

Five Trends in Public Thinking about Manufacturing



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The manufacturing sector and its workers are facing major turning points. As climate change impacts how and what we produce, we have made landmark federal progress toward sustainable infrastructure and shored up supply chains. The resurgence of organized labor has also seen major wins—yet the legal foundations of workers' rights are under attack.

At this juncture, we must make decisions about manufacturing that align with a progressive vision of economic, social, and environmental justice. Progressive advocates, policymakers, and researchers are calling for policy changes that shape the future of manufacturing by increasing 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 fully aligned with advocates. If we are to challenge the status quo of work and labor in this country and shape the future of manufacturing, we need a paradigm shift in the way Americans think about work.

Through in-depth research with a cross section of the American public, including 50 two-hour interviews and three large national surveys,¹ we have learned that:

- Manufacturing is seen as the “backbone” of the economy, but people don't have a vision of what the future of manufacturing should look like. The role that the government should play in shaping manufacturing is contentious.
- People tend to think of manufacturing as a dirty, dangerous, working-class man's job—and as a last resort for those with limited opportunities. Manufacturing is thus associated with thinking about race, racism, class, and gender, but this doesn't come with a deep understanding of how structural inequities shape manufacturing work.
- People tend to think that manufacturing was stronger in the past but don't necessarily recognize the role that unions have played—and can continue to play—in strengthening the industry.

While some of these mindsets present a challenge for communicators, significant opportunity exists to communicate key manufacturing issues—such as worker safety, access, and training—while helping the public understand the role unions and government can play in shaping the future of the industry.

A [detailed report](#) outlines emerging insights and how communicators might advance framing strategies in this direction.² As we continue the project, we will explore how people's thinking shifts in response to how issues of manufacturing are framed. Until then, here are five important trends to inform your narrative strategies.

About this project

This is one of several reports emerging from the first phase of the FrameWorks Institute's multi-year 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—with a particular focus on care work and manufacturing.”

FINDING #1

Two Clusters of Mindsets about Work Shape Thinking about Manufacturing

What We're Finding

As we find in our wider research on work and labor,³ mindsets on work tend to fit into two concurrent, competing, and available clusters:

- ***Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary.*** These mindsets center on the role and responsibility of individuals in determining their own success and see features of society as natural and inevitable. This upholds the status quo and tends to preserve existing power relations between groups.
- ***Collective, Structural, and Designed.*** These mindsets take a wider lens, recognizing how collective actions and decisions shape outcomes and bringing into view how structural factors, such as structural racism or sexism, shape work. These mindsets enable people to contest the status quo and recognize the need for and possibility of structural change.

Both clusters are available to all members of the public, and people move back and forth between them, seeing things sometimes from one perspective, sometimes from the other. They describe ways of thinking, not sets of people.

The dominant mindsets on work—and to an extent manufacturing—tend to be deeply individualistic. One example of this is the thinking that people largely make their own success or failures, even if opportunities for work are shaped by factors outside an individual's control. This dominant *Self-makingness* mindset can lead people to think about work in atomized terms, focusing narrowly on the jobs that individuals do rather than patterns about who works in different types of occupations. Manufacturing, however, is thought of as symbolic of the economy as a whole and has the potential to cue more zoomed-out thinking about industries and sectors.

What It Tells Us

The more people endorse individualistic mindsets, the more likely they are to denigrate unions as corrupt, blame the government for manufacturing challenges, and reject policies that protect manufacturing workers. Collective mindsets, on the other hand, are associated with greater support of policies to protect workers, develop more environmentally sustainable jobs, and strengthen unions.

Since both types of mindsets are available, there is an opportunity to widen the lens from an individualist understanding of manufacturing to a more productive, collective, and structural understanding. Because manufacturing is seen as foundational to the economy, communicators should be aware that when they communicate about manufacturing they also have the opportunity to introduce bigger ideas about how the economy does and should work.

FINDING #2

Manufacturing Is the Backbone of the Economy, but the Government's Role Is Contested

What We're Finding

Manufacturing is seen as the core of our economic activity—the backbone of America that allows society to meet its demands. It is also perceived as both supporting the needs of individuals by providing necessary material resources and supporting the economy as a whole by providing goods to satisfy supply and demand.

But the role of government in manufacturing is contested territory. When drawing on more *Collective, Structural, and Designed* thinking about work, people can see the government as being responsible for protecting manufacturing workers and the environment. When drawing on more *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* thinking, however, people blame the government for being antibusiness and stifling the manufacturing sector's growth and profits.

What It Tells Us

Talking about the economy as designed can help people see what can be changed about it while subverting the idea that the market is a “natural force” best left alone. By explaining the role of government in shaping manufacturing through policy decisions, communicators can support a sense of agency toward policy change that enables manufacturing to better benefit workers and society. This also entails a shift from talking about manufacturing as being an end in itself—as many in the field currently do—to emphasizing how manufacturing can be a means to an end: Making people's lives better.

FINDING #3**It's a Dirty, Dangerous, Working-Class Job****What We're Finding**

People tend to think of manufacturing as a dirty, dangerous, job done by working-class men. A *Self-makingness* mindset—where how you do in life results from hard work and drive—suggests that the demanding tasks of manufacturing jobs can also give people a chance to face challenges and make something of themselves.

Because manufacturing is symbolic of the American economy and national identity, assumptions about who does this work and embodies this identity are central. Class, gender, and race are all bound up in how people think about manufacturing workers, but the association between manufacturing and race can vary—with people sometimes thinking about manufacturing through the lens of structural racism (that is, workers of color are either under- or overrepresented in manufacturing because of racism) and sometimes (mostly white participants) claiming that a form of “reverse racism” is at play (that is, it is white workers who are being discriminated against). Notably, both of these mindsets about race seem to be more salient in conversations about manufacturing than in work more generally—likely because of the particular association between whiteness and traditional manufacturing jobs.

What It Tells Us

An *Opportunity Structures* mindset—which focuses thinking on outside factors that shape the availability and nature of jobs and work—can help encourage thinking about how systems need to be redesigned to create more opportunities for workers. Communicators can highlight the role of human choices in how economic systems are designed to perpetuate racial and gender inequities, while cultivating productive systemic thinking about racism and sexism in manufacturing.

FINDING #4**Manufacturing Pollutes, Unevenly Impacting Communities****What We're Finding**

People tend to associate manufacturing with pollution and sometimes recognize the inequitable effects of this pollution. Though there is a widespread assumption that manufacturing releases toxic waste into the environment, there is limited understanding of the problem, and people don't tend to connect local pollution to climate change. There is also a sense of fatalism, that pollution is inevitable. People sometimes reason that low-income communities of color are more likely to be harmed by toxic industry pollution because they lack resources to move away or to protect their neighborhoods.

What It Tells Us

Communicators can connect the assumption that factories create pollution to an understanding of the scale of the problem and its structural solutions, integrating the climate crisis with a vision for change in manufacturing. There is an opportunity to highlight how modern policy perpetuates the pollution of low-income Black communities through political disenfranchisement and false promises of community benefit continuing the legacy of enforced segregation and industrial zoning. Explanations of the

mechanisms of environmental racism should identify which policies are needed for change and clarify how these policies address the inequitable impacts of pollution.

FINDING #5

Nostalgia for the Past Obscures the Role of Unions

What We're Finding

Manufacturing is associated with an idealized past, when the economy was stronger and manufacturing jobs were better. As a result, changes in manufacturing over the past few decades are often associated with economic decline and sometimes even thought of as its cause. People generally do not connect the strength or weakness of manufacturing jobs to the role of unions, and there is tension in public thinking on unions. Though people often endorse the idea that workers are stronger when they come together through unions, people can also think of unions as corrupt and self-interested.

What It Tells Us

An emphasis on past national pride lends itself to nationalism and isolationism. Instead, communicators can pivot to explain why manufacturing needs unions, now and in the future, to build collective power and ultimately shape work, wages, and the economy on a larger scale. Specific examples of how such collective power has effectively supported manufacturing growth and strengthened work conditions are particularly useful.

What's Next?

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. Our focus will be on diminishing the current dominance of *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* mindsets, instead connecting issues of work and manufacturing firmly with the more productive *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets.



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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 for their generous support of the manufacturing focus of this work, and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation for their generous support of WorkShift.

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

1. For more detail on our methodology, see the [Methods Supplement](#) accompanying this report.
2. Lyew, D., Gerstein Pineau, M., Sanderson, B., Connolly, N., Volmert, A., & John, J. E. (2024). *Is it care, or is it work? Cultural mindsets of care work in the United States*. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/FWI_WS_Care-Report-V4.pdf
3. 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/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/FWI_WS_Long-Report-FINAL.pdf



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