



# Framing Threats to Election Integrity

*Findings from Focus Groups and Experimental Survey Research*

## Introduction

In the face of threats to elections that are unprecedented in modern American history, effective framing is critical to increase the salience of threats, help people distinguish between real threats and fabricated ones, and inspire the public to resist illegitimate actions.

This memo reports findings from framing research conducted in June–July 2026 that explored how the public is thinking about election integrity and tested ways of framing threats. This research yields a highly effective framing strategy to navigate and channel public thinking. This strategy consists of: 1) the value of *freedom from domination*, which helps people recognize the danger of authoritarian interference, 2) the example of *resistance to ICE in Minnesota*, which strengthens people’s sense that we can stand up and push back and their sense of what resistance involves.

## Research Base

- **Six focus groups** were conducted June 29–July 7 2026, to explore how the public thinks about election integrity. Demographic quotas were used to ensure a diverse mix of participants across race, political party, gender, income, age, residential location, and education, among other demographics. Black participants were oversampled (46% of participants were Black/African American). Focus groups were conducted virtually, typically with six participants per session.

- **An experimental survey** was conducted June 26–July 8 2026, to test different ways of framing threats to election integrity. Demographic quotas were used to achieve a nationally representative sample, with an oversample of participants of color. The total sample was 1,923. Participants were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Treatment groups read a framed message, while control groups received no message. Participants in all conditions answered a set of survey questions to measure concern about different threats to election integrity, support for relevant policies, feelings of collective efficacy and agency around addressing threats, and intention to engage in resistance if there are attempts to overturn election results. Researchers used multiple regression analysis to determine whether there were significant differences on the outcome measures between each of the experimental frame conditions and the control condition.

## Framing Objectives

Research was designed to identify frames capable of:

1. Increasing concern about genuine threats to election integrity, such as voter intimidation, refusal to certify legitimate votes.
2. Helping people distinguish between real threats and fabricated ones (e.g., voter fraud).
3. Motivating public action to resist attempts to interfere with or overturn elections.
4. Increasing salience of threats to elections without decreasing intent to vote.

## How the Public Thinks about Election Integrity

*Preliminary analysis of focus groups offers key insights into how the US public thinks about election integrity generally, possible threats to election integrity, and what could be done to address those threats.*

### **Finding #1: Baseline level of concern about threats to “free and fair elections” varies widely.**

In response to initial questions about what might threaten free and fair elections in the United States, some participants expressed substantial concerns, while others expressed little worry. Of these six focus groups, a couple of groups displayed little initial concern, while others raised worries about manipulation and access from the start. Many participants seem not to have thought much about threats to the election. As

conversations proceeded and various threats and scenarios about possible interference were introduced, conversations tended to become more concerned and critical.

## **Finding #2: People have a broad view of what threatens free and fair elections and what election integrity involves.**

Throughout focus group conversations, participants moved back and forth between issues that are traditionally considered issues of election integrity—voter intimidation, access to voting, voter fraud, vote rigging, and vote counting “shenanigans” (in the words of one participant)—and broader problems with the electoral process that are often seen as *outside* the scope of election integrity, including misinformation, money in politics, and political corruption in general. This broad view of election integrity is, in many ways, promising: People recognize that there are broader problems with the electoral system that get in the way of fair representation. However, this broad conception of the issue also contributes to a tendency to see problems with elections as nothing new and, in turn, to downplay the new and distinctive threats of the moment.

## **Finding #3: Sometimes, people personalize the problem in ways that exceptionalize the issue.**

There was a tendency for focus group participants to understand threats to election integrity as emanating solely from individual politicians. When participants personalized threats in this way, they implicitly distinguished these irresponsible politicians from the underlying institutions, which they assumed have not fundamentally changed. This contributed to an assumption that even if certain individuals *try* to manipulate results, they won’t succeed because our electoral system will hold.

## **Finding #4: Thinking about resistance was thin.**

When asked about what people like them could do if there was an attempt to overturn the election, focus group participants offered weak suggestions. Sometimes they struggled to come up with ideas at all. When they did come up with suggestions, they focused on calling representatives and posting on social media. Participants occasionally mentioned protesting, but when asked what this involves, they typically offered little in the way of specifics and relied on vague idioms like “making your voice heard.”

## **Finding #5: The idea of ICE deployment at the polls was widely and strongly condemned.**

In focus group sessions, moderators ran through a number of scenarios including voter purging, refusal to certify election results, and the possibility of deployment of ICE agents at polling places. When the idea of

ICE being deployed at polling places was raised, participants almost universally objected immediately, saying that this would be completely inappropriate. Participants quickly agreed that this would be an attempt at voter intimidation.

In the survey experiment, we found that participants overwhelmingly opposed ICE deployment at the polls. On a scale of 1-100 with 1 being most strongly oppose and 100 being most strongly support, the average baseline level of support for deploying ICE at the polls among the full sample was only 25.7 (this falls midway between “oppose” and “strongly oppose” on the Likert scale).

## How to Effectively Frame Threats to Election Integrity

**Use the value of *Freedom from Domination* to help people recognize the danger of authoritarian interference and motivate action.**

As we have found in previous research, the idea of *freedom from domination* helps people put a finger on what’s so troubling about authoritarian encroachment—it places us “under the thumb of” and “at the whim of” people in power. This value taps into people’s increasing concern about abuse of government power. It sounds the alarm about authoritarian encroachment and consolidation, while channeling concern in ways that help people see what’s wrong and offering a model for resistance.

This value can be used to describe the character of the current threats to election integrity. The winning frame included the following language, which uses the value in this way:

Being free means not having to live according to the whims of powerful people. It means not being under the thumb of those in power. When the government acts like it’s above the law, it takes away our freedom by putting us at the whim of people in power.

When the government interferes with elections, it places us under their thumb. If the government makes it harder for people to vote or intimidates voters who don’t agree with them, this takes away our freedom. If the government throws out votes it doesn’t like or tries to overturn election results, our elections aren’t really free.

**Stress our ability to stand up and push back. Invoke the example of *Resistance to ICE in Minnesota* to convey the character of the threat and foster an understanding of what can be done.**

The value of *freedom from domination* is most effective when paired with an example of successful resistance to authoritarian actions. Research indicates that invoking resistance to ICE in Minnesota is highly effective. Combined with *freedom from domination*, it increases concern about relevant threats, builds support for policies that can help with voting access, and increases intention to engage in collective action to resist any attempt to overturn election results.

Tested message language stressed the kinds of actions people took in Minnesota and offered concrete ideas about what people could do that would go beyond the types of weak actions that are otherwise top of mind (e.g. boycotts, not just writing to representatives):

We don’t have to let this happen. We can and must stand up for our freedom. The people of Minnesota showed us this is possible. When ICE threatened, kidnapped, and killed the people of Minnesota, regular people came together. They protested, boycotted, and demanded action from their leaders—and won.

The people of Minnesota proved that when the government puts itself above the law, ordinary people can stand up and push back. If the government tries to put us under their thumb by interfering with elections, we must take action to ensure our freedom.

**Quick-start guide for effectively framing election integrity:**

| Do This:                                                                                                          | Don’t Do This:                                                                                                                                                                                 |
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| DO clarify the source of the threat (e.g., the federal government and its allies at the state and local levels).  | DON’T talk generally about the possibility of “election interference,” which leaves the door open to fabricated stories about the threat (e.g. voter fraud by “illegals”).                     |
| DO describe the threat in broad terms – as a concerted effort involving multiple actors and levels of government. | DON’T focus only on specific individuals. This is likely to lead people to exceptionalize the individual and assume that it’s “only” them and not government institutions broadly that are the |

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|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | danger. Personalizing the problem is likely to lead to underestimation of the threat.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| DO emphasize concrete steps that people can take.                                                                                                                                                                                        | DON'T talk vaguely about "speaking out." This is likely to prompt people to post on social media or talk to friends, but to stop there.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| DO connect freedom to <i>power</i> . Use the language of those in power putting us "under their thumb" to clarify the character of the danger.                                                                                           | DON'T talk generally about "freedom." While this may lead to concern about our liberties, it is less likely to bring to mind the need to use our collective power to bring about our freedom.                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| DO emphasize resistance to ICE in Minnesota as a powerful example of what it looks like to stand up and resist government overreach. This helps people understand what it looks like to stand up to a government acting outside the law. | DON'T ignore the potential pitfalls of centering the threat of ICE being deployed at the polls, which may discourage some voters from turning out – particularly people in mixed-status families or communities that have experienced ICE surges. You can use resistance to ICE as an example of collective action without raising the possibility of ICE involvement in the election. |

## Evidence Base

A message combining *freedom from domination* with the example of *resistance to ICE in Minnesota* was **highly effective with Democrats and had no backfires with Republicans**.

Among the Democratic sample, the message significantly increased:

- Worries about voter intimidation
- Worries about altered ballots
- Worries about refusal to accept election results
- Support for automatic voter registration
- Support for election day registration

The message also significantly increased Democrats' intention to resist attempts to overturn election results. It boosted their willingness to engage in actions including:

- Joining marches and protests insisting that the government accept election results
- Donating to legal organizations working to uphold election results
- Boycotting businesses that support overturning election results

While the message did not generate positive movement among Republicans, it did not backfire with them. It did not decrease concern about election interference, increase support for policies that limit voter access (e.g., voter ID laws) or that might intimidate voters (e.g., deploying ICE at the polls), or decrease support for policies to expand voter access.

The message did not have a significant effect on intention to vote for either group – Democrats or Republicans. While effects were not statistically significant, effects for both groups were positive, suggesting no signs of a backfire effect.