



Edward J. Bloustein School
of Planning and Public Policy

Media Release

John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers University

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Copies of *A Glass Half Full or Half Empty? Americans Agree the Economy is Strong, but Worry about the Future* will be available on Thursday, August 30. In the meantime, topline data from the report are available at: http://bit.ly/WT_August_Toplines

A Glass Half Full or Half Empty? Americans Agree the Economy is Strong, but Worry about the Future

National survey of Americans finds...

- Americans have a more positive assessment of the economy and job opportunities than they did just two years ago and since the end of the Great Recession.
- At the same time, Americans feel vulnerable and are deeply concerned about the near- and long-term future of the economy and job market.
- Just under one-third consider illegal immigrants taking jobs from Americans to be a major threat to the nation's economy and jobs while just under two-thirds see corporate decision makers moving jobs to other countries as a major threat. Half of the public sees "the government in Washington" as a major threat to American workers.

Americans' confidence in the job market and economy has gradually recovered after the searing experiences of the Great Recession and its aftermath. For nearly a decade, the Heldrich Center's *Work Trends* surveys have reported Americans' dismal views about the economy and job opportunities. After several years of consistent job growth and unemployment rates finally back under 4%, Americans' views have changed in a positive direction, but they remain fearful and uncertain about the future and are concerned about several major threats to continuing prosperity.

The Heldrich Center for Workforce Development's August 2018 *Work Trends* release, *A Glass Half Full or Half Empty? Americans Agree the Economy is Strong, but Worry about the Future*, explores the opinions and experiences of Americans nearly a decade after the official end of the recession in June 2009. The study reports on the results from a national sample of over 800 respondents in a general population survey conducted between August 8 and 19, 2018 and has a sampling error of + or - 4%. The report also compares findings from the 2018 survey with previous Heldrich Center surveys conducted before, during, and after the Great Recession.

The 2018 survey finds that Americans are significantly less concerned about the unemployment rate, the job market for those looking for work, and job security for those currently working than they were in 2016, and notably less concerned than they were on these indicators several years ago.

Among other findings of the Rutgers University-based survey are:

Half Full

- Significant majorities of Americans say that overall economic conditions are good or excellent, that it's a good time to look for a job, and that they are not very concerned about job security.
- In 2009, more than 2 in 3 Americans in the labor force said they were very concerned about the unemployment rate and the job market for those seeking work, compared to 1 in 5 in the August 2016 survey; in 2018, less than 1 in 20 Americans in the labor force (5%) are very concerned about the unemployment rate, and less than 1 in 5 are very concerned about the job market.
- Those very concerned about job security for those in the workforce declined from nearly 50% in 2009 to 16% two years ago, and is now at only 11%.

Half Empty

- 7 in 10 Americans are concerned or worried about the economy in the years ahead.
- Only 10% of working Americans are extremely confident that they could obtain a new position if they were laid off, the same level recorded in 2016 and far below the one in

three Americans who expressed those views in 1999 when unemployment was at similar levels to 2018.

- Only 1 in 10 Americans rate the current state of the economy as excellent.
- Only a third of the public (35%) says that jobs for American workers are good ones because they offer adequate pay and opportunities for advancement.
- More than half (52%) say that the future economy will not be better for the next generation.
- 7 in 10 Americans say they believe that “the country is run for the benefit of the rich rather than for workers,” including 8 in 10 Americans in households earning less than \$50,000 annually.

“Threats” to American Workers

- Americans perceive several “major threats” to the nation’s economic future, including corporations moving jobs overseas (64%), competition and cheap labor from other countries (56%), the government in Washington (50%), technology (such as automation of jobs) (43%), and illegal immigrants taking jobs from Americans (31%).
- When asked to rank these major dangers to the future of the economy, the U.S. government is ranked by Americans as the number one threat to workers, compared to a downturn in the economy, illegal immigrants, corporate decision making, technology, and competition from other countries.
- Despite low unemployment levels and positive job growth, a majority of Americans (57%) say the government in Washington’s handling of the job situation is only fair or poor.

Professor Carl Van Horn, director of the *Work Trends* project, commented, “After nearly a decade of positive job growth and declining rates of unemployment, Americans are not in a mood to celebrate. Americans are more positive than a few years ago, yet they still worry that the government and large corporations could spoil the gradual economic gains of the past two years and the past decade.”

Illegal Immigrant Workers

During the past two years, there has been a great deal of political commentary about the impact of illegal immigrants on American jobs and American workers. Among the more important findings of the August 2018 survey on this topic:

- Just one in three Americans say that illegal immigrants are a major threat of taking jobs from American workers.

- One in two Americans and two-thirds of those with college degrees say that immigrants benefit the United States rather than hurt it.
- Americans' attitudes about illegal immigrants' effect on the economy are sharply divided along partisan lines. Only 18% of Democrats versus 48% of Republicans say that illegal immigrants are a major threat to the economy.

The report's co-author, Jessica Starace, Research Assistant at the Heldrich Center, commented, "Americans are far less concerned about the impact of illegal immigrants than the president or some members of Congress. Americans, by and large, don't believe that illegal immigrants threaten their jobs or the nation's well-being."

In other findings of note:

- While three in four employed Americans say they won't be working on the Labor Day holiday, only one in three think that celebrating the holiday is meaningful for their own work.
- Americans largely agree that labor unions are valuable for workers in 2018: 6 in 10 of the public believe that "labor unions are good for workers in general" in today's economy. Yet most Americans don't know how many U.S. workers participate in labor unions in 2018. The current U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics union membership estimate is 10.7%, a figure correctly guessed by less than one in five Americans.
- The American public is more knowledgeable about the unemployment rate in 2018. One in two Americans in August 2018 know the unemployment rate is hovering around a 4% level.
- 9 in 10 American workers say that obtaining training is important or absolutely essential to adapt to changes in the workplace; 1 in 2 say they believe it is absolutely essential to obtain new skills to keep from falling behind. One in two Americans name employers and workers themselves as ultimately responsible for this training. Fewer people, one in four, say it is the government's responsibility.

The **John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development** is based at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University. It is one of the nation's leading university-based research and policy centers dedicated to raising the effectiveness of the American workplace through improved workforce education, placement, and training. The center identifies innovative workforce practices and practical policy changes that can help Americans receive the education and training they need to be productive and prosperous in a global knowledge economy. Learn more at www.heldrich.rutgers.edu.

The American Association for Public Opinion Research honored the Heldrich Center's Work Trends research on the Great Recession with its Policy Impact Award in 2013.