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Catching the Blues

*Blue-Collar Workers and the
Fading American Dream*



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Introduction

The American Dream is a deeply-rooted and enduring part of the American psyche. Though the term was first coined in 1931 as a marketing push to bring the country together in the face of the Great Depression, the ideals that embody the American Dream drew people to the country even before its founding. Freedom and the possibility to build a good life from the ground up continue to be the driving force for many Americans, 250 years later.

The American Dream was not meant for any specific class or group of people. But one could easily argue that it was used as a guiding light for the working class in particular – as an assurance that it was possible to move up the social ladder, no matter a person's origins, education, financial background, race, or gender.

Today, the American Dream remains relevant, but the context and circumstances in which Americans pursue it have changed. As the world's wealthiest nation and a global superpower, the United States has become a place of contradictions, where many citizens cannot afford basic necessities, much less achieve the intergenerational promise of building a better life for their children.

This has led to a deep dissatisfaction within American society, as people no longer feel that hard work is the key to getting ahead and they are no longer promised a better future. President Donald Trump was one of the first political figures to recognize this development and take advantage of that dissatisfaction, speaking to a growing frustration that the American Dream and its promises are no longer attainable for most Americans.

As progressives, we have yet to develop an emotionally resonant solution to the problem Trump has brought to the forefront. The imagery of the American Dream is politically powerful and should not be abandoned. Instead, we should identify policies and political messaging strategies that promise to bring the American Dream back into reach for Americans.

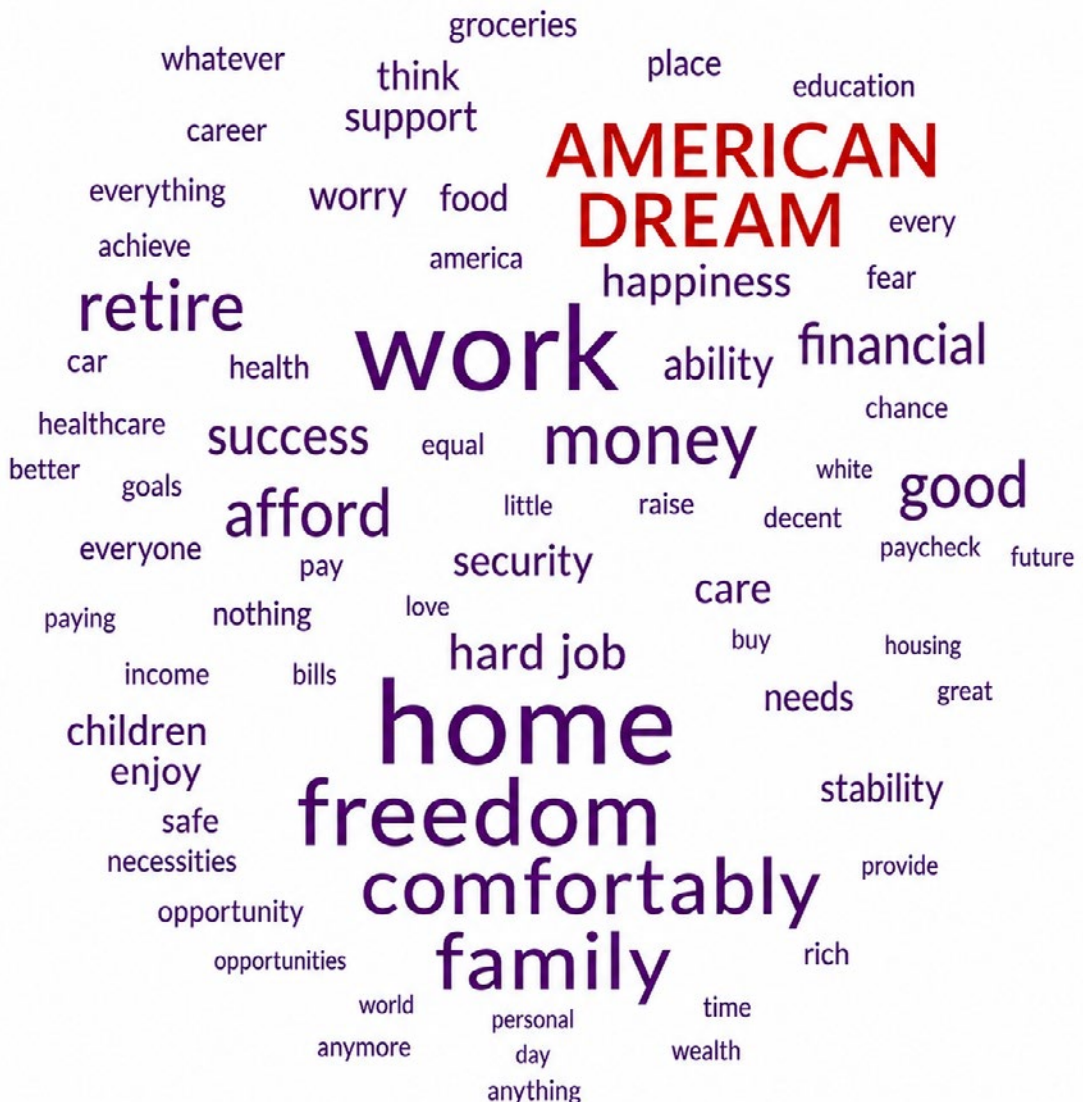
Our survey sought to identify key pillars of the current dissatisfaction specifically among blue-collar workers. Blue-collar workers – as a previously Democratic and social democratic constituency – are a bellwether and early indicator of how themes, messages, and approaches resonate with the broader American public. Can these workers make ends meet? How do they feel about the role of the state in their lives? Do they trust the political decision-making process? Do they feel that their interests are being taken into consideration? And what about the distribution of wealth and evidence of corruption?

When people were asked the open question of what the American dream means to them, many responses were bleak: they presented a shrunken down version of the American Dream, like “being able to pay my bills” or “being able to feed, clothe, and shelter myself and my family.” Many were even more overtly negative, saying that the term meant “nothing,” that it was “a fantasy” or “dead.” However, there were glimpses of hope, as ideological aspects of the dream continue to inspire Americans to work hard, drive innovation, and attempt to build a better future for themselves and their children (see Figure 1).

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) regional office for the US and Canada wanted to know whether

This poll seeks to lay the groundwork for understanding which of those challenges are the most pressing, which aspects of the American Dream still resonate, and where there are openings for progressives to start building better messages and policies.

Figure 1



Main Themes

Economic anxiety and insecurity

250 years in, the concept of the American dream continues to be an aspirational idea among blue-collar workers, albeit significantly shrunk in size and reduced not only to tangible components, but to a primary focus on affording basic necessities. In particular, the intergenerational aspect of the American Dream feels unattainable to most blue-collar and young Americans, with 3 in 5 voters saying they do not believe that the next generation will be better off than their parents' generation (see Figure 2).

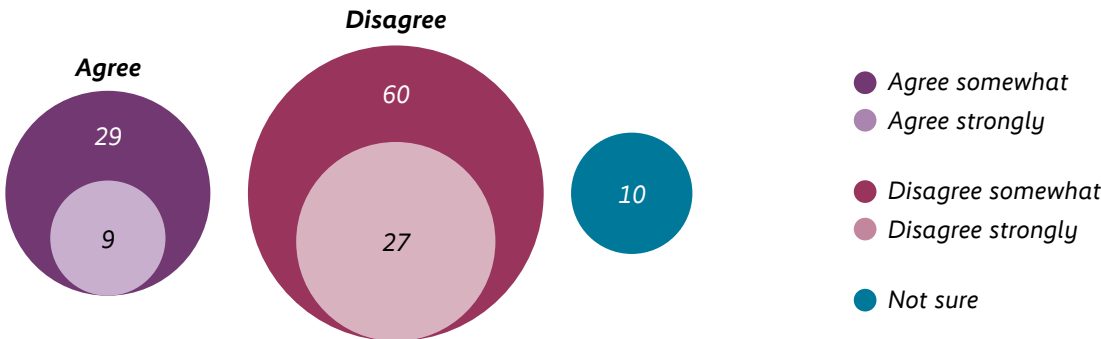
Our poll illustrated just how deep this economic anxiety and insecurity runs among blue-collar workers – a finding that echoes years of polls showing that a deep and enduring economic pessimism has taken root among Americans. Gallup's [Economic Confidence Index](#), which measures Americans' assessment of current economic conditions, has by and large been in the negative since

the beginning of the COVID pandemic, rising into the positive only twice since March 2020. Our findings confirm that economic anxiety and insecurity have become entrenched in the psyche of the American public.

This sense of economic anxiety and insecurity has voters feeling stuck. Just over half of surveyed voters say they can afford basic necessities (see Figure 4), and most voters (two in three) do not feel like they can make enough money to get ahead (see Figure 5) – unsurprising, given that more than half of surveyed voters feel like they are barely getting by. In an open-ended question in our survey, focused on what the American Dream means to them, responses focus on living “paycheck to paycheck” and “making more than enough to survive,” conceding ground to the tangible aspects of the American Dream rather than ideological aims such as freedom, safety, equal opportunity, and achievement through hard work (see Figure 3).

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “I believe that the younger generation of Americans coming up today will be better off overall than their parents’ generation.”

Figure 2



All Figures in %

What does the American Dream mean to you, in a few words or sentences?
(Themes and Categories, in %)

Figure 3

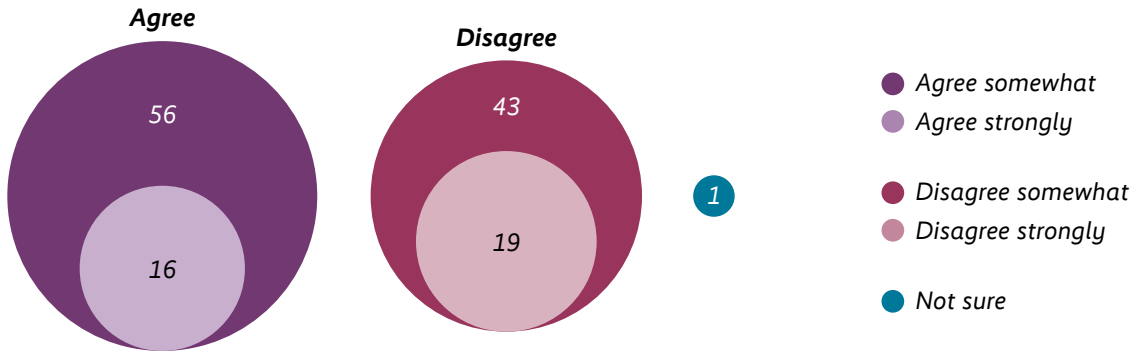


Reinforcing this feeling of not being able to get ahead in their day-to-day lives, only three in ten voters surveyed feel they are making (or have made) enough money to retire

securely in the US, while more than two-thirds of voters surveyed do not feel they are making (or have made) enough money to do so (See Figure 6).

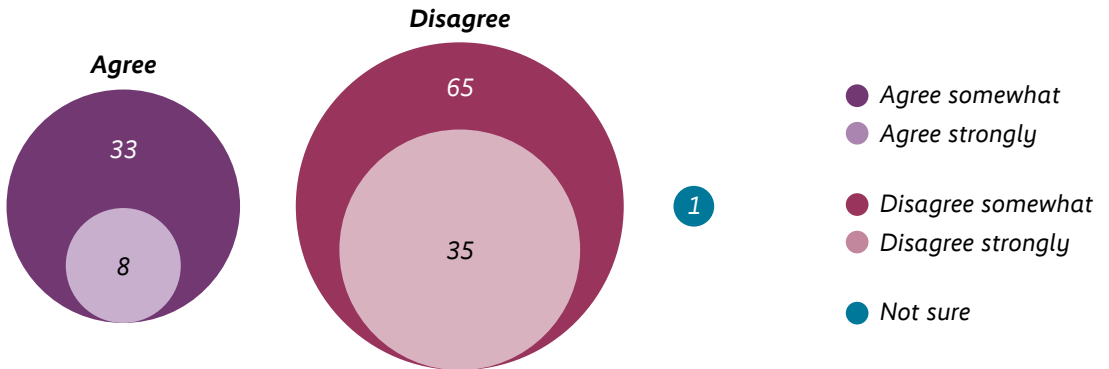
Do you feel that you make enough, or have made enough, money to afford basic necessities in this country? (in %)

Figure 4



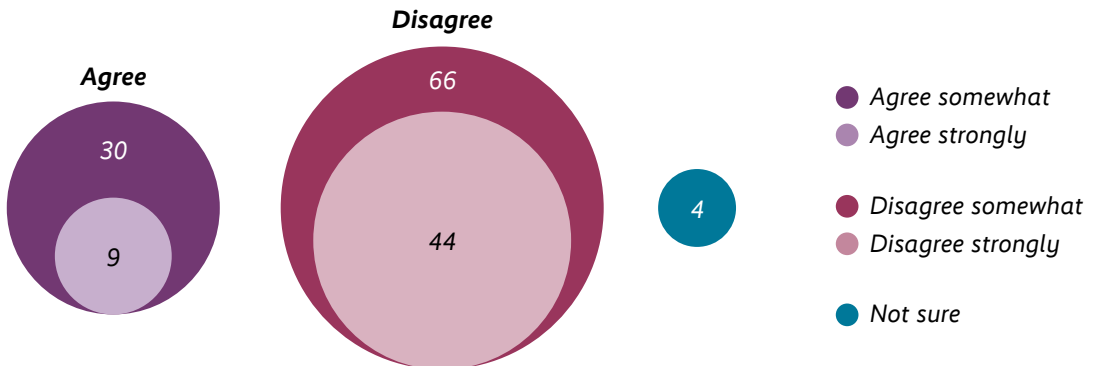
Do you feel that you make enough, or have made enough, money to get ahead in this country? (in %)

Figure 5



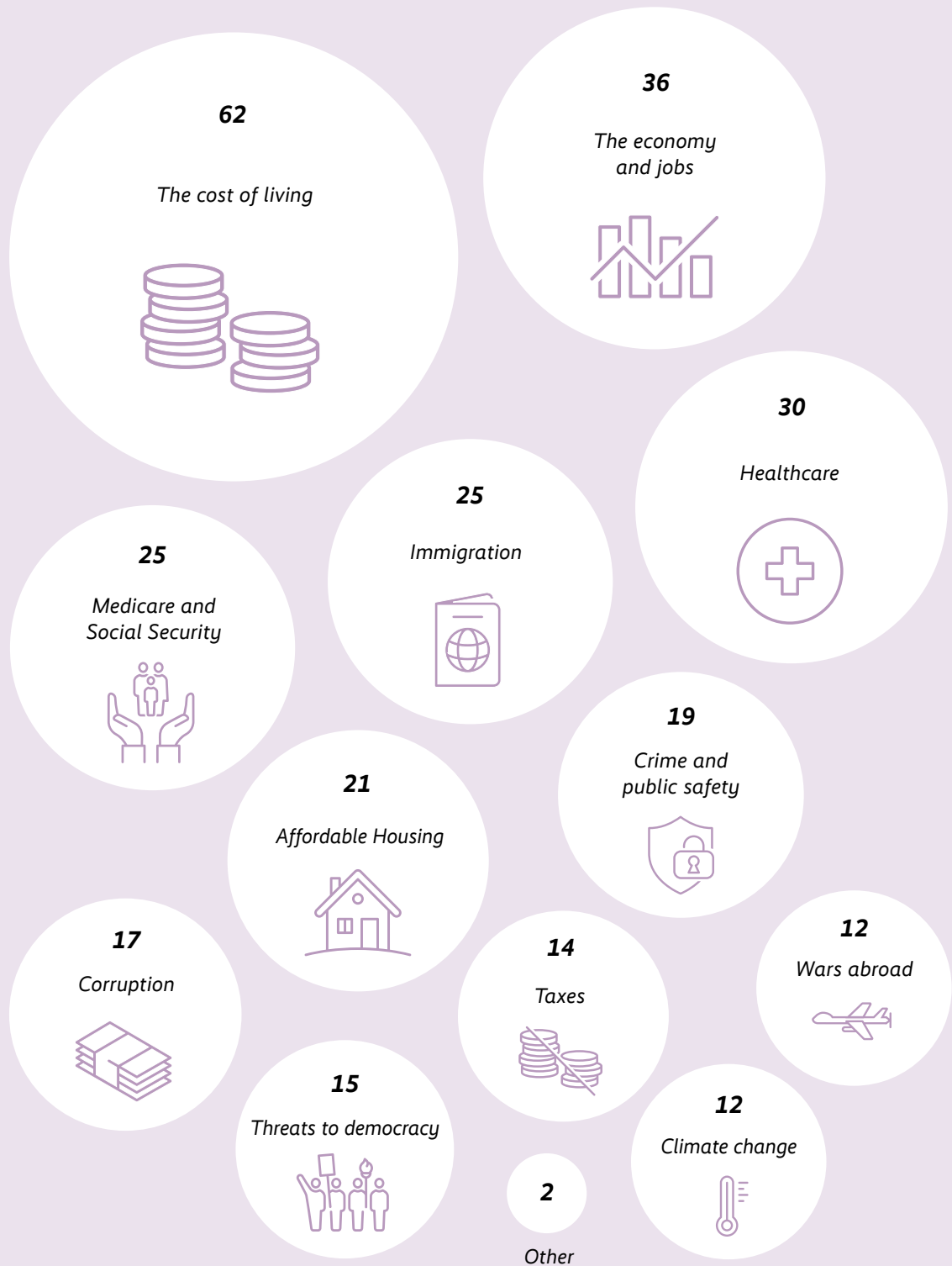
Do you feel that you make enough, or have made enough, money to retire securely in this country? (in %)

Figure 6



What changes in American society are you most concerned or worried about?
(% of respondents mentioning/selecting)

Figure 7



Voters feel that the ground is moving under their feet now, with society evolving rapidly and a number of worrying changes moving to the fore, including a rising cost of living, higher inflation and taxes, AI and technology, and growing wealth inequality. They feel they are looking towards an uncertain future, with no guarantee of stability or security in their old age – a fear shared across the aisle, by both Republicans and Democrats.

Our findings on the most important issues and problems cited by respondents underline this feeling of economic insecurity and anxiety – the cost of living is by far the most important issue for working class voters, outstripping the second-most important issue, the economy and jobs, by more than 25 percentage points (see Figure 7).

The American Dream has become more about affording basic necessities like food, fuel, and monthly utilities, rendering the original concept of the American Dream outdated for Independents and Democrats. Republicans are more likely to still believe the American Dream is achievable, which is likely an expression of their support of Trump's vision for America.

This paints a stark picture. Many blue-collar voters feel that they are barely scraping by, and even getting left behind economically. Worries about sim-

ply getting by have eclipsed the pursuit of the optimistic, forward-looking American Dream.

Unfairness and corruption

Based on our survey results, the issues of unfairness and corruption are deeply intertwined and stand out as issues that a majority of voters are concerned about. Democrats and Independents have stronger feelings on these issues, but even among self-identified Republicans, unfairness and corruption in our system are of major significance.

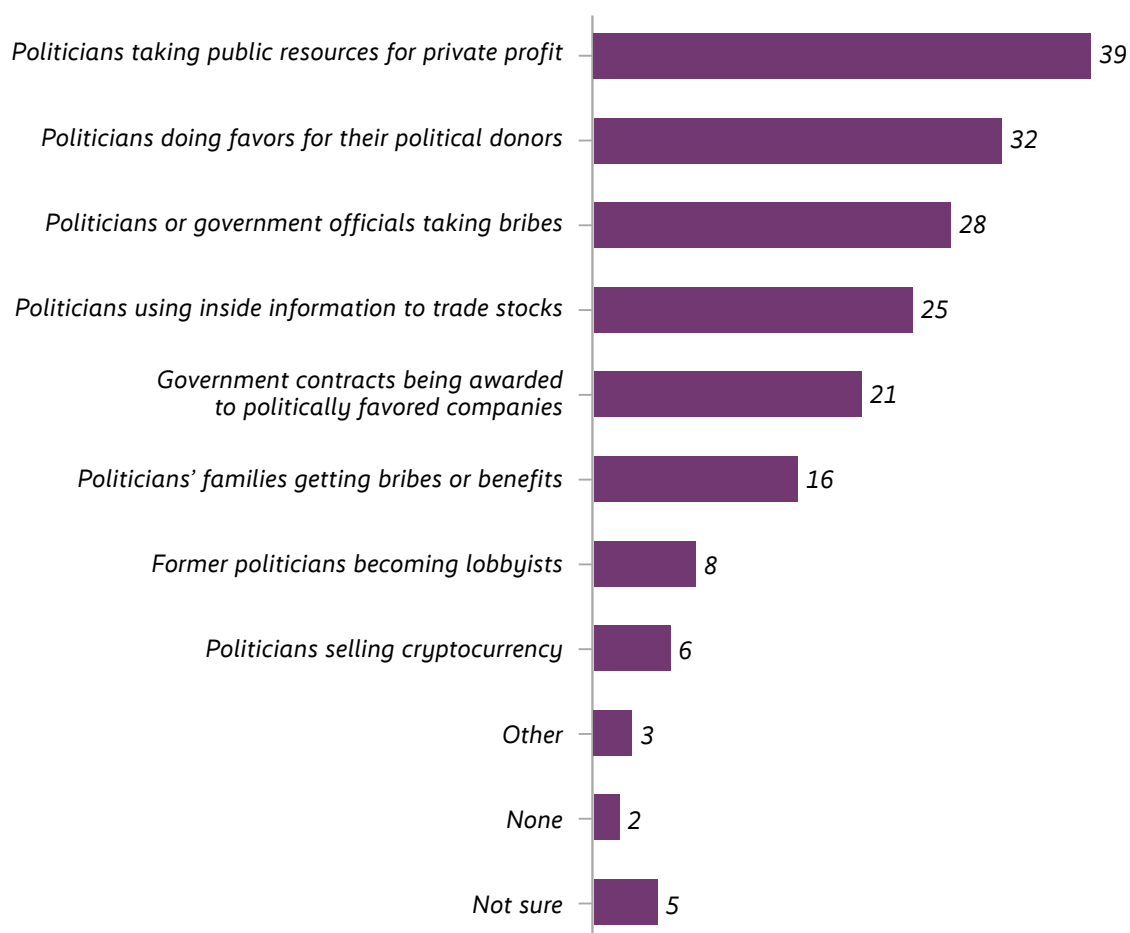
On wealth distribution, 7 in 10 voters say wealth is unfairly distributed (see Figure 8), with nearly half saying it is very unfairly distributed.

When asked whether the government has an obligation to address income inequality, 69% agree. The vast majority of Democrats and Independents agree with this statement, while slightly less than half of Republicans agree. However, the disparity across the aisle is much smaller when voters were asked whether the government has an obligation to ensure a secure retirement, with 78% of voters generally agreeing – including 69% of Republicans. This indicates that, contrary to popular belief, there is an opportunity for Democrats to campaign on more government action to provide economic security, and potentially win over Independents by doing so.

How fairly do you feel that wealth is distributed in the United States? (in %)

Figure 8





In fact, looking at [Gallup polling from 2016 and 2022](#) compared to our polling, our survey indicates an increasing appetite from voters for wealth redistribution, and a growing sense that wealth is not distributed fairly in American society. In polling by Gallup in 2016, 59% of respondents said wealth should be more evenly distributed, while 34% said wealth distribution was fair. Our survey shows that the gap has widened in the intervening decade, at least among blue-collar workers, with 70% of respondents believing that wealth is distributed unfairly. Polling in 2022 also showed that 52% of respondents believed the government should redistribute wealth via heavy taxes on the rich, with 47% disagreeing.

Though the question in our poll is worded differently, we found more appetite among blue-collar voters today for government intervention.

A huge majority of respondents expressed concern about political corruption – nearly nine out of ten respondents, with 62% expressing great concern. Notably, while a larger share of Independents and Democrats are very concerned, the baseline of concern was the same across all party IDs. The top corruption concerns are politicians profiting from public resources and politicians doing favors for their political donors, followed by bribes and insider stock trading by politicians (see Figure 9).

These concerns are polarized by party ID: Democrats expressed more concern about politicians doing favors for their political donors, while Republicans focused more on insider trading. One point that stood out: neither party has a strong edge on the issue of corruption. Democrats and Republicans are seen as equally ineffective at dealing with corruption, with the issue splitting along partisan lines. A majority of Independents says neither party deals well with corruption.

On top of these issues, neither party is trusted to work in the interest of the working class, and 63 % of respondents do not feel represented by political leaders or Congressional representatives. Taking these issues together, it is clear that blue-collar workers are upset with both the economic and political systems, which they see as serving a small group of wealthy or corrupt elites. There is a strong populist orientation among the working class, who feel that they are on the outside of the system looking in. Working-class Americans view politicians, wealthy corporations, and the “top 1 %” in an especially negative light.

If voters felt like they were getting ahead economically, they might be less resentful. However, voters see the rigged political system and economic system as one, and their cynicism about politicians and corruption has only intensified. Politicians, in contrast, tend to treat these issues as separate and message accordingly. There seems to be a real

opening for Democrats to win over voters by talking about economic and political reform together, while also advocating for a more involved government approach, taking on corruption while addressing income inequality and securing retirement.

The role of government

Periods of economic and political crisis in the US have historically been inflection points that have allowed the government to take an active role in creating or expanding the social safety net. Most prominent are the New Deal legislation of the 1930s, in response to the Great Depression, and the “Great Society” legislation of the 1960s, to address poverty and racial disparities. Our survey responses indicate that working class voters today perceive their current economic situation as a similar inflection point that demands more muscular government action. Almost 7 out of 10 working class voters say that the government has an obligation to address income inequality (see Figure 10) and among younger Americans, almost 8 out of 10 share this view.

This demand is consistent with the widening income gap: According to [data](#) collected by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), income for the top 1% almost tripled (277 %) between 1979 and 2022, while the middle fifth of income earners saw a growth of merely 26 % in the same period.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “The government has an obligation to address income inequality in the United States.” (in %)

Figure 10

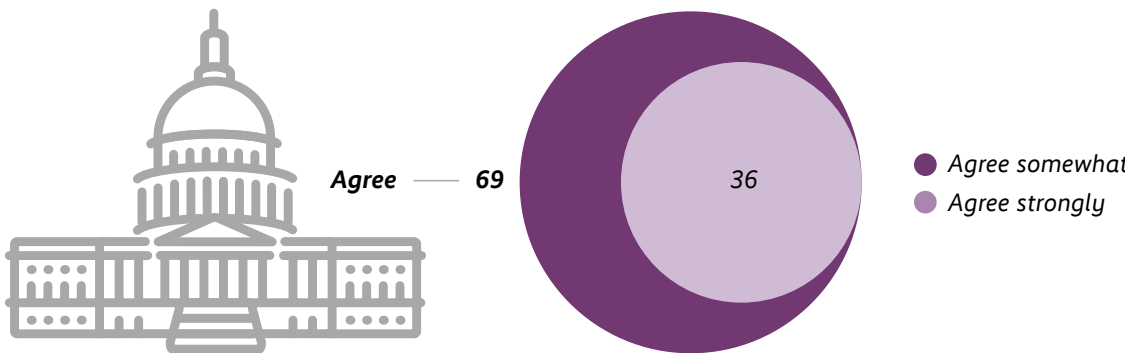
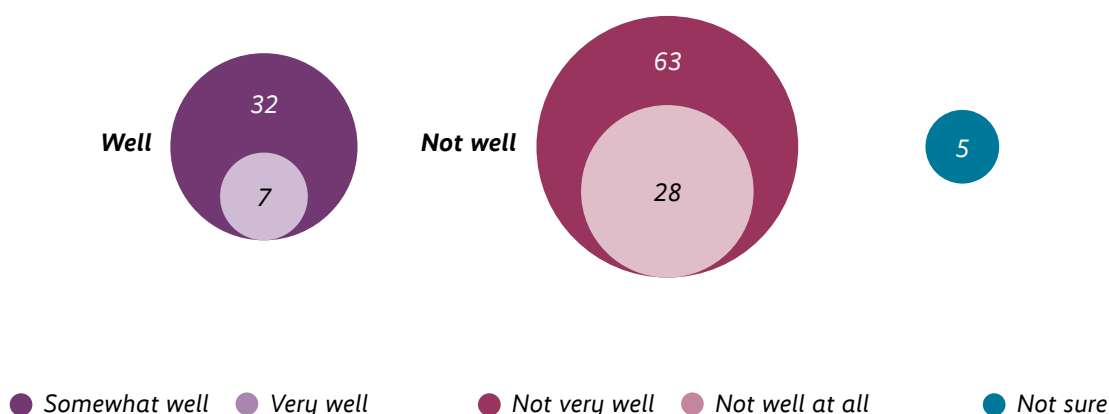


Figure 11

When you think about yourself and people who are in a similar class – they live and work at about the same level you do – how well do you think people like you are represented by your member of Congress? (in %)



As economists point out, the current affordability crisis is based on structural and growing inequality. The economic populism of progressive Democrats is clearly tapping into a potent and mobilizing issue, as blue-collar workers are getting a smaller share of the pie. This populism is not as radical as Republicans want voters to believe, and restores a fairly traditional understanding of the role of government: to guarantee a level economic playing field that serves as a pre-condition for accessing the American Dream.

The debate over the role of government is far from settled, and a large partisan gap still exists between Democrats/Independents and Republicans on the question of whether the government has an obligation to address income inequality. One exception is the question of retirement security, where an active government role is supported by larger majorities across the political spectrum. That explains why attacks on Social Security have proven to be a losing political strategy for Republicans in the past and why a focus on preserving retirement benefits continues to be good policy and politics for Democrats.

To summarize: Blue-collar Americans see a role for an active government in creating a level playing field. The anti-government ideology of Repub-

licans is less of a politically potent argument today. Democrats would do well to continue making the argument for a government that is not corrupt, but rather delivers an expansive economic agenda that restores access to the American Dream for working class Americans.

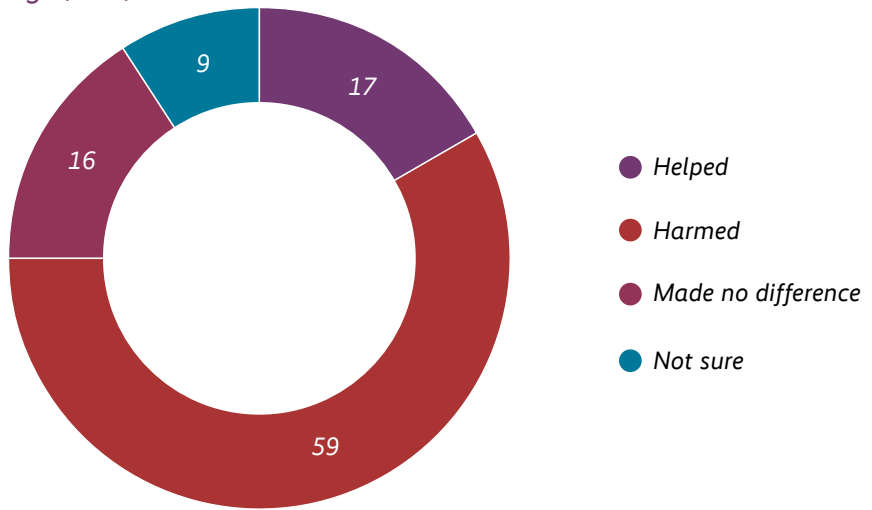
Trump disapproval and political alienation

Blue-collar voters do not approve of Trump's job performance – only one third say Trump is doing an excellent or good job; out of two-thirds who say he is doing just a fair job or a poor job, a majority say poor. Ratings are particularly bad among younger blue-collar voters, women, and independents – 83 percent of independents say he is doing a just fair or poor job, with only 15 percent saying he is doing an excellent or good job. Ratings are also poor among Black and Latino voters, which is concerning for Republicans moving forward, as much of Republican over-performance in the 2024 election relied on gains among the Latino population.

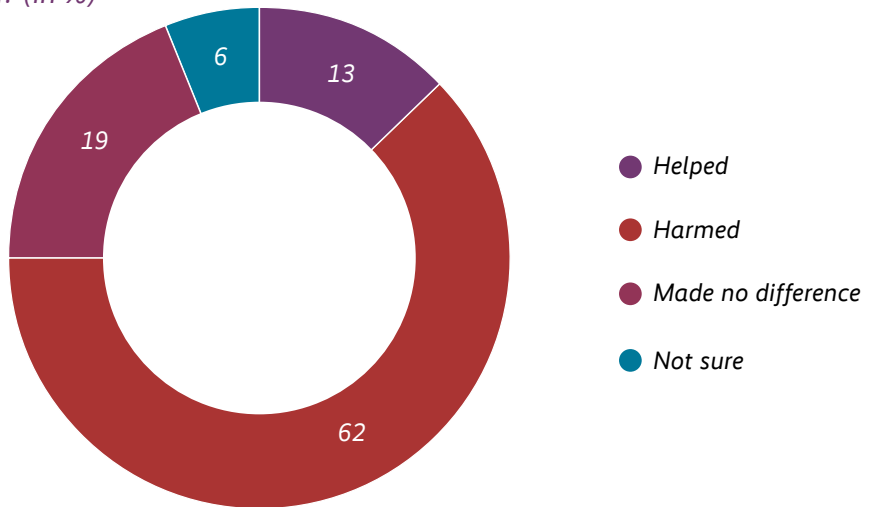
Ratings for Trump's job performance remain high among Republicans, with 69 percent giving him an excellent rating. However, 31 percent say

Figure 12

On a different topic, thinking about the Trump Administration's tariff policies, do you think they have helped, harmed, or made no difference to your local economy? (in %)



On a different topic, thinking about the Trump Administration's tariff policies, do you think they have helped, harmed, or made no difference to your family's economic situation? (in %)



he is doing only a fair or poor job, demonstrating deepening dissatisfaction with the president even among his base. Though this should in theory represent a pickup opportunity for Democrats, in practice, it is unlikely that Democrats will be able to convert these Republican voters. This idea is reinforced by the fact that in our polling, neither major party is trusted, with nearly two thirds of voters feeling unrepresented by

their members of Congress and political leaders. Neither party performs well when voters are asked whether the party is acting in the interests of working class and/or families like yours (see Figure 11), though Democrats perform better by about a 7-point margin.

These findings reflect the deep distrust voters feel for establishment parties and American

Our survey also sheds light on issues for blue collar workers that are unifying across partisan divides. Voters across parties are concerned about the cost of living (Democrats 67%, Republicans 59%) and most Democrats and Republicans feel they do not make enough to get ahead or retire securely. As discussed, working-class Democrats (84%) and Republicans (69%) agree that the government has an obligation to ensure a secure retirement. Voters across party lines are concerned about the success of the next generation. The inter-generational aspect of the American dream – the idea that the younger generation of Americans will be better off than their parents' generation – is viewed with equal pessimism by both sides: only 30% of Democrats and 29% of Republicans believe this is still the case today.

Immigration and the question of whether America should be a Christian nation comprise major areas of partisan division among blue collar workers. Republicans solidly want to decrease the number of immigrants (70% decrease), whereas Democrats are split (18% increase, 23% decrease). Six in ten Republicans believe the US is harmed by immigration, whereas 73% of Democrats say the country benefits from it, and many more Republicans than Democrats assert that immigrants receive too many benefits (76% versus 19%).

Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to say the US is a Christian nation (82%) or should be a Christian nation (74%). A plurality of Democrats says the country is a Christian nation (47%), but six in ten think it shouldn't be. The idea that America was founded as a Christian nation is more important to Republicans than religious freedom (55% Christian nation, 39% religious freedom), while seven in ten Democrats strongly value religious freedom above the idea of America as a Christian nation (70% religious freedom, 21% Christian nation).

institutions at large. Voters no longer feel that they can see themselves or their interests reflected by the two main parties, the policies they represent or offer to the working class, or their candidates. In some ways, this has led to a vicious cycle – this lack of trust leads to an erosion in the effectiveness of institutions, which in turn engenders a further lack of trust, etc.

In terms of hot-button current issues, surveyed voters are strongly negative on Trump's Iran war and largely believe that the war has made their lives worse. The same is true of tariffs – working-class voters are against them, and the majority feel that they have harmed their local economy and their family's economic situation (see Figure 12).

Our polling also highlights the continued effectiveness of immigration as a wedge issue: a plurality of voters polled want the United States to take a decreased number of immigrants, but a slim majority believe that America benefits from immigration overall. A near-majority of the respondents side with the view that newly arrived immigrants receive too many benefits and take resources away from Americans. Overall, this results in a muddled-to-negative picture of how Americans view immigration, demonstrates that false narratives around the issue persist, and highlights that the issue will continue to crop up as a wedge issue that can be weaponized effectively.

Conclusion

Our survey results have illustrated that working-class Americans have come under fire economically, and have a difficult relationship with the American Dream. The American Dream remains an aspirational one, but has grown out of reach for a large number of blue-collar workers, in particular those under the age of 35, who have shifted their focus to making ends meet in what they perceive as an unaffordable environment.

Among our results are crucial – and surprising – findings that indicate that the Democratic Party is not taking advantage of certain issues many blue-collar Americans care about, regardless of party identification. In particular, the interest in government playing a role in securing retirement – traditionally a social democratic objective – is one that is supported by Democrats, Independents and Republicans, who all share concern about their long-term economic prospects and well-being. Distributing wealth more fairly is also an important issue among working-class Americans – a message already being utilized across a plethora of campaigns in the form of political communication around ‘affordability’ and taxing the top 1%. The topic of corruption is more complex, as neither party has a strong edge on the issue and is split heavily along partisan lines; Trump’s open corruption has done little to change perceptions that Democrats are less corrupt, or do a better job at tackling the issue.

The perception of the intergenerational aspect of the American Dream – allowing every new generation to be better off than their parents – has faded. Harnessing frustration about the unattainability of this core tenet of American identity may be the key to reviving the American Dream as a mobilizing political message heading into the midterm elections in November. It goes without saying that such a message must be accompanied by deliverables. The perceived corruption and unfairness among politicians,

and the fact that the majority of blue-collar Americans struggle to get by economically, requires rebuilding trust among voters and addressing their economic concerns practically.

Our data also provides insight into how the Republican Party might splinter into different issue-centered voter groups after the midterm elections. With President Donald Trump approaching his final two years in the Oval Office, the question of who will become the GOP’s presidential candidate for 2028 is not just political, but an ideological one. While Trump was able to run as an anti-establishment outsider and disruptor of the status quo, potential Republican contenders from within his administration will have a harder time doing so. The President presents a singular unifying force to rally conservatives of different convictions around him; his inner circle cannot proselytize voters with the same message while being part of the political establishment.

There is a clear opportunity for whomever blue-collar voters perceive as capable of addressing their economic concerns, anxiety about affording basic necessities, and being able to retire comfortably. With Trump’s disapproval rating soaring, the scant number of Republican decision-makers who have emerged as more critical of the President might be appealing to some conservative voters and Independents. With certain obvious candidates, such as Vice President JD Vance, our data suggests a message centered around a Christian faith-based nation has potential, although it remains unclear whether the issue will suffice to mobilize conservatives and Independents.

It is clear that both parties are struggling to win back trust among blue-collar voters. Addressing and resolving their main economic concerns may not only breathe new life into the American Dream, but also draw voters back to the ballot box in November.

A Note on Methodology

The polling firm Lake Research Partners designed and administered this survey, which was conducted online from May 4–7, 2026. The survey reached a total of 500 blue-collar likely voters in the United States plus an oversample of 100 blue-collar likely voters under age 35.

Blue-collar voters were defined as self-identified non-college-educated voters with a reported household income below \$150,000 per year.

The sample was stratified by gender, age, region, and race to reflect the demographic composition of likely voters. Where there were slight differences between our survey sample and the expected voting population, data were weighted accordingly. The full weighting explanation is in the data tables and crosstabs, which are published on our website.

In interpreting survey results, all sample surveys are subject to possible sampling error; that is, the results of a survey may differ from those which would be obtained if the entire population were interviewed. The size of the sampling error depends upon both the total number of respondents in the survey and the percentage distribution of responses to a particular question. For example, if 50 % of respondents answered “Yes” to a particular question, we can be 95 % confident that the true percentage will fall within 4.4 % of this percentage, or from 45.6 % to 54.4 %. As percentages get higher or lower (farther away from 50 %), the margin of error gets smaller, so if only 10 % of respondents answered “Yes” to a particular question, we can be 95 % confident that the true percentage will fall within 2.6 %, or from 7.4 % to 12.6 %. The table below represents the estimated sampling error for different percentage distributions of responses. Of course, the sampling error for sub-groups is greater.

Margin of Error for Different Percentage Distributions and Different Sample Sizes (95 % confidence)

Table 1

Percentages near									
Sample Size	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90
500	2.6	3.5	4.0	4.3	4.4	4.3	4.0	3.5	2.6
400	2.9	3.9	4.5	4.8	4.9	4.8	4.5	3.9	2.9
300	3.4	4.5	5.2	5.5	5.7	5.5	5.2	4.5	3.4
200	4.2	5.5	6.4	6.8	6.9	6.8	6.4	5.5	4.2
100	5.9	7.8	9.0	9.6	9.8	9.6	9.0	7.8	5.9

About the authors

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Lake Research Partners is a national public opinion and political strategy research firm founded by Celinda Lake in 1995.

Catching the Blues – Blue-Collar Workers and the Fading American Dream

At a moment when the distribution of wealth and evidence of corruption are testing the limits of American democracy and societal prosperity, we asked ourselves how relevant and attainable the American Dream remains 250 years after the nation's founding. This survey of blue-collar workers, in cooperation with Lake Research Partners, endeavors to answer that question.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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