

BROOKINGS

TechTank

Brookings survey finds 58 percent see manufacturing as vital to U.S. economy, but only 17 percent are very confident in its future

Darrell M. West Tuesday, July 9, 2019

Manufacturing is a crucial part of the U.S. economy. According to the U.S. census, around 11.1 million workers are employed in the sector, and it generates about \$5.4 trillion in economic activity annually. Yet this area currently faces significant headwinds. The June IHS Markit Manufacturing Purchasing Managers Index fell to its worst reading since 2009 and there have been recent declines in the Institute for Supply Management's Purchasing Managers Index. There also is concern due to the 25 percent tariffs President Donald Trump has imposed on Chinese goods and his threats to increase tariffs on other nations.

To examine attitudes toward manufacturing, researchers at the Brookings Institution undertook an online U.S. national poll with 2,001 adult internet users between June 16 to 18, 2019. The survey was overseen by Darrell M. West, vice president of Governance Studies, director of the Center for Technology Innovation, director of the John Hazen White Manufacturing Initiative at the Brookings Institution, and the author of The Future of Work: Robots, AI, and Automation. Responses were weighted using gender, age, and region to match the demographics of the national internet population as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey.

Vital Part of the Economy

Reflecting the important role manufacturing plays in the U.S. economy, the survey asked how people feel about the sector. Fifth-eight percent believe manufacturing is very important to the American economy, 14 percent think it is somewhat important, 6 percent feel it is not very important, and 22 percent are unsure.

There are significant differences by age. Seventy-one percent of people over the age of 55 believe manufacturing is very important, whereas only 45 percent of those aged 18 to 34 years feel that way. That is a 26 percentage point difference in feelings about the subject between these age groups.

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Very Important
Gender			
-male	61%	12%	6%
-female	56	15	6
Age			
-18-34	45	16	9
-35-54	58	14	5
-55+	71	11	5
Region			
-Northeast	53	16	6
-Midwest	61	12	6
-South	61	11	6
-West	55	17	6

When asked overall how positive or negative they feel towards manufacturing, 58 percent say they are positive, 10 percent are negative, and 32 percent are unsure.

Confidence in the Future

The poll also inquired about feelings regarding the future. Only 17 percent say they are very confident about the future of manufacturing, 48 percent are somewhat confident, 14 percent are not confident at all, and 21 percent are unsure.

There are some differences by background. People in the Midwest (19 percent) are most likely to be very confident about the future of manufacturing, compared to those in the Northeast (14 percent). Women (14 percent) also are less likely to say they are very confident about manufacturing, compared to men (21 percent).

	Very Confident	Somewhat Confident	Not Very Confident
Gender			
-male	21%	50%	14%
-female	14	45	14
Age			
-18-34	15	45	17
-35-54	16	45	12
-55+	19	52	13
Region			
-Northeast	14	51	14
-Midwest	19	44	13
-South	18	49	12
-West	15	46	18

Forty-seven percent would encourage young people to get a job in the manufacturing sector, 20 percent would not, and 33 percent are unsure.

Biggest Barriers

When asked about the biggest barrier to the manufacturing sector, 23 percent cite government regulations, 21 percent say poorly trained workers, 14 percent name high taxes, 8 percent claim energy costs, and 34 percent are unsure.

Trump's Tariffs

People are divided over President Donald Trump’s decision to impose 25 percent tariffs on Chinese goods. Forty-five percent oppose his decision, 35 percent support them, and 20 percent are unsure.

Women (30 percent) are less likely to support the tariffs than men (41 percent). Older people (42 percent) are more supportive than younger ones (27 percent). Those living in the South are more likely to support the tariffs (42 percent) than those in the Northeast (29 percent) or West (31 percent).

	Oppose	Support
Gender		
-male	43%	41%
-female	45	30
Age		
-18-34	46	27
-35-54	42	36
-55+	45	42
Region		
-Northeast	49	29
-Midwest	43	32
-South	38	42
-West	53	31

When asked how big a threat China is to U.S. manufacturing, 46 percent say it is a very big threat, 30 percent claim it is somewhat big, 8 percent think it is not a very big threat, and 16 percent are unsure.

The Rise of Automation

Sixty-four percent think there will be a lot of automaton in manufacturing 10 years from now, 13 percent believe there will be some automation, 5 percent say there will not be very much, and 18 percent are unsure.

Government Should Provide More Help

Fifty percent think the government should do more to help the manufacturing

sector, 16 percent do not, and 34 percent are unsure.

View of Manufacturing News Coverage

Thirty-seven percent say news coverage of manufacturing has been negative, 10 percent feel it has been positive, and 53 percent are unsure.

Survey Questions and Answers

1. How important do you think the manufacturing sector is to the vitality of the U.S. economy?

- 6% not very important
- 14% somewhat important
- 58% very important
- 22% don't know or no answer

2. Is your opinion of manufacturing?

- 5% very negative
- 5% somewhat negative
- 31% somewhat positive
- 27% very positive
- 32% don't know or no answer

3. Would you encourage a young person today to get a job in the manufacturing sector?

- 8% definitely no
- 12 possibly no
- 26% possibly yes
- 21% definitely yes

- 33% don't know or no answer

4. What do you see as the biggest barriers to the manufacturing sector today?

- 14% high taxes
- 23% government regulations
- 8% energy costs
- 21% poorly trained workers
- 34% don't know or no answer

5. Do you think the government should do more to help the manufacturing sector?

- 7% definitely no
- 9% possibly no
- 25% possibly yes
- 25% definitely yes
- 34% don't know or no answer

6. Do you support President Donald Trump's decision to impose 25 percent tariffs on goods made in China?

- 34% definitely no
- 11% possibly no
- 12% possibly yes
- 23% definitely yes
- 20% don't know or no answer

7. How big a threat do you believe China is to the U.S. manufacturing sector?

- 8% not very big
- 30% somewhat big
- 46% very big
- 16% don't know or no answer

8. Would you say news media coverage of the manufacturing sector is?

- 15% definitely negative
- 22% possibly negative
- 7% possibly positive
- 3% definitely positive
- 53% don't know or no answer

9. How confident are you in the future of manufacturing?

- 14% not confident at all
- 48% somewhat confident
- 17% very confident
- 21% don't know or no answer

10. How much automation do you think there will be in manufacturing 10 years from now?

- 5% not very much
- 13% some
- 64% a lot
- 18% don't know or no answer

Gender:

- 55.1% male, 44.9% female in sample

- 48.1% male, 51.9% female in target population

Age:

- 7.4% 18-24, 13.2% 25-34, 17.7% 35-44, 22.6% 45-54, 20.2% 55-64, 18.9% 65+ in sample
- 12.6% 18-24, 19.4% 25-34, 17.5% 35-44, 17.6% 45-54, 16.7% 55-64, 16.2% 65+ in target population

Region:

- 14.9% Northeast, 28.8% Midwest, 34.7% South, 21.6% West in sample
- 17.3% Northeast, 21.3% Midwest, 37.5% South, 23.9% West in target population

Survey Methodology

This online survey polled 2,001 adult internet users in the United States June 16 to 18, 2019 through the [Google Surveys](#) platform. Responses were weighted using gender, age, and region to match the demographics of the national internet population as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey.

In the 2012 presidential election, Google Surveys was the [second most accurate poll](#) of national surveys as judged by polling expert Nate Silver. In addition, the Pew Research Center undertook a [detailed assessment of Google Surveys](#) and found them generally to be representative of the demographic profile of national internet users. In comparing Google Survey results to its own telephone polls on 43 different substantive issues, Pew researchers found a median difference of about three percentage points between Google online surveys and Pew telephone polls. [A 2016 analysis](#) of Google Surveys published in the peer-reviewed methodology journal *Political Analysis* by political scientists at Rice University

replicated a number of research results and concluded “GCS [Google Consumer Surveys] is likely to be a useful platform for survey experimentalists.” Google’s [2019 analysis](#) of its surveys found similar results to Pew Research Center polls.

This research was made possible by [Google Surveys](#), which donated use of its online survey platform. The questions and findings are solely those of the researchers and not influenced by any donation. For more detailed information on the methodology, see the [Google Surveys Whitepaper](#).