UNIONS HARM ECONOMY BUT BENEFIT MEMBERS, POLL FINDS

For the first time since the 1930s, a majority of Americans disapproves of unions and believes they harm the U.S. economy, according to the annual Gallup Work and Education survey. The poll also finds that 66 percent of Americans think labor unions mostly help workers who are members of unions, and just 28 percent perceive that unions mostly hurt union members.

Until this year, the majority of Americans approved of organized labor, but the percentage in the latest survey dipped below half to 48 percent, down from 59 percent one year ago. In addition, a slight majority, 51 percent, said unions hurt the U.S. economy, up from 36 percent in 2006. Just 39 percent believed unions help the economy. A larger percentage of respondents, 62 percent, said unions overall hurt workers who are not members of unions, up from about half of survey participants one year ago.

The survey was conducted in the midst of an economic recession and in the aftermath of major federal government interventions on behalf of General Motors Co. and Chrysler Group LLC, Gallup notes. A substantial segment of Americans blamed the unions representing employees of the auto companies for the industry’s problems, although more blamed auto executives, according to a later Gallup poll.

Gallup has conducted an annual poll asking Americans their opinions about organized labor since 1936, the year after passage of the National Labor Relations Act. The first poll found 72 percent of Americans approved of unions while 20 percent disapproved. The highest labor union approval rating occurred in 1953 and 1957 when 75 percent of surveyed Americans approved of unions, while previously the lowest rating was in 1979 and 1981 with a 55 percent approval rate.

Gallup compared the decline in Americans’ approval of unions since 2008 by political affiliation and finds the biggest drop to be among political independents, who registered 44 percent approval in 2009, down from 63 percent approval in 2008, followed by Democrats with a 66 percent approval rate, down from 72 percent, and for Republicans a 29 percent approval rate, down from 38 percent.

Demographically, Americans living in union households and those in nonunion households have distinctly different views of unions’ impact on workers, companies, and the economy. Gallup reports that unions represent 18 percent of U.S. adults, and that respondents living in union households consistently perceive the impact of unions more favorably. More than half, 57 percent, of adults in union households say unions help the U.S. economy in general, while only one-third of adults in nonunion households voice that opinion.

One in four participants would like to see labor unions have more influence in the U.S. than they have today, while 28 percent would like to see the same amount of influence, followed by 42 percent saying unions should have less influence. More Americans also believe that unions’ prospects for the future will decline. Nearly half, 48 percent, report that unions will become weaker, and 24 percent say unions will become stronger, while another 24 percent believe their strength will remain the same.