



Producing the Future

Public Thinking about
Manufacturing in the United States

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Introduction

Manufacturing in the United States is at a turning point. Climate change is demanding a shift in how and what we produce, and landmark federal policy is creating new possibilities for ecologically sustainable infrastructure built by empowered workers. Federal legislation is also shoring up supply chains and updating or advancing technology for small and midsize manufacturers. The resurgence of organized labor has seen major wins, building toward a general strike—yet the legal foundations of workers’ rights are under attack.

At this crucial juncture, it is more important than ever that we as a society make decisions about manufacturing that align with a progressive vision of economic, social, and environmental justice. Progressive advocates, policymakers, and researchers are calling for the recognition that government policy can and should shape the future of manufacturing. These stakeholders argue that public policy changes must increase the training, protection, and empowerment of workers. Industrial policy must also change to address the climate crisis while centering racial and economic justice.

Enacting these changes presents serious challenges, in part because public thinking about manufacturing is not yet fully aligned with advocates. If we are to continue to challenge the status quo of work and labor in this country and shape the future of manufacturing, we need to build political will for substantial structural changes, which requires a paradigm shift in the way Americans think about work.

This report outlines findings from in-depth research on the public’s mindsets, the deeply held beliefs and assumptions that shape thinking, as they relate to manufacturing and manufacturing work. By identifying the deep patterns of thinking that offer opportunities and challenges for progressive communicators advocating for systemic change, this research offers communicators a map for the way forward through the following steps:

- **What are we trying to communicate? Seven target ideas.** A summary of the content that needs to be effectively conveyed, based on interviews with experts in the field.
- **How are members of the American public thinking about manufacturing?** Existing cultural mindsets about manufacturing, uncovered through in-depth interviews and nationally representative surveys.
- **How is the field communicating now?** Trends in how a range of advocates are currently communicating, based on an analysis of communications materials.
- **Emerging recommendations.** A concluding summary of what this research means for advocates who are communicating for a more just vision of manufacturing.

We find that manufacturing is often thought of as the current “backbone” of the economy and strongly associated with nostalgia for the past, when manufacturing was stronger and the economy was better. Despite this, the role that government and unions have played in shaping the sector is contentious, and people tend to lack a vision of what the future of manufacturing should look like. People tend to think of manufacturing as a dirty, dangerous, working-class job—and, as such, a last resort for those with limited opportunities. Manufacturing can also be associated with sexist and racist mindsets—for instance, in linking the economic value of the industry to it being traditionally “men’s work” and in arguing that white workers, rather than workers of color, are being discriminated against. However, there is also a set of structural mindsets available to people when they think about manufacturing, including how opportunities for work can be constrained by factors outside an individual’s control and how industrial activity can pollute the environment, with inequitable effects.

About this project

This report is accompanied by a short strategic brief, which presents the key insights and discusses their implications for how we communicate about manufacturing. This research on manufacturing is part of the first phase of the FrameWorks Institute’s multiyear [WorkShift](#) program (see accompanying reports on [cultural mindsets of work and labor](#) generally, and on [thinking about care work](#)). Through this project we will develop a strategy for reframing work and labor that builds public support for the restructuring of our labor systems needed to counter exploitation and create a just and sustainable society.

Acknowledgments

WorkShift is guided by an advisory board of advocates, scholars, organizers, and other stakeholders: Lina Stepick, Jaimie Worker, Vicki Shabo, Chirag Mehta, Chris Zepada-Millan, Jason Tomlinson, Livia Lam, Marc Bayard, Stephen Herzenberg and Ruth Milkman. Read more about our advisory board [here](#). We thank the Square One Foundation, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation for their generous support.

What Are Cultural Mindsets and Why Do They Matter?

Mindsets are deep, durable patterns of thinking that shape how we think, feel, and act. Cultural mindsets are those patterns of thought that are broadly available to people living within a shared context, like American society.

Cultural mindsets can lead us to take for granted or call into question the status quo. For example, a mindset like *Health Individualism*, which holds that people’s health results from lifestyle choices like diet and exercise, leads people to place responsibility for health on individuals, not society. By contrast, more systemic mindsets about health, which understand health as a result of the environments and systems we live in, lead people to ask how society needs to change in order to support health for everyone.

An important feature of cultural mindsets is that we all hold multiple, sometimes competing mindsets. Members of the American public have access to both individualistic and systemic mindsets about health at the same time. What matters is the relative strength of these mindsets and how they are brought to bear on the issue at hand. Good framing efforts are often about bringing a helpful existing mindset to the fore—for instance, in offering explanations that strengthen and extend systemic thinking about health.

While not everyone in American society endorses the same mindsets to the same degree, we can identify a mindset as shared when we have evidence that it is accessible to people across our national culture. We focus particularly on mindsets that emerge from common, national social practices and institutions. It is important to note, however, that different people and groups will engage with common mindsets in different ways. A mindset can be more frequently drawn upon by one group than another. Further, cultural subgroups within American society also have access to distinct 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. Our [2020 report on mindset shifts](#) contains more on what cultural mindsets are and why they matter.¹

Method Note

Next, we briefly describe the methods we relied on for this report. For more detail on all methods, see the methodology supplement accompanying this brief.

We used several research methods to help us understand how the field is thinking and talking about work:

1. **Stakeholder interviews.** A total of 24 interviews with a range of stakeholders in the field, including academics, public policy experts, and worker advocates. Each interview was between an hour and 90 minutes long and was conducted one-on-one over Zoom. Eight of them focused on manufacturing.
2. **Literature review.** A review of academic and gray literature to support our understanding of current problems and public policy solutions.
3. **Field frame analysis.** An analysis of existing communication materials from 11 organizations focused on manufacturing issues, including industry associations, think tanks, nonprofit advocacy groups, and unions.

To map cultural mindsets, we employed two methods:

1. **In-depth interviews.** FrameWorks conducted 50 one-on-one, two-hour, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of the US public from May 1 through July 5, 2023. Twenty sessions were about work and labor in general, while 15 focused on care work and 15 on manufacturing. These interviews were then analyzed to identify the cultural mindsets used to think about manufacturing in the United States. We selected participants to resemble a cross section of the general public, with particular attention to achieving representative quotas of income, political ideology, gender, and level of education. To ensure that our findings enable us to attend to differences in thinking based on the racial identity of the participant, we slightly oversampled Latine and Black participants.
2. **Descriptive surveys.** Following the analysis of the interviews, researchers designed and fielded three descriptive surveys, with a total of 3,741 participants, which examined cultural mindsets on work, including mindsets on care work and manufacturing. We mapped the relationships of mindsets to each other and to target outcomes, including a range of policies on manufacturing. The purpose of these surveys was threefold:
 - a. **Measuring levels of endorsement.** These surveys supplement the interviews by giving us a more precise and fine-grained measure of how strongly people endorse different mindsets. While people hold multiple mindsets simultaneously, some mindsets more strongly and consistently shape public thinking. Understanding the relative dominance of cultural models of work helps us understand their relative importance and impact on thinking.
 - b. **Mapping relationships between mindsets.** The surveys also enabled us to examine whether and how strongly mindsets are related to one another and to a range of public policy outcomes. This helps us understand more deeply the way people think and the impact of that thinking. It gives us more information about which mindsets are the biggest obstacles to the pursuit of a more just labor system as well as the mindsets that can best support this pursuit.
 - c. **Attending to group differences.** The surveys allowed us to analyze whether and how the endorsement of mindsets differed based on demographic variables, such as race and gender, or psychographic variables, such as political affiliation. This analysis provides critical information about the extent to which cultural models are shared between groups.

1. What Are We Trying to Communicate? Seven Target Ideas

Seven core ideas emerged from our interviews with stakeholders in the field and our literature review. These represent the content that needs to be effectively communicated and the solutions the field wants to build support for. They are not framing recommendations; rather, they are the target content, or the untranslated content, that we will help advocates convey in their communications through the course of this project. These core ideas complement and can be considered in the context of the broader ideas about work, labor, and policy directions discussed in the [overarching report](#) for this project.

TARGET IDEA #1

Manufacturing is shaped by public policy decisions.

The economy is always shaped by volitional choices. In recent history, political actors and institutions pushing free market conservatism, working in alliance with large corporations, have actively undermined workers' rights, leading to a drastic decline in unionization and an increase in exploitative labor practices. Manufacturing was heavily hit by this decline in unionization and is now seeing a resurgence in some of the most egregious forms of exploitation, such as child labor. These same actors pushed deregulation of industry while blocking critical environmental policies, accelerating environmental degradation from industrial pollution. In pursuit of less protected workers and less constraint on pollution, many manufacturing facilities relocated to other countries.

While public policy decisions have shaped the problems we face, they are also key to the solutions. Collective wellbeing, not profit for a few, should drive decisions about how the economy is designed. This will require reducing the influence of wealth over public policy decisions while increasing the political power of working people. We can and should design a future for manufacturing that works for everyone by coordinating labor, industrial, and environmental policy for the collective good.

TARGET IDEA #2**Stronger unions are a key way to empower manufacturing workers and improve working conditions.**

Underfunding and understaffing of federal agencies, such as the National Labor Relations Board, has led to a rampant resurgence of union busting and intimidation of organizing workers. Anti-union security laws in most states (under which unions negotiate for, and represent, workers who do not pay dues) undermine the capacity for workplaces to organize. In states with these so-called “right-to-work” laws, wages are lower, benefits are worse, and worker deaths are higher. And when these anti-union security laws are codified, inequality driven by class exploitation increases.² Research has shown that the decline in the once large wage premium in manufacturing is approximately 70 percent accounted for by the loss of unions.³

We need to make it easier for manufacturing workers to form unions and join unions. We can do this by removing barriers to sectoral bargaining,⁴ repealing right-to-work laws, fully staffing the Federal Labor Relations Authority, and effectively prosecuting for intimidation of union organizers.⁵

TARGET IDEA #3**Training needs to meet the needs of workers and communities.**

The pathways into and through manufacturing careers are failing to train skilled workers and match them with good jobs, and this particularly affects workers of color. We can address this by ensuring that industry-recognized accreditation programs are accepted by potential employers and meet the needs of local communities. These programs can teach transferable skills and facilitate a transition into more ecologically sustainable production. We can also support union-based apprenticeship programs. In other sectors, these outperform nonunionized programs in increasing racial and gender diversity.

TARGET IDEA #4**Manufacturing has inequitable impacts on workers and communities.**

Inequity takes many, often intersecting forms in manufacturing:

- **Manufacturing reflects wider trends in occupational segregation.** Black and brown workers are overrepresented in the lowest paid and most dangerous “shop floor” levels within manufacturing and are underrepresented at higher-paid managerial levels.⁶ Women are underrepresented at the higher levels of organizations, as well as in more advanced manufacturing, and overrepresented in jobs with low pay and high risk. This is particularly true for women of color. Women in the sector experience high levels of sexual harassment and discrimination.
- **Prison labor is another form of racialized exploitation within manufacturing.** Producing largely military goods, prison labor structurally incentivizes the continuing increase in the incarceration of disproportionate numbers of people of color. Imprisoned workers are not protected by the Fair Labor Standards Act and are paid extremely little—far below minimum wage.

- **Manufacturing’s pollution has inequitable effects.** Low-income communities of color, especially predominantly Black neighborhoods, are more likely to be the site of new industrial developments. While this is often touted as creating job opportunities, communities of color are not hired at the same rates as white people at new industrial developments and often suffer disproportionately from the polluting effects of industry.

There are a wide range of structural solutions that can help address some of these inequities, including the following:

- Improving educational and training pathways.
- Providing universal services, such as child and health care, removing barriers of access and improving other public infrastructure, such as transportation.
- Increasing worker rights and protections, and strengthening worker power.
- Removing prison labor exemptions from labor rights and protections.

TARGET IDEA #5

We need to do a better job protecting workers from harm and exploitation.

In manufacturing, workers are often exposed to toxic chemicals and harmful and dangerous conditions. Worker protection agencies across the board are underfunded and understaffed. Loopholes, a lack of enforcement capacity, and displacement of responsibility onto third-party staffing agencies have led to widespread exploitation and degradation in the workplace. As a stark example, there have been hundreds of recently reported cases of child labor in manufacturing facilities in the United States. These manufacturers often avoid legal repercussions by using staffing agencies as intermediaries. In addition to a number of policies already mentioned, we need to accomplish the following:

- Shield workers from intimidation and retaliation when reporting violations.
- Strengthen and enforce child labor laws at the national level.
- Pass legislation to hold corporations accountable for labor violations even if they are committed by staffing agencies and other subcontractors.
- Increase the capacity of agencies to effectively enforce worker protections, which means aiming measures at deterrence and relying on data rather than complaints.

TARGET IDEA #6**The future of automation in manufacturing depends on public policy and worker power.**

While the threat of unemployment associated with automation has been leveraged against manufacturing workers, this does not have to be the outcome. Automation could reduce the amount of onerous and repetitive labor while increasing material abundance. With increasing technological capacity, less human labor is needed for the same or greater output. People could work less, particularly in repetitive manual tasks, while simultaneously enjoying more prosperity. For this to become a reality, the economy needs to be designed through public policy to strengthen workers' collective power and benefit collective wellbeing so manufacturing workers can demand that the fruits of collectively produced prosperity are enjoyed by everyone.

TARGET IDEA #7**Manufacturing must be good for workers and the environment.**

Environmental policy can move the manufacturing industry toward a better future. Right now, manufacturing is a major producer of greenhouse gases, which are disrupting global ecosystems, as well as toxic pollutants harming local communities—disproportionately communities of color.

Environmental regulation can support ecological sustainability and create good jobs. Tighter regulation of manufacturing waste practices would reduce exposure to toxins in communities living near industrial sites, and emission regulations would motivate companies to invest in more energy-efficient practices. Following the example of the Inflation Reduction Act, government contracts for public works can come with labor requirements that ensure workers are treated with dignity, making it more likely that contracts go to unionized workers.

2. How Are Members of the American Public Thinking about Manufacturing?

In this section we describe the key mindsets that members of the American public use to think about manufacturing and how they help or hinder our communication efforts. All these mindsets are available across racial, partisan, and other identities, though there are—as we discuss—some differences in the relative salience of mindsets by group.

Seven Findings on American Thinking about Manufacturing

1. Thinking about manufacturing is shaped by general mindsets about work and labor.
2. People tend to think of manufacturing as a dirty, dangerous, working-class job.
3. Manufacturing is seen as *the* core economic activity.
4. Manufacturing tends to be thought of as “men’s work” and—particularly among white participants—can cue the reactionary mindset that white manufacturing workers are being left behind.
5. People associate manufacturing with pollution and sometimes recognize the inequitable effects of this pollution.
6. The role of government in manufacturing is contested territory.
7. People tend to think manufacturing was stronger in the past but don’t necessarily recognize the role unions have played.

FINDING #1**Thinking about manufacturing is shaped by general mindsets about work and labor.**

As we describe in greater length in our accompanying report on [cultural mindsets about work and labor](#), many of the cultural mindsets that members of the US public draw upon to think about work—and adjacent areas such as the economy, racism, and the role of government—fall into two big clusters:

1. ***Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary***. These mindsets center on the role and responsibility of individuals in determining their own success, or they regard the way society is set up as natural and inevitable (for example, gender roles or economic relationships are seen as the natural way of things). This set of mindsets upholds the status quo and tends to preserve existing power relations between groups.
2. ***Collective, Structural, and Designed***. These mindsets take a wider lens, recognizing how collective actions and decisions shape outcomes for society and individuals. They foreground the role of collectives (such as unions) in achieving change, bring into view how structural factors (such as structural racism or sexism) shape work, or highlight the role of political choice and design in shaping the economy. This set of mindsets also enables individuals to contest the status quo and recognize the need for and possibility of structural change.

It is important to stress that both clusters of mindsets are available to all members of the public, and people move back and forth between them, sometimes seeing things from one perspective, sometimes from the other. These describe ways of thinking, not sets of people.

We can think of these clusters as providing competing ways of thinking about work and related social issues. While thinking about manufacturing is distinctive in some key ways, these clusters of mindsets play a critical role in shaping thinking about manufacturing.

There are a few other important features of these clusters to note:

- **These two mindset clusters lead to different judgments about manufacturing policy and government responsibility.** People who strongly endorse *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* mindsets are more likely to denigrate unions as corrupt, blame the government for challenges within manufacturing, and reject a range of policies (for example, those that protect manufacturing workers). People who endorse *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets, on the other hand, are more likely to support policies to protect workers, develop more environmentally sustainable jobs, and strengthen unions.

- **Both clusters are available to people.** Both types of mindsets are available in American culture, so people can (and often do) hold them at the same time. In general, we find that *Individual, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* mindsets tend to be more dominant in thinking—easier to access and more frequently drawn upon—but *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets are also present and available.
- **Both clusters are available to all but are endorsed to different degrees depending on political party, gender, and race.** We find some patterns, such as Republicans and men tending to endorse *Individual, Naturalistic, and Designed* mindsets to a greater extent than Democrats or women, respectively. We also find that white participants are less likely to endorse the *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets than other racial groups, although several foundational individualistic models (such as the idea of the self-made individual) are endorsed equally across racial groups.⁷

Two Available Clusters of Mindsets about Work



Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary Mindsets

Individualism—What happens to an individual in life is primarily the result of the choices they make.

Self-Makingness—It's good to work hard. If someone works hard enough, they can succeed. The economy provides enough opportunities for anyone to succeed through hard work.

Born to Your Work—People have natural traits (e.g., personality) that explain why they are in their jobs, and how good they are at them.

Gender Essentialism—Men and women are biologically different and suited to different jobs.

Gender is Binary—There are two discrete gender categories, and everyone belongs in one of them: man or woman.

Market Naturalism—The jobs we have available are the jobs that the market naturally creates.

Reverse Racism is the New Racism—Society has overcorrected on race, such that white people now face disadvantage at work.

Cultural Differences in Work Ethic—People from some communities and cultures don't value hard work (often anti-Black).

System Is Rigged (conservative version)—The system is rigged by elites (e.g., liberals), against the people (e.g., white working class Americans).

Government Is Anti-business (manufacturing)—Corporate tax and government regulation hurt American manufacturing businesses and jobs.

Unions as Corrupt—Unions are self-interested and get what they want through coercion and fear.



Collective, Structural, and Designed Mindsets

Ecological Thinking—How we do depends on the resources available in our neighborhoods.

Structural Thinking—How successful people are in life is determined by how our society is structured.

Opportunity Structures—Class, race, and location can shape your opportunities and constrain work prospects.

Designed Economy—The laws and policies we make determine how our economy works.

Designed Labor Systems—Government decisions determine what kinds of jobs are available and how much they pay.

Care Work as Context—The quality of care work depends on the conditions of the job (pay, training etc.).

Sexism Shapes Care Work—Sexism explains the undervaluation of care work and low pay of care workers.

Structural Racism Shapes Work—Racism built into our society's laws and institutions shapes how much jobs are valued and paid.

Environmental Racism—People of color are disproportionately affected by pollution from industry.

Profit Motive Drives Exploitation—Corporations prioritize profit at the expense of workers.

System Is Rigged (liberal version)—The system is rigged by elites (e.g. wealthy corporations), against the people (e.g. families trying to make ends meet, Black and brown Americans).

Government as Protector (manufacturing)—It's the government's role to protect manufacturing workers.

Stronger Together—Workers are more powerful when they come together through unions.

Implications for communicators. While productive Collective, Structural, and Designed mindsets aren't always dominant in conversations about manufacturing, they are available and can potentially be strengthened.

FINDING #2

People tend to think of manufacturing as a dirty, dangerous, working-class job.

Manufacturing as a “Factory Job”

At the center of the way people think about manufacturing is the mental image of a factory. People assume that manufacturing takes place in large and crowded buildings with fast-moving assembly lines of heavy machinery. The image of frenetic production leads people to make other assumptions about what manufacturing is like, bringing to mind dirty floors, smoky air, and loud noises. Because of the association with factories, manufacturing jobs are assumed to involve heavy machinery and heavy lifting, both of which present the risk of injury. Manufacturing jobs are also assumed to involve drudgery because assembly lines are thought to be repetitive and boring but still require constant attention.

For these reasons, people can assume that manufacturing work is done by people who do not have many other options. This calls to mind ideas about workers who do not have a college education or other work experience and may be in urgent need of a job. Therefore, manufacturing workers are often thought of as working class.

The “Factory Job” Prototype Activates Mindsets about Work and Class

Three mindsets about work and labor are cued by thinking about manufacturing as a difficult factory job done by working-class people. While these mindsets are generally salient in conversations about work, they can be particularly strong in the context of manufacturing.

1. **The *Self-Makingness* cultural mindset.** This mindset assumes that how you do in life is an outcome of effort and drive. In the context of manufacturing, this mindset is used to assert that the difficulty and danger of the job can create the chance for working-class people to work hard and apply themselves. In this way, *Self-Makingness* can serve as the basis for rationalizing inequality, with those who do not “make something of themselves” being seen as less hardworking. This mindset puts responsibility for success or failure squarely on the shoulders of the individual and can background the need for structural change.
2. **The *Opportunity Structures* cultural mindset.** Unlike the *Self-Makingness* mindset, this mindset focuses thinking on how factors *outside* an individual's control shape their opportunities for work. In the context of manufacturing, this mindset may be particularly salient because people sometimes assume that workers end up in factories as a last resort, due to limited options. This mindset foregrounds race, class, and where someone was born as major factors shaping whether they have job opportunities. Class, in particular, as we have seen, is associated with factory work, with people thinking of manufacturing as a prototypical working-class job. Class is also tied to geography in interesting ways, with many participants saying that manufacturing jobs may be the only work

available to working-class people from certain areas. For this reason, people also saw access to good public transportation as providing opportunities for potential manufacturing workers, while the absence of good public transportation was seen to limit opportunity.

3. **The *Work as Survival* cultural mindset.** This mindset assumes that everyone is forced to work, whether they want to or not, because they need money to survive. This assumption, paired with the *Opportunity Structures* mindset, is used to explain why someone would take a difficult, dangerous, and tedious job. When thinking in this way, all jobs, including manufacturing jobs, are seen as stemming from need rather than choice.

Implications for communicators. Communicators have an opportunity to broaden people's understanding of manufacturing, expanding from “factory jobs” (and the stereotypes that come with that) to include the many other types and settings of manufacturing jobs. There is also a need to build understanding of how systems can be redesigned such that manufacturing jobs—broadly conceived—can be good, desirable jobs rather than jobs of last resort. The *Opportunity Structures* mindset can be particularly productive because it brings into view the structural factors that shape opportunity; it should be built upon where possible. This mindset is associated with support for policy outcomes like raising the minimum wage and providing public childcare for all.⁸ However, the challenge is to deepen understanding of structural inequities relating to race and to diminish the *Self-Makingness* reasoning that such adversities actually offer individuals a useful growth opportunity where they can apply themselves and rise above. The *Work as Survival* mindset has mixed implications. Work being so closely tied to survival can limit people's ability to imagine alternatives where people can live well regardless of how they work. However, this mindset offers a way to understand exploitation because, if workers are forced to work for survival, employers can prey on that precarity. This could be built out into a wider argument about class, showing how poverty serves as a disciplinary function in our society, constraining the freedoms and prospects of people who have less opportunity through no fault of their own.

FINDING #3

Manufacturing is seen as the core economic activity.

People often think about manufacturing as central to the economy as a whole—a way of thinking that has been strongly reinforced through advertising, television, and political campaigns.

The Manufacturing Is the Backbone of America Cultural Mindset.

People widely assume that manufacturing provides the basic material structure of society, allowing society to function and meet its demands. In this way manufacturing serves as both a literal and symbolic representation of America's economy. The sector is thought to be so critical that society would not function without it. When asked what role manufacturing plays in society, interview participants described how it provides for people's material, survival, and consumptive needs. Manufacturing is seen as both supporting the needs of individuals by providing necessary material resources and supporting the economy as a whole by providing consumer goods and products to satisfy supply and demand. Because manufacturing is seen as providing vital material support, participants relied on a popular metaphor of a “backbone,” the central support structure, and emphasized its importance by talking about how incapable society would be without it.

Researcher: *How important would you say manufacturing work is?*

Participant (White woman, Republican, 66 years old): *Extremely important. Americans have needs, they need things, they need goods, they need food, they need cars, they need manufacturing. To me, manufacturing is basically the backbone of the country. They don't get enough recognition, but they're providing goods for the needs of the people. So, manufacturing jobs are extremely important.*⁹

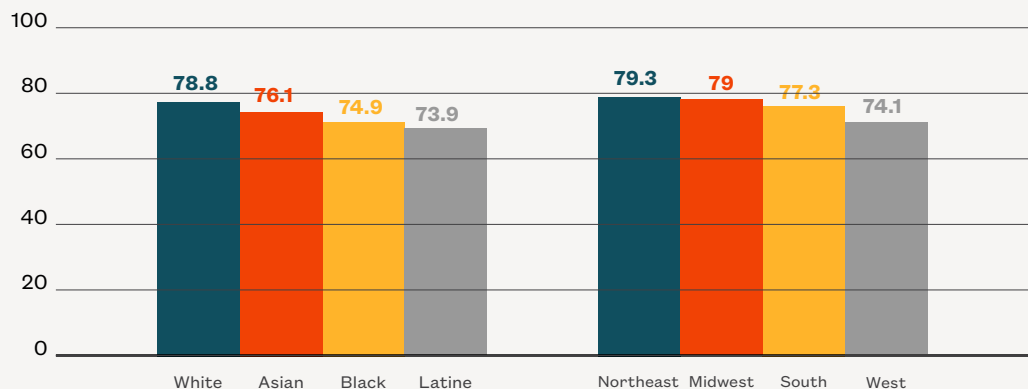
Survey evidence: *Manufacturing Is the Backbone of America* is a ubiquitous mindset but compatible with different mindsets of work.

In our surveys, this was the most strongly endorsed mindset and tended to be high across all demographic groups.

Small Differences by Race and Region

The *Manufacturing Is the Backbone of America* mindset is strongly endorsed regardless of where people live or their racial identity. Yet there are small but significant differences in endorsement between groups, as Figure 1 shows. White participants endorse this mindset significantly more than do Black or Latine participants. Further, people in the Northeast and the Midwest endorse this mindset significantly more than people in the West.¹⁰ We might explain these patterns with reference to how manufacturing has traditionally been seen as a white working-class job, with its heartland in the Rust Belt, but it's key to note that these differences among groups are small.

Figure 1: Mean endorsement of the *Manufacturing Is the Backbone of America* mindset, by racial group and region



The items were on nine-point Likert-type scales (see methodology supplement for items). Means have been transposed to a 100-point scale, so 50 represents the midpoint of the scale (“neither agree nor disagree”). As scores get closer to zero, this indicates increasingly strong rejection of the mindset. As scores get closer to 100, this indicates increasingly strong endorsement of the mindset.

Compatible with Different Mindsets and Public Policy Outcomes

The backbone mindset also does not show a strong or consistent pattern of relationship with either of the two clusters of mindsets (discussed in Finding #1). The assumption that manufacturing is the core economic activity is neither inherently naturalizing nor does it automatically imply a recognition of the way systems are designed. Instead, this mindset can be entwined with either way of thinking.

One important finding from our survey data is that *Manufacturing Is the Backbone of America* tends to not correlate, either positively or negatively, with a range of progressive policy outcomes. This indicates that, when thinking with this mindset, people ascribe importance to manufacturing but without a particular vision of how the sector might change.

Associated with the Devaluation or Instrumentalization of Other Types of Work

When manufacturing is thought of as the primary economic activity, other forms of work can be devalued or instrumentalized. We see some evidence of this in the survey, where the *Manufacturing Is the Backbone of America* mindset is moderately correlated with the mindset that *Care Work Enables Productivity*—the idea that care work’s value and function in society is to allow other types of work and production to happen. We interpret this in light of our interviews on care work, where the need for care was sometimes relegated to a secondary type of need (for example, we only need care work when family members chose not to provide care) and not always regarded as “real work.” This distinction is gendered, with care work being thought of as “women’s work,” which is undervalued in our culture.¹¹

Implications for communicators. The key take-home for communicators is that this mindset, with its emphasis on the inherent value of manufacturing, is not sufficient to encourage support for structural change. For this mindset to be leveraged productively, it needs to be connected to thinking about systemic and structural change.

FINDING #4

Manufacturing tends to be thought of as “men’s work” and—particularly among white participants—can cue the reactionary mindset that white manufacturing workers are being left behind.

Because manufacturing is symbolic of the American economy and national identity, assumptions about *who* does this work, and who embodies this identity, are central. Manufacturing is associated with male workers, and participants (unlike stakeholders) tend to understand gender disparities in manufacturing in terms of fundamental biological differences between men and women (that is, that manufacturing is a physically demanding job more suited to the natural aptitudes of men). The

association between manufacturing and racism is more varied, with people sometimes thinking about manufacturing through the lens of structural racism (that is, that workers of color are either under- or overrepresented because of structural racism) and sometimes (mostly white participants) claiming “reverse racism” is at play (that is, that white workers are the ones being discriminated against). Notably, both of these mindsets about race seem to be more salient in conversations about manufacturing than in the context of care work or work more generally. This may be because some people associate traditional manufacturing jobs with whiteness, while others assume that manufacturing means “jobs of last resort,” which can be associated with people of color.

The Manufacturing Is Men’s Work Cultural Mindset.

When relying on this mindset, people think that men and women have fundamentally different abilities. In the context of manufacturing, which was assumed to be physically difficult and dangerous work, the top-of-mind differences tend to be physical strength and toughness, with men assumed to be superior in these regards. When this mindset was active, participants tended to assume that manufacturing was men’s work and that women lack the natural physical traits necessary for the work. This mindset essentially blames women for not being tough enough to work in manufacturing, hiding the ways the sector can actively discriminate against or exploit women.

Well, because if it's something that's more physical labor [...] I guess men are naturally more inclined to do physical labor, just because of our genetic makeup.

Participant (White man, Independent/other, 33 years old):

Implications for communicators. By assuming that gender disparities in work are natural and genetic, this mindset ignores the role of human choices in how economic systems are designed. In addition to obscuring the real structural reasons for a lack of women in certain levels and subsectors of manufacturing, this mindset also makes it harder to see, let alone understand, the ways in which women—particularly women of color and undocumented women—are overrepresented, and often exploited, in subsectors like meatpacking.

The Reverse Racism Is the New Racism Cultural Mindset.

While many people can accept that racism against people of color existed in the past, there is a view that society has overcorrected and people of color now have advantages that white people do not. This view was expressed mostly by white participants and only came up in conversations about manufacturing, not in our other interviews on care work or work in general.¹²

I think if anything, as a white person, you have to work two times harder because we are a minority now.

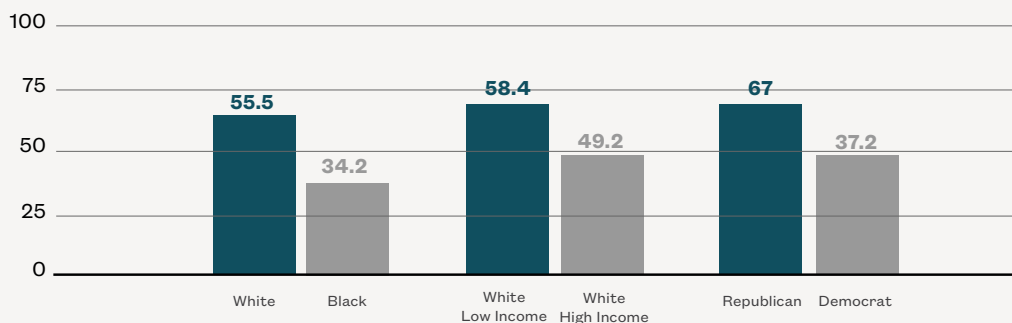
Participant (White woman, Republican, 65 years old):

Survey evidence: *Reverse Racism Is the New Racism* is endorsed differently across groups and connects to other key mindsets on manufacturing.

Reverse Racism Endorsed More by White People with Lower Incomes and Republicans

In the national survey, the reverse racism mindset is endorsed most often by white participants and least often by Black participants. We also find that white participants making less than \$50,000 tended to endorse this model significantly more strongly than white people making more than \$150,000 (mean endorsement = 49.2; $p = .013$, $d = .350$) – as Figure 2 below shows. Together, these findings illustrate that this is a mindset more likely to be endorsed by those groups that are identified in the mindset as the new victims of discrimination. In addition, we find a pattern by political affiliation. Republicans are much more likely to endorse this mindset (mean endorsement = 61.0) compared to Democrats (mean endorsement = 37.2). We can understand this with reference to political discourse on race and jobs. The white victimhood narrative has been used by Republican political media figures to leverage white working-class resentment that might otherwise be aimed at a collective recognition of economic exploitation, and to assert a national identity that centers white working America.¹⁵

Figure 2: Mean endorsement of *Reverse Racism Is the New Racism* mindset, by racial group, income and political leaning



Note: Means have been transposed to a 100-point scale, so 50 represents the midpoint of the scale and higher scores indicate greater agreement. White participants endorsed the *Reverse Racism Is the New Racism* mindset significantly more than Black people ($t = 10.90$, $p < .001$); white low-income participants endorsed this significantly more than white high-income participants ($t = 2.83$, $p = .013$); and Republicans endorsed this significantly more than Democrats ($t = 14.91$, $p < .001$).

Reverse Racism Connects to the Individualistic, Naturalistic, and Reactionary Cluster of Mindsets

The *Reverse Racism Is the New Racism* mindset shows a pattern of positive correlation with many of the other naturalizing and individualistic mindsets we discuss in Finding #1. While on the surface it is represented as a concern about racism, in practice it obscures the structural realities of racism against people of color. One way this can be seen in the quantitative data is that this mindset shows a moderate negative correlation with the *Structural Racism Shapes Work* mindset ($r = -0.33$). In other words, people who endorse reverse racism are less likely to see racism in structural terms. This is not surprising, given that reverse racism is a form of racism denial.

The Structural Racism Shapes Work Cultural Mindset.

Sometimes participants understood that racialized poverty keeps people of color from having the same chances and choices, leaving low-status, low-paying, and difficult jobs as one of the few options. When thinking in this way, people relied on the assumption that the historical legacy of slavery, segregation, inherited wealth, and discrimination have led some people of color to be in a disadvantaged position. People sometimes extended this to explain patterns of occupational segregation and racialized exploitation in work. However, the emphasis on racism as a historical legacy meant that people often weren't thinking about systemic racism as an ongoing process in society.¹⁴

When this mindset was active in the context of manufacturing, people generally either assumed that people of color were *more* likely to work manufacturing jobs (because they were seen as difficult and undesirable jobs) or *less* likely to have the opportunity to get these jobs. This depended largely on whether people were thinking of manufacturing as a dirty, dangerous, and working-class job. If so, people were more likely to argue that people of color would be overrepresented. If not, people assumed that people of color would be discriminated against via exclusion from these jobs. Both of these elaborations of the *Structural Racism* mindset have truth to them, as there are both patterns of overrepresentation and exclusion, depending on the level of manufacturing work (where, for instance, Black workers are overrepresented on the “shop floor” and underrepresented in management). However, people tended to land on one or the other, which does not reflect the complexity and duality of the actual situation.

Researcher: *Does someone's race affect whether or not they become a manufacturing worker?*

Participant (Latino man, Democrat, 26 years old): *Poverty always. People of different ethnic backgrounds, certain people with different ethnic backgrounds were definitely treated differently. They were given a late start in life. And because of that certain late start in life and even racism, and even certain laws to keep them from being here, you could say just in the U.S. has made it harder for, like I said, African Americans or Hispanics, or even Asians, and Native Americans who are even from here.*

Survey evidence: Endorsement of *Structural Racism Shapes Work* is endorsed more by Democrats and people of color.

Looking at group differences on the survey, we find that political affiliation and racial identity both help explain how much people endorse structural racism. Democrats endorse this mindset significantly more than Republicans (mean scores = 67.8 and 52.4, respectively). Democrats are more likely to endorse structural racism than reverse racism, while Republicans are the other way around. This finding aligns with related research in which we found party affiliation had a very large effect on endorsement of mindsets about racism.¹⁵ This is unsurprising, as party identification is now largely coextensive with political ideology and the parties hold very different views of the role of race and racism in American society.

We also find that people of color endorse *Structural Racism Shapes Work* significantly more than white participants and that this difference is particularly pronounced between Black and white participants (mean scores = 70.7 and 54.5, respectively).

Implications for communicators. Communicators need to be aware that discussions of power and/or systemic racism in manufacturing risk being obstructed by reactionary mindsets that promote a sense of white victimhood and resentment toward people of color. At the same time, some productive systemic thinking about racism is available, and work needs to be done to bring this discussion into the present moment, focusing on the way current systems and structures reproduce and perpetuate racial injustice.

FINDING #5**People associate manufacturing with pollution and sometimes recognize the inequitable effects of this pollution.**

People draw on multiple mindsets that see manufacturing as a source of pollution, one primarily focused on the effects on local ecosystems and the other on the inequitable human consequences of pollution.

The *Manufacturing Pollutes* Cultural Mindset.

Participants talked explicitly about factories polluting and tended to assume that manufacturing releases toxic waste into the surrounding environment. While this was a common topic of conversation, people's understanding of the problem was often limited. Sometimes pollution was treated as an exception, not a rule, and as something illegal that should be stopped if it were occurring. Pollution tended to be thought of in immediate and local terms, with several participants expressing concern about "waste" and "trash," and some focusing on the impact on local wildlife and people living nearby. While a few participants explicitly linked "gases" to climate change, others expressed doubt about the reality of climate change and distrust of government regulation, even while talking about the reality of pollution.

Manufacturing throws in a lot of toxins and things that destroy the environment [...]

Participant (Black woman, Democrat, 45 years old):

The *Environmental Racism* Cultural Mindset.

When describing who is impacted by factories, participants discussed residents who live closest to the factory, who were often thought to be people of color, or “urban” communities, subsisting on low incomes. These communities are thought to be more likely to be harmed by toxic industrial pollution because they have fewer resources to move away or fight against the creation of industrial sites in their communities. Some participants—particularly participants of color—linked ongoing systemic racism and poverty to the fact that low-income communities of color may have less power to determine whether industrial sites are built in their neighborhoods. This intersection of larger economic forces, systemic racism, community health, and pollution is tangible in the context of manufacturing in a way that it is not in other contexts. However, the *Environmental Racism* mindset is still less common in people’s thinking compared to many other mindsets and, in line with our other findings on racism, it is endorsed more often by Black participants in our survey than white participants (mean scores = 70.0 and 50.3, respectively). We also find that *Environmental Racism* has direct connections to solutions thinking. For instance, it is correlated with support for public policy aimed at training workers to do environmentally sustainable work ($r = 0.39$) and with the assumption that the government should protect manufacturing workers ($r = 0.38$), discussed further in Finding #6. This indicates that it is an important mindset to build when advocating for a green transition.

I think if you have money and you have a little more power, a little more status, a little more likely to be able to fight to prevent a plant from getting put in your neighborhood. There’s a reason that those plants tend to get put in poor neighborhoods; they can’t fight back. It often disproportionately affects people of color, and that is—environmental justice is a thing.

Participant (White woman, Democrat, 44 years old):

Implications for communicators. While the *Manufacturing Pollutes* mindset is in some ways a helpful and productive mindset, it is quite thin and needs to be built upon. It is also sometimes connected with a fatalism that pollution is inevitable. Communicators need to connect the assumption that factories pollute to an understanding of the scale of the problem and its structural solutions.

The *Environmental Racism* mindset points helpfully to an important structural problem, but there is a lack of clarity about exactly how modern public policy perpetuates the pollution of low-income Black communities (for example, through enforced segregation, political disenfranchisement, and zoning laws). What’s more, the ways that current collective decision-making processes exclude communities of color through democratic disenfranchisement are only vaguely understood. Communicators can better explain the mechanisms of environmental racism and which policies need to change, linking climate policy and local pollution.

FINDING #6**The role of government in manufacturing is contested territory.**

As we have seen, people believe that manufacturing is central to the economy, but this can be connected to either a structuralist systems-design way of thinking or an individualistic and naturalistic way of thinking. Each of these ways of thinking connects to different mindsets about the role of government—the former with the mindset that government is responsible for protecting manufacturing workers and the environment, and the latter with a mindset that blames the government for actively interfering with and stifling the sector’s growth and profits.

The Government Is Anti-business Cultural Mindset.

When drawing on this mindset, people assume that government regulation of manufacturing is harming businesses by making it more expensive and cumbersome to make a profit. This has a clear causal pathway behind it, that the manufacturing sector has a natural tendency toward growth that is actively restricted by laws and regulation. Thinking with this mindset, people say it is the federal government’s job to promote business, and governments should only regulate in the case of severely unethical behavior, such as child labor or “poisoning waterways.” Participants talked about taxes and regulation as encouraging offshoring of manufacturing jobs and hurting the US economy. Often implicit in this thinking is some version of *Market Naturalism*—that the economy is a force beyond individual or societal control and does best when left to govern itself. (For more on this mindset, see our report on [public thinking about work and labor](#)). When drawing on the *Government Is Antibusiness* mindset, people sometimes went beyond the ineptitude of bureaucracies to project hostility onto government. We hear in discourse how this way of thinking can be associated with conspiratorial logic—for example, with former president Donald Trump arguing publicly that there is a Chinese plot to make manufacturing noncompetitive by increasing environmental regulations.¹⁶

I think they [manufacturing businesses] are facing challenges with overregulation, making it expensive and difficult to get their job done, and pay all their bills, and be profitable.

Participant (Latina woman, leans Republican, 55 years old):

The Government as Protector Cultural Mindset.

When thinking in this way, people assume the government is responsible for helping workers (for example, ensuring work environments are safe) through how they spend resources, regulate, and make policy. Government is seen as responsible for solving problems within manufacturing, including pollution, bad working conditions, and exploitation. This mindset showed up particularly when participants responded to questions about responsibility—attributing responsibility either to the government in general, or laws and policies, or particular branches of government. The enforcement of child labor laws and environmental protections were common examples of areas that required government.

Researcher: Okay. So, who's responsible for making these kind of changes that we're talking about? [Referring to discussion of changes required to address the challenges facing manufacturing workers]

Participant (White woman, Republican, 43 years old): Oh, yeah. Definitely the government.

Survey evidence: Two competing mindsets on government lead to different solutions in manufacturing.

The *Manufacturing Is the Backbone of America* mindset is associated with both *Government as Protector* ($r = 0.29$) and *Government Is Antibusiness* in the full sample ($r = 0.19$). This, again, demonstrates the way the backbone mindset does not necessarily lend itself to a particular way of thinking about the role of government or the solutions needed in manufacturing.

Connection between Manufacturing Is the Backbone of America and the Role of Government Depends on Political Affiliation

These two mindsets about government are related to *Manufacturing Is the Backbone of America*, but in opposing ways depending on political affiliation. For Republicans, the *Government Is Antibusiness* mindset is moderately positively correlated with the *Manufacturing Is the Backbone of America* ($r = 0.35$) and not with *Government as Protector* ($r = 0.02$). There is an inverse pattern among Democrats, for whom *Manufacturing as Backbone* is moderately correlated with *Government as Protector* ($r = 0.34$) and not with *Government Is Antibusiness* ($r = 0.04$). So, while both Republicans and Democrats consider manufacturing to be central to the economy, they have different ideas about what this means for the role of government in the sector. This is important because the field is currently talking about the need for a strong and resilient manufacturing sector while not necessarily articulating a progressive vision of how it can be better for workers and the environment.

Mindsets about Government Are Associated with Support for Different Policy Outcomes

These two mindsets about government show distinct patterns of association with policy support, as Table 1 shows. The more people endorse the *Government as Protector mindset*, the more likely they are to also support every progressive policy measured in the national survey—for instance, policies aimed at increasing government protection of manufacturing workers, strengthening unions, and training workers for jobs in a more sustainable economy. The *Government Is Antibusiness* mindset shows an inverse pattern and is negatively correlated with all the progressive policies measured. People's assumptions about the role of government are directly related to their support, or lack thereof, for policy change.

Table 1: Correlations between mindsets about government and support for a range of policies

	<i>Government as Antibusiness</i>	<i>Government as Protector</i>
<i>Forgive Student Debt</i>	$r = -0.22^{**}$	$r = 0.28^{**}$
<i>Skills Training Policy</i>	$r = -0.22^{**}$	$r = 0.41^{**}$
<i>Climate Jobs Training Policy</i>	$r = -0.33^{**}$	$r = 0.41^{**}$
<i>Manufacturing labor Standards Policy</i>	$r = -0.18^{**}$	$r = 0.35^{**}$
<i>Community-Based Care Policy</i>	$r = -0.19^{**}$	$r = 0.37^{**}$
<i>Strengthening Unions Policy</i>	$r = -0.19^{**}$	$r = 0.40^{**}$
<i>Top Tax Rate Increase</i>	$r = -0.27^{**}$	$r = 0.25^{**}$
<i>Federal Minimum Wage Increase</i>	$r = -0.28^{**}$	$r = 0.36^{**}$
<i>Recession Income Policy</i>	$r = -0.14^{**}$	$r = 0.32^{**}$
<i>Jobs Guarantee Policy</i>	$r = -0.14^{**}$	$r = 0.37^{**}$
<i>Paid Leave Policy</i>	$r = -0.13^{**}$	$r = 0.33^{**}$
<i>Public Child Care Policy</i>	$r = -0.21^{**}$	$r = 0.40^{**}$
<i>Reparations Policy</i>	$r = -0.15^{**}$	$r = 0.31^{**}$
<i>Universal Basic Income Policy</i>	$r = -0.12^{**}$	$r = 0.32^{**}$

For the exact wording of these policy questions please refer to our [methods supplement](#).

Key:

Blue: Positive, statistically significant correlation

Red: Negative, statistically significant correlation

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$

0.10–0.29 = small correlation, 0.30–0.49 = moderate correlation, 0.50+ = large correlation

These are correlations rather than causal relationships, so we can't conclude whether mindsets on government are driving policy support. Looking at these results alongside the qualitative data, however, we can see how the *Government as Protector* mindset has the potential to open up structural thinking about solutions if built upon, as we explore below.

Implications for communicators. The *Government as Protector* mindset offers an important but limited role for government and needs to be built upon if it is going to be leveraged to increase support for public policy aimed at structural change. As it stands, this mindset can forefront government's role in addressing immediate safety concerns but does not necessarily help people thinking about government's role in larger structural change. People also seem to have low awareness of how labor and environmental abuses relate to a dismantling of government protections—for instance, through radical legal attacks—and the deliberate defunding and understaffing of the government agencies that are supposed to protect the environment and workers.

FINDING #7

People tend to think manufacturing was stronger in the past but don't necessarily recognize the role unions have played.

Manufacturing is heavily associated with an idealized past, when the economy was stronger and manufacturing jobs were better. While people don't explicitly connect this to the strength and subsequent suppression of unions, there is some tension in public thinking on unions. People widely endorse the idea that unions are a way for workers to become more powerful, but they can also think of unions as fundamentally self-interested and corrupt.

The *Regressive Nostalgia* Cultural Mindset.

When thinking this way, people assume that the country is moving in the wrong direction, away from a past when the economy was strong. Changes in manufacturing are thought to reflect and represent this decline. For example, people opined that technological advances are de-skilling workers and degrading the quality of products through the loss of craftsmanship and tradition. At other times, offshoring was thought of as the cause of this larger decline.

Concerningly, this mindset can involve economic nationalism and isolationism, where the offshoring of manufacturing is seen as a threat to national strength and identity. Within this way of thinking, the nation's borders are thought of as a container that should enclose vital resources and industry to allow the nation to be self-reliant, as the quote below illustrates. Manufacturing's association with past prosperity, along with its symbolic value as a representation of the economy itself, is caught up with fear and loss of trust in larger systems. This is often expressed as concerns about the decline of American society and the rise of other countries' economic power.

Importantly, unions were completely absent from all discussions of an economic decline. Sometimes people spoke wistfully of a time when manufacturing workers had good benefits, but they did not associate this loss of benefits with the decline of unions. When unions were connected to the past, participants implied that unions were vestigial—a relic of the past no longer benefiting workers.

Because it used to be that we were the proud manufacturers of [...] most of what we needed, we were producing ourselves. And then it started getting farmed out to different countries, and now if they decide not to do any business with us, we're going to be in serious trouble, depending on what particular kind of business we're talking about. But it used to be that everything was made, used, bought in the United States. We were self-sufficient more than, more than anything else.

Participant (White woman, Republican, 65 years old):

The Stronger Together Cultural Mindset.

People widely assume that individual manufacturing workers on their own do not have much power to affect their working conditions, but they do see that workers are more powerful when they come together and that unionizing is a way of building collective power. Sometimes people argued that unions would not exist in an ideal world because we shouldn't need unions once better conditions are achieved. We find in our survey that this mindset is positively associated with a range of progressive outcomes, including policies to strengthen unions and train workers for jobs in a more sustainable economy.

Well, unions are [...] they protect the workers' rights and stuff, and it's a bunch of people under one cause, and if things don't go the way they want them to, the union will go on strike and then everything's in upheaval and it puts the bosses' backs against the wall and there's a standoff.

Participant (White man, Independent, 33 years old):

Researcher: *How much influence do you think manufacturing workers have to decide what the working conditions or pay is like?*

Participant (Latino man, Democrat, 26 years old): *I think a lot of influence comes from the workers, for sure. I think that's why there's unions. Because if workers demand a certain type of pay, they're gonna get together and talk about it and do something about it.*

The Unions Are Corrupt Cultural Mindset.

When drawing on this mindset, people assumed unions were only interested in their own profit and power, and actually harmed workers. Unions were imagined to take dues while protecting “lazy” workers at the expense of those who worked hard. When thinking this way, people assume that, far from protecting workers from being taken advantage of, unions themselves take advantage of workers. This involves denying the need for collective action through collective bargaining.

I mean, nowadays unions' goal is to get as much money as possible with doing as little work as possible.

Participant (White man, Independent, 33 years old):

The *Unions Are Corrupt* mindset may be particularly salient for the public in the context of manufacturing. This association does not appear to be a product of people's thinking about the historical role of unions in manufacturing but instead seems to be related to the thinking that it's ultimately up to *individuals* to make a success of themselves in manufacturing. As we have seen, the idea that manufacturing is difficult work done by people with less opportunity can cue thinking about *Self-Makingness*, where an individual's work ethic and drive are thought to be primary to their success in life. When this kind of thinking is dominant, people can reason that unions serve to unhelpfully weaken an individual's drive and work ethic, for instance by protecting “lazy” workers so they don't need to try—as the quote below illustrates:

I've always been told that labor unions are only there to protect lazy and nonproductive workers or troublesome workers. That's what I've always been told. [...] Because I was like, “But don't we need [unions] to protect our jobs?” And [my husband] was like, “No, your hard work protects your job.” So, we didn't join.

Participant (White woman, Republican, 66 years old):

Survey evidence: The *Unions Are Corrupt* mindset is associated with *Individualist* and *Zero-Sum* thinking.

In the survey, the *Unions Are Corrupt* mindset belonged in the *Individualistic, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* cluster of mindsets. Notably, it was positively correlated with *Zero-Sum* thinking ($r = 0.31$), which assumes that if one group receives resources or help, another group necessarily loses out. It was also positively correlated with *Individualism* ($r = 0.26$), which assumes that it is up to individuals to determine their own fate. These correlations suggest that a rejection of collective power is connected to the thinking that individuals are responsible for their own outcomes and groups must compete with each other for scarce resources.

This *Individualistic, Zero-Sum* thinking likely extends into perceptions about racial competition for work (that is, that manufacturing workers have to compete against each other, by race), or even reverse racism (that is, that white workers are now at a greater disadvantage than workers of color). While we didn't examine this directly in connection with *Unions Are Corrupt*, we find people are *less* likely to embrace reverse racism the more they endorse the union-supporting *Stronger Together* mindset ($r = -0.22$). This suggests that different mindsets on unions are connected to thinking on racialized competition in manufacturing, though more research is needed to understand the basis for the *Unions Are Corrupt* mindset and how it connects to reactionary mindsets on racism.

Implications for communicators. While concerns about the declining real wages of manufacturing jobs may be a useful starting point for talking about systemic change, communicators need to explain why those system changes are needed—for instance, by bringing the active suppression of unions into the picture. Otherwise, an emphasis on past national pride likely lends itself to authoritarian zeal and reactionary xenophobia.

The *Stronger Together* mindset is a productive way of thinking that can be built upon to increase support for union-strengthening policy and removing anti-union security laws. *Unions Are Corrupt*, on the other hand, obscures how unions empower workers to collectively bargain and how this in turn shapes work, wages, and the economy on a larger scale.

3. How Is the Field Communicating Now?

As part of this research, we conducted a narrative scan and analysis of public-facing communications materials from 11 organizations working to improve conditions and outcomes for manufacturing workers (that is, the manufacturing “field”). These organizations represented a range of areas within the manufacturing sector, including industry membership associations, think tanks, nonprofit advocacy groups, and unions. These groups fell into two camps in terms of consistent patterns of communication, perhaps reflecting their positions within the field and the shared objectives within each camp. The first camp consisted of all the industry membership associations—organizations that have as their mission the advancement of the manufacturing sector—and, to a lesser extent, the think tanks. The other camp consisted of the unions and the nonprofit advocacy groups, who have as their shared objectives a more just manufacturing sector that is keenly attentive to the needs and plight of workers in the sector. The differences, nuances, and similarities between these camps are discussed in the following sections.

The process of analyzing how the field is currently communicating included qualitative analysis to identify themes, trends, and patterns of meaning in the data. It also required interpreting those findings against the backdrop of the public’s mindsets about manufacturing and the core ideas that field wants to communicate to the public. Our analysis revealed three trends in framing strategies across organizations’ communications materials, which we discuss next.

TREND #1

The field emphasizes the centrality of manufacturing to life in the United States, but different organizations present different visions for its future.

Manufacturing is described as a key part of life in the United States and, across the field, communications share a generally unifying, efficacious, and optimistically defiant tone in the face of what the field describes as global shifts and challenges. In this sense, the field is communicating in ways that align with how the public thinks about manufacturing and the backbone role it plays in the US economy.

The two camps within the field diverge in describing their visions for the future of manufacturing. Industry associations generally emphasize a positive yet vague outlook, highlighting the sector’s potential to boost the US economy and support the success of the country. This perspective may implicitly assume that the wellbeing of manufacturing workers is either linked to the overall prosperity of the country or that the wellbeing of workers conflicts with the goal of fostering a thriving sector and enhancing economic prosperity. These organizations often lack explicit explanation of how a successful manufacturing sector both depends on and directly impacts individuals, especially workers, or how specific changes are needed to improve their wellbeing. Relatedly, communications in this camp tended

to fail to mention environmental sustainability as part of their vision for the future of manufacturing. When solutions are mentioned in relation to this vision, they tend to be vague and include things like further investment in manufacturing.

On the other hand, the advocacy nonprofits and unions put forth a vision for manufacturing that includes more just practices for workers and sector-wide transformation toward a more environmentally sustainable future. Some of the key principles guiding the visions being proposed emphasize the importance of building a stronger, more resilient, and inclusive sector that promotes the wellbeing of those working within it. The solutions that flow from this more aspirational vision are usually more focused on workers (for example, better working conditions and pay, more worker power). This camp tends to frame environmental sustainability as going hand in hand with high-quality jobs, not as a trade-off.

In short, the two camps propose different visions: One envisions manufacturing continuing to grow but remaining largely as it is now, while the other sees manufacturing as a catalyst for aspirational societal changes.

Implications for communicators. It is clear from this analysis that the field as a whole is offering different visions for the future of manufacturing. This has strategic implications for how organizations in the more transformative camp proceed with their communications. Aligning the field behind a shared, affirmative, and aspirational vision should be a priority for those who would like to see more public understanding, engagement, and action toward a more just and transformational manufacturing sector.

Additionally, using a positive vision to introduce the many policy and design solutions to the challenges facing workers—such as those that increase wages and worker protection—can help build the public's understanding of these policies (an understanding that our research found needs to be built in public thinking) and ideally make people feel that positive change is possible.

TREND #2

***Shared Prosperity, Justice, and Resilience* are values the field uses to talk about manufacturing and manufacturing workers.**

Many of the communications materials we analyzed appealed to values, with *Shared Prosperity*, *Justice*, and *Resilience* being the most commonly used across organizations.

Shared Prosperity.

Both camps appeal to the value of *Shared Prosperity* to talk about the importance and potential of a thriving manufacturing sector. They highlight the sector's potential to create jobs, boost economic prosperity, and contribute to the success of families. Advocacy groups and unions tend to emphasize the inclusion of everyone in this shared prosperity.

We believe that an innovative and growing manufacturing base is vital to America's economic and national security, as well as providing good jobs for future generations.

(Nonprofit Advocacy Organization)

Justice.

Only the unions consistently employed the value of *Justice* to guide their messaging. They did this primarily to underscore the importance of fair treatment for workers and advance the notion that they should receive fair compensation for their labor.

Besides making sure workplaces are free from discrimination, our union promotes more justice for workers who are Indigenous, racialized, women, LGBTQIA+, and/or living with a disability.

(Union)

Resilience.

Resilience is being used in field communications to talk about the sector being resilient to changing economic times, innovation, and, in the case of advocacy nonprofits and unions (but not industry associations), the challenges posed by climate change.

The Manufacturing institute builds a resilient manufacturing workforce prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the future.

(Nonprofit Advocacy Organization)

Implications for communicators. It is encouraging that the field is already framing communications with values because values let people know why an issue matters, can help convey a vision, and can prime collective thinking. While both *Justice and Shared Prosperity* have proven to be effective values for communicating about different issues in previous FrameWorks research,^{17 18} we cannot yet say whether they or *Resilience* are effective for talking about work and labor. The next phase of framing research will seek to identify specific values that are most effective for framing manufacturing, work, and labor more broadly.

TREND #3

Stakeholders in the field often hint at challenges faced by the sector and workers without fully specifying them, sometimes leaving equity issues unaddressed.

In our examination of field communications, organizations often failed to offer clear and specific explanations regarding the challenges confronted by both the manufacturing sector and individuals in manufacturing jobs. Instead, the trend was to use vague phrases such as “challenges of our time,” “changes,” “changing times,” and “challenges of the future.”

The more transformative-leaning camp of advocacy nonprofits and unions is in some cases offering up more specific challenges facing workers and the sector. For instance, some of these organizations talked about the severe impacts of climate change, automation, growing racial wealth and income gaps, attacks on unions, and harmful trade policies, as these quotes illustrate:

Too often, Americans are asked to choose between jobs and the environment. But as we face increasingly severe impacts of environmental challenges like climate change and adapt to an interconnected global economy, we can no longer choose one or the other. We believe we can and must choose both.

(Think Tank)

With automation on the rise, laborers will soon have to compete with robotic technologies for low-skill jobs, which could threaten traditional entry points into the industry.

(Nonprofit Advocacy Group)

Even if not all organizations were specific about the challenges we face, they did tend to offer solutions. There was a tendency to be much more clear about the solutions we need than the problems we face. Here is an example solution:

UAW is fighting for better schools for kids, secure health care and pensions for retirees, clean air and water, tougher workplace health and safety standards, stronger workers' compensation and unemployment insurance laws. and fairer taxes.

(Union)

Equity challenges, while important to the field, are not consistently communicated—challenges such as the underrepresentation of women, Black, and brown people in upper management roles and overrepresentation of those groups of people in lower-paying roles in manufacturing.

Implications for communicators. As communicators, when we are vague about the challenges we face, it makes it more difficult for our audiences to embrace the specific solutions we are advocating for, as the rationale for such solutions may not be apparent. Communicators in the more transformative-leaning camp should make sure to provide a robust explanation of the problem that specific solutions (like better worker wages and protections) will help ameliorate. Filling in the public's understanding and bringing your audience along with the rationale for the solutions you are proposing should be a focus for all communicators moving forward.

Communicators should be more bold in talking about equity challenges and how they need to be addressed. More research is needed to help the field communicate about issues such as racism and sexism in ways that build the public's understanding of how these issues work and increase support for solutions that address those issues in the manufacturing sector.

4. Emerging Recommendations

Taking into account the core ideas the field wants to get across, public mindsets about work, and current communication trends in the field, several recommendations emerge. All of these are in the service of helping communicators widen the lens from an individualistic understanding of work to a systems approach. These recommendations provide ways of moving away from or backgrounding the cluster of dominant mindsets that can be described as *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary*, and instead connecting issues of work with the more productive *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets. Because manufacturing is symbolic of the American economy, communicators should be aware that when they communicate about manufacturing they also have the opportunity to carry across bigger ideas about how the economy does and should work.

We intend these recommendations to be taken as suggested directions of travel for communicators. In the next phase of this project, we will use them as a guide to help us develop and test specific frames to determine the most effective ways to move in these directions.

1. **Talk about the economy as designed through human choices and discuss the role of government in shaping manufacturing through policy decisions.** Talking about the economy as something that is designed can help create space for both productive critique and collective efficacy. Paired with issues of manufacturing, it can help people see what's wrong and what could be changed. It can subvert the idea that the market is a natural force best left to its own devices.

To this end, communicators can try the following:

- Explain how many of our problems with work are a matter of design and can be traced to policy decisions.
- Talk about how the government has played a positive role in designing the economy and is responsible for public policies that have had positive impacts on the manufacturing industry and manufacturing workers.
- Pair any discussion of design problems with design solutions—for instance, show how corporate exploitation of workers can be addressed through political decisions that curb corporate power and strengthen worker power.

- 2. Move from emphasizing the importance of manufacturing to focusing on what needs to change.** Right now many communicators are talking about manufacturing as if it's an end in itself. Instead, communicators should talk about manufacturing as a means to an end—making people's lives better.

To do this, communicators can try these tactics:

- Help the public collectively imagine ways industry can be good for workers and how manufacturing jobs can be decent, safe, high quality, well paid, and well supported.
 - Explain the structural changes that are needed to make this happen (for instance, in terms of investments, training programs, and other public policy changes).
- 3. Firmly integrate the climate crisis into the challenges the sector faces and a vision for change.** If manufacturing is to be part of a better world, it needs to rise to the challenges and opportunities posed by the climate crisis. The environmental impacts of the sector need to be explained and connected to potential solutions. Right now public thinking on the issue is limited, localist, and vague. Communicators can counter that by taking this approach:
 - Avoid talking about the problem of climate disruption alone. Instead, make sure to pair problems with proportionate solutions.
 - Talk about how manufacturing can be good for both workers and the environment. This can be a win-win, rather than a zero-sum, situation.
 - Bring human concerns of climate change into the picture, for example by drawing upon people's existing understanding of how industrial pollution affects local communities, and seek to connect local pollution to the larger climate crisis through the net effects of industrial emissions.
 - Focus on the public policy changes that can allow for a just transition to a manufacturing sector that will create good jobs, train workers, and sustain the ecological system.
 - 4. Explain inequities within the sector and what can be done to address them.** To effectively talk about how manufacturing jobs can be better for workers, communicators will need to explain what is wrong at the moment. In particular, communicators can highlight why changes are needed to address current inequities within the sector. They should aim to accomplish the following:
 - Build understanding of the systemic barriers that hinder women's access and advancement in this field and connect to solutions. Simply naming gender disparities can lead people to rely on gender essentialist explanations like "women and men are biologically suited to different types of work."
 - Explain how racial inequities facing workers in the manufacturing sector also have a structural root that can be understood as part of a wider pattern of representation and discrimination across industries.

5. **Explain why manufacturing needs unions now and for the future.** Communicators have a great opportunity to leverage the existing mindset that we are stronger together and that unions are a way for workers to have collective power. However, communicators need to address a certain level of skepticism (for example, that unions are a corrupt, threatening force) and also a lack of understanding about how unions work. Communicators can take the following steps:
- Avoid talking about unions as separate and apart from workers in ways that implicitly “third-party” unions, as if unions are an independent third party. Instead, communications should reinforce that unions are made up of workers.
 - Give tangible examples about what workers achieve through collective power. This might mean sharing examples of where unions have shaped working conditions for the better (for instance, their role in securing manufacturing wage premiums).
 - Be specific about mechanisms that unions can use to leverage and maintain power (for instance, by winning better contracts).
 - Show how unionized accreditation programs can be good for workers and communities.
 - Talk about how unions can help us shift the balance of power in the economy away from corporations and toward workers.

5. Future Research and Next Steps

The next step in the WorkShift program will be to develop and test frames that can shift public thinking about work and labor in the United States. We will build upon and hone these emerging recommendations and test some of the framing strategies currently being used by the field. In particular, we hope to explore the following:

- Metaphors that can help show the systemic problems and structural solutions in manufacturing (for example, by testing body metaphors related to *backbone* compared to more mechanistic metaphors).
- Explanations that build people's understanding of how capitalism and neoliberal system design, create, and reinforce inequalities—for instance, how the exploitation of manufacturing workers is inherently connected to profit incentives built into our economy.
- Testing values that are in usage in the field, such as *Justice, Shared Prosperity, and Resilience*, to see if they can bolster people's sense of collective responsibility for reimagining work and the way our economic system functions. Effective values may be particularly important for communicating about racial and gender inequities.
- Ways of effectively framing “worker power” to move people away from individualistic assumptions about manufacturing work and build understanding of and support for collective action. This would include strengthening support for unions in the sector.
- Framing of corporations as a driver of exploitation in ways that create support for stronger regulation and alternative models of economic production.
- Framing of government responsibility for solutions beyond immediate protection against egregious harm—for instance, building understanding of how the government does and should shape work through explanatory examples.
- Strategies that are targeted at short-circuiting reactionary mindsets that stand in the way of structural understandings of race, such as *Reverse Racism Is the New Racism*. For instance, how to talk about structural racism in manufacturing in a way that avoids cueing ideas of racialized competition and white victimhood, and how to talk about race and class in ways that can build solidarity.

- Strategies to leverage frames about manufacturing work to make a wider argument about work in general. For instance, how to communicate about gendered discrimination and structural barriers for women within manufacturing without cueing ideas of “men’s work” that naturalize gender disparities and devalue other forms of work, like care work, which are often considered “women’s work.”
- How to talk about industrial pollution in a way that expands people’s thinking from localist concerns to an understanding of climate disruption without losing sight of the ways systemic racism and poverty cause some communities to bear the brunt of pollution.



About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis[®], offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks[®], toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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Endnotes

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4. At the moment, collective bargaining is incentivized by law to happen at the workplace level, not the sectoral level. This means that even the big unionization drives that have taken place across the country in recent years—for example, the various drives to unionize Starbucks stores and Amazon warehouses—remain drops in the bucket of US collective bargaining. Instead of bargaining with the entire food sector, for example, workers bargain at individual outlets, such as Starbucks stores. See: Cohen, L. (2022). U.S. bargaining and organizing rights trail every other democracy. *New Labor Forum*, 31(1), 8–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10957960211061714>; Madland, D. (2019). *How to promote sectoral bargaining in the United States*. Center for American Progress Action Fund. <https://www.americanprogressaction.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/07/How-to-Get-Sectoral.pdf>
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7. For a more detailed discussion of group differences in the endorsement of the clusters, see our report on mindsets of work and labor: Sanderson, B., Volmert, A., Gerstein Pineau, M., Hestres, L. E., Moyer, J., John, J. E., & Vierra, K. (2024). *Self-made individuals and just labor systems: Public thinking about work in the United States*. FrameWorks Institute. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/self-made-individuals-and-just-labor-systems-public-thinking-about-work-in-the-united-states/>
8. The more people endorse an *Opportunity Structures* mindset, the more likely they are to support raising the minimum wage (a moderate correlation of $r = 0.45$) and providing public child care for all (a moderate correlation of $r = 0.45$).
9. We have lightly edited quotes from our interviews to remove some verbal filler (such as “so,” “you know,” “like,” and “um”), unless it is an important indication of hesitation, uncertainty, or some other important pattern of thought. We have been careful to retain the original meaning of these quotes and have not edited the language otherwise.
10. White participants endorse the *Manufacturing Is the Backbone of America* mindset (mean = 78.8) significantly more than Latine participants (mean 73.9), $t = 3.67$, $p < .001$, and significantly more than Black participants (mean = 74.9), $t = 2.92$, $p = .019$. People in the Northeast (mean = 79.3) endorse this mindset significantly more than people in the West (mean = 74.1), $t = 2.95$, $p = .017$. People in the Midwest (mean = 79) also endorse this mindset significantly more than people in the West, $t = 3.00$, $p = .015$.
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12. Across 50 interviews about work and labor, the *Reverse Racism Is the New Racism* mindset was only expressed in the interviews that were focused on the manufacturing industry, which raises the question

about whether manufacturing in particular is seen as a place where society has left the “so-called” white working class behind (an argument that has been pushed by some media outlets and political actors). Its absence from other conversations suggests that this discourse might not be particularly dominant in shaping how people think about work in general, although we should take that with a grain of salt. It’s quite possible that this mindset is more strongly associated with manufacturing, but that in other conversations people self-censor based on what they think is socially acceptable to say.

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Producing the Future

Public Thinking about
Manufacturing in the
United States

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