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Class, Inequality, and Symbolic Workers: How Candidates Construct Economic Identity in U.S. Presidential Spots (1952–2024)

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Abstract:

Purpose: *This article examines how U.S. presidential campaigns construct economic identity through the recurring figure of the symbolic worker, a communicative form rooted in mid-twentieth-century industrial iconography and later reshaped by post-industrial inequality, cultural polarization, and the economic anxieties of the digital era.*
Design/Methodology/Approach: *Using over seven decades of presidential general-election audiovisual advertising, the article traces the evolution of blue-collar symbolism from its mid-century roots in manufacturing prosperity to its contemporary role in narratives of decline, precarity, fairness, and populist grievance.*
Findings: *Through combined textual analysis and rhetorical-economic interpretation, the study argues that symbolic workers function as a durable political shorthand for structural inequality. They serve as embodiments of national resilience, victims of economic transition, or moral exemplars of "real America," depending on partisan emphasis.*
Practical implications: *These developments reveal how candidate rhetoric now uses the symbolic worker not simply as an economic figure but as a vehicle for representing social belonging, inequality, and moral desert.*
Originality/Value: *Building on the concept of group-interest Democrats—candidates who claim to represent the economic and moral interests of working-class voters through imagery of factories, miners, machinery, and industrial labor—this study expands the historical analysis to incorporate the 2020 Biden–Trump campaign and the 2024 Harris–Trump contest.*

Keywords: *Donald Trump, job outsourcing, reshoring, political economy, labor markets, manufacturing employment, campaign rhetoric, industrial policy.*

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1. Introduction

For more than seven decades, U.S. presidential candidates have attempted to define their economic identities by aligning themselves with a particular version of "the American worker." This figure has taken multiple forms: the unionized steelworker, the coal miner, the machinist beside a clattering assembly line, the farmer in a field, the firefighter or teacher serving the public, and, more recently, the nurse, the single mother balancing multiple jobs, or the immigrant striving for the American dream.

Across these eras, campaigns have used workers not merely as demographic targets but as symbols—indexical shorthand for the economy itself, for the dignity of labor, and for broader narratives of inequality or aspiration.

In *American Political Issue Ownership and Framing*, the subchapter on *group-interest Democrats* demonstrated how Democratic candidates, beginning in the New Deal order and extending into the 1980s and 1990s, deployed imagery of workers to signal solidarity with labor constituencies, to emphasize economic fairness, and to frame Republicans as aligned with corporations and elites (Płudowski, 2018).

Over time, this rhetorical strategy extended beyond explicit labor messaging to broader appeals to "working families," "ordinary Americans," or "people struggling to get ahead." In the late twentieth century, these symbolic workers became fixtures of Democratic advertising—even as the economic base of the party shifted toward urban, professional, and multicultural coalitions. What is group-interest representation to political scientists remains consistent with what political communication terms issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003), i.e. being believed to be better equipped, competent and interested to tackle and resolve certain problems.

The present article expands that chapter by showing how worker symbolism has evolved in response to shifting economic conditions and escalating inequality. Drawing on the historical corpus (1952–2016) but mostly by incorporating the 2020 and 2024 transcripts, the analysis demonstrates that symbolic workers remain central yet transformed figures in presidential persuasion.

The collapse of manufacturing employment, the precarity of service work, the rise of care labor, and the disproportionate effects of financial and health crises on working-class households have produced new symbolic laborers and new narrative functions.

Where mid-century ads used workers as evidence of national productive strength—as in Eisenhower's direct appeals to wage earners facing taxes and prices (e.g., *"High Prices,"* Eisenhower campaign, 1952)—contemporary ads more often use them as evidence of structural neglect or economic victimization. Biden's 2020 *"Crossroads"* ad explicitly frames "working families" and "small businesses" as casualties of mismanagement (Biden campaign, 2020), while Trump's 2024 *"The Great Debate"* constructs inflation itself through everyday consumption—"food, rent, gas"—as lived working-class deprivation (Trump campaign, 2024). The symbolic worker thus migrates from a growth narrative to a loss narrative, reflecting both economic transitions and the politicization of inequality.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Symbolic Workers, Economic Identity, and Inequality

The symbolic worker is not simply a rhetorical flourish but an organizing construct of political economy. From the perspective of cognitive framing theory (Goffman, 1974; Iyengar, 1991; Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007), symbolic workers function as *embodied frames*—figures that compress complex economic narratives into relatable human shorthand.

A factory worker represents not only industrial output but also fairness in wages, dignity in labor, and the stability of communities built around shared economic purpose. Coal miners in West Virginia, auto workers in Michigan, or machinists in Ohio stand in for entire economic geographies, sometimes evoking nostalgia, sometimes decline, and often political grievance.

Political leaders use symbolic workers for two principal functions. First, they use them to signal economic competence or solidarity: standing in front of a factory or referencing wages, prices, and taxes positions the candidate as aligned with the productive backbone of the nation.

Eisenhower's *"Never Had It So Good"* (1952) directly challenges claims of prosperity by invoking debt, doubled prices, and burdensome taxes experienced by ordinary workers (Eisenhower campaign, 1952). Second, candidates use symbolic workers to embody inequality: images or descriptions of households unable to "get ahead" create a moral grammar of structural unfairness.

In Chapter 3 of *American Political Issue Ownership and Framing*, the symbolic worker serves as a rhetorical proxy for the coalition Democrats claimed during the New Deal order and beyond—organized labor, industrial wage earners, and economically vulnerable households (Płudowski, 2018).

Democratic ads repeatedly used workers to frame ownership of fairness, wages, and social protection while contrasting these interests with corporate or elite power. This pattern is already visible in Stevenson's 1952 *"The Same God Made Us All,"* which links decent wages, security in old age, and equal dignity to working men as moral entitlements (Stevenson campaign, 1952).

The decline of union membership, the rise of service-sector employment, and the transformation of gender roles complicated—but did not eliminate—this strategy. Instead, worker symbolism broadened. By 2020, Biden's *"How to Build Back Better"* explicitly expands "American workers" to include manufacturing labor, clean-energy workers, and caregivers, presenting them as beneficiaries of public investment and protection (Biden campaign, 2020).

In 2024, Harris's *"Knows"* and *"Everyday"* ads further personalize symbolic labor by grounding economic credibility in lived middle-class experience, low-wage work, and rising household costs (Harris campaign, 2024).

Republican campaigns increasingly appropriate worker symbolism through grievance and populist contrast. Trump's 2024 ads repeatedly frame inflation, housing, and groceries as evidence that "there's not much left at the end of the month," transforming consumption itself into a marker of working-class struggle (*"The Great Debate,"* Trump campaign, 2024).

In this sense, symbolic workers become vessels for inequality narratives across parties, though with sharply divergent moral attributions and solutions.

3. Historical Foundations of the "Symbolic Worker"

From the earliest era of television advertising, symbolic workers appear as stabilizing figures in narratives of economic normalcy and aspiration. In the 1952 election, Eisenhower's *"High Prices"* and *"Sturdy Lifeboat"* frame economic hardship through the voices of ordinary Americans struggling with the cost of living and taxation, positioning the candidate as a corrective to Democratic mismanagement (Eisenhower campaign, 1952). These ads do not yet depict inequality as structural injustice but rather as a temporary imbalance correctable through leadership change.

By contrast, Stevenson's 1952 messaging begins to link workers to fairness and moral equality. *"The Same God Made Us All"* explicitly invokes decent wages, security in old age, and freedom from man-made barriers as universal rights grounded in shared humanity (Stevenson campaign, 1952). Here, the symbolic worker is not merely productive but morally deserving.

Across subsequent decades, as documented in Płudowski (2018), Democratic advertising increasingly uses factories, plants, and specific blue-collar settings to proximize economic experience, while Republicans emphasize growth, stability, or managerial competence. This asymmetry intensifies in late twentieth-century Democratic campaigns, where workers are routinely pitted against "the powerful," corporations, or wealthy interests.

By the end of the 2016 cycle, however, the symbolic worker is already undergoing transformation. Deindustrialization, wage stagnation, and regional economic decline produce a rhetoric less about shared prosperity and more about loss, vulnerability, and resentment—a trajectory that fully emerges in the 2020 and 2024 campaigns analyzed in subsequent sections.

4. Symbolic Workers in Crisis: Economic Identity, Inequality, and Essential Labor in the 2020 Biden–Trump Campaign

4.1 The 2020 Election Context: Pandemic, Precarity, and Moralized Inequality

The 2020 presidential election marked a critical turning point in the construction of symbolic workers in U.S. campaign advertising. Unlike previous cycles dominated by debates over growth, trade, or globalization, the 2020 campaign unfolded amid a global pandemic that simultaneously exposed and intensified structural inequality.

Economic identity was no longer framed primarily through prosperity or opportunity but through vulnerability, risk, and moral responsibility. As a result, symbolic workers in 2020 advertising were defined less by what they produced than by what they endured.

The COVID-19 crisis abruptly reordered the hierarchy of labor symbolism. Workers previously peripheral to presidential advertising—nurses, grocery clerks, delivery drivers, caregivers, and service employees—became central figures in narratives of national survival.

The concept of the "essential worker" entered campaign discourse as both an economic and moral category, signaling not only contribution but sacrifice. This transformation altered the semiotics of class representation: work was framed as exposure to danger rather than as a pathway to advancement.

In this environment, economic inequality was no longer abstract or ideological. It was narrativized as immediate and bodily, affecting health outcomes, employment security, and family survival. Campaigns responded by intensifying *proximization*, drawing economic harm closer to the voter's personal experience and household. As Płudowski (2018) predicts, such moments of systemic disruption favor group-interest framing over ideological abstraction, privileging concrete human figures over policy generalities.

4.2 Biden's 2020 Advertising: Expanding the Symbolic Worker Coalition

4.2.1 From Industrial Labor to "Working Families"

Joe Biden's 2020 advertising extends the Democratic tradition of group-interest representation while substantially broadening the category of the symbolic worker. Rather than centering exclusively on industrial or unionized labor, Biden's campaign consistently uses the phrase "working families" as an umbrella term encompassing wage earners, caregivers, small business owners, and service-sector employees.

In *"Crossroads"* (Biden campaign, 2020), economic identity is framed at a moment of national choice, with the economy described as something that must "work for working families" and restore viability to "small businesses" disrupted by crisis. The symbolic worker here is collective and relational—defined by family responsibility and community interdependence rather than by occupation alone. This rhetorical move preserves continuity with earlier Democratic worker symbolism while adapting it to a post-industrial economy.

4.2.2 Essential Workers and Moralized Labor

The pandemic enables Biden's campaign to moralize labor explicitly. In *"Donald Trump Failed to Protect Us from COVID-19"* and related pandemic-focused messaging, workers are implicitly positioned as victims of governmental neglect rather than market forces. Economic harm is inseparable from physical danger, and responsibility is assigned upward—to leadership failure rather than individual circumstance.

Most notably, *"How to Build Back Better"* (Biden campaign, 2020) reframes American workers as agents of national recovery. Manufacturing workers, clean-energy laborers, caregivers, and health workers are presented as the foundation of future prosperity, not through deregulation but through public investment. The ad's repeated emphasis on "American workers" anchors inequality in policy choices, asserting that government action can either abandon or empower those who labor.

This framing directly extends the group-interest Democratic strategy identified by Płudowski (2018), but with a critical shift: symbolic workers are no longer contrasted primarily with corporations but with systemic inertia and mismanagement. Inequality is thus portrayed as preventable and morally charged.

4.2.3 Race, Class, and the Symbolic Worker in Biden's 2020 Messaging

The 2020 campaign also marks a significant intersectional expansion of worker symbolism. In *"Better America"* (Biden campaign, 2020), Black Americans are framed simultaneously as workers, citizens, and moral agents who have "pushed this country to live up to its stated ideals." Economic identity is inseparable from racial history, and inequality is framed as cumulative and intergenerational rather than episodic.

Similarly, Vice-Presidential introduction ads featuring Kamala Harris link personal biography, professional labor, and economic justice. Harris's narration of confronting banks during the foreclosure crisis positions her as an advocate for families displaced by structural financial inequality, reinforcing the Democratic use of symbolic workers as victims of elite abuse rather than market failure alone (*"Kamala Harris: Vice President Announcement,"* Biden campaign, 2020).

In these ads, symbolic workers are not anonymous stand-ins but narrativized individuals whose labor and suffering authenticate broader claims about inequality. This personalization intensifies proximization, aligning economic injustice with moral outrage and civic responsibility.

4.3 Trump's 2020 Advertising: Absence, Deflection, and Implicit Worker Symbolism

In contrast to Biden's expansive worker imagery, Trump's 2020 advertising largely avoids explicit representation of workers as social groups. Instead, economic identity is constructed through denial, deflection, or abstraction. Where workers appear, they are implied rather than depicted—referenced through aggregate outcomes such as employment numbers or economic reopening rather than through lived experience.

The absence of essential workers as moral figures is particularly notable given their centrality in public discourse during the pandemic. This omission itself functions rhetorically, reinforcing a model of economic identity rooted in pre-crisis normalcy rather than structural vulnerability. Workers are positioned as beneficiaries of reopening rather than as individuals exposed to risk.

From the perspective of symbolic representation, Trump's 2020 strategy reflects a departure from both traditional Republican managerial framing and Democratic group-interest appeals. The symbolic worker is neither celebrated nor moralized; instead, economic conflict is displaced onto questions of leadership credibility and crisis attribution.

4.4 Inequality Reframed: From Distribution to Exposure

The central transformation of symbolic worker representation in 2020 lies in the reframing of inequality. Earlier campaign eras emphasized inequality as unequal access to wages, opportunity, or prosperity. In 2020 advertising, inequality is increasingly framed as unequal exposure—to illness, unemployment, and insecurity.

Biden's campaign repeatedly links economic harm to the failure to protect workers, implicitly redefining fairness as safety and dignity rather than growth alone. Symbolic workers are portrayed not as aspirants to middle-class stability but as defenders of collective survival. This shift represents a significant evolution in political advertising, aligning economic identity with vulnerability and care.

Consistent with Płudowski's (2018) functional theory, moments of crisis intensify reliance on group-interest representation. The 2020 election demonstrates that symbolic workers remain indispensable to presidential persuasion, but their meaning is contingent on historical context. In a pandemic, labor signifies risk, sacrifice, and moral worth more than productivity or efficiency.

5. Inflation, Moral Economy, and Populist Grievance: Symbolic Workers in the 2024 Harris–Trump Campaign

5.1 The 2024 Context: Everyday Economics and the Moralization of Inequality

The 2024 presidential campaign unfolds in an environment defined less by crisis disruption than by persistent economic dissatisfaction. While headline indicators suggest post-pandemic recovery, advertising rhetoric is dominated by the perception that everyday life has become materially harder.

Inflation, housing costs, food prices, and household expenses replace unemployment or industrial decline as the primary loci of economic grievance. In this context, symbolic workers are no longer primarily depicted at worksites; instead, they appear implicitly through consumption, budgeting, and family decision-making.

This shift marks a further evolution in the construction of economic identity. Where the 2020 campaign emphasized exposure and vulnerability, the 2024 campaign emphasizes endurance and fairness. Inequality is framed not as a temporary shock but as a chronic condition embedded in daily routines—buying groceries, paying rent, saving for a home, or planning for retirement. Symbolic workers are thus defined less by occupation than by their position within a moral economy of effort and reward.

Both campaigns rely heavily on *linguistic proximization* (Cap, 2013), repeatedly invoking "your family," "your money," and "everyday prices" to collapse the distance between macroeconomic policy and personal experience. This development confirms Płudowski's (2018) expectation that, as economic complexity increases, successful campaigns translate structural inequality into intimate, morally legible narratives.

5.2 Harris's 2024 Advertising: Middle-Class Identity and the Ethics of Fairness

5.2.1 Re-centering the Symbolic Worker as Middle Class

Kamala Harris's 2024 advertising reconstitutes the symbolic worker through explicit identification with the middle class. Rather than foregrounding industrial labor or essential services, Harris's ads emphasize biography, upbringing, and everyday economic struggle as sources of political legitimacy.

In *"Knows"* (Harris campaign, 2024), Harris is described as having grown up in a middle-class home, worked at McDonald's while earning her degree, and been raised by a working mother—an accumulation of experiences that authenticate her claim to "know what it's like to be middle class."

Here, symbolic labor is biographical rather than visual. The worker is not shown at a factory or hospital but invoked through narrative memory. This strategy aligns with earlier Democratic proximization techniques while adapting them to an electorate for whom traditional blue-collar imagery may no longer resonate. Economic identity is thus grounded in life course rather than job title.

5.2.2. Everyday Costs as Structural Injustice

In *"Everyday"* (Harris campaign, 2024), the symbolic worker appears as a family confronting high prices and financial planning under constraint. The ad explicitly frames rising costs as a failure of fairness, promising tax cuts for more than 100 million Americans and positioning Harris as "laser-focused on creating opportunities for the middle class." Inequality is no longer framed through deprivation alone but through blocked mobility—the inability to "get ahead" despite effort.

Similarly, *"Full House"* (Harris campaign, 2024) situates housing affordability at the center of class identity. Home ownership becomes the moral benchmark of economic success, while corporate landlords and banks are cast as antagonists who distort the housing market. The symbolic worker here is aspirational but constrained, reinforcing a moral economy in which effort should be rewarded with stability and dignity.

Across these ads, Harris consistently frames inequality as a product of corporate concentration and policy failure rather than individual inadequacy. This framing preserves the Democratic group-interest tradition while shifting its emotional register from grievance to ethical obligation.

5.3. Trump's 2024 Advertising: Inflation, Betrayal, and the Populist Worker

5.3.1 Inflation as Lived Experience

Donald Trump's 2024 advertising reconstructs the symbolic worker through populist grievance and economic betrayal. Rather than referencing labor directly, Trump's ads repeatedly invoke inflation as an omnipresent force shaping daily life. In *"The Great Debate"* (Trump campaign, 2024), economic hardship is rendered through price comparisons—bread, beef, rent, housing—culminating in the assertion that "there's not much left at the end of the month."

The symbolic worker is thus defined by scarcity and frustration rather than occupation. Consumption becomes the site where inequality is felt and politicized. Unlike Harris's moral economy of fairness, Trump's rhetoric constructs a moral economy of betrayal, in which elites celebrate "Bidenomics" while ordinary Americans struggle.

5.4 Populist Attribution and Moral Polarization

Trump's 2024 ads consistently attribute economic suffering to political opponents, collapsing complex economic processes into personal culpability. In *"Kamala Harris Owns Bidenomics"* (Trump campaign, 2024), inflation and declining purchasing power are framed as the direct result of Democratic governance. The symbolic worker is implicitly positioned as a victim of elite arrogance and ideological experimentation.

This framing intensifies moral polarization. Whereas Harris presents herself as fighting for the middle class against corporations, Trump presents himself as fighting *with* the people against a governing class that is detached from everyday reality.

The symbolic worker is no longer merely disadvantaged but wronged—a crucial distinction that fuels populist mobilization.

5.5 Competing Moral Economies of Work and Worth

The 2024 campaign reveals a clear divergence in how symbolic workers are mobilized to represent inequality. Harris's advertising constructs a moral economy centered on fairness, opportunity, and dignity, in which hard work should translate into security and upward mobility. Trump's advertising constructs a moral economy centered on loss and resentment, in which hard work is undermined by incompetent or hostile elites.

Both campaigns rely heavily on proximization, but with different affective outcomes. Harris's ads emphasize empathy and collective uplift, while Trump's emphasize anger and dispossession. In both cases, symbolic workers remain central to economic identity construction, even as their visual representation recedes in favor of narrative and linguistic cues.

Consistent with Płudowski's (2018) theory, the 2024 election demonstrates that symbolic workers are not static figures but adaptive instruments of persuasion. As economic inequality becomes normalized and routinized, campaigns increasingly translate it into moral narratives that assign blame, responsibility, and deservingness. The symbolic worker thus remains indispensable—not as a reflection of the labor market, but as a moral anchor for competing visions of national belonging.

6. Comparative Synthesis and Theoretical Implications: The Transformation of Symbolic Workers, 1952–2024

6.1 From Growth to Exposure to Moralized Endurance: A Three-Stage Transformation

Across seven decades of U.S. presidential advertising, the symbolic worker emerges as one of the most stable yet adaptive figures in campaign rhetoric. The longitudinal analysis conducted in this article reveals a three-stage transformation in how symbolic workers are mobilized to construct economic identity and frame inequality.

In the first stage, dominant from the 1950s through the early postwar decades, symbolic workers function primarily within *growth narratives*. Eisenhower-era advertising uses wage earners and taxpayers as indicators of national productivity and managerial competence, framing economic problems—such as high prices or taxes—as temporary distortions correctable through leadership change (e.g., *"High Prices,"* Eisenhower campaign, 1952). Workers in this period signify stability, contribution, and shared prosperity rather than structural disadvantage.

The second stage, which crystallizes during the 2020 election, redefines symbolic workers through *exposure*. The pandemic foregrounds workers' vulnerability to health risks, unemployment, and institutional failure. Biden's 2020 advertising repeatedly frames workers—especially caregivers, health professionals, and service employees—as moral agents placed at risk by political mismanagement (*"How to Build Back Better,"* Biden campaign, 2020). Here, inequality is no longer a question of distribution alone but of protection and safety.

The third stage, dominant in the 2024 campaign, centers on *moralized endurance*. Symbolic workers are no longer primarily depicted as exposed to crisis but as trapped in a chronic condition of economic strain. Inflation, housing costs, and everyday expenses become the principal signifiers of inequality. Harris's 2024 ads frame endurance as unjust but remediable through fairness and reform (*"Everyday,"* Harris campaign, 2024), while Trump's ads frame the same endurance as evidence of betrayal by detached elites (*"The Great Debate,"* Trump campaign, 2024).

This three-stage trajectory demonstrates that symbolic workers persist not because of occupational continuity but because of their rhetorical flexibility. They remain central to economic identity construction precisely because they can absorb new meanings as economic conditions change.

6.2 Symbolic Workers and the Politics of Inequality

One of the central findings of this study is that symbolic workers increasingly function as proxies for inequality itself. Whereas earlier advertising used workers to signal competence or solidarity, contemporary campaigns use them to narrativize structural divergence between effort and reward. Inequality is no longer framed abstractly but embodied through lived experience—what it feels like to pay rent, buy groceries, or plan for the future.

This development aligns closely with Płudowski's (2018) analysis of group-interest representation, which emphasizes that successful candidates personalize structural issues through human figures rather than ideological language.

However, the present study extends that framework by demonstrating that symbolic workers now operate within *moral economies* rather than distributive models. The central question posed by contemporary advertising is not simply "Who gets what?" but "Who deserves what—and who is responsible when effort fails to yield security?"

In Harris's 2024 advertising, symbolic workers embody fairness claims: hard work should translate into dignity, stability, and opportunity (*"Knows,"* Harris campaign, 2024).

In Trump's advertising, symbolic workers embody grievance claims: hard work is rendered futile by inflation, corruption, or ideological governance (*"Kamala Harris Owns Bidenomics,"*Trump campaign, 2024). In both cases, inequality is moralized, and economic identity becomes inseparable from judgments of blame and desert.

6.3 Proximization and the Decline of Workplace Imagery

Another key implication concerns the changing semiotics of labor representation. Over time, presidential advertising shows a marked decline in explicit workplace imagery—factories, plants, machinery—in favor of linguistic proximization. Economic hardship is increasingly located not at the site of production but within the household.

This shift reflects both economic transformation and communicative adaptation. As fewer voters identify with industrial labor, campaigns rely on consumption, caregiving, and family budgeting as more universally relatable experiences. Biden's 2020 emphasis on caregiving labor and Harris's 2024 focus on housing and everyday costs exemplify this transition, as do Trump's inflation-centered narratives that transform grocery shopping into a political act (*"The Great Debate,"* Trump campaign, 2024).

The symbolic worker thus becomes less visible but more intimate. This development intensifies emotional engagement while reducing the need for explicit class language, allowing campaigns to address inequality without invoking overtly redistributive rhetoric.

7. Implications for Political Communication Theory

The findings of this study carry several implications for theories of political advertising and economic identity. First, they confirm that symbolic representation remains a core mechanism of persuasion even as economic structures evolve. Second, they demonstrate that class representation in advertising is increasingly indirect, moralized, and experiential rather than occupational.

Third, the study suggests that future campaign research must move beyond binary distinctions between "working class" and "middle class" and instead examine how campaigns construct *deservingness narratives* under conditions of persistent inequality. Symbolic workers function less as sociological categories than as moral characters within competing national stories.

Finally, the expansion of symbolic labor to include caregivers, renters, and consumers indicates that economic identity in presidential advertising is becoming more inclusive but also more diffuse. This diffusion may broaden appeal while simultaneously obscuring structural causes of inequality—a tension that future research should address.

8. Conclusion

From the factories of the postwar boom to the grocery aisles of the inflationary present, symbolic workers have remained central to how U.S. presidential candidates construct economic identity. Their persistence underscores the enduring political need to humanize economic abstraction and to anchor policy debates in recognizable lives. Between 1952 and 2024, symbolic workers evolve from emblems of growth, to figures of exposure, to embodiments of moralized endurance.

This transformation mirrors broader shifts in the American economy and in the politics of inequality. As campaigns increasingly rely on moral narratives of effort, fairness, and betrayal, symbolic workers serve not only as representations of labor but as moral touchstones through which voters are invited to judge the nation's economic order.

In this sense, symbolic workers do not merely reflect inequality; they *constitute* it rhetorically—shaping how inequality is understood, felt, and contested in presidential politics.

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