

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

August 31, 2005

(Covering polls and related articles from the week of August 22–28 2005.)

In this edition of *Public Opinion Watch*:

**Labor Day, 2005: Workers Are Unhappy Campers
And It's Not Just Workers: It's a Nation of Unhappy Campers**

[Click here](#) for an index of previous *Public Opinion Watch* topics.

Labor Day, 2005: Workers Are Unhappy Campers

Hart Research recently conducted a nationwide poll of workers for the AFL-CIO which has just been released. The poll indicates that, despite upbeat talk coming out of the administration, American workers are quite unhappy with the economy and the general direction of the country.

Here are the key findings from the poll:

1. In four different areas, workers think the country is off on the wrong track: health care (68 percent wrong track/24 percent right direction); retirement security (65 percent/24 percent); the war in Iraq (56 percent/34 percent); and the quality and availability of jobs (49 percent/42 percent).
2. Looking ahead five years, 43 percent say they are “more hopeful and confident” than “worried and concerned” (54 percent) about achieving their financial goals. That contrasts with 60 percent confident/34 percent worried in July, 2001 and a peak of 70 percent/25 percent in June, 1999.
3. More than half of workers (53 percent) say their income is falling behind the cost of living, compared to 35 percent who say it's staying even and 11 percent who believe their income is rising faster than the cost of living. That 53 percent figure is the highest Hart Research has found on this question, going back to 1996.

The Century Foundation conducts public policy research and analyses of economic, social, and foreign policy issues, including inequality, retirement security, election reform, media studies, homeland security, and international affairs. The foundation produces books, reports, and other publications, convenes task forces, and working groups and operates eight informational Web sites. With offices in New York City and Washington, D.C., The Century Foundation is nonprofit and nonpartisan and was founded in 1919 by Edward A. Filene.

HEADQUARTERS: 41 EAST 70TH STREET – NEW YORK, NY 10021 – 212.535.4441 – 212.535.7534 (FAX) – INFO@TCF.ORG
DC OFFICE: 1333 H STREET, NW – 10TH FLOOR – WASHINGTON, D.C. 20005 – 202.387.0400 – 202.483.9430 (FAX) – INFO@TCF.ORG

www.tcf.org

4. Just 40 percent say they are very or somewhat confident they will be able to retire with financial security, compared to 59 percent who are just somewhat or not that confident.
5. Workers overwhelmingly believe (69 percent) that the jobs being created today in the U.S. economy are “mainly lower-paying jobs without benefits”, rather than “mainly good-paying full-time jobs that provide benefits” (17 percent). Moreover, by 63 percent to 31 percent, they believe that, even with a college degree, it’s difficult to find good jobs and financial security in today’s economy, rather than that, given a college degree and hard work, a good job and financial security will follow.
5. From a list of six problems facing working people, workers are most likely to select the cost of health care and jobs going overseas, followed by rising gas prices. The lowest ranked item was work schedules interfering with family responsibilities.
6. Half or more of workers worried very or somewhat often about the following problems: the price of gasoline (80 percent, including 62 percent very worried), the rising cost of health care (68 percent), prices rising faster than your income (64 percent), American companies moving jobs to other countries (60 percent), too many jobs lacking health insurance and retirement benefits (52 percent) and not being able to afford health care (50 percent).
7. The poll asked workers to rate employers on different aspects of handling their workers. Employers were rated poorly in quite a few important areas: providing regular cost-of-living raises to employees (70 percent falling somewhat or very far short); sharing profits with employees when the company does well (67 percent); providing adequate and secure retirement benefits (65 percent); showing concern for employees, not just the bottom line (65 percent); being loyal to long-term employees (64 percent); providing permanent jobs that offer good benefits and job security (62 percent); paying a fair share of employees’ health care costs (57 percent); and adopting policies that help working parents (55 percent).
8. Workers overwhelmingly oppose Bush’s proposals for changing Social Security (58 percent to 28 percent). That compares to a 42 percent to 42 percent split last January (among nonretired voters).
9. On the health care system, 68 percent of workers say they are dissatisfied with the system, compared to just 30 percent who are satisfied. That’s even less satisfied than workers were back in early 1994, before the defeat of the Clinton health plan. And 72 percent now say they favor a government guarantee of health insurance for every American. That’s even more favorable than workers were back in 1999, the last time Hart Research asked this question. Finally, by 63 percent to 27 percent, workers believe it’s wrong for large companies not to provide health care coverage for their employees, because that drives up everyone else’s costs, rather than “companies cannot afford to provide health care coverage to employees, because they have to keep costs down to remain competitive in a global economy.”

10. In terms of solutions, workers express a great deal of interest in the following steps that Congress and the president might take to address workers' problems: strengthen employees' rights to their pay/retirement benefits when a company declares bankruptcy (86 percent say this should be a top or high priority); provide incentives for companies to keep jobs in America (85 percent); preventing American companies from leaving the country to avoid paying taxes (74 percent); establishing a national health care system (73 percent); giving regular employees the retirement plan breaks received by management (73 percent); eliminating tax breaks for very high CEO compensation (72 percent); strengthen laws requiring equal pay for women (70 percent); eliminating CEO golden parachutes (68 percent); require employers to provide basic health insurance and pay most of the premiums (67 percent); raising the minimum wage to \$7.25 (65 percent); expanding support for child care and after-school (65 percent); and make it harder to replace full-time jobs with part-time jobs with lower wages/benefits (65 percent).

Quite a list. Presumably, Bush, Bill Frist and Dennis Hastert are taking careful notes.

How about joining a union? This poll did not cover the issue, but an earlier Hart Research poll did. In a February poll, also for the AFL-CIO, they found the following:

The February survey includes a long-term trend question developed by the Gallup organization that asks whether respondents approve or disapprove of unions. Two-thirds (64%) of Americans voice approval of unions and just 21% disapprove (results among workers are identical to those among the general public). This is among the highest approval ratings and is the lowest disapproval score for unions since 1965.

As with general support for unions, interest in union representation on the job has increased in recent years. Among all non-managerial workers, 53% now say that they definitely or probably would vote in favor of union representation in their workplace, with 38% who would vote no. By comparison, in 2003, we find an even division in the vote on union representation: 47% vote yes and 47% vote no. This result and a similar response in a 2002 AFL-CIO survey (50% yes) mark a very substantial improvement over the previous decade. In both 1993 and 1996, the "yes" vote stood at just 39% among nonunion workers, while a majority indicated that they would vote no. From 1997 to 2001, support rose slightly to about 43% yes, but opposition still stood above 50%. Now support for union representation equals or exceeds opposition—a substantial change from sentiment in the early 1990s.

It's worth noting that the Hart findings diverge dramatically from [a June Zogby poll](#), conducted for the militantly anti-union Public Service Research Foundation. That poll found workers saying they would vote *against* unions 56 percent to 35 percent. This seems hard to square with the Hart result of 53 percent to 38 percent *for* unions. Even if we assume that Zogby also included managers in their survey, which might be true (it's hard to tell for sure from looking at their report), the analogous figure for all nonunion workers from Hart would still be 49 percent to 43 percent *for* unions.

Curiouser and curiouser. It seems highly unlikely that the differing survey dates could possibly

make that much difference. Perhaps question wording can account for the difference. So far, however, Zogby has not released the exact question wording, so we can't tell. Until he does, I'd be inclined to trust the Hart result, which is based on a solid question with some history behind it.

Gallup itself asked some questions about unions in August (though not a question about whether workers would vote to join unions). They didn't find as high an approval score for unions (58 percent), but did find, for the first time since they started asking the question in 1999, a plurality (38 percent to 30 percent) saying they wanted unions to have more, rather than less, influence in the country. They also found, however, a spike in the perception that unions will be weaker in the future than they are today (up to 53 percent from 41 percent in 2004). Just 19 percent thought unions will be stronger in the future. No doubt this perception that unions are more an institution of the past than the future is among the several problems that unions currently face in turning interest in union representation into actual union members.

And It's Not Just Workers: It's a *Nation* of Unhappy Campers

It's not just workers who seem unhappy these days. The whole country seems to be in a pretty surly mood. Here's the lead to [the Washington Post story on their latest poll](#):

Rising gas prices and ongoing bloodshed in Iraq continue to take their toll on President Bush, whose standing with the public has sunk to an all-time low, according to the latest *Washington Post*–ABC News poll.

The survey found Bush's job approval rating at 45 percent, down seven points since January and the lowest ever recorded for the president in Post-ABC surveys. Fifty-three percent disapproved of the job Bush is doing.

And here's the lead to [Gallup's story on Bush's approval rating in their latest poll](#):

A new Gallup Poll reflects further erosion in President George W. Bush's job approval rating, continuing the slow but steady decline evident throughout the year so far. The poll—conducted Aug. 22–25—puts Bush's job approval rating at 40% and his disapproval rating at 56%. Both are the most negative ratings of the Bush administration. Bush's previous low point in approval was 44% (July 25–28, 2005) and his previous high point in disapproval was 53% (June 24–26, 2005).

But that's not all! Check out the lead to [Gallup's story about the economic opinion data in their latest poll](#):

As oil prices soar past \$70 a barrel in response to the potential damage created by Hurricane Katrina, there are widespread predictions of another surge in gas prices at the pump, and a slowdown in the U.S. economy. While the coming "soft-patch" in the economy will most likely be attributed to Katrina, the reality is that consumers' expectations for the economy were already tumbling in response to increasing gas

prices prior to the storm hitting southern Louisiana on Monday (Aug. 30).

In a new Gallup Poll (Aug. 22–25), taken about a week before Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, two in three consumers say the economy is getting worse while only 28% say it is getting better. This suggests that the modest declines reported by both the University of Michigan on Friday (Aug. 26) and the Conference Board on Monday (Aug. 30) were significantly out-of-date even as they were announced. Of course, Katrina, and the storm's aftermath are likely to significantly exacerbate consumers' already plummeting expectations.

In this latest poll, 63% of consumers say current economic conditions in the country as a whole are "getting worse." This is the highest level of negative economic expectations recorded by Gallup since just before the beginning of the war in Iraq (March 3–5, 2003) when the percentage of consumers saying economic conditions were getting worse reached 67%.

It could be a mighty difficult autumn for the Bush administration. Stay tuned.

Ruy Teixeira is a Senior Fellow at The Century Foundation and a Fellow at The Center for American Progress.

Public Opinion Watch covers newly released polls, as well as key newspaper and magazine articles that make use of polling data. If you've ever wondered what to make of the blizzard of survey data covered in the newspapers—and whether the newspapers themselves know what they're talking about—you'll want to check out this feature on a regular basis. Each edition will combine noteworthy findings and trends from the latest polling data with analysis of the misinterpretations and misrepresentations to which polling data are so often subject. This and other publications can be found at The Century Foundation Web site:

www.tcf.org.