

THE NEW AMERICAN WORKING CLASS

Jack Sorock | The Frontier Lab Report | September 2018

THE FRONTIER LAB

In both colonies the communistic experiments were failures.

Angry at the lazy men in Jamestown who idled their time away and yet expected regular meals, Captain John Smith issued a manifesto: "Everyone that gathereth not every day as much as I do, the next day shall be set beyond the river and forever banished from the fort and live there or starve."

Even this terrible threat did not bring a change in production.

Not until each man was given a plot of his own to till, not until each gathered the fruits of his own labor, did the colony prosper.

— Charles A. Beard

History of the United States

Introduction

On the surface, the relationship between Americans and their work would seem to be shaped by the “collar divide.” That is, the color of your collar could predict who you were: your demographics, your attitudes, and your politics. This utterly fails to provide a meaningful construct for understanding how work relates to Americans or the more powerful story of connection that lies beneath the surface of the story of how we occupy our time.

The election of President Donald Trump has prompted a reevaluation of the presumptions about the utility of the “collar divide” in today’s political and cultural environment.

While a “collar” indicates the *type* of work being done, examining the attitudes behind the meaning of work offers more salient insights into how Americans’ work relates to their view of themselves, their country, and to each other.

Behavioral science provides a pathway to the unchangeable bedrock that produces our attitudes, interests, and opinions: our values. As The Frontier Lab’s research on work reveals, the prism of work not only connects Americans across surface-level divides, but also identifies a new frontier for sowing demand for the principles of freedom. It also identifies a corollary grouping of Americans for whom work fails to carry this type of meaning, who are rejecting work’s pathways to empowerment, connection, and fulfillment: the Gleaners.

Without understanding how work functions as a uniter *and a divider*, therefore, we are missing a story of the new American characters that are emerging and that will define America’s future.

Key Values Findings

The Frontier Lab’s study on the nature of work in America today revealed that, for those who relate positively to their work, it accomplishes this:

1. Affirmation: Work is exhilarating and empowering
2. Mental Health: Work is part of our natural design
3. Moral Self-Image: Work is a way to measure our own substance and that of others
4. Family: Work connects us to generations past, present, and future

In stark contrast with those who seek to avoid work – who view it either as a necessary evil or a true obstacle to satisfaction in life, the New American Working Class finds work restorative, energizing, and meaningful. Work is “part of our natural design,” an oasis of connection, a place of challenge that improved our mental health, rather than detracted from it.

For the New American Working Class, work is not the enemy of rest, *it is rest*. Work provides independence, satisfaction, stimulation, and being in harmony with one’s innate design. It facilitates community. It allows the empowerment of being able to serve others and to give of one’s resources.

Methodology

In order to obtain these insights, The Frontier Lab utilized the behavioral science foundations of the means-end value standard, which establishes a hierarchy of meaning in how people relate to products, issues, or concepts.

The Values Stage (Stage 1) of the research identified the values of a “brand champion” of work – someone who exhibits “high-intensity” for the meaning of work in their life. The Frontier Lab performed 32, 45- to 60-minute “Laddering” interviews (30 hours) based on the Means-End Theory via telephone to uncover these deeply held core values that explain their connection to work.

Following the preparation of individual ladders for each respondent, a “cluster analysis” was performed to determine if links in discrete groups of ladders of individual respondents existed or whether the respondents were homogeneous. Based on this cluster analysis and a study of the individual ladders, a hierarchical value map was then formulated reflecting the shared attributes/consequences/values.

Quantitative Testing (Stage 2) provided the means to test, refine and further explore those findings in a quantitative survey instrument with a larger audience. We collected data from 201 panel survey responses regarding their political preferences and demographic attributes. In addition, specific questions were asked to glean certain lifestyle traits and personal views.

For the purposes of this research, we defined work as an occupation held in the present or past, which could include paid labor or work within the confines of the home (such as housework or caregiving). Work could be part-time or full-time; those we spoke with who are currently retired reflected on work in the past. The traditional definition of working class may refer to the 85 percent of Americans today who are in production and non-supervisory positions.¹

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/11/06/heres-the-best-part-of-the-jobs-report-commentary.html>

The New American Working Class: Values

The story may not have been put into words, but many Americans instinctively feel a sense of connection with seemingly dissimilar people, simply through a common connection to the concept of work. Both those whose work has a clearly defined social impact, such as a nurse or doctor or teacher, and those for whom work was more task-oriented, like cashiers or corporate workers, had common ways of positively viewing work. This positive view resulted in a sense of well-being and psychological sustenance associated not with their pocketbook but with the way they were spending a more precious commodity: time.

There are four key aspects of work's meaning that unite the members of the New American Working Class across demographic differences:

- Mental Health
- Affirmation
- Moral Self-Image
- Family

Mental Health

The conventional view of work is that it is a source of stress and conflict. Not so with the New American Working Class, who found that work resonates with their natural design. "We were made to work," and that context alone made work feel restorative and as though it was in harmony a "good" way to spend our time.

The sense of connection begets a healthy mental state, for the New American Working Class: "You feel better at the end of the day," said Cynthia. Another said, "it feels good to work," and that it provides a "family" atmosphere. Given the amount of time spent working together, communities develop that provide relationship and security. Against a broader societal context of strained community, work is taking on a greater role in providing a sense of mooring and community; others said it make them feel a "complete person."

Beyond the connection with others and with a natural design, work avoids the strain of boredom. In avoiding mundanity, either because work duties constantly demand attention or because the work itself is interesting and entertaining, time is not wasted but applied to a greater purpose.

In fact, the New American Working Class dreads *dreading* work. As Laura said, it “battles any dreaded life of leisure.” Another, Steven, a retired man who know drives a shuttle, said “even though I’m retired, I need to get out of the house.”

The stimulation of work also provides challenges – and with them, a source of real, felt accomplishment. Within the structured context of work, individuals told us they could take risks and pursue goals. When their skill set improves and they achieve minor wins along the way, they feel energized knowing they will be able to harness their potential and exploit new, bigger opportunities in the future. Ultimately, they have a sense of ease, a quiet confidence knowing they have a way to measure their progress through life as being on a positive trajectory. As Jose put it, he wakes up each morning with the “inner drive to succeed,” feeling “fulfilled” when his head hits the pillow.

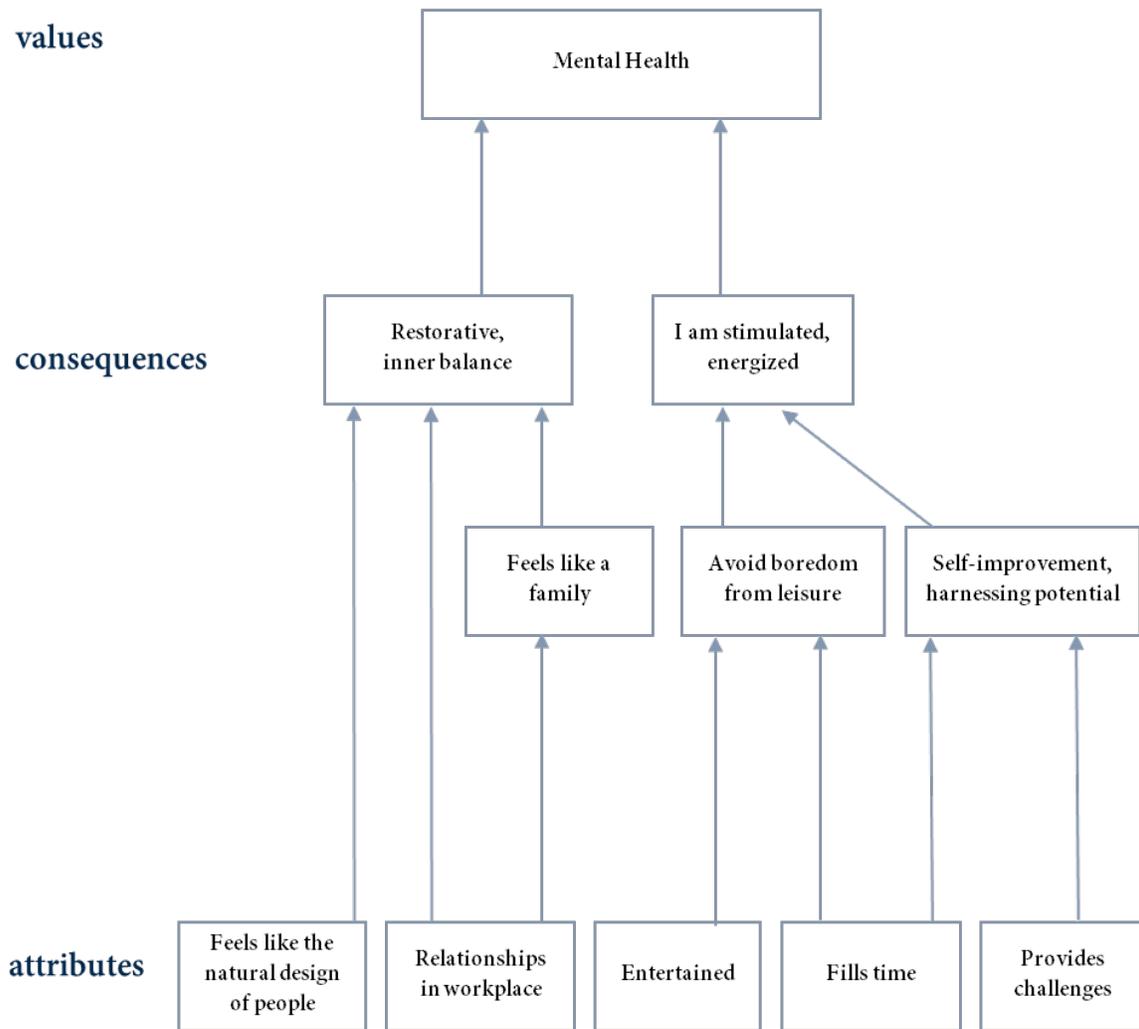


Figure 1 - Hierarchical Value Map of Mental Health Value

Affirms Choices Made

As work takes up more of our time, and especially as women find themselves working longer hours, the New American Working class said they sought indications that their investments in education, time, and sacrifices made in other ways, had been worth it.

When they found recognition at work, or overcame challenges, whether they be personal or recognized by their work community, they felt as though these sacrifices were investments, and therefore affirmed their past choices rather than undermined them.

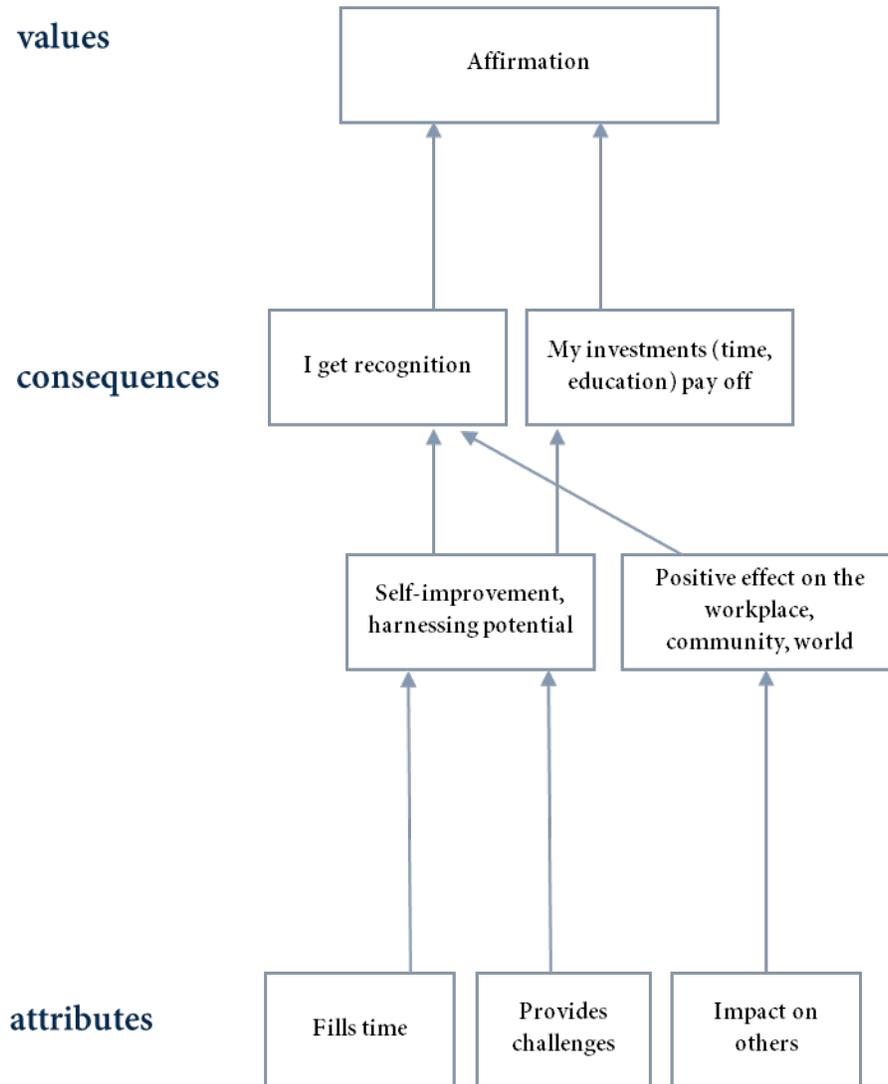


Figure 2 - Hierarchical Value Map of Affirmation Value

Work affirms past choices beyond sacrifices made; many were pleased to reflect that their work served a broader societal goal and was having a positive effect on the world. Even those with less of a concrete social impact felt as though their daily efforts made someone's day better in some small way. Research participant Christopher said that even selling one person the right mattress each day meant doing "what needs to be done," and that his "work made a difference."

Serving others in ways large and small meant that their time had impact beyond their own self, and this sense of broader impact was a foundational aspect to the wisdom of their choices.

For the New American Working Class, this focus on impact outside of themselves did impart more stress on finding work either obviously vocational, or proving to themselves that work is meaningful. The ambition for self-improvement, discussed under the Mental Health section above, was also cause for seeking approval from colleagues and superiors, namely that they were "exceeding company goals" and "keeping up with competition," as Stacey said. Building skill sets and overcoming challenges also confirmed with the New American Working Class that their education and other investments affirmed the worth of their work as having been worth all investments made thus far.

Moral Self-Image

Work in and of itself is a "good thing," instilling the New American Working Class with a basis for self-respect. Work becomes a standard, a measure by which they are able to evaluate their own worth, their own moral standing — both against their own ideal expectations and those around them. As David said about work, "it gives me a set of core values." This moral self-image articulated through this research — a positive feeling of the moral traits one possesses — provides a framework for what the New American Working Class values and hold sacred in their lives. Being able to refer back to a measure of what makes a person worthy of respect provides these workers stability in a context of shifting moralities and hazy standards.

Family expectations passed down through the generations, or even the broader societal influences in their networks, were one way to instill an inherent dignity to the idea of working for many. They can instill in their children the value of work through their own example, with the goal of ensuring one's own status as a worthy torchbearer for the family's values. For example, Elias, who works in the healthcare technology sector and sees himself as "responsible for maintaining people's health," wants to show his children how "doing something positive is important." He does this ultimately so he can regard himself as good father, and a good parent.

For others, a strong work ethic is a cultural (and not necessarily familial) value that has spanned generations to get us to where we are now as a country and the world-at-large. They see their

participation in this long history of humanity as an affirmation of their proper place in our society. Joseph, for example, noted that it's a fact of life that "you have to work" and felt a sense of respect for others with a similar work ethic; he was happy to report that he is just "like the majority of the population."

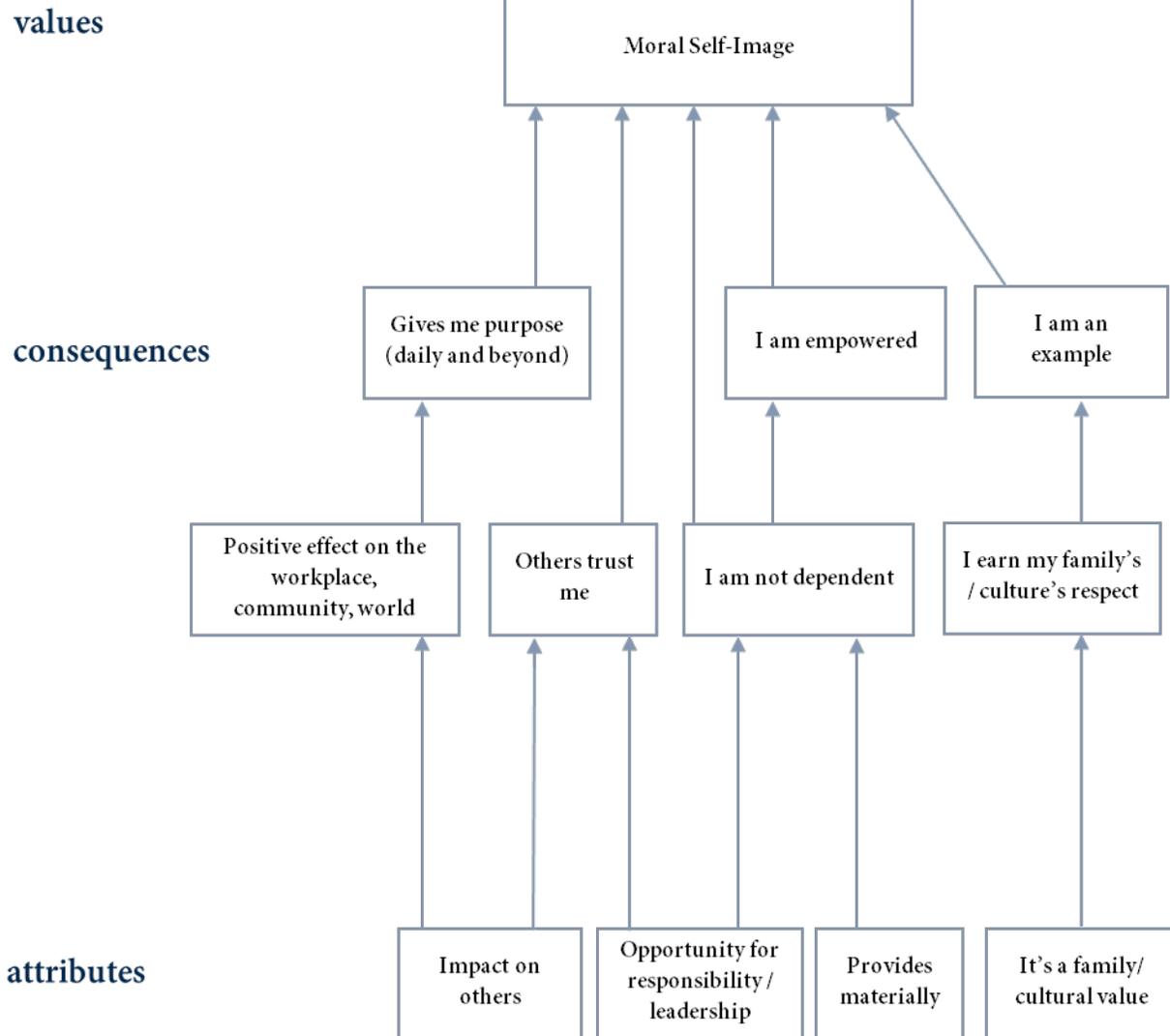


Figure 3 - Hierarchical Value Map of Moral Self-Image Value

Work also provides opportunities to practice personal responsibility and leadership in the workplace, allowing the New American Working Class' to shun dependence and any undue marginalization of their autonomy. Similarly, the material benefits rewarded as the fruits of labor provide additional self-sufficiency, precluding the need to seek outside sources of revenue – namely, from the state -- to fund one's own existence. This sense of sovereignty imbued by work gives these workers a sense of

confidence and control over their present and future selves that was, in itself, something good in their eyes. On a deeper level, the New American Working Class relished the freedom to be true to one's self and not defined by others.

Family

Finally, work allows the New American Working Class to serve the past and the future through family. Through work, family culture is maintained and strengthened by acting in ways similar to, and that would be appreciated by, past family members. It also allowed family members to demonstrate to the next generation how that culture relates to work, developing those traits and the hope of the culture continuing on. Developing self-reliance, overcoming challenges, and making wise choices also earns your family (or culture's) respect.

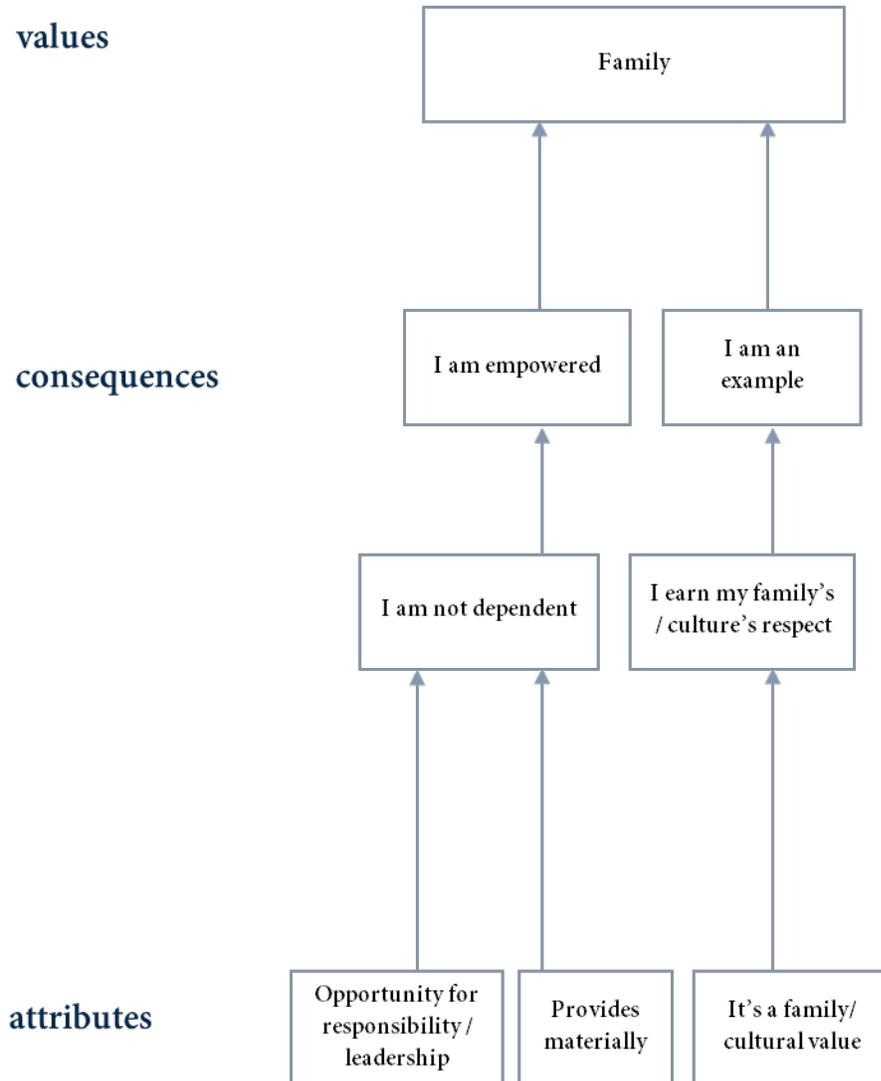


Figure 4 - Hierarchical Value Map of Family Value

The New American Working Class also appreciated that work allowed them to transmit values and ethics between generations. Each family's success depends on the worker's ability to navigate this process with self-determination and independence in their work. Without that freedom, the family would be susceptible to the wavering morays and the influence of external forces that might seek to destroy the family unit with time.

Who is (*and isn't*) the New American Working Class?

In terms of beliefs and attitudes, we found five significant variables that describe the New American Working Class and differentiate them from the Gleaners, the cohort of Americans for whom work is not deeply meaningful:²

- Political Affiliation
- Wealth and the Wealthy
- Automation and Universal Basic Income
- Children and Education
- Belief in God

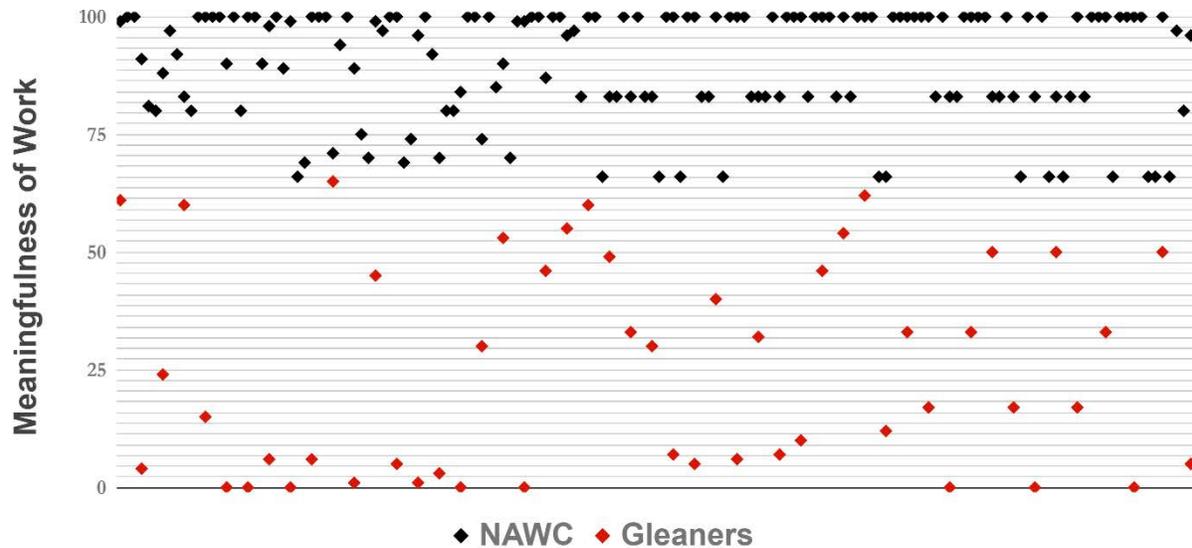


Figure 5

Political Affiliation

Members of the New American Working Class comprised a more Republican-heavy, partisan mix than the more Independent-leaning Gleaners. That said, both groups shared equally among Democrat identification - approximately three in 10. A large plurality of the NAWC identified as Republican – 43

² The identified values of the New American Working Class formed the basis for developing a prototype description of this group by testing these insights in a survey instrument of 201 American workers. This survey data identified meaningful distinctions between this group and those who do not share their connection to work, referred to as the Gleaners. In order to ascertain the group to which a respondent belonged, we asked the question, “On a scale from 0 (not at all important or significant) to 100 (extremely important and significant), how important is it to you to do some type of work, be it in the home or outside the home?” Respondents answering 66 out of 100 or above belong to the New American Working Class, and respondents answering 65 or below belong to the Gleaners Group. To identify distinguishing contours of the New American Class, we therefore contrasted characteristics of this group with those for whom work was largely negative -- the Gleaners.

percent – while only 18 percent of Gleaners did the same. The remaining 50 percent of Gleaners identified as Independents, nearly double the 28 percent of NAWC Independents.

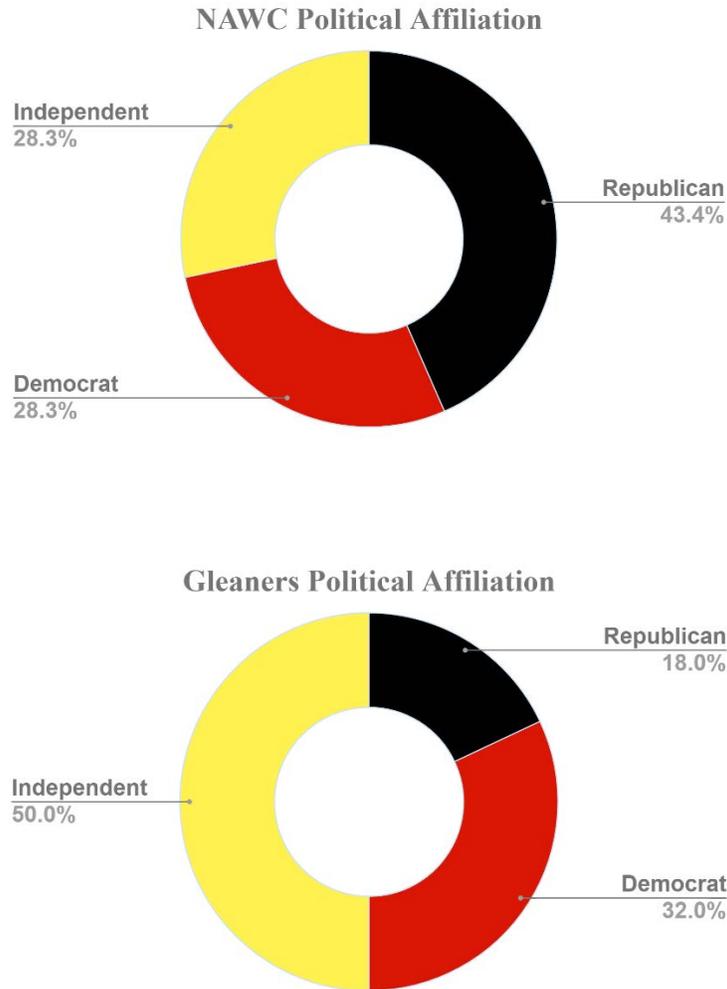


Figure 6

NAWC respondents expressed support for Trump by a 14 percent margin (55 percent to 41 percent), which is accounted for not only with near universal support from Republicans but with 40 percent approval among Independents. On the other hand, nearly two-thirds of Gleaners hold an unfavorable opinion of Donald Trump.

A juxtaposition of President Trump to former President George W. Bush puts in perspective how contentious the current political climate is. Two out of every three Gleaners stated they had more in common with Bush than with Trump, closely tracking their overall disapproval of Trump of 64 percent. The NAWC was more evenly split between Trump and Bush with 53 percent feeling more aligned with Trump, also mirroring the NAWC’s overall Trump approval rating of 55 percent.

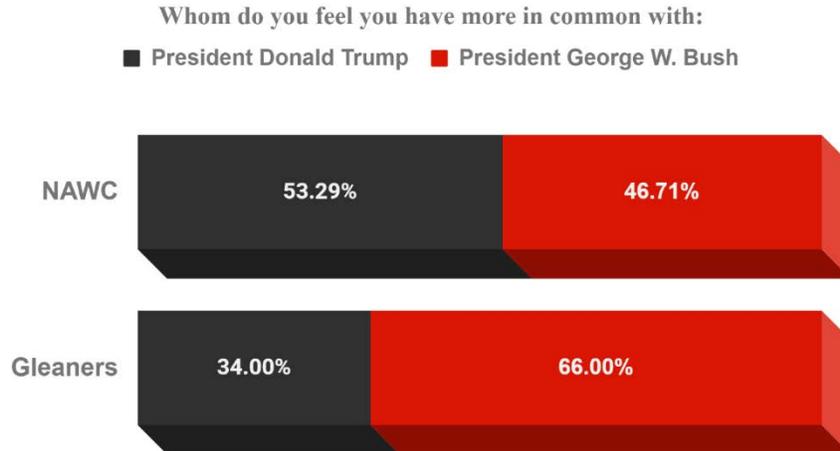


Figure 7

Wealth and the Wealthy

The New American Working Class is much less likely to express apprehension over the accumulation of wealth or support political solutions to level the “playing field” than their Gleaner counterparts. While one in three NAWC respondents was definitely concerned over the “wealth gap” between the poor and rich, nearly half of all Gleaners were. Similarly, when it came to raising taxes on those who can easily afford more, two in three in the NAWC said it could be, or is, wrong; over half of Gleaners said is never wrong to do so. As to wealth accumulation, 77 percent of the NAWC would be against any limit on the amount anyone should be able collect, while only 56 percent of Gleaners would be against it.

Automation and Universal Basic Income

Another dividing line exists between the NAWC and Gleaners in how they envision the future of work in America. At the outset, both groups expressed similar concerns over the automation of jobs reducing work opportunities, with approximately three in four showing at least some concern in both groups. However, the NAWC was much less likely to support one government-centric solution to the potential problem of automation – a universal basic income. While only 26 percent of the NAWC supported a UBI, 42 percent of Gleaners did. This makes sense, given the Gleaners expressed strong support for raising taxes on those who could easily afford to pay more.

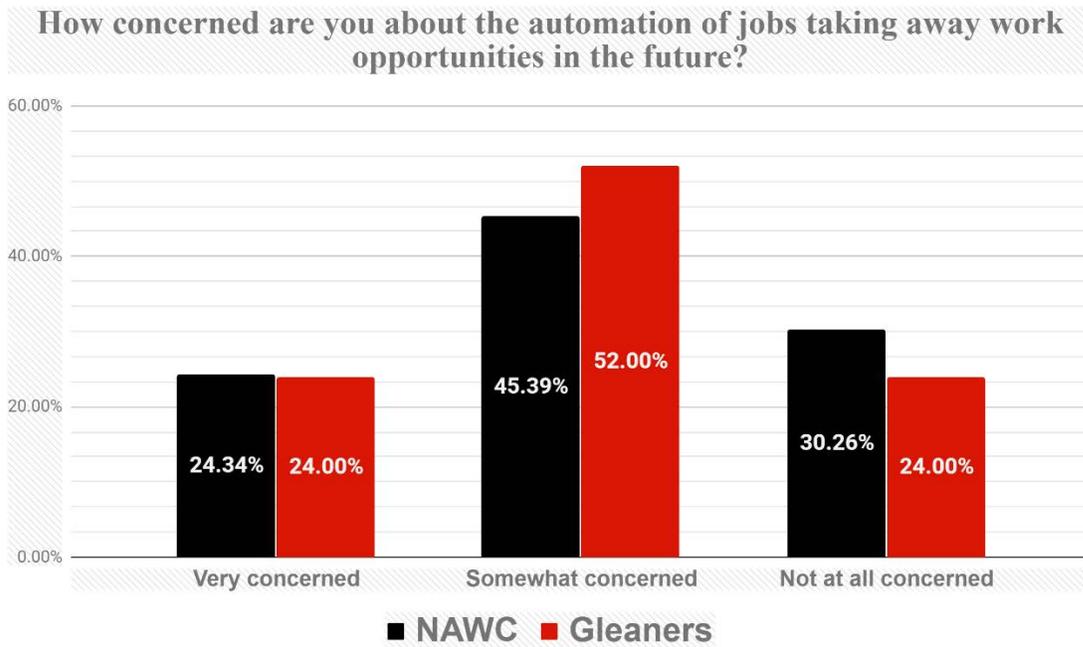


Figure 8

Children and Education

The NAWC’s attitudes and lifestyle characteristics regarding children and education track their prioritization of family as expressed in the qualitative research interviews. Seven in 10 NAWC respondents reported having children, while Gleaners were 14 percent less likely have them. Homeschooling as an option for educating children was much more popular among the NAWC, of whom 65 percent supported the idea. 50 percent of Gleaners, on the other hand, supported the option, and they were twice as likely as the NAWC to oppose homeschooling. Finally, the NAWC was much more likely to support a family’s right to choose exactly what their children are taught in school (66 percent in favor vs. 44 percent of Gleaners).

Belief in God

Just as the NAWC was more likely to connect with their work, they also were more likely to find connection with a higher being. 82 percent of the group said they believe in God, 18 percent more than the Gleaners group. However, these numbers do not seem to imply that the NAWC is also significantly

more “religious;” they were only 6 percent more likely to attend religious services than the Gleaners.

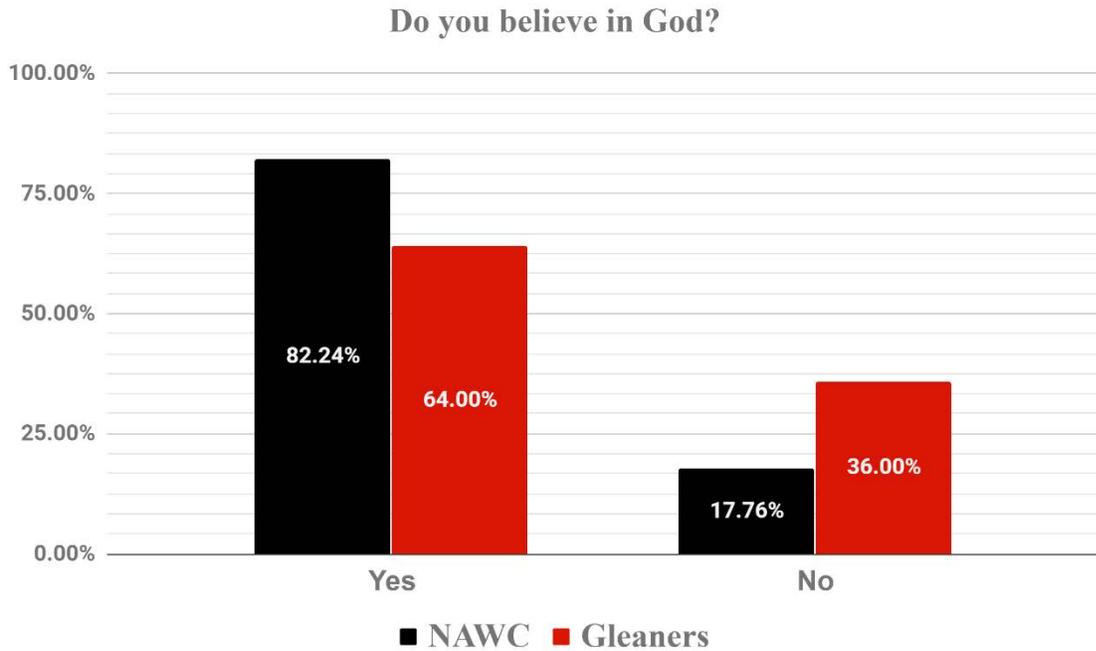


Figure 9

Where do Millennials fit in?

The responses from millennials comprising the NAWC cut against the larger NAWC segment on many fronts. Politically, millennials identify as either Democrat (six in 10) or Independent (four in 10), hold Donald Trump in low regard (seven in 10 either somewhat or very unfavorable), and are much less likely to vote (four in 10 hardly voting, never voting, or not registered). Another defining trait of this group manifested itself not in their specific views on political issues, religion, or America in general, but rather in millennials’ tendency to respond with neutrality. For questions about education and children, prohibiting compulsory union participation, unions in general, universal basic income, job automation, raising taxes, attainability of the American Dream, and America’s exceptionalism, millennials scored significantly higher than other groups in the “maybe,” “unsure” or “I don’t know” answer choices.

How the NAWC Unites Blue and White Collar America

Support for President Trump unites NAWC across collars

As previously mentioned, the NAWC united Americans across the “collar divide” through identifying deep sources of connection with work; while the shared values explain why they are connected, how the NAWC relates to politics, belief in God, and the American Dream, are manifestations of that common bedrock.

As to opinions on President Donald Trump, one in two members of both blue-collar and white-collar groups shared high-intensity support for the president. In addition, 50 percent of NAWC blue-collar and 56 percent of NAWC white-collar respondents are likely to, or definitely will, vote Republican for Congress in the 2018 midterm elections.

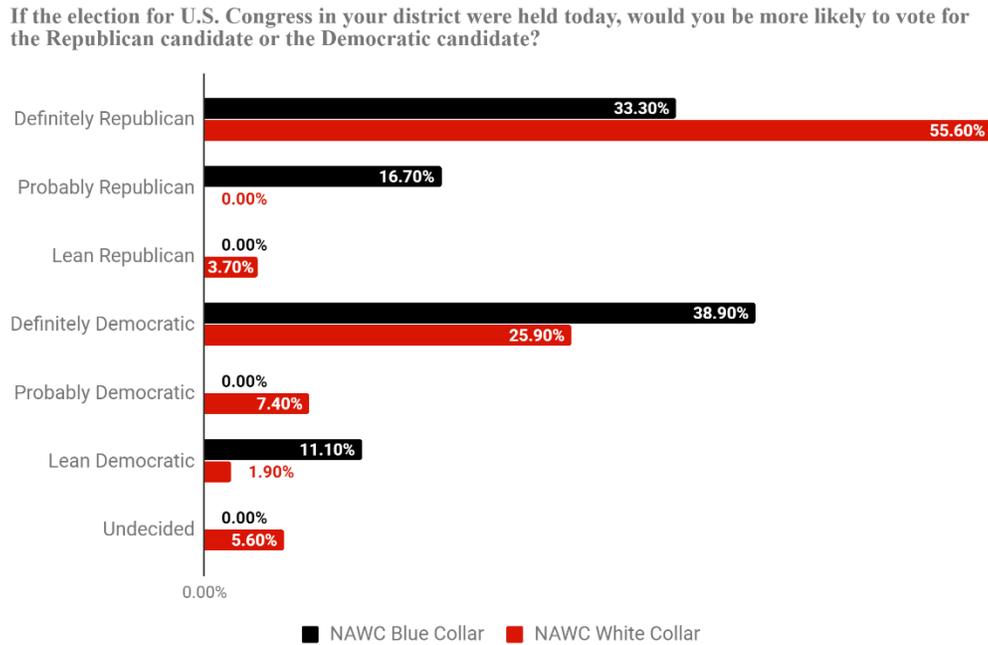


Figure 10

The two NAWC collar groups also shared a strong belief in God (83 percent for blue-collar and 81 percent for white-collar). That said, possibly due to the more strenuous work conditions or odd working hours of a blue-collar job, white-collar NAWC respondents were much more likely to attend church on a regular basis (41 percent vs. 17 percent).

Both groups also shared similar views regarding the exceptional nature of America, with 83 percent of blue-collar workers and 85 percent of white-collar workers stating the country was great (or at least

might be). Finally, 45 percent of blue-collar respondents believe that the American Dream is, or is probably, attainable for most Americans, while 50 percent of white-collar respondents agreed in kind.

Blue-collar Workers More Likely to Identify as NAWC than Gleaners

Of the entire pool of respondents identifying as blue-collar, a large majority - two-thirds - fell into the New American Working Class. These NAWC blue-collar workers, furthermore, exhibited marked differences from the general blue-collar worker that further distinguish the NAWC as a unique subset of the American workforce.

Demographically speaking, the NAWC blue-collar worker is better educated, younger, and more female than the typical blue-collar worker. Specifically, they were 11 percent more likely to have at least a four-year college degree (28 percent vs. 17 percent), 8 percent more likely to be 60 years old or younger (61 percent vs. 52 percent), and 6 percent more likely to be a woman (44 percent vs. 38 percent).

As for political orientation, the NAWC blue-collar worker shared a plurality of Democrat representation with the general blue-collar pool (around 40 percent), but also exhibited more Republican identifiers than Independent. They were 8 percent more likely to identify as Republican than the overall blue-collar group (33 percent vs. 24 percent) and 7 percent less likely to identify as Independent (28 percent vs. 35 percent).

As to economic and financial issues, this subset of the NAWC shied away from views in support of government intervention. They were much more likely to oppose a universal basic income for all Americans (67 percent opposed vs. 55 percent), and they were even more unsupportive of the idea of legally limiting one's accumulation of wealth (83 percent against vs. 69 percent).

Conclusion

A common story of who America is seems more elusive than ever in today's fractured political culture. Yet even as Americans are increasingly told how they are divided, we have found, through inquiry powered by behavioral science, that a powerful unity exists. That cohesive set of values, defined by how some Americans relate to their work, is held by the New American Working Class.

The New Working Class chooses to work. Work, for them, is not an end in itself nor is it simply a way to provide. It is a way to do better for themselves and for others.

For those with an interest in self-governance, the New American Working Class's values and modes of thinking directly relate to the institutions of a limited state that depends on an empowered, charitable, and future-thinking population. Work empowers individuals to test out and activate a capacity for self-determination, soothes and stimulates the mind, provides a way to evaluate the self, and is a mechanism to give to others. Work functions as a restorative and a confidence-builder, a standard of behavior and a gift to prior and future generations.

When work is valued, as it is by the New American Working Class, it provides a counter-force to dependence and tribalism. What remains is for Americans to learn about their own story as it relates to work, to appreciate it, place themselves confidently into its narrative, and regain an acute desire to continue in the tradition of great American creators.