Self-Made Individuals and Just Labor Systems

Public Thinking about Work in the United States

FRAME WORKS

WORK/SHIFT

Contents

Introduction

Workers in the United States face enormous challenges within the economy as it is currently structured. If we are to achieve a fundamental shift in power in favor of workers, rather than corporations and the wealthy, then we need to examine how we collectively think and talk about work.

Work for many Americans is insecure, unequal and disempowering, and these problems are structural. Over the past 50 years, there has been a sharp rise in income inequality[1], wage stagnation, and continuing occupational segregation, such that women, people of color, migrants and youth are overrepresented in lower status, poorly paid jobs.[2]

Yet we're beginning to see some promising trends. Major bills have become law—the Inflation Reduction Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act—all of which are designed to create good jobs and accelerate the much needed green transition. At the same time, public support for unions is high[3], and 2023 has been named the biggest year for labor action in nearly four decades, with an estimated 362,000 workers going on strike[4]. As we re-evaluate work in the wake of the pandemic, a large segment of the working population is choosing to work from home, citing improvements to work-life balance.[5] The number of people quitting their jobs has climbed to its highest level in a century, and continues to stay high, in what has been called the "Great Resignation."[6] This is a moment in time where there is an opening for bigger conversations about—and demand for—changes to how we work.

If we are to continue to challenge the status quo of work and labor in this country and create more just labor systems, we need a paradigm shift in the way Americans think about work.

To generate widespread public support for change, we must first understand the assumptions that people bring to this issue. In this report, we map this cultural terrain, describing the mindsets—the tacit assumptions and implicit understandings—that members of the US public use to think about work and labor. This map helps us understand how existing thinking about work and labor must shift to enable major changes to existing systems and structures, pointing us where we need to go and how to get from here to there.

Across ideologies and demographics, we find that members of the public continue to assume that people's ability to get a good job and make a good living is ultimately down to individual ability and effort. These assumptions undercut recognition of the value of recent policy changes and limit demand for the further changes needed to redesign labor systems. There are more collective and systemic ways of thinking about work and labor available to people, but these understandings are too often weak or below the surface.

This reinforces an important finding from our Culture Change Project, where we are tracking American cultural mindsets over time. We find that systemic mindsets about the economy and racism are on the rise, but that, so far, this thinking has not expanded to people's thinking about work.[7] For instance, the mindset that the economy is a system that humans design and maintain, rather than something with its own natural life force; the mindset that a powerful and wealthy few have rigged the system in their own interest; and the mindset that racism is built into our society, through laws, policies and institutional practices—such systemic thinking, while highly relevant to work and labor, barely penetrates people's understanding of work—but it could.

The big questions coming out of this research are whether and how we can connect to this rise in systemic thinking about the economy and racism to build a more structural narrative about work. In this brief, we offer emerging insights into how communicators might progress framing strategies in this direction, through the following sections:

— **What are we trying to communicate? Five 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 work and labor?** Existing cultural mindsets about work, uncovered through 50 in-depth interviews, and three 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 from 37 organizations

— **Emerging recommendations:** A concluding summary of what this research means for advocates who are communicating for a more just vision of work.

This report is accompanied by a short strategic brief, which presents the key insights from this research and discusses their implications for how we communicate about work.

About this project

This is the first release of findings in the FrameWorks Institute's multi-year WorkShift program. 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.

Acknowledgments

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. So, 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 distinctive 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.[8]

Method Note

Below, we briefly describe the methods that we relied upon for this report. For more detail on all methods, see the Methods 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, policy experts and worker advocates. These were each between an hour and 90 minutes long, and conducted one-on-one over Zoom.

2. **Literature review.** A review of academic and gray literature to support our understanding of current problems and policy solutions.

3. **Field frame analysis.** An analysis of communication materials from 37 organizations focused on work and labor issues, including unions, workforce development organizations, and a range of think tanks, community organizers, and industry groups.

4. **Media content scan.** In addition, we ran an analysis of news sources to assess media framing in particular areas, such as unions, strikes, and the Great Resignation.

To map cultural mindsets, we employed two methods:

1. **In-depth interviews.** FrameWorks conducted 50 one-on-one, two-hour-long, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of the US public from May 1–July 5, 2023. Twenty of these 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 work and labor 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 over-sampled 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, that examined cultural mindsets on work, including mindsets on care work and manufacturing. We mapped the relationships of mindsets to each other, and also to target outcomes, including a range of policies on work and labor. 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 to 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 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, like race and gender, or psychographic variables, like political affiliation. This analysis provides critical information about the extent to which cultural models are shared between groups.

I. What Are We Trying to Communicate? Five Target Ideas

Five "core ideas" emerged from our interviews with stakeholders in the field and our literature review. These are key ideas that the field believes need to be effectively communicated to members of the public, including the solutions to build support for through communications. These core ideas orient the project—they help us understand the implications of cultural mindsets, and they are the big ideas that the reframing strategy we develop will be designed to carry.

TARGET IDEA #1

Political decisions have weakened worker power and privileged large corporate actors at workers' expense.

Public policies and government decisions structure our economy, regulate industry, and shape jobs. These policies have created an economy in which many workers face stagnant wages, precarious employment, and undignified conditions—while corporate profits soar. The imbalance of power between workers and corporate employers is a result of deliberate decisions made by powerful actors in government and business, driven by neoliberal commitments to individualism, "race neutrality," and the free market. Corporations and successive neoliberal governments have engaged in a decades-long campaign to undercut labor protections. The government has systematically underfunded and understaffed institutions that are supposed to look out for worker interests, such as the National Labor Relations Board, and cut back workforce development initiatives, like the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Meanwhile, a decades-long campaign to appoint corporate-friendly judges has resulted in a series of decisions restricting workers' rights and limiting employers' bargaining obligations.

TARGET IDEA #2

Structural oppression shapes how society values different industries, who does which jobs, and how people experience the workplace.

The economy is marked by "occupational segregation" along lines of race, gender, and age. Women are vastly overrepresented in child care jobs, for instance, and Black women in home health aide jobs—both of which have an average hourly wage that is roughly half the US national average. People under the age of 25 make up 35 percent of service sector jobs, many of which are low waged. Workers of color are overrepresented in low wage manufacturing jobs, and migrant workers in agricultural work. By contrast, white men are vastly overrepresented in high-paying high-status jobs, such as chief executives, legislators, physicians, and architectural and engineering managers.[9] Trends of discrimination and oppression are evident not just in the ease or difficulty people face in getting different types of jobs, but through pay disparities, promotional disparities, risk of maltreatment on the job, failure of institutions to respond to discrimination claims, and uneven access to public goods that can support workers (e.g., child care, quality public transportation). These structural patterns are built into the historical design of our economy—shaped by slavery, colonialism and patriarchy—and they continue to be maintained by powerful political and economic elites. The devaluation of care work, for instance, finds its roots in the US history of misogyny and slavery, where enslaved African women performed many of the domestic tasks required to keep the plantation afloat.[10]

TARGET IDEA #3

We need to shift power in favor of workers rather than corporations and the wealthy.

Without a shift in power, we will change little by creating "more good jobs" or helping particular groups of people become more "economically mobile." All workers need to have more choice and autonomy over how they spend time, what work they do, and how they care for their families and their communities. Building worker power goes hand in hand with addressing structural oppression and patterns of discrimination in the workforce. We can shift the balance of power by:

— Passing laws that make it easier for workers to organize.

— Passing laws that raise standards for workers (e.g., health and safety standards).

— Passing laws that eliminate worker exploitation (e.g., bolstering rather than weakening child labor laws).

— Incentivizing worker cooperatives and alternatives to corporate ownership.

— Reforming the tax system in order to reduce corporate power and increase support for workers on lower incomes (e.g., increasing and enforcing taxes on corporations and wealthy people, making the Child Tax Credit permanent).

— Enforcing antitrust laws in order to break up monopolies.

— Overhauling the job training system (e.g., providing free and accessible education and skills training at all levels and ages).

— Improving the coordination between workforce development systems and other services (e.g., the child welfare system, and the juvenile justice system).

— Increasing staffing and funding to agencies like the National Labor Relations Board and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

— Changing enforcement systems to hold employers accountable for labor violations (e.g., properly funding and staffing agencies like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration).

TARGET IDEA #4

Stronger unions are a key way to build worker power and improve working conditions.

Unions are powered by workers themselves. They are not a "third party" standing between workers and employers, as anti-union advocates suggest. Unlike corporations, they are democratically organized.[11] Collective bargaining can help both union members and people who are not members, leading to binding changes in a firm, affecting a whole sector, and influencing politics. Union-coordinated apprenticeships and accreditations lead to higher race and gender diversity in jobs, and union partnerships with employers can facilitate skilled workers finding dignified work. We need to make it easier for workers (including gig workers) to form unions and join unions; we need to remove the barriers to sectoral bargaining,[12] and we need to repeal so-called "right to work laws."

TARGET IDEA #5

Policy and culture change to enhance worker power must be situated within a broader vision of economic justice.

— **Meeting people's needs, whatever their work status**—and however much they have "contributed" to society. This means introducing social policies that would make life more secure for all Americans, measures like universal health care, universal child care, affordable housing, and guaranteed income. In particular, access to and quality of health care should not depend on employment status.

— **A job guarantee for those who want to work**. In addition to supporting people who can't or don't work, the federal government can guarantee decent fixed-waged jobs, with good benefits, to those who want to work—both stabilizing the economy and avoiding involuntary unemployment.

— **A collective reckoning about what labor is socially valuable.** Sectors like care work should be understood as a public, collective good, while the extraction of profit through exploitation should not. Socially valuable work should be rewarded by becoming high quality, well paid and supported jobs, while extractive practices should be banned or disincentivized.

— **Economic policy that is good for workers *and* the environment.** A Just Transition towards a low carbon, regenerative economy will require:

    a. Massive investment in green, sustainable industries, creating many new jobs, alongside a phaseout of environmentally harmful industries.

    b. Pathways for workers to train and transition to working in those industries.

    c. Strong requirements for job quality and the protection of workers' rights across supply chains.

    d. Federal investment to support workers and communities affected by the transition (e.g., closure of coal mines and power plants).

II. How Are Members of the American Public Thinking about Work and Labor?

In this section, we describe the key mindsets that members of the American public use to think about work and labor and how they help or hinder our communication efforts. All of 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.

We begin with an overarching finding about a particularly important pattern in the data that helps us understand how Americans think about work.

The big picture: Thinking about work tends to be dominated by a cluster of unproductive mindsets that are individualistic and embrace the status quo as natural. Yet these are accompanied by a set of recessive mindsets that allow people to see how work is shaped by systems that can be redesigned.

Many of the cultural mindsets we find about work—and about 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, and see features of society as natural and inevitable (e.g., gender roles or economic relationships). This set of mindsets upholds the status quo and tends to preserve existing power relations between groups.[13]

2. *Collective, Structural, and Designed.* These mindsets take a wider lens, recognizing how collective actions and decisions shape outcomes. These mindsets foreground the role of collectives like unions in achieving change, bring into view how structural factors shape work (like structural racism or sexism), or highlight the role of political choice and design in shaping the economy. This set of mindsets enables contestation of the status quo and recognition of the need for and possibility of structural change.

Mindsets within clusters are linked together in people's thinking. The more strongly people endorse one mindset within a cluster, the more likely they are to strongly endorse other mindsets within the cluster. They are also linked in thinking with outcomes. Stronger endorsement of mindsets in the *Collective, Structural, and Designed* cluster tends to be accompanied by stronger endorsement of progressive

policies—like a federal jobs guarantee, increasing the top rate of tax, or making it easier to form and join unions—while endorsement of *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* mindsets are accompanied by less endorsement of these policies. (See our Methods Supplement for correlation tables that evidence these connections.)

These clusters describe two broad orientations. One pictures a world in which society arises through natural processes and forces. In this picture, attempts to change or interfere with this natural order are foolish at best and, at worst, dangerous. Given this natural order, it is up to individuals to navigate society to the best of their abilities. The other orientations pictures a world in which society is designed through our collective decisions, which set up systems and structures within which we live. In this picture, societal problems are seen as the result of bad decisions, and it is up to society as a whole to address them by redesigning those systems and structures.

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, seeing things sometimes from within one perspective, sometimes from within the other. These describe ways of thinking, not sets of people.

These clusters of mindsets have clear strategic importance for advocates, organizers, and researchers trying to build just labor systems. We want to avoid reinforcing *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* thinking, and instead build and extend people's *Collective, Structural, and Designed* understandings of work. In other words, the goal is to strengthen the latter cluster of mindsets, so that people more frequently and fully draw upon these mindsets.

There is, however, texture and detail in the data. Each and every mindset within these groupings has its own unique set of assumptions and implications for communicators. Here, we focus on the clusters as a whole, but below we'll dig into the specifics of each mindset and their distinctive characters. And as we'll talk about shortly, not all mindsets fit neatly into one cluster of mindsets or the other.

Below, we provide an overview of the mindsets in the two clusters, offering a brief articulation of each mindset's core assumption.

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 under-valuation 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., hard right), against the people (e.g., 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.

Both clusters of mindsets are available to people.

It is important to note that both of these types of mindset are available in American culture, so people can (and often do) hold them at the same time, although some mindsets are more frequently drawn upon in thinking than others. In general, we find that *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* mindsets tend to be more dominant in thinking—easier to access and more frequently drawn upon. In the interviews, where we asked open-ended questions to explore how people were thinking about work, we found these mindsets to be much more dominant. However, the survey data suggest that the *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets are very much available too. In the surveys, when we asked people their level of agreement or disagreement with a range of mindsets, articulated in statement form, we found that *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets on work were more strongly endorsed than the interview conversations suggested. For instance, the mindset that structural racism shapes work barely surfaced in the interviews, but tended to be endorsed when asked about in the survey. This adds nuance to the picture.

While *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* mindsets may be more top-of-mind in conversations about work, *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets are available to people and, when cued, endorsed.

Another pattern in the survey data backs up the conclusion that both types of mindsets are widely available to people in American society. There is *not* a strong inverse relationship between the two clusters. Mindsets in one cluster tend either to not correlate with mindsets in the other, or have only weak negative correlations. In other words, stronger endorsement of mindsets in one cluster does not mean that people agree *less* with mindsets in the others. This suggests that many people are capable of holding both types of mindset.

The mindsets are available to all, but endorsed to different degrees depending on political party, gender, and race.

While these mindsets are available across groups, we do find some group differences in the extent to which they are endorsed. These patterns are particularly consistent with regards to political affiliation, but we find that gender and race also play an important role. The evidence for these patterns is laid out in the Methods Supplement that accompanies this report.

I. Political affiliation affects how much people endorse each cluster

There is a clear pattern that compared to Democrats, Republicans more strongly endorse mindsets that are *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary*, while Democrats endorse *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets more strongly than Republicans do.

It is unsurprising that political affiliation affects how people endorse these mindsets, given the ideological position, rhetoric, and policies of each party. But it's worth noting that there is not always a sharp political divide in our data. Republicans can and do endorse *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets, and Democrats can and do endorse *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* mindsets. To illustrate, see the table below. Differences between Democrats and Republicans are statistically significant on all of these mindsets.[14] However, on two of these mindsets there is a big contrast whereby people affiliated with one party tend to endorse the mindset much more than the other—*Government Is Anti-business* (the mindset that the manufacturing industry is being hurt by regulation), and *Structural Racism Shapes Work* (the mindset that workplace racism comes from how society is set up). The other two, however, show a small difference, where Republicans and Democrats actually trend in the same direction. For instance, *Self-Makingness* (the mindset that individuals succeed through hard work) is moderately endorsed by both Democrats and Republicans, and the *Designed Economy* mindset (that the economy is shaped by human decision-making) is weakly endorsed by both groups. So, while there are patterns of difference between Republicans and Democrats, it is not the case that one party completely rejects a mindset that the other party endorses.

Figure 1: Mean endorsement of mindsets within each cluster, by political leaning
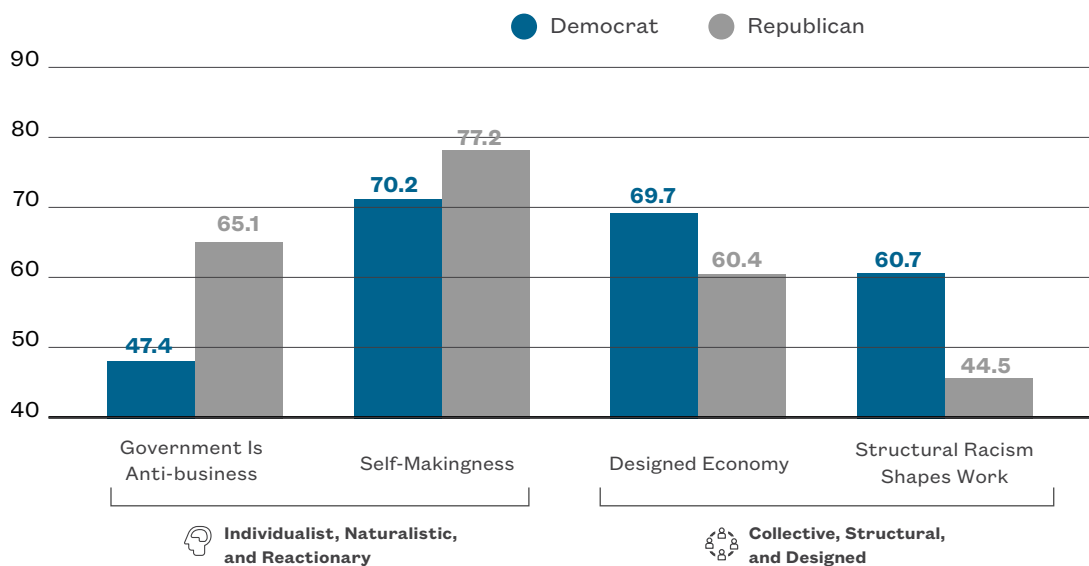
The items were on nine-point Likert-type scales (see Methods Supplement for items). Means have been transposed to a 100-point scale, so 50 represents the midpoint of the scale ("neither agree nor disagree"). As scores get closer to zero, this indicates increasingly strong rejection of the mindset. As scores get closer to 100, this indicates increasingly strong endorsement of the mindset.

II. Gender identity affects how much people endorse each cluster, with some exceptions

Men are more likely to endorse *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* mindsets than women. This is true of mindsets that are explicitly and directly about gender (like *Gender Essentialism*), as well as those that aren't (like *Self-Makingness*). Women, on the other hand, are more likely to embrace *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets, and particularly those relating to gender or race (for instance, the mindsets *Sexism Shapes Care Work* and *Structural Racism Shapes Work*).

Given that we live in a system that tends to give men more power than women, it makes sense that men are more likely to endorse mindsets that preserve the status quo and justify existing power structures—and that women are more attuned to structural problems. However, this pattern doesn't always hold. Based on the survey data, men and women seem to think very similarly about several *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets that are *not* explicitly connected to race or gender, such as *Stronger Together* (the mindset that workers are more powerful when they come together in unions), and *Profit Motive Drives Exploitation* (the mindset that corporate power puts profit over workers). This, again, shows that we cannot draw clean lines between groups. While gender shapes thinking about work in a variety of ways, it does not neatly and simply determine thinking. Rather, people are complex and multiple in their thinking.

III. Racial identity affects some aspects of these clusters, and not others

Race seems to affect how much people endorse the *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets. White participants are the least likely to endorse these, compared to other racial groups (and particularly Black participants—who tend to be the most likely to endorse). We might explain this, again, with the logic that groups with less power in society will be more likely to understand the structural problems that shape work.

However, we don't find such a clear pattern when it comes to the *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* cluster of mindsets. While the mindsets that are explicitly about race—such as *Reverse Racism Is the New Racism*—are, unsurprisingly, endorsed more by white people, there aren't large differences by racial identity in endorsement of individualistic mindsets relating to gender or to work more broadly. Several individualistic models—such as *Self-Makingness*—are endorsed equally across racial groups. We explore this finding further below. It shows, again, that people can be multiple in their thinking, and also that some mindsets on work are foundational and held strongly across groups in society.

We can conclude from these findings that people will engage differently with the two clusters of mindsets about work, based on their own identity positions— namely, political affiliation, gender, and race. However, both clusters are available to people across groups.

Some key mindsets about work don't fit into these two clusters.

We identified several mindsets that don't correlate consistently with mindsets in one cluster more than the other. We mention them only briefly here, as we expand upon the findings below.

— **Foundational mindsets about why we work.** There are several mindsets that offer explanations for why we work with reference to benefits for individuals—that we work in order to survive, that we work to develop ourselves, and that we work to stay out of trouble. These mindsets are positively correlated with both clusters and are compatible with a wide range of policy positions. They are also strongly endorsed across groups, and tightly linked to each other. This suggests that they are go-to mindsets for most people, however they lean in terms of policies, and whether or not they might otherwise embrace more individualistic or structural understandings of work. In other words, they are so universal that they don't fit a particular profile.

— *Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal.* This is the idea that racism and sexism at work are a result of personal bias and are expressed through individual actions, like offensive jokes and slurs. This mindset correlates positively with both clusters, though more strongly with *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets. While the mindset itself focuses on individual actions, it is compatible with more systemic understandings. Importantly, there is a positive relationship between *Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal* and *Structural Racism Shapes Work*. Far from being mutually exclusive, these two mindsets hang together: People who see workplace prejudice as operating at an individual level tend also to see racism as structural. The two mindsets have a common root—both accept that racism exists, and that racism affects work.

— *System Is Rigged.* The idea that the system is rigged by a few people at the top, at the expense of the many is widely shared and increasingly used to make sense of almost all issues in American society.[15] Yet, as we have found in recent research, it is a flexible mindset that can be applied in quite different ways. In our survey, we measured a conservative variant of the mindset (for instance, with statements like "In our society, the system is rigged against white working class Americans" and "Liberal politicians are rigging the system to steal votes"), as well as a liberal version (for instance, "In our society, the system is rigged against Black and brown people" and "The hard right is manipulating the system to undermine our collective values"). We found that the conservative variant slotted neatly into the *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* cluster of thinking, while the liberal version belonged to *Collective, Structural, and Designed*. This mindset is highly contested, and while conceptually it seems to fit with the systemic cluster, conservatives have successfully linked a version of it with a reactionary defense of the status quo.

While not all mindsets of work fit into one of these two clusters, they give us the big picture of American thinking about work. It is important to understand the specific mindsets that make up these clusters as well, as they offer particular challenges and opportunities for communicators. In the next section, we dig into specific mindsets and explain how they matter for those working to create more just labor systems in the US.

Ten Specific Insights on American Thinking about Work

1. The concept of the self-made individual is foundational to how most people make sense of work. This obscures how our collective choices structure work.

2. People widely assume that all work has a critical purpose, which prevents consideration of whether and how labor systems should be different.

3. People do not draw on well-established mindsets to explain the existence and availability of jobs—or the role of government in shaping work.

4. When thinking about why we end up in particular jobs, people tend to draw on individualistic and naturalistic mindsets. Unproductive "gender essentialism" is more prominent here than on other issues.

5. People also recognize that there are structural factors that shape opportunities for work. Sometimes people understand the status and pay of jobs as being shaped by classism.

6. People often assume that corporations prioritize profit at the expense of workers. Sometimes, people draw on the System Is Rigged mindset to explain worker exploitation.

7. While people often assume that education is the key to success at work, they are as likely to think that education is no longer worth the investment.

8. The role of structural racism in shaping work is not widely understood and sometimes actively rejected—particularly by white Americans.

9. While people often assume the government should protect workers, there is not a widespread understanding of what the government should do differently.

10. People tend to assume that workers are stronger when they come together, and that unions can be a vehicle for positive change. But unions are also seen as corrupt or inept.

FINDING #1

The concept of the self-made individual is foundational to how most people make sense of work. This obscures how our collective choices structure work.

The idea of the self-made individual is overwhelmingly dominant in how Americans think about work, and a major challenge for communicators.

The *Self-Makingness* cultural mindset.

The core to this mindset is the assumption that individuals can succeed if they work hard enough, and, on the flipside, if they don't work hard then they will fail. According to this way of thinking, everyone has potential, and it's up to the individual whether or not they make something of themselves. Success through hard work has moral value, while failure is seen as a moral failing.

A key, often implicit assumption of this mindset is that the economy is meritocratic, providing enough opportunities for anyone to succeed through hard work. People can and do recognize that there are constraints on an individual's ability to succeed, for instance due to discrimination and racism, but, when relying on the *Self-Makingness* mindset, people emphasize the potential of individuals to meet the challenge. This possibility of "rising above" constraints actually strengthens individualistic thinking, because individuals are thought to become stronger and more successful when they strive to overcome challenges.

> *You can start at a low paying job and work your way up to a high paying job. Then I believe it really is, while other factors contribute to it, I think it really is a person's drive and motivation as to where as an individual they want to go and what they want to do with their life.*[16]
> White woman, Democrat, 61 years old.

In our interviews, people drew on this mindset to explain why we work in the first place, how we end up in particular jobs, and whether or not we are successful. However, it leads people to think about work in atomized terms, focusing narrowly on the jobs that individuals do (e.g., farmer, doctor), rather than on groups of jobs (like the agricultural sector, or the care work industry) and patterns about who works in different occupations.

In our surveys, we found that this is a mindset that is strongly endorsed across demographic groups, regardless of race, income level, or other factors17—demonstrating just how pervasive this mindset is in American society. Even those groups most disadvantaged in the system, and the least able to succeed through the mechanism of hard work, frequently rely on the idea of *Self-Makingness*—although not always, as we explore below.

Survey evidence: The power of widening the lens from jobs to the economy

When people are thinking narrowly about work and jobs, the *Self-Makingness* mindset is dominant, and dominant across demographic groups. However, when we ask people to think more generally about patterns of financial success in society, we see an interesting and quite dramatic shift: *Self-Makingness* drops off, and structural thinking comes more to the fore. In the survey, alongside our measure of *Self-Makingness*, we asked people to choose between different explanations of how groups of people become financially successful—a *Self-Makingness* explanation, and a structural explanation, as follows:

Self-Makingness: "People who are financially successful are well-off because of their own talent and/or hard work."

Opportunity Structures: "Some people and groups do better than others financially because of differences in opportunity, not talent or effort."

In this forced choice question, we find that people tend to choose *Opportunity Structures* over *Self-Makingness*. This shows that productive structural thinking is not just available, but that it even has the potential to become more dominant than individualistic thinking. However, we also find that there are significant differences between racial groups. The contrast between white participants and Black participants is particularly notable: Black participants are much less likely to choose *Self-Makingness* than white participants, and more likely to choose *Opportunity Structures*—as illustrated in the charts below.

Figure 2: Percentage of people who choose *Opportunity Structures* or *Self-makingness*, by racial group

African American / Black

70%

30%

White

58%

42%

● **Self-Makingness:**
People who are financially successful are well-off because their own talent and/or hard work.

● **Opportunity Structures:**
Some people and groups do better than others financially because of differences in opportunities, non talent or effort.
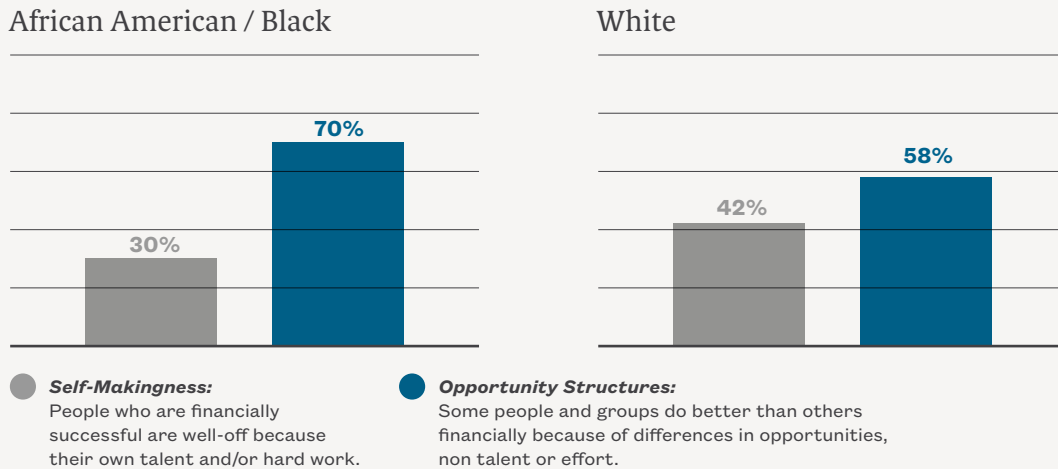
Implications for communicators. The *Self-Makingness* mindset obscures systemic causes of poverty and social and economic inequality and minimizes the importance of structural factors that shape work. By leading people to explain outcomes as coming from individual choices, *Self-Makingness* can justify poor treatment, or discipline, of people who fail to get work or perform poorly. It can also be used to argue against government support (e.g., "lazy people should work hard, rather than getting something for nothing"). However, our survey results suggest that we can diminish its dominance in two ways:

1. **Widen the lens.** If we ask people to think about the economy as a whole rather than jobs, and groups of people rather than individuals, then people seem to think more in terms of structures.

2. **Offer a contrast.** If we explicitly offer a structural explanation—that groups of people have different opportunities through no fault of their own—people often choose that over a *Self-Makingness* explanation, even if they might be more likely to generate a *Self-Makingness* explanation on their own.

FINDING #2

People widely assume that all work has a critical purpose, which prevents consideration of whether and how labor systems should be different.

Why do we work? Besides assuming that it's morally good for individuals to work hard, people draw on several other mindsets to explain this. Two focus on individual needs and benefits, while two center on collective needs. Yet all of these mindsets share a key assumption: work *as we know* it is necessary. This presents a challenge for communicators who are trying to offer a vision of how work could function differently in our economy than it does now.

The *Work as Survival* cultural mindset.

This mindset rests on two assumptions—first, that money is necessary for survival, and, second, that we must exchange our labor to make money. While work is assumed to be a transaction, it is not necessarily a transaction that workers have freedom and choice over. When drawing on this mindset, people often spoke about work effectively in terms of coercion—that "we are compelled to work," or "forced to, whether we like it or not"—because without it we wouldn't be able to meet our most basic needs for food, shelter, and health.

> *Money is what you need in order to sustain yourself and live on this planet to get things.*
> Black woman, Independent, 44 years old.

> *Maybe they [workers] have to, you can say forced to, work, maybe in a job that they're not really wanting to pursue or gonna think of going into, but they have to because of money.*
> Latine man, Democrat, 26 years old.

Implications for communicators. This mindset has mixed implications. There is such a strong commitment to the idea that we *must* work to survive that people struggle to imagine an alternative, where people can be supported to live well regardless of how much they work. This mindset also obscures dynamics in our current economic system that allow (usually already privileged) people to live well without working (e.g., through inheritance). In these ways, it presents a challenge. However, this mindset also offers an important way for people to understand exploitation. If workers are forced to work for survival, then employers can prey on that precarity. This could be built out into a wider argument about class, showing how work 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.

The *Work as Self-Development* cultural mindset.

Rather than seeing work as a transaction for money, *Work as Self-Development* assumes that work can and should be fulfilling, creative, and a place for self-expression. When drawing on this mindset, people think that all work would ideally be a way for individuals to develop and express themselves. However, people tend to recognize that, in practice, that's the exception rather than the rule—it's a "good" job that offers self-development, not the average job (which we do out of necessity for money). Voluntary work,

on the other hand, is more associated in practice with self-development. The assumption is that people pursue volunteering because they want to, rather than because they need to, so it's more likely to be fulfilling.

> *In an ideal world I guess everybody would be able to use at least some creativity at work because I think humans are not meant to just stamp, push, stamp, push, stamp, push.*
> White man Democrat, 43 years old.

> *I think [work] is important for people's wellbeing and their personal fulfillment because for some people, their fulfillment comes from work and that's their sense of accomplishment and inner self.*
> Asian American woman, Democrat, 21 years old.

Implications for communicators. This mindset has mixed implications. On the one hand, developing ourselves, being creative, and feeling fulfilled are all worthy goals. If people think that work should be fulfilling, then they may be less likely to accept that work can be awful and demand better jobs for themselves and others. But this mindset can also obscure the reality that much work is exploitative and done out of necessity. If work is meant to be fulfilling, then people might assume a good job is its own motivation and its own reward. In other words, it comes with the risk of accepting exploitation and low pay as the price of supposedly doing what we love. This can make it hard to talk about the need to increase pay for professions that are seen as being intrinsically rewarding, such as work in teaching, care work or nonprofit mission-driven organizations.

The *Work Brings Order to Society* cultural mindset.

According to this way of thinking, societies need order to function and work brings that order. Work gives people structure and something useful to do, keeps people out of trouble, and maintains peace. This mindset leads people to talk about how without work, society would cease to function. While this is, in part, about the role of work in meeting our collective needs like food and health care, it is also connected to a conception of social order. Without work, people assume, the fabric of society would disintegrate and there would be chaos. This has a moral component: An individual should work in order to develop discipline (similar to the development of moral character in the *Self-Makingness* mindset), and societies work best when they are composed of these disciplined, hardworking individuals. This kind of thinking can lead to the conclusion that welfare policies lead to crime, because they disincentivize people from working hard and developing discipline, which leads to a breakdown in social order.

> Researcher: *Why do the jobs we have in our society exist?*
> Participant (Black woman, Republican, 26 years old): *Because if they didn't the world would be pure chaos probably.*
> Researcher: *Why?*
> Participant: *Because there wouldn't be any structure. There wouldn't be any constructive way of life.*

Implications for communicators. This way of thinking can be used to justify exploitation and unpaid labor, in the service of maintaining order and peace. It can also be used to argue against measures that provide support to people who are unemployed. Further, if work brings social order, then changing

how we work might create social disorder. By casting doubt on the possibility that society could function if people worked less, or did different types of jobs, this mindset presents a challenge for communicators who are offering a different vision of work.

Survey evidence: Working to survive, thrive, and stay out of trouble

These three mindsets correlate strongly with each other. *Work as Survival, Work as Self-Development*, and *Work Brings Order to Society* rest on distinctly different assumptions about why we work, but they are compatible rather than competing ways of thinking. While *Work as Survival* appeared most pervasively in participants' talk during interviews, all three mindsets were strongly endorsed in the survey (their average scores out of 100 are: 78.4 on *Work as Survival*, 80.2 on *Work as Self-Development*, and 79.2 on *Work Brings Order to Society*). The fact that they are also strongly correlated with each other (see table below), supports what we observe in the interviews, that reliance on one mindset doesn't decrease reliance on the others. For instance, we often heard participants talk about work as a necessary transaction for money in the same breath as saying it would ideally also be meaningful and fulfilling.

Table 2: Correlations between mindsets of why we work

	Work Brings Order to Society	Work as Self-Development
Work as Survival	r=0.55**	r=0.54**
Work as Self-Development	r=0.68**	

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 mindsets don't fit into a particular cluster of thinking about work. While these mindsets tend to correlate with mindsets in the *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* cluster, as we might expect given their focus on the reasons individuals work, they also correlate with mindsets that are *Collective, Structural, and Designed* (for instance, that the government's role is to protect workers, and that workers are stronger through unions). This makes sense conceptually—because people can reason about the motivations individuals have for working, and still think that other actors need to improve how we work, if an individuals' power to make change is limited.

The *Work Brings Order to Society* mindset tilts more towards conservative policies than the other two—not surprisingly, given its focus on discipline—but all three have only weak relationships with policy support. In other words, these mindsets are not strongly linked with support for conservative or progressive policies. We might explain this with reference to how widely endorsed these mindsets are. They are so commonly held that they don't fit a particular pattern of thinking about how we should handle work in our society.

Racial identity has a small impact on how strongly people endorse these mindsets. Although endorsement of all three is high across groups, white participants are slightly more likely to endorse *Work as Self-Development* and *Work Brings Order to Society* than Black, Latine, and Asian American participants (see table below). These differences, though small, might tentatively be explained by differences in how racialized groups are treated in society. Self-development through work is an ideal that is likely to be more accessible to white people than people of color, for instance. And thinking of work in terms of social order can easily lead people towards opinions with racist associations (e.g., "welfare policies lead to crime," "prisoners should work to better themselves"). Interestingly, there are no differences by race in endorsement of *Work as Survival*—which is still more likely to be the reality for people of color, given how racism structures opportunities and pay. This underlines how widespread this thinking is in American society.

Table 3: Mean endorsement of mindsets about why we work, by racial group

	White	Black	Latine	Asian American
Work as Survival	78.6	78.4	78.4	76.9
Work as Self-Development	81.6	78.2	78.5	78.4
Work Brings Order to Society	79.2	74.0	74.7	75.6

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 endorse *Works Brings Order to Society* significantly more than Latine (t = 3.36, p = .004) and Black participants (t = 3.86, p < .001). Additionally, Asian American participants endorse the model significantly less than white participants (t = -2.68, p = .038). The difference between white and Latine participants on *Work as Self-Development* is borderline significant (t = 2.54, p = .054). White participants endorse *Work as Self-Development* significantly more than Asian American (t = 2.65, p = .041) and Black participants (t = 2.77, p = .029).

The *Work Fulfills Collective Needs* cultural mindset.

People tend to assume that all jobs exist to meet our needs as a society. Unlike the mindsets above that explain the purpose of work with reference to individual needs and benefits, this mindset is about our collective needs. According to this mindset, *all* work meets some collective need.

Yet people apply this idea to industries in different ways. Participants drew on farming as a common example of a job that meets a direct material need, for food. Manufacturing was offered as another archetypal example of an industry that allows society to function and meet its demands, by providing the very basic material structure of society. Indeed, in interviews on manufacturing, participants often talked about manufacturing as the backbone of the American economy. The need for care work, on the other hand, is thought about in a different way. For instance, interview participants sometimes expressed the opinion that child care jobs were created by women going to work, implying that we didn't need those jobs when women were at home, doing domestic work for free. So the need for professional care work seems like a second order modeling of need (we *created* the need for it), rather than a first order (we'll always need jobs that deliver food and utilities). This contrast between manufacturing and care work shows that thinking about "need" can be hierarchical, and gendered. While people widely assume that both industries are needed, manufacturing (traditionally, "men's work") is seen as more central to society's functioning than care work (traditionally "women's work").

> Researcher: *Why do the jobs we have in our society exist?*
> Participant (White woman, Democrat, 61 years old): *Because things need to get done. If somebody wasn't changing the light bulbs everywhere, the light bulbs would all burn out, you know? It's something that's got to get done. If farmers weren't growing food, wasn't raising food, we wouldn't eat. Everything that needs to be done has a job associated with it.*
> Participant (White woman, Democrat, 61 years old): *I think most jobs come about because of a need that people have for certain things. For years, most women did stay home with their families, but as soon as they didn't, they needed daycare centers, and babysitters, and early morning school programs, and after school programs. They needed people to teach those. There is a need once women—once both parents were working—to have new jobs, new types of work for people to do. I think everything develops because of a need that is identified.*

Implications for communicators. This mindset has some helpful entailments and carries some potential traps. It can unhelpfully contribute to justifying the status quo—all jobs are needed; all jobs must be "good"—ignoring types of work and wealth generation that might not perform any useful function, or actually cause harm (see, for instance, David Graeber's concept of "bullshit jobs"[18]). It can also support the gendered devaluation of professions like care work, as these jobs are only necessary to make the *truly* necessary work possible. On the other hand, it offers an explanation for the existence of jobs that puts work in the bigger picture of how we organize society to deliver *collective* needs, and this can be a helpful orientation to draw upon. Communicators could try to leverage this modeling of jobs in order to make a broader economic justice argument about how the whole economy should be designed in order to meet our needs collectively, rather than the interests of an elite few.

FINDING #3

People do not draw on well-established mindsets to explain the existence and availability of jobs—or the role of government in shaping work.

While people tend to assume that work performs a necessary function, both for individuals and for society, when it comes to the question of the mechanisms that create jobs, people's thinking tends to be less clear. Through our interviews, we found that people draw on several mindsets about the economy and government to understand this. However, all of these mindsets are "recessive," in the sense that they are available, but rarely front of mind. More commonly, people simply don't think much at all about how jobs are created.

In our interviews, the mindsets people used to reason about how jobs are created were largely unproductive. As we discuss below, they rest on the assumption that the market is best left to its own devices. However, in our related research on the economy,[19] we have found that members of the public can and do think about the economy as a designed system. While our interview participants generally did not, on their own, apply this mindset to think about how *jobs* are created, our survey suggests that when the notion of economic design is applied to jobs, people can readily understand this connection.

The *Market Naturalism* cultural mindset.

When people draw on this mindset, they think of the labor market as a force beyond individual or societal control. It's assumed to be the "invisible hand" of the market that determines which jobs are available. People sometimes draw on language suggesting that the economy is governed by natural laws and logic (e.g., supply and demand, evolution), rather than governed by humans. When people are asked follow-up questions about how the economy works to create jobs, however, understanding is very thin. When thinking with a *Market Naturalism* mindset, people can also assume that the jobs available to young people will depend on the state of the market—rather than seeing young people as having an active role in shaping the market, through new ways of thinking and working.

> *When the economy is hurting there aren't that many jobs available. So, I think that's just the phase that the country is in right now.*
> Latine woman, Republican, 30 years old.

The *Government as Dysfunctional* cultural mindset.

When drawing on this mindset, people see the government as inept, badly organized, and liable to create more problems when it intervenes in the economy. This connects to the idea that the economy is self-creating (rather than designed and set up in particular ways) and that it is best left to its own devices (in line with *Market Naturalism*, above). A common explanation for government dysfunction is division—that people within government argue and fight too much to get things done.

> *The government has screwed up more stuff than they fix. They argue about things that aren't relative to most of the population. And you know, they're just taking our time and money and throwing it away. Regulating us into oblivion.*
> White man, Republican, 69 years old.

Implications for communicators. *Market Naturalism* and *Government as Dysfunctional* are both deeply unproductive mindsets because they work against the idea that we can and should make changes to the economy (and jobs). Communicators instead need to be able to advocate for policy change, and that government is both responsible and competent to make these changes.

Survey evidence: Design thinking is available

As noted above, in other research, we have found that not only can people think of the economy as a designed system, but that when people think about the economy as a whole, this mindset is *more* dominant than *Market Naturalism*.[20] In other words, people widely and consistently assume that government decisions and public policies shape how the economy works and who benefits in it.

Our surveys show that people not only hold this *Designed Economy* mindset, but that they can endorse designed systems thinking about the labor market as well. When prompted with the idea that public policy shapes jobs, including which jobs are available and how much they pay, people tend to agree, although weakly:

The Designed Economy cultural mindset. This mindset holds that laws and policies determine how our economy works (mean score out of 100: 63.8).

The Designed Labor Systems cultural mindset. This mindset holds that public policy shapes what jobs are available, and what they pay (mean score out of 100: 56.4).

We can see from the mean scores that people seem to agree more with designed systems thinking when this is applied to the economy than when this is applied to jobs. This supports our general hypothesis that *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets that people draw on to think about other relevant domains (such as the economy) are accessible but not typically applied when people think about work.

FINDING #4

When thinking about why we end up in particular jobs, people tend to draw on individualistic and naturalistic mindsets. Unproductive "gender essentialism" is more prominent here than on other issues.

As we explore above, people often draw upon *Self-Makingness* to make sense of what jobs people have, and this is a challenge for communicators. When the concept of individual choice is central—that is, opportunities exist for any individual who works hard enough—the concept of structural constraint can be obscured.

We also find that people draw on mindsets about how an individual's *natural* traits (their personality, intelligence, and physical attributes) shape work. While this naturalistic thinking relies on the assumption that individuals are born with different natural aptitudes that they can't necessarily control, choice remains central, because individuals can supposedly choose to go into the jobs that they are naturally suited to. Like individualistic thinking, naturalistic thinking justifies that status quo—things are as they naturally should be.

The *Born to Your Work* cultural mindset.

People often assume that individuals are born with traits that help explain why they are in the jobs they are in, and how good they are at those jobs. These traits could be personality traits (e.g., naturally caring), or physical traits (e.g., naturally strong). People draw on this mindset to explain patterns of who goes into certain industries—for instance, librarians are thought to be quiet people, politicians driven, and physicists intelligent. There is an underlying assumption that individuals can choose to play to their natural strengths, and that they will enjoy their work more when they do. People also sometimes explain exploitation with reference to natural weaknesses—that is, exploitation happens to people who are timid and unable to advocate for themselves (rather than on the basis of factors like gender, race, or class).

> *Because some people in health care have those quiet personalities. But the bubbly [people] would probably be like your car salesmen, like your grocery shopper person, or the person that they put in front at retail.*
> Black woman, Independent, 26 years old.

> *I feel like people get exploited at work because people feel like these people are timid or not as confident in themselves, and that they're push-overs.*
> Native American man, Independent, 31 years old.

Implications for communicators. Like other individualizing and naturalistic mindsets about work, this unhelpfully obscures the structural factors that shape the jobs we go into. It is helpful to shift the focus away from individuals, and towards patterns in the workforce that cannot be explained with recourse to a person's natural aptitude.

The *Gender Essentialism* cultural mindset.

When drawing on this mindset, people see men and women as inherently different and biologically suited to different jobs. Although many participants said they believed anyone of any gender could do any job, they still often explained gendered patterns in the workplace with reference to natural attributes of men and women—women are more caring or mothering, for instance, and men are physically stronger. When thinking about gender and work in this way, people explain overrepresentation of women or men in an industry as natural. Unsurprisingly, this came out particularly strongly in connection with the care work industry, where the feminized trait of "caring" is seen as centrally important.

> *We are made differently than men so, yes there's certain things that we can do that they can't and certain things we can handle.*
> Latine woman, Republican, 30 years old.

> *I think women tend to be more caring, [so they] go into social service jobs.*
> White man, Democrat, 43 years old.

The extent to which people seem willing to explicitly express gender essentialist ideas in conversations about work is notable, as this marks a departure from our research in other areas. For instance, when people talk about housekeeping and domestic responsibilities, they are more likely to explicitly reject the idea that men and women are suited to different roles, arguing that labor in the home is and should be increasingly equal.[21] People do frequently, of course, tacitly think about domestic responsibilities in gender essentialist ways, yet they disavow essentialism in this domain in a way that they don't when they talk about work outside the home.

Implications for communicators. The gender essentialism that people express in conversations about work is particularly regressive, and a challenge for communicators. We can't assume that people will understand patriarchy if we simply talk about the overrepresentation of women and men in different jobs. Instead, people are likely to think that this happens because women and men are naturally suited to different roles. We need to build greater understanding of how structural sexism shapes work.

Our research into how people think about care work, specifically, suggests that people do sometimes draw on structural thinking about how sexism shapes care work.[22] While it wasn't a dominant way of thinking, participants sometimes connected the low pay and devaluation of care workers to the fact that it is perceived as "women's work." This suggests that people *can*, even if they don't always, see how patriarchy shapes perceptions and material conditions of work. Communicators could potentially leverage this recessive understanding of care work to explain wider patterns of gendered occupational segregation, lower status, and pay inequities.

FINDING #5

People also recognize that there are structural factors that shape opportunities for work. Sometimes people understand the status and pay of jobs as being shaped by classism.

While not always dominant in conversations, there are, alongside individualistic mindsets about work, more productive mindsets about how money constrains a person's options for work, and how "working class" jobs are deemed to be lower status. This thinking is structural, but shallow, in the sense that people see that there are factors outside an individual's control that shape their opportunities, and will sometimes name "class" explicitly, but do not show a deep understanding of *how* class and other social structures shape work. Racism is barely mentioned, indicating that there is a lack of salience or understanding about the role of racism in constraining opportunity. Communicators have an opportunity to deepen people's understanding of how classism shapes opportunity, and a challenge in explaining the impact of racism.

The *Opportunity Structures* cultural mindset.

When drawing on this mindset, people see that social and economic factors shape life outcomes. In particular, if you grow up in poverty and in a "lower class," you are likely to have fewer opportunities, like access to good education, which constrains your prospects for work. While it is assumed that most of us need to work in order to survive, this mindset leads people to reason that people with less money have less choice and control over their options, and will often take "jobs of last resort." Some participants connected socioeconomic background to place, suggesting that income shapes people's choices about where they live and, in turn, their access to schools and opportunities for work. Place was also sometimes seen as a signifier of race, alongside class—with
people associating communities in certain areas as being predominantly lower income and Black, for instance—and especially in conversations about manufacturing. However, in general, people did not offer a strong analysis of structural racism when talking about work opportunities—a finding that we explore further below.

> But then I think that ends up circling back to what the limitations or the availability of jobs are based on where a person comes from. And it tends to be minorities who come from that lower income, lower socioeconomic environment where they may grow up without a very strong support system.
> White woman, Democrat, 61 years old.

Survey evidence: Race and age—but not income—affect thinking on opportunity structures

When we look at group differences in endorsement of this mindset in the survey, we find that race affects level of endorsement, with Black participants endorsing this more than white participants.[23] We also find that age plays a role, with older adults (60+) endorsing this mindset significantly less than younger age groups (18–29, 30–44).[24] Both of these findings suggest that groups experiencing greater constraints on their actual opportunities are more likely to point to the structural causes. However, interestingly, people's level of income does not seem to play a role. In the survey, people were as likely to agree with this mindset, whatever they earned personally. For instance, mean endorsement in the lowest earning bracket of $0–$25,000 was 66.7 out of 100, compared to 66.3 out of 100 in the highest bracket ($150,000+)—a negligible difference. This shows, again, that mindsets do not always map onto life experience in predictable ways.

Implications for communicators. This way of thinking is productive, and can be leveraged and built upon. Our survey results confirm that the *Opportunity Structures* mindset correlates with the kinds of policy outcomes we want to achieve—for instance, with raising the federal minimum wage (r=0.44), and with providing public child care for all families (r=0.45). These correlations are stronger than for most other mindsets in our survey, showing that this is a particularly helpful mindset to draw upon. However, communicators will need to deepen people's understanding of structural inequities given the relative thinness of existing understanding, and in particular connect structural racism more firmly with *Opportunity Structures* thinking. In addition, communicators need to offer ideas about how these inequities can be addressed, to avoid resignation and the idea that "that's just the way it is."

The *Class Affects Job Status* cultural mindset.

People sometimes recognize a relationship between class and prestige, such that traditionally working class jobs are looked down upon. This is seen as classism operating in society. When thinking with this mindset, people assume that jobs are considered working class because they are low status and undesirable, and other people can choose not to do them. (Participants occasionally raised the inverse relationship—that those jobs *become* low status and undesirable because they are associated with being working class.) This mindset is about status, rather than pay. For instance, one participant noted that some working class jobs are actually well paid, yet still underappreciated in society. This suggests that, when people think about the status of different jobs, this doesn't always correlate with monetary value.

> Researcher: *How about if I say that a type of work is "undervalued by society or unvalued by society." What do you think that means?*
>
> Participant (Black man, Independent, 48 years old): *I think it means people generally don't care for it or a certain group doesn't care for the particular type of work. But that's more of a classism thing. You know, some people ... [CHUCKLE] ... some people have a tendency to look down on the service industry. I think that's been here for hundreds of years and will always be. People have a problem with, you know, it's a classism thing. "Look at them; don't associate yourself with them because they do this or they don't work hard." I mean, it's a classism thing; that's all it is.*

> *Like a hotel maid, you know, or a trashman, those have typically always been kind of like, oh, "those kinds of jobs." You know, the "lowly kind of jobs."*
>
> Participant (White woman, Democrat, 61 years old)

Implications for communicators. This is a structural way of thinking about work that is potentially productive. However, it's quite thin, in the sense that people don't seem to have a deep analysis of how class shapes the status, value, and experience of different jobs. People also rarely connect structural racism with class, so this is an intersection that needs to be explained.

FINDING #6

People often assume that corporations prioritize profit at the expense of workers. Sometimes, people draw on the *System Is Rigged* mindset to explain worker exploitation.

People across demographic groups point to an imbalance of power in the economy as a problem. While this makes it easier for communicators to convey the realities of unjust power dynamics—workers versus corporations, and people versus elites—people often can't see how this imbalance of power could change.

The *Profit Motive Drives Exploitation* cultural mindset.

People assume that corporations act out of self-interest to make a profit, and put profit over workers. There are two distinct versions of this mindset that people use to explain *why* that is—one focusing on the individuals in power, and the other on how the system works:

a. **Powerful individuals are greedy.** This is the dominant interpretation, that corporate behavior is driven by the profit motive of the people at the top. Employers, executives and owners want to make money, and will take advantage of their workers for their own self-interest. When people see corporate greed in these terms, the obvious solution is simply to replace the person at the head of the corporation. However, people also think that "power corrupts": When someone gets into a position of power they will inevitably become greedy and self-interested, even if they weren't before. So greed can be created by having this role, rather than people being greedy to begin with.

I just don't think this [ideal of manufacturing is] going to happen. People are too … the goal of a head of a company is to increase production and profit. And if you could do that while paying less to a human being, you're going to do that. Compassion doesn't play a role.
White man, Independent, 33 years old.

b. **Corporations must be greedy to survive.** There is also an interpretation of corporate greed that sees it as a function of the economic system. While participants didn't typically talk about "capitalism," they sometimes gestured to how corporations have a constant need to make money, in order to stay afloat, and this means that they have to prioritize profit over workers. Unlike the "greedy people" interpretation, above, this points the finger at a structural cause of injustice and imbalance in the economy.

People who own the stuff, whether it's individuals or just large shareholders and companies, the only thing they care about is just how's their stock doing and how the earnings are. There's constant pressure to improve on [productivity] I think at the expense of the workers.
White man, Democrat, 43 years old.

Whether people have an individualistic or systemic explanation for corporate greed, there is a strong sense that the situation is hard or impossible to change. Even though both versions of the *Profit Motive Drives Exploitation* mindset, in theory, open space to think about the possibility of redesigning the system, such that neither people nor corporations are incentivized to be greedy, this possibility isn't usually discussed. Participants sometimes argued for policies and regulations to limit corporate greed, but more in the spirit of keeping corporations in check, rather than fundamentally changing incentives. Rather, people seem to assume that these dynamics will always exist, and that workers will continue to be exploited by employers.

Implications for communicators. This mindset is potentially productive, as it highlights a real imbalance of power in our economy, and the detrimental impact corporations have on workers. The second variation of this mindset is particularly helpful for focusing people's thinking on structural causes of exploitation (rather than pointing the finger at greedy individuals). However, the major challenge for communicators is to show that change is possible, rather than fueling fatalism. The recognition that the system creates an imbalance of power and incentivizes prioritization of corporate profit and exploitation must be paired with the idea that the system can and should be redesigned to rebalance power and prevent exploitation.

Survey evidence: Critique of corporate power is widespread, despite differences based on political affiliation and race

The *Profit Motive Drives Exploitation* mindset is strongly endorsed across groups, but Democrats and people who lean Democratic are significantly more likely to endorse it than Republicans and people who lean Republican.[25] This is not a surprising difference, given the different political philosophies about wealth generation associated with the two parties—Republicans being more traditionally associated with neoliberal "greed is good" economics and the idea that wealth acquisition trickles down and "lifts all boats," rather than corporate profit being bound up with harm, exploitation, and increased inequality. The no finding is not that Republicans endorse this less than Democrats, but that Republicans *actually do*, on average, endorse this mindset.

Table 4: Mean endorsement of the *Profit Motive Drives Exploitation* mindset, by political leaning why these stories work

	Whole sample	Democrats	Republicans
Profit Motive Drives Exploitation	68.8	73.8	63

Means have been transposed to a 100-point scale, so 50 represents the midpoint of the scale, and higher scores indicate greater agreement.

We also find significant differences by race: Black and Latine participants are more likely to endorse this mindset than white people.[26] This may be because people of color are more likely to experience exploitation, and thus are more critical of the profit motive that drives this. Conversely, whiteness can involve a denial of systemic exploitation. However, it's worth noting, again, that people still tend to endorse this mindset, regardless of their racial identity.

Table 5: Mean endorsement of the *Profit Motive Drives Exploitation* mindset, by racial group

	Whole sample	White	Black	Latine
Profit Motive Drives Exploitation	68.8	66.8	72	71.5

Means have been transposed to a 100-point scale, so 50 represents the midpoint of the scale, and higher scores indicate greater agreement.

These findings suggest that while political identity and race affect thinking, there is still widespread critique of corporate power, across groups, in American thinking about work.

The *System Is Rigged* cultural mindset.

When drawing on this mindset, people think that a few people at the top are controlling "the system" for their own gain at the expense of most people's wellbeing. While this can be expressed in general terms, as about "wealthy" or "powerful" people rigging the system against "ordinary" people, it takes different forms, depending on political ideology. These different forms offer different answers to the question of who is rigging the system, against *whom*. In the interviews, we heard a conservative version (anti-Biden, and anti-globalist), a liberal version (anti-Trump), and a version that was explicitly anti-corporate—in which corporations are seen as manipulating politics and politicians to increase their profit and control, at the expense of workers. As we explore above, with reference to the two clusters of mindsets about work, the conservative version of *System Is Rigged* thinking coheres with the *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* orientation to work, while the liberal version coheres with the *Collective, Structural, and Designed* orientation.

> *We're definitely taking two steps back. Because there's a lot of greed in people in power just influencing politicians. And because of that I feel like our life in the US is just getting worse. I think with jobs, or even with health, too. For me, I feel like a lot of the things the right are [sic] doing have been basically destroying our country. I think a lot of it has to do with greed and just power.*
> Latine man, Democrat , 26 years old.

Implications for communicators. As with the *Profit Motive Drives Exploitation* cultural mindset, this mindset could potentially help to draw attention to how the system is designed, and can be redesigned. It brings the role of power into view, enabling people to see how the system allows those with power to manipulate the system for their own benefit and at the expense of workers. But, different interpretations of this mindset have very different implications. While the anti-corporate version of this mindset can help people connect the dots between economic design and outcomes for workers, the conservative version can lead to the scapegoating of people of color, immigrants, and liberal elites. And even the anti-corporate version can trigger fatalism, as people aren't sure how to unrig the system.

In our Culture Change Project,[27] we are currently testing different framing strategies for engaging with the *System Is Rigged* mindset (e.g., different ways of explaining *how* the system is rigged, using values and vision framing to cultivate efficacy and orient thinking in productive directions). This research will provide guidance about how to leverage productive aspects of this mindset while inoculating against unproductive applications.

FINDING #7

While people often assume that education is the key to success at work, they are as likely to think that education is no longer worth the investment.

We find conflicting mindsets about the role of education in getting and succeeding at jobs. On the one hand, it's seen as a centrally important way to secure a job—the more education you have, the better your prospects. On the other hand, people are skeptical that education serves its proper function, pointing to the prohibitive cost of college education, and to a labor market where credentials are required but sometimes arbitrary for the job at hand. While these mindsets are ostensibly about the education and employment *systems*, and could be leveraged to talk about structural inequities, they are often raised in connection with *individuals*, focusing on how individuals fare as consumers of education and job candidates.

The *Education as Investment* cultural mindset.

Education, and particularly higher education, is widely thought to be a personal investment of time and money in the future. People tend to agree that a good, well-paying job *should* be a return on that investment, as it's fair to get something back. This is an instrumental, consumerist way of thinking about education that isn't critical about privilege (e.g., it doesn't question why some people can pay for education and others can't).

This mindset allows for different perspectives about whether education is or isn't a *reasonable* investment at the moment. In the survey, we found that people are equally likely to think that education *doesn't* offer a return on investment (mean score of 68), as to think that it does (mean score of 68.4). When talking about recent policies on student loans, for instance, participants sometimes argued that it's not fair to have to pay back a student loan when you can't guarantee a good job at the end of it. While participants didn't always talk about who or what was driving the problem of education being a poor investment, they sometimes drew on *System Is Rigged* thinking to explain this, suggesting that the education system is rigged against workers or young people entering the workforce.

> *I'm hearing about people who go and they have their bachelor's, master's degree and they're asking them to have these degrees at these jobs they're paying $17, $18, $20 an hour and I'm like, you're kidding me? I think that a lot of people would feel defeated with that because you make that investment and you can't even expound on it.*
> Black woman, Democrat, 44 years old.

Implications for communicators. This mindset has both helpful and unhelpful entailments. By construing education in terms of investment, it makes the individual a consumer of education, and can unhelpfully narrow thinking about work down to individual responsibility (if you invest in your education, you can succeed). On the other hand, the idea that education is no longer worth that investment can create space for talk and thinking about the many structural factors that shape opportunities, outside individual control.

The *Credentialism* Cultural Mindset.

This mindset is based on the assumption that the qualifications employers want are often unnecessary for the work, yet have become a requirement for many jobs. As the quote below implies, people can think of this as something that has changed over time—that you used to be able to get a good job without a college degree, but that's no longer the case. When thinking in this way, the education system is seen as a costly (but not necessarily valuable) hoop to jump through in order to get a job, excluding those who can't afford to jump through the hoops. Life experience, in contrast, is often seen as being valuable for work, and sometimes more valuable than what is learned in the formal education system.

This mindset has the potential to be paired with a class analysis, highlighting how educational credentials coupled with high costs reinforce class location. Yet in interviews, this mindset was more frequently used in conversations about what work is like for the younger generation, as a way of explaining how things are harder for young people now than they used to be.

> Researcher: *What do you think it's like for a young person entering the workforce?*
> Participant (White man, Republican, 69 years old): *Be a nightmare. If I was graduating from high school today I don't know what I'd do. I never went to any further education. And nowadays it seems like they got to do it to get any job, you know, kind of requirement. And that's so silly that it's become that.*

Implications for communicators. This mindset could be drawn upon to explain the value of the different pathways people take into work, beyond formal education, and to show how people from some class and race backgrounds can be put at a disadvantage in the current educational and labor systems. However, communicators must be careful not to reaffirm the idea, discussed below, that class, not race, determines pathways into education and work.

Survey evidence: Age matters when it comes to mindsets on education

We find a pattern that participants aged between 25–34 seem to be more skeptical about the value of education to their success in the workplace, compared to participants aged 60 and above.[28] This younger group is more likely to think that education does not offer a return on investment, and more likely to embrace the *Credentialism* mindset (as measured by such items as "employers often require education qualifications that aren't really needed for the job"). These two mindsets are also moderately positively correlated with each other (r=.40, p < .001). So, if people think that employers unnecessarily require educational qualifications, they are also more likely to think that those qualifications don't guarantee a good job. This relationship between mindsets makes sense if we see them both as a rejection of the value of education. The patterns based on age could reflect the different realities of different generations in the labor market, the rising cost of tuition over the past decades, and the struggle to pay this back even in full time work.

FINDING #8

The role of structural racism in shaping work is not widely understood and sometimes actively rejected— particularly by white Americans.

Racism is not generally front of mind in conversations about work, and rarely spontaneously introduced. While people sometimes recognize that racism happens in the workplace, they tend to draw on interpersonal mindsets of racism (e.g., focusing on how people talk and behave to each other at work) rather than structural mindsets (e.g., focusing on how racism in society leads to patterns of occupational segregation and racialized exploitation). Worse, people—and especially white people—sometimes reject the very idea that racism disadvantages people of color at work.

The *Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal* cultural mindset.

People tend to think of racism and sexism and other forms of discrimination at work as something that happens between individuals, in the form of abusive behavior, slurs, or offensive jokes. When people think about racism and sexism in this way, the assumption is that the problem lies primarily in bad people, rather than bad systems. This takes people to solutions like educating individuals to change their behavior, or replacing "bad bosses" with "better bosses" in the workplace.

> *I think discrimination means that somebody is treating you in an unfair way that's not based on your actions, but based on your identity and it can look like excluding you from important situations, or not giving you credit where it's due, or making very passive aggressive remarks of who you are as a person.* Asian American woman, Democrat, 21 years old.

Implications for communicators. This mindset helpfully brings interpersonal racism and sexism into view, which is a real and important form of discrimination. As we explore in the pull out box below, this mindset is productive in a range of ways, just not as productive as thinking about racism and sexism in structural terms. For communicators, there is an opportunity to build on interpersonal understandings of discrimination to show that individual patterns of talk and behavior are symptomatic of and rooted in wider trends of structural oppression.

The *Structural Racism Shapes Work* cultural mindset.

Occasionally, participants showed an understanding of how race and/or racialized poverty keeps people of color from having the same chances and choices, often leaving people with only low status, low paying, and difficult jobs. When drawing on this mindset, participants could interpret patterns of occupational segregation and exploitation as being built into the design of the economy (rather than thinking about racism only at the interpersonal level). Often participants connected patterns of racist disadvantage to the historical legacy of slavery and segregation—although sometimes without acknowledging how racism is a continually evolving process today.

> Researcher: *Does someone's "race" affect whether or not they become a manufacturing worker?*
> Participant (Latine 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 US has made it harder, for like I said, African Americans or Hispanics, or even Asians, and Native Americans who are even from here.*

This mindset and the *Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal* mindset tended to come up only when participants were asked directly about racism. It was very unusual to hear people making a connection between labor issues and racism without any prompting. Interestingly, we found much less systemic thinking about racism in connection with work than we have seen on other issues (such as policing and education).[29] This is likely because, as we have discussed, work activates individualistic mindsets more than many other social issues (such as the economy as a whole), which backgrounds more systemic mindsets in people's thinking.

Implications for communicators. Communicators must try to strengthen and deepen this mindset. While discussions of systemic racism can trigger a backlash, as we explore below, finding effective ways of talking about racism and how it shapes work is essential if we want to build support for the steps needed to redress it. Many people are not connecting structural racism with work at all—so there is a general need to build an understanding of how current systems, policies, and institutions perpetuate racial injustice today.

Survey evidence: Interpersonal versus structural mindsets of racism

Interpersonal and structural mindsets of racism are correlated. While we might assume that these are competing mindsets because they offer different explanations of what racism *is*, it's quite possible to believe that racism is both something that happens between individuals *and* that racism is built into our structures and institutions. Our survey data supports this. People who agree that interpersonal racism shapes work are also likely to agree that structural racism shapes work (a moderate, positive correlation of r=0.34). Indeed, this makes sense because these mindsets share a common root—they both acknowledge that racism exists, and that racism affects work.

A structural understanding of racism is much more strongly associated with desired policy outcomes. When we look at the relationship between these mindsets and policies, we see that a structural understanding of racism is much more firmly linked with the outcomes we want to build towards (i.e., correlations are consistently stronger than they are between the same policies and the interpersonal understanding of racism). This underscores the importance of trying to strengthen and deepen this mindset.

Race, political affiliation, and age all affect how much people endorse these mindsets. In our surveys, participants of color endorsed *Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal* and *Structural Racism Shapes Work* significantly more than white participants—and Black participants endorsed these mindsets more than all other groups.[30]

Table 6: Mean endorsement of *Workplace Prejudice is Interpersonal* and *Structural Racism Shapes Work*, by racial group

	White	Latine	Black	Asian American
Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal	64.8	69.7	72.3	68.9
Structural Racism Shapes Work	54.5	63.7	70.7	64.2

Means have been transposed to a 100-point scale, so 50 represents the midpoint of the scale, and higher scores indicate greater agreement.

It is not surprising that people with lived experience of racism are more likely to think that racism shapes work. What is more surprising is that across racial groups, endorsement of both mindsets is higher than we would have expected from the interviews, given how little participants spoke about racism. We believe this can be explained in a similar way as the discrepancy between qualitative and quantitative findings around designed systems thinking about work: This thinking may not be front of mind for people, but when it is introduced, people can readily make sense of it and recognize its validity.

Another interesting result is that political affiliation appears to matter as much as racial identity, when it comes to recognizing either form of racism. Democrats are slightly more likely than Republicans to agree that prejudice is interpersonal, and much more likely to agree that structural racism shapes work. This finding aligns with related research, in which we found that in which we found that <u>party affiliation had very large effects on endorsement of mindsets about racism</u>.[31] 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.

Table 7: Mean endorsement of *Workplace Prejudice is Interpersonal* and *Structural Racism Shapes Work*, by political leaning

	Republican	Democrat
Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal	64.8	69.7
Structural Racism Shapes Work	54.5	63.7

Means have been transposed to a 100-point scale, so 50 represents the midpoint of the scale, and higher scores indicate greater agreement. Differences between Republicans and Democrats are significant on both of these mindsets. Compared to Republicans, Democrats are significantly more likely to agree with the *Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal* model, t = 2.72, p = .007. Compared to Democrats, Republicans are significantly less likely to agree with the *Structural Racism Shapes Work* model, t = -11.12, p < .001.

And, finally, we find a pattern based on age. Younger participants endorsed the two mindsets to a similar degree, while older participants seemed to endorse the interpersonal view more than the structural view. In addition, endorsement of *Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal* stays fairly stable across the life span, but endorsement of *Structural Racism Shapes Work* goes down with age. This is consistent with the general tendency of younger people to think more systemically about social issues than older people.[32]

Figure 3: Mean endorsement of *Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal* and *Structural Racism Shapes Work*, by age
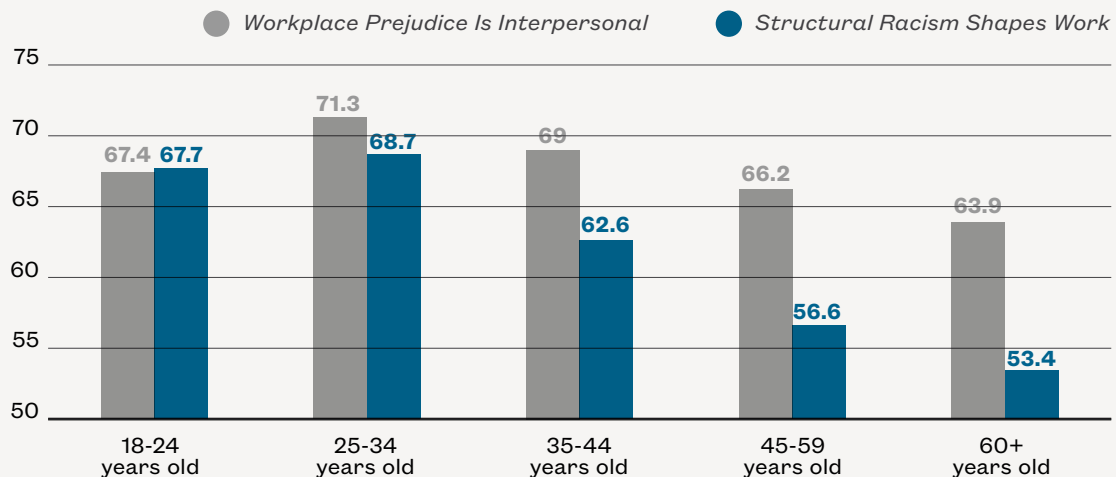
Means have been transposed to a 100-point scale, so 50 represents the midpoint of the scale, and higher scores indicate greater agreement.

The *Racial Progress* cultural mindset.

When thinking in this way, people often recognize that racism used to be a problem, but argue that it has diminished over time to the point that it is no longer a major issue. Sometimes, people will recognize that racism still exists, but assume that it's on the way out. This mindset leads to racism denial or minimization—the idea that racism simply isn't a big problem anymore, in society in general and also at work.

When it comes to how we have made progress on racism at work, people offer a couple of explanations. One is that the younger generation of workers have more progressive views on race, and are bringing these ideas into the workplace. Another (related) explanation is that employers want to improve on diversity and inclusion, largely for self-interested reasons, in order to attract and retain staff in a social climate where this is important to people.

> *I think that the hate and judgment, and discrimination, and racist behaviors, I think that's gonna die out because these younger people are coming in and they look at life differently.*
> White woman, Democrat , 61 years old.

> *Minority people are starting to go to college, and starting to build their careers. That coupled with companies wanting to build diversity for their numbers is starting to go up. [...] Not in all companies. Some companies are still needing to work on that, but I think it's being diversified and [is] a little bit more equal than it was in the past.*
> Latine woman, Republican, 30 years old.

Implications for communicators. While this mindset does not totally deny the existence of racism, it does diminish the issue. While recognizing that progress has been made isn't in itself a problem, the overstatement of this progress obscures the continuing, urgent need to redress racial injustices. This mindset also leads people to assume that younger workers won't face racism in employment, since racism is disappearing.

The *Cultural Differences in Work Ethic* cultural mindset.

Racism denial can take another form as well—the idea that racial differences in employment and working conditions result from cultural differences, including differences in work ethic. People use this mindset to argue that variation in how people think, behave, and succeed at work can be explained by their cultural background. When drawing on this mindset, words like "culture" or "country" are usually a coded way for talking about race, opening space for stereotypes about specific racial groups. While people may be more likely to express supposedly "positive" stereotypes (for instance, that "Asian people are more hard-working," as the quote below illustrates), negative stereotypes are usually implicit (primarily the pathologization of Black culture). This mindset can therefore be dehumanizing for people of color.

> *So, when you see Asians overrepresented in the Silicon Valley of certain fields it's not a surprise because I think there is more work that gets put in there. That work is not exclusive to them; I'm just saying you see it more, right?*
> White man, Democrat , 43 years old.

Implications for communicators. This model is a coded form of racism and reinforces racist stereotypes. By attributing different outcomes at work to "culture," it obscures the many societal factors (including sexism, racism, and classism) that shape work and produce disparities in outcomes between groups.

The *"Class Not Race"* cultural mindset.

Sometimes, people make the case that disadvantage at work is more connected to class than it is to race. This mindset was usually expressed defensively by white participants, for instance in reaction to the idea that white people have a structural advantage, arguing that it's less about being white or Black, and more about being rich or poor. When thinking in this way, people tend to pull class and race apart, by drawing attention to the white people that are working class or lower income, and therefore at a disadvantage. In this type of talk, "working class" is typically coded as "white," even if people are not necessarily consciously pulling race and class apart. Unsurprisingly, the "*Class Not Race*" mindset was not endorsed equally across groups in our survey—white participants (mean=50.2) are more likely to endorse it than Black participants (mean=40.5) and Latine participants (mean=47.6) and Asian American participants (mean=49.3).[33]

> *The dominant narrative is that the white people have all of the advantages, all the structural advantages of society and these things, but I don't really think that's true. ... Like if you look at median household income, for example, white people are like seventh or eighth on that list. It's like Indian Americans, followed by Indonesians, followed by Chinese Americans, and white people are in the middle. Their median household income is like sixty, sixty-five thousand dollars. ... The news says I have [it] all, I get special treatment and I get all these advantages, and it's just never been my experience. I've never received any handouts or anything from anybody, really.*
> White man, Independent, 35 years old.

> Researcher: *Do particular groups or types of people tend to end up in certain jobs?*
> Participant (Latine woman, Republican, 30 years old): *I don't think so. I mean, now I think more and more quote-unquote low income, less whatever that word is called, "minority."*

Implications for communicators. The "*Class Not Race*" mindset serves to minimize or deny the reality of structural racism, and communicators need to contend with it as a possible defensive reaction to frames about how racism shapes work. If "working class" is used as a stand-in for the "white working class," this obscures the important reality that many people in the working class are not white. Communicators should be careful to avoid referring to the "working class" without mentioning race and leaving this open to being interpreted through this mindset. Instead, communicators should focus on building an understanding of how structural racism operates through class while also having discrete effects alongside it.

The *Reverse Racism Is the New Racism* cultural mindset.

While people across groups can widely accept that racism against people of color existed in the past, at times, some (especially white) people suggest that society has overcorrected and people of color now have advantages that white people do not. Notably, we only observed people drawing on this mindset 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[34]). This mindset's 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 hope 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.

Unsurprisingly, this way of thinking is much more strongly endorsed by white participants (mean=55.5) than other racial groups (Black mean=34.2, Asian American mean=43.4, Latine mean=42.5). The mean among white participants represents, on average, very slight agreement, which reinforces the idea that this way of thinking is not dominant but is present for white people.

> *I think everybody has a very real awareness that the problem of racially discriminating goes all the way, it goes around, it doesn't matter what group it is, there is a degree of discrimination against them. It also applies to white people. ... I think if anything, as a white person, you have to work two times harder, because we are a minority now.*
> White woman, Republican, 65 years old.

Implications for communicators. This is a particularly aggressive form of racism denial, even if it might not be dominant. Like the "*Class Not Race*" mindset, this mindset can lead to defensive reactions to communications about how racism shapes work. When communicating with certain audiences, communicators will need strategies to inoculate against this mindset in order to introduce productive consideration of racism and how it operates in workplaces and within labor systems.

Survey evidence: Avoiding, dismissing, and denying racism

There is a connected nexus of harmful mindsets on race. These mindsets are moderately to strongly related to each other, as the below table shows. (As we conducted surveys in three separate waves, for reasons of length and accessibility, we don't have correlations for all of the mindsets against each other. We include here another mindset that is not discussed in this report—"*Gender Not Race*"—that came up exclusively in connection to care work and is described in a separate report.[35] Briefly, the mindset holds that if care workers are discriminated against, this is far more likely to be on the basis of their gender than their race.)

Table 8: Correlations between mindsets that diminish or deny the role of racism in shaping work

	Reverse Racism Is the New Racism	*Cultural Differences in Work Ethic*	*"Gender Not Race"*
"Class Not Race"	0.55**	0.42**	0.40**
Reverse Racism Is the New Racism		0.40**	(not in same survey)

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 relationships aren't surprising but do show how attempts to minimize the role of racism in shaping work can draw on several available explanations. These different explanations appear in different conversations (e.g., we hear "*Gender Not Race*" in conversations about care work, and *Reverse Racism Is the New Racism* in conversations about manufacturing), yet they are closely linked ways of thinking. All of these mindsets are (weakly to moderately) connected with *Self-Makingness*—again suggesting how the dominant individualistic thinking about work as self-made success can obscure how racism constrains opportunity. While all of these mindsets are also negatively (mostly weakly) associated with progressive policy outcomes on work, *Reverse Racism Is the New Racism* is particularly harmful, having the strongest negative relationship. This is unsurprising, given that this mindset goes beyond downplaying racism against people of color, to arguing that white people are actually more disadvantaged.

Put together, these findings show a potent web of resistance to embracing structural racism as a real and current problem. These are the mindsets that communicators need to contend with when talking about how racism shapes work.

FINDING #9

While people often assume the government should protect workers, there is not a widespread understanding of what the government should do differently.

The government is not front of mind in conversations about work, and when it comes up, is often thought of as a dysfunctional and interfering force, as we explore in Finding 3 above. However, when people are asked to think about who is responsible for improving work in the US, they tend to point to the government as having a role in protecting and providing for workers. But there is not a strong consensus on what types of policies the government could implement to better protect and provide for workers. Across the interviews, we heard people propose the solutions that could be government-led, but usually only one or two people mentioned each idea:

— **Universal health care.** Providing good, free health care to everyone, and separating health care from work.

— **Free schooling or daycare.** Offering free child care and good quality education.

— **Universal basic income.** Offering everyone a sum of money that is enough to live on.

— **Living wage.** Raising the minimum wage to be enough to live on, if you work.

— **Better safety at work.** Improved safety guidelines and enforcement.

— **Four day work week.** Offering jobs with reduced hours but enough pay to live on.

— **Abolish "right to work."** Getting rid of laws that weaken unions.

— **Redistribute resources.** Directing more money and support to people in poverty, and less to the rich.

— **Action on climate change.** Taking care of the environment for the sake of the future (although it should be noted that this was raised in a general sense, and not in connection with work).

Participants didn't always point to the government as the actor who would implement such changes—pointing, again, to a lack of clarity about how government policy structures work. While these kinds of ideas could add up to a vision of and program for major policy change around work, participants didn't usually think of these changes in that way. To the contrary, they tended to treat these ideas in a piecemeal fashion, introducing a couple of ad hoc ideas without a clear sense of what an alternate paradigm of work might involve. And even when raised in isolation, participants typically talked about these ideas as pie in the sky.

Despite these limitations, there are productive mindsets about government that could potentially be drawn on to explain the need for major policy changes around work.

The *Government as Protector* cultural mindset.

People widely see the government as responsible for directly protecting workers, through stepping in to ensure that work environments are safe. This means, for instance, implementing health and safety regulations, enforcing them, and maintaining the institutions that protect workers, like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, as the quote below illustrates. While this is seen as the responsibility of the government, people don't necessarily think the government is adequately meeting its responsibilities. For instance, people might argue that employers *should* respect existing government rules and regulations, but at the same time acknowledge that they often don't and aren't forced to. So while the government is seen as having the role of protector, people vary on whether it is effectively fulfilling this role.

> *I think it depends on the job itself, but generally speaking, we have regulations in workplaces that say you can't have standing water on the floor, or elevators can only carry a certain amount of weight. You know, equipment has to have shields on it. It's regulated. People should follow safety standards in order to ensure that the workplace is safe.*
> White woman, Democrat, 61 years old.

Implications for communicators. While helpful to an extent, this mindset is quite narrow in its focus on worker health and safety. Communicators must take care to highlight a broader set of responsibilities beyond protection, in line with the *Government as Provider* mindset, below.

The *Government as Provider* cultural mindset.

There is a related but broader mindset, which sees a role for government in not only protecting but also providing for people. When drawing on this way of thinking, the government is seen as having a wide remit of helping workers, through how the government spends resources, regulates, and makes policy. Government impacts on workers are understood to be both direct (e.g., through compensation) and indirect (e.g., through health care).

This mindset emerged in interviews when participants were asked directly about who should be responsible for acting on the kinds of problems that they had raised. One rationale that participants drew on when talking about the government's role as a provider is that the government is more powerful than individuals, because the government has more resources and the ability to make change, and therefore has a greater responsibility to act—as the quote below illustrates. In other words, the government should act as a provider because it can effectively provide for all in ways that individuals cannot.

> Researcher: *In terms of working toward the ideal world, who would be responsible for making those kinds of changes?*
> Participant (Latine man, Republican, 57 years old): *Boy, I would say we would have to let the government do it. A lot of people would argue that it starts with the people, but if the government doesn't show us how it can be done—they're the ones with the money—they're the ones that can make change where they can start implementing ideas for people.*

Implications for communicators. This is a productive way of thinking about government as the vehicle for solutions we need. However, people still need help understanding how political decisions fundamentally shape work, and how the government's management of the economy can either help or hinder workers.

FINDING #10

People tend to assume that workers are stronger when they come together, and that unions can be a vehicle for positive change. But unions are also seen as corrupt or inept.

There is a tension in public thinking about unions. While people widely endorse the idea that unions are a way for workers to become more powerful, at times, they also think of unions as fundamentally self-interested and corrupt. As we explore below, these mindsets are negatively correlated with each other but not mutually exclusive.

While people can reflect on the helpful or unhelpful function of unions, there is generally very little understanding of how unions work, and what they can do to effect change, beyond going on strike. Communicators have an opportunity to fill in these gaps in understanding, and to strengthen the recognition that collective worker power is both possible in theory and achievable in reality.

The *Stronger Together* cultural mindset.

People tend to think that workers have a lot less power than their employers, and that individual workers cannot do much to improve the conditions of their job. However, there is a sense that workers can have more influence if they come together collectively, and that unions are a vehicle for doing that.

While participants didn't generally seem to have much understanding of how unions work, strikes were seen as an effective mechanism that unions could use to leverage their power, as the second quote below illustrates. Sometimes, people spoke about this in terms of strength in numbers—that workers far outnumber their employers. Underlying this mindset is the assumption that collective action is needed when the conditions of work—pay, benefits, hours—are not good for workers. It's likely that people draw on the *Profit Motive Drives Exploitation* mindset to explain why conditions of work often aren't good. In an ideal world, participants sometimes argued, there would not be a need for unions to exist, because workers would not need to improve their lot.

> *I think of my union in my poker business I was in. It was just a collective group of people and through their collectiveness they have power and they can influence the companies and the government in ways that people wouldn't be able to do individually.*
> White man, Independent , 35 years old.

> *So those workers did a strike and all the students and faculty supported that. Before, the negotiations were very stagnant and not going anywhere, but after the strike and all this community effort, they agreed on something and ended up working out because people came together.*
> Asian American woman, Democrat, 21 years old.

Implications for communicators. This is a productive way of thinking, as it connects collective power to unions (rather than third-partying unions as if they are separate from workers). This a mindset that communicators can strengthen, by furthering people's understanding of the mechanisms by which union members can leverage and re-balance power.

The *Unions As Corrupt* cultural mindset.

While, on balance, many people see unions as a way to help workers have power, people also sometimes think of unions as a self-interested, bullying force. When thinking in this way, unions are suspected of operating through coercion and fear, getting what they want through threats, and bullying workers into submission. Sometimes this was spoken about in terms of unions having a violent past, but being much better in how they operate today—as illustrated in the quote below, where a parallel is drawn between unions and exploitative employers. Otherwise, the assumption was that unions will always be coercive because they are driven by a profit motive, and trying to make money for themselves. Underlying this mindset is a clear "third-partying" of unions, as if they are a separate and independent organization, rather than being composed of the workers themselves. When this mindset is active people reject the idea that the economic system may need to be redesigned to benefit workers. Instead, people assume that it is up to each individual to work hard and prove themselves.

> *Let's face it, if you look at the history of unions, they were violent. They were very violent. They had to carry baseball bats and if you tried to cross through a picket line, they beat you up, found out where you lived, burnt your house down. Because they wanted it their way. Unions have a history of violence.*
> Latine man, Republican, 57 years old.

> *I think that unions threaten jobs a lot in the US. I guess they feel like they have to do it, but I feel like they sometimes come off just as bad as the jobs, sometimes just as exploitative as a mafia group or something.*
> Black woman, Independent, 44 years old.

Implications for communicators. This mindset stands in the way of advocating for stronger unions as a solution, because of the fear of how unions will behave when they have power. If unions cannot be trusted to do what's best for workers, strengthening them seems ill-advised. When talking about unions, communicators also have to be careful not to talk about unions as if they are separate entities from their members.

Survey evidence: Political differences on thinking about unions

Across the whole sample, people are more likely to endorse the union-supporting mindset *Stronger Together* than the union-skeptical mindset *Unions As Corrupt*. However, when we look at political party breakdown, this difference seems to be driven by Democrats, who strongly endorse the former and not the latter (with a 35 point difference, as the graph below shows). Republicans, on the other hand, are as likely to endorse *Unions As Corrupt* as *Stronger Together*. The differences between Democrats and Republicans on both mindsets are statistically significant.[36]

Figure 4: Mean endorsement of mindsets on unions, by political leaning
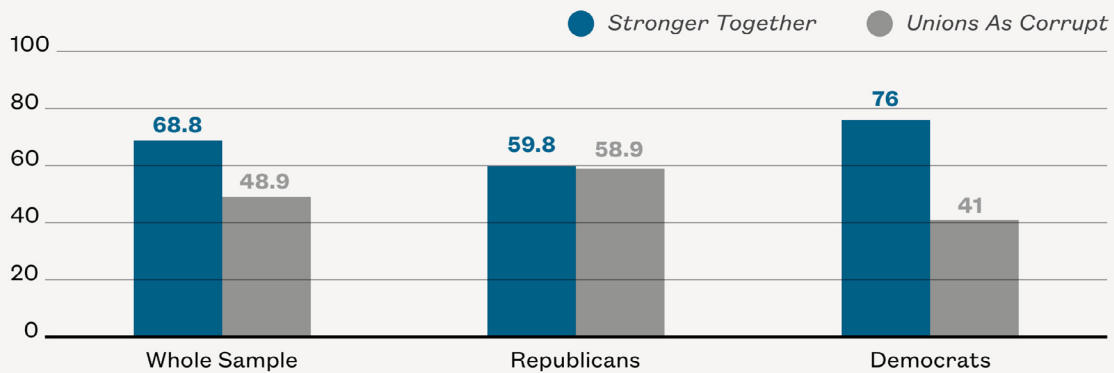
These two mindsets are negatively correlated (r=-0.48 in the whole sample). In other words, the more someone endorses the *Stronger Together* mindset, the less they tend to endorse the *Unions As Corrupt* mindset, and vice versa. While both mindsets are available to people, these mindsets are in greater tension than most mindsets, as negative correlations this strong are quite rare.

Political differences on thinking about labor unions are not surprising, given how the Democratic party has traditionally been associated with a more pro-union stance than the Republican party. What's more notable is that Republicans still *do* endorse the *Stronger Together* mindset on average. This corresponds to polling showing a general uptick in support for unions since 2009, across party identity.[37] One possible explanation for this is a shifting media environment when it comes to unions. Academic research on media framing has historically shown that labor unions are typically portrayed as greedy, corrupt, conflict driven, and lacking public interest.[38] Our own analysis of 18 national and regional newspapers in the US, between January 1, 2022–October 30, 2023, paints a different picture. In this sample, there was barely any portrayal of unions as corrupt or incompetent. Instead, the overwhelming framing of unions was as vehicles for worker power—in line with the *Stronger Together* mindset.[39] We can't comment definitively on the causal relationship between the media environment and public thinking, though it likely runs in both directions—with more pro-union media coverage strengthening endorsement of the *Stronger Together* mindset and the increase in salience of this mindset leading to more positive media coverage of unions.

III. How Is the Field Communicating Now?

As part of this research, we conducted a narrative scan and analysis of public-facing communications materials from 37 organizations working to improve conditions and outcomes for workers (i.e., the work and labor "field"). Ten of these organizations were unions, thirteen had a particular focus on workforce development, including pathways to employment and job training for both young people and adults, and the remainder were selected to represent a range of think tanks, community organizers, and care worker advocacy groups. Although all of these organizations advocate for better conditions and outcomes for workers, they vary in their respective visions and approaches to social change. For instance, some organizations envision a future that significantly disrupts the status quo, calling for large-scale economic and policy restructuring to address underlying economic and racial inequities. Other organizations advocate for modifying, rather than replacing, existing structures as a way to ensure workers have opportunities to do well. In many cases, organizations fall somewhere along a spectrum between these two approaches.

Our analysis revealed seven trends in framing strategies across organizations' communications materials, which are described below. Most of these trends transcend types of organizations and approaches to social change, although we note where framing strategies are concentrated among a particular group of organizations. Although we did not analyze in detail how specific framing and messaging guidance in circulation is being taken up by the field in this analysis, we recognize that some of the below trends result from such guidance currently being provided to the field by organizations within the field or messaging experts. These strategies, such as Groundwork Collaborative's "corporate greed" narrative about inflation,[40] are present in the trends below.

TREND #1
The field offers a vision of an economy that "works for all of us."

A common aspirational vision offered by the field features an economy that "works for everyone." In this vision, workers share in the benefits of a thriving economy and the profits of successful businesses, raising everyone's standard of living. This future vision is typically contrasted with the current reality in which the economy works extraordinarily well for a select few but not at all for the many (see related Trend #2 below). The "economy that works for all" vision framing appears across a wide variety of organizations' communications, and is used to advocate for a vast range of solutions—from raising the minimum wage, to increasing taxes on corporations, to protecting civil and human rights in the workplace and beyond.

Implications for communicators. Evoking an "economy that works for all of us" vision can potentially move thinking about work and labor in a more productive direction in several ways. First, appealing to the notion of a shared, prosperous future could facilitate "common good" thinking about work and labor that pushes back against *Self-Makingness* and other individualistic mindsets. Second, these messages can cue designed systems thinking about the economy and the labor market by emphasizing collective agency. Linking work and labor to the economy more broadly could also potentially expand public thinking about the scope and scale of needed solutions. However, if communicators tether work and labor to a thriving economy without offering an alternative economic model—a vision of an economy that works in fundamentally different ways—they risk reinforcing *Market Naturalism* and the flawed but dominant logic of neoliberalism.

TREND #2

Greedy corporations and wealthy elites are depicted as the villains in the story.

Organizations calling for large-scale economic reform and some unions are using a "corporate villains" narrative in which greedy companies and wealthy elites are the central characters. In this narrative, corporations and CEOs are responsible for an exploitative economic structure that fuels wealth inequality by increasing corporate profits "at the expense of workers." Examples of these corporate tactics mentioned in communications include: manipulating markets to increase inflation, hoarding company profits, predatory lending against people of color, and preventing or breaking up unions. Although communications using this narrative don't always offer clear solutions, government regulation of CEO pay and policies that increase the minimum wage are commonly mentioned remedies. Notably, the government is usually the hero in this narrative, while workers themselves are more passive protagonists.

Implications for communicators. The "corporate villains" narrative will cue *System Is Rigged* thinking about economic and political issues and the *Profit Motive Drives Exploitation* mindset. Although this narrative can potentially neutralize *Market Naturalism* and *Self-Makingness*, there is also a chance that too much focus on corporate villains—and in particular CEOs' compensation—will lead the public to blame individual bad actors and not the larger economic system for wage and wealth inequality. There is also a danger that this narrative may also reinforce fatalism, as people assume that little can be done to eliminate greed.

TREND #3

Balancing and *Leveling* metaphors are used to explain how the system can be fixed.

Communications across the field of work and labor use *Balancing* and *Leveling* metaphorical language to explain how the system is currently broken, and more importantly how it can be fixed. For instance, organizations describe the distribution of profit and power as "tilted" in favor of large-scale corporations and CEOs, creating an economy dangerously "out of balance." This "power imbalance" must be remedied by "raising the floor so that every job is a good job," "lifting up and building power at the bottom of the income and wealth scale," and "bringing down" the profits and incomes of corporations and CEOs to more acceptable "levels" through measures like tax reform.

Implications for communicators. The concepts of balancing and leveling have strong explanatory potential because they offer simple, familiar, active, and powerful imagery. They are also likely to activate productive *Designed Economy* and *Stronger Together* mindsets, which may give people a sense that the economy can be fixed and increase the public's sense of collective efficacy.

One possible hazard of this framing is that it could lead to binary thinking about balancing the conflicting interests of two opposing sides. While this can be productive in some contexts (e.g., bargaining between employers and unions), it could also reinforce zero-sum thinking about the economy that tends to undermine cross-group solidarity. These metaphors have excellent potential, but may need to be further developed and tested in order to understand how they can best be used to communicate about the many different actors, interests, and forces at play.

TREND #4

Upward Mobility is routinely employed as a metaphor for individual advancement.

Upward Mobility metaphors are commonly used to describe how individuals, or sometimes households, can "move up" in the world—through educational progression, workplace hierarchies, and socioeconomic status. Organizations that focus on expanding training and skills and increasing access to work for younger workers and those who are un- or underemployed are particularly likely to use this language. The phrase "economic mobility" is often used without explanation to emphasize the importance of creating and expanding opportunities for individual workers (present and future). Closely associated language references the need for "pipelines" from school to employment, "on-ramps" for workers in particular industries, opportunities for employees to "move up the career ladder," and guaranteed "pathways" to future success. Embedded in this framing is the assumption that upward mobility is a universally shared goal.

Implications for communicators. Given that this metaphor is used almost exclusively to describe the workplace trajectories pursued by individuals, without consideration for movement or change at a societal level, it is likely to reinforce the *Self-Makingness* and potentially *Work as Survival* mindsets. Whether a *Mobility* metaphor could be adapted and expanded to facilitate more systemic thinking

is worth exploring in future research. It could, for example, be used to build public understanding about the fluidity of workforce systems, particularly when talking about young people's entry into and experience of work. There is a danger built into the metaphor, however, of reinforcing existing hierarchies—if some people are moving up, this may suggest that there needs to be a bottom.

TREND #5

Field communications frequently appeal to the values of *Fairness* and *Justice*.

Unions regularly appeal to the value of *Fairness* to advocate for better wages, contracts, and working conditions. Other organizations pair the *Fairness* value with calls for tax reform and related measures to ensure that corporations and the wealthy pay their "fair share." (This echoes the vision of "an economy that works for everyone" described under Trend #1 above.) The value of *Justice* is also frequently invoked, including through reference to a "just economy" and a "just society," as well as terms like "racial," "social," and "economic" justice. While the two values are used similarly and sometimes even interchangeably in calls for organizational and systemic change, an important distinction exists between the patterns of their usage. Appeals to *Fairness* tend to be more optimistic and inviting in tone, placing the emphasis on solutions rather than problems, whereas appeals to *Justice* tend to be more focused on and explicit about economic inequality, gender oppression, and especially structural racism as the specific conditions that need changing. In other words, *Justice* tends to be used to talk about *in*justice.

Implications for communicators. FrameWorks' previous research shows that the value of *Fairness* can be effective in communicating about inequitable conditions across several issues, including environmental health,[41] early education,[42] and safe and affordable housing.[43] Whether it has the potential to prompt new, more productive ways of thinking about work and labor is a question for future research. *Justice*, meanwhile, has a long history as a widely shared principle in the work and labor field as well as various civil rights movements. Research demonstrates that it can be a helpful framing device for communicating about health inequities[44] and changing the narrative about history.[45] It may be a particularly effective frame for talking about race and racism, but future research is needed to bear this out.

TREND #6

Racial and gender inequities are invoked—in two distinctly different ways.

Race and, to a lesser extent, gender are common themes across the field of work and labor, though the attention paid to racial and gender inequities takes two very different forms. In one case, communications highlight equity as a moral commitment and practical goal (often alongside appeals to *Fairness* as described under Trend #5 above), or even an opportunity to unlock potential and achieve innovation. Within this framing, current inequities are cited as reasons to incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives into workplace policies and organizational missions. In the second case, communications adopt a more solemn tone (often alongside appeals to *Justice* as described under Trend #5) to invoke racial and gender inequities as evidence of enduring and deeply entrenched structural oppression. White supremacy in particular is depicted as an inherently defining attribute of our work and labor system, and potentially its fatal flaw. Both treatments of racial and gender inequities are accompanied by calls to action, though solutions named in the first case tend to be modest and concrete whereas those named in the second tend to be bigger in scope and somewhat abstract.

Implications for communicators. Acknowledging the prevalence of racial and gender inequities within work and labor is essential to raising public awareness about their existence in the first place, but it doesn't go far enough. Drawing attention to racial and gender inequities without linking structural causes to effects—specifically, without naming problematic policies and their disparate social impacts—risks strengthening individualistic mindsets like *Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal*.

TREND #7

"Worker power" is named as a key goal for the field—and for democracy generally—but specifics about how it would be exercised are often missing.

"Worker power" is frequently mentioned in field communications, also expressed in terms of "worker-led" and "worker-centered" solutions, and ensuring that workers have "autonomy over their labor." But many organizations evoke the idea of worker power without offering specifics about what this looks like in practice. Unions are an exception: their communications often describe the process of building worker power, such as through community-led organizing, capacity building, and increasing union membership overall.

Some unions and other organizations also discuss worker power alongside an appeal to democracy, arguing for example that "how goods are made and wealth produced should be governed democratically" and that "good jobs are essential [...] to a well-functioning democracy." A few organizations add democracy to the corporate villains narrative, asserting that big firms and their political allies purposefully thwart democratic governance of the economy. However, field communications generally say little about how workers might use their collective power to uphold or strengthen the democratic process, other than by voting for elected representatives who support increased regulation of the workplace.

Implications for communicators. Because the public tends to default to individualistic mindsets about work, the lack of explanation about how collective worker power is exercised could lead people to fall back on *Self-Makingness* and the assumption that workers just need to be empowered as individuals to pursue their own career paths. It may also fuel a sense of fatalism, given that people struggle to conceive what kinds of collective "power" are even possible.

In addition, FrameWorks' research on democracy,[46] conducted as part of our Culture Change Project, demonstrates that people tend to equate democracy with voting. This presents a challenge for organizations that want to assert a connection between democracy and worker power—it is not at all obvious to people how these are connected. Leveraging concern about democracy to argue for strengthening worker power likely requires expanding and concretizing people's thinking about democracy itself. Future testing is needed to understand whether and how democracy, as a frame, can be used to build support for changes to the labor system.

IV. Emerging Recommendations for Communicators

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. We intend for 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. Widen the lens to move from self-made success to opportunity structures.

While thinking on work tends to be dominated by individualistic mindsets, and particularly the idea of self-made success, we find that people also understand that opportunities can be shaped by many factors outside the individual. Merely noting the presence of structural constraints on people, however, is not enough because individualism has an answer to that ("work hard; rise above"). Communicators must widen the lens and make a point of consistently bringing structural contexts into view. We offer the following advice for strengthening thinking about opportunity structures.

— Talk about patterns of success in society or the economy as a whole, rather than narrowly focusing on jobs.

— Explain why groups of people have different opportunities for success, through no fault of their own. These explanations can cover how structural constraints originate and how to address them.

— When talking about young people, emphasize that connections to resources and supportive relationships, not just the availability of opportunities, are critical to their success.[47]

2. Talk about the economy as designed, and the role of government in shaping work through policy decisions and investments.

A helpful direction for communicators is to try to build more understanding of how the economy has been designed, and the role of political decision-making in shaping work. Talking about the economy as designed creates space for both productive critique and collective efficacy. It helps 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 do this, communicators can:

— 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 today and in the past.

— 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.

3. Offer an accessible vision or paradigm of a society where work could look fundamentally different.

Communicators can build public imagination for what the future of work could look like. People are likely to be receptive to the idea of big changes in how we work, but need help with what those changes might be and how we get there. On this issue, as with others, there is likely to be a "feasibility-ambition paradox": That which is feasible doesn't seem ambitious enough to solve the problem, and that which is ambitious enough to solve the problem doesn't seem feasible. That's why, when presenting any radical vision of a new economy, it's important to lay the groundwork for how this can happen. A key step is showing that the economy is designed and malleable through design making, as discussed above. Communicators need to show that the function, value, and status of work is shaped by human beings, rather than being a natural phenomenon. To expand public imagination, communicators can also take the following steps:

— Lift up the values and principles by which we want the economy, and our labor systems, to be designed.[48]

— Connect specific policies on work with the values and principles of a new economy.

— Help people imagine how work could be organized such that people are not exploited, and offer current examples of where this is happening.

— Challenge the idea that all jobs are necessary by talking about how industries do or don't meet our needs as a society. Drawing attention to the jobs and industries that cause harm can help us talk about what needs to change.

4. Show how structural racism fundamentally shapes the work people do and how it's valued.

Communicators have a great challenge in building an understanding of how structural racism shapes work, particularly among white audiences, given that it is not front of mind in thinking about work and can be met with various forms of racism denial. Merely noting disparities in outcomes between racial groups is not enough, as such disparities can be made sense of using racist explanations (for instance, the idea that some racial groups have a better or worse work ethic). All efforts to pivot from more individualistic to structural understanding of work could help, because dominant individualist mindsets like *Self-Makingness* can obscure structural racism. Future research is needed to identify the most effective ways of framing structural racism in the context of work, yet there are some general steps we are confident can help:

— Explain how disparities in opportunities and outcomes stem from structural racism. For instance, show how patterns of occupational segregation and pay have come about through design rather than accident or nature, instead of merely sharing statistics and facts about these patterns.

— Explore strategies that are targeted at short-circuiting mindsets that stand in the way of structural understandings of race, such as "*Class Not Race*". (See Future Research and Next Steps, below).

— Explain how white supremacy and other forms of structural oppression operate within work and labor, including how the processes by which they are perpetuated can be disrupted and redesigned.

5. Explain how sexism shapes work without cuing gender essentialism.

Communicators have a challenge in talking about gender justice in work, because it is easy to inadvertently cue unproductive mindsets, like the gender essentialist idea that men and women are naturally, biologically suited to different jobs. Again, it's not enough simply to point out that women or men are overrepresented in particular occupations, as this can be explained with reference to different aptitudes (e.g., more women are in care work because women are naturally more caring). Again, more research is needed to develop framing strategies, but as a first step communicators can:

— Explain patterns like occupational segregation in ways that cannot be interpreted with reference to gender essentialism (for instance, pointing to sexist policy decisions that have shaped work).

6. Bring climate change and the Just Transition into the conversation about the future
of work.

Even if people care about climate change as an issue, it is largely absent in conversations about work. It's likely that people don't tend to understand how the two issues intersect, and what it would look like to move towards a greener economy, with greener jobs. We also know from past research in the UK that people can hold a zero-sum mindset, such that what is good for the economy is assumed to be bad for the environment, and vice versa.[49] The major challenge, again, is to bring a wider lens to work and labor, so that people are thinking about systems and economic design. Communicators can try the following:

— Use examples to clarify the connection between action on climate change and the future of work (e.g., the need for policies on industrial pollution and emissions; the types of low carbon industries that would need to grow; the need for jobs in those industries).

— Explain how such actions can be a win-win—good for the economy, workers, and the environment.

7. Build more understanding of how unions are a vehicle for collective power.

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, they need to address a certain level of skepticism (e.g., that unions are a corrupt, threatening force) and also a lack of understanding about how unions work. Communicators can:

— Avoid talking about unions as separate and apart from workers in ways that accidentally positions unions as an independent third party. Instead, communications should reinforce that unions *are* workers.

— Give tangible examples of what workers achieve through joining together in unions. This might mean sharing examples of where working people have improved their lives working together in their union, such as successful strikes or winning contracts with better wages, benefits and working conditions.

— Be specific about mechanisms that unions can use to leverage and maintain power (for instance, through securing contracts).

— Talk about how unions can help us to shift the balance of power in the economy, away from corporations and toward workers.

V. 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 also test some of the framing strategies currently being used by the field. In particular, we hope to explore:

— Metaphors that can help show how the system is broken, and how it can be fixed (including the *Balancing* and *Leveling* metaphors currently in circulation).

— Explanations that build people's understanding of how capitalism and neoliberal system design create and reinforce inequalities—for instance, how the exploitation of workers is inherently connected to the incentives built into our economy.

— Testing values such as *Fairness* and *Justice* that may increase people's sense of collective responsibility and collective benefit 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 work and build understanding of and support for collective action. This would include strengthening connections between work and democracy.

— 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—for instance building understanding of how the government does and should shape work through explanatory examples.

— Strategies that are targeted at short-circuiting mindsets that stand in the way of structural understandings of race, such as "*Class Not Race*". For instance, how to talk about "the working class" in conjunction with race, so as to avoid cuing a narrow conception of "the white working class," and how to talk about race and class in ways that can build solidarity.

— Strategies to leverage frames about care work, in order to make a wider argument about work in general. For instance, how to strengthen existing, recessive understandings of how structural sexism connects to the devaluation of care (e.g., the thinking that care workers are badly paid because it is "women's work") and, if possible, building from care to talk about how patriarchy has shaped work more broadly.

— "Jobs" as a term, and whether it is helpful. Given that "jobs" seems to carry positive connections, and orient people to individuals, it's a matter for further research whether the word itself might be difficult to use in conjunction with frames that point out structural injustices—as opposed to other terms, like "work" and "labor."

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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10. Banks, N. (2019, February 19). Black women's labor market history reveals deep-seated race and gender discrimination. Economic Policy Institute. https://www.epi.org/blog/black-womens-labor-market-history-reveals-deep-seated-race-and-gender-discrimination/

11. Madland, D., Wall, M., Root, R., & Berger, S. (2020). *Unions are democratically organized, corporations are not.* American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/unions-democratically-organized-corporations-not/

12. 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—e.g., 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

13. The *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Traditional* cluster of mindsets may broadly be described as "hegemonic", in the Gramscian sense, and the *Collective, Structural and Designed* cluster of mindsets may be described as "counter-hegemonic".

14. Differences between Democrats and Republicans are significant on these mindsets: *Self-Makingness* t = 5.93, p < .001; *Structural Racism Shapes Work* t = -11.12, p < .001; *Government Is Anti-business* t = 12.15, p < .001; and *Designed Economy* t = -7.72, p < .001 (means reported in text).

15. FrameWorks Institute. (2023). *Research Update: Findings and Reflections from our Second Year Studying Culture Change*. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Research-Update-Spring-2023_Final.pdf

16. 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.

17. Mean endorsement of *Self-Makingness*, out of 100: 72.7 white participants, 73.4 Black participants, 76.7 Asian American participants, 73.5 Hispanic participants. The differences between groups based on racial identity are not statistically significant.

18. Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit jobs: A theory*. Simon & Schuster.

19. See FrameWorks Institute. (2022). *How is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval? Findings from the Culture Change Project*. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/how-is-culture-changing-in-this-time-of-social-upheaval/

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21. FrameWorks Institute. (2023). *Three Things to Know about How Americans are Thinking about Gender*. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CCP-Gender-and-Government-Docs-v2.pdf

22. See FrameWorks Institute (2024). *Is it Care or is it Work? Public Thinking About Care Work in the United States*.

23. In our survey, Black participants (mean score out of 100 = 71.06) endorse the *Opportunity Structures* mindset significantly more than white participants (mean score = 63.23), t = 3.82, p < .001.

24. Adults aged 60+ (mean score = 61.4) endorse the *Opportunity Structures* mindset significantly less than 30- to 44-year-olds (mean score = 67.7), t = -4.14, p < .001 and 18- to 29-year-olds (mean score = 68.0), t = -3.53, p = .002.

25. Democrats endorse the *Profit Motive Drives Exploitation* mindset significantly more than Republicans, t = -7.28, p < .001.

26. Black participants endorse the *Profit Motive Drives Exploitation* mindset significantly more than white (t = 2.91, p = .019), and Latine participants (t = 2.64, p = .042).

27. FrameWorks Institute. (n.d.). F*rameWorks Culture Change Project*. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/culturechange/

28. Participants aged 25–34 (mean score = 70.9) endorse

the mindset *No Return on Education Investment* significantly more than the 60+ participants (mean score = 65.6), t = -2.85, p = .036. Moreso, participants aged 60+ (mean score = 59.2) are less likely to endorse the *Credentialism* mindset, compared to all other age groups (aside from the very youngest, 18–24), and most notably the 25- to 34-year-old group (mean score = 69.3), t = -4.56, p < .001.

29. For more on interpersonal and systemic models of racism, see Volmert, A., Lyew, D., John, J., Vierra, K., & Moyer, J. (2023). *The Terrain of Spatial Justice: Cultural Mindsets of Race and Place in the United States*. FrameWorks Institute. https://www. frameworksinstitute.org/publication/the-terrain-of-spatial-justice/

30. White participants endorse *Structural Racism Shapes Work* significantly less than all other racial groups p < .001. Black participants endorse this significantly more than all other groups (Black compared to white, t = 9.33, p < .001; Black compared to Latine, t = 3.29, p = .006; Black compared to Asian American, t = 3.07, p = .012). For *Workplace Prejudice Is Interpersonal*, white participants endorse the model significantly less than all other groups (with p values all at or below < .01) and there are no differences in endorsement between any of the other groups.

31. See Volmert, A., Lyew, D., John, J., Vierra, K., & Moyer, J. (2023). *The Terrain of Spatial Justice: Cultural Mindsets of Race and Place in the United States.* FrameWorks Institute. https://www. frameworksinstitute.org/publication/the-terrain-of-spatial-justice/

32. For more on this, see FrameWorks Institute. (2022). *How Is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval? Findings from the Culture Change Project.* https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/ how-is-culture-changing-in-this-time-of-social-upheaval/

33. Black participants endorse the "*Class Not Race*" mindset significantly less than white (t= -7.06 , p < .001), Latine (t = -4.21, p < .001) and Asian American participants (t = -5.23, p < .001).

34. Holland, J., & Fermor, B. (2021). The discursive hegemony of Trump's Jacksonian populism: Race, class, and gender in constructions and contestations of US national identity, 2016–2018. Politics, 41(1), 64–79.

35. FrameWorks Institute (2024). *Is it Care or is it Work? Public Thinking About Care Work in the United States.*

36. Democrats are significantly more likely to endorse *Stronger Together* than Republicans, t = -10.93, p < .001. Republicans are significantly more likely to endorse *Unions as Corrupt* than Democrats, t = 11.27, p < .001.

37. Saad, L. (2023, August 30). More in the U.S. see unions strengthening and want it that way. Gallup. https:// news.gallup.com/poll/510281/unions-strengthening. aspx

38. Brimeyer, T., Silva, E. O., & Byrne, R. J. (2016). What do unions do? Media framing of the two-faces of labor. *Working USA, 19*(4), 517–532.

39. The Methods Supplement accompanying this brief explains more about how we did this analysis.

40. For more on the Groundwork Collaborative's corporate greed narrative about inflation, see Groundwork Collaborative. (2023, September 14). *Groundwork Collaborative – built to win* [Video]. YouTube. https://www. youtube.com/watch?v=CwbXQhUGqY8&ab_ channel=GroundworkCollaborative and Pancotti, L., & Owens, L. (2024). *Inflation revelation: How outsized corporate profits drive rising costs*. Groundwork Collaborative. https://groundworkcollaborative. org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/24.01.17-GWC-Corporate-Profits-Report.pdf

41. Bales, S. N., & Lindland, E. (2014). *Talking Environmental Health*. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/ uploads/2020/03/eh_mm.pdf

42. Nichols, J., Levay, K., O'Neil, M., & Volmert, A. (2019). *Reframing Early Math Learning*. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/ uploads/2020/06/early-math-learning-mm-2019.pdf

43. O'Neil, M., and Sweetland, J.. (2018). *Piecing It Together: A Framing Playbook For Affordable Housing Advocates*. FrameWorks Institute, https:// www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/ uploads/2020/03/enterprise_housing_playbook.pdf

44. FrameWorks Institute and ChangeLab Solutions. (2021). *Justice In The Air: Framing Tobacco-Related Health Disparities*. https://www.changelabsolutions. org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Justice-in-the-Air-Framing-Tobacco-Related-Health-Disparities_ FINAL_20220307A.pdf

45. Miller, T. L., Volmert, A., L'Hôte, E., Aassar, M., & Callen, A. (2022). *Making History Matter: From Abstract Truth to Critical Engagement*. FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Reframing-History-Report-1.pdf

46. *Volmert, A., Gerstein Pineau, M., & Cohen, E. (2023). By and For the People? Cultural Mindsets of Democracy and the US Political System: A Culture Change Project Report.* FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FWI_CCP-2023-Democracy-v2c-12.15.pdf

47. FrameWorks Institute. (2024). *Reframing How We Talk About Opportunity Youth.* https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/connections-and-communities-reframing-how-we-talk-about-opportunity-youth/

48. In research in the UK, we identified the values of *Autonomy* (having the freedom to live and work how we choose) and *Dignity* (we should all be respected, whatever our ability to work or the price of our labor) as being important guiding principles in designing the economy. We also identified key principles of a new economy—such that everyone's basic needs can be met, whatever their labor status, and that the future of work must sustain ecological systems. Pending frame testing in the US we cannot yet recommend what values or principles to draw upon, and how to iterate them. See New Economy Organisers' Network, New Economics Foundation, FrameWorks Institute, & Public Interest Research Centre. (2018). *Framing The Economy: How To Win The Case For A Better System*. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Framing-the-Economy-NEON-NEF-FrameWorks-PIRC.pdf

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Self-Made Individuals and Just Labor Systems

Public Thinking about
Work in the United States