THE VALUES WE SHARE

Views on Government, Fairness, and Equal Protection in the United States

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SUMMARY

Americans across political divides unite around shared aspirations for accountability, compassion, dignity, and opportunity in government—even as they hold distinct understandings of how to bring fairness and equal protection to life.

Equal protection, enshrined in the 14th Amendment, and **fundamental fairness**—a principle woven throughout the Constitution—represent critical cornerstones of America's democratic promise. The Equal Protection Clause arguably marked a profound legal and moral turning point in United States history: from a founding that excluded so many to a vision of democracy meant to include and serve all. These principles continue to define American democracy as foundational ideals while remaining sources of ongoing tension as the nation strives to fulfill these promises in practice.

This research, commissioned by PolicyLink and conducted by Worthy Strategy Group, examined how people define fairness and equal protection; the values they believe should drive governing; and what government must do to actively reflect those values in our democracy, economy, and daily lives.

Participants—of all political backgrounds, racial groups, and geographic regions—are frustrated by a nation that feels like a "rigged game." Nearly everyone perceives a system stacked in favor of the powerful and against everyone else. The most significant divide that emerged in this diagnosis of an inherently unfair system was not left versus right but "them versus us." People across ideologies and attitudes all perceive government as distant, self-serving, and careless—whether by abandoning them through neglect or crushing them through overreach. Fairness and protection feel reserved for the lucky, the connected, or the loudest.

But people do not just share this profound sense of frustration—they also share hopes for the future. We found that people across all backgrounds also share similar visions of what the United States could look like if fundamental fairness and equal protection were fully realized:

- Everyone would have equal opportunity with a fair starting line
- Each person would have a real voice in politics and decision-making
- Society would be unified but diverse while working toward common goals
- There would be balance, peace, and shared responsibility
- Freedom, opportunity, and happiness would be within reach for all

- Society would be built on mutual care and interdependence, where fairness is sustained by collective effort.

Alongside this shared vision, Americans demonstrate striking alignment on four core values that should guide fair government, which transcend partisan lines and geographic divides:

- **Accountability and consistency** (Government applies clear rules, which do not place anyone above the law)
- **Compassion and empathy** (Government exhibits genuine care for people's well-being, especially those who are struggling)
- **Dignity and respect for all** (Government sees, hears, and reflects people, regardless of background, race, class, or identity)
- **Opportunity** (Government provides tools and support for everyone to thrive)

When government operates at its very best, people envision it serving as a protector of justice, unifier, nurturing caretaker, and stabilizing force that ensures equal rules, represents the people, and responds to real community needs.

Though people align around these visions and values, they diverge sharply when it comes to translating these ideals into practice—holding fundamentally different beliefs about what fairness requires and how government should achieve it. The research reveals three lenses through which Americans understand fairness:

- **Opportunity** (everyone should have equal access to succeed)
- **Process** (rules must be applied consistently to everyone)
- **Outcomes** (opportunity needs to lead to stability and dignity; outcomes are proof that fairness is working)

These different lenses illuminate not just ideological differences between groups but intense emotional tensions within individuals. Many people are caught between pride in self-reliance and rage at systemic failure. They fear government control but resent being left on their own. They value equality but wrestle with how to reconcile that with unequal starting points.

As they navigate these tensions, participants repeatedly returned to one core insight: fairness is not static. **The emotional key to navigate some of these tensions is to recognize fairness as balance—not sameness.** People believe fairness should operate as a living system that needs constant balancing: between empathy and accountability, opportunity and effort, universal rules and contextual justice.

Participants emphasized that fairness also requires constant recalibration between what government provides and what people must do, between creating opportunity and removing barriers. Understanding this vision of fairness as a balance of personal and collective responsibility reveals a path forward that resonates broadly.

HOW WE CONDUCTED THIS RESEARCH

Worthy Strategy Group spoke to participants using a metaphor elicitation technique. As part of the metaphor elicitation technique, participants first spent several hours gathering images that resonated with them in response to prompts. Then, trained interviewers met with participants for an 75-minute in-depth discussion about their thoughts and beliefs, in what is often described as feeling like a therapy session. Researchers spent extensive time analyzing the deep beliefs and metaphors that emerged.

This metaphorical approach was designed around the way people think and the way thought is structured, leveraging best practices from psychology and neuroscience to give participants the time and space to share what matters most to them in an unfiltered manner.

The 48-person sample was demographically and ideologically diverse. Participants were drawn from attitudinal segments developed by PolicyLink through four years of research, based on factor analysis of four key belief dimensions:

- The degree to which people experience racism in their own lives
- Whether people think we have a collective responsibility to end racism
- The degree to which people think racism and inequality are structural problems
- Whether people have a more individualistic or collective worldview

FIGURE 1

Six Attitudinal Segments for the United States Population

Attitudinal Segment	Description	Number of Participants
Antiracism Progressives	Progressive on all questions; intensely support government action to address structural racism; highly collective in worldview. Mostly multiracial, urban, young, and highly educated.	8
Sympathetic Liberals	Recognize structural inequality and support action to address it but rarely experience or observe racism directly. Mostly white Democrats with about half living in suburbs.	8
Diverse Strivers	Highly aware of and critical of racism, and support government action but also emphasize individual action to improve communities. Many are people of color or immigrants and are lower-income.	8
Concerned Conservatives	Acknowledge racism exists and recognize a responsibility to address it but remain skeptical of government action and are mixed on race-conscious policies. The second most white and rural group; half identify as Republicans and one quarter as Democrats.	8
Individualists	View racism as an individual attitude and believe that the US does a good job on equality; resist collective action to address inequality or racism. Tend to be older, 75% white.	8
Racism Skeptics	Intensely oppose action to address racism and inequality; rate the US very high in providing equal opportunity. Nearly all white and majority male.	8

All of the illustrations in this report are meant to reflect concepts that were conveyed in the images shared by participants as part of the research.

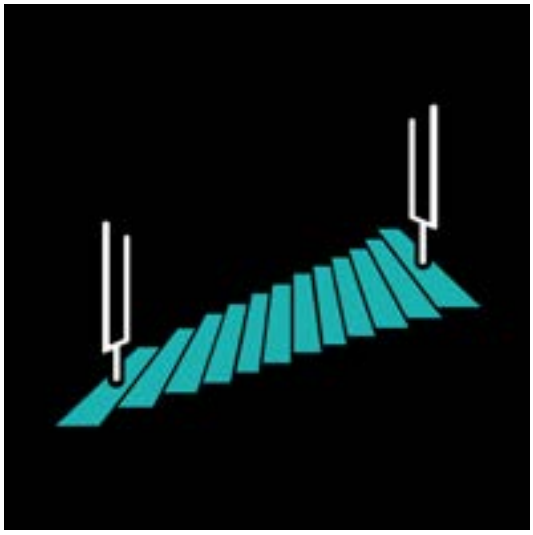
A SHARED DIAGNOSIS OF A "RIGGED GAME"

Across race, ideology, and geography, Americans share a troubling consensus: life in the United States feels like a "rigged game." People want to believe in a nation where rules are fair and protection is for all. But nearly everyone, regardless of ideology, perceives a system tilted in favor of the powerful and against everyone else. Democracy does not feel representative, and the economy is not built for everyday people. People must fight for what should be guaranteed.

> "People can't even get their basic needs taken care of, and then they see a calm ocean of wealth and power and great medical care. In the meantime, the rich people are like, 'You know what? Take away their medical care and their social security. They don't need those entitlements. Give me some of that money.' ... That's just going to cause more and more lightning, more and more turmoil in the sky."
>
> *—Sympathetic Liberal, Rural*

While people differ on the specific sources of unfairness—some pointing to racial injustice, others to economic inequality—nearly everyone agrees the system is failing. Like a game where some players get a head start while others face impossible hurdles, life in the United States feels like a "rigged game," where the playing field isn't level and the referees seem to look the other way.

Many participants evoked fields, games, and starting lines to convey how they feel about the unfair systems of government and life in the United States.



> I don't know that I would be against a basic income for everybody. I sound like a socialist, but at any rate, it's probably better than this capitalist nightmare we are living in.
>
> *—Concerned Conservative, Rural*

And within this diagnosis, the most significant divide that emerged was not left versus right. It was "them versus us." People of all backgrounds pinpointed government as distant, self-serving, only catering to the wealthy, or careless—crushing people through overreach or abandoning them through neglect.

Government was characterized as:

- **An authoritarian dictator,** which is domineering, controlling, punitive, self-serving
- **A corrupt elite and disconnected overseer,** which is distant, out of touch with everyday people, selectively nurturing the powerful
- **A chaotic and careless leader,** whose short-sightedness and unpredictability cause crushing harm

A strikingly common theme in the images that people shared about the current state included people carrying or being crushed under the weight of rocks, boots, and other objects.

> The government has this big boot on...that's coming down on the common people... because they keep getting rid of all the departments that help people... It's like the boot is getting bigger and the people underneath are having to work harder to try to keep the boot off of them.
>
> *—Antiracism Progressive, Urban*

> The weight of life, work, stress, kids, family, house payment, car payment. It's just the stress of life on your back... The overseers don't have rocks on their back, so they can be removed if you get into a certain economical class... [like] these people that are in the government [that] are millionaires and billionaires, unlike most of the population of the United States. How could they see life in a day-to-day event or the day-to-day workings of someone with a regular life, nine-to-five job?
>
> *—Individualist, Rural*

SHARED DESIRE FOR A FAIR FUTURE

We recognize that equal protection, enshrined in the 14th Amendment, and fundamental fairness—a principle woven throughout the Constitution—represent critical cornerstones of America's democratic promise. These principles remain foundational to American democracy—and ongoing sources of challenge as the nation strives to fulfill them. Both this tension and hope for the future was evident in our research.

While participants were aligned around their diagnosis of a "rigged game," they also shared similarities when asked about the possibilities for a different future. When people were asked to imagine a future where fairness and equal protection are fully realized, they were fairly aligned around key conditions:

- Everyone would have equal opportunity with a fair starting line
- Each person would have a real voice in politics and decision-making
- Society would be unified but diverse while working toward common goals
- There would be balance, peace, and shared responsibility
- Freedom, opportunity, and happiness would be within reach for all
- Society would be built on mutual care and interdependence, where fairness is sustained by collective effort

> If we work together to share resources, we can thrive together...the fertilizer that helps the yellow flower grow also helps the white and blue flowers to grow. We share when it rains...it helps us to grow and build stronger roots.
>
> *—Concerned Conservative, Rural*

Participants shared many images of flowers, trees, and nature when describing a desired future.

> In the orchestra, you might have...first chair, second chair, and third chair. We need all those different types of chairs in society. We need somebody that might not have any experience or it's their first year of the instrument, but they're working hard. We need people that are more seasoned that have experience...
>
> So in a orchestra, everybody works together. Everybody has a different job... but you're all together. You work together... for the greater good, for the overall piece... You can't be like, 'You know what the bass or the flutes could have done the whole piece by themselves.' No, you all work. You all have a place and a value."
>
> *—Antiracism Progressive, Urban*

These aspirations for the future were not merely abstract ideals. They also translated directly into concrete visions for policies and practices across democracy, economy, and communities. People described a fair democracy, where politicians reflect the people, laws are applied equally, and voting is protected. People described a fair economy, where people had a fair chance at success, regardless of their background. And they described a vision of fair communities, where people experience belonging, accessible public services, and supportive environments where they can be themselves.

FIGURE 2

Americans' Priorities for Fair Democracy, Economy, and Communities

Democracy	Economy	Community
A functioning democracy, to Americans, is accountable, representative, and inclusive. Fairness shows up when politicians reflect the people, laws are applied equally, and voting is protected.	Americans envision an economy where everyone has a fair shot—not dictated by wealth, race, or connections. Fairness means livable wages, access to education and healthcare, and a system that reduces extreme inequality.	Fairness in communities means safety, belonging, and basic dignity. It is about neighbors supporting each other, integrated neighborhoods, and access to services like healthcare, schools, and housing.
• Inclusive representation (diverse leaders, accessible voting) • Accountability and transparency (public forums, town halls) • Nonpartisan governance (unity over party lines) • Elimination of systemic barriers (abolishing Electoral College) and corruption (establish term limits, bans on lobbying) • Government guided by empathy and public interest • Citizen oversight of institutions • Demographic balance in leadership	• Livable wages and dignity of work • Equal starting points and access to education/jobs • Fair taxation (the ultra-wealthy paying their fair share) and reduced corporate influence • Merit-based opportunities with safety nets • Universal access to housing, healthcare, and childcare • Redistribution to correct historical disadvantages • Support for middle/lower classes over elite privilege	• Safe and inclusive neighborhoods • Equal investment in schools, hospitals, and infrastructure, regardless of location • Visible diversity and cultural intermingling • Supportive environments (mutual aid, trust, belonging) • Accessible public services and social programs • Dignity in everyday interactions • Freedom to be oneself without fear

CONVERGENT ASPIRATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

Amidst profound frustration about the current state of government, people across all backgrounds want to believe this kind of different future is possible. Although peoples' ideas about the role of government do differ, there are some powerful areas of consensus. When imagining what government could be at its best, Americans envision it as:

- **A protector and warrior of justice,** which is vigilant, impartial, grounded in fairness, protecting the vulnerable
- **A unifier** that brings people together across differences
- **A nurturing caretaker** that listens and knows how to care for its people
- **A stabilizing force** that ensures peace and calm throughout the nation

People evoked metaphors like a skilled referee or lifeguard, expressing a desire for government to function as a steady, trusted presence that keeps the game fair, protects the vulnerable, and lets everyone play to their full potential.

Alongside these metaphors, we found other points of convergence across backgrounds and ideologies. Americans express striking alignment on core values that government should embody in order to lead us toward a future where fairness and equal protection are fully realized:

1. Accountability and Consistency

- **What it means:** A fair government is dependable, principled, and accountable. It sets clear rules, applies them consistently, and ensures no one is above the law—including those in power. Fairness requires a system where everyone knows the rules, plays by them, and trusts that their rights will be protected no matter who is in charge.
- **Why it resonates broadly:** Accountability and consistency is the most broadly shared value across all segments. For progressive audiences, it speaks to justice and transparency; for conservatives, it affirms law and order without favoritism. This value can bridge equity concerns with conservative preferences by emphasizing consistency in opportunity, not just outcomes.

> Rules are there to be enforced so we're all having equal fairness... If that's not happening and it's coming from the top down, that really shakes accountability... If someone can get away with something and someone else can't, how is that fair? What's the point of the rule then?
>
> *—Diverse Striver, Rural*

2. Compassion and Empathy

- **What it means:** Government must act not from a place of power or politics, but from genuine care for people's well-being, especially for those who are struggling. Fairness starts with viewing people fully and responding with humanity.
- **Why it resonates broadly:** Compassion and empathy resonate deeply across segments, especially progressive audiences. Even those most skeptical of government action acknowledge the need for compassion in moments of vulnerability, as long as it is framed around shared human dignity rather than what is perceived as "identity politics."

> You have to feel for others...You have to put yourself in their shoes to really be down on their level, to understand—and understanding is 90% of the problem... You can give it mouth service real easy, but to really make a change, you really have to open your heart.
>
> *—Individualist, Rural*

3. Dignity and Respect for All

- **What it means:** Everyone deserves to be treated as worthy—regardless of background, race, class, or identity. People want a government that sees, hears, and reflects them—not just in policy, but in power and representation.
- **Why it resonates broadly:** All audience segments prioritized government's responsibility for supporting everyday dignity, including acting as a true safety net and offering non-stigmatizing, respectful public services.

4. Opportunity

- **What it means:** Government should provide tools, support, and scaffolding until people can thrive on their own. It means ensuring everyone has what they need to succeed—including those historically disadvantaged.
- **Why it resonates broadly:** Opportunity resonates deeply for progressive audiences who understand it as essential for equity. It also resonates with conservative audiences when framed as investment in potential rather than guaranteed outcomes.

> “You can choose to just go on a flat walking path in your neighborhood, or if you like a challenge, you can go climb Mount Everest. If the world had fairness and equal protections and they were actively created and delivered, I think that it would at least give people the opportunity to choose what their path would look like and it would be more peaceful and beautiful... People have the tools and preparation to take on that more difficult path...to take on that challenge, and you’re choosing to do it, versus I think without fairness and protections, it puts people on Mount Everest who only have the tools to do the flat walking path.
>
> *—Diverse Striver, Urban*

Across the entirety of the ideological spectrum, we found that Americans agreed on seven fundamental government responsibilities: equal application of rules, leadership that represents the people, transparent decision-making, community responsiveness, removing systemic barriers, providing dignified public services, and choosing good policy over partisanship.

FIGURE 3

Americans' Expectations for Key Government Responsibilities

Government Responsibility	How Government Embraces This Responsibility	Audiences For Whom This Is A Priority
Ensure rules and consequences apply equally	Uniform enforcement of laws regardless of status/demographics	**All groups**
Represent and reflect the people	Diverse, community-rooted leadership; term limits for politicians (to reduce corruption)	**All groups**
Make decisions openly and clearly	Clear policy explanations and public deliberations	**All groups**
Respond to real community needs	Government outreach and presence in local crises	**All groups**
Acknowledge and address systemic barriers	Structural reforms to remove access barriers	**All groups**
Support everyday dignity	Non-stigmatizing, respectful public services; act as a true safety net, offering the basics: food, clothing, shelter	**All groups**
Own up to mistakes, and act on the best ideas, rather than partisan lines	Policies that cause harm are changed or eliminated, rather than doubled down on; more bipartisanship in legislature	**All groups**
Design policies with historical context in mind	Equity-based reforms and reparative programs	Antiracism Progressives, Diverse Strivers, Urban
Create fairness, not just protect it	Fair, proactive policies with community benefit	Antiracism Progressives, Urban
Protect the most vulnerable first	Programs targeted at historically harmed groups	Antiracism Progressives, Diverse Strivers
Maintain law, order, and peace	Lack of war or violent crime. People are physically safe in their homes and public spaces.	Individualists, Racism Skeptics

There was widespread agreement that, at minimum, **government should serve as the foundation that supports fairness—keeping the field fair, the rules honest, and the path open—and not as a force that dictates it.** It should set the stage for people to thrive on their own terms rather than picking winners and losers.

The Fairness Divides

While Americans unite around a shared vision and core values for fair governance, they diverge on the crucial question: What does fairness actually mean in practice? At the heart of these differences are three different lenses that people use to think about fairness:

- **Opportunity:** Everyone should have equal access to succeed. This lens focuses on ensuring fair starting points and removing barriers that prevent people from competing on merit.
- **Process:** Rules must be applied consistently to everyone. This perspective emphasizes procedural fairness, where the same standards and consequences apply universally, regardless of background or identity.
- **Outcomes:** Opportunity needs to lead to stability and dignity, and outcomes are proof that fairness is real. This view holds that true fairness must be measured by whether people can actually achieve secure, dignified lives.

It is important to understand that these three lenses exist on a spectrum rather than as rigid categories. In practice, most Americans blend or interpret elements of all three, while emphasizing one as their primary framework for understanding fairness.

One example of this blending is evident across geographic segments. These geographic patterns reveal how daily realities shape abstract ideals:

- **Rural** participants overwhelmingly lean toward viewing fairness through the lens of opportunity paired with process. They want everyone to have a shot—but fairness means the rules do not bend. However, there is also a quiet ethic of neighborliness and community care, especially when framed as helping people who are willing to help themselves.
- **Urban** participants, shaped by direct experience with systemic barriers, lean much more heavily toward understanding fairness as a fusion of opportunity and outcomes—believing fairness remains unrealized if efforts do not ultimately lead to stability or dignity.
- **Suburban** participants live in the balance—valuing clear process and access to opportunity but sensitive to outcomes particularly when they impact children or local families.

Similarly, the attitudinal segments—which are informed by people's attitudes on racism, inequality, collectivism and individualism—also distinctly shape how they prioritize opportunity, process, and outcomes in their understanding of fairness:

A. Progressive-Leaning Americans: Fairness as Outcomes

Groups like **Antiracism Progressives** and **Diverse Strivers** center their understanding of fairness as opportunity deeply tied to outcomes. For these Americans, creating opportunity without ensuring people can actually achieve dignity and stability is not real fairness. They are also highly attuned to process but often perceive broken processes (like biased policing or underfunded schools) as symptoms of denied opportunity rather than isolated procedural problems.

Unlike the other two groups, **Sympathetic Liberals** center their view of fairness more in process—being heard, respected, and included—than the other groups, while still strongly valuing opportunity creation. They want everyone to have a fair starting point but are particularly sensitive to whether people feel seen and respected along the way. They support equitable outcomes if the process getting there feels just and inclusive.

B. Conservative-Leaning Americans: Fairness as Process

Concerned Conservatives and **Racism Skeptics** believe consistent process must sit at the center of fairness and serve as a guardrail against chaos or favoritism. They regard opportunity as already existing in America, though they acknowledge that access is not always equal. While deeply skeptical of outcomes being promised or engineered by government, they firmly believe that positive outcomes should result from individuals applying effort to the opportunities they are given. Therefore, if access to opportunities is unfair, so are the resulting outcomes.

Concerned Conservatives in particular show some recognition that not everyone starts from the same place, leading to a desire to expand the availability of meaningful opportunities based on merit.

C. Individualists: Situational Fairness

Individualists live in the middle, sometimes leaning toward conservative views of opportunity as personal responsibility but are often sympathetic to more equity-oriented arguments when framed locally, practically, or around kids and families. For many individualists, fairness is situational—it depends on context, need, and common sense. They value process because they want things to feel transparent and respectful, especially in their own communities. They'll accept outcome-based policies if they feel locally grounded or address real visible need, but resist anything that feels like abstraction or federal overreach.

In summary, progressive-leaning Americans demand tangible outcomes—stable jobs, safe neighborhoods, quality education—as evidence that opportunity and fairness are real. Conservative-leaning Americans point to consistent processes and equal access as proof of fairness, trusting that individual effort will produce fair results. Individualists lean toward the belief that individual effort will produce fair results but are also open to outcome-based policies, if the solutions feel practical and locally relevant rather than based on abstract principles. These disagreements about evidence and governmental responsibility explain why Americans can share values about fairness yet reach different conclusions about specific policies designed to achieve it.

These different understandings of fairness create two fundamental points of division among Americans: what constitutes proof that fairness exists and what role government should play in achieving it.

The Relationship Between Fundamental Fairness and Equal Protection

The introduction of perspectives on equal protection reveals that each attitudinal segment operates from fundamentally different assumptions about the relationship between moral ideals and legal frameworks.

Conservative-leaning Americans (Concerned Conservatives, Racism Skeptics) view fairness and equal protection as identical—both meaning consistent rules applied impartially to everyone. **Progressive-leaning Americans** split into two camps: Sympathetic Liberals and Diverse Strivers commonly view equal protection as the legal tool meant to achieve the higher moral ideal of fairness, often requiring different approaches for different groups, while **Antiracism Progressives** distinguish between fairness as personal dignity in daily interactions and equal protection as the structural safeguards that make such dignity possible. **Individualists** occupy the pragmatic middle, supporting consistent rules while acknowledging that some people need extra support to compete fairly.

Fairness and Equal Protection as One Unified Concept

Most common among Concerned Conservatives, Individualists, and some Racism Skeptics, this view holds the concepts as essentially identical. Fairness means following the law consistently, and equal protection means laws that treat everyone the same way. Both represent a single principle: consistent rules with impartial enforcement.

Fairness as a Value, Equal Protection as a Legal Principle

More common among Sympathetic Liberals and Diverse Strivers, this perspective distinguishes between aspiration and implementation. Fairness represents the moral ideal of what's right, while equal protection is the legal mechanism designed to achieve that vision. Crucially, this group often believes equal protection falls short of true fairness unless government policies account for different starting points shaped by race, class, or history.

Fairness as Lived Experience, Equal Protection as a Structural Guarantee

Most common among Antiracism Progressives and some Diverse Strivers, fairness is personal and emotional—captured in questions like "Did I feel respected? Was I heard? Was I treated with dignity?" Equal protection operates at the structural level: "Are there laws and policies that protect me from discrimination and harm?" This group understands fairness as something experienced in daily interactions, while equal protection creates the institutional conditions that make those fair interactions possible.

We find that participants fall on a spectrum between two visions of equal protection: one perceives equal protection as treating everyone exactly the same, while the other perceives it as structural or legal guarantees. And just as people blend or interpret various interpretations of fairness, many participants—especially Diverse Strivers and Concerned Conservatives—both value clear rules and accountability while noting some people need more support to "reach the starting line."

Altogether, these differences in perspective reflect a deeper tension between ideals of neutrality and the realities of persistent disadvantage. They also help explain why Americans can support the same constitutional principles while disagreeing intensely about policies and practices meant to implement them. The concepts themselves become the grounds for competing visions of what fairness means and how government should uphold it.

FIGURE 4

Americans' Perspectives on Fairness and Equal Protection (By Attitudinal Segment)

Attitudinal Segment	Fundamental Fairness	Equal Protection
Antiracism Progressives	Repairing systemic harm, redistributing power, addressing racial disparities, economic inequality, and historical injustice. **Metaphors**: "Leveling the playing field," "Lifting up communities," and "Bridge building."	Policies that explicitly account for race and history; strong rejection of colorblind approaches. **Emotional Undertones:** Hope for transformation, but often mixed with frustration or fatigue about slow progress.
Sympathetic Liberals	A blend of empathy-driven equity and desire for a competent compassionate government. **Metaphors**: "Helping hand," "Safety net," and "Mother figure."	Everyone can access a good life, even if that means tailored support. **Emotional Undertones:** Guilt, compassion, and aspiration for a kinder system.
Diverse Strivers	Access to opportunity and dignity in everyday systems (housing, education, jobs). **Metaphors**: "Foundation," "Ladder," and "Gatekeeping."	Making room for those historically left out; language is often more practical than ideological. **Emotional Undertones:** Pragmatic resilience, often grounded in personal or community struggle.
Concerned Conservatives	Consistency of rules and procedural justice; government's role is to ensure standards rather than intervene heavily. **Metaphors**: "Rulebook," "Referee," and "Everyone playing by the same rules."	More mixed. Some view it as treating everyone the same, while others hint at recognizing some structural issues, though rarely with racial framing. **Emotional Undertones:** Desire for order and stability, skepticism about fairness being used to justify special treatment.
Individualists	Personal morality and noninterventionism; government should stay out of people's lives unless it is to prevent chaos. **Metaphors**: "Hands off," "Live and let live," and "Balanced scales."	Viewed narrowly; government does not favor anyone. **Emotional Undertones:** Cynicism, independence, and distrust in institutions.
Racism Skeptics	Individual responsibility and freedom from government interference. **Metaphors**: "Do not tread on me," "Pull yourself up," and "Rules are rules."	Strong preference for equal treatment—same rules, same consequences. **Emotional Undertones:** Defensiveness, resentment, and sometimes anger, particularly toward affirmative action or perceived favoritism.

FIGURE 5

Americans' Perspectives on Fairness and Equal Protection (By Geographical Segmet)

Geographical Segment	Fundamental Fairness	Equal Protection
Rural	Everyone has the same "starting point" with equal access to opportunities for growth. Everyone's freedoms and rights are protected.	Neutral enforcement of laws, same consequences for all. Avoids favoritism. Protections under the law, including basic safety, but also protection against discrimination in opportunities and inclusion.
Urban	Addressing structural barriers and systemic bias to end long-standing forms of discrimination. Proactive, equity-based systems that work to uplift people toward an ultimate goal of inherent, "natural" fairness.	Viewed as safeguarding from harm, discrimination, government neglect, and predatory financial practices. Most want policies that acknowledge historical inequities and are tailored to context.
Suburban	Ensuring access and "level playing fields", especially for children and families. Equal treatment for all with a focus on dignity, though there is a split between those who want purely equal treatment versus equitable treatment.	Tends to include due process, equal application of laws, and some recognition of inequities. Some cite a need to be proactive, but many stop short of endorsing corrective policies.

The Role of Government vs. Society in Ensuring Fairness

Despite their different understandings of what fairness means, most Americans agree that achieving fairness requires both government action and individual responsibility, with each playing distinct but complementary roles.

The attitudinal segments do hold sharply different views on how much government responsibility is appropriate and what form it should take. People fall along a spectrum of whether to hold government responsible for **laying the bridge**, providing opportunity but leaving the outcome to the individual, or **maintaining the game**, constantly correcting to ensure equity.

However, where people do agree is that government should serve as a foundation-builder and rule-keeper. Across all segments, Americans expect government to show up when systems break down or fail the people it is meant to serve. This includes:

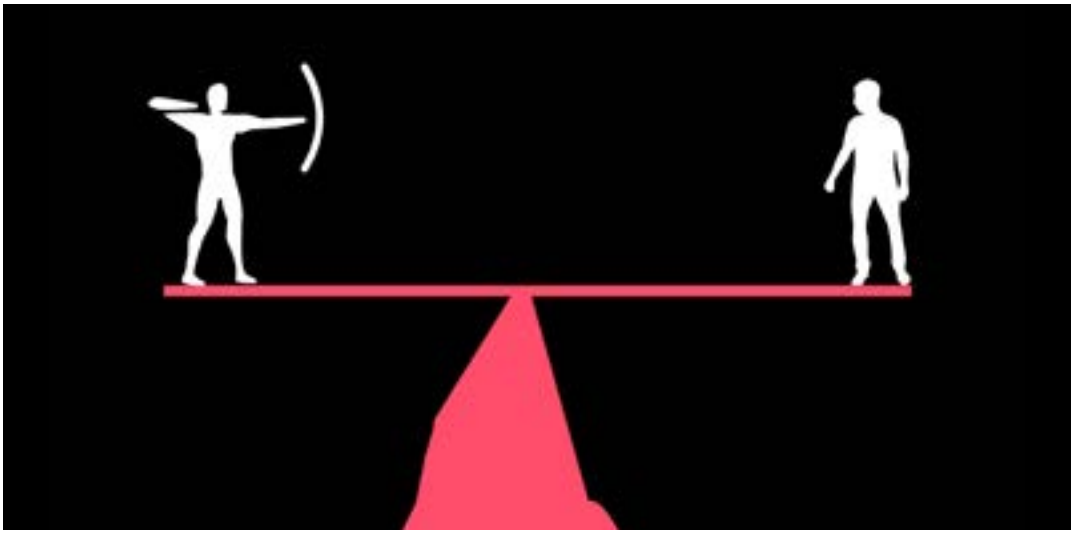
- Setting clear, consistent rules that apply to everyone
- Removing barriers that prevent fair competition
- Protecting the vulnerable from systemic harm
- Ensuring basic systems (education, infrastructure, safety) function fairly

Many people described wanting a government that looks like a skilled referee or a lifeguard: a steady, trusted presence that keeps the game fair, protects the vulnerable, and lets everyone play to their full potential.

Participants also recognized that government alone cannot create the fairness they envision. The deeper foundation that makes fairness sustainable lies in how we relate to one another—a recognition rooted in the belief that we are fundamentally connected.

> If your solution is to shoot the other person... you will also fall down.
>
> *—Sympathetic Liberal, Suburban*

Participants shared images that spoke to a core belief that we are connected, and that fairness is sustained by mutual care and a sense of shared fate.



People across all groups believe that fairness is sustained by mutual care and a sense of shared fate. Even people who value individual responsibility deeply still believe that at the end of the day we are supposed to look out for each other. It shows up in: family metaphors (government as parent, community as family), religious/moral frames (Golden Rule, Good Samaritan), rural "neighbor-helping-neighbor" pride, and urban "it takes a village" narratives. Deep down, everyone recognizes that neglecting others eventually hurts us all.

> We're all connected...we're all really one people... So those people... on the ground there, they're all kind of working collaboratively... lifting other people up by doing and saying things and putting resources where they need to be.
>
> *—Racism Skeptic, Suburban*

This sense of connection translates into concrete expectations about individual and community responsibility. People believe that individuals must exhibit the actions that make fairness real in daily life by:

- Modeling fair treatment in personal interactions
- Mentoring and supporting others in their communities
- Holding institutions accountable at the local level
- Creating the cultural norms that make fairness feel natural

Tensions and Bridges

Competing understandings of fairness and equal protection—and the role of government—explain the tensions we observe between different groups across attitudes, ideologies, and geography. However, we found that these tensions do not exist solely between groups—profound emotional tensions play out within individuals themselves.

People want to believe in effort and self-reliance while knowing the system does not always play fair. They worry about too much government intervention while being aware of what it feels like to be left on their own. They value equality while understanding that history and context still shape the present.

As many people held their own seemingly contradictory emotions, they expressed the different ways they navigate these tensions:

FIGURE 6

How Americans Reconcile Conflicting Values and Realities

Belief	Contrary Emotion Or Action	How They Navigate It
"Government should stay out of my life."	But I want government to fix roads, protect food supply, enforce laws.	I'm ok with structure—if it is invisible, fair, and stabilizing.
"Everyone should be treated equally."	But I know people face systemic barriers.	I'm ok with targeted help—if it is framed as investment, not favoritism.
"Hard work should be enough."	But I acknowledge luck, privilege, and inherited advantages.	I accept fairness as balanced opportunity, not guaranteed outcome.
"Freedom matters most."	But I fear chaos or being left behind without support.	I support rules and safety nets that do not threaten autonomy.

Many Americans find themselves caught between conflicting values: pride in self-reliance alongside rage at systemic failure; fear of government control, yet resentment at being left on their own; and commitment to equality while wrestling with how to address unequal starting points.

Over and over, participants returned to one core insight: fairness is not static. It is a living system that needs constant balancing between empathy and accountability; opportunity and effort; and universal rules and contextual justice. The emotional unlock is balance—not sameness. Participants described a world where government and people are "all in" on building fairness—not through force or quick fixes, but organically and over time. It requires steadying what's out of line and balancing competing needs, whether that involves:

- What government provides and what people must do
- Opportunity and barriers, where success is not guaranteed but is not systemically rigged
- Universal rules and corrective justice
- Empathy and logic in policy design
- Punishment and crime, voice and power, wealth and taxation, and wages and living costs
- Branches of government, levels of government, and representation of real people over special interests

> "The garden is the greatest example of patience and pouring into something... If a government or a society is pouring into the people, with time and pruning, taking away, adding different nutrients, then you produce fruit. And the fruit would be equivalent to people that are functioning well in society... I feel like as a society we have to keep growing, pruning, taking things out, adjusting, seeing what works, what doesn't work.
>
> *—Antiracism Progressive, Urban*

CONCLUSION

Finding the path towards a future where fundamental fairness and equal protection are at the core of government is critical. This research, by offering a more nuanced understanding of beliefs and aspirations across groups, reveals both the challenges and the potential for navigating towards this possibility.

The research uncovers genuine tensions about what fairness and equal protection mean to people in practice, and government's role in achieving them. Americans approach fairness through different lenses—some prioritize equal opportunity, others consistent processes, and still others outcomes. Similarly, Americans hold competing visions of equal protection: one view emphasizes identical treatment for everyone, while the other requires structural guarantees that address systemic disadvantages. All of these perspectives often seem incompatible, creating policy deadlock and public frustration.

Yet these divisions also coexist with areas of consensus. Americans share deep dissatisfaction with current systems they perceive as fundamentally unfair and enabled by government failure. More importantly, they harbor shared aspirations for future government that would embody accountability and consistency, compassion and empathy, dignity and respect for all people, and genuine opportunity. Across all segments, Americans can still envision government at its best: a protector of justice, a unifying force, a nurturing caretaker, and a stabilizing presence that ensures equal rules, represents all people, and responds to real community needs.

While some policies may remain incompatible across the full spectrum of American views, solutions may emerge from recognizing the multiple entry points into shared conversations about creating a fairer society. Each lens—opportunity, process, and outcomes—captures a truth about how fairness is valued across the nation. The ongoing challenge lies in finding pathways forward that honor Americans' diverse perspectives or in surfacing the nuances of perspective or alignment that broader public discourse on widespread division fails to reflect.

For example, the emotional breakthrough for many participants was recognizing that **fairness means balance, not sameness**. People can agree that government must set the foundation, and that society must take responsibility for building the house through both individual responsibility and collective care. This reframes fairness as an active, shared ethic that honors both personal effort and mutual obligation. These points of alignment offer a guiding light forward in our work to build a country where fairness is not left to chance, but is intentionally built into how we govern ourselves.

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