

## Patriots' "Easy Schedule" Myth — and Why It Matters Beyond Football

This isn't about football.

It's about how entire industries cling to early narratives long after reality has changed — and how bad models survive by sounding authoritative.

The New England Patriots entered the 2025 NFL season labeled as beneficiaries of one of the league's "easiest schedules," a preseason judgment based almost entirely on opponents' prior-year records. That framing hardened early and persisted for months, repeated reflexively by analysts and media as if static forecasts were immune to revision.

By conference championship weekend in January 2026, reality had fully inverted the premise.



New England finished atop the Super Bowl LX playoff field with 8 wins across 8 games against fellow playoff teams — the most of any contender. That tally included six regular-season matchups and two postseason victories, outperforming every other team in exposure and outcomes against the league's eventual elite. Despite the narrative lock, no team navigated a more playoff-dense path.

Yet the "easy schedule" trope endured.

## Prevailing Cultural Narrative Lock (PCNL)\*

This is a clean example of what I call Prevailing Cultural Narrative Lock (PCNL):

When early assumptions harden into consensus, and new evidence is ignored because updating the story would require intellectual humility.

Preseason models are static by design. Seasons are not. As opponents qualified for the playoffs, the Patriots' schedule objectively became harder — but the narrative failed to update. Legacy framing was recycled long after its underlying assumptions collapsed.

Much like the observer effect in physics, perception shapes interpretation — but unlike science, media narratives often refuse to recalibrate when conditions change.

Playoff qualification is the only defensible proxy for season-long schedule “hardness.” By that standard, New England’s AFC-heavy slate proved significantly tougher than advertised, while several NFC contenders faced lighter inter-conference overlap. Performance didn’t just contradict the prophecy — it invalidated it.



## “Weak Playoff Field” Doesn’t Hold Up

A common objection claims the bracket itself was diluted — that stronger non-qualifiers “should have” replaced certain playoff teams, inflating New England’s résumé.

The data doesn’t support that claim.

The 12 playoff teams collectively ranked top-12 in point differential and turnover margin, with AFC entrants outperforming preseason expectations on advanced efficiency metrics. Head-to-head comparisons show parity at the top: no team faced more top-tier offenses, defenses, or elite quarterbacks than New England.

Wild-card volatility is not a flaw — it’s the NFL’s design. Seventeen games plus single elimination is the acid test. And no outsider exceeded the Patriots’ playoff-win threshold.

| Rank | Team            | 2025 SOS (Opponent<br>2024 Win %) |
|------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1    | New York Giants | .574                              |
| 2    | Chicago Bears   | .571                              |
| 3    | Detroit Lions   | .571                              |
| 4    | Eagles          | .561                              |
| ...  | ...             | ...                               |
| 30   | Patriots        | .429                              |
| 31   | Saints          | .419                              |
| 32   | 49ers           | .415                              |

This reliable preseason metric (based on opponents’ prior performance) was widely circulated and repeated — which is exactly the kind of data that *becomes a narrative anchor* long after evidence has changed.

ESPN.com

[ESPN explanation of the process of the team strength ranking at the start of the season](#)

## Regressing the Outliers

Even substituting hypothetical non-qualifiers into the bracket doesn't change the conclusion.

Swapping in teams like Kansas City or Baltimore would marginally adjust individual overlaps — but the Patriots (and Bills) would still lead the league in games played against the rest of that elite cohort. Structural scheduling limits cap exposure for most teams. The rankings remain intact.

The result is robust to substitution. That's what real analysis looks like.



**This Patriots season is going to be a ride.**



## The Deeper Reckoning: Data Over Illusion

A spectacular catch can pierce doubt. Data does it permanently.

Yet commentary culture often prefers smart-sounding frames over empirical recalibration. Preseason projections are treated as prophecy. Evidence becomes inconvenient. PCNL fills the gap.

Strong systems don't need narrative protection. Weak ones do. That's as true in markets as it is in monarchies.

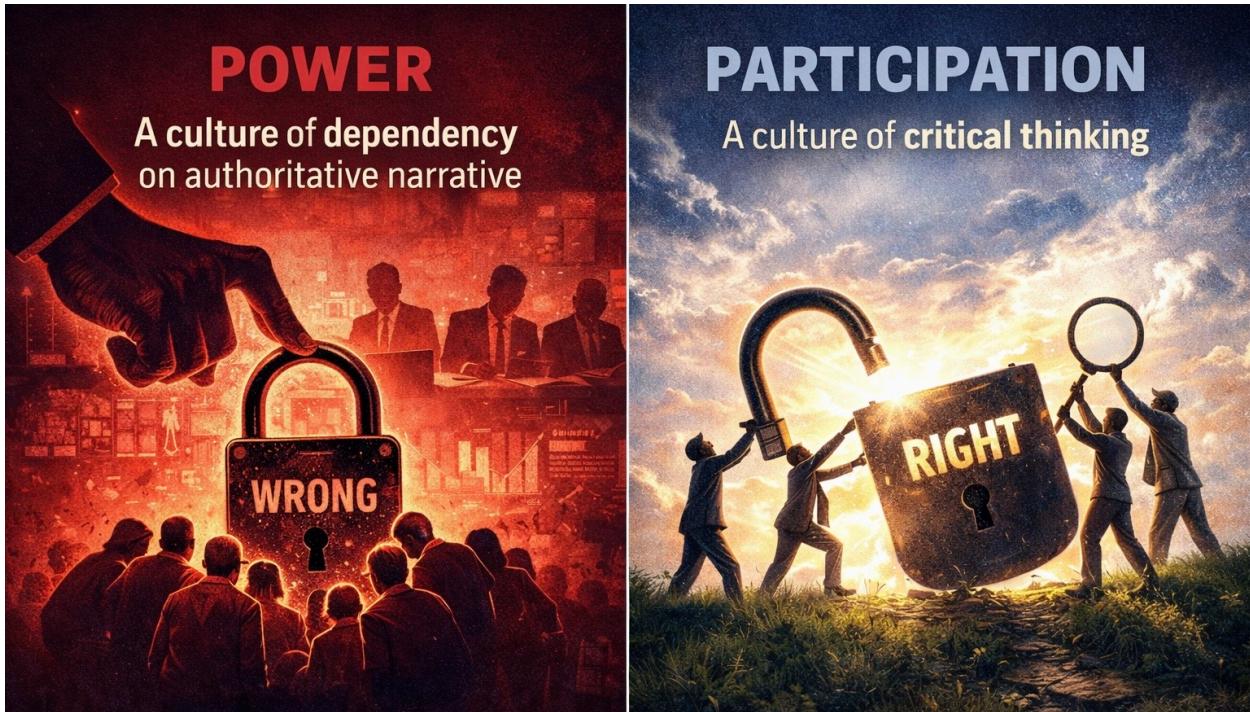
Whether in sports, investing, or consulting, the heuristic holds: Fact-check your assumptions. Regress outliers. Explicitly model time and performance deltas — and discard inherited analysis that persists by claims of authority rather than evidence.

Otherwise, illusion wins — not because it's right, but because the 800-pound narrative in the room intimidated logical rigor into silence.



### \*Note on Terminology:

I previously used the phrase PNCL ("Prevailing Narrative, Cultural Lock") in past published research. I now prefer PCNL ("Prevailing Cultural Narrative Lock") intentionally.



The distinction is causal. PNCL implies a narrative that becomes dominant and then locks a culture — a framing that can suggest top-down imposition or malign intent. PCNL instead locates the lock within the cultural body itself: a collectively reinforced interpretive frame that persists through habit, incentives, and social validation.

This reframing matters. PCNL emphasizes agency and educability over cynicism — a reminder that narratives prevail not only because they are promoted, but because cultures participate in sustaining them. What a culture can lock, it can also unlock. 



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