

Nebraska's Labor Movement

Exploring Union Membership, Perceptions, and Efficacy

In 2022, U.S. approval of labor unions was at its highest point since 1965;¹ however, apathy among labor union members persists and has significant implications for the labor movement more broadly. Although the share of U.S. workers who belong to a union has fallen over time, the majority of Americans view this as a bad thing for working people (59%) and the country overall (54%).² In an effort to better understand the labor movement in Nebraska, the William Brennan Institute for Labor Studies (WBILS) partnered with the Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR), both housed in the College of Public Affairs and Community Service at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, to study union membership and participation in Nebraska and better understand members' attitudes towards unions and union efficacy.

UNO CPAR developed an online survey using Qualtrics Survey Software. The survey was distributed to key labor organizations in Nebraska and was also open to members of the public via distribution on social media. The survey was open from September 2023 through February 2024. In total, the survey received 600 responses.

74% of respondents are currently members of a union

26% are not currently in a union

Among survey respondents, 43% have belonged to a union for less than five years, 19% between five to ten years, 13% between ten to twenty years, and 25% over 20 years. The survey demonstrates that, overall, respondents have a high regard for unions and believe workers are better off when affiliated with a union. This is true among both respondents who are currently members of a union and those who do not belong to a union.

Respondents Who Belong to a Union

82%

believe unions are a positive force in this country



72%

believe unions are a positive force in this state



Respondents Who Do Not Belong to a Union

76%

believe unions are a positive force in this country



59%

believe unions are a positive force in this state



¹ McCarthy, J. (2022, August 30). U.S. approval of labor unions at highest point since 1965. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/398303/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx>

² Van Green, T. (2024, March 12). Majorities of adults see decline of union membership as bad for the U.S. and working people. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/12/majorities-of-adults-see-decline-of-union-membership-as-bad-for-the-us-and-working-people/>

Respondents were asked about the large reduction in the percentage of workers represented by unions over the past several decades and whether this is good or bad for working people. Among respondents who belong to a union, nearly 60% believe this reduction in representation is very bad for working people. Interestingly, among respondents who do not currently belong to a union, 58% view this reduction in representation as very bad for working people as well. Findings indicate that, regardless of involvement in a union, respondents share a positive view of unions and recognize the benefits of being in a union for working people.

89% of respondents who currently belong to a union are glad labor unions exist



Survey findings also indicate that union members value the sense of belonging and community that comes with being in a union. Among respondents, 60% feel a strong sense of belonging to their union and 55% have strong bonds to their union that would be hard to cut off. The data suggest that union members value community and collective commitment to a cause as experienced through union membership. Unsurprisingly then, 81% of respondents believe that workers need strong trade unions to protect their interests and 77% believe in the goals of organized labor.

In terms of union efficacy, survey findings demonstrate that unions are overall highly effective in advocating for, protecting, and improving workers' rights. Over 60% of respondents agree that their union is effective at improving their pay, improving their physical work environment, and protecting their employment security. According to respondents, the top benefits of belonging to a union include access to pensions and retirement security and access to affordable healthcare and medical benefits.

77% of respondents who currently belong to a union believe in the goals of organized labor

Survey findings suggest that there is support for unions and the labor movement more broadly in Nebraska. This support is evident in how union members perceive the purpose and effectiveness of unions. However, this support does not necessarily translate into members' willingness to assume leadership roles within their local union chapters. When asked about their involvement in union leadership, 23% of respondents currently hold a leadership position in their local chapter, 10% have held a position in the past, and 67% have never held a leadership position. Although identifying the next generation of union leadership may present challenges, the labor movement overall retains strong support in Nebraska.

According to survey respondents, union membership offers many benefits.

- ✓ Job security and stability
- ✓ Competitive and fair pay
- ✓ Affordable healthcare and medical benefits
- ✓ Access to pensions and retirement benefits
- ✓ Sense of belonging and collective voice
- ✓ Education and training opportunities
- ✓ Equal opportunities and representation
- ✓ Improved safety and working conditions