



To: Interested Parties
From: Forecast Labs
Date: January 16, 2026
Re: Takeaways from the Pulse of the Worker Pilot

BACKGROUND

In 2024, Donald Trump narrowly won among voters with a household income under \$50,000 by two points (50-48). This was a notable shift towards the Republicans compared to 2020, when Biden won by an 11-point margin, and 2016, when Clinton won by a 12-point margin. The Democratic Party's image is decidedly negative among these low- to middle-income key constituencies that have been central to its coalition: voters who identify as working class (-18 net favorability), non-college voters (-21 net favorability), and those with a household income below \$50,000 (-12 net favorability). More than one in six voters (17%) identify as former Democrats who have drifted from the party but are not strongly aligned with Republicans¹.

Any effort within the Democratic Party that is aimed at rebuilding power will include re-establishing effective communications among the working class, which include a significant portion of the low- to middle-level income voters. As we approach 2026 and 2028, it is critical that there be more efforts dedicated to speaking *specifically* to working Americans *throughout the entire election cycle*. And it's clear that we need to do something different.

Beyond consistent contact, we must also engage with workers in more in-depth, ongoing conversations. If we continue to rely too much on online polling and one-off focus groups, we will continue to miss the mark when it comes to creating better messages and content that can break through to working Americans. We need to create a network of workers in key states from both sides of the political spectrum to monitor their pulse on key issues affecting their lives. We need a **Pulse of the Worker**.

This report outlines the results of the Pulse of the Worker pilot program, undertaken in fall 2025 by Climate Power's R&D arm Forecast Labs. We present an initial case study on how this project began, how it evolved as we spoke with union leaders as well as union and non-union workers, what we took away from our initial observations and in-depth engagements with workers, and what we think will be needed to truly scale the work beyond the pilot phase.

WHY WE CREATED PULSE OF THE WORKER

Initially, our hypothesis was that we lack an ongoing *research* infrastructure that captures workers' true beliefs and sentiments; one-off focus groups or online polls done

¹ Hart Research conducted a national survey among 2,529 voters on behalf of Groundwork Action.



by mainstream political research firms were not delivering the insights we needed.

What became clear, however, as the project went on, was that union leaders, union workers, and non-union workers were genuinely moved that someone was showing up to listen to them. Many of the participants told us that they have never been meaningfully engaged to have in-depth conversations, where they can talk to those who care about their concerns, and focus on how they see the world. Even those who have filled out surveys or have been contacted by more formal methods of research found this type of engagement more meaningful. One worker even initially thought our work was initiated by his union and expressed that he was happy and surprised his union was giving him this level of attention and deep conversation.

This real-time feedback was the main reason why **we shifted our Pulse of the Worker Project from a “research project” to an always-on network building project.** We quickly learned that when these participants see us as their partners in representing them and their voice (with unions, or simply among DC politicians or in spaces that they do not have a meaningful representation), they speak to us more openly, and they are willing to continue the conversation, to be contacted multiple times, and to be part of a broader network. By cultivating this network, we not only get answers about workers’ opinions about the “issues” we care about, but we create a new means for surfacing *their organic opinions, needs, and voices* to advocacy groups and political communicators – all while building trusting relationships with a constituency whose faith in Democratic and progressive leaders needs to be earned back.

We believe this approach can help address the [lack of trust](#) that is a major challenge in political communications today. While Democrats have taken steps to address their [“messenger” problem](#), they have developed a blind spot that good messengers (and a good message) does not magically appear out of blue. It takes an in-depth understanding of the communities whose trust – and votes – we need to earn; how they think, how they talk, how they formulate their opinions, and how they decide whether to trust a messenger. How a message is received depends not only on what is said but *how* it is said. It cannot be reduced to a focus group-tested list of talking points, but rather it depends on tone, organic voice, and constant dialogue with a community.

In other words, refining our message cannot be done with one focus group, or even a few. It requires constant, ongoing conversations with people who are outside of the D.C. consultant class bubble. To have these constant conversations, we need to build trust. To build trust, we need consistent, dignified, casual communication with a network of workers from all parts of the political spectrum. This was why the Pulse of the Worker project evolved from a “research project” to a case study in “*network building*” among workers who do not necessarily share our political leanings or partisan loyalties. What we believe we can do with these relationships goes far beyond shaping a message.

HOW PULSE OF THE WORKER WORKS



To do this project, we traveled to Wisconsin and attended union meetings, grabbed lunch or coffee with workers individually to build rapport, and had our interviewees recruit their friends and family, eventually allowing us to talk to 20 workers (doing multiple check-ins and follow-up interviews since July) by the end of the year. Building on the initial network of workers in Wisconsin, we also could find interviewees in other states of interest such as Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. We did everything we could to remove barriers that impact workers' ability to participate and to create an environment that would make them feel comfortable and, therefore, more honest:

- Workers are interviewed one-on-one.
- In most cases, they are interviewed by people who look like them (same race and gender).
- The workers dictate when and how these conversations happen. They could be talking to us at home on their couch or driving in their car before/during/or after work.
- They are paid to speak with us.
- In most cases, workers are referred to us by their friends, lending credibility and comfort to the experience.

For each interview, we start with a few conversation starters, but no agenda, except to simply talk to workers and listen to what they are most concerned or excited about at the moment. We explained the project to workers by telling them that these conversations are not done on behalf of the party or a specific politician. We tell them their responses will inform all future questions, conversations, and content. In the future, we plan to create or source content based on what workers have already told us in previous interviews, and use the Pulse of the Worker network as a content-testing mechanism.

We compensated workers for their time and were explicit about our interest in long-term dialogue and in creating political value for the workers by being a trusted custodian for their opinions, ideas, and voices on political, social, and cultural issues.

We have found that this set-up has allowed us to communicate with most of these workers on an ongoing basis. They take our calls, answer our texts, and respond when we ask specific follow-up questions. Our network is already allowing us to get responses from workers faster when new issues arise that we want to speak with them about any time-sensitive issue or political event ("What do you make of everything Trump's doing in Venezuela?").

And because we won't stop interviewing most of these workers, we will be building a constant record of the issues that they care about. We plan to use that record to create content on the issues, messengers, and values the workers themselves identify, and to continually test this worker-informed content with workers from both political parties. This virtuous cycle will create content and message guidance that truly reflects what resonates with workers.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM OUR WORK SO FAR

Although we see the utility of this work going far beyond research alone, our interviews so far in 2025 (and follow-ups in early 2026) have taught us a few key lessons to shape our message.

1. **Increases in electricity bills are getting more *organic* mentions over time. However, for the working class, they are still not as “baked in” and lag concerns around groceries. We still have more work to do to flesh out the narrative around why electric bills are going up, and our posture on AI and data centers has to be part of that message.**

In our interviews, we see signs that the narratives around electricity bills can no longer be separated from narratives around AI/data centers. In workers’ views, these two stories are interrelated, and our message should reflect that. We are also seeing that American workers perceive a lack of transparency around the AI/data center buildout and say that American people “have no choice” or have no voice when it comes to the politics of AI/data centers, because “too much money is involved.” Having said that, workers are also aware of and receptive to the tech right’s messaging that “we will need these data centers for our future” and “if we don’t build it here, China will build it.”

*“There’s a pretty big [data center] here [near my town] right now. They are trying to push an AI data center through and **the whole process seems to be pretty shady...** The biggest issue is obviously **energy prices**. Those things suck a whole lot of energy. **It’s so hard to find the true information [about AI data centers] out there and the true facts, and pros and cons of it.**”–Male, Wisconsin, 29*

*“Data centers have been huge. There’s one that was pushed through pretty close to our house maybe like 30 miles away, right on Lake Michigan. So I was paying attention to that quite a bit and **our union was really in support of that. They were sending all a lot of stuff about it and obviously their point of view was what they wanted everybody to believe [that data centers are good] but didn’t mind all the other factors. They just want everybody to have jobs for the next 5 years.**”–Male, Wisconsin, 38*

*“I heard that **if you ask a question from ChatGPT, it apparently uses an equivalent of two water bottles to process your question.** I am seeing a lot of negative things about data centers, for example how they cause cancer. I haven’t looked into that. **Another concern is having a data center outside of the US, [as I am concerned about] letting them be built in China, because we’re going to need these data centers anyway.**”–Female, Pennsylvania, 43*

*“Q: Digging in on the data center, what do you think are positive? If you think it’s a negative thing, what are the negative reasons? A: On the positive side for me personally, our company has a part of [building] it already that we know of. So **financially, there are opportunities for me to work for like 80 hours a week and as much as I want within the next couple years. I [personally] don’t want to do that, but they’re probably just gonna put it somewhere else [if they don’t build it here***



in Wisconsin].

Negatively, **fresh water in the Great Lakes is one of my interests and I've really been looking at that part of it.** These data centers and these companies want to bring these to our backyard. Because we have the fresh water that they need to cool them. Even though they consider it a closed up system, which is ridiculous, because it's going to consume some amount of fresh water. It's gonna, and they don't want to put it on the ocean side because they can't take all the salt out of the water. **The other negative part is they're taking people's homes [to build these data centers, and they say] here's what your offer is. It's not really a "take it or leave it" thing. It's more or less like we're gonna take it [anyway].**"—Male, Wisconsin, 38

2. Trump's war in Venezuela is not popular: "I need things to be affordable... that's not even on Trump's to-do list anymore"

The speed of the Trump administration's action in Venezuela and the constant change in the official narrative seem to have caused exhaustion and confusion. However, the outcome of this confusion seems to be decreasing Trump's approval when it comes to his actions in Venezuela. The default bottom line is that the Trump administration's "to do" list seems to be accommodating everything, but the cost of living crisis.

"My understanding of what happened in Venezuela is that Nicholas Monduro was a dictator. The administration used the drug angle for a bit. And they were like we're gonna take them out because of drugs. Then all of a sudden it changed a little bit to oil. And then [they said] now we want to step in there and transform this country. There's so much stuff that seems to be happening. **It's just like you can't keep up with it. It's like it's lost in the news.** I think the administration thinks that any of these minerals that are out there are theirs for some reason. I don't know what to think.

Q: What do you think about all of the news around the oil [in Venezuela]? A: If [the administration wants to] just gonna take it as theirs, it's not ours [to take]. **It should be traded as a commodity, just like how we get every other foreign oil. It is not like they're gonna give the Venezuelan people their cut of this money... just going to be [for] oil executives or big oil companies.** It's hard to say what's gonna happen."—Male, Wisconsin, 38

"I need things to be affordable. I feel like **that's not even on [Trump's] to-do list anymore** because everything is right now about the immigrants and now about Greenland and Venezuela. **It's not about the American people anymore.**"—Female, Pennsylvania, 43

3. On the state of economy, **greed** is the biggest explanatory frame for describing current problems – both politically and culturally.

In our conversations, when we push workers to be more precise on why they think their problems are not being addressed or being taken seriously, **greed** has emerged as a recurring motivation and a natural explanation. It is noteworthy to mention that greed is assigned to *both* corporations (and their executives, CEOs,



etc.) and to the political parties themselves. Additionally, this greed is not purely intentional – a number of people mentioned how corporate and political structure might need a wider reform, which sounds like what some Democrats are framing as a “[culture of corruption](#)” problem.

*“The **overarching reason is greed**. I think that, um, you know, the hospital that I was working at, multiple hospitals actually I've worked at, we have like 15 VPs. Why does a hundred bed hospital need 15 VPs? And I don't know how much they make, but it's far more than I was making. And the CEOs of the hospital and the little bit of research that I've done into it, You know, especially in today's world, like with hospitals, doctors are making far less money than they ever used to... And honestly, I do think that there's a lot of higher-ups that they're just making a ridiculous amount of money, particularly in the hospital.” – Female, Utah, 34*

*“I think **both sides of the aisle are greedy** as hell. I think you have genuine people there. I think that everybody in that line of work genuinely thinks or wants to try and do better, but ultimately in the day, everybody's human. Reagan's policies in the 80s, I love the idea of lowering the taxes for corporations and the wealthy with the theory that they would trickle that money down to the less fortunate. Well, we all know what happened. That didn't work, right? So, you know, even with the best intentions like that, it's just that people are greedy.” –Male, Pennsylvania, 50*

4. There is a widespread demand for **fundamental and systemic changes in the economy**.

Our ongoing interviews with participants have shown us that they have abandoned the idea that their economic problems have any easy solutions. Their analysis of the country's economic troubles is often sophisticated and acknowledges complexities. Unfortunately, this often leads to cynicism that there can be any fix, or at least that we need more than just simple reforms, but rather a fundamental and deep economic restructuring.

*“[The issues I have been thinking about the most]...very recently, tariffs, how that's going to affect the economy. **Definitely AI and the amount of work that's needed for the infrastructure** and also the buildings and construction itself to support all this **AI and data centers** and **power needed to run these facilities**. I mean, of course, then all of that, how it affects the markets and interest rates. What the Fed's doing with the interest rate and how the market is going to be affected by that. As for inflation, it's not going to be higher for a very long time, but it just seems everything is just skyrocketing as far as prices in general. So that's definitely affecting a lot of people's pocketbooks.” –Male, Wisconsin, 51*

*“Q: So why do you think there is a problem with wages, why has that occurred and why do you think politicians are not trying more to solve that problem? A: For example, once **insurance companies** could be publicly traded, we as policyholders went from the primary focus [as customers] to being just the commodity that is actually traded by the insurance companies [and that has caused an increase in] the cost of insurance. I'm not saying it's just health insurance, but it's also the doctors who carry their malpractice insurance. We have our home and auto insurance. Everything that we do has to be backed by some insurance. And I think a lot of costs or a lot of money that could have been kept in our pockets is siphoned off by insurance one direction*



or another, whether I'm the end user or I'm paying an end user for a service or a product. Ultimately, there's an insurance company siphoning off the money. I think that is one of **the biggest plagues that has hit us as a country. It's the cost of insurance.**" –Male, Wisconsin, 40

"Q: If you could talk to a politician or someone running for president and tell them, "This is what I would like you to talk about the most", what would those things be? A: Providing a budget that is not insane. It would be a miracle if we saw a balanced budget again. Maybe helping the people in need, as far as homelessness, veterans, and the people who are truly at the bottom. If we can bring the lowest-income people up, that would overall help our economy and help cities/taxes. It would help everything greatly increase. Helping with housing and food—providing them with what they need. Finally, this out-of-control military complex that everyone seems to be totally involved in. **Both parties cannot get out of their own way** in being involved in every single conflict over the world because **it's all about making money.**" –Male, Wisconsin, 38

5. Both parties are underwater – “independence” and “doing one’s own research” are the ascendant value and attitude.

Workers see the whole political system as malfunctioning. The disillusionment with parties is not a *Democratic* or a *Republican* party problem – both parties have serious deficits. On the Democratic Party’s side, there are clear signals that these workers believe these problems will not be resolved until a truly fresh leader appears within the Democratic party in 2028. They want this leader to “get things done.” They also express an exhaustion with polarized political messaging.

"Q: What do you think the biggest blind spots are for the Democratic Party? Why do you think they're so unsuccessful? A: Because they fundraise better after they've lost, it seems like. I don't know if that's true or not, but **it seems like they have taken on the role of an opposition party versus a governing party. You need to offer something to people who don't vote.** Give people a reason to vote. Most people are apathetic because both parties are “the same”. Neither one does anything for the average person. Why would I take a day off work to go vote? I can barely afford to take a day off work. I'm saying that as a general mentality... If neither party is offering you anything, why would you bother?" –Male, Massachusetts, 37

"I am not one-sided; I sit in the middle of the road. My biggest grief is that I can see great ideas on both sides, but there is that fine line in the middle. If one party does something good, the other tears it down, even if it is in the best interest. Needs to be a compromise on both ends. I didn't vote when Obama ran the first time. I wasn't able to vote in his first term, but listening to him... that guy the way he presented himself, what he did was great. **But a lot of things he said he would do never happened...** In my eyes, all politicians are crooks; that is the way I see it. They are obviously doing the job for their own financial gains." –Male, Wisconsin, 29

"I am a registered Republican. I have been a registered Republican since I was 18. However, **the current administration has really made me question my political affiliation for many reasons.** I feel like this administration is trying to hinder women's rights in many ways like the abortion laws. I want someone to have that choice. It's their right to choose whether or not they want that procedure or not. But the other thing that really worries me is the economy and the trade wars. I have a 401k and that is how I have to retire and social security. I don't have a pension. I don't have a clear stipend of cash to get me to retirement and get me through retirement." –Female,



Pennsylvania, 47

*"Democrats are lost. **They're not setting [any new] agenda.** They seem to be a lost party, like you know, if the best thing they can come up with is Project 2028, give me a break! I could have came up with that and I'm just an electrician...that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."*—Male, Wisconsin, 38

6. Republicans seem to have a difficult path ahead to credibly adopt Trump's message and promises to the working class. The fracture within the coalition is real and will have ramifications for 2026 and 2028.

There is a broad perception that Democrats have lost the working class (especially blue-collar workers) to Republicans. However, we did not see this zero-sum thinking in many of our interviews. Even among those who were closer to MAGA, there seems to be a meaningful difference between how they think of Trump and how they think of Republicans writ large. Non-MAGA workers are dissatisfied with Trump and MAGA workers have no faith in Republicans other than Trump.

*"It is **hard to say [anything about the Republican] party versus Trump... he has been making it very tough for our business currently.** So we're hanging in there. starting to look a little bit more optimistic, but just people are afraid to spend money right now... I'm a conservative, I'm sort of a liberal conservative, but I'm definitely more on the conservative side. I think I have the ability to see things and issues from both sides of the aisle."*—Male, Pennsylvania, 50

*"Q: Do you ever find yourself sharing any type of information with friends and family on any of these issues? A: **A couple of my friends I'll talk to about and have discussions with, but I cannot talk to my family because my family are all diehard Republicans [Note: the interviewee is herself a moderate Republican]. They are far right wing Republicans.** And quite honestly, it's a huge point of contention for us. But so I just don't talk about it with my family."*—Female, Pennsylvania, 47

7. "American Dream" is still attainable – but it is not guaranteed anymore.

We expected to hear from interviewees that "the [American dream is dead](#)," at least for the working class. To our surprise, many workers said that achieving the American dream is possible, but one "should work for it," "plan for it," or be "smart about it," in order to get there. While the tone could vary (e.g., conservative interviewees emphasize the value of hard work and individual responsibilities), the perception is the number of people who will get an opportunity to achieve it is shrinking and will continue to shrink. One alarming signal is that younger folks seem to be more likely to be totally disillusioned.



*"It's attainable. **I think people are [...] soft, and not as hard working as my generation and prior.** I mean when people say they can't get jobs you know that they have to live off of state or federal support. I could work 100 hours a week at five jobs if I really wanted to. I mean **it's just people's work ethic and drive that are what's holding them back from achieving the American dream.**"*

–Male, Wisconsin, 51

*"To some [it's been dead], sure. I think that the **American dream has been twisted... your entire focus has to be on your career.** What's sad to me is that I hear some of my own coworkers talking about the fact that I just do what I have to do to make ends meet. And what that means for them is that they work 40 hours here a week or more, and then they work Saturday and Sunday too, to make enough money to provide for their children. And I don't think that that should be reflecting the American dream. But... technically they're owning a house and they have kids. To some, **I think it is still attainable. And maybe that's 30% of people.**"* –Male, Massachusetts, 36

*"I think it's attainable **for very very few people and it's getting even fewer as days go by.** You own your own home. You can afford to pay your bills. You can go on vacation once a year. That kind of like I would say that's like the American dream. You could own your own business and things like that. **My view now is that you really have to work your ass off and you better hope you're in a good place economically, like where you have good economic opportunity. Otherwise you have to own your own business. And honestly, even if you own your own business, it's really hard to compete with some other businesses, because [companies like] Amazon make it so easy [for the average consumer].**"* –Female, Utah, 34

*"I think it depends how you define what the American dream is. I think it's different for different people. When I think of the classical [definition of the] American dream, like a house with a white picket fence, like two kids and a dog or whatever it is. I think for a lot of younger people that's kind of shifted because that feels so unattainable at this point... why even bother. I mean I think people are just going to have it and could be attainable depending on how you define it. **I can think about when I was in high school, it's like, go to college, get a degree, that's the only way you're going to get a job, that's going to pay well enough, yada, yada, yada. And... like that, in my opinion, turned out to be a complete lie. But it was presented to, I know myself, and probably a lot of other people, like it was the only option.**"* –Male, Massachusetts, 34

8. **Working class media habits have irreversibly changed. Many workers deeply mistrust most of the current media landscape and see a need for sources they believe to have a *fair* and *independent* tone in their communication. Additionally, our interviews show a need to incorporate more about not just “passive news consumers” but also “news avoiders” in our other media research.**

While more partisan interviewees still mention cable news and more traditional news outlets in their interviews, there is a strong signal that the non-traditional outlets resonate more deeply and broadly – especially, since “independence” as a value is becoming more and more dominant. These new outlets are reaching and are trusted by more workers than our traditional media comfort zone, because they are seen as more authentic and independent.

Having said that, we also encountered interviewees who are *actively avoiding the news*, and at the same time, have voted in a recent election cycle. Like passive



news consumers, we see this audience as critical to rebuild with, and plan to investigate more about them in our media habit research.

"[I] try to avoid the negative [news]. It's going to take a lot of my time. There's a lot of angry people out there. I don't know what the answer is, how you get out of that. I know I just can't talk about politics. There are others that I know and we do and we just agree to disagree like we used to, like adults did. But **so many people have bought into the cable news.**"—Male, Pennsylvania, 52

"Primarily, it's a podcast. It's called *Breaking Points*. I listen to it periodically. **I really like it because the premise of the whole thing is that it's a person who's center right and another person who's center left and they discuss and debate.** They tend to agree on most things and then have little differences and policies. It's a good way to hear a bit about both sides of certain issues and how things are being portrayed. They were on Joe Rogan like years ago and they just had a great conversation. I thought it was interesting. **I was still sick of the news too, because of the corporatized news,** it's the same problem. You have these stakeholders who have all the money and are controlling everything that you say and do. Whereas, independent media don't have those constraints anymore. **I would much rather support these small channels who can actually just say what they want to say rather than me sitting here listening to CNN and Fox news.**"—Female, Utah, 34

"Q: I want you to think a little bit about the next election. If you could have a conversation with a politician that truly had the ability to impact some of these issues, what would be like the first three issues you would want them to focus on? A: The number one focus, at least at this national level, especially from the point of as president, they have got to figure out how to talk to single white males between the ages of 35 and 55. That is the boat they missed. 100%. I mean, so much of that base, that is my demographic, **so much of that base is Joe Rogan and Theo Von, Ben Shapiro, Charlie Kirk. They have these captivating, white-leaning people that are all spreading information. And the Dems have it, too. And I know that because they show up in my news feed. But they're not household names.** And they don't carry these podcasts in the same fashion that Rogan and Theo Von carry. They have to get that back. And I truly think that's how Trump won, is that a single white male, single white males do not think, well, you can just say straight white male. They love Joe Rogan and they feel like they're getting heard that way."—Male, Wisconsin, 40

"Q: How did you find out about Charlie Kirk? And what about him do you like? A: **Found him on Twitter** and we relate on a lot of topics. **He is independent,** and he started his own podcast at first, but now he has influences from people who aren't independent, so I don't know how independent he actually is. I listen to Rogan quite a bit, and I would say I am a Republican, **but I am more centered because there was another guy on that podcast, Dave Smith, who I agree with a lot but also disagree with [on some topics]. I like listening to it because I find common ground with both.**"—Male, Wisconsin, 29

"I'm never Googling, I'm never typing in, I'm never searching for anything political. Yeah, **it just comes to you. It just pops up on my feeds... on mostly Reddit.**"—Male, Massachusetts, 36

"I still read the newspaper. I'm old school. It is a local paper. I try to stay away from the bigger news like CNN. Because I can listen to it in my car like an old person, [I still listen to] NPR and the PBS station. I do enjoy their news. I know a lot of people say that they're leaning one side over the other, but I don't know. I feel like they get to the point and facts. **When I see anything on social media my first thing is to check before I even open up the article and look for misinformation.**"—Female, Pennsylvania, 43



9. Wages, housing, and health are the three main pillars of workers' attention. All other issues are secondary.

Housing, homeownership and household expenses (including groceries and utilities) are the main source of stress. Additionally, insurance, especially health insurance, is a constant reminder for the working class that costs are going up. Workers are generally cynical about the healthcare system and say that it basically feels inaccessible due to high co-pays and excessive out of pockets. Stagnant wages not only impact workers' financial security right now, but they also actively think about the prospects of retiring in the future. They look at almost every issue (and process it) through these three sources of stress/concern. Everything else is either relevant to these concerns, or will be deemed as secondary. It is noteworthy that some workers organically and explicitly mention *home insurance* when they raise their concerns on either insurance in general, or as part of the broader story of *housing affordability*.

"I feel it's getting harder. Things are getting harder to afford and pay is not changing. I do feel it's harder to rent and it is constantly going up."—Female, Pennsylvania, 43

"Somebody just texted me on Friday or Saturday something like that we need more money on our check at the next allocation because nothing is getting cheaper and we just need more money on our check. They don't care about the benefits, more money on the check, plain and simple."—Male, Wisconsin, 51

"And I think a lot of costs or a lot of money that could have been kept in our pockets is siphoned off by insurance one direction or another, whether I'm the end user or I'm paying an end user for a service or a product. Ultimately, there's an insurance company siphoning off the money. I think that is one of the biggest plagues that has hit us as a country. It's the cost of insurance." —Male, Wisconsin, 40

*"Without being able to save money and not being able to put down a down payment, a \$700,000 mortgage at zero down is well beyond what I could pay a month. I've been approved for a \$350,000 loan from a bank for a mortgage. That's a \$3,000 a month mortgage payment. And then you put property taxes on top of that, \$1,600 quarterly, right? **Home insurance**, \$3,500 on top of that. That's not including **utilities**, Any amenities that would be, you know, like help, anything that you want, cable, you don't need it. But the internet, that's what the world thrives on right now. So you add all that money up, it's just impossible. I literally cannot make it, and that's why myself and a lot of my coworkers are constantly working, including on the weekends doing side work, just to keep up with what we have now, but still not saving."—Male, Massachusetts, 36*

10. Political messaging should always ladder up to a broader narrative. While strictly concerned and anxious about their specific economic circumstances, workers still use common-sense (macro)economic narratives to make sense of their life and individual circumstances. In other words, the broader vision or framework still matters – and might matter the most in messaging.

Any message about oil and gas, nuclear, solar, wind, etc. is interpreted through a



broader economic lens. This is why taking a political or partisan *tone* on our issues (e.g. “Big Oil”) is usually dead on arrival with this audience, no matter how refined and tested our message is. Using certain labels signals that the underlying economic story is ideological, compromised, unfair, and “paid for.” Instead, we are better off tapping into the values and beliefs of the audience we are trying to reach.

“National debt is the first thing that pops into my head, and paying that down. The debt isn’t the end all be all, but it is a scary number to look at, and what was it at 20 years ago? 20 years ago I spent a quarter of my income for the month on rent. Today my wages have gone up considerably, rent has also climbed a lot, and inflation. And they will never go back to the previous prices.”–Male, Wisconsin, 40

*“[The question is] would you support a transition to **nuclear energy** compared to coal/natural gas? If the numbers make sense, yes. I think it would be hard for us to do because is there money to be made on nuclear power like there is on oil and gas? I don’t know. **Refining fossil fuels is a trillion-dollar industry, so a nuclear investment– can you sell it to someone else?**”–Male, Wisconsin, 51*

11. Values are present in how people think of the environment—but there is a cynicism about the activist class.

For moderate and right-leaning workers especially, when environmental/climate messaging and activism is successfully linked to their perception of corruption or packaged in a way that resonates with the cynicism and the feeling that “the system does not work”, it turns off this audience. To overcome the cynicism, we should get the “tone” (values) and “big frames” right, before engaging in specific details of events or messaging.

“I’m a man of faith and I think the good lord’s gonna take care of the world and the environment...I think that’s [become too] political definitely, and a way to split people politically unfortunately. But as for green energy I love it because it’s great for construction...none of my decisions are ever based on environmentalists and environmental studies and CO2 outputs and all of that crap.”–Male, Wisconsin, 51

“We should be underwater by now, according to climate change. That issue is off the table for me. I will never believe it. Someone made money somewhere.”–Male, Wisconsin