At 65%, Approval of Labor Unions in U.S. Remains High

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- 65% of Americans approve of labor unions
- Latest reading is highest since 2003
- Democrats' approval is 83%, Republicans' 45%; independents' is 64%
WASHINGTON, D.C. -- As Labor Day approaches and economic conditions in the U.S. remain tenuous, Americans' 65% approval of labor unions is once again the highest it has been since 2003. Public support for labor unions has been generally rising since hitting its lowest point of 48% in 2009, during the Great Recession.

Gallup's initial reading of the public's support for labor unions was 72% in 1936, at the advent of the modern U.S. organized labor movement, and approval peaked at 75% in 1953 and 1957. The lowest ratings to date have been recorded during particularly weak economic times. This includes the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s -- when support fell below 60% for the first time -- and 2009 through 2012, when it hovered around 50%.

While the latest reading, from a July 30-Aug. 12 poll, comes at a time of severe economic upheaval, this has so far not had a negative impact on the public's view of unions, as it is little changed from last year's reading.

Americans' support for unions is politically polarized, as it has been since 2001, when Gallup began tracking the measure annually. Democrats' current 83% approval of labor unions is the highest on record since then. At the same time, 45% of Republicans and
64% of independents approve of unions.

In 2009, 66% of Democrats, 29% of Republicans and 44% of independents viewed labor unions favorably. Since the Great Recession, union approval has recovered among all three major party groups.

Membership in Labor Unions Remains Steady

Americans' reported membership in a labor union remains similar to recent years, with 10% saying they are a union member. Overall, 16% say there is a union member in their household.

Americans' Labor Union Membership

Are you, or is anyone in your household, a member of a labor union?

Yes, respondent in labor union  7
Yes, other household member in labor union  6
Both respondent and other household member in labor union  3

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Implications

Americans' approval of labor unions has been consistently high for several years and has more than recovered from low points around the Great Recession. Even as the U.S. grapples with the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting economic crisis, which includes record-high unemployment, support for unions remains strong.

Previous Gallup data have found that while Americans largely think unions help their own workers, they are less inclined to say they are helpful to the U.S. economy overall. As such, support for unions has been weaker during challenging economic times.

Americans' continued high approval of unions may result from a current focus on issues other than the economy. Generally, when economic indicators have been negative, the economy has been viewed as the most important problem facing the nation, but that is not the case now. The public is divided in its assessments of the biggest U.S. problem, with roughly one in five each citing the coronavirus, the economy, race relations and leadership. Yet, if the economy continues to struggle and it eclipses other issues in importance, Americans' views of unions could very well worsen.

View complete question responses and trends (PDF download).

Learn more about how the Gallup Poll Social Series works.
Results for this Gallup poll are based on telephone interviews conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2020, with a random sample of 1,031 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. For results based on the total sample of national adults, the margin of sampling error is ±4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting.

Each sample of national adults includes a minimum quota of 70% cellphone respondents and 30% landline respondents, with additional minimum quotas by time zone within region. Landline and cellular telephone numbers are selected using random-digit-dial methods.