

What Working People Want

How the Next Generation of Democratic Leaders Can Rebuild Trust in 2028 and Beyond

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WINNING WORKING PEOPLE ACTION

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What Working People Want

How the Next Generation of Democratic Leaders Can Rebuild Trust in 2028 and Beyond

Democrats emerged from the 2026 midterms with a historic victory. But winning an election and rebuilding lasting trust with working people are two different things. As the party looks toward 2028 and beyond, it faces a fundamental question: What do Democrats stand for on the economy, and why should working people believe them — and trust them to deliver?

The economic frustrations that helped reshape American politics in 2024 haven't gone away, and Democrats' challenges with working people run deeper than one election can fix. The task isn't simply finding a better affordability message. It's demonstrating that political leaders understand working people's lives, respect their contributions, and have a believable plan to make their lives better.

New nonpartisan research — commissioned by Winning Working People Education and conducted by New River Strategies in the days before the election — provides a clearer picture of how Americans understand working people, what they're striving to achieve, and what they want from the economy and their elected leaders. Reviewing those findings, WWP Action believes they point to three connected conclusions:

1. **The People: Working people are defined by what they do and what they're striving to build, not just what they earn.** It's a broad American identity rooted in hard work, responsibility, and the aspiration to build a better life. What working people want is security for their families, control over their time and futures, and the opportunity to give the next generation a better life. But while the identity is broadly shared, the economic barriers to achieving those aspirations fall especially hard on households that depend on what they earn from work.

2. **The Problem: Americans still believe in hard work, but too many have lost faith that it pays off — and they don’t trust either party to fix it.** There's a profound gap between what people believe hard work should make possible and what they think it actually delivers. Working people want leaders who will fight for them and solve problems, but neither political party has convincingly demonstrated that it can deliver the economic future they're working toward.

3. **The Approach: People want leaders who fight for a better future, not just against powerful interests.** They want leaders who will take on the forces standing in their way, deliver tangible improvements to their lives — starting with lowering costs — and offer a believable vision of what a better economy can make possible. An aspirational approach that connects economic fairness to opportunity and broadly shared prosperity resonates across political and demographic divides.

Put simply: We are in a populist moment. But the question for Democrats heading into 2028 isn't just who they're willing to fight. It's what they're fighting for — and whether they can offer working people a believable path to the better lives they're working so hard to build.

Who Working People Are — and What They Want

A broad identity, defined by responsibility and aspiration

Leaders often talk about working people as a demographic: a set of occupations, an income band, or voters without a college degree. But the way Americans understand the working-person identity is much broader.

85% say the term "working person" describes them well, including 58% who say it describes them *very* well. The identity cuts across party (92% of Republicans, 83% of independents, 80% of Democrats), race (93% of Latino voters, 85% of white voters, 81% of Black voters), education, and age — and it includes most voters at the highest income levels in the survey.

The identity cuts across party and race

Share who say “working person” describes them well



When asked what they most associate with working people, voters point to what people do and whom they're responsible for, not what they lack:

- Taking responsibility for supporting themselves or their families: **53%**
- Trying to build a better life for themselves or their families: **47%**
- Depending on earnings from work rather than wealth or investments: **44%**
- Working hard at whatever they do: **43%**

Far fewer define working people primarily as those earning a low or middle income (23%) or doing physical work (22%) — though lower-income voters were more likely to make those associations.

Too much of our political conversation defines working people by their struggles — as people squeezed by high prices or left behind by economic change. **Those struggles are real, but they**

aren't how working people primarily understand themselves. They see themselves as people who work hard, take responsibility for their families, and are trying to build something better.

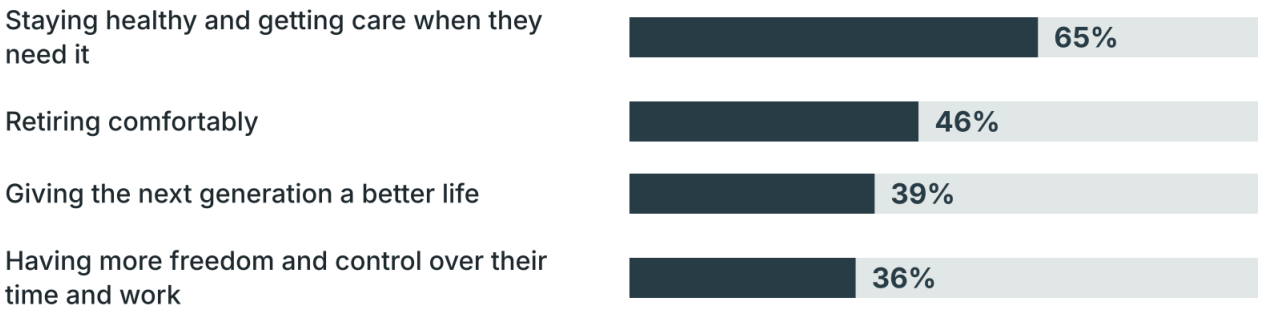
The strategic implication is straightforward: Start with working people's contributions and aspirations, not just their hardships. Speak to them as the people driving our economy and building our country, and focus on giving them the opportunities to build the lives they want.

A future grounded in security, care, and control

To connect with working people, you have to understand what they're striving for. As we explored in our earlier research on aspirational populism, an effective economic narrative must do more than simply identify what's wrong or who's responsible. It has to put working people at the center of the story, recognize the lives they're trying to build, and show how overcoming the obstacles in their way can help them achieve those aspirations. Our previous work found that this approach consistently outperformed messages focused primarily on the misconduct of powerful interests.

This new research helps us better understand what those aspirations actually look like. The future voters want is grounded less in abstract wealth than in financial security, personal freedom, and the ability to care for the people they love. Their top aspirations are **staying healthy and getting care when they need it (65%)**, **retiring comfortably (46%)**, **giving the next generation a better life (39%)**, and **having more freedom and control over their time and work (36%)**. Taken together, these findings suggest that economic success is measured not simply by how much people earn, but by the lives those earnings allow them to build.

Voters' top aspirations for the future



That distinction has important implications for how Democrats talk about the economy. Lower costs and higher pay matter enormously, but they aren't ends in themselves. They're what make it possible for people to care for their families, retire with dignity, enjoy more time with the people they love, and give their children a better shot than they had.

An aspirational economic narrative connects concrete improvements in people's financial circumstances to the security, freedom, and opportunities they're working so hard to achieve.

The broken bargain of hard work

Voters haven't given up on themselves or the futures they're trying to build. **59% remain confident they can build the life they want** over the next five years — including 65% of voters ages 18 to 34 and 62% of Black voters. Even amid widespread economic frustration, a majority still believe a better future is within reach.

But that optimism coexists with significant financial strain, particularly among households that depend on income from work. And while 85% of voters identify as "working people" — making it a powerful and broadly resonant identity — a **shared identity doesn't mean a shared economic reality**.

To better understand these differences, the research also examines a narrower group we call **"working households"**: people who rely on what they earn or have earned from work, rather than wealth or investments, and whose incomes are no more than modestly above the median for their area. This group represents **54% of voters**. As the findings below demonstrate, financial insecurity is substantially more prevalent among working households than among voters outside the group:

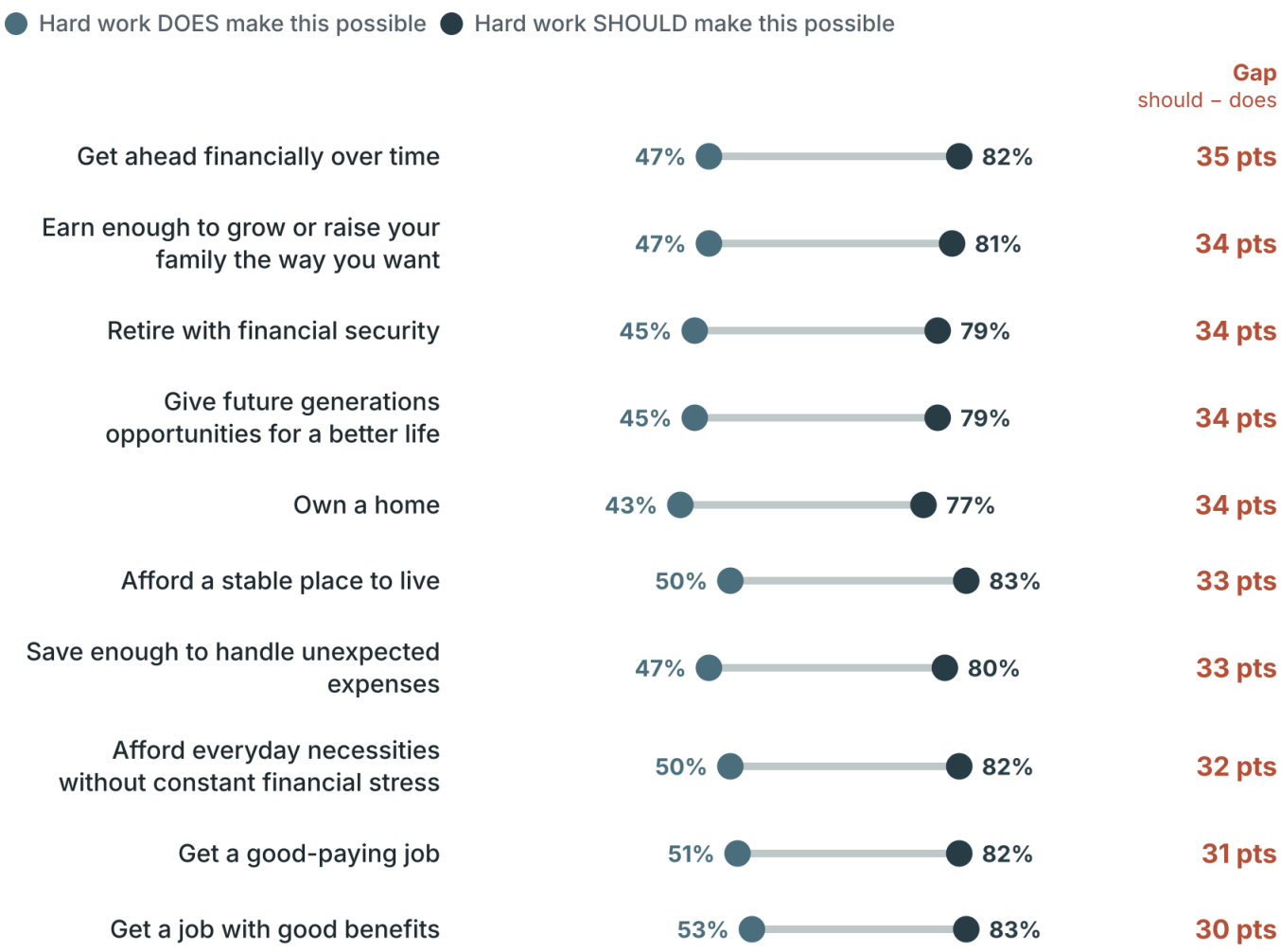
Current outlook or condition	All voters	Working households[1]	Voters outside working households
Confident they can build the life they want	59%	**53%**	66%
Falling somewhat or far behind	52%	**58%**	46%
Not doing as well as expected at this age	56%	**64%**	46%
Could easily cover a $1,000 expense	26%	**18%**	36%
Would need to borrow, sell something, or couldn't cover $1,000	39%	**50%**	27%
Say the economy is on the wrong track	68%	**70%**	65%

[1]"Working households" are voters with household income at or below 120% of HUD's area median income for their county, adjusted for household size, who live primarily on income from work, retirement savings, or government benefits. "Outside working households" refers to all other voters.

These findings reveal the financial pressures facing working households. But the problem extends beyond immediate economic hardship. It reflects a broader disconnect between what Americans believe hard work *should* make possible and what they believe it *actually* makes possible in today's economy.

Across 10 economic aspirations tested — from affording everyday necessities to owning a home, raising a family, and retiring securely — voters perceive a remarkably consistent 30- to 35-point gap between the opportunities hard work should provide and those it currently does:

What hard work should make possible vs. what it does today

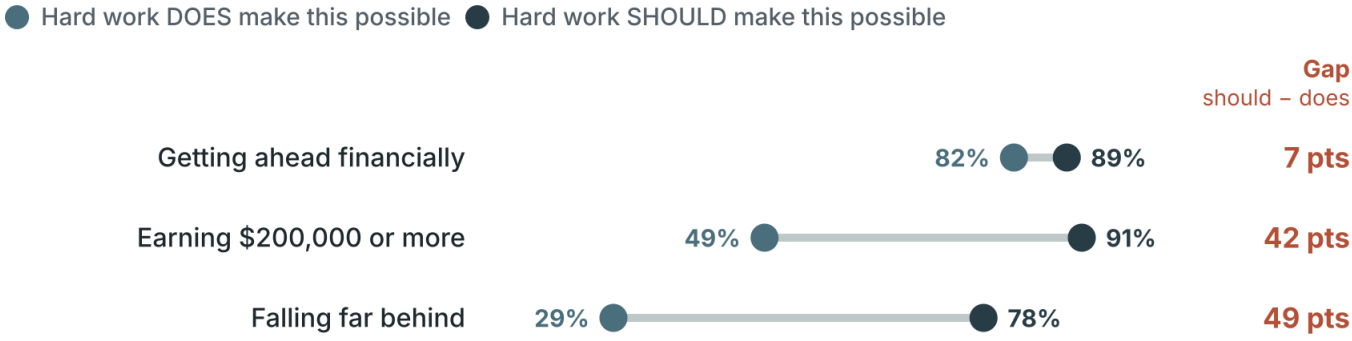


This gap isn't confined to people experiencing financial hardship. Even among voters earning $200,000 or more, 91% say hard work should make getting ahead financially possible, while just 49% believe it actually does. The perception that the economy is falling short of what hard work should deliver extends well beyond those struggling to make ends meet.

But the contrast is particularly striking when we look at voters' own financial circumstances. Among those who say they're getting ahead financially, 89% believe hard work should make

getting ahead possible, and 82% believe it does. Among those falling far behind, 78% still believe it should — but just 29% think it actually does.

Getting ahead financially: should vs. does



The divide isn't primarily about whether people value hard work. It's about whether they believe today's economy rewards it.

Partisanship also shapes perceptions of economic opportunity. On getting ahead financially, the gap between what hard work should and does make possible is 45 points among Democrats and independents, compared with 14 points among Republicans. The magnitude of the disconnect varies, but the broader finding remains: Americans haven't stopped believing in hard work. But too many have lost confidence that it will deliver the security, opportunity, and better future it should.

Working people don't need to be told to work harder. They need an economy where their hard work makes it possible to build the lives they want.

The Leadership Working People Want — and Neither Party Owns

As Democrats gear up for 2028, the challenge for those aspiring to lead the country isn't simply to convince working people that they understand what's wrong with the economy. It's to demonstrate that they have the determination, ideas, and ability to make things better. But what does that look like? After years of economic frustration, what are voters looking for in the leaders who will shape America's economic future? And do they see those qualities in either political party?

Our research offers a revealing answer. Voters were asked to choose up to three of the qualities that matter most in a leader from a list of seven, and then which of those qualities describe each party. Their top two answers were clear:

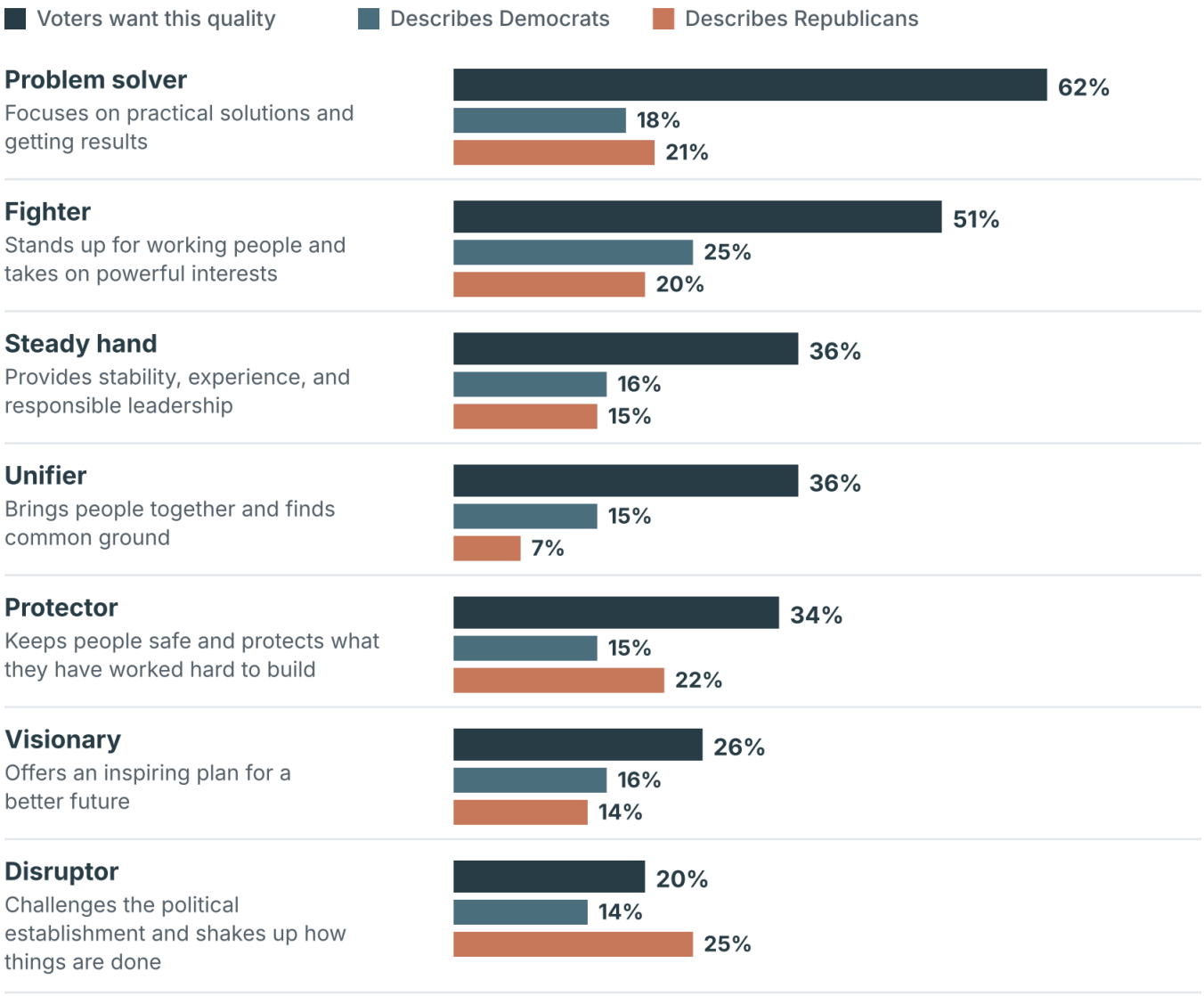
- **A practical problem solver focused on solutions and results (62%)**
- **A fighter who stands up for working people and takes on powerful interests (51%)**

The demand for practical problem-solving is remarkably consistent across party lines: 61% of Democrats, 63% of independents, and 63% of Republicans selected it among their top qualities.

Voters prioritize leaders who will fight for working people and deliver results for them, but many also crave a visionary with an inspiring plan for a better future. While only 26% chose a visionary as one of their top choices, the data shows that a leader who combines these three qualities — the ability to deliver, a commitment to the fight, and a positive vision for the future — would appeal to a whopping 91% of voters.

But perhaps most notably, voters don't see either party as currently embodying the qualities they value most:

The qualities voters want most — and which describe each party



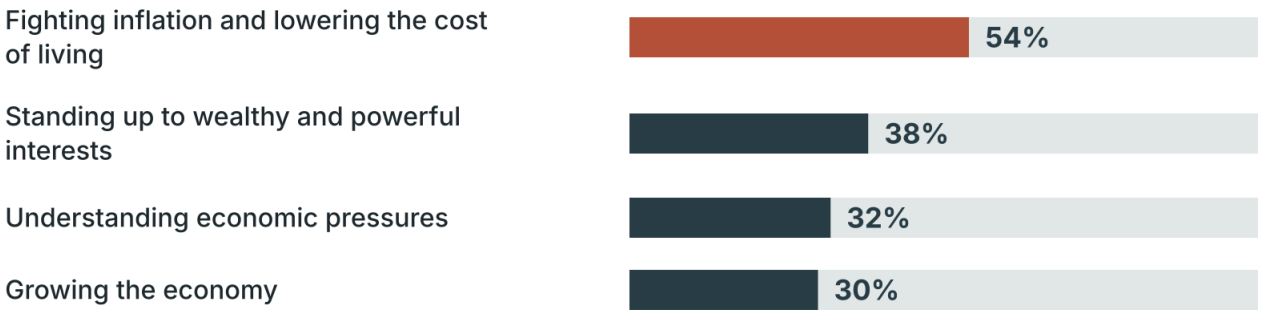
At present, neither party owns the quality voters value most: only 21% say practical problem solver describes Republicans, and just 18% say it describes Democrats. Each party's strengths lie elsewhere — with Democrats more likely to be viewed as fighters and unifiers, while Republicans are seen as disruptors and protectors. And nearly three in ten say *none* of these qualities describe Democrats (29%), about the same share who say the same for Republicans (28%).

In these choppy political waters, how can a leader show they're on voters' side? The research offers a clear test.

When asked what leaders would need to demonstrate to earn voters' support, **more than half (54%)** say fighting inflation and lowering the cost of living is among the most important — well

ahead of other priorities, such as standing up to wealthy and powerful interests (38%), understanding economic pressures (32%), and growing the economy (30%).

What leaders must demonstrate to earn voters' support

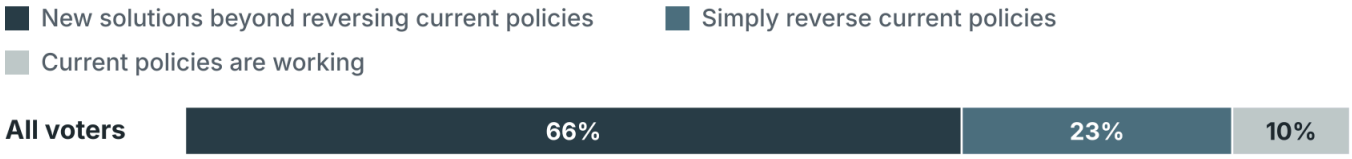


Lowering the cost of groceries and everyday necessities is also the single action voters are most likely to say would make a meaningful difference in their lives (36%), rising to 47% among non-college women. **Affordability isn't the whole economic agenda, but it is an immediate and concrete concern against which voters assess political leadership.**

New solutions, not just reversal

Voters are also clear that undoing Republican policies isn't enough. **66%** prefer a leader offering new solutions that go beyond reversing current policies, compared with 23% who want to simply reverse them and 10% who say current policies are working. That includes 75% of Democrats, 73% of independents, and half of Republicans.

New solutions vs. reversing current policies



That is an important warning for Democrats heading into 2028. Voters don't want to go back to an economy that was slightly less expensive but still felt rigged against them. A platform defined primarily by opposition to Trump — or by restoring what came before — will not meet the moment. Voters want new leaders who can make meaningful change a reality.

Working people want leaders who will fight for them and actually get results. The party that becomes known for doing both will hold an enormous advantage heading into 2028.

The Lesson of 2026: Electoral Victory Is Not the Same as Lasting Trust

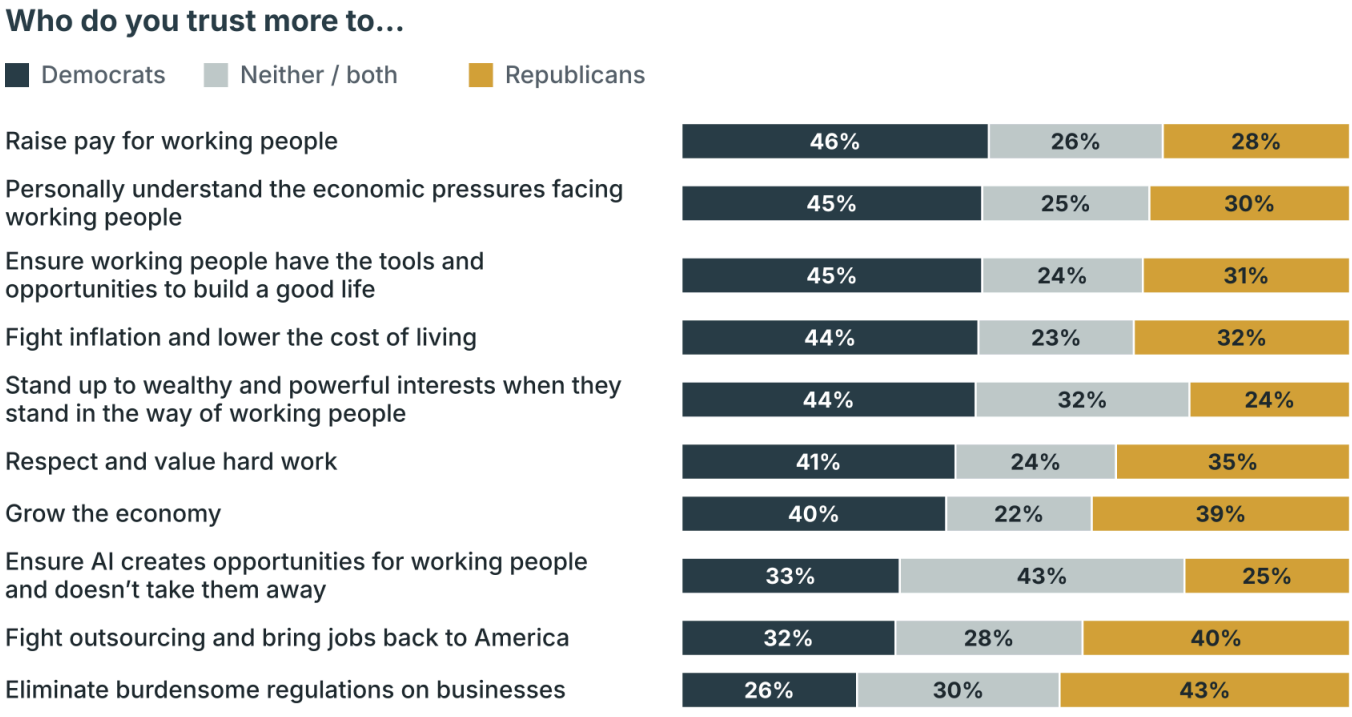
The 2026 election offers a timely illustration of the challenge. Democrats dealt a historic defeat to Republicans, but the underlying economic frustrations that have driven political discontent in recent years remain substantial. The WWP Education survey finds that:

- **68%** believe the economy is on the wrong track
- **52%** say their households are falling financially behind
- **56%** are doing worse financially than they expected at this point in their lives.

Those findings don't diminish the significance of Democrats' victory. They do, however, caution against interpreting an electoral win as evidence that voters have developed lasting confidence in the party's ability to deliver the economic change they seek.

The political pendulum may have swung back toward Democrats — but many of working people's underlying frustrations remain unresolved.

That distinction matters as Democrats look toward 2028. As the leadership findings above demonstrate, relatively few voters associate the party with practical problem-solving or standing up for working people. Yet the research also shows that Democrats enter this debate with meaningful advantages on several economic issues central to working people's lives:



Those advantages are meaningful, but incomplete. Democrats lead Republicans by double digits on several issues directly connected to working people's economic circumstances, including raising pay, understanding economic pressures, expanding opportunity, lowering costs, and standing up to wealthy interests. **Yet fewer than half of voters select Democrats on any measure.** The parties are effectively tied on growing the economy, while Republicans lead on outsourcing and regulation. On AI — one of the major economic questions ahead — the largest share of voters (43%) selects neither party or both equally.

Even on the most basic tests of trust, fewer than half of voters side with Democrats: 45% trust them more to understand the pressures working people face, and 41% to respect and value hard work. Democrats' advantages on individual issues have not yet added up to an identity as the party that delivers for working people.

To be clear: Because this research was conducted before Election Day, it cannot tell us why individual voters made the choices they did. What it does reveal is a gap between what working people want from their leaders and what they believe either party offers.

The 2026 election settled who would hold power in Congress. It didn't settle which party working people trust to make their lives better. That is the question the 2028 conversation has to answer.

Which Populism? Voters Choose Aspirational Over Adversarial

Working people know what they want from the economy, and they're increasingly frustrated that it isn't delivering. They want leaders who will fight for them and offer a believable path to a better future. **But what kind of economic narrative can bring those aspirations and frustrations together — and meet this populist moment?**

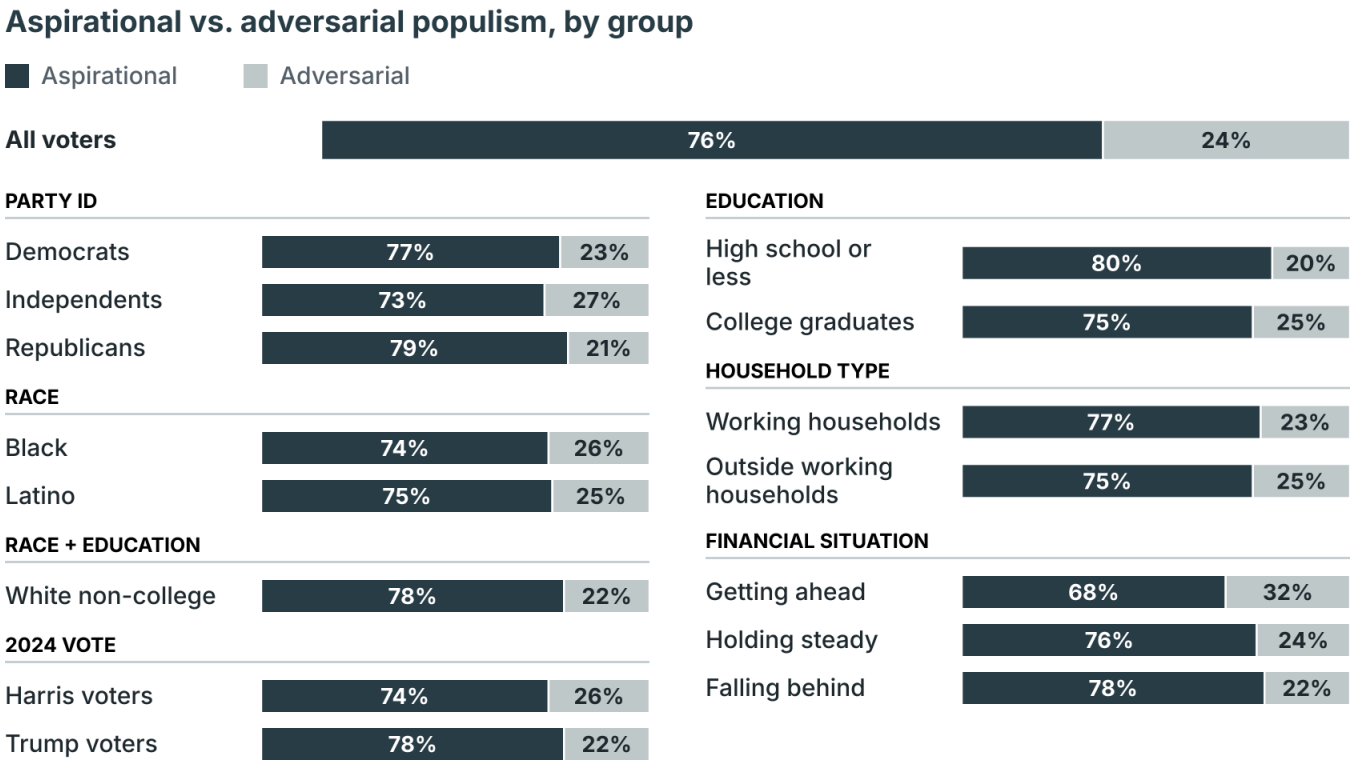
The WWP Education survey tested two complete economic messages head to head. Both criticized billionaires and corporations and called for raising their taxes. The winning message, which connected those policies to lower costs, greater opportunity, and broadly shared prosperity, read:

> **Aspirational Populism:** Hardworking Americans are doing everything right, but billionaires and big corporations have rigged the rules. Our economy should work for everyone, not just the wealthy and powerful. We need to increase taxes on billionaires and corporations and lower costs on healthcare, housing, and everyday essentials. When working people have the tools and opportunities to build good lives, businesses grow, communities thrive, and America becomes stronger and more prosperous.

Conversely, the alternative focused primarily on corporate misconduct, inequality, and threats to the economy and democracy:

> **Adversarial Populism:** The U.S. tax code is rigged. Many billionaires and big, profitable corporations go tax-free for years on end. Companies are rewarded for shifting profits and shipping jobs offshore. We need to raise taxes on billionaires and corporations to put a check on the extreme wealth inequality that is ruining the country and threatens our economy and our democracy.

Voters preferred the aspirational message by a 3-to-1 margin — 76% to 24% — and that preference held by similar margins across virtually every demographic group.



In an electorate polarized on nearly every economic question, that kind of consistency is rare.

Notably, the winning message doesn't avoid conflict. It says billionaires and corporations have rigged the rules, and it calls for raising their taxes. What sets it apart is that the antagonist is just one part of a larger story where working people are the heroes: who they are, what's standing in their way, and what they should be able to build. It pivots quickly from the problem to concrete solutions, then ends with the future those solutions make possible.

The concerns presented by the adversarial message are legitimate. But on their own, they are abstract and system-focused, and they leave working people as victims or spectators rather than the protagonists of the story. Accountability for the powerful means little to voters unless it leads directly to better outcomes for working people themselves.

A fight *for* working people, not just *against* the powerful

A second question tells the same story: **75% of voters prefer a leader whose priority is "fighting for working people"** over one focused on "fighting against corporations and billionaires."

That preference crosses every major audience: 73% of Black voters, 75% of Latino voters, 78% of white non-college voters, and 82% of non-college women choose fighting *for* working people, rising to 92% among Republicans.

Prefer a leader focused on fighting for working people

vs. one focused on fighting against corporations and billionaires



Even among Democrats, 63% preferred the fighting-*for* formulation. However, the strong appeal of the fighting-*against* alternative within the party underscores an important tension for those aspiring to lead it: how to confront powerful interests without losing sight of the working people they're fighting for.

To be clear: voters are not asking Democrats to go soft on powerful interests. More than half (51%) name a fighter who stands up for working people and takes on powerful interests as one of the most important qualities in a leader. As **our earlier research on corruption and affordability reinforced**, identifying the bad actors responsible for economic problems is important — but accountability must be connected to meaningful improvements in working people's lives.

What voters want is for the fight to be in service of something. Fighting powerful actors is a means to the end, not the goal itself.

The strategic implication is not to eliminate conflict, but to establish the right hierarchy:

Working people are the heroes, striving to build better lives for themselves and their families. ›

Powerful interests are the villains, creating obstacles that keep working people from building a good life. ›

Leaders — and the policies they enact — are the means of removing those barriers. ›

The goal is a better life and broadly shared prosperity.

The purpose of the fight matters as much as the opponent. Voters want to know not only whom Democrats will take on, but what their lives will look like when they win.

Five Keys for Winning Working People in 2028 & Beyond

As Democrats debate their direction, the research points to five actionable insights for any leader who hopes to earn — and keep — the trust of working people.

1. **Put working people — the heroes — at the center of the story.** Nearly nine in ten voters (85%) see themselves as "working people," defining that identity by responsibility, hard work, and the aspiration to build a good life for themselves and their loved ones, not simply by income or occupation. Democrats' message should lead with working people, small businesses, and family farmers.

Action Item: **Speak to working people as the drivers of the economy, not as victims in need of rescue. Make the vision tangible: staying healthy and getting care when it's needed, a secure retirement, a better future for our kids, more control over our time, and a home. Explain policies by what they make possible, not just what they cost or whom they target.**

2. **Name the broken bargain.** Hardworking Americans are doing everything right, but the economy isn't delivering. Working people still believe in the promise of hard work, but too many have lost confidence that today's economy delivers on it. Across ten aspirations, there's a 30-plus-point gap between what voters believe hard work should make possible and what they believe it actually does.

Action Item: **Make restoring the promise that hard work pays off a central argument of Democrats' economic agenda. Show how the economy can better respect working people's contributions and equip them with the tools and opportunities to build good lives.**

3. **Frame the fight as being *for* working people, not just *against* powerful interests.** Great stories need villains, but they are not *about* villains. Among working households, 56% want a fighter, rising to 62% among the most financially squeezed. But the key is who the fight serves: three in four voters prefer a leader focused on fighting for working people over one focused on fighting corporations and billionaires, rising to 79% among the most financially squeezed working households.

> Action Item: **Name powerful interests as obstacles when needed, but keep working people — not the villains — at the center of the conflict. Every message should end with an answer to the question voters care about: How will my life be better?**

4. **Deliver on affordability — the clearest test of whether you're improving working people's lives.** Fighting inflation and lowering the cost of living is the top thing voters say leaders must do to earn their support (54%). Among working households, lowering the cost of groceries and everyday necessities is the single most meaningful action (39%), but health care, housing, energy, and other costs are also weighing on their pocketbooks. Voters don't just want a fighter; they want results. The quality they value most — a practical problem solver — is one neither party owns.

> Action Item: **Offer concrete plans to lower costs, raise incomes, and fix broken systems, and explain who has been keeping costs high. Leaders who can point to real results, and speak credibly about how they'll deliver more, will stand apart.**

5. **Offer forward-looking economic solutions, not nostalgia for a pre-Trump era.** Two-thirds of voters (66%) want new solutions that go beyond undoing current policies, so an agenda built on reversal won't be enough. Neither party currently has a clear advantage on growing the economy (40% Democrats, 39% Republicans).

> Action Item: **Contrast a people-driven economy with a trickle-down system that prioritizes those at the top. Offer a forward-looking vision in which working people have the tools and opportunities to build good lives — and when they succeed, the economy grows, businesses prosper, and America becomes more competitive.**

The leaders who meet this test have the opportunity to do more than win an election. They have the opportunity to redefine the Democratic Party in the eyes of working people for a generation.

The Bottom Line: The 2028 Ideas Primary Starts Now

Voters have a remarkably consistent idea of what economic life should make possible: security for their families, a comfortable retirement, a better future for their kids, and more control over their time. Many no longer believe the economy is delivering on that promise — and neither party has convincingly demonstrated that it can fix it.

That is the opening for Democrats. After voters shifted toward Republicans in 2024 and delivered Democrats a historic victory in 2026, the challenge is to turn electoral success into lasting confidence. **Winning working people for the long term means earning their trust**: showing that leaders understand their lives, respect their contributions, and deliver results they can feel. The debate over the Democratic agenda for 2028 is an opportunity to address that challenge.

The research reinforces the case for aspirational populism as the clearest path toward rebuilding trust with working people. It takes working people's frustrations seriously, names the forces standing in their way, and offers a believable vision of a better future. But a compelling narrative is only the beginning. Rebuilding lasting trust ultimately requires leaders who can turn that vision into meaningful improvements in people's lives.

The question for 2028 isn't whether Democrats should embrace populism. It's whether they'll offer a populism that gives working people something to fight for — and proof that hard work can pay off again.

Methodology & Research Sources

This memo presents analysis from Winning Working People Action (formerly Winning Jobs Narrative Action). It references separate research by Winning Working People Education, provided here as background only.

New River conducted a national survey of 2,731 likely 2028 voters from October 26-November 2, 2026, on behalf of Winning Working People Education. Interviews were conducted via SMS-to-web and online panels. The survey was weighted to be reflective of 2028 voters. The margin of error for the survey is +/- 1.9%. It is larger among subgroups and for questions that were not asked of all. Due to rounding, displayed answer choices may not always add up to 100%.

Winning Working People Education and Winning Working People Action are separate organizations. The analysis and conclusions presented in this memo are those of Winning Working People Action alone and are not attributable to Winning Working People Education.