

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Public attitudes toward organized labor

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Abstract

Objective: Despite declining and historically low membership, labor unions remain important and relevant actors in American politics. Accordingly, we have learned a good deal about the economic and political consequences of labor unions and union membership. However, we know less about the dynamics, determinants, and political consequences of public attitudes toward organized labor.

Methods: I use a variety of survey data to (1) track public support for labor unions over time, (2) to examine the microlevel determinants of labor attitudes, and (3) to examine how such attitudes shape voting behavior in national elections.

Results: First, I show that American public opinion has consistently been “pro-labor” and that such sentiment is growing in recent years, despite historically low levels of union membership. Second, I show that while the strongest individual-level correlate of union support is labor union affiliation, pluralities, and in some cases majorities, of nonunion-affiliated Americans hold “pro-labor” attitudes as well. Finally, I show that labor union attitudes significantly predict (among both union and nonunion-affiliated Americans) support for the Democratic presidential candidate, net of partisanship, ideology, core political values, and macroeconomic conditions.

Conclusion: Overall, these results show that low levels of union membership do not imply an “anti-union” mass public. These findings also demonstrate that attitudes toward labor unions are politically consequential.

Despite decades of declining membership and waning political clout (Rosenfeld 2014), organized labor remains a relevant actor in American politics. Indeed, numerous studies show that where labor unions are stronger, we observe greater political and economic equality (e.g., Becher and Stegmueller 2021; Bucci 2018; Farber et al. 2021; Flavin 2018). Labor unions also have important electoral consequences. This is evidenced by a body of work showing that unions boost political participation (e.g., Kerrissey and Schoefer 2018; Flavin and Radcliff 2011; Radcliff and Davis 2000), particularly among underresourced citizens (e.g., Francia and Orr 2014; Leighley and Nagler 2007; Kim 2016; Rosenfeld 2010) and that unions are capable, via their communication and socialization efforts, of shaping their members’ issue attitudes (e.g., Donnelly 2016; Frymer and Grumbach 2021; Han and Ye 2022; Kim and Margalit 2017; Lyon 2020), as well as their voting behavior and partisan orientations (e.g., Arndt and Rennwald 2016; Francia and Bigelow 2010;

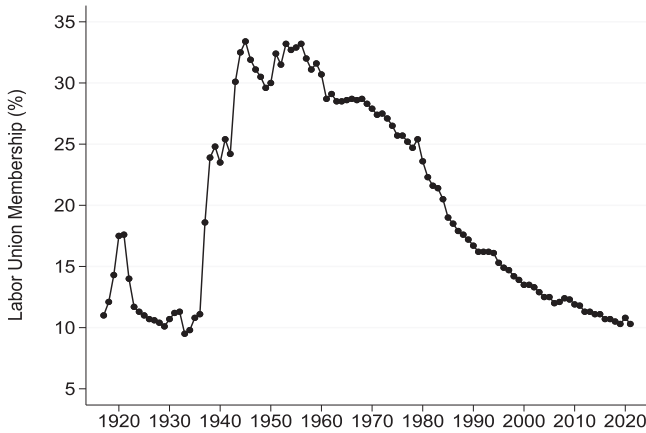


FIGURE 1 U.S. overall labor union membership, 1917–2021.

Note: This figure shows annual union density (percentage of workers who belong to a union) from 1917 through 2021. Data from 1917 to 2017 was compiled by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) and was updated through 2021 with data from <https://www.unionstats.com/>. As of this writing, 2021 was the most recent year of data.

Macdonald 2021). While we have learned a good deal about the political and economic consequences of labor unions and union membership (see Ahlquist 2017; Rosenfeld 2019, for relevant reviews), we know far less about public opinion toward labor unions themselves, and how such attitudes may matter politically. I address this oversight here, focusing on attitudes toward labor unions/organized labor as *both* an independent and dependent variable. I use a variety of survey data to show (1) that large numbers of Americans view organized labor favorably, including people who are neither union members nor residents of a union household, and (2) that attitudes toward organized labor are politically consequential, significantly influencing ordinary Americans' (regardless of their personal union affiliation) voting behavior, net of partisanship, ideology, core political values, and macroeconomic conditions. Overall, these findings suggest that even in an era of labor union decline, the broader mass public's feelings toward this diminished but still relevant organization matter.¹

This article proceeds as follows. I first examine the dynamics of U.S. public opinion toward organized labor over the past 70 years, contrasting this with the overall decline in union membership over a similar time period. I next use survey data to examine the correlates of union attitudes and how public opinion toward organized labor differs by individuals' labor union affiliation. I then use survey data to examine the political consequences of labor union attitudes by testing whether they shape how ordinary Americans vote in national elections.

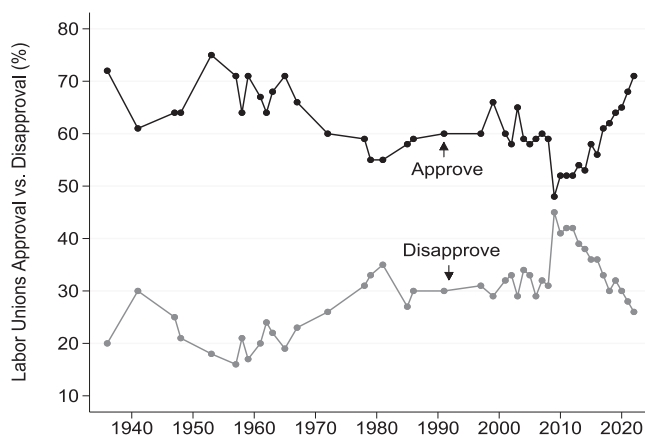
UNION MEMBERSHIP VERSUS UNION FAVORABILITY

In this section, I contrast union membership and public opinion toward labor unions over time. As shown in Figure 1, U.S. union membership has been declining for decades. From a peak of nearly 1 in 3 workers belonging to a union in the 1950s, this dropped to barely 1 in 10 by the end of the 2010s. This has been driven largely by the private sector, where the vast majority of Americans are employed. This private sector union decline has been offset somewhat by growth (particularly in the 1960s and 1970s) in the public sector (Anzia and Moe 2016). However, the proliferation of state-level “right to work” laws in the 2010s in conjunction with the Supreme Court’s 2018 ruling in *Janus v. AFSCME*, which curtailed public sector unions’ ability to retain membership and collect dues from the workers that they represent, poses a threat to the broader labor movement (Finger and Hartney 2021; Hertel-Fernandez 2018). In short, there are fewer Americans in labor unions today than in decades past. As a consequence, organized labor has less political power, influence, and clout than during its mid-20th century peak (Rosenfeld 2014).

¹ Throughout the article, I use terms such as “labor union attitudes” and “public opinion toward organized labor” interchangeably. Both refer conceptually to how people view, perceive, and/or evaluate labor unions as a societal group. Also, unless otherwise noted, I use the term “union-affiliated” to mean that an individual is a current labor union member themselves or resides in a household with other union members.

FIGURE 2 Public approval of labor unions, 1936–2022.

Note: This figure shows responses to the question of “do you approve or disapprove of labor unions?” Responses of “no opinion,” which are less than 10 percent of the sample, are not displayed here. Responses are averaged in years where this question was asked multiple times. Source is various Gallup surveys from 1936 through 2022 (some years missing); <https://news.gallup.com/poll/12751/labor-unions.aspx>.



Low union membership can coexist, however, with pro-union sentiment. As shown in Figure 2, the percentage of Americans who approve of labor unions has consistently eclipsed the percentage who disapprove of them. Public disapproval of labor unions peaked in the early 2010s, when Republican politicians such as then Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker marshaled Obama-era backlash and “waged war” against various public sector unions by embracing anti-union rhetoric (Kane and Newman 2019) that pitted corrupt union bosses and undeserving overpaid public sector employees against the broader middle and working classes (Cramer 2016). Since this time however, public approval of unions has rebounded and is approaching its previous heights, observed during the 1950s and 1960s.

It is unclear as to why public opinion has moved in a “pro-union” direction since the Great Recession, and comprehensively answering such a question is beyond the scope of this article, but it seems reasonable to speculate. One possibility is a backlash to the aggressive anti-union policies advanced by various Republican state governments. Another could be Republicans’ heightened post-2015 focus on race, immigration, and other cultural grievances, relative to economic “class warfare” (Bartels 2018). Other reasons could include the rise of vocally “pro-worker” politicians such as Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, growing economic inequality (Newman and Kane 2017), as well as the Covid-19 pandemic’s illumination of the vulnerabilities and “voicelessness” that many workers face. Regardless of the exact reason(s), the larger point is that declining union membership is not necessarily indicative of an “anti-union” mass public.

WHO SUPPORTS ORGANIZED LABOR?

In this section, I explore the correlates of labor union support among the American mass public. I do so by using survey data from the 2020 American National Election Study (ANES), a large nationally representative sample of the U.S. adult citizen population. My dependent variable is a feeling thermometer rating of labor unions. This ranges from 0 to 100, with a value of 0 indicating the coldest/least favorable attitudes, a value of 50 indicating neutral feelings, and a value of 100 indicating the warmest/most favorable attitudes.

As previously noted, few studies have focused on labor union attitudes as a dependent variable. Those that have (e.g., Newman and Kane 2017; Lyon 2020) show that labor union affiliation, that is, membership in a labor union and/or residence in a household with other union members, is among the strongest demographic determinants of support for organized labor and “pro-union” policies. As such, I focus attention on respondents’ union affiliation, comparing people with no union affiliation to those who are currently union affiliated, that is, those individuals who reside in a union household with other union members and people who are current labor union members themselves. Following the approach of these aforementioned studies, I also account for a set of relevant demographic controls that could plausibly predict both

union support and respondents' personal union affiliation. All of these variables are dichotomous (0 vs. 1), allowing for direct comparison with one another.²

As shown in Table 1, the largest and most consistently significant demographic determinant of labor union support is labor union affiliation. On average (the results vary slightly across model specifications in Table 1), union-affiliated respondents feel between 10 and 14 points "warmer" toward labor unions as a group than their nonunion-affiliated counterparts. In column 1 of Table 1, a model that does not include any demographic control variables, the results show that respondents who lack any current union affiliation rate labor unions at a value of approximately 57 (on a 0–100 scale). In contrast, people in a union household but who are not members themselves, rate labor unions at a value of 69, while union members rate labor unions at a value of approximately 72. The results are similar in column 2, which accounts for a host of other demographic factors that could plausibly predict membership in a union and/or residence in a union household, and in column 3, which includes an additional control for Democratic Party identification. Overall, the results in Table 1 suggest that public opinion toward organized labor appears to be driven, by a substantively significant degree, by economic self-interest and a potential "union social identity."

Even though union-affiliated Americans feel considerably "warmer" toward labor unions as a group than do their nonunion-affiliated counterparts, people without any current union affiliation, that is, those who are neither union members nor residents of a union household, still lean in the "pro-labor" direction. This is evidenced by the fact that close to a majority of nonunion-affiliated respondents (48 percent) in the 2020 ANES rate labor unions at a value greater than 50 and that a considerably smaller minority (23 percent) report that feel "cold" toward labor unions, that is, explicitly rate them below 50 (on a 0–100 scale).³

In Table 2, I further explore the divide in labor union attitudes across union and nonunion-affiliated Americans, using survey data from the 2019 Voter Study Group panel and from the 2021 General Social Survey. In Table 2, I compare the percentage of respondents who adopt a "pro" versus "neutral" versus "anti" labor position.⁴

Overall the results show, similar to the 2020 ANES, that union-affiliated Americans are significantly more supportive of organized labor than their nonunion-affiliated counterparts. However, the percentage of nonunion-affiliated Americans with "pro-union" attitudes is significantly higher than the percentage with explicit "anti-union" attitudes. These data, combined with the Gallup data in Figure 2 and ANES data in Table 1, imply a latent "pro-labor" majority in the American mass public.

DO UNION ATTITUDES MATTER?

In this section, I explore the political consequences of public attitudes toward organized labor. I again turn to the ANES. I specifically test whether union attitudes (measured with a feeling thermometer rating of labor unions) are consequential by examining if they predict voting behavior in national elections.⁵

² See the [Supporting Information](#) for details on how all variables were created and coded. Replication data and code will be made publicly available in the Harvard Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/>).

³ Data from the 1964–2016 Cumulative ANES (the first-year labor union feelings were queried) yield similar results. In this data set, 43 percent of nonunion-affiliated respondents rated labor unions above 50 (on a 0–97 scale), 24 percent rated them at the midpoint of 50, and 33 percent rated them below a value of 50.

⁴ Both data sets in Table 2, but especially the 2021 GSS, lack a sufficient number of respondents to separately (and reliably) examine labor attitudes among people with no union affiliation whatsoever, people in union households who are not members themselves, and people who are current union members. This is not problematic, however, given that the difference in labor union attitudes between union members and people who reside only in a union household is quite small (see Table 1).

⁵ I use data from the 1988–2016 ANES in Table 3 because two of the four survey questions used to measure the core value of traditionalism, which was first asked in 1986, are not asked in the 2020 ANES. The results are very similar however if I extend the ANES data to 2020 and drop the traditionalism variable or use a two-question version of it instead.

TABLE 1 Correlates of labor union attitudes, 2020

	Dependent Variable (DV) = feeling thermometer: labor unions		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Union Household (HH) resident	11.842*** (1.740)	11.047*** (1.756)	9.736*** (1.765)
Union member	14.600*** (1.371)	13.404*** (1.609)	13.236*** (1.650)
White		-4.429*** (0.982)	-1.515 (0.956)
Female		2.854*** (0.843)	1.764** (0.840)
Millennial/Gen Z		1.289 (0.898)	1.679* (0.881)
College degree		-1.049 (0.854)	-3.038*** (0.842)
Married		-3.062*** (0.922)	-1.873** (0.913)
Homeowner		-2.042** (1.018)	-1.600 (1.008)
Income over \$100,000		-0.986 (0.976)	-1.258 (0.965)
Public sector		2.556** (1.137)	1.913* (1.135)
Attend Church weekly		-2.375* (1.237)	-0.286 (1.190)
Urban area		4.148*** (0.941)	2.617*** (0.929)
Right to Work (RTW) state		-3.570*** (0.885)	-2.262** (0.887)
Democrat			13.682*** (0.856)
Constant	56.875*** (0.439)	62.493*** (1.415)	54.367*** (1.425)
Observations	7282	6434	6432
R ²	0.039	0.089	0.157

Note. Dependent variable is a feeling thermometer rating of labor unions (0–100; cold warm). All independent variables are coded to be categorical (0 vs. 1). The omitted reference category is nonunion household (respondent is not a union member nor is anyone else in their household). Source is the 2020 ANES, survey weights applied. OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$;

** $p < 0.05$;

* $p < 0.1$; two-tailed.

TABLE 2 Public opinion toward organized labor by union household status

	GSS, 2021			VSG, 2019		
	Workers need strong trade unions to protect their interests			Make it easier for workers to organize		
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Support	Neutral	Oppose
Nonunion HH	45.8	33.0	21.2	42.0	31.2	26.8
Union household	68.0	21.3	10.7	63.2	23.8	13.0
All respondents	49.0	31.3	19.8	45.5	29.9	24.5

Note: This table shows the percentage of respondents who agree with the above statements (vs. disagree or taking a neutral position), by union household status. Sources are the 2021 GSS and the 2019 VSG, survey weights applied for both. Rows might not add up exactly to 100 percent due to rounding. GSS total $N = 1,697$; VSG total $N = 6,715$.

Abbreviations: GSS, General Social Survey; VSG, Voter Study Group.

In Table 3, I regress voting behavior (support for the Democratic presidential candidate versus the Republican presidential candidate) on labor union attitudes, while also accounting for several important determinants of voting behavior (e.g., Goren 2013; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). I specifically control for partisanship, ideological self-placement, and the core political values of egalitarianism and moral traditionalism. I also account for state fixed effects, which helps control for factors such as how much money the various campaigns spent in each state during a particular election contest, and year fixed effects, which can account for various election-specific factors such as the incumbency status of each candidate and national economic conditions. Overall, the results in Table 3 show that union attitudes also matter in terms of how ordinary Americans vote (columns 1 and 2) and how they feel about the major party candidates (columns 3 and 4).

The results from the probit model in column 1 show that a shift in labor union support from its minimum value to its maximum value ($0 \rightarrow 1$) is associated with an approximately 0.13 shift in the probability of voting for the Democratic presidential candidate (over the Republican). The OLS model in column 3 shows that a minimum to maximum (coldest \rightarrow warmest) shift in labor union attitudes ($0 \rightarrow 1$) is associated with an approximately 17 point shift in warm feelings toward the Democratic Party candidate's (relative to the Republican).

In columns 2 and 4 of Table 3, I interact labor union attitudes with a dummy variable indicating respondents' union affiliation ($0 =$ no union affiliation; $1 =$ union household/union member). The statistically insignificant interaction terms suggest that attitudes toward organized labor matter among both union and nonunion-affiliated citizens, even though "pro-union" attitudes are significantly more prevalent among the former group.

In Figure 3a,b, I plot the predicted values from the regression models in columns 1 and 3 from Table 3, visualizing the (noninteractive) relationship between union attitudes and presidential candidate support. The results from the vote choice model (Figure 3a) show that a shift in labor union feelings from the coldest possible value to the warmest possible value ($0 \rightarrow 1$) is associated with a 0.13 increase in the probability of voting for the Democratic presidential candidate (over the Republican candidate), from 0.46 to 0.59. A more reasonable and realistic shift from approximately 1 standard deviation below the mean value of labor union feelings (0.56 on a 0–1 scale) to approximately 1 standard deviation above the mean (from 0.30 to 0.80) is associated with a 0.07 increase in the probability of voting for the Democratic presidential candidate (over the Republican candidate), from 0.50 to 0.57.

The results from the candidate feelings model (Figure 3b) show that a shift in labor union feelings from the coldest possible value to the warmest possible value ($0 \rightarrow 1$) is associated with an approximately 17-point increase in warmth toward the Democratic presidential candidate (relative to the Republican candidate), from -5.0 to $+11.9$, with values above (below) 0 on the y -axis reflecting warmer feelings toward the Democratic (Republican) candidate. A shift from approximately 1 standard deviation below

TABLE 3 Labor union attitudes and presidential voting behavior, 1988–2016

	Vote choice (0 vs. 1)		Candidate feelings (–97 to +97)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Feeling thermometer: labor unions	0.820*** (0.089)	0.858*** (0.098)	16.886*** (1.540)	17.547*** (1.656)
Union household		0.062 (0.172)		0.343 (2.581)
FT: Labor unions × Union HH		–0.147 (0.251)		–2.140 (3.821)
Partisanship	–3.056*** (0.072)	–3.050*** (0.073)	–84.209*** (1.253)	–84.262*** (1.259)
Ideology	–1.497*** (0.119)	–1.499*** (0.119)	–31.678*** (1.967)	–31.651*** (1.972)
Egalitarianism	1.339*** (0.110)	1.338*** (0.110)	22.827*** (1.807)	22.824*** (1.816)
Traditionalism	–1.649*** (0.110)	–1.642*** (0.110)	–28.594*** (1.666)	–28.491*** (1.679)
Constant	1.765*** (0.188)	1.750*** (0.188)	42.076*** (3.152)	41.831*** (3.156)
State fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	12,696	12,661	17,475	17,406
Pseudo- R^2 / R^2	0.616	0.616	0.605	0.605

Note: Dependent variables are coded so that higher values indicate support for the Democratic candidate (vs. the Republican). All independent variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1 (Union HH is dichotomous; 0 vs. 1). Source is the Cumulative ANES (1988–2016), survey weights applied. Probit (columns 1 and 2) and OLS (columns 3 and 4) coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$;

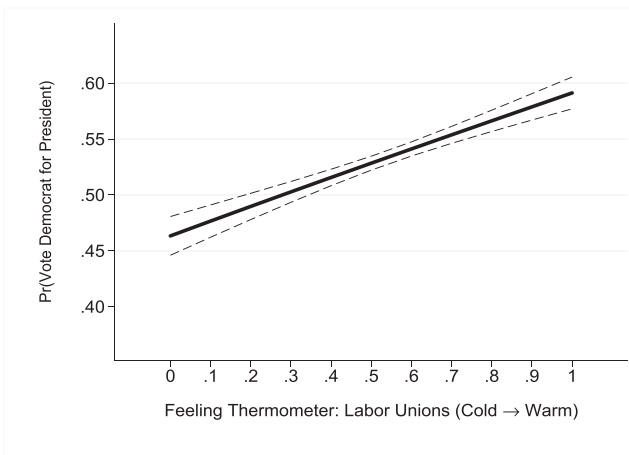
** $p < 0.05$;

* $p < 0.1$; two-tailed.

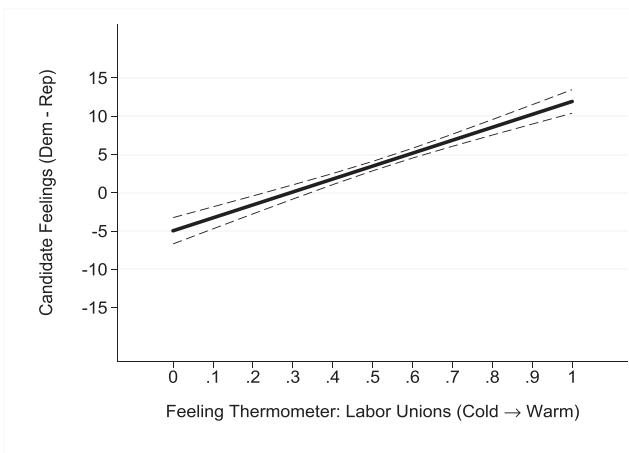
the mean value of labor union feelings (0.56 on a 0–1 scale) to approximately 1 standard deviation above the mean (from 0.30 to 0.80) is associated with an approximately 9-point increase in Democratic candidate warmth (relative to the Republican), from +0.1 to +8.6.⁶

Overall, the magnitude of labor union attitudes, measured in these analyses with a feeling thermometer, is not especially large but it is also not trivial. Indeed, even small changes in voting behavior can make difference between victory and defeat, particularly in competitive swing states. Moreover, it is possible for union attitudes to matter even more in future elections, especially if political candidates make an effort to “prime” these attitudes (e.g., Bartels 2006; Tesler 2015) by emphasizing issues related to unions and/or workers’ rights and making them more central to their campaigns, as Bernie Sanders did during the 2016 Democratic Party primary contest (Lyon 2019).

⁶ Unlike the 2020 ANES, the Cumulative ANES top codes feeling thermometer responses of 97, 98, 99, and 100 into a value of “97” instead of letting these variables range from 0 to 100.



(a) Vote Choice



(b) Candidate Feelings

FIGURE 3 Labor union attitudes and presidential voting behavior, 1988–2016.

Note: (a) The predicted probability of voting for the Democratic presidential candidate (over the Republican presidential candidate). (b) The predicted differences in candidate feeling thermometer ratings (Democratic presidential candidate—Republican presidential candidate), based on Model 1 (vote choice) and Model 3 (candidate feelings) in Table 3, respectively. Thick black lines represent predicted values. Dashed lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

CONCLUSION AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Overall, these results help us to better understand the dynamics, determinants, and consequences of public opinion toward organized labor. One important finding from these results is that a potential pro-labor majority exists in the mass public, despite historically low levels of union membership. This suggests that even if union membership fails to return anywhere near to its mid—20th century heights, political candidates, especially those who belong to the comparatively “union-friendly” Democratic Party, may find fertile ground by running on a pro-worker/pro-labor platform.

During a period of sustained Democratic Party success, in the New Deal era roughly spanning the 1930s through the 1960s, union membership was high (see Figure 1) and labor unions were popular among the mass public (see Figure 2). During the 1980s, following Ronald Reagan’s ascendance and the breakup of the once dominant New Deal electoral coalition, the Democratic Party lost three consecutive presidential elections by wide margins. While there were numerous reasons for this, two contributing factors were likely the decline, compared to the 1960s, in labor union membership (see Figure 1) and decreased public support for organized labor (see Figure 2). Since 1992, Democrats have improved their fortunes in presidential elections, winning the popular vote in seven of eight contests and capturing the White House five times. Again, numerous factors can help account for this, but it seems plausible that Democrats’ post 1988 national electoral success, relative to the preceding two decades, were not driven by

increased union membership (which has fallen to historic lows), but rather were driven, in small part, by increased (excepting the years immediately following the Great Recession) public support for organized labor.

These analyses are not without limitations. For one, a feeling thermometer rating of labor unions is a satisfactory measure of union attitudes but is less than ideal. The ANES (and other academic surveys) would do well to include additional questions tapping citizens' attitudes toward organized labor. For instance, most surveys do not ask separately about attitudes toward public and private sector unions nor do they ask respondents to differentiate between union members and union leadership. It also seems plausible that ordinary Americans would view the rank and file of labor unions more favorably than union leadership, and that such attitudes could differently affect citizens' political attitudes and behavior, but this is an empirical question best left to future work. It would also be valuable to examine the causes and consequences of public attitudes toward strikes and work stoppages, which are among labor unions' most visible and controversial tactics.

In sum, organized labor is broadly popular, despite union membership being at its lowest level in decades. Both the federal government and state governments have the ability, through legislation and regulation, to bolster labor unions, but even absent such action, public opinion may help to breathe life back into the labor movement, one that appears to have made some inroads (at the time of this writing) in organizing massive service industry corporations such as Starbucks and Amazon. This may reflect a fledgling 21st century labor movement, but this is far from certain and entirely speculative at this point. In short, labor unions matter for American politics, as do public attitudes toward this diminished, but still relevant organization.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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