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Ending Exploitation: Voters' Viewpoints on the U.S. Child Labor Crisis

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Introduction

Over the July 4th weekend, the United States regressed further into a new, bleak era of child labor law. In the U.S. we often consider the issue of child labor exploitation long-settled, with a century of legislation crafted to protect child workers and families. Yet [new laws taking effect](#) across states like Iowa, Arkansas, and Ohio reverse nearly a century of progress on child labor protections, with minors working more hours in more dangerous jobs, while limiting the liability that businesses face for their exploitation of underage workers. These state laws put children at risk and undermine federal protections and enforcement of child labor law. Today we're seeing a massive deterioration in children's rights, and a return to the economy of exploitation that had been relegated as a shameful mark in our past.

Earlier this year, the [New York Times](#) exposed companies such as General Mills, Fruit of the Loom, Frito-Lay, Ford, General Motors, J.Crew, and McDonald's for their negligent violations of child labor laws. Since 2018, the [U.S. Department of Labor \(DOL\)](#) has seen a 69 percent increase in children being employed illegally, with a [141 percent increase in the number of minors employed in violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act \(FLSA\) between 2017 and 2022](#).

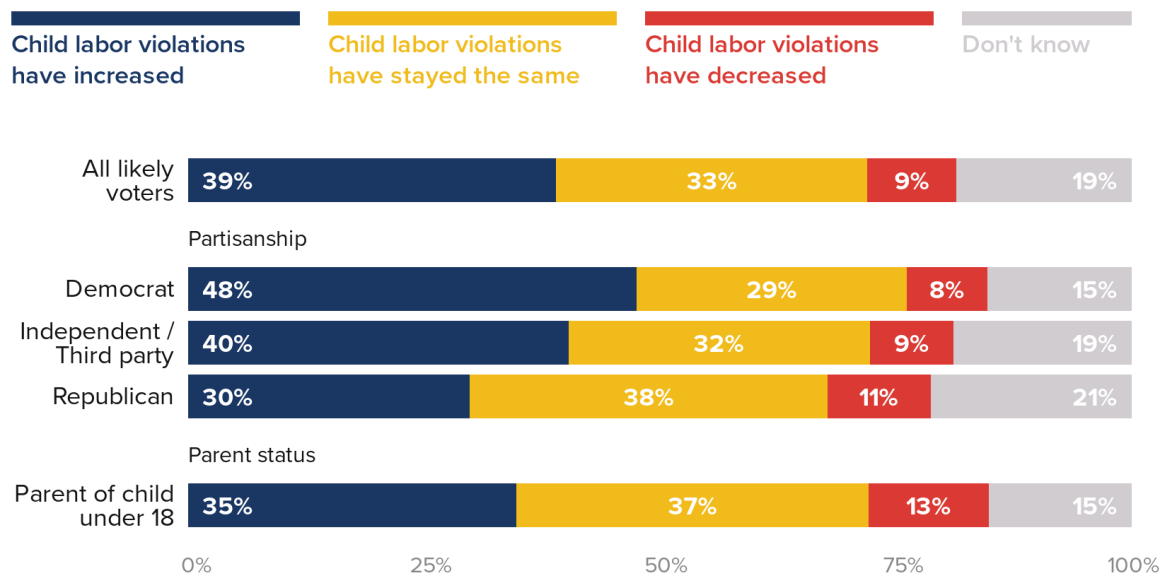
Investigations have uncovered [dozens of cases where employers illegally hired children](#) to work hazardous jobs, with minors using caustic chemicals to clean dangerous equipment, dying from injuries on construction sites, [losing fingers operating machinery, fainting in fields from heat and chemical exposure](#), and children as young as [10 years old working in restaurants until 2 a.m.](#) Examples have popped up in household brands across industries throughout the United States, exposing the cruel reality of labor practices here at home, and shining a light on the wide gaps in legislation protections and enforcement.

In light of these harrowing increases in illegal child labor, Data for Progress conducted a [survey](#) of likely national voters from June 1-5, 2023, finding bipartisan support for expanding child labor laws and ensuring corporate accountability regardless of children's migration status. We also find wide opposition to most state-level rollbacks of child labor laws.

Despite the high-profile NYT investigation, voters lack awareness of this concerning trend. We find that 61 percent of voters overall, and majorities of voters across parties, are not aware of the increase in child labor violations.

A Majority of Voters Are Unaware of Increases in Child Labor Violations in the Past Five Years

In the past five years, do you think business violations of U.S. child labor law have increased, decreased, or have they stayed the same?



June 1–5, 2023 survey of 1,258 likely voters

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How Did We Get Here?

This child labor crisis was brought on by a perfect storm of [increased child migration](#), an [increasingly strained labor market](#), [weakened state child labor protections](#), and [underfunded and understaffed federal agencies](#) unable to meet operational demands. These factors created a growing pool of vulnerable children entering the country with deteriorated safety nets and protections while allowing industries looking for new sources of cheap labor to operate without oversight or restraint.

In 2022 child migration surged to about [three times its magnitude five years prior](#), overwhelming Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) facilities with new cases. HHS was inundated with mounting pressure to quickly locate and guarantee long-term placement for these minors. As HHS began to expedite processing cases, the agency reduced the rigor of background checks and vetting of child sponsors.

In addition, the [HHS national hotline for child migrants to report unsafe living conditions went largely unanswered](#) during this period due to staffing shortages at the agency. Officials rarely

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conducted follow-up phone calls and eventually [lost contact with an overwhelming majority of kids they placed](#). The collapse of HHS' oversight process meant that migrant children were hastily placed, and given little to no follow-up to ensure their safety, making way for the exploitation and abuse of these minors to go undetected.

At the same time, headlines swirled with news of a so-called “Great Resignation,” sounding alarm bells about [record-breaking quit rates](#) in tandem with [cross-industry short-staffing](#) in what the [Federal Reserve labeled as a “structural labor shortage.”](#) Industry and journalistic frenzy painted pictures of broken supply chains, [empty shelves](#), and [failing services](#), stirring concerns from consumers and fueling the image of desperate industries in search of a new labor supply.

Industries looking for cheap labor found that they were in a unique position of diminished government oversight. For years, Congress left DOL with a [stagnant budget](#), resulting in staffing reductions and thwarted enforcement capacities over the last decade.

Unprecedented free reign in labor practices and a record increase in unprotected and vulnerable child migrants offered bad actors ample opportunity for abuse and exploitation in service of their shareholders and bottom lines. These conditions under which child labor thrives are compounded by present threats to the child labor legislation that first addressed this crisis nearly 100 years ago.

Legislative Context

Current Labor Protection Under the Law

Workers in the United States are protected first and foremost by the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), established in 1938 to “[bar ‘oppressive child labor’](#) and set a floor on standards, wages, and hours for teen jobs.” When it comes to [youth employment provisions of the FLSA](#), the express intent of the statute is to “ensure that when young people work, the work does not jeopardize their health, well-being or educational opportunities.” For this reason, the FLSA sets age employment standards and specifically bars children from certain hazardous industries like mining and manufacturing where operating heavy machinery is required and children are much more likely than adults to sustain injury.

Typically, state labor laws go above and beyond existing federal standards, such as all states except Nevada setting [working hour limits](#) to prevent conflict with children’s schooling. Likewise, most states (with Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Minnesota setting the highest standards) [require work permits](#) so that a child’s school, parents, and state government are aware of their employment.



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However, legislators — pressured by business interests — have leveled bold attacks against state-level labor protections in recent years, subjecting young children to longer work hours and riskier industries. Some attacks have gone even further, threatening to upend federal precedent on child labor protections. [Lawmakers in Ohio issued concurrent resolutions](#) in the hopes of amending federal law to meet the weakened state labor norms they endorse, threatening long-settled nationwide child labor rights.

With high-profile companies turning to (often illegal) child labor to fill jobs, we asked voters at what age, if any, they feel it is appropriate for minors to do certain kinds of work. We find:

- 86 percent of voters say only those 18 or older should serve alcohol or bus tables where alcohol is served.
- 79 percent of voters say only those 18 or older should work in industries such as mining, meat processing, manufacturing, or construction.
- 62 percent of voters say only those 18 or older should work without permission from parents.

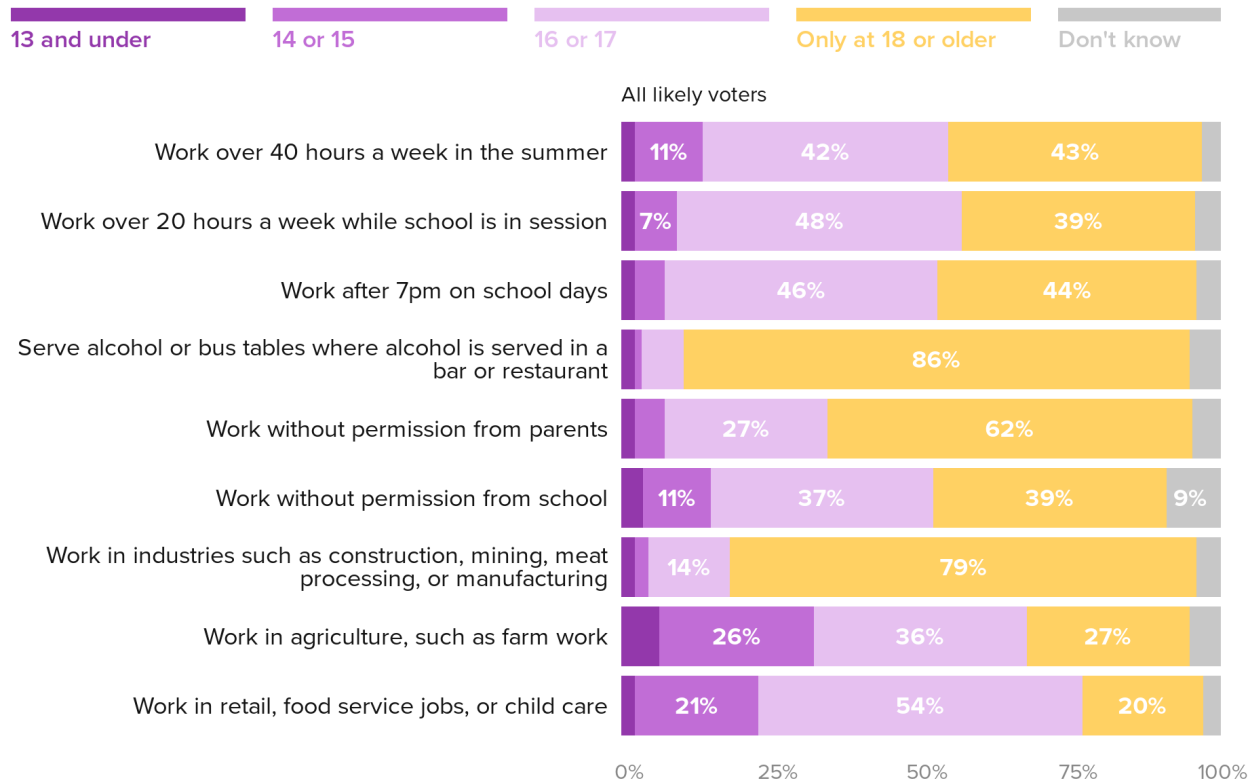
Additionally, a wide majority of voters say each of the following should only be legal for those 16 or older:

- Working over 40 hours a week in the summer
- Working over 20 hours a week while school is in session
- Working after 7 p.m. on school days
- Working without permission from school
- Working in agriculture, such as farm work
- Working in retail, food service jobs, or childcare

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Voters' Views of Appropriate Ages for Certain Jobs and Aspects of Work

Below are some aspects of work or employment. For each, please say at what minimum age you think minors should be legally allowed to do that, or if they should only be able to do so after turning 18.



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Today's child labor protections may seem sturdy in theory, but in reality, violations of these laws have surged. Much of the problem lies in the limitations of child labor law enforcement.

Current Labor Law Enforcement

DOL is responsible for enforcing the FLSA, and its [Wage and Hour Division](#) enforces the federal minimum wage, overtime pay, recordkeeping, and child labor requirements of the FLSA, as well as the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act. However, the federal government has [not met budgetary requests](#) to keep the agencies in charge of enforcement fully funded and operational. With its [600 open child labor investigations](#), DOL does not have the necessary muscle to properly penalize and crack down on infractions.

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Current enforcement tools at DOL are also weak deterrents for modern multinational corporations and megabrands, and the penalties that accompany child labor crimes are completely outdated. Paired with a vastly overstretched agency with limited capacity for enforcement, there is a “pay to play” system in which current child labor laws are not effective deterrents for large corporations breaking federal labor standards.

For example, [Packers Sanitation, a company deemed to have systematic, illegal child labor practices](#) throughout the nation, employed over 100 minors between 12 and 17 in hazardous work, but was fined just \$1.5 million. As a company with a [projected \\$400+ million revenue for 2022](#), this fine is an inconvenience, not a sufficient deterrent. Beyond simply hiring illegal child labor, Packers Sanitation went even further, [using invested public pension funds](#) from the retirement savings of unionized teachers, firefighters, and police officers to hire children to complete hazardous work in meatpacking facilities.

This use of public funds especially highlights the urgent need for oversight and the closure of labor law loopholes that systematically advantage Wall Street executives who want to increase their bottom lines at the expense of the safety and well-being of their vulnerable employees.

Labor Law Loopholes and Agricultural Industry Carve-Outs

A variety of labor law loopholes exist across industries, states, and supply chains that render monitoring and enforcement of labor laws complicated, insufficient, and unjust. Current legislation allows responsible parties to distance themselves from the illegal hiring of children through [subcontractors, franchises, and third-party staffing companies](#), making it difficult or impossible to hold them accountable for infractions. Enforcement typically only assigns blame on hiring companies for breaking federal labor standards and does not adequately pursue violations throughout the supply chain.

Additionally, inconsistent laws across states and industries permit uneven protections for children, allowing companies to move their operations to skirt the most prohibitive legislation. Legal carve-outs allow for [weaker standards in agricultural employment](#), making it easier for industry to exploit unaccompanied migrant youth who are the likeliest to take this work. For example, the [Federal Child Labor Provisions in Agriculture](#) do not require minors to obtain work permits, nor do they limit the number of hours or times of day (other than outside of school hours) for minors working on farms.

Agricultural workers experience a disadvantage from a [two-tiered labor system](#) in which they are legally allowed to work longer hours and from younger ages in extremely harsh conditions. At the

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time they were passed, these [legislative exemptions were widely understood to have racist implications meant to exclude Black workers from the protections guaranteed by the FLSA](#).

Today these exemptions still exist and the racial implications continue to reverberate. Farmworkers are predominantly [non-white and seventy-eight percent are of Latino/a descent](#), and agriculture poses the largest risk for child workers, with the [highest death rate of any industry](#). That means that Latino/a workers and workers of color are more likely to experience working conditions in agriculture that expose them to physical injury, long hours, and lower wages, trapping them in cycles of poverty.

Republican Efforts to Loosen Child Labor Laws

The present boom in child exploitation is further exacerbated by Republican lawmakers and [conservative business lobbyists](#) actively working to weaken child labor standards — with bills that aim to undercut current protections for child workers [introduced or passed](#) in more than [10 states](#) during the last two years. One bill, which was passed by Wisconsin’s Republican-controlled legislature and would have [extended work hours for minors](#), was vetoed by the state’s Democratic governor, but children in deeper red states have not been as lucky.

In [Iowa](#), a recently passed law will allow teenagers to work longer hours and in dangerous industries such as manufacturing. In March, Arkansas Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed the [Youth Hiring Act](#) into law, which would do away with work permits signed by parents, allowing the state government to oversee and verify that employees are at least 16 years of age. In Ohio, legislators have also sought to curb working hour limits by reintroducing legislation to [extend working hours for youth during the school year beyond the federal legal limit](#). This means that Ohio legislators had to introduce accompanying resolutions asking Congress to lower federal protections to accommodate the leniency of proposed changes to state laws — an egregious and direct attack on national protections for workers.

Other efforts to curtail safety protections for child workers have also proliferated at the state and federal levels. In [Minnesota](#), lawmakers have introduced a bill that would allow teenagers to work on construction sites and building projects — again opening the door to dangerous industries where children were previously explicitly prohibited for their safety.

A summary of the active legal attacks on child labor protections by state are displayed in the following table.



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Summary of State-Level Measures Targeting Child Labor Protections

State	No longer requiring work permits to be signed by parent or guardian	Lowering the age for children to work in hazardous industries	Lowering the age for children to serve or handle alcohol	Establishing a lower minimum wage for minors	Extending work hours for minors allowed on school days	Extending work hours for minors allowed in the summer	Weakening Federal Protections
Arkansas ¹	Enacted						
Iowa ²		Enacted	Enacted		Enacted	Enacted	
Minnesota ³		Proposed					
Missouri ⁴	Proposed				Proposed		
Nebraska ⁵				Proposed			
New Hampshire ⁶			Enacted		Enacted		
New Jersey ⁷			Enacted			Enacted	
Ohio ⁸					Proposed		Proposed
Virginia ⁹				Proposed			
Wisconsin ¹⁰			Proposed				

Legend	
Proposed	Proposed
Enacted	Enacted

At the federal level, members of Congress are also introducing bills to threaten current protections to child workers. The [Future Logging Careers Act](#) would allow 16- and 17-year-olds across the country to work in aspects of mechanized logging operations with parental supervision. Logging is an industry that the secretary of labor finds to be [particularly hazardous for children of that age](#) and as recently as [this month was responsible for the death of a teenager in Wisconsin](#).

When American voters are faced with these state legislative proposals to weaken child labor protections, they stand in strong opposition, with the exception of allowing minors to work

¹ Arkansas - [HB1410](#)

² Iowa - [SF542](#)

³ Minnesota - [SF375](#)

⁴ Missouri - [HB960](#), [SB175](#)

⁵ Nebraska - [LB15](#)

⁶ New Hampshire - [SB345](#)

⁷ New Jersey - [A4222](#)

⁸ Ohio - [SB30](#)

⁹ Virginia - [SB1669](#)

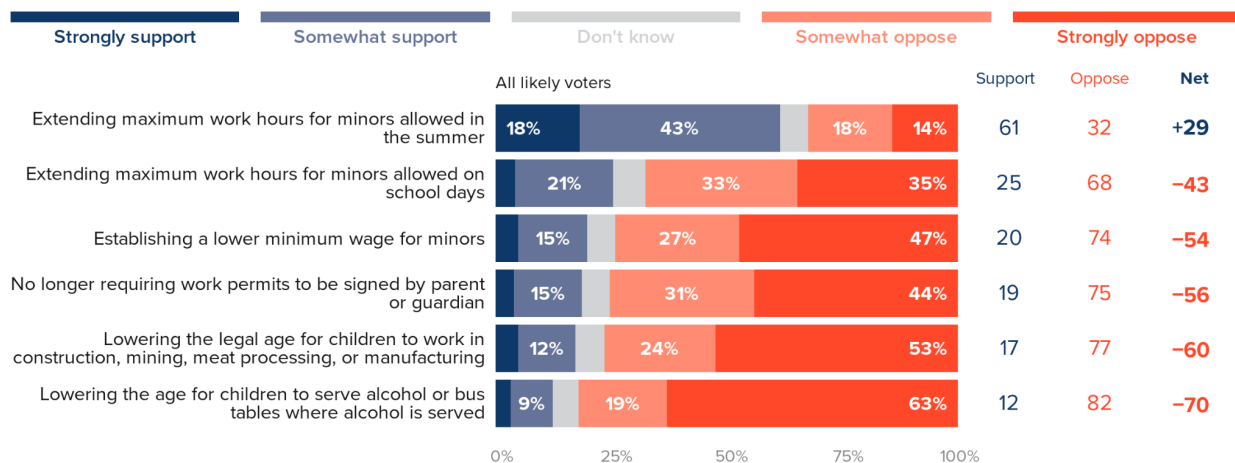
¹⁰ Wisconsin - [Proposed bill](#)

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additional hours in the summer. Voters are most concerned about proposals to lower the age for minors to serve alcohol or bus tables where alcohol is served, with 82 percent of voters opposed to this proposal. Lowering the legal age for minors to work in hazardous industries is also opposed by 77 percent of voters, while three-quarters of voters oppose eliminating requirements that work permits be signed by a minor’s parent or guardian. Voters also oppose establishing a lower minimum wage for minors by a -54-point margin and extending maximum work hours for minors on school days by a -43-point margin.

Voters Overwhelmingly Oppose Most State Laws Loosening Child Labor Restrictions

State lawmakers are considering the following proposals related to child labor. For each proposal, please say whether you would support or oppose it in your state.



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While legislation to weaken child labor laws is overwhelmingly unpopular at the surface, it also introduces domino effects that threaten oversight and enforcement of remaining protections, standards for all workers, and opportunities for children across racial and socioeconomic lines.

Downstream Effects of Loosening Child Labor Laws

Weaker Labor Laws Across the Board

Proponents of weakening child labor laws claim their efforts protect parental rights over their children and give young people the opportunity to build discipline and save money. However, the policy advocates and lobbyists behind these bills have not been concerned parents, but rather business leaders who directly stand to gain from access to cheap, deregulated labor. The [restaurant, hospitality, and retail industries vocally supported legislation](#) that would amend the

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FLSA to allow 14- and 15-year-olds to [work extended hours](#), and have shown their support on other occasions for allowing teenagers to start [serving and handling alcohol](#).

Conservative think tanks and business leaders that have backed these laws have also coincidentally been strong advocates of concurrent [anti-labor legislative efforts](#), taking aim at union rights and environmental safety standards that protect workers. In fact, the Foundation for Government Accountability lobbying group that was key in drafting looser state child labor laws was also involved in [restricting access to anti-poverty programs and blocking Medicaid expansion](#).

History shows that [weak and uneven child labor laws](#) incapacitate states from mandating stronger labor legislation as businesses take advantage of the asymmetry in labor standards and move their operations to jurisdictions with lower protections.

It is no coincidence that proponents of weaker child labor laws are broadly anti-union and anti-labor. Defending labor rights starts by setting high legal thresholds for all workers, because the degradation of rights for any group has a historically proven ripple effect on labor rights, wages, and safety standards for workers at all levels, industries, and legal jurisdictions. These laws inevitably challenge the notion of a meritocratic American economy by retracting years of progress in defending quality jobs for working families and providing feasible opportunities to escape generational poverty.

Administrative Roadblocks for Enforcing Child Labor Laws

Public reports and exposés have demonstrated the practical struggle both HHS and DOL have had in meeting their operational objectives. The government has inaccurate or incomplete information on child labor — particularly in the agricultural sector — with children often [paid in cash](#), and the Census Bureau’s data limited solely to employment status for those ages 16 and older. Experts agree that ending work permits for children will likely exacerbate the difficulties in [tracking child labor in the United States](#), inevitably making enforcement more cumbersome.

Systemic underfunding and a growing case backlog further weaken the investigative and enforcement capabilities of DOL and its partner agencies. After the announcement of an [interagency task force](#) between the DOL Wage and Hour Division and HHS in February, many advocates were optimistic about a mobilization towards a serious and immediate response. However, the lack of [updates on the task force's progress](#) investigating one of the major infractors, Packers Sanitation, have disillusioned those hoping for change. Under the FLSA, DOL does [not explicitly have the authority](#) to compel state agencies to respond to these state challenges to federal standards, including to enforce more protective federal law within state borders.

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A majority of voters [support increased funding and rigor of labor law enforcement](#). Weak enforcement can embolden industries to embrace even more exploitative practices, crippling workplace regulations and limiting workers' wages. Republican efforts to reduce permitting and deregulate child hiring incapacitates the government's enforcement agencies, allowing bad actors to operate without restraint.

Jeopardizing Educational Opportunities of Future Workforce

The *New York Times* reported several cases of children working jobs that ultimately forced them to drop out of school at early ages. Many of these proposed laws present an additional threat to children's ability to perform in school and to enjoy their childhoods, in direct conflict with the intent of the FLSA. Proposed legislation undercuts children's equal access to education by allowing poor and vulnerable children to forgo or risk their education for low-wage jobs, trapping them in cycles of poverty.

These policies prioritize immediate employment over the long-term benefits of education and fail to invest in the potential of American children and the future workforce. Proposed legislation that makes it easier to treat children as adults in the workforce is shortsighted and negligent, failing children and the American public in the long run since education "pays off in a [more competitive workforce and better-informed and engaged citizens](#)."

Proposed Solutions

Immediate Response

Within two days of the *New York Times* exposé, the Biden Administration created a new interagency task force to combat child exploitation. This led to an immediate [investigation into](#) infractors, a proactive search for cases of child exploitation, and increased scrutiny of the involved corporations throughout the chain.

The administration also responded by [fixing the HHS hotline](#) for child migrants by directing operators to return calls to children and requiring them to explain what local law enforcement agency would be in touch. HHS is also undergoing a monthlong investigation of its policies to ensure that the agency fully considers the environment that children are placed in upon migrating to the U.S.

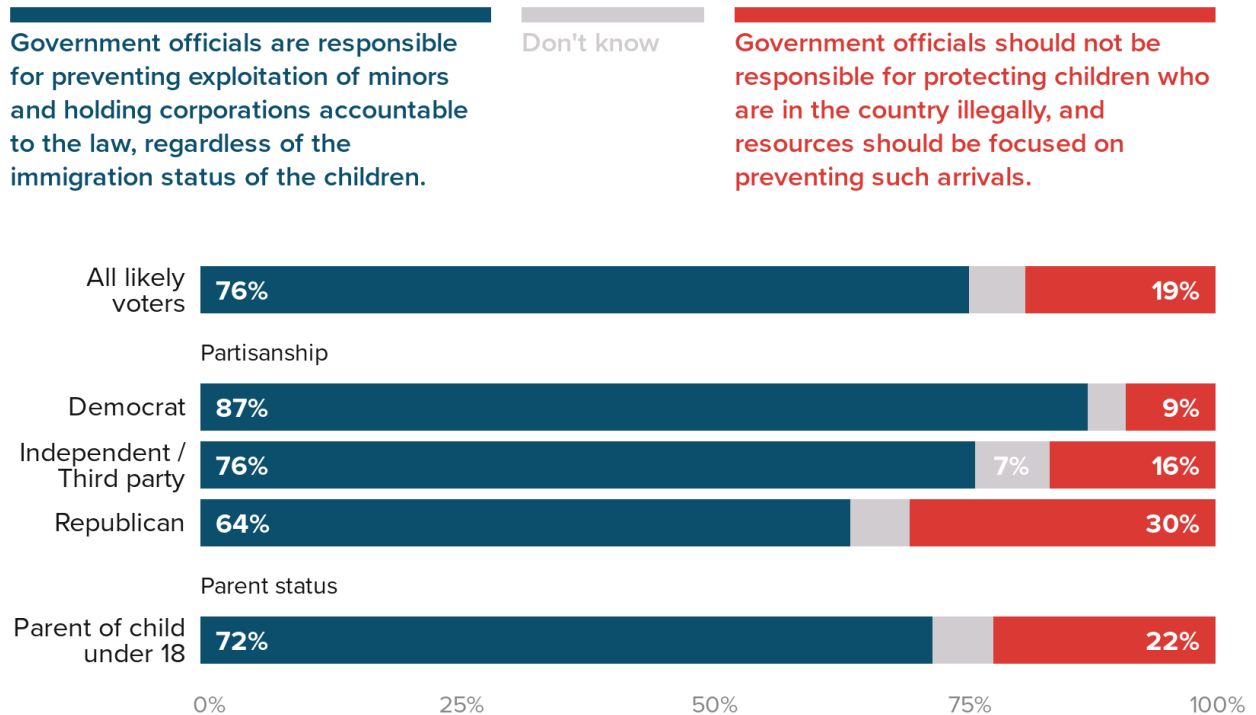
Federal recommitment to the protection of migrant children aligns with public opinion. When asked whether they believe government officials **should not be responsible** for protecting children in the country illegally or government officials **are responsible** for preventing child

exploitation regardless of migration status, over three-quarters of voters agree with the latter. Eighty-seven percent of Democrats, 76 percent of Independents, 64 percent of Republicans, and 72 percent of parents of children believe government officials are responsible for holding corporations accountable to the law and preventing child exploitation, regardless of migration status.

A Bipartisan Majority of Voters Say Government Officials Are Responsible for Preventing Exploitation of Minors Regardless of Their Immigration Status

Recently, journalists have reported that many American corporations are illegally using migrant child labor directly or in their domestic supply chain. As an increasing number of unaccompanied minors are seeking asylum, these children may or may not have parents in the United States.

When thinking about how government officials should respond to American corporations illegally using migrant child labor, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?



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Historical labor movements in the United States have proven that the federal government plays a fundamental role in setting a baseline of sustainable and impermeable labor protections and providing the necessary safety nets to alleviate poverty and protect the most vulnerable members of our society.

Legislative Solutions

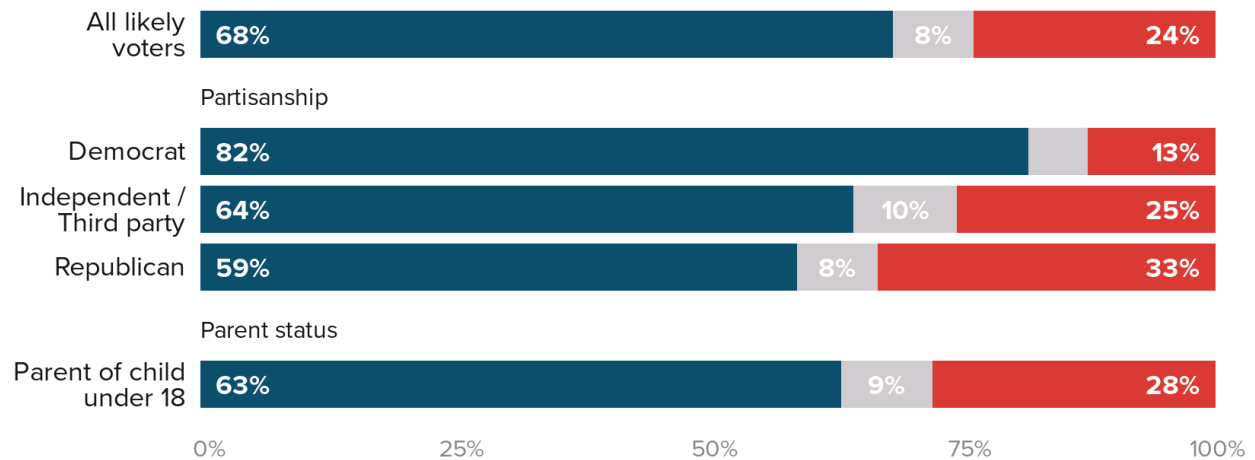
The child labor crisis illustrates the large holes in oversight at the federal level and sheds light on the limitations of dated labor legislation. Our new polling shows that voters support increased enforcement measures for industry violators of child labor, and our past polling showed high support for other relevant legislative measures that could help fill jobs, such as [investments in the social safety net](#), [reformed immigration pathways](#) for essential workers, and increased [labor rights protections](#).

We asked voters if they think child labor laws should be expanded in the face of increased violations and state-level rollbacks, or if they think existing laws are sufficient and any more expansion of child labor laws would hurt business and young people's work ethic. Over two-thirds of voters, including majorities of all parties and a majority of parents of children under age 18, agree that child labor laws should be expanded, with Congress upping penalties and scrutiny.

Voters Across Parties Agree That Congress Should Expand Child Labor Laws and Increase Scrutiny and Penalties for Violators

When thinking about federal proposals to expand child labor laws, which of the following statements comes closest to your view, even if neither is exactly right?

<p>We need to expand federal child labor laws. At a time when companies are increasingly ignoring child labor laws and state lawmakers are weakening protections, Congress needs to step in and increase scrutiny and penalties for violators at every level.</p>	<p>Don't know</p>	<p>We do not need to expand federal child labor laws. Existing child labor laws are sufficient to protect children. Any more burdensome government regulation in the private sector will hurt business growth and could deteriorate young people's work ethic.</p>
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Fortunately, several proposed congressional bills can address the many weak points in current child labor protections, and satisfy voters’ interest in stronger protections.

In March, [Senator Brian Schatz introduced the Child Labor Prevention Act](#) to address the child labor crisis by cracking down on illegal hiring practices and working conditions through steeper fines and stronger criminal penalties for responsible parties. The bill also targets FLSA loopholes that permit the employment of children as independent contractors, bypassing labor protections for full-time employees.

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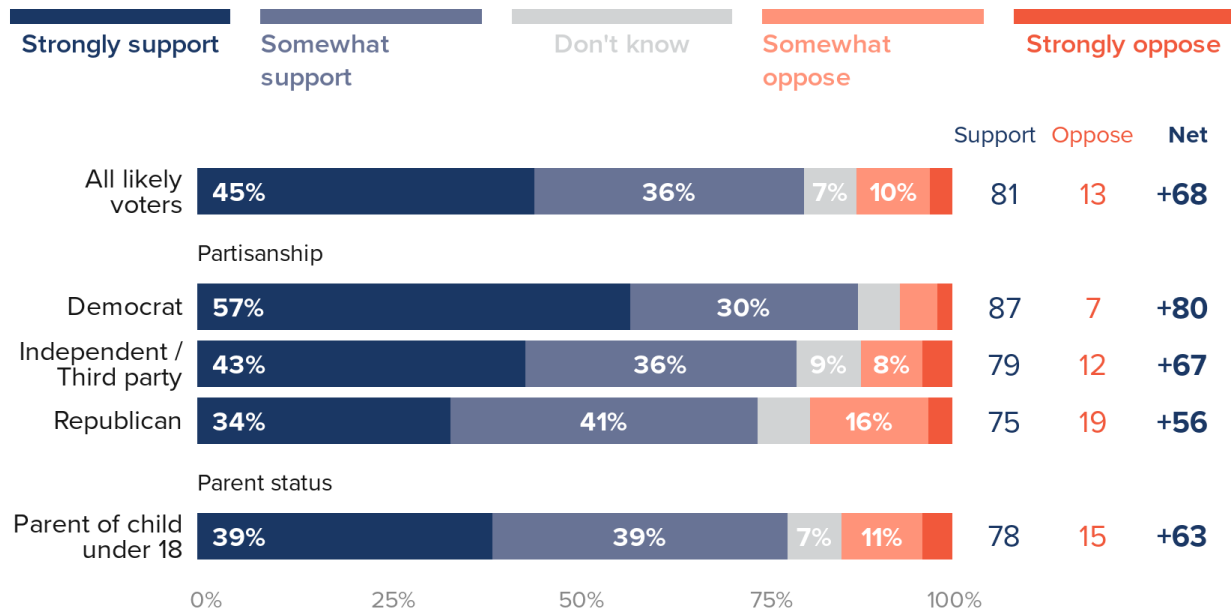
We find that voters across all parties overwhelmingly support the [Child Labor Prevention Act](#) after reading the details of the legislation, with overall support from 81 percent of likely voters.

A Bipartisan Majority of Voters Support the Child Labor Prevention Act

Some members of Congress are proposing the Child Labor Prevention Act to expand existing U.S child labor laws.

- The bill would: Increase financial penalties for companies from the current maximum of \$15,000 to a new maximum of \$132,270 for standard violations and a maximum of \$601,150 for violations involving the serious injury or death of a minor
- Expand existing child labor laws to apply to independent contractors and children employed by independent contractors
- Introduce criminal penalties for repeated or willful violations of child labor laws

Do you support or oppose the Child Labor Prevention Act?



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The Children's Act for Responsible Employment and Farm Safety (CARE Act) is a proposed amendment to the FLSA that addresses the particularly vulnerable situation of child workers in the [agricultural sector](#). The proposed [legislation](#) would raise the minimum age for children working on farms to 14, and raise the hazardous work age to 18.

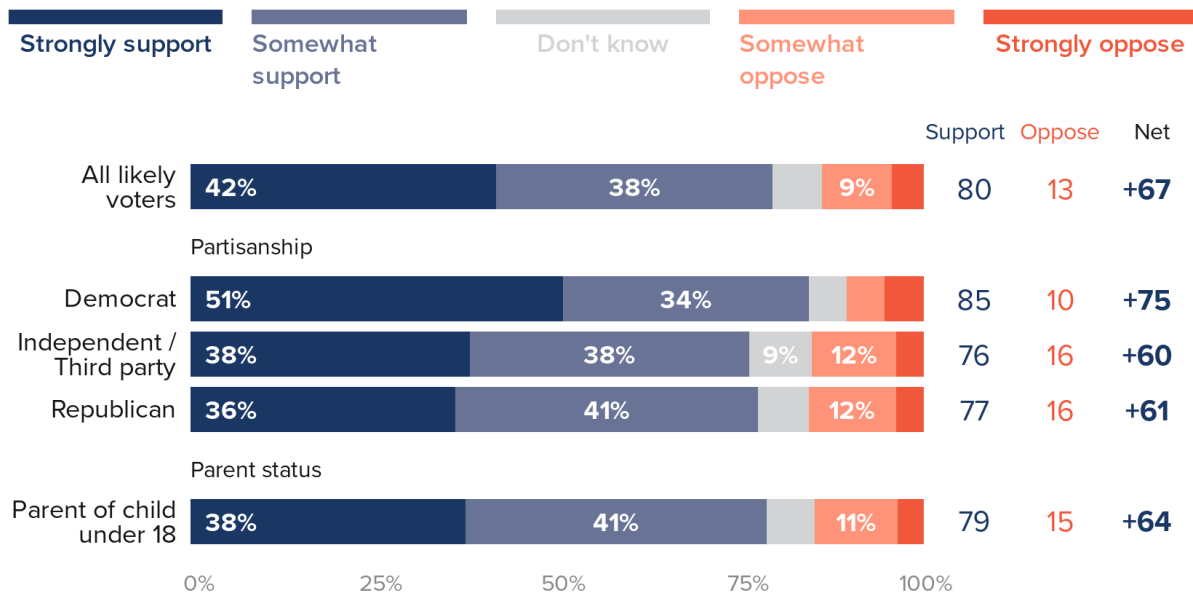
We find that voters overwhelmingly support passing the CARE Act, with overall support from 80 percent of likely voters. The CARE Act has been circling the floors of Congress for over a decade, and our polling shows that voters have stated loud and clear that it is time to pass it.

Voters Overwhelmingly Support the Children's Act for Responsible Employment and Farm Safety

Some members of Congress are proposing the Children's Act for Responsible Employment and Farm Safety. The bill would:

- Raise the minimum age to be employed in farm work to 14
- Increase fine amounts for civil penalties and introduces criminal penalties for severe injuries or death of a child
- Require employers to report serious incidents and participate in annual government reporting on work-related injuries to child farmworkers
- Prohibit children under 18 from handling pesticides

Do you support or oppose the Children's Act for Responsible Employment and Farm Safety?



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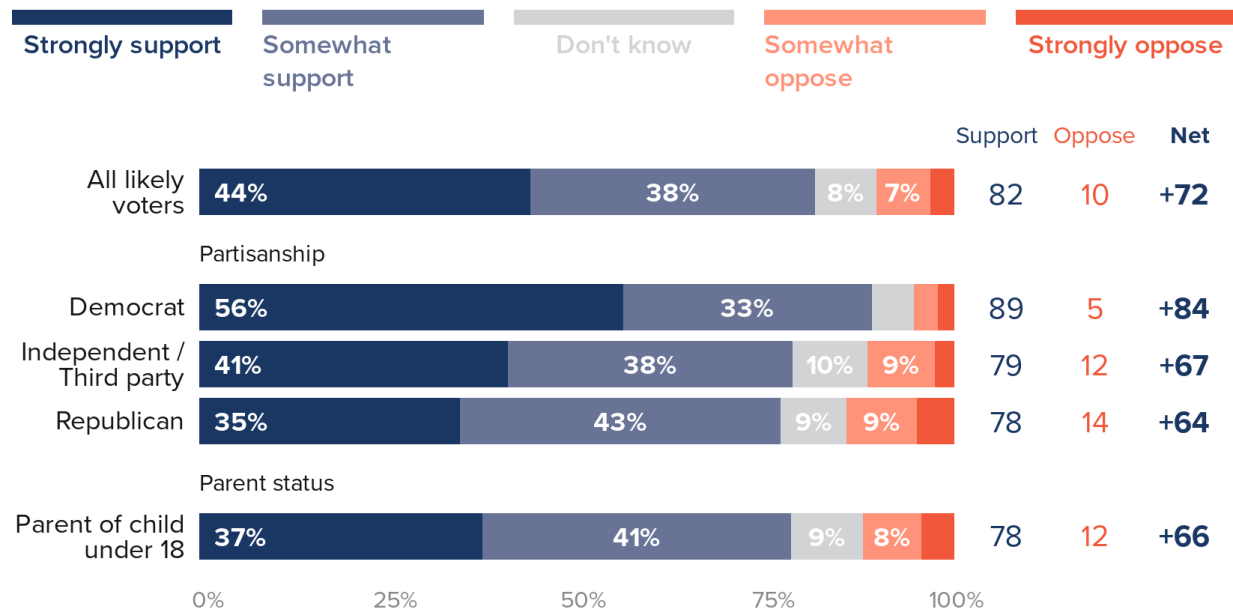
Furthermore, in April Sens. Cory Booker and Peter Welch introduced the [Child Labor Exploitation Accountability Act](#), which focuses on holding corporations accountable for children and workers in the food industry. We asked survey respondents how they feel about the details of the bill, and again, voters are overwhelmingly supportive.

Over Three-Quarters of Voters Across Party Lines Support the Child Labor Exploitation Accountability Act

Some members of Congress are proposing the Child Labor Exploitation Accountability Act.

The bill requires companies that have a federal contract with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to disclose whether they violated any labor laws in the previous three years. If a company is found to have violated certain labor laws, like child labor laws, or committed serious violations, they will be prohibited from getting a contract with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the future. The bill also introduces criminal penalties if it is found that a company knowingly hid their labor violations.

Do you support or oppose the Child Labor Exploitation Accountability Act?



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Agricultural labor laws are out of sync with progress made on labor rights across other industries in the United States, and are [out of compliance with international standards](#) governing child labor. Americans approve of closing these loopholes that place agricultural workers, especially children, at a steep disadvantage.

Beyond this, Congress must prioritize transforming labor rights to protect workers across the board and prevent state legislation from crippling labor rights progress. Workers with a living wage and families that can rely on [strong social protection programs experience relief from economic insecurity](#) and are able to withstand the economic pressure to send their kids into dangerous and exploitative working conditions. Voters believe that the federal government needs to act to protect [workers' right to organize and collectively bargain](#) and [invest in social programs that protect children's health](#), access to education, and well-being.

Alternative Sources of Labor Supply

Proponents of loosening child labor protections claim to solve labor shortages by reducing red tape that prevent workers from joining the workforce. However, this false narrative fails to consider the large number of adults who are willing but unable to work due to economic and legal factors. The [inaccessibility of affordable childcare bars mothers from entering the labor force](#), and extreme [inefficiencies in border policy prevent foreign workers willing to work in these job openings](#) from having access to such roles.

In fact, we have found that voters strongly [approve of measures to expand access to childcare](#) so mothers can join or reenter the labor force. Voters also support a pathway to citizenship for [Dreamers and essential workers](#). These are two popular solutions that can address the labor shortage without exploiting children.

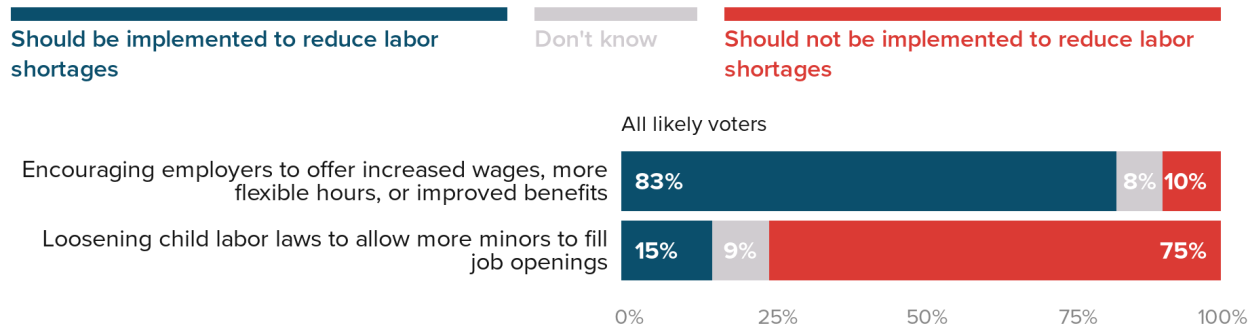
Improved Hours, Wages, and Benefits

Free-market economic theory attributes labor shortages to [employers failing to offer competitive enough terms](#) to attract workers and fill their openings. In fact, Americans are [experiencing real \(inflation-adjusted\) drops in their wages](#) so if employers want more workers, they should pay them more instead of looking to children for cheaper labor to exploit.

When voters are asked about their preferred methods of addressing labor shortages, we find that 83 percent would prefer encouraging employers to offer increased wages, better hours, or improved benefits, while only 15 percent say child labor laws should be loosened to fill jobs.

Voters Support Employers Offering Improved Benefits, and Strongly Oppose Loosening Child Labor Laws, to Address Labor Shortages

Some industries have a labor shortage, meaning there are many unfilled job openings. Below is a list of proposals that may reduce labor shortages. For each proposal, say whether you think it should or should not be implemented to reduce labor shortages.



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[Some industries have offered](#) flexible working hours, work-from-home options, signing bonuses, increased wages, and additional benefits such as childcare, educational stipends and training. [Voters agree](#) that more businesses should adopt policies like these to attract workers and fill their openings.

Industry Response

Many of the corporations who were found to be employing child labor either directly or indirectly have [responded to allegations](#) and enlisted internal investigations; however, companies like J.Crew and Ford have yet to respond publicly.

While upstream suppliers blame downstream hiring practices for these illegal practices, there is a clear vetting process failure for which the responsibility lies on all corporations involved. [Forge Industrial Staffing](#) went as far as to claim it was “a scapegoat for a systemic breakdown” and that “as a regional staffing agency, there is depressingly little we can do to affect change at scale.” However, the magnitude of exploitation demonstrates an unwillingness to respond to the concerns raised by employees on multiple occasions.

The October DOL investigation and public outcry invoked a strong response in the case study of Packers Sanitation, which was found to have illegally hired over 100 child workers across the country to complete dangerous work in meatpacking facilities, among other kinds of labor. While current fines for child labor may not be a sufficient deterrent for this behavior, naming and

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shaming is a proven strategy used across human rights advocacy to elevate public awareness of exploitation and wrongdoing in order to use tactics like boycotts and protests to force companies to change their practices. Public pressure on Packers Sanitation led to the company [hiring a new CEO and developing a charitable fund to help reduce child labor](#) in the nation.

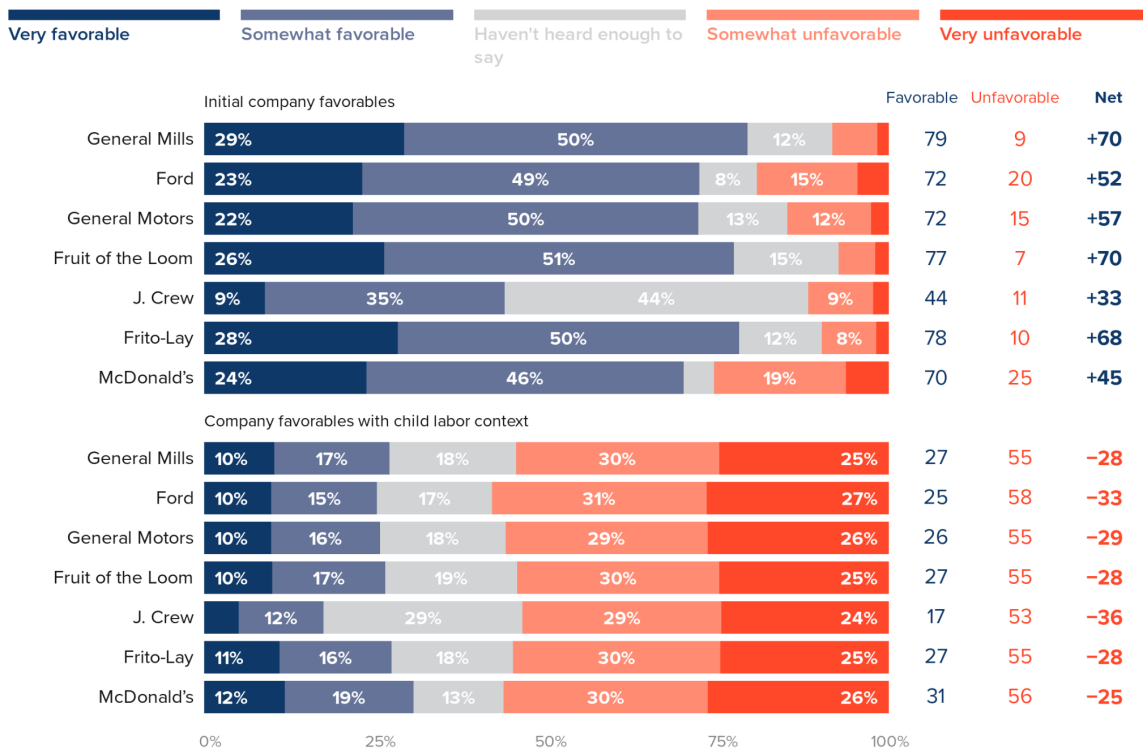
We asked voters about how recent news might change their opinion of the companies involved in the more egregious cases of child labor exploitation. Voters across party lines initially viewed every corporation favorably, but after we provided them with further context regarding each company’s involvement in violating U.S. child labor law, average net favorability across these seven companies drops by 86 points. Every company listed goes from being viewed favorably to unfavorably across party and most demographic lines. Favorability between corporations evens out after voters hear the news about their child labor violations — showing that these practices tarnish any comparative advantage companies had in voters’ eyes.

Company Favorability Ratings Drop Dramatically When Voters Learn of Child Labor Violations

Voters were asked: Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the following companies?

Then, voters were told: The following companies were found to have violated U.S. child labor laws on domestic soil, either directly or in their supply chains. Examples of violations include: having children work longer hours than the law permits, hiring children younger than the law permits, and assigning children to complete hazardous tasks prohibited for minors.

Voters were then asked: Knowing what you know now, do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of the following companies?



June 1–5, 2023 survey of 1,258 likely voters



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Our polling shows that efforts to blame downstream supply issues or social and government failures for these companies' exploitative and unethical behavior haven't worked. Americans' favorability of these companies severely diminishes after hearing about their practices.

Conclusion

The United States passed the FLSA close to a century ago to protect children from exploitation, establishing a historic change in industry standards. However, regulation and enforcement of those laws have floundered, with insufficient funding for federal agencies, constant industry-endorsed legislative attacks at the federal and state levels, and a child migrant crisis at the border. Today's reality mirrors images of Depression-era working conditions, and it is time for Congress to step up and raise our labor standards to meet the challenges facing young American workers.

Data for Progress polling finds that new legislative efforts at the state level to loosen child labor protections are overwhelmingly unpopular among voters across party lines. Instead, they support measures that broaden social safety nets, encourage workforce participation by expanding opportunities for working mothers and immigrants, and create a more competitive and attractive job market with better benefits and higher wages. These proposals are popular and proven approaches to relieving generational poverty and addressing the country's economic challenges.

Today, it is crucial to expose the self-serving motives of business interests in lawmaking and advocate for strong, comprehensive child labor protections that prioritize the rights and dignity of our future generations. It's time Congress listen to the American people and close the loopholes in legislation that let corporations hide behind third parties for their exploitative practices, end the exemption in protections that relegate our agricultural workers to second-class status, and boldly set a higher federal standard that protects all workers.

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Survey Methodology

From June 1 to 5, 2023, Data for Progress conducted a survey of 1,258 likely voters nationally using web panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, geography, and voting history. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is ± 3 percentage points.