

U.S. Workers Are Worried About Democracy— But Most Aren't Hearing From Unions About These Threats Ahead Of The 2026 Midterms

Findings and Implications from a New Survey of American Workers

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From [scholars of democracy](#) to the *New York Times* [editorial board](#) to senior intelligence [officials](#) to the [Pope](#), many people are raising the alarm about rapidly eroding democratic institutions in the United States. Some concerns—such as partisan gerrymandering, malapportioned legislatures, broken campaign finance laws, and racialized criminal justice institutions—are longstanding. But President Donald J. Trump's simultaneous efforts to undermine the rule of law, separation of powers, civil liberties, and elections represent an extraordinary and acute threat.

Civil society organizations, especially organized labor, are often held up as an important bulwark against rising authoritarianism. With an organized, independent base of power, unions have the capacity to mobilize their members to oppose authoritarian encroachment. Some U.S. unions have taken important steps to resist aspects of Trump's executive aggrandizement, including helping to [organize](#) the pushback against violent immigration enforcement in Minnesota, filing lawsuits [against](#) attacks on collective bargaining rights, and supporting broad-based protests, such as the No Kings [rallies](#).

We zoom out to look at workers nationally. Are workers concerned about threats to U.S. democracy? Do rank-and-file union members differ from non-union workers in this regard? Are union members hearing from their unions about various actions that undermine democratic norms and institutions? If so, which unions are communicating most with their members? Do these messages connect with workers' concerns? And are union members mobilizing to take meaningful political actions in response to union appeals?

We are asking these questions because the [historical](#) record demonstrates that unions can help to build, sustain, and defend political democracy. But unions' willingness and ability to play this role depends on deep member engagement, strong communication, coordination across organizations, regions, and constituencies, and, above all, trust between unions and their members. Those capacities cannot be improvised or deployed overnight; they must be built deliberately over time and they require extensive member education and buy-in. What degree of readiness and engagement do rank-and-file union members perceive?

To answer these questions, this memo draws on a new survey of 1,682 unionized workers and a parallel sample of 1,318 non-unionized workers conducted through YouGov in May and June 2026. The surveys were fielded on, and weighted to, national populations, intended to reflect a nationwide picture of union and non-union workers across the United States.

Three important caveats come with any survey project, including ours. First, we focus on mass member education and engagement. Surveys are unlikely to reflect many important but less visible union activities, such as preparing litigation, training programs at local unions, or [behind-the-scenes coalition-building](#) with elected officials and other social movement groups that proved essential to defending the integrity of the 2020 elections. Second, our survey only captures a point-in-time snapshot; it cannot predict how union activities or worker attitudes might change in the coming months. Last, we note that many unions regularly solicit member input and conduct their own polling; much of what we report may be already well known among union leaders. By conducting an independent survey and publicizing key findings, however, we hope to provide pro-democracy organizers inside and outside the labor movement with a common understanding of the terrain, especially the political heterogeneity within and across unions.

We hope this shared understanding can help unions and other pro-democracy practitioners understand each other better as they work to build mass support against backsliding in the United States.

Key Findings

More details and supporting data appear in the Detailed Research Findings and Figures sections below.

- **U.S. workers are concerned about threats to democracy across the board.** Workers were concerned about all of the fifteen threats to democracy we tested. Averaged across all items, workers rated the threat as 7.5 on a scale of 1 (not a threat) to 10 (crisis). Both union and non-union workers were most alarmed by threats against judges and by partisan redistricting ahead of the 2026 election, and least concerned about unilateral presidential tariffs and the deportation of immigrants without criminal records.
- **On average, union members express more concern about threats to democracy than non-union workers.** Relative to non-unionized workers, union members are especially likely to see federal workers losing collective bargaining rights as a threat to American democracy.
- **Union members are also more likely to act in defense of democracy.** Nearly half—48%—reported taking at least one action opposing the Trump Administration’s attacks on democracy, compared with 39% of non-union workers.
- **But this union “advantage” is largely about who belongs to unions, not necessarily what unions do.** College-educated workers—especially women—are more likely to be unionized *and* more likely to view Trump’s actions as a threat and to take action. Union members with a college degree are far more likely to be employed in the public sector than college-educated non-unionized workers. Union workers *without* a college degree, especially in the private sector, look virtually identical to non-union workers in their concerns about democracy and views towards the Trump administration.
- **Most union members report hearing nothing from their unions about the current threats to democracy.** 57% of union members report that their union has not raised any of the ongoing threats to democracy with them; just 43% recall their union discussing even one of the fifteen issues we asked about. Our results are virtually identical in battleground and non-battleground states. We find no difference across states based on whether they are viewed to be at [high risk of federal executive interference](#).
- **On the most urgent near-term issue—the integrity of the midterm elections—union members are hearing very little.** Only 11% of union members report hearing from their union about threats to the 2026 midterm elections.
- **Union mobilization of members is even rarer than union communication with members about threats to democracy.** Nearly two-thirds—65%—of union members have received no request from their union to get involved in defending democracy. To the extent that union members are getting involved to defend democracy, they are often *not* doing so through their unions.

Key Implications

Based on the analysis of our survey data, we offer the following recommendations for consideration among union members, leaders, and other pro-democracy organizers within the labor movement:

- **Union leaders confront diverse memberships.** Many unions have memberships that mirror political divisions among American workers overall. We find in our own survey sample that the percentage of union members who reported voting for President Donald J. Trump in the 2024 elections was nearly identical to the percentage of non-unionized workers who reported voting for Trump. These political fault lines can make it challenging for union leaders to communicate with members about issues that activate members' partisan identities, including on issues of democratic backsliding.
- **Some unions are already engaging members, but many are not.** Union members in the public and healthcare sectors report the most engagement with their unions about the current threats to US democracy. Labor leaders could learn from models of successful union member engagement in these sectors, including political education programs.
- **Union members are not necessarily hearing about the threats to democracy that they care most about.** Unions are not communicating about the issues members rank as most threatening to democracy, including attacks on judges, foreign corruption, and partisan redistricting. These threats are ripe openings for engagement. Similarly, unions can connect weakened democracy to the daily problems workers face, like high and rising prices, long commutes, deteriorating access to good healthcare and schools, impunity for the rich. These issues also have the potential to appeal to members across party lines.
- **If unions are going to play a central role in defending fair 2026 midterm elections, there is more work to do laying the groundwork among union members.** There is serious, informed concern that the Trump Administration may try to subvert or ignore the results should his party lose its majorities in Congress. Union members rate election fairness as their highest democracy concern, yet only 11% have heard from their union about the security of the 2026 midterms. Unions are no doubt working locally and nationally behind the scenes on important election security efforts preparing for worst-case scenarios, including litigation and rapid response. But our survey data are not consistent with national rank-and-file membership prepared for broad-based mass action. Important groundwork must be laid, including naming potential threats and connecting those threats to workers' everyday problems well before election day.
- **Local union leaders are especially credible to union members.** In our survey, we find that union members hold much more positive orientations towards their local leaders compared to their national unions. But local leaders usually have fewer resources and must negotiate local trade-offs that may differ from national headlines. This suggests that local leaders are best positioned to surface the specific messages that motivate their members. Messages from local leaders will earn greater buy-in from members, and local leaders must thus be part of the process of planning a pro-democracy strategy from the beginning.

- **Many local unions can offer a physical civic footprint to support pro-democracy efforts.** Most union members (58%) report that their union has a regular physical location where they hold meetings, and many members report that their union makes those spaces available to community members outside of union business (in all, 24% of union members belong to a union whose union hall functions as a community space). As part of broader pro-democracy mobilization efforts, local unions could make union halls available for pro-democracy trainings and other volunteer organizing. Unions can also make their physical spaces available as election infrastructure, building on the 14% of union members who report that their union hall serves as an election polling location.

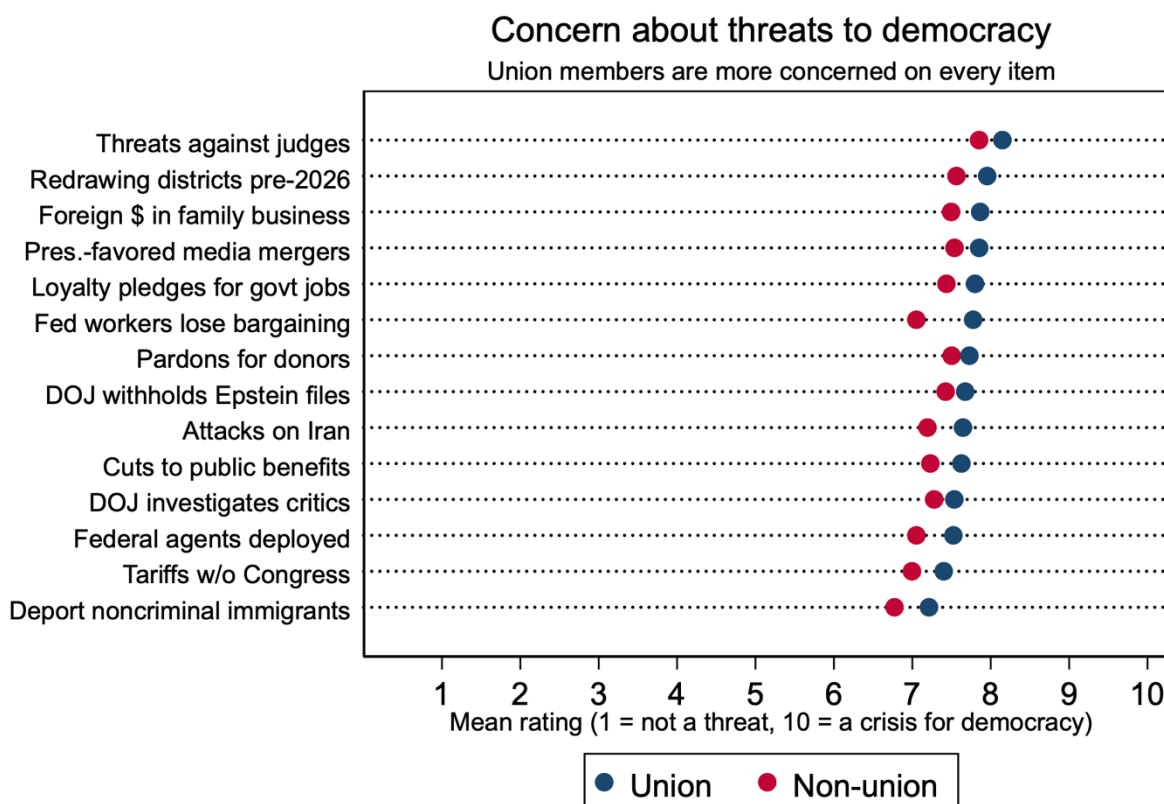
Detailed Research Findings

Unionized workers perceive more threats to democracy from the Trump Administration than non-union workers

When presented with a list of 15 actions that might threaten democracy, unionized workers consistently expressed greater concern than non-unionized workers for what those actions mean for democracy. (Note these actions were described generically and *not* attributed to the Trump Administration.)

At the same time, unionized and non-union workers tended to track one another in their concerns about different threats: threats that unionized workers perceived as being more serious tended to be the same threats that non-unionized workers perceived as being more serious, albeit at a lower level of concern. The biggest exception to this pattern was for cuts to federal workers' collective bargaining rights: union workers tended to view this action as being a much more serious threat than non-union workers. A key conclusion from Figure 1 is that union members express deep concern about a range of non-economic and non-workplace threats to democracy.

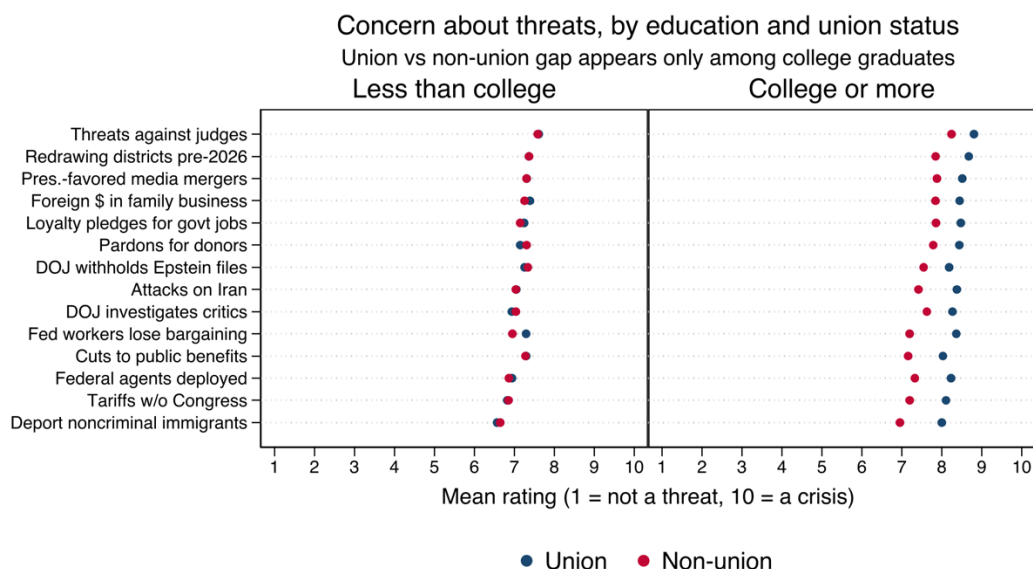
Figure 1: Concern about threats to democracy, by union membership



Source: YouGov survey of 1,682 union and 1,318 non-union workers, May-June 2026; weighted.

The topline union/non-union gap masks major differences among union members based on whether they have a college degree. The union/non-union gap around perceived threats to democracy is *only* visible among college-educated workers, especially among women. Among respondents without a college degree, there is very little daylight between union and non-union workers. Workers without a college degree, union or not, are less worried on average that the Trump Administration’s actions constitute a “crisis” for American democracy.

Figure 2: Concern about threats to democracy, by union membership and education



Source: YouGov survey of 1,682 union and 1,318 non-union workers, May-June 2026; weighted.

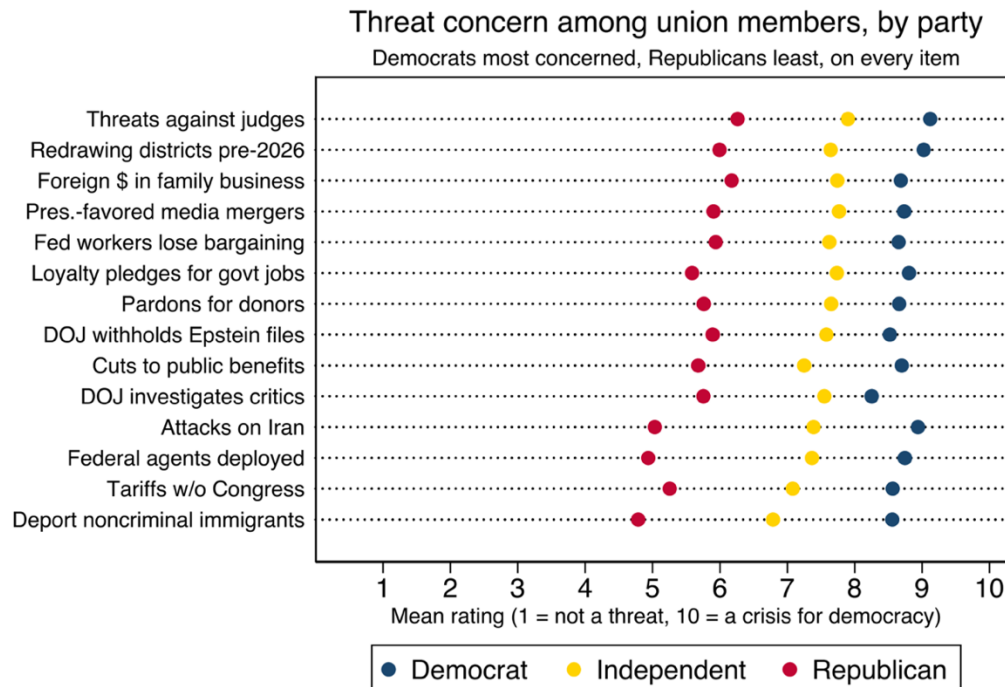
In other words, the overall union/non-union gap is not the result of unionists consistently seeing a greater threat to democracy compared to non-unionized workers. Rather the gap is the byproduct of compositional differences in the population of union members, as displayed in [Table 1](#). Workers with a college degree or more express the most concern about threats to democracy, especially women. These workers are overrepresented among union members, helping to explain the union-non-union difference in concern about threats to democracy. In our sample, union members are more likely to have a college degree (45%) than non-union workers (41%). Among workers with college degrees, union workers were 59% female compared to 49% in the non-union sample. College-educated union members are far more likely to be employed in the public sector, compared to non-union workers with a college degree (60% versus 12%). It is equally important to note that the gap between college and non-college unionists cannot be explained by racial differences.

Table 1: Concern about threats to democracy, by union membership, education, and gender

Union Status	Education	Gender	Mean Threat	N
Non-union	College	Female	7.9	283
Non-union	College	Male	7.3	287
Non-union	No college	Female	7.2	344
Non-union	No college	Male	7.1	404
Union	College	Female	8.5	557
Union	College	Male	8.1	406
Union	No college	Female	7.6	285
Union	No college	Male	7.0	434

When looking at partisanship, we also find a sharp difference across union members depending on their party identification. Although Republican union members expressed concern about many of the issues we probed, their perceptions about the threats to democracy were consistently lower than those of Independent and Democratic union members. Republican unionists were most likely to be concerned about threats against judges, foreign corruption, and partisan redistricting. They were least likely to be concerned about deportation of undocumented immigrants, federal agents being deployed in American cities, and the imposition of tariffs without Congressional approval.

Figure 3: Concern about threats to democracy, by partisanship (among union members)

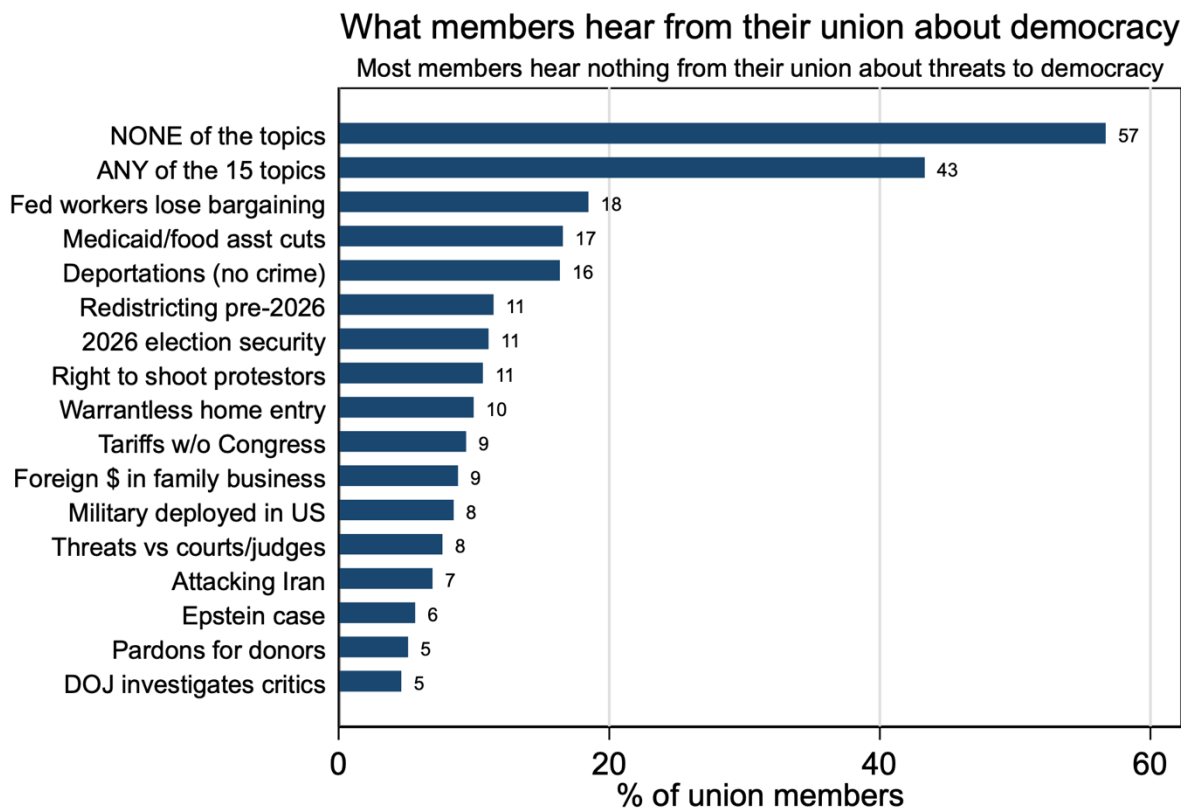


Source: YouGov survey of 1,682 union and 1,318 non-union workers, May-June 2026; weighted.

Union communication with members about threats to democracy

We asked union members about whether they recalled their union communicating with them through any channel about 15 distinct threats to democracy undertaken by the second Trump Administration, including issues related to labor rights, immigration enforcement, weaponization of the Department of Justice, and threats to the separation of powers. 43% of union members reported hearing about at least one topic, which falls to 39% if we exclude communication about cutbacks to federal workers' collective bargaining rights (the most union-adjacent threat to democracy we probed on the survey). Nearly sixty percent (57%) of union workers thus report not hearing about *any* threats to democracy from their unions. Troublingly, messages about the most immediate threat to democracy—around the integrity of the 2026 elections—were reported by just 11% of union members. It may be that union members in our survey failed to attend to or remember political communication within their unions. Either way this suggests that those messages were never sent or failed to register in their political views and behaviors.

Figure 4: Members reporting union communication about threats to democracy



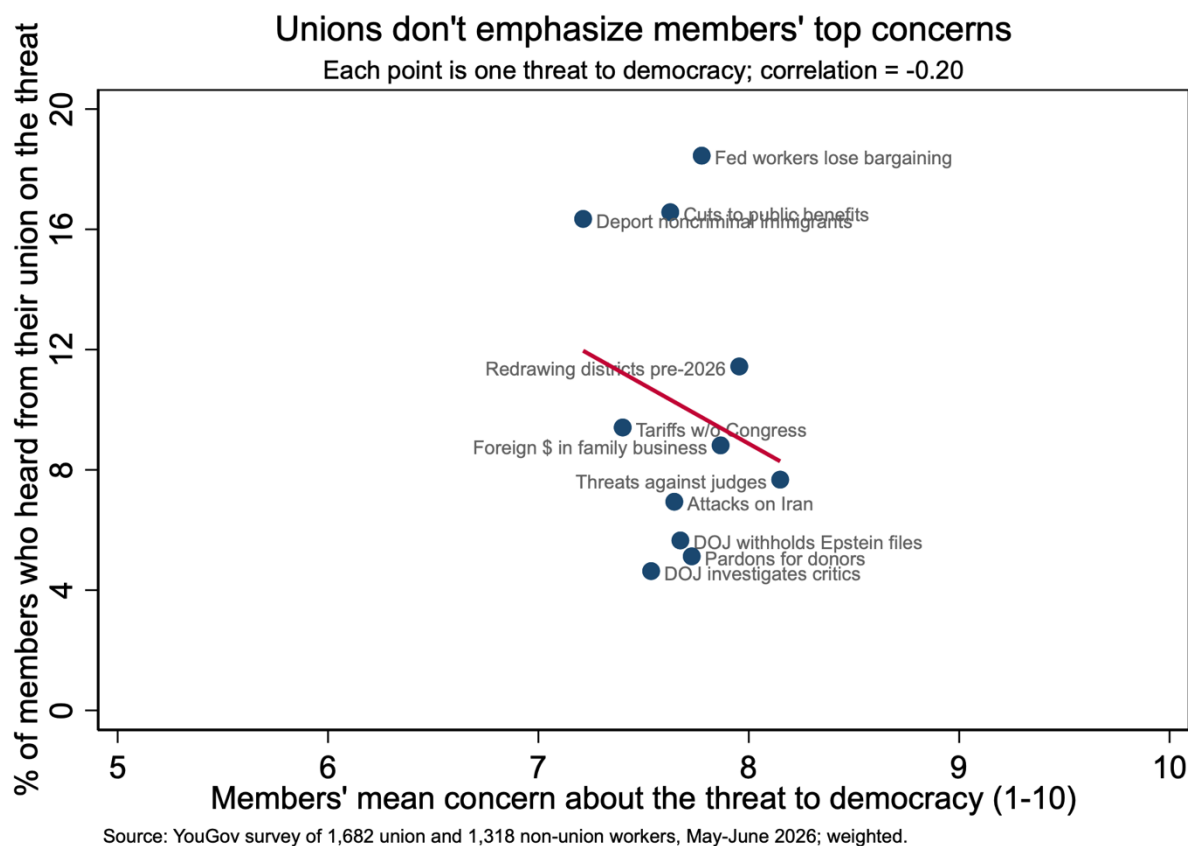
Source: YouGov survey of 1,682 union and 1,318 non-union workers, May-June 2026; weighted.

Perceived threats and union communications about threats to democracy

When we compare the threats to democracy that members perceive as being most serious against the extent of union communication on the same issue, we find little relationship. Figure 5 plots threats to democracy by members' concern about those threats (on the horizontal axis)

and how many unions communicated about those threats to their members (on the vertical axis). If unions were communicating more frequently about issues that most concerned their members, we should see a positive, upward-sloping relationship. Instead, if anything, we see a negative, downward-sloping relationship. This plot tells us that unions were no more likely to communicate about threats that members perceived as being most serious to democracy and may be communicating more frequently about issues that members rate as less worrisome. The threats that unions communicated about most frequently—federal workers losing collective bargaining rights, cuts to public benefits, and deportations of undocumented immigrants—were not necessarily the threats that union members perceived as being most serious to democracy.

Figure 5: No relationship between the threats members are most concerned about and union communication of those threats



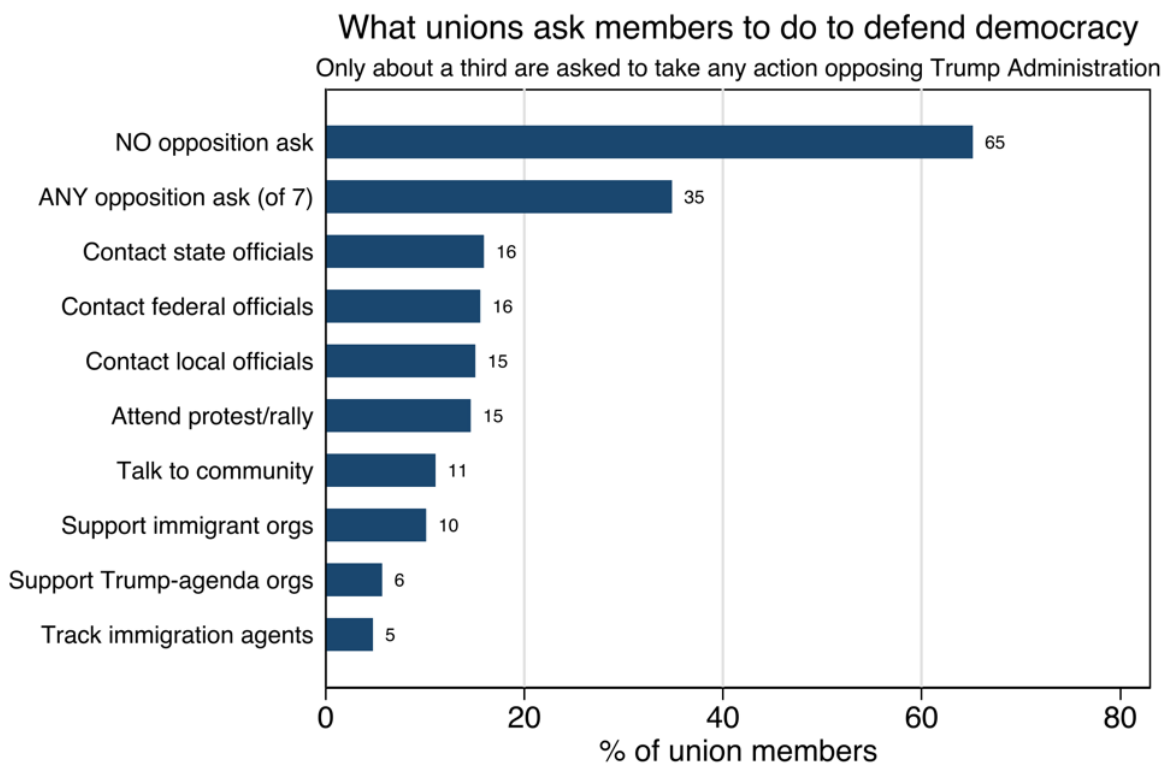
Union political asks of members related to threats to democracy

We next asked if union members had received requests from their union to take specific actions against the Trump Administration's backsliding efforts, including contacting elected officials, attending protests or rallies, talking to members of their community, supporting local immigrant organizations, or tracking immigration agents in their community. (For balance, we also asked if unions were asking members to take actions to support Trump-aligned organizations.) As we summarize below, we find that only about a third (35%) of union members reported receiving a specific request to undertake an action opposing the Trump Administration. The most common

requests involved contacting elected officials or attending protests or rallies. The vast majority of union members thus have not received requests from their union to oppose the actions of the Trump Administration. Only a very small percentage of union members reported receiving pro-Trump requests from their unions (about 6% of union members).

The survey asked about the home state of each union member. We examined union communication about threats to democracy by whether a state had competitive, high profile state or federal races in the upcoming 2026 elections (we count the following states as having competitive, high profile races: Alaska, Arizona, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Maine, Georgia, North Carolina, New Hampshire, Ohio, Florida, Iowa, Montana, Nebraska, and Texas). We find virtually no difference in union communication and requests for engagement across battleground and non-battleground states. We also examined state variation by whether or not a state faces serious threats to its election integrity, as judged by recent federal or state actions to interfere with elections (using the [Federal Election Interference Risk Map](#), we code Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, and Wisconsin as falling into this category). Again, we find no variation in union communication and engagement across these states.

Figure 6: Union political asks of members related to democracy



Source: YouGov survey of 1,682 union and 1,318 non-union workers, May-June 2026; weighted. ANY total excludes supporting Trump-agenda organizations.

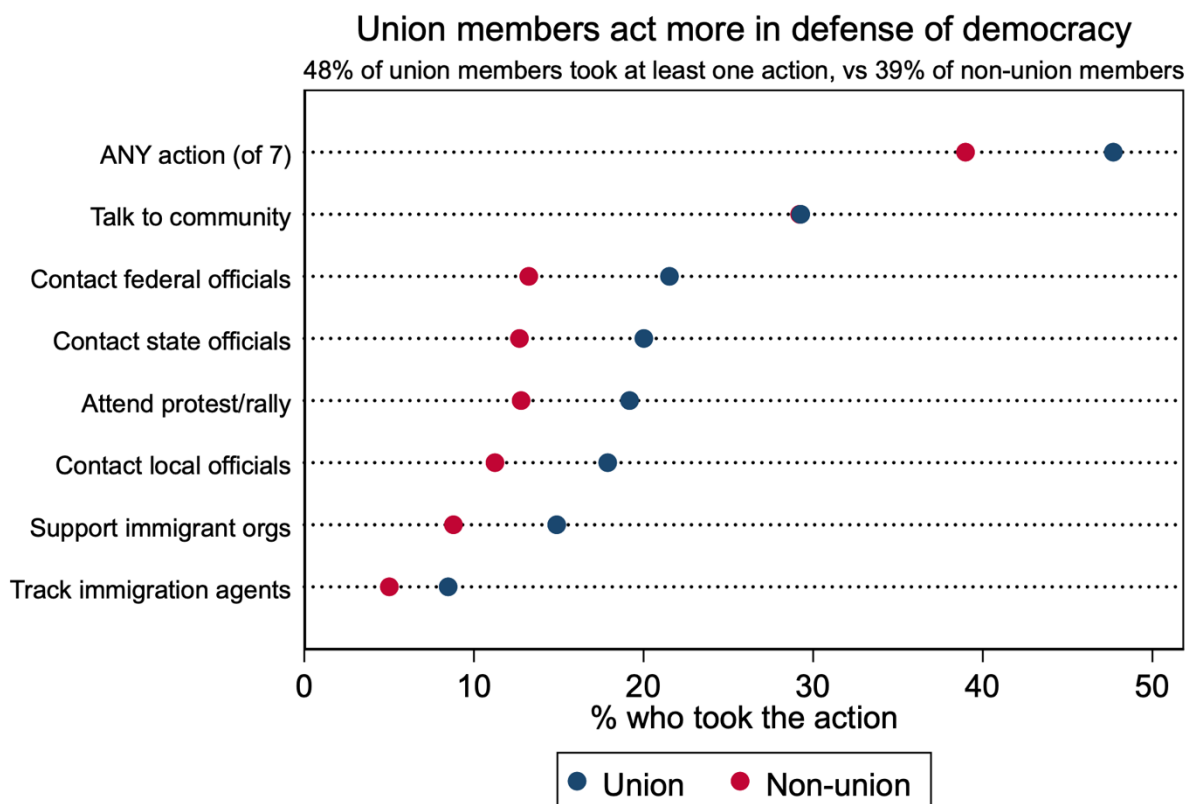
Unionized workers' political actions on democracy exceed those of non-union workers

Despite the fact that most unions are not recruiting their members to take actions opposing the Trump Administration, unionized workers are more likely to report taking political actions than are non-union workers. We found that nearly half of union members (48%) reported taking at least one action opposing the Trump Administration, compared to 39% of non-union workers. The difference was especially large for contacting elected officials and attending protests or rallies.

The fact that union members' rates of political action around threats to democracy exceed the rates of union requests to them suggests that union members are receiving calls to action from other organizations beyond the labor movement. Again, however, this union "advantage" masks internal divisions. Among union members, 40% of those without a college degree have taken any action—roughly the same rate as non-members overall—compared to 57% among union members with a college degree.

As before, we find no meaningful variation in union member action in defense of democracy by whether a union member was in a state with a high profile battleground race or in a state facing more serious threats to their elections.

Figure 7: Action taken to defend democracy, by union membership

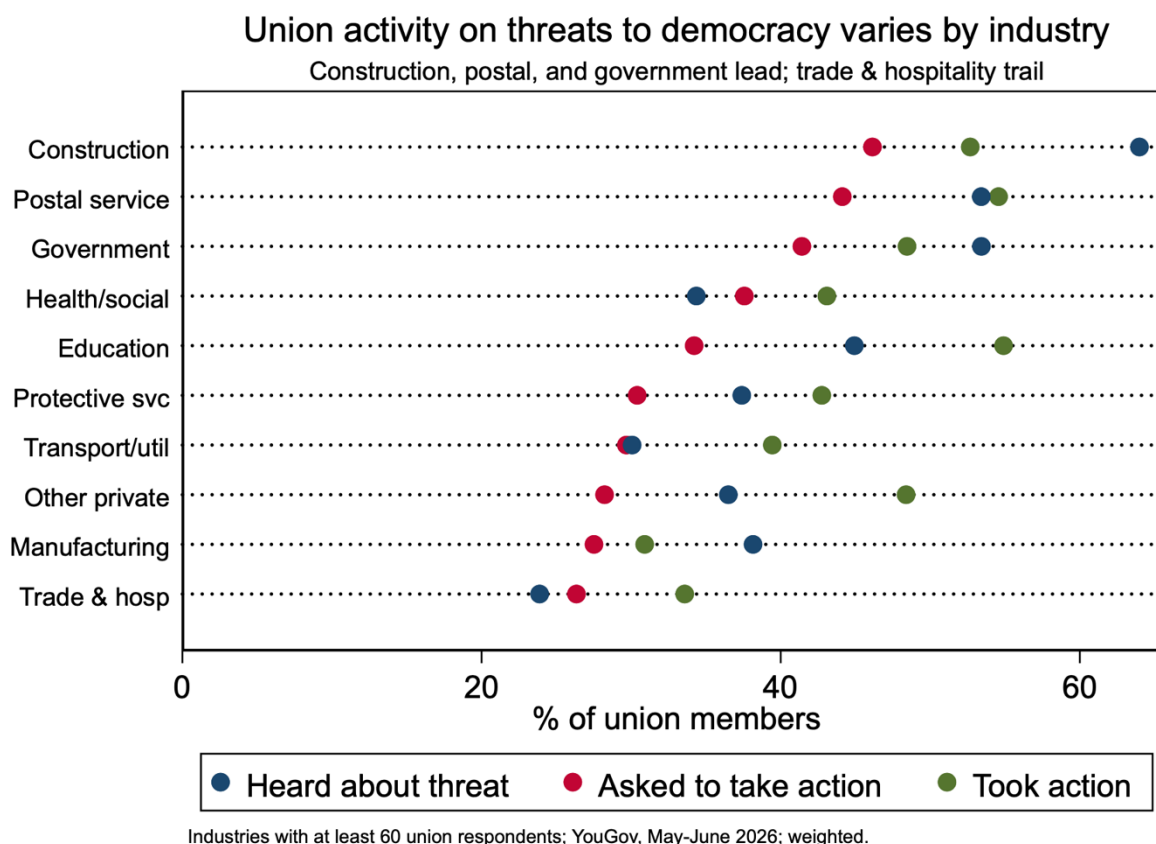


Source: YouGov survey of 1,682 union and 1,318 non-union workers, May-June 2026; weighted.

Union activity on threats to democracy varies greatly across industries

We find substantial variation in union communication and mobilization in support of democracy across different sectors of the economy (restricting our analysis to sectors with at least 60 unionized survey respondents). While we urge caution in interpreting these results because of smaller sample sizes, we find patterns that indicate that construction unions were especially likely to communicate with their members about threats to democracy (especially President Trump's use of unilateral tariffs on important goods), as were postal workers and other government workers (especially in the federal government). Generally, trade, hospitality, manufacturing, transportation and utility, and protective service unions were least likely to be communicating with their members or mobilizing their members into political action, and also had corresponding low rates of member political activity.

Figure 8: Union activity on threats to democracy by industry

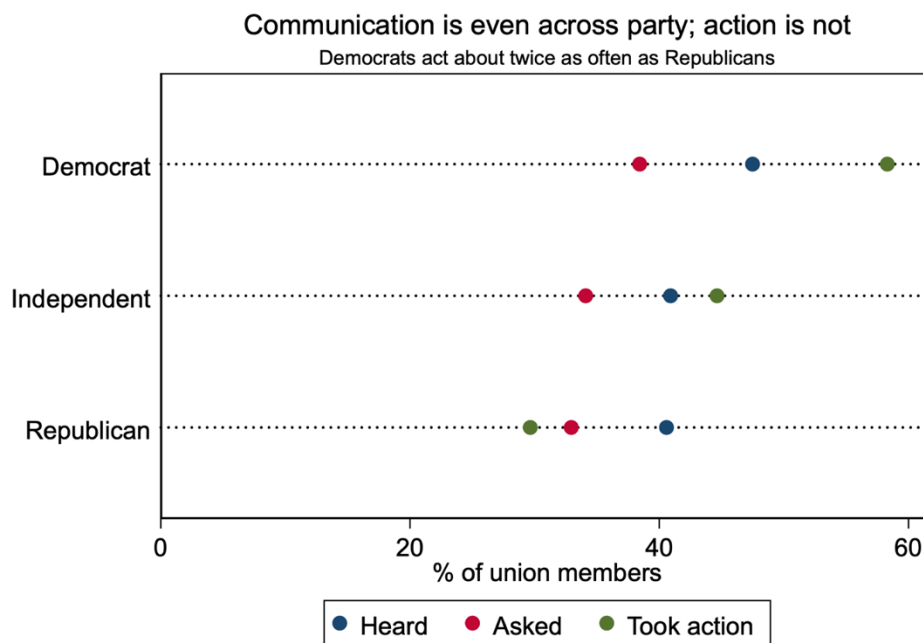


Union communication, mobilization, and action on threats to democracy by party and age

Examining variation in union communication, mobilization, and action around threats to democracy by partisanship, we find a notable lack of differences in union communication and mobilization. Democratic and Republican union members were about equally likely to say that their union had communicated with them about threats to democracy and made political

requests of them. Where we do identify a partisan difference is examining political action: Democratic union members were much more likely to report taking at least one action to oppose the Trump Administration’s agenda than were Republican union members. Democratic union members were nearly twice as likely to say that they took at least one political action than were their Republican counterparts.

Figure 9: Union activity on threats to democracy, by member party



Aside from partisanship, we find striking differences in union communication and mobilization and pro-democracy actions by **age**. Younger workers (18-29) were substantially more likely than older union members to report that they were contacted by their unions about threats to democracy and that their unions asked them to take action. 60% of union members aged 18-29 reported hearing about threats to democracy (36% for 45–64 and 33% for 65+). More than half of younger unionists—53%—reported receiving an ask to take pro-democracy action, compared to around a quarter for workers aged 45+. Younger unionists were also more likely than older unionists to report that they took at least one pro-democracy action. 63% of younger unionists aged 18-29 reported taking action (compared to 39% for 45–64 year-old unionists).

Most union members perceive a connection between American democracy and their unions, though there is a gap with the activities of their own unions

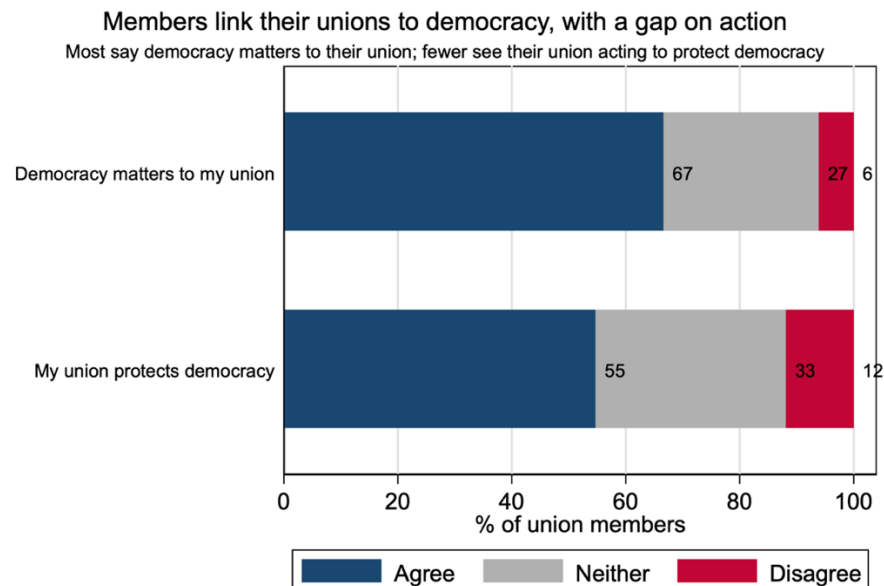
Last, when asking union members if they think there is a direct connection between what is happening with American democracy and their own unions, most union members agree that there is a link: 67% of union members either strongly agree or agree with that sentiment. But a lower share of union members—55%—think that their own union is working to protect democracy in the United States. The modal response to this item was neither agreement nor

disagreement. The survey also points to an important educational and partisan disconnect on these items: members with lower levels of formal education and who identify as Republican are much less likely to think that democracy matters to their unions and to agree that their union protects democracy.

Looking at non-unionized workers, we find that only about four in ten workers perceive that unions are protecting democracy. Most non-union respondents are neutral in their responses, and only 18% actively disagree with the idea that unions protect democracy.

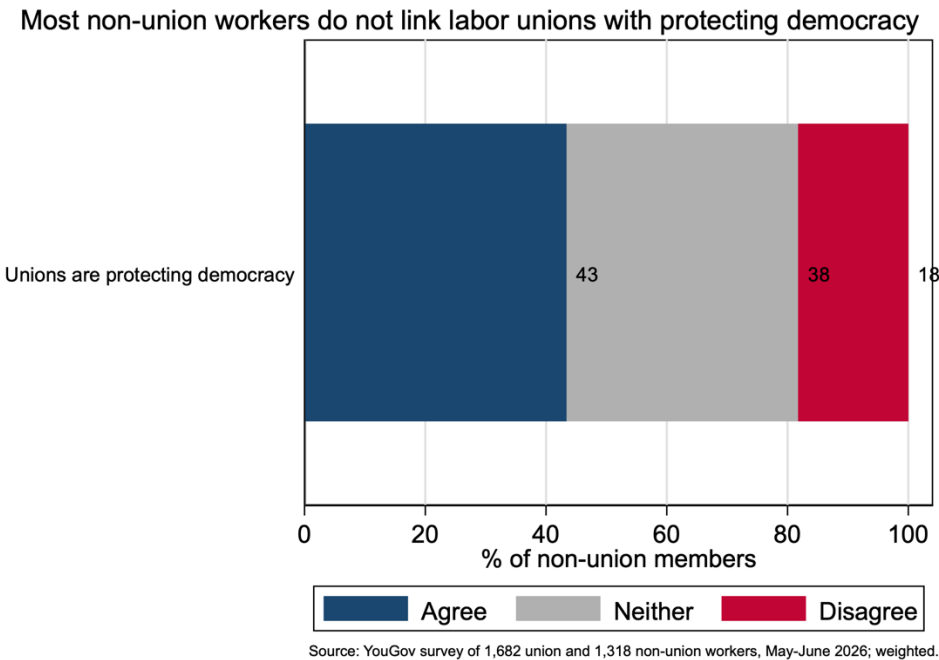
Taken together, this analysis suggests an important gap that unions could address through more engagement of their members around the defense of democracy—and also helping non-union workers see that role in defending democracy.

Figure 10: Union member perceptions of their unions and democracy



Source: YouGov survey of 1,682 union and 1,318 non-union workers, May-June 2026; weighted.

Figure 11: Non-union worker perceptions of unions and democracy



Survey Methodology and Sample

YouGov interviewed 3,272 respondents from May 15 through June 8, 2026, who were then split apart into a sample of employed US adults, and US adults that were current members of unions. Each sample was matched down to a size of 1500, and both samples were eventually combined to produce the final dataset of 3000. The respondents in each group were matched to sampling frames on gender, age, race, and education. The sampling frames were constructed by stratified sampling from subsets of the 2022 Current Population Survey (CPS) sample with internet usage supplement, with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file).

After matching, the current union members in the sample of employed US adults were combined with the matched union sample. The matched cases in each group were then weighted to their respective sampling frame using propensity scores. In both groups, the matched cases and the frame were combined, and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. Both propensity score functions included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, region, and employment status (full-time or part-time). The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles.

The weights for both groups were then post-stratified on a four-way stratification of gender, age (3-categories), race (4-categories), and education (4-categories). Finally, the sample of employed US adults went through an individual stratification on union membership. After that, the final weights for both groups were complete.

The survey received Institutional Review Board approval from Columbia University, under protocol ACYY2117; UCSD Institutional Review concurred with the Columbia determination.

Funding for the survey came from the American Democracy Initiative at the Institute of Global Politics, Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs.