WORKTRENDS

AMERICANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT WORK, EMPLOYERS, AND GOVERNMENT

Exploring 2024 and 2020 Election-Year Longitudinal Trends in Support for Minimum Wage, College Loan Forgiveness, and Paid Leave Among U.S. Workers

Republicans Appear More Supportive of Policies for Some Americans Over Time

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Introduction

To better understand the public's attitudes about work, employers, and the government, and improve workplace practices and policies, the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey produces *Work Trends* surveys on a regular basis to inform employers, union leaders, policymakers, community members, the media, and academic communities about critical workforce and educational issues facing Americans and American businesses. Measuring and reporting on public opinion using rigorous survey research methods is an essential facet of representative democracy, as it is a reliable snapshot of the public's opinions, experiences, and behaviors at a moment in time.

In December 2024, as the Trump Administration prepared to return to the White House with Republican control of Congress, Heldrich Center researchers polled U.S. workers (Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, 2025) about policy proposals related to the economy, education, and work. These policy proposals were also the subject of survey questions asked of workers in December 2020, after Joe Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election, and as COVID-19 vaccines began rolling out across the nation (Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, 2021).[1]

The U.S. labor force (workers who are employed full or part time, are on temporary leave [furlough], or are unemployed and looking for work) was asked about the following policy proposals discussed during the 2020 and 2024 presidential campaigns:

> **Raising the federal minimum wage to at least $15 per hour**,

> **Eliminating college loan debt for low- and moderate-income individuals**, and

> **Ensuring workers can take paid family leave when needed**.

Workers were asked if they strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree that these policies are actions that government should take. This brief summarizes the responses of workers who said they strongly or somewhat agree with each policy.

These nationally representative *Work Trends* surveys measured similarities and differences in opinions of workers by various subgroups of the U.S. labor force, including household income, age, gender, and political party identification. Documenting cross-sectional observations and comparing trends in the public's opinions and attitudes over time, especially during times of economic and political transition, and of important segments of the population, such as U.S. workers, are essential to evidence-based and democratic policymaking. This issue brief outlines the three policy proposals as noted above discussed during the 2020 and 2024 presidential campaigns, providing background on each policy and highlighting changes in U.S. workers' support based on polling data from both periods.

Overall, there was broad support for key economic policies such as raising the federal minimum wage, eliminating student loan debt for low- and moderate-income individuals, and ensuring paid family leave remains strong among U.S. workers. Deeper analysis revealed shifting perspectives across demographic and political lines between the December 2020 and December 2024 surveys. Further research that disaggregates opinions by multiple demographic subgroups, such as political party identification by age, might explain these observations. Notably, there appears to be an increase in Republican support for raising the federal minimum wage and forgiving college loan debt for low- and moderate-income individuals since 2020 — trends that may signal shifts in the Republican Party's makeup today, as well as responses to evolving economic conditions. These trends highlight evolving attitudes toward economic equity and the government's role in addressing financing challenges facing working Americans. With a new administration in place and potential policy shifts on the horizon, the direction of U.S. workers' opinions and the likelihood of policies being enacted may continue to change in the years ahead.

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[1] Additional policy proposals were asked in 2020 and 2024 that are not included in this analysis.

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Government Should Raise the Federal Minimum Wage to at Least $15 per Hour

The federal minimum wage currently stands at $7.25 per hour, where it has remained since July 2009 (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). As of January 1, 2025, 30 states have a minimum wage greater than the federal minimum wage, 13 states have a minimum wage equal to the federal minimum wage, and 7 states have either no state minimum wage or one that is lower than the federal minimum wage (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025). However, there have been changes to minimum wages for federal contractors. On March 14, 2025, the Trump Administration revoked a previous Biden-era executive order (Executive Order 14026) that had set the minimum wage for employees of federal contractors at $17.75 an hour, and is no longer enforcing or implementing the rule (The White House, 2025; U.S. Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, 2024). A 2021 Congressional Research Service report summarized the arguments for and against a minimum wage increase, as policymakers, business owners, and the public disagreed on the impacts that this policy would have on workers, employers, and the labor market (Donovan, 2021). Wages not keeping pace with inflation, effects on hiring, and effects on poverty rates are considerations that stakeholders make when weighing the benefits and disadvantages of minimum wage increases (Payne-Patterson & Maye, 2023).

While a majority of U.S. workers agree that the government should raise the federal minimum wage to at least $15 per hour, differing opinions across demographic groups are apparent, especially for groups that are expected to be less supportive overall of minimum wage laws. For example, 57% of workers living in households making less than $100,000 annually said they strongly agreed that the government should raise the federal minimum wage to $15 per hour in 2024, compared to 33% of workers earning more than $100,000 per year. A majority of female workers (59%) compared to male workers (41%) said they strongly agreed that the federal minimum wage should be increased to $15 per hour. Overall, Republicans demonstrated increasing levels of agreement that the federal minimum wage should be raised. In 2024, 60% of Republicans agreed with the policy, a significant jump from 36% in 2020. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Percent of the U.S. Labor Force Who Strongly Agree and Agree with the Federal Minimum Wage by Demographics, 2024 and 2020

% Strongly Agree (% Agree)		2024 631 U.S. Workers	2020 484 U.S. Workers
U.S. Workers		50% (78%)	48% (68%)
Household Income			
	Less than $100,000	57% (82%)	53% (72%)
	$100,000 and More	33% (69%)	43% (64%)
Age*			
	18 to 34	50% (81%)	52% (71%)
	35 to 54	51% (78%)	49% (70%)
	55 to 70	46% (70%)	42% (61%)
Gender**			
	Male	41% (70%)	40% (59%)
	Female	59% (86%)	57% (77%)
Political Party Identification**			
	Republican	29% (60%)	19% (36%)
	Democrat	70% (93%)	71% (89%)
	Independent	50% (81%)	43% (69%)

See page 6 for the notes for Table 1.

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Government Should Eliminate College Loan Debt for Low- and Moderate-Income Individuals

There are two main types of student loans: federal and private. Federal student loans, including parent loans, are funded by the U.S. government and administered by the U.S. Department of Education, while private student loans are provided by lenders such as banks, credit unions, state agencies, or schools (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). Federal loans comprise 92.2% of all student loan debt, while private loans account for the remaining 7.79% (Hanson, 2025). According to the Pew Research Center, one in four U.S. adults under age 40 have student loan debt (Fry & Cilluffo, 2024). As of the last quarter of 2024, the outstanding federal student loan balance stood at $1.777 trillion, with 42.7 million borrowers holding a federal loan debt (Fry & Cilluffo, 2024). As of March 21, 2025, the Trump Administration signed an executive order proposing to transfer management of the federal student loan portfolio to the Small Business Administration. This move introduces uncertainty regarding the future of the current Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, as it is unclear how or if the existing structure will be maintained under the new agency. Studies have shown that college loan debt likely has disproportionate impacts on lower-wage workers (Odumosu, 2023).

Most U.S. workers agree that government should eliminate college student loan debt for low- and moderate- income individuals, with support remaining steady at 65% in 2024 compared to 63% in 2020. By age, strong support among adults aged 18 to 34 remained consistent at just under half, yet among older workers aged 55 to 70, less than 30% strongly agreed in 2024. Just one-quarter of workers living in households making $100,000 or more annually said they strongly agreed with this policy proposal (24%) compared to 43% of workers earning less than $100,000 per year. The most notable shift in opinions occurred among Republican workers, with the percentage who strongly agreed that the government should eliminate student loan debt for low- and moderate-income individuals rising from 9% in 2020 to 23% in 2024, more than doubling over the four-year period. (See Table 2.)

Table 2: Percent of the U.S. Labor Force Who Strongly Agree and Agree with Eliminating College Loan Debt by Demographics, 2024 and 2020

% Strongly Agree (% Agree)		2024 631 U.S. Workers	2020 484 U.S. Workers
U.S. Workers		37% (65%)	36% (63%)
Household Income			
	Less than $100,000	43% (71%)	41% (70%)
	$100,000 and More	24% (53%)	31% (56%)
Age*			
	18 to 34	42% (74%)	44% (68%)
	35 to 54	36% (62%)	38% (68%)
	55 to 70	27% (57%)	23% (48%)
Gender**			
	Male	33% (62%)	29% (53%)
	Female	41% (70%)	44% (74%)
Political Party Identification**			
	Republican	23% (44%)	9% (31%)
	Democrat	50% (87%)	55% (85%)
	Independent	38% (66%)	37% (61%)

See page 6 for the notes for Table 2.

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Government Should Ensure Workers Can Take Paid Family Leave When Needed So They Can Care for Themselves, their Children, or Close Relatives

Paid family and medical leave is not mandated by the U.S. federal government, but 18 states and the District of Columbia have either passed legislation requiring the provision of paid leave for medical, caregiving, or parental leave, or offer workers the opportunity to purchase coverage (Mitchell, 2024; Center for American Progress, 2025). The federal Family and Medical Leave Act requires the provision of job-protected unpaid leave for workers who are bonding with a new or adopted child, or to care for the health needs of themselves or a family member. According to a 2023 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics analysis, among private industry workers, paid sick leave was available to 86% of union workers and 77% of non-union workers while paid family leave was available to 23% of union workers and 27% of non-union workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Because 50 million U.S. adults ages 25 to 54 in the labor force have at least one child in their household, with these and other U.S. workers caring for disabled or older family members, the arguments for and against paid family and medical leave are an important policy dialogue between policymakers, employers, and workers (Center for Hunger-Free Communities, 2023).

Most U.S. workers agreed that government should ensure that workers have paid family leave, though only a slight majority said they strongly agreed with government's role in doing so. There were significant differences among workers when tabulating strongly agree statements by household income, age, gender, and political party identification in 2024. For example, 60% of U.S. workers with an annual household income under $100,000 strongly agreed that government should ensure workers have paid family leave, compared to 42% of U.S. workers earning $100,000 or more (and this difference was not observed in 2020). A majority of 18– to 34-year-old workers (58%) said they strongly agreed, compared to fewer 55- to 70-year-old workers (41%). Just 44% of male workers strongly agreed with the policy, compared to 63% of female workers. In 2020, 21% of Republican workers said they strongly agreed that the government should ensure workers have access to paid family leave; in 2024, 35% of Republican workers strongly agreed with the policy. (See Table 3.)

Table 3: Percent of the U.S. Labor Force Who Strongly Agree and Agree with Paid Family Leave by Demographics, 2024 and 2020

% Strongly Agree (% Agree)		2024 631 U.S. Workers	2020 484 U.S. Workers
U.S. Workers		54% (86%)	50% (83%)
Household Income			
	Less than $100,000	60% (88%)	53% (85%)
	$100,000 and More	42% (82%)	47% (81%)
Age*			
	18 to 34	58% (88%)	52% (85%)
	35 to 54	56% (90%)	55% (85%)
	55 to 70	41% (73%)	39% (80%)
Gender**			
	Male	44% (80%)	43% (81%)
	Female	63% (92%)	57% (86%)
Political Party Identification*			
	Republican	35% (76%)	21% (65%)
	Democrat	70% (95%)	72% (96%)
	Independent	56% (86%)	47% (82%)

See page 6 for the notes for Table 3.

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Methodology Statement

This brief used data from two national probability surveys fielded in December 2020 and December 2024. The December 2020 survey was fielded by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC via a web survey in English from December 4 to 14, 2020 of 814 adults age 18+. The sampling error for the total sample was +/-3.8 percentage points at a 95% confidence interval (design effect is 1.21). The December 2024 survey was fielded by SSRS on its Opinion Panel Omnibus platform via the Internet (N=1,004) and telephone (N=30) in English and Spanish from December 16 to 18, 2024 of 1,034 adults age 18+. The sampling error for the total sample was +/- 3.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level (design effect is 1.54). Sampling error increases as sample size decreases, such as for subgroups of the labor force.

Table 4 presents the unweighted sample sizes for each of the demographic subgroups highlighted in this brief.

Table 4: Survey Sample Sizes by Demographic Subgroup, 2024 and 2020

	2024	2020
U.S. Workers	631	484
Employment Status		
Employed	566	431
Unemployed and Looking for Work	59	39
On Temporary Layoff from a Job (furlough)	6	14
Household Income		
Less than $100,000	423	246
$100,000 and More	207	238
Age*		
18 to 34	225	143
35 to 54	297	192
55 to 70	102	141
Gender**		
Male	310	255
Female	303	229
Political Party Identification**		
Republican	201	153
Democrat	208	169
Independent	164	128

See page 6 for the notes for Table 4.

Demographic subgroup sample sizes may not total to the number of U.S. workers due to refusals to answering demographic questions.

For more information about the 2020 study, visit: https://heldrich.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Work_Trends_Topline_Survey_Results_May_2021.pdf.

For more information about the 2024 study, visit: https://heldrich.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Work-Trends-Topline-Labor-Force-Concerns-February-2025.pdf.

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Table Notes

The following notes pertain to Tables 1 to 4:

* The percentage of the labor force over age 70 was removed from this analysis.

** The answer category "I describe myself another way" is not captured in this analysis due to the small cell size.

*** Political party identification was asked by using two separate questions in the 2024 and 2020 studies (political party identification followed by a question about leaning to either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party). This brief uses the first question asked about political party identification only; leaners are not taken into account. In 2024, the question was, "Generally speaking do you think of yourself as…" with Republican, Democrat, and Independent as answer choices (this analysis removes "Something else" or "Don't know/Refused" responses). In 2020, the question was, "All things considered, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent?"

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Background

The Heldrich Center for Workforce Development is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, based at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design and evaluate education and training programs. The Heldrich Center is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

The Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and governmental officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center's work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers' skills and knowledge with the demands of employers.

Since its inception, the Heldrich Center has sought to inform employers, union leaders, policymakers, community members, the media, and academic communities about critical workforce and education issues that relate to the emerging global economy. To better understand the public's attitudes about work, employers, and the government, and improve workplace practices and policy, the Heldrich Center produces the *Work Trends* surveys on a regular basis. (The complete set of reports is available at **heldrich.rutgers.edu**). The surveys poll the general public on critical workforce issues facing Americans and American businesses. The survey findings are promoted widely to the media and national constituencies. The series is directed by Carl E. Van Horn, Ph.D., Director of the Heldrich Center and Distinguished Professor of Public Policy at Rutgers University.

Exploring 2024 and 2020 Election-Year Longitudinal Trends in Support for Minimum Wage, College Loan Forgiveness, and Paid Leave Among U.S. Workers: Republicans Appear More Supportive of Policies for Some Americans Over Time continues to advance the goals of the *Work Trends* series to give American workers a voice in the national economic policy debates, and thereby provides policymakers and employers with reliable insights into how workers across the nation are judging and acting upon the realities of work and the workplace.

The authors of this brief were Heldrich Center staff members Jessica Starace, Survey Research Manager; Kristine Joy Bacani, Research Project Coordinator; and Brittney Donovan, Research Project Coordinator. Carl Van Horn, Ph.D. reviewed the brief. Robb C. Sewell was the editor and graphic designer.