase efficacy, we believe, because they bring into view the possibility of taking collective action to resist those in power and help people envision how this might create a different world. By highlighting the power we have when we act together, these values—*Popular Self-Government, Solidarity*, and *Freedom from Domination*—overcome fatalism and foster the belief that we can unrig systems.

The value of *Fairness* helps people envision a different, more inclusive political system.

Coupling *system is rigged* talk with the value of *Fairness* helps people envision what an *unrigged* system would look like. It builds support for changing political systems and fosters positive attitudes toward immigrants.

The basic structure of the message tested was the same for *Fairness* as for the other values described above. Here's the headline and first paragraph of the message, which shows how the value was articulated:

> **To Give Everyone a Fair Chance, We Must Unrig the System**
> *As a society, we believe in fairness. Our outcomes in life should depend on what we do, not who we are or where we come from. This means that how we do in life shouldn't be determined by the circumstances we're born into.*

Our research found that leading a message about rigged systems with the value of *Fairness* leads people to support major changes to the political system, increasing people's *institutionalist* thinking (i.e., generating an understanding of the role political institutions play in shaping how government works), and fosters positive attitudes toward immigrants (see figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Effects of *Fairness* and *Common Good* values (full sample)
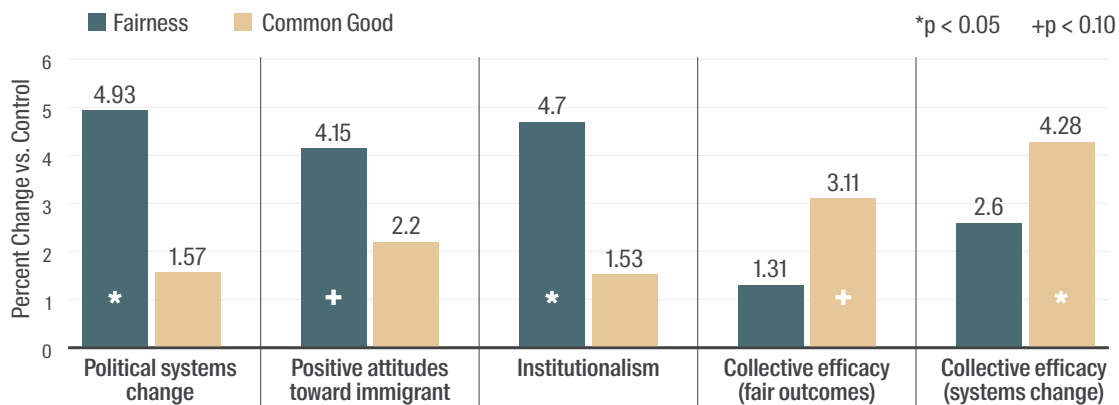
While *Fairness* doesn't move efficacy, it helps people think about why we need to unrig the system and what an unrigged system would look like. It helps people see that in order for systems to be fair, they would need to be fundamentally transformed. While the values discussed under finding #1 productively leverage the *system is rigged* mindset's attention to power, the value of *Fairness* cues the *systemic* aspect of the mindset. It helps people see that systems and institutions shape our opportunities and outcomes. And the call for a *fair* system points thinking in an inclusionary direction, which we see from the value's effect in increasing positive attitudes toward immigrants.

The value of *Fairness* doesn't always prompt productive thinking. For example, in the context of the criminal legal system, we have found fairness is often interpreted as uniform treatment and can strengthen punitive thinking. Coupling *Fairness* with *system is rigged* thinking is, we think, productive because it locates unfairness in systems rather than focusing on what individuals deserve. Against the backdrop of a systems critique, it becomes clear that what's needed to create fairness is systemic change that would make society more just.

These first two findings illustrate how values can orient *system is rigged* thinking in productive directions. When talking about rigged systems, communicators should lead with one of these values—*Solidarity, Popular Self-Government, Freedom from Domination*, or *Fairness*—as a necessary element in the message.

FINDING #3
It's critical to fill in the blanks through explanation— and to focus more on explaining <u>how</u> the system is rigged and less on <u>who</u> rigs it.

Because the *system is rigged* mindset is malleable, it's essential to fill in the slots in the mindset in specific ways. Left unfilled, people may fill in these blanks in problematic ways—for example, suggesting that liberal elites are rigging the system to benefit immigrants at the expense of middle class white people.

Our research shows clearly that to productively channel the mindset, communicators need to make clear who is rigging the system, what the system is, and what is happening as a result of the rigging.

But filling in these blanks is not enough—and an overemphasis on *who* is rigging the system can actually be harmful. Rather than focusing on who is to blame, communicators must address what's *not* provided by the mindset—a sense of *how* the system is rigged. By explaining how the *system is rigged* and how it can be unrigged, communicators help people see the truth behind a progressive understanding of rigged systems and make it less likely that people will buy the idea that it's liberal elites and immigrants who are creating their problems.

In our first survey experiment, we explored the effects of explanation through a set of tiered messages. The base message asserted *that* the system is rigged, articulating the core assumption of the mindset, but provided no explanation of how it is rigged:

> **Base Message:** *In America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Our system concentrates power and wealth in the hands of the few, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them.*

We then added in several additional components to the messages and tested different ways of combining them:

Naming Villains: *In America, powerful corporations, dishonest politicians, and unprincipled media organizations have rigged the system to benefit themselves at the expense of the many. These unaccountable elites have hijacked our system to concentrate power and wealth in their own hands, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them. Corporations, politicians, and media have used their wealth and power to manipulate the system so it benefits them rather than the rest of us.*
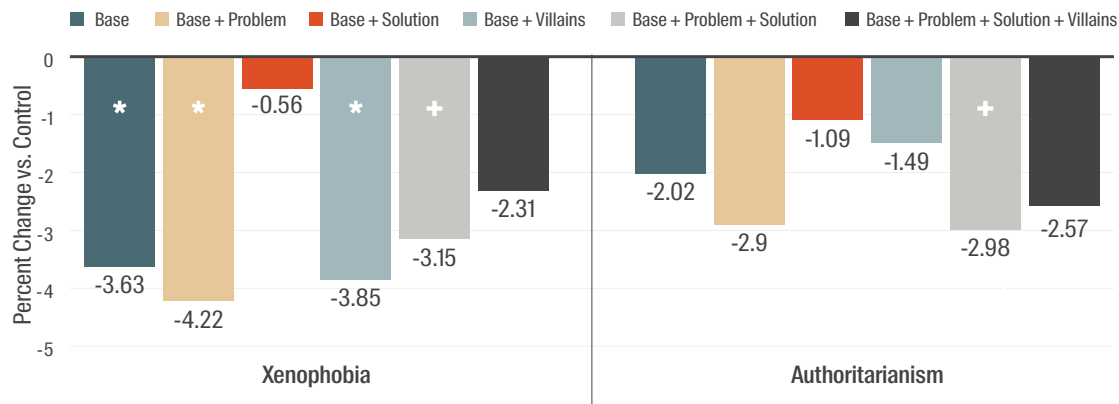
Explaining the Problem: *The system is rigged in many ways. For example, our campaign finance system works against the public interest by allowing a small number of people to buy influence over elected officials. As a result, the government helps corporations profit at the expense of the rest of us by cutting taxes for people at the top, weakening labor unions, and letting employers avoid paying decent benefits. As wealth is concentrated in a few hands, there's even less of a check on the powerful. This leaves the rest of us without a real say over our own lives and without a fair shot in life.*

Explaining the Solution: *We can rebalance power in American society and transform the system so it works for all of us. We can publicly fund political campaigns so candidates can't be bought. By taxing the ultra-rich and breaking up corporate monopolies, we can make sure no one has so much money that they can bend the rules in their favor. And we can strengthen the power of the many by protecting the right to vote and strengthening labor unions. By changing the system, we can take back control over our lives and make sure everyone has a fair shot.*

Every message included the base message that asserted the *system is rigged*. We tested messages that layered on every partial combination of the other elements as well as the full combination (claim that the *system is rigged* + named villains + explanation of problem + explanation of solution).

The message that combined the base claim with the explanations of the problem and solution was the most effective in reducing exclusionary attitudes while building support for progressive change. As figure 3 shows, this message led to a marginally significant reduction in xenophobic and authoritarian attitudes. And as figure 4 shows, it increased support for a range of progressive

Figure 3: Effects of explanation on exclusionary attitudes (full sample)   *p < 0.05   +p < 0.10

Legend: Base | Base + Problem | Base + Solution | Base + Villains | Base + Problem + Solution | Base + Problem + Solution + Villains

Xenophobia: -3.63*, -4.22*, -0.56, -3.85*, -3.15+, -2.31

Authoritarianism: -2.02, -2.9, -1.09, -1.49, -2.98+, -2.57

Y-axis: Percent Change vs. Control

policies—breaking up corporate monopolies, taxing income over $10 million at 70 percent, public funding of elections, and prohibiting partisan gerrymandering.

Figure 4: Effects of explanation on policy support (full sample)   **p < 0.01   *p < 0.05   +p < 0.10
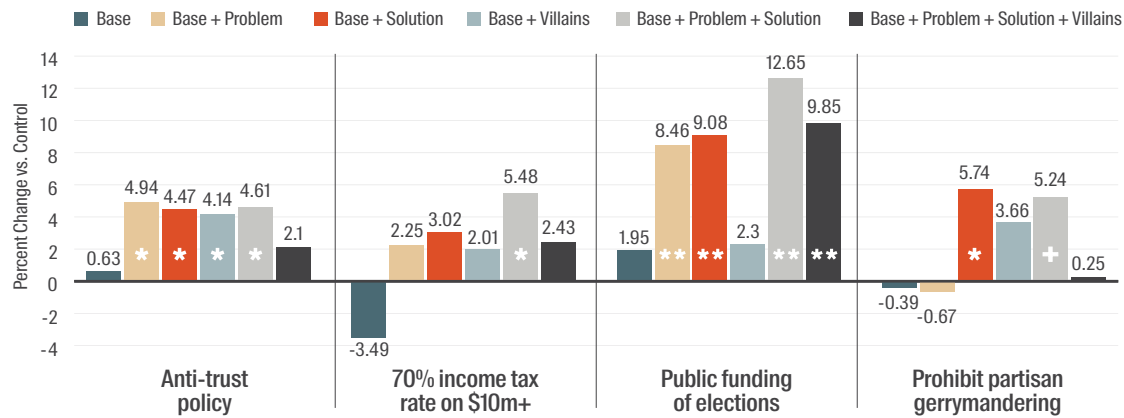
Other messages also showed some productive effects, which makes sense—all of the messages offer, in some form, a progressive understanding of rigged systems. Even the base message, which offers only a thin description of rigged systems, highlights the concentration of wealth as a key problem. By filling in some or all of the blanks of the mindset in a progressive way, these messages all move at least one outcome in a productive direction. However, only the message that included explanations of both how systems are rigged (problem) and how they can be unrigged (solution) showed consistent effects across all of these different outcomes.

These results suggest that emphasizing villains doesn't help and actually detracts from the effectiveness of the explanatory message. The *Naming Villains* message on its own (see above), which layered onto the base message an emphasis on villains (labeled "base + villains" in figures 3 and 4), decreased xenophobic attitudes and built support for anti-trust policy but was otherwise ineffective. The message that added this villain-naming component to a full explanation of problem and solution (labeled "base + problem + solution + villains in the figures) was, similarly, much less effective than the message that did not emphasize villains. And as we discuss below (see finding #5), we have additional evidence from focus groups and a later survey experiment indicating that naming specific villains has downsides and pitfalls—it can undercut systemic thinking (by focusing on people rather than systems) and may open the door for antisemitism in certain cases (especially when talking about billionaires).

There's a tendency in progressive communications to focus on villains *instead* of explaining how systems work. This is sometimes borne of an instinct that villains are an effective shorthand for explanations—if you blame corporations, for example, that surely prompts thinking about what corporations are doing to rig the system. The focus on villains also seems critical to prevent people from blaming the wrong actors. Our research suggests this conventional wisdom is—at least when talking about rigged systems—misguided. Simply naming villains doesn't give people a sense of how systems work, and focusing instead on *how* systems are rigged is actually the best way to

prevent immigrants—the right's current bogeyman—from being blamed.

Filling in the blanks and connecting the dots prevents people from reaching for alternative explanations they may have heard elsewhere. The populist right is telling a clear and coherent story that hinges on immigrants as the problem and strong authority as the solution. To prevent people from reaching for this story when they're looking to make sense of the experience of the system being rigged against them, communicators have to provide an alternative explanatory story that fills in the blanks in a different way and makes the story stick with careful explanation. When they do, this builds support for progressive change.

This doesn't mean always providing a deep and comprehensive explanation—that's not viable in many communication contexts—but rather, across communications, providing a simple and clear explanatory story.

FINDING #4
Matching the scale of the problem and solution helps overcome the ambition-feasibility paradox.

As described above, the *system is rigged* mindset leads people into the ambition-feasibility paradox, which results in fatalism. The values of *Popular Self-Government, Solidarity*, and *Freedom from Domination* can help with fatalism by highlighting the strength and urgency of collective power.

We also found that we can address the ambition-feasibility paradox by matching the scale at which we explain the problem and solution. Communicators can do this in two ways:

1. Spotlight a specific aspect of a rigged system, explain how it works, and connect the dots to actions that can be taken to unrig that particular part of the system.
2. Zoom out and explain rigged systems on a broader scale and explain how transformative structural solutions could unrig the whole system.

While each avenue has limitations, both strategies help overcome the ambition-feasibility paradox. What's critical is to avoid a mismatch in the scale of the problem and the solution (e.g., explaining how systems are rigged across US society and then offering small-scale solutions).

Spotlighting a Specific Aspect of a Rigged System

As we described in finding #3, explaining how systems are rigged and can be unrigged, with a focus on *how* the system is rigged rather than *who* is rigging it, inoculates against xenophobic and authoritarian thinking and builds support for progressive policies. The explanations tested in this first experiment and provided above use a spotlighting strategy: They spotlight a series of specific problems with rigged systems and propose a set of specific solutions that would unrig these particular aspects of rigged systems.

To deepen our understanding of the effects of spotlighting specific ways in which the *system is rigged* and particular solutions, in our third survey experiment we tested messages that spotlight corporate rigging of employment and the role of unions in unrigging this system. This experiment helps us further understand the benefits of this spotlighting strategy.

We tested two messages in this third experiment that had a similar structure. Both began by talking about how corporations rig the system against workers, then explained how, by joining together in unions, working people can counter this power. One explanation focused on how unions help workers secure favorable contracts. The second focused on how strikes can help workers counter the power of corporations, using recent strikes at UPS and in Hollywood to illustrate. Here's the message on how unions secure contracts:

> *In America, most of us, no matter our skin color, faith or where we come from, want to have a good job and live a good life. But, at the moment, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Corporations have too much influence in this country. They rig the system against workers by keeping wages low and by threatening to fire workers who try to change things. They do their best to make it more difficult to form or join unions, lobby against rules they don't like—often at the expense of workers—and deliberately outsource key operations in order to sidestep their responsibilities as an employer.*
>
> *It doesn't have to be this way. By joining together in unions, working people win the right to negotiate a contract with their employer to secure better pay, benefits, and working conditions. The contract is legally binding and employers can't change things without negotiating with union members. When union members win better contracts, other employers have to match those contracts in order to keep up, which raises standards across an entire industry. And, when we take part in contract negotiations, we can then leverage the power we have through the union to demand bigger changes that benefit everyone—such as improved wages, better healthcare and retirement, and holding corporate employers to account. When working people unite in organizations like unions, we can use our strength in numbers to shift the balance of power so that all of us have what we need.*

Here's the section of the other message that focuses on strikes and explains how they help workers counter corporate power:

> *People working in some of the biggest industries in the country—from UPS drivers to writers in Hollywood—are demanding improved wages, benefits, and safer working conditions. They know that striking is the most powerful tool working people have, because their work is what makes our country run. When they join together to bring our country's industries to a standstill, the wealthy and powerful have to listen. When working people unite in organizations like unions, we can use our strength in numbers to shift the balance of power so that all of us have what we need.*

As figure 5 below shows, both explanations increased collective efficacy about fixing problems in society and increased support for progressive economic policies, including pro-union policies as well as other economic policies (e.g., antitrust policies and raising the minimum wage). Both explanations also increased support for unions and understanding of their positive impacts.

Figure 5: Effects of spotlighting how unions can help unrig the system (full sample)
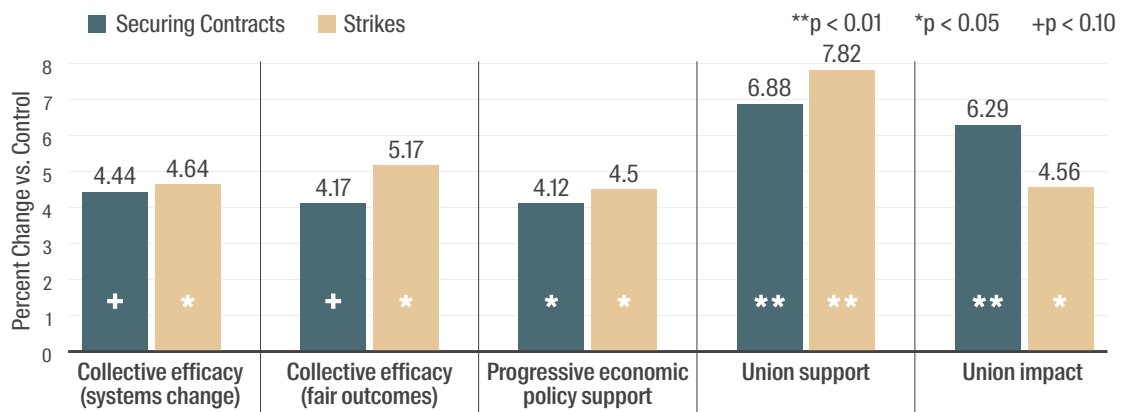
These messages overcame the ambition-feasibility paradox by spotlighting a specific aspect of the system and explaining how it is rigged and can be unrigged. In this case, these messages explained how corporations rig the employment system and then provided specific and concrete explanations of how workers, through unions, can counter corporate power in ways that help to unrig the system. By getting specific about the problem and solution, communicators can make the daunting problem of a fundamentally rigged system tractable and provide a sense of what can be done and how it would help.

These results deepen the evidence behind the spotlighting strategy. Specifically, they show how spotlighting one specific aspect of the rigged systems and offering a feasible solution can foster efficacy—an outcome that the explanations that touched on a larger set of problems with rigged systems did not move. The spotlighting strategy appears to be most effective in overcoming the ambition-feasibility paradox when it focuses on one specific aspect of the system.

It's important to note that spotlighting a smaller-scale aspect of system rigging *doesn't* mean minimizing the extent to which systems are rigged. It doesn't involve trying to boost efficacy by suggesting that system rigging isn't a major problem and is easy to solve. The strategy focuses on giving people a sense of the possibility of change by helping them see how progress can be made in a particular part of the system, with the recognition that this doesn't solve other ways in which systems are rigged.

Zooming Out and Explaining Structural Change

In our fourth survey experiment, we tested two contrasting messages—one focusing on big transformative changes, the other on *realistic* changes. This comparison was intended to determine whether leaning into one or the other side of the paradox—ambition or feasibility—fared better.

What we found is that focusing on big changes boosted collective efficacy to change systems, while the focus on changes that are *in reach* did not.

Figure 6: Effects of solutions-focused messages on collective efficacy (full sample)
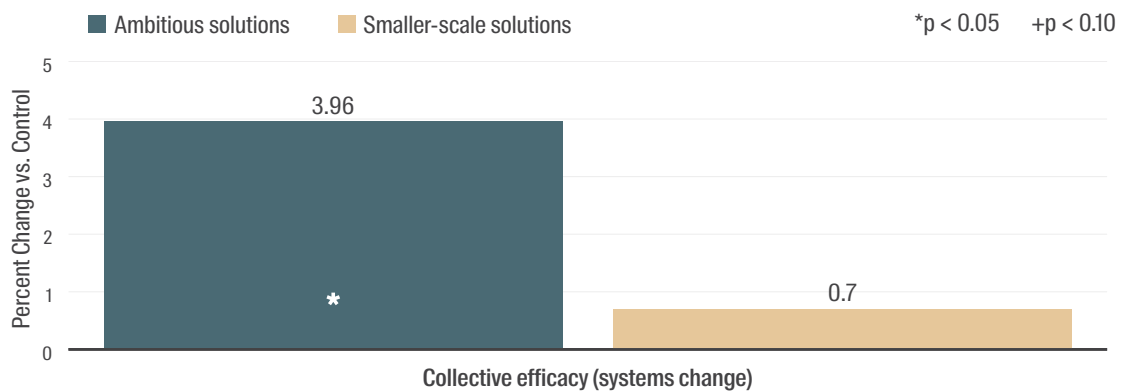
On its surface, this might suggest that it's simply better, in terms of effects on collective efficacy, to foreground big, bold solutions. However, when we examine the messages more closely, the problem with the focus on smaller-scale solutions becomes clear: It involved a mismatch between the scale of the problem (described in broad, general terms) and the solution (narrow, small scale).

The two messages shared a similar structure: They began with a claim about the need to make *big changes or changes that are in reach*. They included a short description of system rigging in the United States. Then they proposed a list of (either) *big* or *realistic* changes that could help unrig the system. Here's the tested language on *big* changes:

We Need to Make Big Changes to Unrig the System

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others, but we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Corporations set the terms under which we live and work and the powerful few use the government to protect their wealth and power. To free ourselves from domination and gain the power to shape our own lives, we need to make fundamental changes to society.

Big changes would rebalance power in fundamental ways:

- *A maximum wage that caps income and a heavy tax on wealth would do away with extreme wealth and the power that comes with it.*

- *Changing our electoral system so more political parties can win congressional seats would give everyone the power to be represented in government.*

- *Creating "baby bonds" that give all children a large nest egg at birth would give people the power to shape their own lives and reduce the racial wealth gap.*

- *Term limits for the Supreme Court would stop unelected judges from overturning popular policies.*

By making big changes, we can get out from under the thumb of the powerful few and claim the power to shape our own lives. Going big is important if we truly want to change things.

Here's the other message. Notice that it highlights the need for *realistic changes,* yet it offers the same explanation of the problem:

We Can Start to Unrig the System through Changes that Are in Reach Now

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others, but we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Corporations set the terms under which we live and work and the powerful few use the government to protect their wealth and power. To free ourselves from domination and gain the power to shape our own lives, we need to make achievable, realistic changes now. Realistic changes would begin to rebalance power:

- *Raising taxes on the highest incomes and increasing taxes on inherited wealth would put some limits on extreme wealth and the power that goes with it.*

- *Public funding for political campaigns would make it possible for anyone to run for office*

- *Raising the minimum wage would give people more of an ability to shape their own lives.*

- *Enforcing anti-discrimination laws and voting rights laws would limit racial discrimination.*

By making realistic changes that are in reach now, we can begin to get out from under the thumb of the powerful few and claim the power to shape our own lives. Doing what is possible now is important if we truly want to change things.

Both messages offer a broad critique of how the economy and government are rigged ("Corporations set the terms under which we live and work and the powerful few use the government to protect their wealth and power."). The *big changes* message then offers relatively bold solutions that would redistribute both wealth and power within our political system. The *realistic changes* offered in the other message are more measured—like raising the minimum wage and instituting public funding for political campaigns (see Appendix B for the full message). These realistic changes do not match the scope and scale of the problem presented.

There are two clear takeaways. First, it's possible to go big and cultivate efficacy. Given the scope of the problem described—societal rigging at the broadest level—it's striking that giving people a sense of the solutions that would genuinely solve the problem cultivates efficacy.

Second, it doesn't work to go big on the problem and offer small-scale solutions. This mismatch undercuts the effectiveness of the message. When talking about smaller-scale solutions, it's important to zoom in and focus on specific aspects of the problem to ensure a match in scale.

By matching the scale of the problem and solution when talking about rigged systems, we can counter the ambition-feasibility paradox and increase efficacy.

THE CORE ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE SYSTEM IS RIGGED FRAMING

The four findings above identify three core elements—three critical framing choices—that should be included in all *system is rigged* messages:

1. An effective value—*Popular Self-Government, Solidarity, Freedom from Domination*, or *Fairness*

2. An explanation of how the *system is rigged* that focuses more on *how it's rigged* and less on *who rigs it*

3. Solutions that match the scale at which the problem is explained.

When these elements are included, we steer *system is rigged* thinking in productive directions, cultivating collective efficacy and building support for systemic changes that advance justice while inoculating against exclusionary and authoritarian thinking.

Ways of Talking about Rigged Systems that Are Important in Specific Contexts

In addition to the core elements of effective *system is rigged* framing, which should be included in all messages about rigged systems, the research identified several additional ways of talking about rigged systems that are important in specific contexts:

1. When the situation calls for naming villains, messages should focus on groups of villains rather than individual villains.

2. When communicating with politically diverse audiences, explaining systemic racism as a rigged system is highly effective.

3. When talking about the economy, it's critical to explain the role of government decisions in rigging the economic system.

These framing moves aren't appropriate for every context, but in the relevant circumstances, they're critical to ensure that *system is rigged* thinking points in productive directions.

Below, we review findings on these framing choices, unpacking what they involve and why they are important.

FINDING #5
Individualizing villains undercuts systemic thinking. Talking about groups of villains is less likely to backfire.

As we discuss above, evidence from our first experiment indicates that emphasizing who is responsible for rigging the system—the villains in the story—doesn't help and may actually undercut the effectiveness of explanations of how the *system is rigged*. We followed up this experiment with a deeper dive into ways of talking about villains in both focus groups and a subsequent survey experiment.

We found that talking about individual villains is *particularly* problematic as it can undercut systemic thinking and may cue antisemitic thinking.

In our second survey experiment, we tested three messages that highlighted the role of wealthy people or corporations in rigging the system. The first message named individual billionaires ("billionaires like Jeff Bezos, Howard Schultz, and Warren Buffett"); the second named specific corporations ("large corporations like Amazon, Starbucks, and Goldman Sachs"); and the third talked generally about how "large corporations" rig the system without naming individual people or companies. All the messages offered a brief explanation of system rigging and only varied in who they described as rigging the system.

Here's the message naming individual billionaires (the other messages are in the Appendix B):

> **Billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Howard Schultz Have Rigged the System to Work for Them**
> *In America, billionaires like Jeff Bezos, Howard Schultz, and Warren Buffett have rigged the system to benefit themselves at the expense of the rest of us. These billionaires have rigged the economic system so they can set the terms under which we live and work, and they've rigged our system of government so they can buy influence to protect their wealth and power. Bezos, Schultz, and other billionaires undermine our collective power by pitting us against each other, fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live. To unrig the system, we must reduce the economic and political power of ultra-rich billionaires like Bezos and Schultz and increase our power to shape our own lives.*

We found that the message that names specific billionaires decreased support for systemic change, relative to the control condition, while *increasing* market naturalism (the idea that the economy is governed by natural forces beyond our control) and support for limited government (see figure below). These shifts are unproductive, combining to leave people more supportive of letting the market be rather than trying to make changes to it or to society more broadly. The message that names specific corporations did not have significant backfire effects, but it also didn't have positive effects. The message that left the villain general—talking about "large corporations"—was the only one that had positive effects, boosting collective efficacy. However, even this message produced a marginally significant increase in support for limited government, suggesting that even naming corporations generally undercut the idea that broader systems and policies are the problem.

Our qualitative research offers insights into why foregrounding villains tends to be unproductive and why these negative effects are amplified the more individual these descriptions get.

Figure 7: Effects of villian framing (full sample)   **p < 0.01   *p < 0.05   +p < 0.10
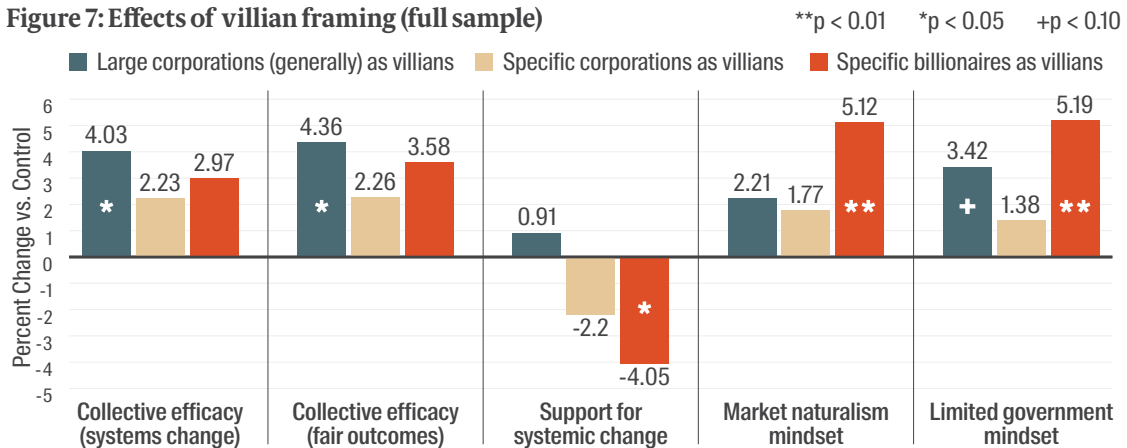
In focus groups, we conducted an activity asking participants to think specifically about *who* is rigging the system. Participants were then asked to consider two particular groups who might be responsible—politicians and corporations—and to offer explanations of how one or the other rigs the system.

There was a tendency for the conversation about both groups to focus on personal character flaws of powerful people. Discussions about politicians quickly turned into scathing critiques of politicians as selfish, dishonest, uncaring, and morally bankrupt. While there was occasional talk about more systemic critiques of corruption—the ways in which the system enables or rewards bad behavior—the focus typically stayed on the character of individuals as the problem. The discussion about corporations similarly focused on greed—a personal motivation and character flaw. This conversation was sometimes systemic, as participants talked about how profit incentives lead corporations to do whatever they can to boost profits, like using money to influence politicians. But more often, the conversation focused on the greed of individuals, as in this quote:

> *I think that a lot of people, especially people who are extremely greedy, have a lack of integrity. And that is something that they try and force on other people, a lack of integrity. It can be corporate greed, individual greed, the more they are forcing people to help them make more and more money, and it affects everybody.*
> **Black, woman, Democrat, age 47**

In a few cases, conversations around villains included antisemitic comments, as in the quote below:

> *I'm thinking more globally, like the George Soros of the world, Carl Schwab, all those guys have their hands in everything. So they might be the puppet here. Is that the word? The puppet master?*
> **Latina, woman, Republican, age 47**

The path from the idea of greedy individuals rigging the system to antisemitic tropes is a relatively clear one, so it is not entirely surprising that focusing on economic villains can lead in this direction. These comments were prompted by questions about who is rigging the system and the possibility that it might be corporations—the focus groups did not ask people to think about individual billionaires, as the survey experiment did. We suspect that messages that name individual billionaires may be even more likely to cue antisemitic thinking as personalizing the issue cues the idea of greed, and the idea of greedy individuals rigging the system is a short step from familiar tropes about wealthy Jews acting as "puppet masters."

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that it is generally better to avoid focusing heavily on *who* is rigging the system and instead, as we discuss above, to focus on *how* the system is rigged and can be unrigged. However, there are occasions when communicators may need to highlight villains—in particular, in organizing efforts, villains are often necessarily salient. In these cases, the research suggests that it is best to collectivize villains as much as possible—to talk about a set of actors (e.g., large corporations) or a broader set of organizations rather than specific individuals or companies. And when villains are discussed, it's important not to lose track of *how* systems are rigged—talking about villains isn't a substitute for explaining how systems are rigged (as we see with the results of the "base + villains" message in figures 3 and 4 above).

Talking about systemic racism as a rigged system builds support for a more inclusive, multiracial democracy—especially among Republicans.

In our fourth survey experiment, we tested two messages that used the idea of a rigged system to explain systemic racism and white supremacy (the concepts, not the terms). We found that these messages were effective in fostering collective efficacy and support for justice-advancing solutions. Strikingly, these messages were *highly* effective with Republican participants.

We tested two different versions of this explanation—one that focused on how our society is *designed* to give wealthy white people power (*racism by design*), the other saying it has been *twisted* to give wealthy white people power in violation of its promises (*racism as violation*). We found that the messages performed similarly: Both cultivated a sense of collective efficacy and increased support for progressive policies, with particularly pronounced effects among Republican participants.

The messages were similar. Both led with the values of *Freedom from Domination* and *Solidarity*. They then proceeded to explain *how* US society is rigged to give wealthy white people power and limit the power of people of color, tracing how systems have been rigged throughout history, from slavery and the stealing of land from Native Americans to employment systems and natural resource extraction. The messages wove together the political and economic systems, explaining how both systems are rigged against Black and Native people and other people of color. The messages concluded by repriming the values and talking about solutions that would unrig these systems, like baby bonds and taxing inherited wealth. Here's the *racism by design* message:

> **Our Society Is Designed to Let Wealthy White People Rule**
>
> *As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others. Yet our society is rigged, by design, to give wealthy white people power over Black, Native, and other people of color. We need to come together to build a new social system where all of us are free from domination and have the power to shape our own lives.*
>
> *Our society was designed to let wealthy white people rule and to limit the power of people of color. Our Constitution was written by and for slaveholders, and our economic system still depends on paying Black people and immigrants of color low wages for essential work like childcare and home care. The United States was built on land stolen from Native Americans, and the US continues to let corporations profit from this land by taking natural resources like oil. From its founding, our political system denied Black and Native people political rights, and it continues to deny them equal representation.*
>
> *We must come together across our differences to resist domination and demand a new social system. We can start by enforcing anti-discrimination and voting rights laws, heavily taxing inherited wealth, and creating "baby bonds" that give all children a nest egg at birth. This will lay the groundwork for a new system in which all of us, including Black, Native, and other people of color, have the power to shape our own lives.*

Figure 8 below shows the effects of both messages on collective efficacy for the full, nationally representative sample.

Figure 8: Effects of *racism as a rigged system* framing on collective efficacy (full example)
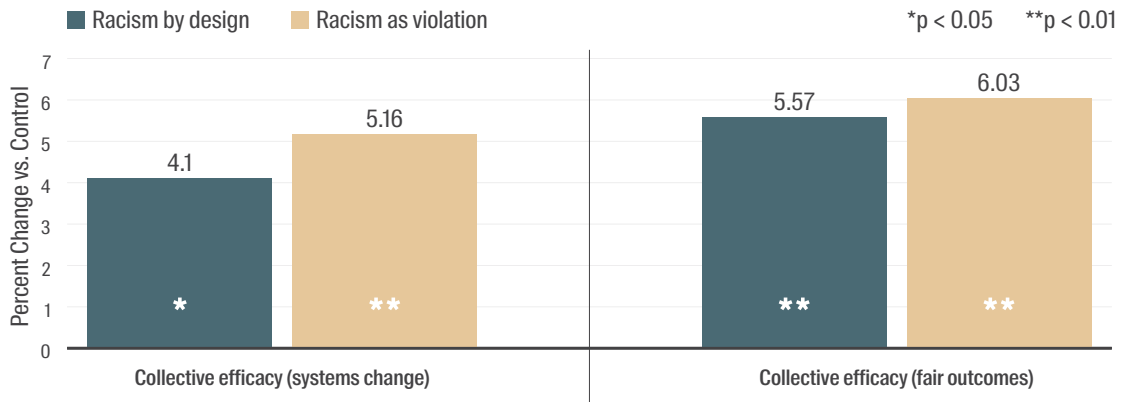
We see that both versions of the explanation increased both forms of collective efficacy. The messages also had some productive effects on policy support, though they also had a couple of backfire effects (see figure 9 below). Both versions of the message increased support for expanding polling places on American Indian reservations; the *racism by design* message also increased support for raising the inheritance tax, and the *racism as violation* message decreased support for major cuts to immigration. On the negative side, both messages increased support for adding work requirements to programs like SNAP and Medicaid, and the *racism by design* message produced a marginally significant increase in support for making it easier for employers to punish employees who strike.

Figure 9: Effects of *racism as a rigged system* framing on policy support (full example)
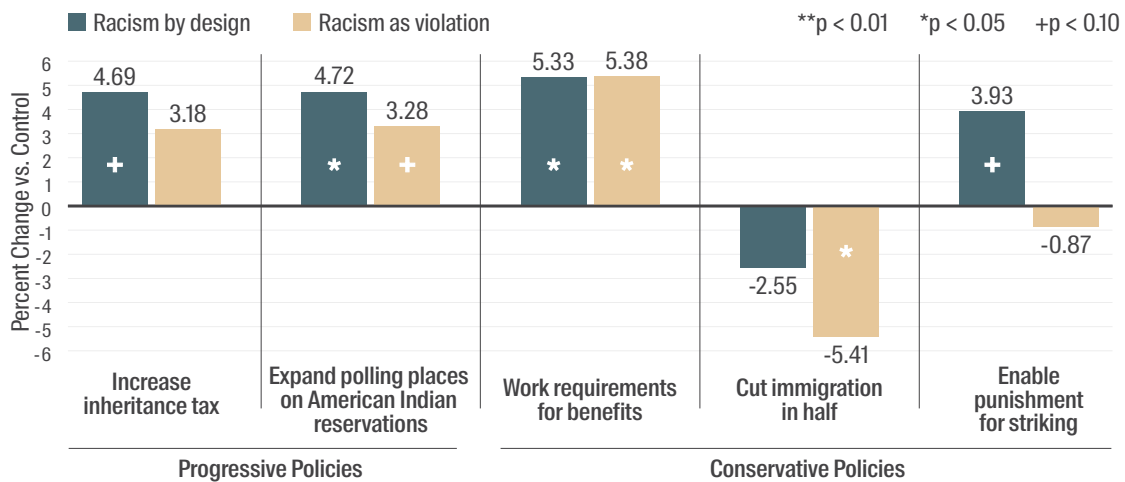
While taken together the effects are generally positive, it's important to acknowledge that this framing is not without risks. We are not sure exactly why these messages had these particular backfire effects but given that the *system is rigged* mindset sometimes reinforces exclusionary or authoritarian attitudes, there is always a possibility that cuing it will prompt unproductive thinking alongside more productive thinking. The more we can consistently tell a coherent progressive story about rigged systems, the less likely it is that this kind of slippage will happen.

The power of using the idea of rigged systems to explain systemic racism is clear and the dangers disappear when we look specifically at Republicans as an audience. These messages were overwhelmingly and strikingly effective with Republicans and independents who lean Republican. With this group, we see effects on multiple outcomes—collective efficacy, policy support, mindset endorsement, and other attitudes.

Figure 10: Effect of *racism as a rigged system* framing on collective efficacy (Republican sample)
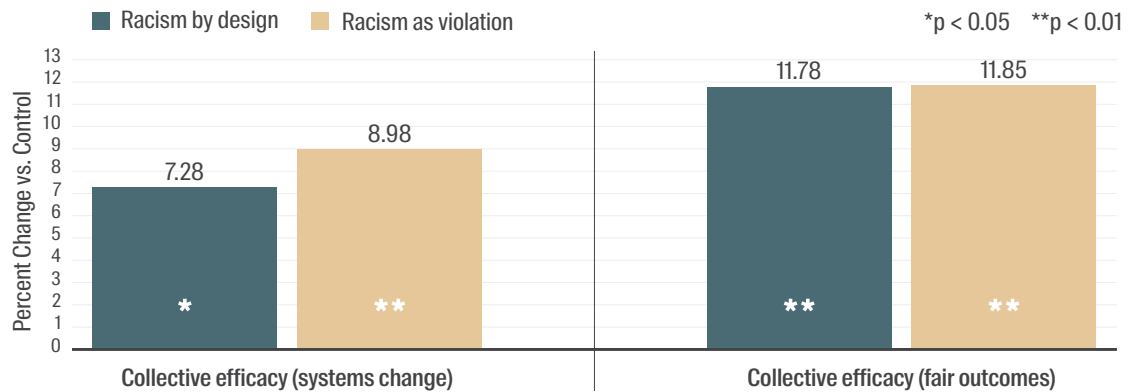
Among Republicans, the *racism as a rigged system* messages generated large increases in both types of collective efficacy (see figure 10 below). Increases of 10+ percent are unusual in single-exposure framing experiments of this type. The size of these effects indicates a high degree of effectiveness.

These messages also, among Republican participants, increased support for a wider range of progressive policies than they did for the full sample (see figure 11). Also encouraging, the *racism as violation* message cut support for immigration restrictions by over 9 percent.11 Together with the effect on collective efficacy, this shows that framing *racism as a rigged system* is a highly effective way of talking about systemic racism with Republicans.

Figure 11: Effects of *racism as a rigged system* framing on policy support (Republican sample)

■ Racism by design ■ Racism as violation   **p < 0.01   *p < 0.05   +p < 0.10

| Progressive Policies | | | | Conservative Policies |
| Increase inheritance tax | Expand polling places on American Indian reservations | Increase minimum wage | Make it easier to join unions | Cut immigration in half |

Racism by design: 7.27 (+), 7.98 (**), 3.91, 6.21 (+), -4.24
Racism as violation: 8.89 (*), 5.5 (+), 8.86 (+), 10.19 (**), -9.25 (*)

Percent Change vs. Control
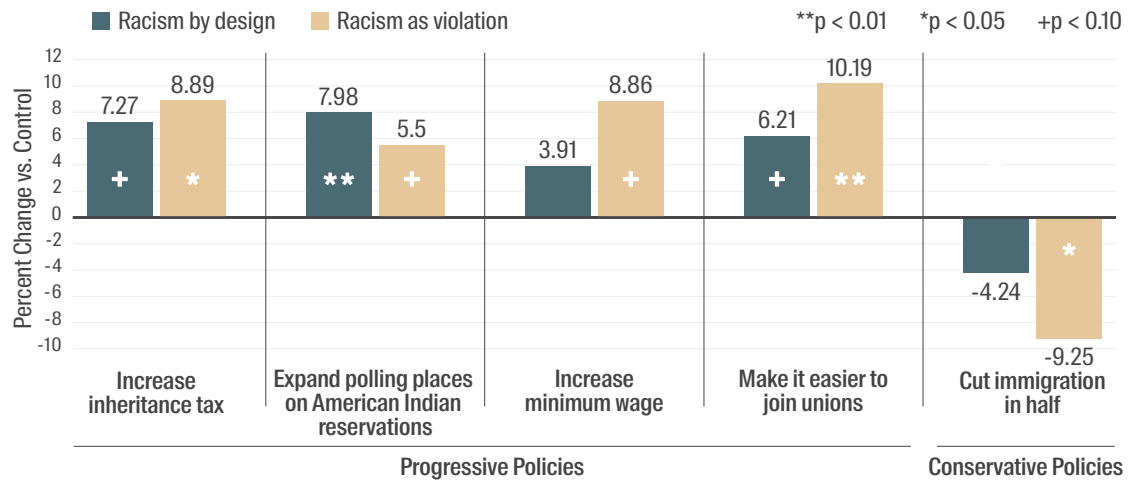
This is all the more striking because Republicans did not *like* these messages. Immediately after reading the message, survey participants were asked if they agreed or disagreed with what they had read. A majority of Republicans who received each of the *racism as a rigged* system messages disagreed (see figure 12).

Figure 12: *"Do you generally agree or disagree with what you read?"* (Republican sample)

■ Racism by design ■ Racism as violation

	Disagree	Neither disagree or agree	Agree
Racism by design	52	15	33
Racism as violation	56	17	27

Percent of Participants
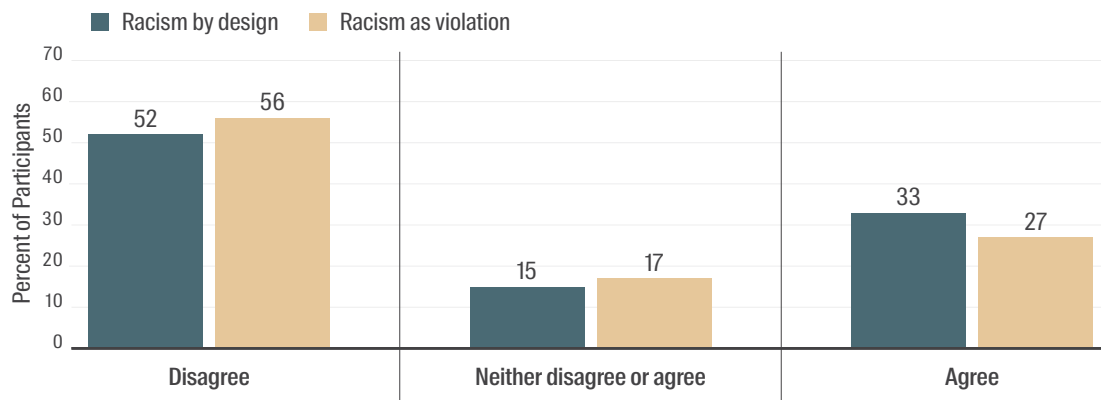
The divergence between participants' avowed opinions about the messages and the messages' effects on their thinking illustrates why we should not treat people's opinions about frames and messages as the main measure of effectiveness. Often, people like a message or agree with it because it fits their prior thinking. If the goal is to *shift* people's thinking, we typically need messages that challenge and push people in some way, and—as we see here—this can lead people to dislike or disagree with the message. Yet the evidence is clear that these messages were *highly* effective in achieving their ultimate goal—to shift how people think about society in fundamental ways and make people more open to progressive policy change—even though they were not popular.

It is worth noting that the messages didn't have the same effects among Black survey participants. The only significant effect—positive or negative—they had was that the *racism as violation* message

led to a marginally significant increase in authoritarian attitudes among Black participants. We don't read this as a meaningful backfire effect—a marginal effect on a single outcome could very well be a result of chance. But it *is* clear that these messages, while not *unproductive*, were also not effective in shifting thinking among Black participants.

Why does framing *racism as a rigged* system work especially well for Republicans yet not move Black participants? While we don't have qualitative research that answers this question directly, our past research and our understanding of this mindset suggest answers.

We suspect that this framing strategy works with Republicans because it provides a framework for thinking about systemic racism that is simultaneously highly accessible and apt while also being novel. As we discuss above, Republicans strongly endorse the *system is rigged* mindset. This makes the mindset a natural starting point for engaging Republicans—it is easy to cue. At the same time, the mindset provides an apt framework for understanding the reality of systemic racism, enabling people to think about how powerful groups shape systems to advantage themselves and exercise power over others. While the mindset is accessible, using it to think about systemic racism is novel: Republicans, as a default, generally either deny the reality of contemporary racism or understand it in wholly interpersonal terms.[12] Talking about *racism as a rigged* system offers Republicans a readily accessible, systemic framework that enables them to see, in a new way, how systemic racism works.

For Black people, we suspect that the idea that racism is a rigged system doesn't shift thinking because it's not news. As we have found in past research, Black people tend to much more strongly endorse a systemic view of racism than white people.[13] Black survey participants widely agreed with both *racism as a rigged system* messages (70 percent agreed with the racism by design message, and 75 percent agreed with the *racism as violation* message). Because the messages aligned more closely with Black participants' preexisting views, the messages did not shift Black participants' thinking like they did for Republicans, but rather echoed what Black participants already thought.

When talking about the economy as a rigged system, it's critical to emphasize the government's role in designing and redesigning the system.

As we discuss above, explanations about how systems are rigged and can be unrigged are critical to channeling this thinking in the direction of justice. When we're focusing on the economy as a rigged system, it's crucial that these explanations don't treat the economy as a standalone system. Rather, they need to emphasize the government's role in designing and redesigning the economy in order to avoid inadvertently strengthening *market naturalism* and anti-government thinking.

In the fourth survey experiment, we tested two messages that focused on the economy as a rigged system—one on how the economy is rigged by design (*rigged economy by design*), the other on how the economy is being twisted to give corporations power over us, in violation of its promises (*rigged*

economy as violation). In contrast to explanations tested in earlier experiments, which discussed the ways that rigging of the economic and political system are related, these new messages did *not* talk about the government's role in rigging the economy and instead isolated the economic system.

The basic structure of these messages was the same and was similar to the structure of the messages on *racism as a rigged system:* They began with values (*Freedom from Domination* and *Solidarity*); explained how the economic system allows corporations to gather power and prevent anyone from challenging this power; then reprimed the values and talked about solutions that would unrig the economic system, like taxing the ultra-rich and breaking up corporate monopolies. Here's the rigged economy by design message we tested:

> **Our Economic System Is Designed to Give Corporations Power over Us**
> *As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others. Yet our economic system is rigged, by design, to give corporations power over us. We need to come together to build a new economic system where we are free from domination and have the power to shape our own lives. Our economic system is designed to allow corporations to gather extreme wealth and power. Their size and power lets them crush competition and raise prices. It allows them to stop us from coming together in labor unions, so we can't negotiate a fair wage. By putting us in competition for jobs, the system fuels division by income, race, and place so we can't come together to challenge corporate power.*
>
> *We must come together across our differences to resist domination and demand a new economic system. We can start by taxing the ultra-rich, breaking up corporate monopolies, and strengthening labor unions. This will lay the groundwork for a new system in which we have the power to shape our own lives.*

While the two messages had slightly different effects, the general pattern is the same—they moved policy thinking in productive directions (see figure 13 below).

Figure 13: Effect of *economy as a rigged system* framing on policy support (full sample)
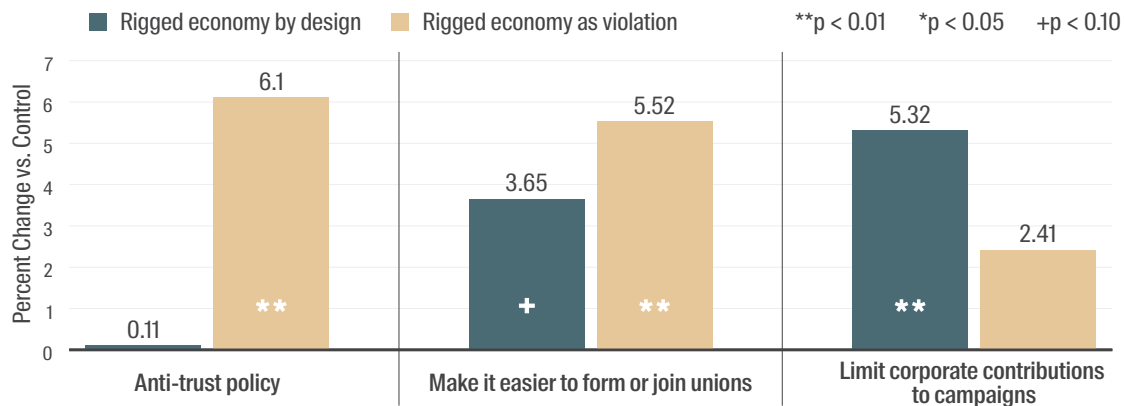
While effects on policy were productive, these explanations also increased endorsement of two unproductive mindsets—*market naturalism* (the idea that the economy is governed by natural forces outside our control) and *limited government* (the idea that the government should have a limited role in society) (see figure 14 below). Both mindsets undercut the idea that the government needs to take a strong active role in shaping how the economy works—a core, underlying tenet of progressive economic thinking.

Figure 14: Effects of *economy as a rigged system* framing on mindsets (full sample)
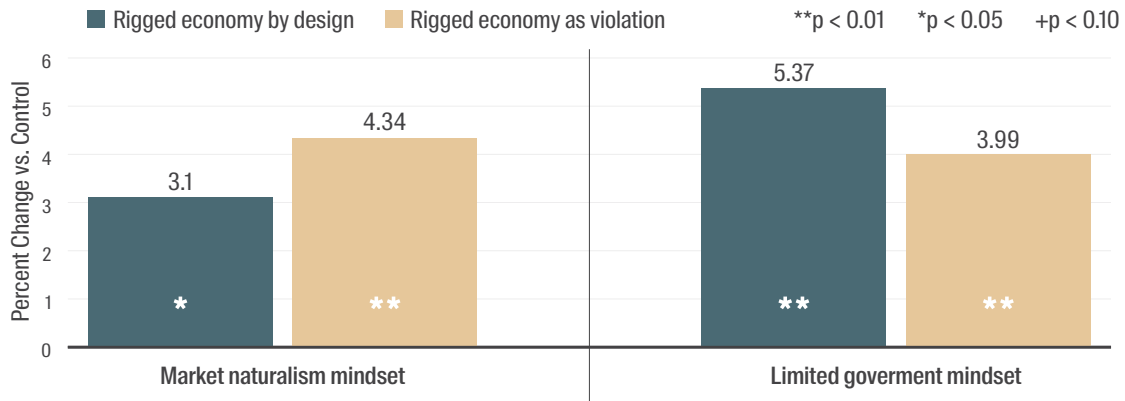
We did not see this type of backfire effect with earlier messages that provided more holistic explanations of how systems in the United States are rigged, weaving together economic and political systems (see finding #3 above). Those earlier explanations made clear that it is public policies and government choices that design how the economy works and give corporations so much power. Explaining the role of government prevented the messages from inadvertently strengthening the idea that the economic system is shaped by forces outside of the government's control. While the newer messages provided a fuller explanation of how corporate power works *within* the economy, they failed to bring in government in a clear way, resulting in this backfire on *market naturalism* and *limited government mindsets*. This indicates the importance of making clear and explicit the role of government in rigging—and unrigging—systems.

Talking about the *economy as a rigged* system can be an effective way to bring out what's wrong with the economy and to make the case for progressive policies. To make best use of this idea, it's important to be explicit about the government's role and to foreground the relationship between the government and the rigged economy.

WAYS OF TALKING ABOUT RIGGED SYSTEMS THAT ARE IMPORTANT IN SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

Findings 5, 6, and 7 identify ways of talking about rigged systems that are important in specific contexts:

1. When the situation calls for naming villains, messages should focus on groups of villains rather than individual villains.

2. When communicating with politically diverse audiences, explaining systemic racism as a rigged system is highly effective.

3. When talking about the economy, it's critical to explain the role of government decisions in rigging the economic system.

When appropriate, these ways of talking about rigged systems can be productively layered onto the core elements of *system is rigged* framing, steering this mindset in the direction of justice and away from exclusionary and authoritarian thinking.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The *system is rigged* mindset has become dominant, consistently shaping how people across groups make sense of virtually every issue in US society. Progressives can't avoid this mindset. In this populist moment, members of the public *will* draw on this mindset. The only question is in which ways and toward which ends. If progressives cede this mindset to the right, there is a danger that the right's story will stick and solidify, hardening the mindset in a xenophobic, racist, authoritarian form. In order to avoid this, progressives must engage with the mindset and tell an alternative story about rigged systems—a story that helps people see how power is actually exercised in US society, in which ways, to whose benefit, and against whom.

The research we have conducted offers insights about how to tell this progressive story about rigged systems. It's a story that leads with specific values, explains *how* systems are rigged rather than focusing on *who* is rigging them, and offers solutions that match the scale of the problem explained. The story has space to talk about how particular systems are rigged—including the economy and systemic racism—while highlighting how these systems are connected to others. These core elements and additional ways of talking about rigged systems leverage the productive features of the *system is rigged* mindset—its foregrounding of power and systems—to make the case for the structural changes needed to advance justice.

While this research offers productive ways of talking about rigged systems, there are outstanding questions that would benefit from more work in the future:

- What is the best way to talk about the path to big, bold solutions? While offering people big solutions helps them envision what it would take to unrig systems, it doesn't help them see how these bold solutions could actually come about. More work is needed to identify the best ways of talking about the path to transformative change.

- How does *system is rigged* framing need to be adapted when we talk about specific issues, such as the tax system or healthcare? Each issue introduces specific assumptions (e.g., about who is responsible for that issue or what is owed), and framing must be responsive to these contextual differences.

- When focusing on the political system, how can framing put structural reform on the table? We know from our research on democracy and the US political system that members of the public struggle to think about bold solutions that would strengthen democracy in the United States.[14] More research is needed to identify effective ways of talking about the structural reforms needed to unrig the political system at scale.

- How can *system is rigged* framing be used most effectively within different strategies? For example, how does it need to be adjusted and adapted within cultural strategy or organizing campaigns?

Answering these questions will require a combination of new research and the expertise of practitioners who know how to apply frames in different strategic and issue contexts. While work is needed to tailor framing to context, it's also critical that we keep an eye on what cuts across contexts. Only by telling a coherent, consistent story about rigged systems—a story with common core elements—can progressives effectively contest what the *system is rigged* means. By filling in the blanks of this mindset and fleshing out how systems work in consistent ways, we can ensure that it is a progressive story that sticks and solidifies so that the form the mindset takes advances justice rather than exclusion and authoritarianism.

Appendix A: Research Methods

Below, we provide additional information about research methods and samples, to accompany the general description of methods provided on pages 14-15 above. Here we focus on the methods used to test frames—focus groups and survey experiments. In total, 14,482 participants from across the United States were included in these methods. As noted in the body of this report, descriptions of methods and sampling for previous research drawn upon in this report are included in Culture Change Project annual reports, including, most recently, _The State of American Culture: 2023–2024, Research Evidence and Methods_.

Experimental Surveys

FrameWorks conducted four online experimental surveys involving a total sample of 14,428 adults in the United States (Survey 1: N = 2,712; Survey 2: N = 5,713; Survey 3: N = 2,701; Survey 4: N = 3,302). These surveys were conducted between October 2022 and May 2024. Target quotas were set according to national benchmarks for age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, education level, and political party affiliation. See Tables 1–4 for information about the sample composition for each survey. Data were not weighted.

Table 1: Survey 1 (October 2022) demographic information[15]

Demographic Variable	Total Sample N (N = 2,712)	Total %
Age		
18–29	481	18%
30–44	677	25%
45–59	784	29%
60+	770	28%
Gender		
Man	1,272	47%
Woman	1,413	52%
Trans Man	7	<1%
Trans Woman	6	<1%
Genderqueer	10	<1%
Other	4	<1%

Region		
Northeast	528	19%
Midwest	552	20%
South	1,085	40%
West	547	20%
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian/White (non-Hispanic/Latino)	1,674	62%
Hispanic/Latino	462	17%
Black/African American	312	12%
Asian	96	4%
American Indian/Alaska Native	41	2%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	6	<1%
Other/Biracial or multiracial	121	4%
Income (USD)		
0–24,999	580	21%
25,000-49,999	672	25%
50,000-99,999	882	33%
100,000-149,999	369	14%
150,000+	209	8%
Education		
High school diploma or less	879	32%
Some college or associate degree	880	32%
Bachelor's degree	603	22%
Graduate/Professional degree	350	13%
Political Party		
Republican/Closer to Republican Party	1,036	38%
Democrat/Closer to Democratic Party	1,267	47%
Neither	409	15%

Table 2: Survey 2 (July 2023) demographic information

Demographic Variable	Total Sample N (N = 5,713)	Total %
Age		
18–29	1,219	21%
30–44	1,431	25%
45–59	1,433	25%
60+	1,630	29%
Gender		
Man	2,757	48%
Woman	2,903	51%
Trans Man	22	<1%
Trans Woman	3	<1%
Genderqueer	21	<1%
Other	7	<1%
Region		
Northeast	1,117	20%
Midwest	1,129	20%
South	2,224	39%
West	1,243	22%
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian/White (non-Hispanic/Latino)	3,560	62%
Hispanic/Latino	941	16%
Black/African American	651	11%
Asian	199	3%
American Indian/Alaska Native	53	1%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	10	<1%
Other/Biracial or multiracial	299	5%

Income (USD)		
0–24,999	1,137	20%
25,000-49,999	1,497	26%
50,000-99,999	1,858	33%
100,000-149,999	733	13%
150,000+	488	9%
Education		
High school diploma or less	1,944	34%
Some college or associate degree	1,796	31%
Bachelor's degree	1,246	22%
Graduate/Professional degree	727	13%
Political Party		
Republican/Closer to Republican Party	2,176	38%
Democrat/Closer to Democratic Party	2,640	46%
Neither	897	16%

Table 3: Survey 3 (September 2023) demographic information

Demographic Variable	Total Sample N (N = 2,701)	Total %
Age		
18–34	733	27%
35-49	693	26%
50-64	677	25%
65+	598	22%
Gender		
Man	1,308	48%
Woman	1,350	51%
Trans Man	17	1%
Trans Woman	3	<1%
Genderqueer	16	1%
Other	7	<1%

Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian/White (non-Hispanic/Latino)	1,656	61%
Hispanic/Latino	413	15%
Black/African American	295	11%
Asian	102	4%
American Indian/Alaska Native	22	1%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	5	<1%
Other/Biracial or multiracial	208	8%
Income (USD)		
0–24,999	559	21%
25,000-49,999	681	25%
50,000-99,999	849	31%
100,000-149,999	388	14%
150,000+	224	8%
Education		
High school diploma or less	1,047	39%
Some college or associate degree	811	30%
Bachelor's degree	525	19%
Graduate/Professional degree	318	12%
Political Party		
Republican/Closer to Republican Party	1,108	41%
Democrat/Closer to Democratic Party	1,238	46%
Neither	355	13%
Union Membership		
Is currently or has been a union member	603	22%
Is not currently or has never been a union member	2,068	77%
Unsure	30	1%

Table 4: Survey 4 (May 2024) demographic information

Demographic Variable	Total Sample N (N = 3,302)	Main Sample %	Total Sample N (N = 4,165)	Total %
Age				
18–34	917	28%	1,091	26%
35–49	824	25%	1,086	26%
50–64	806	24%	1,032	25%
65+	755	23%	956	23%
Gender				
Man	1,614	49%	2,031	49%
Woman	1,666	50%	2,111	51%
Trans Man	6	<1%	6	<1%
Trans Woman	2	<1%	2	<1%
Genderqueer	11	<1%	11	<1%
Other	3	<1%	4	<1%
Race/Ethnicity				
Caucasian/White (non-Hispanic/Latino)	2,067	63%	2,067	50%
Hispanic/Latino	514	16%	662	16%
Black/African American	476	14%	662	16%
Asian	132	4%	661	16%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	31	1%	31	1%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	8	<1%	8	<1%
Other/Biracial or multiracial	74	2%	74	2%

Income (USD)				
0–24,999	577	17%	714	17%
25,000-49,999	683	21%	891	21%
50,000-99,999	989	30%	1,291	31%
100,000-149,999	605	18%	730	18%
150,000+	448	14%	539	13%
Education				
High school diploma or less	1,069	32%	1,214	29%
Some college or associate degree	941	28%	1,191	29%
Bachelor's degree	788	24%	1,092	26%
Graduate/ Professional degree	504	15%	668	16%
Political Party				
Republican/Closer to Republican Party	1,310	40%	1,527	37%
Democrat/Closer to Democratic Party	1,636	50%	2,129	51%
Neither	355	11%	509	12%

Participant recruitment and survey hosting was completed by Dynata. Participants were recruited from some combination of the following sources: proprietary loyalty panels, open invitation, or integrated channels that recruit from partnerships with external sources, such as publishers or social networks. All participants opted in to complete the survey. Participants with Dynata earned points for completing surveys, which they can exchange for various rewards. These rewards vary by panel and recruitment method but may include things such as airline miles or gift cards.

Participants with Dynata were required to verify their identity at multiple points during survey enrollment and routing. Dynata uses various methods, such as third-party validation and digital fingerprinting, to detect fraud, identify bots, and monitor and detect suspicious activity from participants.

Participants were not allowed to complete the survey more than once. Participants who did not fully complete the survey were removed from the data and were not paid. In addition, participant data was removed if they completed the survey within one-third of the median survey time, if they straightlined, or if they provided nonsensical responses to the open-ended questions

included in the survey.

After providing consent to participate, participants were randomly assigned to one of several experimental conditions. Treatments were framed messages that offered specific ways of talking about rigged systems. All tested frames can be found in Appendix B. Each experiment also included a null control condition. Participants assigned to these conditions did not read any message; they instead moved immediately to the survey questions.

Participants assigned to treatment conditions were asked to read a short message, which they were required to view for at least 30 seconds, before answering a series of survey questions. These questions were designed to measure specific outcomes of interest. Each battery consisted of multiple questions and was primarily measured using Likert-type items with seven-point response scales. Survey items can be found in Appendix C.

Prior to any inferential analysis, we conducted a series of randomization checks. Chi-square analyses indicated that all target demographics were evenly distributed across conditions. We also conducted a series of exploratory factor analyses (EFA) to determine the psychometric qualities of our outcome scales. Items with rotated factor loadings below |.50| were dropped from each battery. Once finalized, Cronbach's alpha (α) was used to assess internal consistency among the items in each battery. Given that there are various heuristics for determining acceptable internal consistency, we determined that batteries with internal consistency scores approaching .60 or above would be considered acceptable. After assessing internal consistency, items within each battery were combined into composite scores that indicated participants' average ratings of the attitudes or stereotypes measured by each battery. The table below provides more information on these composite scores.

After conducting the preliminary analyses described above, we used multiple regression analysis to determine whether there were significant differences in the outcomes between each of the experimental frame conditions and the control condition. A threshold of $p < .05$ was used to determine whether the experimental frame conditions had any significant effects. Significant differences were understood as evidence that a term influenced a particular outcome. Below, an example is provided to illustrate how regression results were interpreted. We also consider $p < .10$ to determine whether the experimental frame conditions had any marginal effects. Though we don't typically make recommendations on marginal effects, we do consider these effects as part of a holistic approach to understanding broader patterns across results. The table below provides the coefficient for the control group as well as the coefficient for the *Popular Self-Government* condition on collective efficacy (systems change). The coefficient of 41.56 indicates that, when measured on a scale from 0–100, participants in the control condition scored an average of 41.56 on collective efficacy (systems change). The coefficient of 6.20 indicates that participants in the *Popular Self-Government* condition scored an average of 47.76 (41.56 + 6.20) on collective efficacy (systems change). The P value of <.05 indicates that the coefficient for the *Popular Self-Government* condition is significantly different—in this case, significantly higher—than the coefficient of the control condition.

Collective Efficacy (systems change)

Condition	Coefficient	P value
Null control	41.56	
Popular self-government	6.20	.002

As with all research, it is important to remember that results are based on a sample of the population, not the entire population. As such, all results are subject to margins of error.

Focus Groups

As discussed above (see p. 14), FrameWorks researchers conducted nine focus groups, six participants each (total 54), divided by partisan affiliation (three sessions composed of Democrats and participants who lean Democratic, three sessions with Republicans and participants who lean Republican, and three sessions mixed across Democrats, Republicans, and Independents). Sessions were mixed along other demographics, including age, gender, income, education, and residential location, and oversampled people of color.

The sessions began with open-ended discussion of the state of the country, to elicit top-of-mind thinking. Researchers then introduced a short statement priming the system is rigged mindset:

> *In America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Our system concentrates power and wealth in the hands of the few, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them.*

Researchers facilitated a conversation about this idea to understand how participants made sense of it and whether and why they agreed or disagreed with it.

The sessions proceeded to an activity around who is responsible for rigging the system (i.e., villains; we use this term here to identify the concept, though this language was not introduced by moderators during sessions). Participants were split into breakout groups, with each group assigned one of two villains—"politicians" or "corporations." Each group prepared and then gave a short presentation explaining why their assigned villain is responsible for rigging the system. Facilitators then moderated a conversation around which presentation was more compelling and why.

The next activity was around solutions that would "unrig" the system. Participants were again split into breakout groups. The first group was asked to think of "a big, ambitious solution" that would "unrig the system." They were given the following list of ideas they could use or ignore:

- Publicly fund all local, state, and federal campaigns.
- Change the Constitution to restructure our system of government.
- Make cash payments to Black Americans affected by the legacy of slavery and segregation.

- Unionize industries and set wages across all companies in each industry.
- Create a maximum wage (e.g., 100 percent tax on all income above $500,000).
- Have the government take over production of key goods.
- Cancel all consumer debt.

The second breakout group was asked to think of a "feasible, doable solution" that would "make a difference." They were given the following list of ideas to use or ignore as they saw fit:

- Regulate campaign spending to be more transparent.
- Strengthen voting protections.
- Enforce laws against racial discrimination in the workplace.
- Protect collective bargaining rights for labor unions.
- Raise the minimum wage to $15 per hour.
- Increase the corporate tax rate (e.g., from 21 to 25 percent).
- Regulate credit card companies to limit excessive interest rates.

Each group then prepared and gave a presentation about their solution and how it would help. The facilitator then moderated a conversation about which solutions were most compelling and why.

In the final activity, facilitators shared the following message with participants, which was drafted to capture typical right-wing populist talk about rigged systems:[16]

> *Powerful elites and institutions have manipulated the system, letting in illegal immigrants and handing power to radical organizations that are undermining American values. Big Tech has vaporized dissent. Political operatives have shamelessly manipulated the voting process to steal the vote, supported by mainstream media outlets pushing a woke agenda.*
>
> *We must take back control and thwart the radical left that is threatening us. We need to end voter fraud, crack down on immigration, break up Big Tech, and lock up corrupt politicians. If we don't, the system will continue to be rigged against ordinary Americans and will destroy our way of life.*

Facilitators led a brief conversation to understand how participants made sense and reacted to this message, including whether they agreed with it and why or why not.

Analysis of the sessions included cultural mindsets analysis and frame analysis. Cultural mindsets analysis identified patterns in talk, the ways in which participants connected or failed to connect topics, and what was included and left out of conversations. Analysis then looked to identify the underlying assumptions that could explain these patterns in talk. Researchers drew upon past research to see how known mindsets appeared in conversation, while focusing on how the *system is rigged mindset* was applied and contested.

Frame analysis involved identification of patterns in participants' responses to different ways of talking about rigged systems. Researchers focused on how participants responded to particular language (e.g., in the initial short statement) as well as how the introduction of new concepts (e.g., villains or solutions) affected the conversation. Analysis primarily focused on patterns

in talk as a reflection of participants' thinking, although analysts also attended to the ways in which group conversation and social dynamics influenced whether and how participants engaged in particular conversations.

Appendix B: Tested Frames

Below, we list message treatments included in each of the four experimental surveys. For length reasons, we've included only the messages discussed in this report. Several additional messages were tested but did not generate clear findings.

Experimental Survey #1

Base Message

In America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Our system concentrates power and wealth in the hands of the few, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them.

Base + Explanation of the Problem

In America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Our system concentrates power and wealth in the hands of the few, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them.

The system is rigged in many ways. For example, our campaign finance system works against the public interest by allowing a small number of people to buy influence over elected officials. As a result, the government helps corporations profit at the expense of the rest of us by cutting taxes for people at the top, weakening labor unions, and letting employers avoid paying decent benefits. As wealth is concentrated in a few hands, there's even less of a check on the powerful. This leaves the rest of us without a real say over our own lives and without a fair shot in life.

Base + Naming Villains

In America, powerful corporations, dishonest politicians, and unprincipled media organizations have rigged the system to benefit themselves at the expense of the many. These unaccountable elites have hijacked our system to concentrate power and wealth in their own hands, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them. Corporations, politicians, and media have used their wealth and power to manipulate the system so it benefits them rather than the rest of us.

Base + Explanation of Solutions

In America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Our system concentrates power and wealth in the hands of the few, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them.

We can rebalance power in American society and transform the system so it works for all of us. We can publicly fund political campaigns so candidates can't be bought. By taxing the ultra-rich and

breaking up corporate monopolies, we can make sure no one has so much money that they can bend the rules in their favor. And we can strengthen the power of the many by protecting the right to vote and strengthening labor unions. By changing the system, we can take back control over our lives and make sure everyone has a fair shot.

Base + Explanation of the Problem + Explanation of Solutions

In America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Our system concentrates power and wealth in the hands of the few, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them.

The system is rigged in many ways. For example, our campaign finance system works against the public interest by allowing a small number of people to buy influence over elected officials. As a result, the government helps corporations profit at the expense of the rest of us by cutting taxes for people at the top, weakening labor unions, and letting employers avoid paying decent benefits. As wealth is concentrated in a few hands, there's even less of a check on the powerful. This leaves the rest of us without a real say over our own lives and without a fair shot in life.

We can rebalance power in American society and transform the system so it works for all of us. We can publicly fund political campaigns so candidates can't be bought. By taxing the ultra-rich and breaking up corporate monopolies, we can make sure no one has so much money that they can bend the rules in their favor. And we can strengthen the power of the many by protecting the right to vote and strengthening labor unions. By changing the system, we can take back control over our lives and make sure everyone has a fair shot.

Base + Explanation of the Problem + Explanation of Solutions + Naming Villains

In America, powerful corporations, dishonest politicians, and unprincipled media organizations have rigged the system to benefit themselves at the expense of the many. These unaccountable elites have hijacked our system to concentrate power and wealth in their own hands, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them. Corporations, politicians, and media have used their wealth and power to manipulate the system so it benefits them rather than the rest of us.

These elites have rigged the system in many ways. For example, corporations and wealthy people have used their power to create a campaign finance system that allows them to buy influence, so unprincipled elected officials serve the interests of people at the top rather than the public interest. As a result, political elites help their corporate cronies profit at the expense of the rest of us by cutting taxes for people at the top, weakening labor unions, and letting employers avoid paying decent benefits. By concentrating wealth in their own hands, corporations and wealthy people further limit our ability to check their power. This leaves the rest of us without a real say over our own lives and without a fair shot in life.

We can make the system work for all of us by taking back power from these unaccountable elites. We can limit the influence of powerful corporations by publicly funding political campaigns so

candidates can't be bought. By taxing the ultra-rich and breaking up corporate monopolies, we can make sure no wealthy person or corporation has so much money that they can bend the rules in their favor. And we can strengthen the power of the many by protecting the right to vote and strengthening labor unions. By changing the system, we can take back control from powerful corporations, dishonest politicians, and unprincipled media organizations and make sure everyone has a fair shot.

Experimental Survey #2

Specific Billionaires as Villains

Billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Howard Schultz Have Rigged the System to Work for Them
In America, billionaires like Jeff Bezos, Howard Schultz, and Warren Buffett have rigged the system to benefit themselves at the expense of the rest of us. These billionaires have rigged the economic system so they can set the terms under which we live and work, and they've rigged our system of government so they can buy influence to protect their wealth and power. Bezos, Schultz, and other billionaires undermine our collective power by pitting us against each other, fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live. To unrig the system, we must reduce the economic and political power of ultra-rich billionaires like Bezos and Schultz and increase our power to shape our own lives.

Specific Corporations as Villains

Large Corporations like Amazon and Starbucks Have Rigged the System to Work for Them
In America, large corporations like Amazon, Starbucks, and Goldman Sachs have rigged the system to benefit themselves and their shareholders at the expense of the rest of us. These corporations have rigged the economic system so they can set the terms under which we live and work, and they have rigged our system of government so these companies and their executives can buy influence to protect their wealth and power. Amazon, Starbucks, and other big companies undermine our collective power by pitting us against each other, fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live. To unrig the system, we must reduce the economic and political power of companies like Amazon and Starbucks and increase our power to shape our own lives.

Large Corporations as Villains (general, no specific corporations named)

Large Corporations Have Rigged the System to Work for Them
In America, large corporations have rigged the system to benefit themselves and their shareholders at the expense of the rest of us. These corporations have rigged the economic system so they can set the terms under which we live and work, and they have rigged our system of government so these companies and their executives can buy influence to protect their wealth and power. Corporations undermine our collective power by pitting us against each other, fueling divisions based on how

much money we have, our race, and where we live. To unrig the system, we must reduce the economic and political power of big companies and increase our power to shape our own lives.

Solidarity

We Must Come Together Across our Differences to Unrig the System

As a society, we know that the only way to create the world we want is by coming together across our differences. When we run into challenges or people try to keep us down, it's by acting together that we can change things. This means recognizing what we have in common and also our different needs, and coming together to do right by all of us and each of us.

We need to come together now to change our rigged system. In America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Our economic system allows corporations to set the terms under which we live and work, and our system of government allows the powerful few to buy influence to protect their wealth and power. The system undermines our collective power by pitting us against each other, fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live.

The only way to unrig the system is to come together across our differences. By recognizing both our common and different needs and acting together for each other, we can take on those who are working to keep us down. Coming together is the only way we can reduce the economic and political power of the few and take back the power to shape our own lives.

Popular Self-Government

We Must Reclaim Popular Power and Unrig the System

As a society, we believe that the power lies with the people. We have the right to govern ourselves collectively, and nothing can happen without our consent. This means that what happens in society is up to us.

We need to take back our collective decision-making power and change our rigged system. Right now, in America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Our economic system allows corporations to set the terms under which we live and work, and our system of government allows the powerful few to buy influence to protect their wealth and power. The system undermines our collective power by pitting us against each other, fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live.

To unrig the system, we must reclaim our power to govern ourselves from those who are working to keep us down. To make collective self-government a reality, we must reduce the economic and political power of the few and take back the power to shape our own lives.

Freedom from Domination

To Be Free from Domination, We Must Unrig the System

As a society, we believe that no one has a natural right to rule over others. We should all be free from domination by the powerful. This means that we shouldn't have to live according to the whim of

powerful people and do what they tell us to do.

We need to reject the illegitimate rule of the few and change our rigged system. Right now, in America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Our economic system allows corporations to set the terms under which we live and work, and our system of government allows the powerful few to buy influence to protect their wealth and power. The system undermines our collective power by pitting us against each other, fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live.

To unrig the system, we must resist the domination of the few. To be free from domination, we must reduce the economic and political power of the few and take back the power to shape our own lives.

Experimental Survey #3

Spotlight Explanation: How Unions Secure Contracts

In America, most of us, no matter our skin color, faith or where we come from, want to have a good job and live a good life. But, at the moment, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Corporations have too much influence in this country. They rig the system against workers by keeping wages low and by threatening to fire workers who try to change things. They do their best to make it more difficult to form or join unions, lobby against rules they don't like—often at the expense of workers—and deliberately outsource key operations in order to sidestep their responsibilities as an employer.

It doesn't have to be this way. By joining together in unions, working people win the right to negotiate a contract with their employer to secure better pay, benefits and working conditions. The contract is legally binding and employers can't change things without negotiating with union members. When union members win better contracts, other employers have to match those contracts in order to keep up, which raises standards across an entire industry. And, when we take part in contract negotiations, we can then leverage the power we have through the union to demand bigger changes that benefit everyone—such as improved wages, better healthcare and retirement, and holding corporate employers to account. When working people unite in organizations like unions, we can use our strength in numbers to shift the balance of power so that all of us have what we need.

Spotlight Explanation: How Strikes Help Unions Counter Corporate Power

In America, most of us, no matter our skin color, faith or where we come from, want to have a good job and live a good life. At the moment, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many, but it doesn't have to be this way. When we come together we can make huge changes.

That's why so many union members are going on strike. People working in some of the biggest industries in the country—from UPS drivers to writers in Hollywood—are demanding improved wages, benefits and safer working conditions. They know that striking is the most powerful tool working people have, because their work is what makes our country run. When they join together to bring our country's industries to a standstill, the wealthy and powerful have to listen. When working people unite in organizations like unions, we can use our strength in numbers to shift the balance of power so that all of us have what we need.

Experimental Survey #4

Fairness

To Give Everyone a Fair Chance, We Must Unrig the System

As a society, we believe in fairness. Our outcomes in life should depend on what we do, not who we are or where we come from. This means that how we do in life shouldn't be determined by the circumstances we're born into.

We need to give everyone a fair chance and change our rigged system. Right now, in America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Our economic system allows corporations to set the terms under which we live and work, and our system of government allows the powerful few to buy influence to protect their wealth and power. The system pits us against each other, undermining our chances of success in life while fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live.

To make fairness a reality, we must unrig the system. To give us all a fair chance, no matter who we are or where we come from, we must change how the system works.

Common Good

To Advance the Common Good, We Must Unrig the System

As a society, we believe in the common good. We should prioritize the good of society as a whole, not our own self-interests. This means that our collective decisions should advance the common good, not private interests.

We need to advance the public interest and change our rigged system. Right now, in America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Our economic

system allows corporations to set the terms under which we live and work, and our system of government allows the powerful few to buy influence to protect their wealth and power. The system pits us against each other, undermining our chances of success in life while fueling divisions based on how much money we have, our race, and where we live.

To advance the common good, we must unrig the system. To pursue the public good over private interests, we must change how the system works.

The Economy as a Rigged System—by Design

Our Economic System Is Designed to Give Corporations Power over Us

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others. Yet our economic system is rigged, by design, to give corporations power over us. We need to come together to build a new economic system where we are free from domination and have the power to shape our own lives.

Our economic system is designed to allow corporations to gather extreme wealth and power. Their size and power lets them crush competition and raise prices. It allows them to stop us from coming together in labor unions, so we can't negotiate a fair wage. By putting us in competition for jobs, the system fuels division by income, race, and place, so we can't come together to challenge corporate power.

We must come together across our differences to resist domination and demand a new economic system. We can start by taxing the ultra-rich, breaking up corporate monopolies, and strengthening labor unions. This will lay the groundwork for a new system in which we have the power to shape our own lives.

The Economy as a Rigged System—as Violation

Our Economic System Is Being Twisted to Give Corporations Power over Us

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others. Our economic system is built on the promise of freedom from domination. Yet right now, corporations are rigging the system to give them power over us. We need to come together to fix our economic system so it lives up to its promise and we have the power to shape our own lives.

Corporations are manipulating our economic system to gather extreme wealth and power. Their size and power lets them crush competition and raise prices. It allows them to stop us from coming together in labor unions, so we can't negotiate a fair wage. By twisting the system to make us compete for jobs, corporations fuel division by income, race, and place so we can't come together to challenge their power.

We must come together across our differences to resist domination and demand that the economic system lives up to its promises. We can start by taxing the ultra-rich, breaking up corporate monopolies, and strengthening labor unions. This will help fix the system so we can shape our own lives.

The Political System as a Rigged System—by Design

Our Political System Is Designed to Limit Popular Power

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others. Yet our system of government was rigged, by design, to keep power in the hands of the few and limit the power of the people. We need to come together to build a new political system where we are free from domination and we, the people, decide what happens.

Our system of government was designed to limit popular power. Both houses of Congress and the President have to agree for a law to be passed, which makes it hard to act on popular demands. There are two senators from every state, no matter their size, so senators representing a minority of voters can stop popular bills. And if popular bills do pass, the unelected Supreme Court can strike them down.

We must come together across our differences and demand a new political system where the people have the power. We can start by banning large contributions to political campaigns, establishing term limits for Supreme Court justices, and changing elections so more political parties can win congressional seats. This will help lay the groundwork for a new system where we truly govern ourselves.

The Political System as a Rigged System—as Violation

Our System of Government Is Being Twisted to Limit Popular Power

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others. Our system of government was founded on the promise of being by and for the people. Yet right now, the powerful few are rigging the system to keep power in their hands and limit the power of the people. We need to come together to fix our political system so it lives up to its founding promise.

Powerful groups with lots of money are manipulating our system of government to limit popular power. Both houses of Congress and the President have to agree for a law to be passed, which corporations and other powerful interests are using to thwart popular demands. There are two senators from every state, no matter their size, and senators representing a minority of voters are misusing this power to stop popular bills. And when popular bills do pass, the unelected Supreme Court twists the law and strikes them down.

We must come together across our differences to resist domination and demand that the political system lives up to its promises. We can start by banning large contributions to political campaigns, establishing term limits for Supreme Court justices, and changing elections so more political parties can win congressional seats. This will help fix the system so we can truly govern ourselves.

Racism as a Rigged System—by Design

Our Society Is Designed to Let Wealthy White People Rule

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others. Yet our society is rigged, by design, to give wealthy white people power over Black, Native, and other people of color. We need to come together to build a new social system where all of us are free from domination and have the power to shape our own lives.

Our society was designed to let wealthy white people rule and to limit the power of people of color. Our Constitution was written by and for slaveholders, and our economic system still depends on paying Black people and immigrants of color low wages for essential work like child care and home care. The United States was built on land stolen from Native Americans, and the US continues to let corporations profit from this land by taking natural resources like oil. From its founding, our political system denied Black and Native people political rights, and it continues to deny them equal representation

We must come together across our differences to resist domination and demand a new social system. We can start by enforcing anti-discrimination and voting rights laws, heavily taxing inherited wealth, and creating "baby bonds" that give all children a nest egg at birth. This will lay the groundwork for a new system in which all of us, including Black, Native, and other people of color, have the power to shape our own lives.

Racism as a Rigged System—as Violation

Our Society Is Being Twisted to Let Wealthy White People Rule

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others. Our society is built on the promise of freedom from domination. Yet right now, wealthy white people are rigging the system to maintain power over Black, Native, and other people of color. We need to come together to fix our social system so it lives up to its promise and we all have the power to shape our own lives.

Wealthy white people are manipulating society to keep power and to limit the power of people of color. Slavery violated our society's basic promises and was abolished, yet our economic system still depends on paying Black people and immigrants of color low wages for essential work like child care and home care. By stealing land from Native Americans, the United States violated our core principles, yet corporations continue to profit from this land by taking natural resources like oil. The Founders promised equal freedom, but fell short by denying Black and Native people political rights. And today, wealthy white people continue to prevent equal representation in order to maintain power.

We must come together across our differences to resist domination and demand that society lives up to its promises. We can start by enforcing anti-discrimination and voting rights laws, heavily taxing inherited wealth, and creating "baby bonds" that give all children a nest egg at birth. This will help fix our society so that all of us, including Black, Native, and other people of color, have the power to shape our own lives.

Ambitious, Larger-Scale Solutions

We Need to Make Big Changes to Unrig the System

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others, but we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Corporations set the terms under which we live and work and the powerful few use the government to protect their wealth and power. To free ourselves from domination and gain the power to shape our own lives, we need to make fundamental changes to society.

Big changes would rebalance power in fundamental ways:

- A maximum wage that caps income and a heavy tax on wealth would do away with extreme wealth and the power that comes with it.
- Changing our electoral system so more political parties can win congressional seats would give everyone the power to be represented in government.
- Creating "baby bonds" that give all children a large nest egg at birth would give people the power to shape their own lives and reduce the racial wealth gap.
- Term limits for the Supreme Court would stop unelected judges from overturning popular policies.

By making big changes, we can get out from under the thumb of the powerful few and claim the power to shape our own lives. Going big is important if we truly want to change things.

Feasible, Smaller-Scale Solutions

We Can Start to Unrig the System through Changes that Are in Reach Now

As a society, we believe no one has a natural right to rule over others, but we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the rest of us. Corporations set the terms under which we live and work and the powerful few use the government to protect their wealth and power. To free ourselves from domination and gain the power to shape our own lives, we need to make achievable, realistic changes *now*.

Realistic changes would begin to rebalance power:

- Raising taxes on the highest incomes and increasing taxes on inherited wealth would put some limits on extreme wealth and the power that goes with it.
- Public funding for political campaigns would make it possible for anyone to run for office
- Raising the minimum wage would give people more of an ability to shape their own lives.
- Enforcing anti-discrimination laws and voting rights laws would limit racial discrimination.

By making realistic changes that are in reach now, we can begin to get out from under the thumb of the powerful few and claim the power to shape our own lives. Doing what is possible *now* is important if we truly want to change things.

Appendix C: Survey Items

Several adjustments were made to survey items between surveys, to improve measures, but the set of outcomes was generally consistent across Surveys 1, 2, and 4. Survey 3 included several batteries focused specifically on unions, and it included some but not all of the measures included in the other surveys. The version of survey items below is from Survey 4, unless otherwise noted.

Initial Reactions *(not presented in null control conditions)*

1. In one or two sentences, please summarize what you have just read.
   [provide open-ended text box, 50 character minimum]

2. Do you generally agree or disagree with what you read?
   [seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"]

Type 1: Collective Efficacy

Collective Efficacy—Systems Change

1. In your opinion, how realistic is it for our society to change for the better?
   [seven-point Likert scale: "Not at all realistic," "Slightly realistic," "Somewhat realistic," "Moderately realistic," "Very realistic," "Extremely realistic," "Totally realistic"]

2. How confident are you that our political system can be changed for the better?
   [five-point Likert scale: "Not at all confident," "Slightly confident," "Somewhat confident," "Moderately confident," "Very confident," "Extremely confident," "Totally confident"]

3. How confident are you that our economic system can be changed for the better?
   [five-point Likert scale: "Not at all confident," "Slightly confident," "Somewhat confident," "Moderately confident," "Very confident," "Extremely confident," "Totally confident"]

Collective Efficacy—Fair Outcomes

1. In your opinion, how realistic is it for us to have a society in which everyone has the opportunity to do well in life? *[seven-point Likert scale: "Not at all realistic," "Slightly realistic," "Somewhat realistic," "Moderately realistic," "Very realistic," "Extremely realistic," "Totally realistic"]*

2. How optimistic or pessimistic are you that we can have a society where all people are treated fairly? *[seven-point Likert scale: "Very pessimistic," "Pessimistic," "Somewhat pessimistic," "Neither pessimistic nor optimistic," "Somewhat optimistic," "Optimistic," "Very optimistic"]*

3. How confident are you that our society can work well for everyone? *[five-point Likert scale: "Not at all confident," "Slightly confident," "Somewhat confident," "Moderately confident," "Very confident," "Extremely confident," "Totally confident"]*

Type 2: Policy Support and Systems Change

Support for Policies

To what extent do you support or oppose the following policies? *[seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly oppose," "Oppose," "Somewhat oppose," "Neither oppose nor favor," "Somewhat favor," "Favor," "Strongly favor"]*

Subscale 1: Progressive Policies

1. Break up big corporations that hold monopolies.

2. Raise the federal minimum wage to $20 per hour.

3. Change labor laws to make it easier for workers to form or join a union.

4. Limit corporate contributions to political candidates.

5. Establish term limits for members of the U.S. Supreme Court.

6. Invest a "nest egg" of money for all children at birth, to be accessed when they turn 18.

7. Increase the tax on inheritances of over $2 million to a 70% rate.

8. Expand the number of polling places on American Indian reservations.

Subscale 2: Conservative Policies

9. Cut the corporate tax rate by 20%.

10. Add work requirements to government programs like food stamps and Medicaid.

11. Reduce government regulations on businesses.

12. Ban public schools from teaching about gender identity.

13. Cut the rate of total immigration to the U.S. in half.

14. Make it easier for employers to punish employees who participate in strikes.

Support for Systemic Change

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: *[seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"]*

Subscale 1: Societal Change

1. Our society needs to be radically restructured.

2. We need to make fundamental changes to how our society works.

3. We need to remake our society in major ways.

Subscale 2: Political System Change

1. We need to make major changes to our political system.

2. Our system of government needs to be remade from the ground up.

3. We should radically change our political system.

Subscale 3: Economic System Change

1. We need to change our economic system from the ground up.

2. We should make major changes to our economic system.

3. The rules of our economy need to be fundamentally rewritten.

Support for Unions *(Survey 3 only)*

1. Imagine two candidates are running for office. Candidate A has a record of supporting policies that make it easier to form labor unions. Candidate B does not have a record of supporting these policies. How likely would you be to **vote for Candidate A over Candidate B?** *[seven-point Likert scale: "Extremely unlikely," "Unlikely," "Somewhat unlikely," "Neither likely nor unlikely," "Somewhat likely," "Likely," "Extremely likely"]*

2. Suppose you learned that a candidate for Congress was actively trying to pass policies that would make it easier for corporations to stop their workers from unionizing. Knowing this information, how likely would you be to support this candidate? *[seven-point Likert scale: "Extremely unlikely," "Unlikely," "Somewhat unlikely," "Neither likely nor unlikely," "Somewhat likely," "Likely," "Extremely likely"] (reverse coded)*

3. When you hear about a dispute between management and a labor union, which side do you generally tend to favor? *[seven-point Likert scale: "Side much more with management," "Side more with management," "Side somewhat more with management," "Side with neither," "Side somewhat more with the union," "Side more with the union," "Side much more with the union"]*

4. In general, do you support or oppose labor union strikes when they occur? *[seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly oppose," "Oppose," "Somewhat oppose," "Neither oppose nor support," "Somewhat support," "Support," "Strongly support"]*

Union Impact *(Survey 3 only)*

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below: *[seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"]*

1. Unions have a positive impact on the economy.

2. Unions balance out the power of big corporations.

3. Unions improve wages and benefits for their members.

4. All working people benefit from labor unions.

5. Unions cause more trouble than they're worth. *(reverse coded)*

6. Unions were needed in the past, but are less relevant today. *(reverse coded)*

7. Unions make things worse for workers. *(reverse coded)*

Type 3: Exclusionary/Inclusionary Attitudes

Attitudes toward Immigrants

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. [*seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"*]

Xenophobia (Surveys 1 and 2)

1. Immigrants are a burden on American taxpayers.

2. Immigrants are a threat to our national security.

3. There are too many immigrants in the U.S.

4. Immigrants should be given the same rights as native citizens. *(reverse coded)*

Positive Attitudes toward Immigrants (Survey 4)

1. Immigrants make our country a better place to live.

2. The cultural life of our country is better because of immigrants.

3. Immigrants make us feel part of a bigger world.

4. Immigrants should have the same opportunities as those of us who were born in the U.S.

Antisemitism

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. [*seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"*]

1. Jewish business people go out of their way to hire other Jews.

2. Jewish people have too much power in the business world.

3. Jews are more loyal to Israel than to America.

Type 4: Authoritarian Attitudes

Authoritarian Attitudes

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. *[seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"]*

1. Our country needs a powerful leader who can destroy the radical and immoral currents in society today.

2. If we want to uphold law and order, we need strong leaders to crack down on crime and immorality.

3. What our country really needs instead of more "civil rights" is a good stiff dose of law and order.

4. We need strong leaders who can eliminate all the troublemakers that are causing trouble in our society.

5. Our leaders are justified in using strong force against people who are a threat to authority.

Type 5: Mindset Endorsement

Unproductive Mindsets

Pathologizing Black Culture Cultural Mindset

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. *[seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"]*

1. Black inner-city communities would do better if they took responsibility for their lives rather than relying on welfare.

2. The reason why poor urban communities are poor is because they don't value hard work.

3. If poor families want to do better, they should stop having children that they cannot afford.

Market Naturalism Cultural Mindset

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. *[seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"]*

1. Who benefits in our economy is determined naturally by the free market.

2. The free market just works well, naturally.

3. Our economy naturally generates wealth.

4. If the economy is left to work on its own, it will naturally produce what we need.

Limited Government **Cultural Mindset**

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. *[seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"]*

1. Government should limit itself to protecting human health and safety, and shouldn't be in the business of providing for people's other needs.
2. Receiving benefits from the government, like subsidized housing or food, makes people less likely to get a job or work hard.
3. Private individuals and organizations, such as businesses, generally produce better outcomes for society than the government does.
4. Government should be hands off when it comes to the economy.
5. Government should play a limited role in our lives.

Personalism (about Government) **Cultural Mindset**

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. *[seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"]*

1. What the government does is a direct reflection of the character of our leaders.
2. When government doesn't work well, it's because bad people are in charge.
3. Problems with how our government works are solely the result of the character of our leaders.
4. If we replaced our current leaders with better people, the government would work well.

Productive Mindsets

Economic Design **Cultural Mindset**

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. *[seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"]*

1. The laws and policies we make determine how our economy works.
2. Policy choices determine who does and doesn't benefit in our economy.
3. Economic inequality exists because of choices our society has made about how our economy will work.
4. Our laws and policies decide how much power corporations have.
5. Economic inequality is the result of the laws and policies our government has put into place.
6. Our laws and policies are the reason why some people are much wealthier than others.

Expansive Government **Cultural Mindset**

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. *[seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"]*

1. It is government's job to provide individuals with the resources and services they need.
2. Government should play a large role in shaping how our economy works.
3. Government should do whatever it takes to make sure people have what they need.

Institutionalism (about Government) **Cultural Mindset**

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the statements below. [seven-point Likert scale: "Strongly disagree," "Disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Neither disagree nor agree," "Somewhat agree," "Agree," "Strongly agree"]

1. When government doesn't work well, it's because the political system is poorly designed.
2. If we redesigned our political system, our government could work much better.
3. If we changed major aspects of our political system, our government could work much better.
4. Our government has problems because of the way our political system is set up.

Appendix D: Additional Evidence for Findings

Figure 15 shows the effects among Republican participants of *racism as a rigged system* framing on positive attitudes toward immigrants and the *economic design* mindset.

Figure 15: Effects of *racism as a rigged system* framing on other outcomes (Republican Sample)
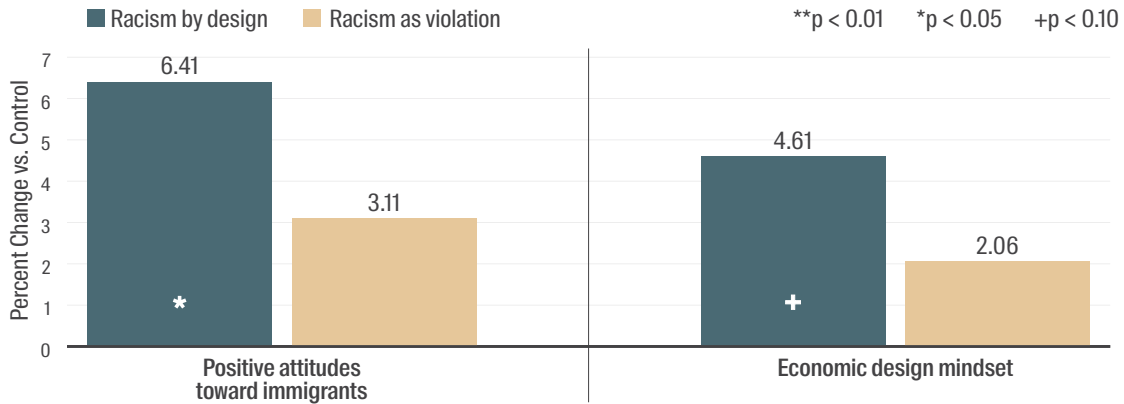
Endnotes

1. See, for example, Scheiring, G. (2024, June 26). *Populism can degrade democracy but is on the rise – here's what causes this political movement and how it can be weakened.* The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/populism-can-degrade-democracy-but-is-on-the-rise-heres-what-causes-this-political-movement-and-how-it-can-be-weakened-222323

2. See, for example, Peters, B.G., & Pierre, J. (2020). A typology of populism: Understanding the different forms of populism and their implications. *Democratization* 27 (6). https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1751615

3. Volmert, A., O'Neil, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., & Sweetland, J. (2016). *Mixing it up: Reframing neighborhood socioeconomic diversity.* FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2020/03/Knight_MessageMemo_Final_2016.pdfRaise the Age. https://raisetheage.org.au/

4. For more information, see FrameWorks Institute. (2022). *How is culture changing in this time of social upheaval? Findings from the Culture Change Project.* https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2022/06/Culture-Change-Report.pdf

5. For more information, see Volmert, A., Gerstein Pineau, M., & Cohen, E. (2023). *By and for the people? Cultural mindsets of democracy and the US political system: A Culture Change Project report.* FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2023/12/FWI_CCP-2023-Democracy-v2c-12.15.pdf

6. Percentages are from the February 2024 survey.

7. For more on mindsets and how they work, see FrameWorks Institute. (2020). *Mindset shifts: What are they? Why do they matter? How do they happen? A FrameWorks Strategic Report.* https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2021/02/FRAJ8064-Mindset-Shifts-200612-WEB.pdf

8. For more on this danger, see FrameWorks Institute Culture Change Project. (2024). The state of American Culture, 2023–2024, p. 6. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2024/10/FWI-CCP-2024-Update-Report-FINAL.pdf

9. This earlier conversation centered on the following message: "In America, we live in a system that is rigged to benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Our system concentrates power and wealth in the hands of the few, and they're using this influence to gather more power so they can make society work for them." In this conversation, participants discussed the meaning of this message. Is it true? What is "the system"? Who are "the few" and "the many"? This conversation was then followed by a conversation that focused on the powerful few rigging the system and involved consideration of politicians' and corporations' roles, specifically.

10. Several adjustments were made to survey items between surveys to improve measures, but the set of outcomes was generally consistent across surveys. Only survey 3 included the batteries on support for unions and union impact, and it included some but not all of the measures included in the other surveys.

11. The racism by design message also moved a couple of other outcomes among Republican participants, increasing positive attitudes toward immigrants and strengthening endorsement of the economic design mindset—the assumption that the economy is designed through policy choices and governmental decisions. These results provide further evidence that framing racism as a rigged system is highly effective with Republicans. See figure 15 in the Appendix D for these results.

12. See Volmert, A., Lyew, D., John, J., Vierra, K., & Moyer, J. (2023). The terrain of spatial justice: Cultural mindsets of race and place in the United States. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2023/09/TerrainofSpacialJustice-Report.pdf

13. See Volmert, A., Lyew, D., John, J., Vierra, K., & Moyer, J. (2023). The terrain of spatial justice: Cultural mindsets of race and place in the United States. FrameWorks Institute, pp. 61-62. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2023/09/TerrainofSpacialJustice-Report.pdf

14. Volmert, A., Gerstein Pineau, M., & Cohen, E. (2023). *By and for the people? Cultural mindsets of democracy and the US political system: A Culture Change Project report. FrameWorks Institute.* https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/app/uploads/2023/12/FWI_CCP-2023-Democracy-v2c-12.15.pdf

15. Due to rounding, the total of some demographic groups may not add up to exactly 100 percent.

16. Language for this frame was adapted from multiple sources, including quotes from Donald Trump and from Mollie Hemingway's book Rigged: How the Media, Big Tech, and Democrats Seized Our Elections.

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Filling in the Blanks

Contesting What "the System is Rigged" Means