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2020

AMERICAN COMPASS

RESEARCH

Labor Market Not Yet Working for Workers

New data on job quality and worker views on unions

October 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August 2023, American Compass partnered with YouGov to survey 1,000 Americans between the ages of 18 and 65 who work at least 20 hours per week. We found:

- **Only 40% of workers have “secure jobs,” meaning jobs that pay at least \$40,000 annually, include health insurance and paid time off, and offer predictable earnings and a regular or controllable schedule.**
 - Only 30% of workers without a bachelor’s degree have secure jobs.
 - Government and non-profit jobs are more likely than private-sector jobs to be secure.
 - Work is not transitioning to the “gig” economy; only 3% of workers report employment as independent contractors and only 3% report being “gig” workers.
- **Workers have generally favorable views of organized labor, with 56% reporting a very or somewhat favorable view compared 26% who have a very or somewhat unfavorable view.**
 - But, middle- and upper-class workers are more likely to have favorable views, while lower- and working-class workers are more likely to say they “don’t care.”
 - Likewise, views are much more favorable among workers not eligible to be private-sector union members.
 - While views of Democratic workers have been stable over the past two years, net favorability among Republican voters has increased by more than 20 points, swinging into positive territory (+2).
- **Politics drives union attitudes and low support for unionization.**

- Lower- and working-class workers and those with low opinions of their own jobs are less likely to say they would vote for a union, while Democrats regardless of their jobs are much more likely to say they would vote for a union.
- Among eligible private-sector workers who would vote for a union, political campaigning and activism for social change are the activities they are least enthusiastic to see a union pursue.
- Among eligible private-sector workers who would vote against a union, involvement in politics by the union is the top reason for their opposition.

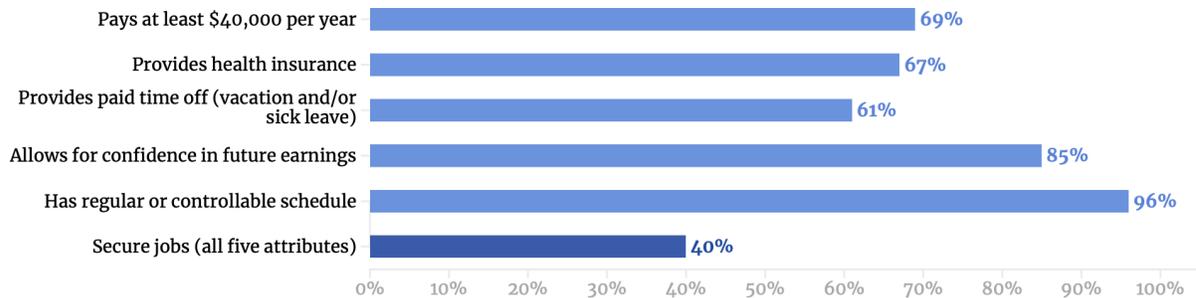
WHERE ARE THE SECURE JOBS?

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports monthly on the number of jobs in the economy, but not much is known about the character of those jobs. American Compass created the definition of a “secure job,” intended to represent a minimum threshold for a worker to attain economic security and support a family. A secure job is one that pays at least \$40,000 per year, includes health insurance and paid time off, and offers predictable earnings and a regular or controllable schedule (see “About the Data” for precise question wording).

Most jobs fulfill any one of these criteria, but only 40% fulfill them all.

FIGURE 1. Jobs, But What Kinds of Jobs?

Share of jobs held by representative sample of part- and full-time workers



Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023)

N = 1,000 American adults working at least 20 hours per week

Note: See methodology section for question wording on each of the five attributes.

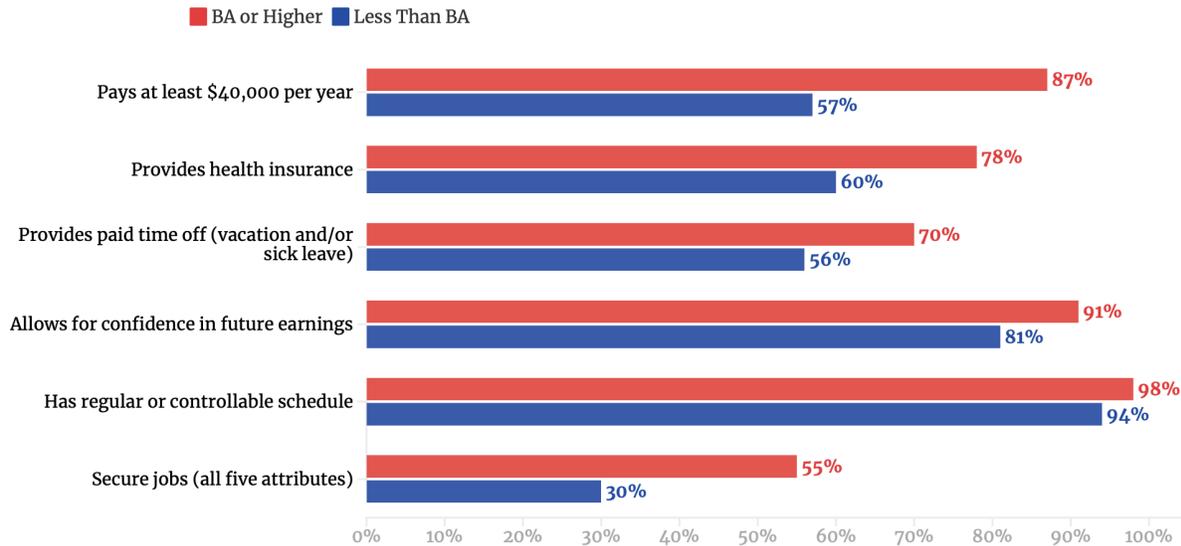


These figures place in context the lament from employers that they cannot find enough workers, purportedly even after sweetening their offers. Have they tried offering the bare minimum that might provide an American worker with security? Apparently, for most, the answer is no.

The problem becomes more pronounced when bifurcating the market by education level. Among workers holding at least a bachelor’s degree, 55% hold secure jobs. For those with less than a bachelor’s degree, 30% hold secure jobs.

FIGURE 2. Who Has a Secure Job?

Share of jobs; workers with less than bachelor's degree and bachelor's degree or more



Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023)
 N = 1,000 American adults working at least 20 hours per week
 Note: See methodology section for question wording on each of the five attributes.

The rise of the so-called “gig economy” has produced both enthusiasm about greater flexibility for workers and concern about fewer secure jobs. An oft-cited study from Upwork reported in 2020 that 36% of workers (or nearly 60 million individuals) had done freelance work in the past year. The American Compass survey finds that this may significantly overstate the role of freelancing in the labor market. Asked “which of the following describes your employment situation?” and told to “check all that apply,” only 3% of workers reported that they are an independent contractor or freelancer and only 3% reported that they are a “gig” worker.

FIGURE 3. In Search of the Gig Economy

Share of workers who describe their employment situation as including...

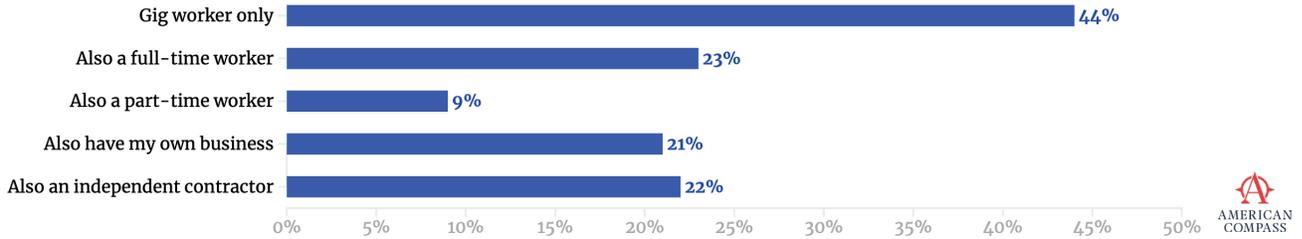


Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023)
 N = 1,000 American adults working at least 20 hours per week

Most of these gig workers perform the tasks to supplement other forms of income. Of the 1,000 workers surveyed, a total of four reported both having secure full-time jobs and performing gig work.

FIGURE 4. What Are Gig Workers Doing?

Employment situation of workers who describe themselves as “gig” workers



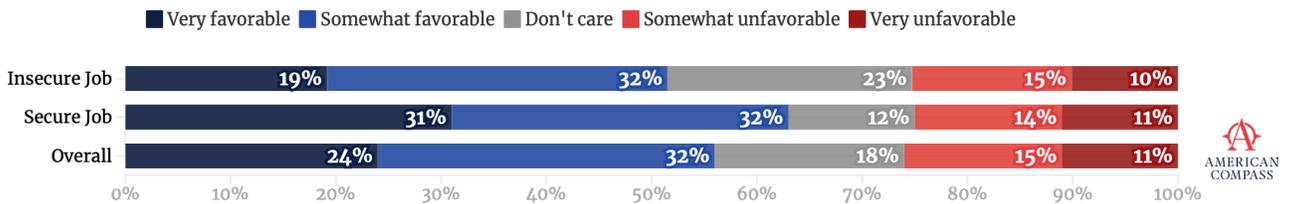
Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023)
N = 25 American adults who describe themselves as “gig” workers

ATTITUDES TOWARD LABOR UNIONS

With so few workers holding secure jobs, a surge in enthusiasm for labor unions might seem natural. But in fact, workers with secure jobs have the more favorable views, while just half of those with insecure jobs have favorable views and nearly one-quarter say they “don’t care.”

FIGURE 5. How Do American Workers Feel About Organized Labor?

“My general view of labor unions is:”

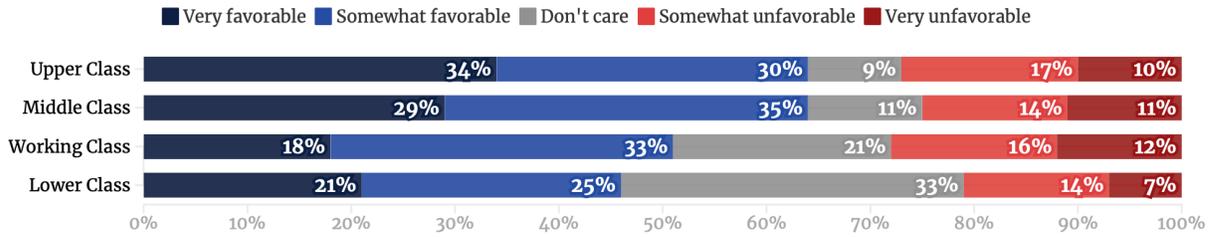


Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023)
N = 1,000 American adults working at least 20 hours per week

This same pattern repeats itself across various cross-sections of workers. While most people think of lower-income workers in less secure jobs as the ones who would benefit most from a union, those workers show less enthusiasm and are more likely to say they don’t care. Workers with higher incomes and higher levels of education show the most interest.

FIGURE 6. How Do American Workers Feel About Organized Labor?

“My general view of labor unions is:”



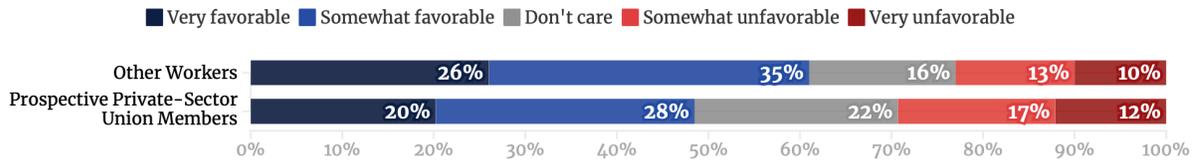
Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023)
N = 959 American adults working at least 20 hours per week



Likewise, the workers employed by for-profit firms in non-supervisory roles, in theory the core constituency for organized labor, have a lower opinion of unions; less than 50% view them favorably, as compared to more than 60% of other workers.

FIGURE 7. Who Are Unions Really For?

“My general view of labor unions is:”



Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023)
N = 1,000 American adults working at least 20 hours per week

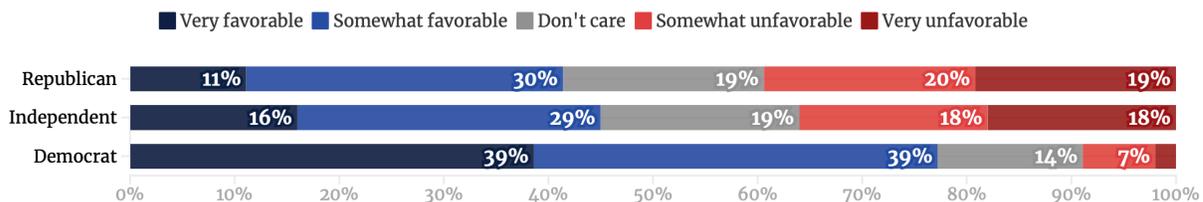
Note: Prospective private-sector union members workers in for-profit companies who do not have supervisory responsibilities.



The main determinant of a worker’s views on unions is not his employment situation but rather his politics. Democrats are twice as likely as Republicans to view unions favorably.

FIGURE 8. Labor as a Political Football

“My general view of labor unions is:”



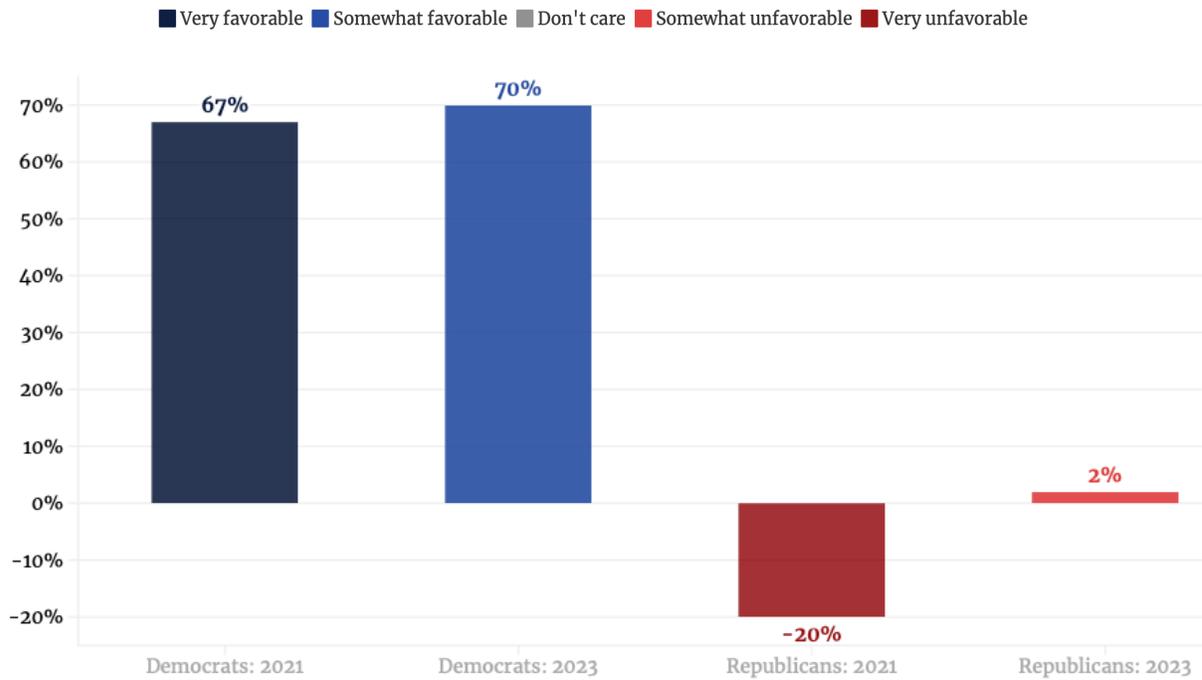
Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023)
N = 904 American adults working at least 20 hours per week



Notably, though, Republican views may be shifting quickly. In a similar sample from an American Compass survey in 2021, 32% of Republicans viewed unions favorably while 52% views them unfavorably. The 42% favorable versus 39% unfavorable response in this survey reflects a shift of more than 20 points in net favorability. Views among Democrats, by contrast, show no significant shift.

FIGURE 9. Changing GOP Attitudes on Labor

*Net favorability for “My general view of labor unions is:”
Very or somewhat favorable minus very or somewhat unfavorable*



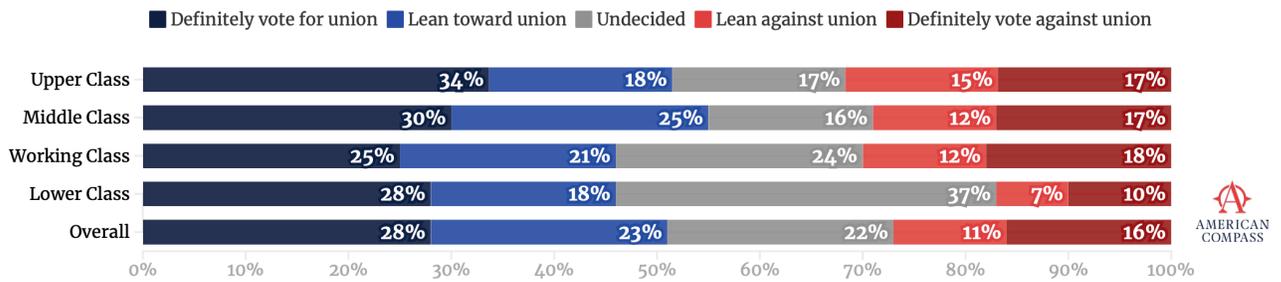
Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023); N = 619 American adults working at least 20 hrs/week
 American Compass Better Bargain Survey (2021); N = 924 American adults working at least 20 hrs/week
 Note: Net favorability is percent responding “very favorable” or “somewhat favorable” minus percent responding “very unfavorable” or “somewhat unfavorable.”

SUPPORTING A LABOR UNION

Americans often show more enthusiasm for labor unions in the abstract than for joining one themselves. But it is only through workplace elections that unions can form and grow. Overall, roughly half of Americans say they would vote to support a union, but as with general favorability, this support is highest where it is least relevant. Majorities say they would vote for unions in the middle and upper classes, but not the lower and working classes.

FIGURE 10. Who Would Vote for a Union?

“If an election were held today to decide whether workers like you at your workplace should be represented by a union, would you vote for the union or against the union?”

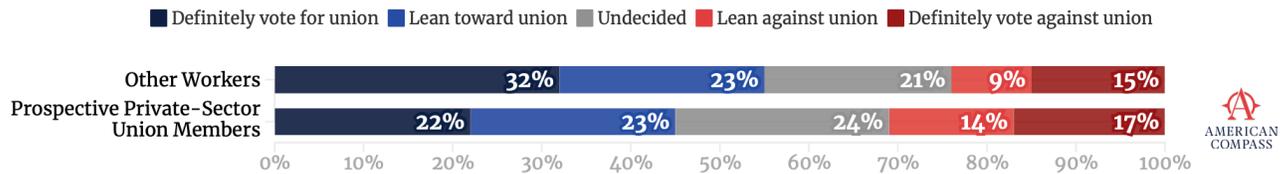


Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023)
 N = 835 American adults working at least 20 hours per week
 Note: Excludes workers who say “My job would not be eligible for a union.”

And as with favorability, non-supervisory workers at for-profit companies are less likely to vote for a union. Rather, a worker’s politics is the best predictor of how he says he would vote.

FIGURE 11. Prospective Private-Sector Union Workers Remain Divided

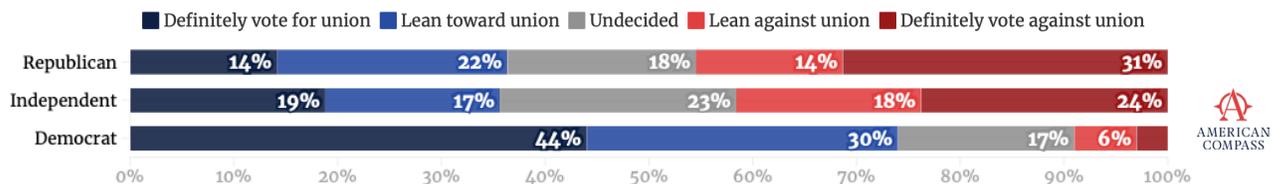
“If an election were held today to decide whether workers like you at your workplace should be represented by a union, would you vote for the union or against the union?”



Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023); N = 835 American adults working at least 20 hrs/week
 Note: Prospective private-sector union members workers in for-profit companies who do not have supervisory responsibilities. Excludes workers who say “My job would not be eligible for a union.”

FIGURE 12. Labor as a Political Football, Continued

“If an election were held today to decide whether workers like you at your workplace should be represented by a union, would you vote for the union or against the union?”



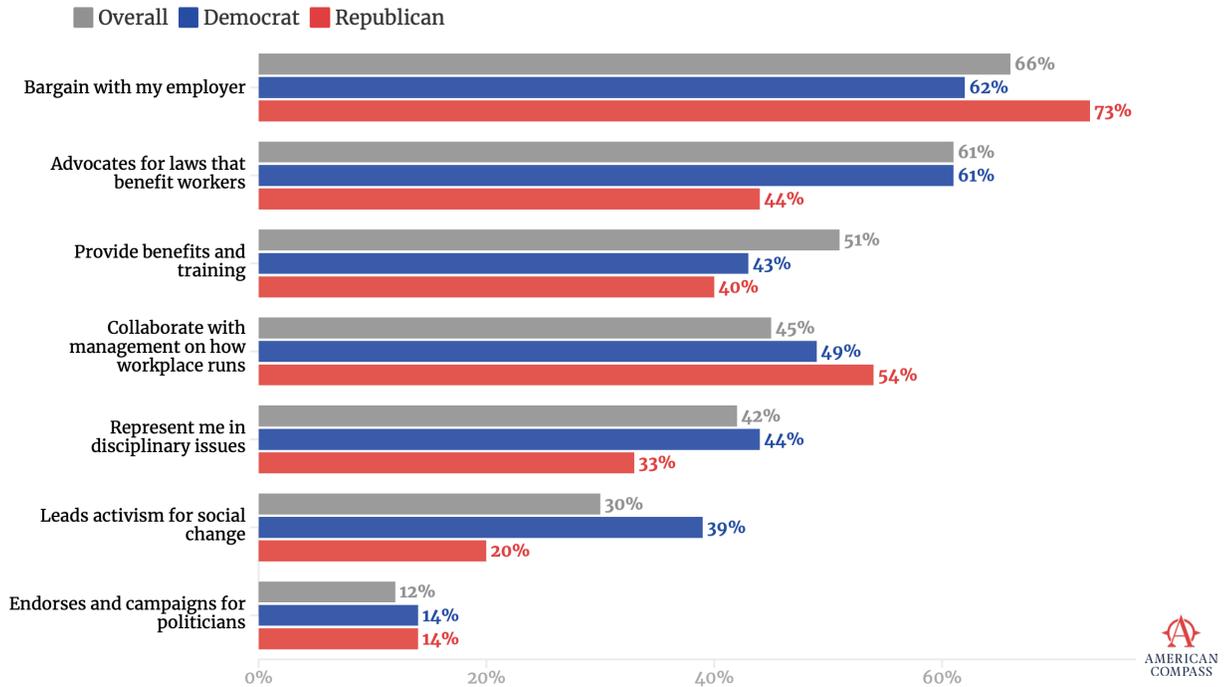
Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023); N = 758 American adults working at least 20 hrs/week
 Note: Excludes workers who say “My job would not be eligible for a union.”

While politics plays a major role in determining who supports a union, the role of politics plays a clearly corrosive role within in unions. Among the non-supervisory workers at for-profit companies who say they would vote for a union, its involvement in politics ranks last among the reasons they would support one. Among those who say they would vote against, its involvement in politics ranks first among their reasons for oppositions.

Remarkably, this response does not vary by party: Republicans and Democrats have nearly identical views.

FIGURE 13. What Do Workers Like About Unions? Not Politics

“Which of these are reasons why you would vote for a union?”

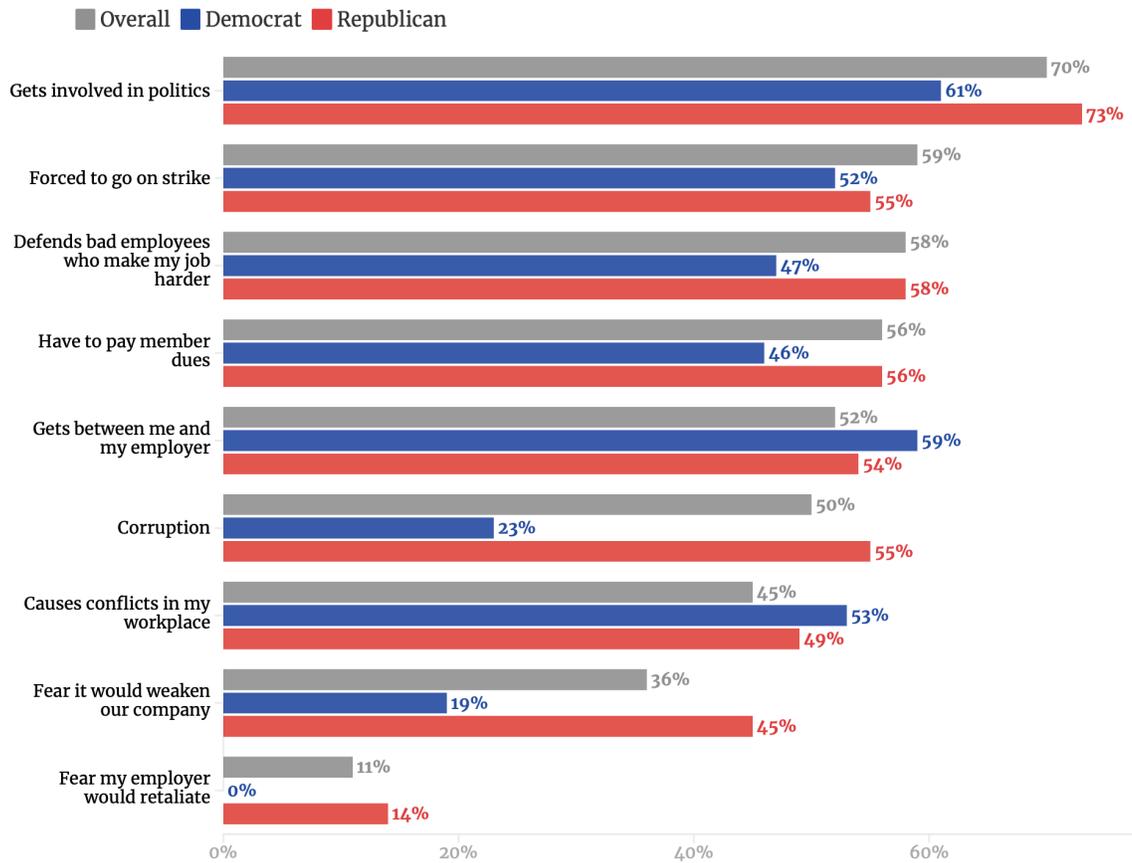


Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023); N = 145 American adults working at least 20 hrs/week
 Note: Workers are in for-profit companies and do not have supervisory responsibilities; said they would definitely vote for or lean toward a union.



FIGURE 14. What Don't Workers Like About Unions? Politics

"Which of these are reasons why you would vote against a union?"



Source: American Compass Labor Tracking Survey (2023); N = 105 American adults working at least 20 hrs/week
 Note: Workers are in for-profit companies and do not have supervisory responsibilities; said they would definitely vote against or lean against a union.



Separating the more popular economic function of unions from the unpopular political function may hold promise for depoliticizing them as an institution and broadening their appeal to workers.

ABOUT THE DATA

YouGov interviewed 1,058 employed respondents between the ages of 18 and 65 who were then matched down to a sample of 1,000 to produce the final dataset. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The sampling frame is a politically representative “modeled frame” of U.S. adults, based upon the American Community Survey (ACS) public use microdata file, public voter file records, the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration supplements, the 2020 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll, and the 2020 CES surveys, including demographics and 2020 presidential vote. The frame was subset on employed respondents between the ages of 18 and 65.

The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined, and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and region. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles.

The weights were then post-stratified on 2020 presidential vote choice as well as home ownership, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (4 categories), race (4 categories), and education (4 categories), to produce the final weight.

Definition of “Class”

In analysis of the results, “Class” is defined by education and income:

- “Lower” (N=165): less than a four-year degree and household income below \$30K; or did not report household income and do not have a high school diploma.
- “Working” (N=319): less than a four-year degree and household income \$30K–\$80K; or did not report household income and have either a high school diploma or some college but no degree.
- “Middle” (N=401): four-year degree or more and household income \$30K–\$80K; or household income \$80K–\$150K; or did not report household income and have a 2-year or 4-year college degree.
- “Upper” (N=74): household income above \$150K; or did not report household income and have a post-graduate degree.

Respondents with a four-year college degree or more but household income below \$30K are excluded from analyses using the “Class” variable.

Definition of “Secure Job”

A job is defined as “secure” if the worker responds to four questions as follows:

1. *Over the past year, how much did you earn from your job? If you have been at your job for less than a year, estimate how much you would expect to earn in your first year.*
 - Selects “\$40,000– \$49,999” or higher
2. *Which benefits are available to you through your job? Select all that apply.*
 - Selects “Health insurance” and
 - Selects “Paid time off (PTO) or vacation” or “Paid sick time”
3. *How confident are you in your ability to estimate your earnings over the next twelve months?*
 - Selects “Very confident” or “Somewhat confident”
4. *Please select the option that best represents your work schedule in a typical week.*
 - Selects “I have a regular work schedule that is generally the same from week to week” or “My work schedule varies from week to week, but I am satisfied with my control over it”



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