For years, right-wing politicians have hammered away on an economic message of smaller government and lower taxes, while progressives struggled to find clear and consistent language to effectively communicate about jobs and the economy. The Winning Jobs Narrative Project addresses this challenge by creating a narrative architecture to help strengthen our connections with working people across race and geography.

Radical cooperation has been our guiding principle. No single project can deliver all that we need. So we set out to build on the work of colleagues and share our work widely to help inform a broader conversation. The progressive movement must be a movement for working people — and achieving that will take everyone’s contributions and long-term collaboration.

To develop a narrative architecture that works broadly across race and place, we needed an expansive research agenda. The Winning Jobs Narrative project team began with an intensive review of all the research from the last two decades that we could access from state and national partners to identify potential gaps in what we knew about voter attitudes. We followed that with a six-month qualitative research phase that included nearly 3,000 conversations with voters in 17 states, followed by a massive quantitative phase that has included over 70,000 survey interviews, including several rounds of A/B implementation message tests and a national Spanish-language message test.

A full presentation of the narrative and research, including methodology details for each phase, is available at www.winningjobsnarrative.org. For additional information and briefings, please email us at connect@winningjobsnarrative.org.
The Mindset: How Voters Think & Feel About the Economy

To have effective conversations about the economy, we first need to understand how voters think and feel about key aspects of it:

ENVIRONMENT

1 **The Economy:** Voters fundamentally “get” the economy, how it works, and that it’s something that’s created. They see hardworking people, small businesses, and family farmers as the backbone of the economy. So economic growth should be measured by how working people are doing—in other words, whether they have quality jobs, good wages, and can afford housing and the other basic things we all need to build a good life.

2 **Jobs:** The pandemic changed things when it comes to jobs. Working people want more from a job—fair pay, better well-being on the job, quality benefits, more certainty, and respect. Not just more jobs; **better jobs.**

ACTORS

1 **The Heroes:** Working people—and their work, spending, and contributions—power our economy. Their personal agency is paramount, and people respond most favorably to messaging that respects that agency. Small business owners may be the epitome of the working-person hero. Their initiative, responsibility, productivity, and contributions to their communities are top of mind and broadly admired. Family farmers, like small business owners, are also emblematic of working people.

2 **Corporations:** Corporations are a big part of the story, and most people have a mix of feelings about them—both positive and negative. Most people recognize that corporations are important employers and a key part of our economy—and they believe corporations have responsibilities beyond their bottom line to their employees, customers, and communities. People want corporations to be positive contributors, and are aware of those that are. On the other hand, people can also be suspicious of the power that large corporations have and believe that many do not live up to their responsibility to contribute positively. “Greedy” is the word most ascribed to corporations that take advantage of working people and/or do not pay their fair share.

3 **Government:** Voters aren’t inherently opposed to an active role for government when it comes to jobs and the economy. But there can be push-back about what government can actually accomplish. And most people want their government to **support** them, not do for them. Some voters also conflate government with corporations as being part of the elites who control power.

4 **Political Parties:** Neither major party is really seen as focusing enough on working people, and Democrats face a couple of particular deficits. Research often shows that they’re seen as focusing more on poor people than on working people by a wider margin than Republicans are seen as more focused on the wealthy. And Republicans have exploited that to position themselves as aligning with working-class values, despite pushing and embodying an agenda designed to hurt working people and families.

VALUES

1 **Hard Work:** Hardworking. It’s an identity and an attribute that most Americans across race and geography proudly claim. It’s not about romanticizing work. It’s more about the key things in life that hard work helps provide. Being a hardworking person is a core and deeply rewarding part of who we are and how we see ourselves.

   Hard work also invokes a set of important related individual-level values, including:

   • Agency
   • Autonomy
   • Independence
   • Freedom
   • Personal Responsibility
   • Love for Family

2 **Contribution:** Not only is hard work about self and family—the responsibility people feel to build a good life for ourselves and our loved ones—but it’s also about **community.** It’s about our sense of mutual responsibility to do our part, fulfill our commitments, and contribute to our local communities and our society. Because when we all do our part, contributing in the ways we can, we can have a fair shot at both a good life and a more thriving community for all of us.

   Just as hard work corresponds to a set of related individual values, contribution invokes a powerful range of community-based values. Among them:

   • Mutual Responsibility
   • Opportunity
   • Community
   • Fairness
The Narrative Architecture: Talking About Our Economy

Narrative is created through storytelling and messaging repeated over time. The five Winning Jobs Narrative elements below can be combined and layered to help build effective conversations with a broad range of audiences.

| 1 | Center and lead with working people — the heroes — so they hear that they are a priority |
| 2 | Value and support work to connect around deeply held shared values. |
| 3 | Situate working people as the engines of our economy — the logic model for our policies. |
| 4 | Position government in a supporting (not starring) role, so that we respect and center personal agency. |
| 5 | Relate policy to the broader economy and broad benefits — to remind people that we’re focused on the economy and shared prosperity. |

**Centering working people**

Centering working people means (1) naming them expressly and (2) making them the subject and focus of messaging that acknowledges their contributions and prioritizes their concerns and aspirations.

**MESSAGING EXAMPLE**

“Hardworking Americans are bringing us back from the pandemic — and Democrats are getting things done for them by creating good-paying jobs and lowering costs.”

**Value and support work to connect around deeply held shared values.**

Two key ways to do this: (1) Acknowledge and appreciate hard work and hardworking people, and focus on what working people should be able to expect in return: acknowledgement, appreciation, liveable wages, good benefits, support, opportunity, and respect; and (2) frame policies as being about supporting and empowering work and contribution.

**MESSAGING EXAMPLE**

“We need to build an economy that respects working people — with quality jobs and education, affordable healthcare and childcare — so people can work, take care of their families, and contribute to their communities.”

**Sitatuate working people as the engines of our economy — the logic model for our policies.**

We can elevate Middle-Out Economics (and inoculate against conservative “trickle-down” claims) via (1) simple, factual statements that working people are the engines of the economy, and (2) messaging that shows and illustrates the many ways working people drive our economy.

**MESSAGING EXAMPLE**

“We want to make sure working families, small businesses, and family farmers have the tools and opportunities they need to build a good life.”

**Position government in a supporting (not starring) role, so that we respect and center personal agency.**

Progressive policies are about empowering people and removing barriers that hold them back. Messaging that keeps government in a supporting role, rather than a leading one, affirms and centers the agency of working people.

**MESSAGING EXAMPLE**

“We have to do more to make sure working families, small businesses, and family farmers have the opportunities and tools they need to build a good life.”

**Relate policy to the broader economy and broad benefits — to remind people that we’re focused on the economy and shared prosperity.**

Stating that a policy makes good economic sense, and explaining how it benefits everyone, boosts support.

**MESSAGING EXAMPLE**

“Restoring the Child Tax Credit would give most American families $300 per child each month, which makes sound economic sense. This $300 per month will allow people to afford things like childcare so they can work, take care of their family, and do their part to keep growing our economy — which is good for everyone.”
In Focus: Framing & Language

**RESPECT MORE THAN “DIGNITY.”** Our qualitative research showed that “dignity of work,” a phrase many progressives use, might not land the way we intend with voters. And there’s evidence it can generate backlash. *Respect*, on the other hand, is more resonant, more active and also multi-directional — applying both to what working people give and what they expect in return.

**RESPECTING HARD WORK—AS OPPOSED TO “REWARDING” IT.** “Reward” connotes something bestowed and situates power in the hands of the bestower. *Respect* is something that is multi-directional and invokes reciprocity. As of this publication, we have not yet explored whether “reward” is heard negatively by voters, but we do know that respect is a concept that resonates strongly with voters across race and geography.

**QUALITY AND/OR GOOD-PAYING JOBS, NOT JUST “JOBS” (OR “MORE” JOBS).** When talking about policies that will generate job growth, remember to focus on the quality of those jobs. Voters want *better jobs*, not just more jobs. They want good-paying jobs that include benefits and work/life balance. Most of all, they want to be respected in their jobs.

**OPPORTUNITY AND TOOLS TO BUILD A GOOD LIFE—NOT “HELP.”** Progressive messaging can sometimes come across as progressives and/or government “helping” or “coming to the rescue.” But most people want to be supported and empowered, not “saved.”

In truth, the intent behind progressive policies is very much about empowerment, even if the language we sometimes use in messaging isn’t. And if we shift our messaging to be empowering as well, we are more persuasive with voters. A key way we can do that is to focus on the ways our policies are about ensuring that everyone has the *opportunity and tools to build a good life.*

*Opportunity* provides a way for us to talk about the things we’re doing to knock down barriers that people experience (and experience differently). *Tools* provides a way for us to talk about how we want to prioritize investments — like making basic needs such as childcare, healthcare, education, energy, and housing more affordable. Other metaphors like *platforms* and *foundations* can also help convey the sense that what we’re advocating keeps the agency with working people — we’re not doing “for” people, we’re empowering them.

**DEFINING VILLAINS BY WHAT THEY DO, NOT SIMPLY WHO THEY ARE.** Most voters do not reflexively dislike corporations and the wealthy, and they see the potential for both to be positive contributors. So when talking about economic bad actors, like greedy billionaires and corporations that don’t pay the taxes they owe, don’t assume that voters will oppose them simply because they’re rich and powerful. Instead, be specific about actions they take that hurt working people, our communities, and our economy.

**BE CAREFUL WITH VICTIM LANGUAGE.** The Winning Jobs Narrative is rooted the power of working people as a collective economic force. Language that diminishes that power undercuts the narrative.

**BE CAREFUL TO AVOID OVER-SELLING PROGRESS.** Voters need to be aware of the impact of progressive economic policies, especially as we recover from the pandemic. But it’s also true that working people need to feel seen, appreciated, and recognized for the ways in which their contributions are driving economic progress with support from progressive policies.