

MONTANA'S PROPOSED RIGHT-TO-WORK LEGISLATION: DO RESIDENTS KNOW THEIR LABOR LAWS?

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ABSTRACT

The current investigation was designed to determine whether or not average residents of the State of Montana were knowledgeable about their labor laws. Using an eight-item questionnaire, 100 subjects from the State of Montana were randomly selected for participation and sampled by telephone. The results indicated that the average Montanan was either uninformed or misinformed about the provisions of the law. There were no significant differences in knowledge found between the male and female respondents. When compared with the research findings from earlier studies, Montana residents demonstrated that they were either uninformed or misinformed about their labor laws to a greater extent than residents of the 22 right-to-work states.

The passage of the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947 (Taft-Hartley) “brought forth an immediate outcry of unfairness on the part of organized labor” [1, p. 31]. Particularly troubling to unions was Section 14(b) of the act that enabled states to enact right-to-work laws¹ prohibiting employers and labor

¹ There are currently 22 right-to-work states. The states and their years of enactment are: Alabama (1953), Arizona (1946), Arkansas (1944), Florida (1944), Georgia (1947), Idaho (1985), Iowa (1947), Kansas (1958), Louisiana (1976), Mississippi (1954), Nebraska (1946), Nevada (1951), North Carolina (1947), North Dakota (1947), Oklahoma (2001), South Carolina (1954), South Dakota (1946), Tennessee (1947), Texas (1947), Utah (1955), Virginia (1947), and Wyoming (1963).

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organizations from entering into any agreement that requires union membership or non-membership as a condition of employment. Arguably, Section 14(b) has generated more controversy over the past six decades than any other labor law.

Almost immediately, organized labor embarked on lobbying efforts aimed at repealing or amending the act and at thwarting states from enacting right-to-work laws. In opposition to their positions, advocates for right-to-work laws, most notably the National Right-to-Work Committee, arose in resistance. Over the years, both opponents and proponents of the right-to-work issue have expended countless resources in their attempts to garner support for their respective positions. These factors have been evidenced by continued attempts to sway legislative and popular opinion by disseminating educational materials, using mass media channels to promote emotional appeals, and providing fertile research grounds and debating platforms for academicians and practitioners.

In the past, studies have attempted to measure and predict the impacts that right-to-work laws have had, or will have, on union membership [2-5] and the effects these laws have on a right-to-work state's overall economic condition [6, 7]. Unfortunately, 60 years of research has resulted in inconclusive and mixed findings. Some researchers concluded that those states that have enacted right-to-work laws might indeed see decreased union membership [7-9]. Other investigators determined that whether or not a state has a right-to-work law has little, if any, impact on unionization [3-6]. Finally, while some articles have concluded that states with right-to-work laws may experience overall improved economic conditions [10, 11], other researchers have concluded that the real effects of right-to-work laws rests in "symbolism" rather than the overall impact that these laws have on economic conditions and unionization [3, 12-14].

Interestingly, the mixed research findings have had little effect in dissuading either right-to-work supporters or their opponents from adhering to their original positions. This phenomenon is best understood by accepting the premise that from its onset, the debate over the impact of right-to-work laws appears to have been fueled by emotions rather than facts. As early as 1956, Keller noted that, "the mere mention of right-to-work laws causes an immediate and intense emotional reaction" [15, p. 5]. Furthermore, the strength of these sentiments appears to be geographically based with southern and midwestern states favoring right-to-work laws [16-18].

Emotional arguments by both supporters and opponents of right-to-work laws have historically been categorized into two opposing doctrines. Proponents of right-to-work laws maintain that compulsory unionism violates freedom of choice and unions do not have the right to enjoy more strength than voluntarism provides [19]. To deny a worker these rights, by forcing them to join a union, or to pay a portion of the dues, in order to maintain their job is tantamount to making them a "captive passenger." On the other hand, opponents of right-to-work laws argue that since the law requires that they represent all workers in the bargaining unit irrespective as to whether or not they join the union or pay dues, and since this

process requires that they expend significant resources, all workers who benefit from the union's efforts should be required to pay their fair share [20]. Employees who do not contribute are characterized as "free riders," profiting at the expense of their fellow workers.

After decades of heated debates, extensive lobbying efforts, research, media campaigns, and the dissemination of educational literature, it seems logical to assume that workers would be well versed in the provisions of a law that affects their daily lives. In fact, the AFL-CIO and its affiliate unions used this line of reasoning in 1979 and 1980 to defeat legislation introduced in the Virginia Senate (Senate Bill No. 125, Sec 40.1-58.2) that would have required the posting of Virginia's right-to-work law in all covered places of employment [21]. Although both bills failed to reach the floor, the controversy persisted. In an attempt to determine the soundness of the union's contention, Singer et al. conducted research designed to determine whether or not Virginians were knowledgeable about the provisions of their right-to-work law. The results of the study indicated that average Virginia residents were uninformed or misinformed regarding their rights under their right-to-work law [21].

Seeking to understand their findings as to why workers living under a state right-to-work law that had been enacted over 30 years earlier were so uninformed or misinformed about the law, Singer et al. [21] formulated several hypotheses. First, they postulated that perhaps, as indicated by earlier researchers, the differences between right-to-work and non right-to-work states reflects the tastes and preferences of the populace rather than the effects of the laws [3, 4, 22]. Second, the researchers hypothesized that perhaps the problem resided in the fact that it was difficult to educate workers because there was a lack of advocates for either position with direct communication channels to the general populace. Lastly, they contended that perhaps Virginia was an atypical right-to-work state [21].

In an effort to test the above hypotheses, Singer expanded the research to the remaining right-to-work states. Once again the results indicated that the residents of right-to-work states were uninformed or misinformed about the provisions of labor laws. Furthermore, Singer concluded that the research findings failed to support or refute the hypotheses about the impact that emotions, state culture, or communication access have on worker's knowledge of right-to-work laws [20].

Oklahoma's adoption of a right-to-work law in 2001 provided Singer with another opportunity to test his hypotheses. The last state to have enacted a right-to-work law was Idaho, 16 years earlier. It seemed only logical to Singer that the advent of the Internet, coupled with an abundance of modern communication channels, would have finally provided advocates with tools by which they could educate the populace on the law's provisions. In fact, with the exception of Idaho, the results indicated that residents of Oklahoma were no more or less uninformed or misinformed about the provisions of their right-to-work law than the residents of the other 20 right-to-work states [23]. In explaining

the results, Singer conjectured that perhaps the extensive communication channels available to right-to-work advocates during the Oklahoma campaign enabled them to reach more residents than was possible in Idaho during the early 1980s. Second, since Idaho residents were sampled immediately after the enactment of their law, their lack of knowledge about the law may have been attributable to the fact that they had not yet accumulated any experience living under the law [23].

The Oklahoma victory energized right-to-work proponents in their quest to expand similar laws to six other non right-to-work states: Colorado, Kentucky, Indiana, New Hampshire, Montana, and New Mexico [24]. Of these states, Montana, a state that recorded committee and floor votes regarding their proposed right-to-work legislation (S.B. 250) during its January 2007 legislative session, was selected for study.

The present study attempted to determine whether or not the average resident of Montana was knowledgeable about the provisions of the state's labor laws and if any significant differences existed between the males and females of the state. Second, it was hoped that the findings might shed additional light on whether or not right-to-work advocates have direct communication access to the general public and if they use these channels to educate the populace. Finally, the researchers were optimistic that the investigation might answer the following questions. If a state was currently undergoing an attempt to enact a right-to-work law, did the residents of the state understand their current labor laws sufficiently enough to know what benefits, if any, might be obtained by the enactment of the new law? Or is their decision to support or oppose the legislation truly based on symbolism and emotion rather than knowledge and understanding?

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects for the present study consisted of 100 randomly selected residents (45 males and 55 females) from Montana. All the participants were over 18 years of age with seven subjects (five males and two females) ranging between 18 and 25 years of age, 13 subjects (four males and nine females) ranging between 26 and 35 years of age, 20 subjects (nine males and 11 females) ranging between 36 and 45 years of age, and 24 subjects (11 males and 13 females) ranging between 46 and 55 years of age. The remaining 36 subjects (16 males and 20 females) indicated that they were 56 years of age or older. When queried as to their employment status, 21 respondents (15 males and 6 females) indicated that they were self-employed, 33 subjects (12 males and 21 females) stated that they were non-government employees, 13 participants (seven males and six females) indicated that they were employed by the state or federal government, three respondents (one male and two females) said that they were unemployed but actively seeking work, and the remaining 30 subjects (10 males and 20

females) indicated that they were currently out of the workforce and ,for various reasons, e.g., retired, were not actively seeking employment (see Table 1).

Procedure

The current investigation, designed to replicate Singer et al. [21] and Singer's [20, 23] previous investigations, used the same sampling procedures and validated questionnaire that the original researchers had developed and employed. The instrument required the subject to respond either for "true, false, or not sure" to eight questions that were designed to test their knowledge of labor laws [21, p. 113]. Additionally, demographic information about each subject's sex, age, and occupational status was solicited and recorded.

Prior to identifying the sample to be studied, a telephone interviewer was chosen. The individual selected was a female business administration graduate student who had previously been employed as a graduate assistant and had satisfactorily completed the Human Participants Protection Education for Research Teams course. She was given a standardized letter to read to the respondents, was instructed in the basic survey techniques to be used in the research, advised of the study's purpose, and given literature on past right-to-work research in order to familiarize herself with the basic tenets of the law.

All of the subjects who participated in the study were randomly chosen and solicited anonymously using the following procedure. The percentage of Montana's population living within each city and county was determined by using the United States 2000 census data [25]. The population percentages were

Table 1. Relevant Demographics of the Montana Participants

	Total <i>N</i>	Males	Females
Sex	100	45	55
Age			
18-25	07	05	02
26-35	13	04	09
36-45	20	09	11
46-55	24	11	13
56+	36	16	20
Employment status			
Self-employed	21	15	06
Nongovernment	33	12	21
State or federal government	13	07	06
Seeking employment	03	01	02
Out of the workforce	30	10	20

subsequently multiplied by 100 (the amount of completed surveys desired by the researchers) to determine the total amount of respondents needed in each geographic area. Next, the area codes and telephone suffixes for each of the selected areas were obtained, and a table of random numbers was used to determine the last four digits of the telephone numbers. Ultimately, many of the telephone numbers selected resulted in either non-existent or out-of-service numbers. Consequently, a total of 1,399 calls were placed before the targeted number of 100 calls was realized.

After identifying the random numbers to be called, the actual surveying began. In order to avoid connecting with business organizations, and to minimize the potential of a skewed sample consisting of females and/or unemployed respondents, all of the telephone calls were placed between the hours of six and nine p.m. (MDT) or on weekends. If a minor answered the phone, the interviewer asked to speak with his or her parent, avoiding any researcher bias in choosing the sex of the participant. Each potential subject was read the standardized letter that explained the purpose of the research and asked if he or she would be willing to participate in the study. After concluding the survey, the interviewer answered any questions posed by the respondent and thanked him or her for participating.

After the interviewing stage was completed, the data were aggregated and analyzed using the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences [26]. Frequency data for each of the eight questionnaire items were calculated, and Pearson chi square analyses were performed to determine if any significant differences existed between the sexes.

RESULTS

Table 2 indicates the response percentages for the questionnaire items for the total population and the males and females. Overall, Montana residents averaged 3.91 correct answers per subject (49 percent correct). Question number one produced the most correct responses with 69 percent of the population answering the item correctly. The question that elicited the most incorrect responses was item number two with a total combined correct response rate of only 28 percent. For Montana males, question number one generated the most correct responses (76 percent), while question number seven resulted in the least amount of correct responses with a correct response rate of only 31 percent. Montana females scored highest on question number four answering correctly 65 percent of the time, while the lowest correct score was obtained on item number two with only a 22 percent correct response rate. For the entire survey, males and females differed by only .05 correct responses per subject (males 3.94, females 3.89).

The data presented in Table 3 details the results of Pearson chi square analyses between the males and the females. The results indicated that a significant difference existed between the sexes for occupational status ($p \leq .05$). In general, males tended to be self-employed more than females, while females appeared to be

Table 2. Frequency Responses for the Questionnaire Items

Question	Total <i>N</i> = 100		Males <i>N</i> = 45		Females <i>N</i> = 55	
	Response	Percent	Response	Percent	Response	Percent
1 Correct	69	69	34	76	35	64
Incorrect	09	09	05	11	04	07
Not sure	22	22	06	13	16	29
2 Correct	28	28	16	36	12	22
Incorrect	56	56	20	44	36	65
Not sure	16	16	09	20	07	13
3 Correct	45	45	19	42	26	47
Incorrect	42	42	21	47	21	38
Not sure	13	13	05	11	08	15
4 Correct	56	56	20	44	36	65
Incorrect	20	20	12	27	08	15
Not sure	24	24	13	29	11	20
5 Correct	61	61	27	60	34	62
Incorrect	17	17	09	20	08	14
Not sure	22	22	09	20	13	24
6 Correct	61	61	29	64	32	58
Incorrect	21	21	12	27	09	16
Not sure	18	18	04	09	14	26
7 Correct	38	38	14	31	24	44
Incorrect	29	29	16	36	13	24
Not sure	33	33	15	33	18	32
8 Correct	31	31	16	36	15	27
Incorrect	50	50	24	53	26	47
Not sure	19	19	05	11	14	26
All eight questions						
Correct	391	49	177	49	214	49
Incorrect	242	30	117	33	125	28
Not sure	167	21	66	18	101	23
Avg. # correct answers per respondent		3.91		3.94		3.89

Table 3. Pearson Chi Square Analyses
for the Questionnaire Items
between the Sexes

Question number	χ^2	Probability
1	3.71	NS
2	4.44	NS
3	.79	NS
4	4.58	NS
5	.60	NS
6	5.18	NS
7	2.24	NS
8	3.41	NS
Age	8.11	NS
Occupational status	9.15	.05

employed more often in government positions or out of the workforce in comparison to their male counterparts. There were no significant differences found in the responses to the questionnaire items between the males and females.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Before discussing the findings of the current study, it seems prudent to reiterate the purposes of the present investigation. As mentioned earlier, this is the first time that the initial Singer et al. [21] research was replicated using a non right-to-work state. First and foremost, the study was designed to determine if the average resident of Montana had knowledge about the provisions of the labor laws and if any significant differences existed between the males and females of the state. Second, the researchers were attempting to determine if proponents and opponents of the proposed right-to-work law in Montana had used the available communication networks to educate the general public on the provisions of the labor laws or if they were attempting to generate emotional reactions to the issues. In essence, the investigators attempted to find additional evidence that might validate or refute the ongoing controversy as to whether or not right-to-work laws are symbolic or substantive in nature. The study was not designed to determine the impacts that right-to-work laws have on the economics of a state or the effects these laws have on the unionization process, nor was it designed to lend support to arguments for or against the enactment of right-to-work laws.

Similar to earlier right-to-work state studies by Singer et al. [21] and Singer [20, 23], the results reported in Table 2 confirm that a large percentage of the residents of Montana are either uninformed or misinformed about the provisions of their labor laws. On the eight questions posed, the average Montanan obtained a score of 3.91 correct items per subject. Males scored only slightly better than females with average scores of 3.94 and 3.89 respectively. Excluding Oklahoma (population 4.60, males 4.95, females 4.33) [23], the other right-to-work states averaged 4.64 correct responses per subject (males 5.00, females 4.37). On a state-by-state comparison, Montana's females scored higher than Virginia's females (3.65), but lower than all the other states, while Montana's males scored lower than any of the other states' males. Additionally, comparisons on each of the eight questionnaire items indicated that Montana residents scored a lower percentage of correct responses per item than the average score of all the other right-to-work states [20].

Although not totally unexpected, the results of the investigation present two enigmas. First, how can residents of a state in the midst of a hotly debated contest over enactment of a right-to-work law that will affect their everyday working lives be so uninformed or misinformed about the provisions of their existing labor laws? It seems only natural that in order to decide whether or not the proposed new legislation would be beneficial requires that a comparison be made between the provisions of the new law and the tenets of the law currently in existence. Second, with the exception of Montana's females in comparison to Virginia's females, why are Montanans less knowledgeable about their existing labor laws when compared to 22 other states?

The answers to both of these questions may be found, at least in part, in the earlier work of researchers who contended that the reaction to right-to-work laws is deeply rooted in the tastes and preferences of the populace rather than the actual impacts of the law [3, 4, 22]. Residents of states with long-standing intense labor cultures, either for or against unions, may exhibit a tendency to adhere to their respective convictions in spite of evidence to the contrary.

Perhaps Montana, despite being a non right-to-work state, may exhibit some fundamental similarities to Virginia, a staunch right-to-work state, in that both may be anomalies, having laws and cultures that make them distinctly different than their respective reference groups. Montanans (3.91) and Virginians (4.12) average populace scores indicate that they are more uninformed or misinformed about their respective labor laws than any of the other states previously sampled [20, 23]. Additionally, both share a long-standing passion for organized labor, albeit in opposite directions.

Virginia, one of the first states to enact a right-to-work law, has been characterized as a state whose populace views the law as a part of the state's value system and above reproach. As Sabato stated, ". . . right-to-work has become one of the most overreaching symbols of Virginia's conservatism. And while most people don't understand the issues involved, through the generations they have

been told by their leaders that right-to-work is one of the pillars of Virginia society, and they accept it . . .” [27, p. C-1]. Furthermore, “of the states with right-to-work laws, it has the most tightly written statute. It has no known loopholes” [28, p. A-18]. Montana has been reputed to be the most pro-union state in the Rockies [29], and its lawmakers have rejected right-to-work law enactment whenever it was previously proposed in the legislature. In addition, Montana holds claim to being the only state that does not recognize the at-will-employment doctrine, requiring that termination be on the basis of “just cause” [30].

Ironically, the strength of the passions about right-to-work laws may, in part, contribute to yet another reason for the lack of knowledge about labor laws. As Singer et al. [21] postulated, it appears that the strong advocacy positions adopted by both proponents and opponents of right-to-work laws may have interfered with the goal of educating the general public. Although both sides have attempted to present economic findings, the preponderance of mixed research over the decades, and emotionally charged controversies, have resulted in confusion about the laws and may have generated a propensity on the part of people to dismiss any factual information presented as prejudicial. As Krehbiel maintained during the recent Oklahoma campaign, “many of the promises are speculative. Few, if any, are outright fabrications. Most are misleading. Most are open to interpretation” [31, p. 1]. Furthermore, it appears that even highly energized attempts at disseminating the economic impacts of right-to-work laws during campaigns are being overshadowed by the “freedom of choice” argument [24, 32].

Another plausible explanation that may explain the lack of knowledge workers have about their labor laws is that there are no real opportunities to discuss the issues in open objective forums. Workers who are not members of labor organizations have no reason or need to discuss the issues. Unions oppose the law because it would significantly impact on their ability to recruit dues-paying members. Non-unionized employers are fearful of raising any labor issues, unless an organizing campaign at their organization is currently underway, because it may foster an interest in unions. Employers of unionized workers are afraid that discussing this subject may sour current relations with the union or be construed as an attempt to undermine or decertify the workers’ chosen collective bargaining agent. Few, if any, colleges and universities teach the subject matter as a part of their standardized curriculum [21]. As demonstrated recently in Montana, it appears that even publicly elected officials are not indisposed to attempting to stifle open discussion on these issues [33].

As a point of conjecture, both proponents and opponents of right-to-work laws appear to expend minimal resources on educational endeavors in comparison to the efforts spent on lobbying elected officials. Initial enactment, rejection, or repeal of right-to-work laws usually occurs at the legislative level. In the case of the Virginia posting law, both the 1979 and 1980 bills were defeated in committee. Montana’s bill recently recorded committee and floor votes, but it still failed to be enacted. Consequently, advocates appear to be more concerned with

persuading or pressuring lawmakers to support or reject the legislation than in educating the populace about the provisions of the law. It appears that the information disseminated during campaigns is selectively chosen because of the powerful emotions elicited. In turn, it is hoped that these strong emotions will energize the public to lobby and pressure their legislators. These efforts are evidenced in the actions of Montanans who are currently lobbying their legislators to cast pro right-to-work votes [34].

In conclusion, it is interesting to contemplate what, if any, effect an educated populace would have on the right-to-work controversy. It is doubtful, however, that such an occurrence is likely to happen in the near future. A decade after the passage of Section 14(b) of the Labor Management Relations Act, Witney indicated that the right-to-work controversy would most probably be continually waged at the state level since it was unlikely that either Section 14(b) would be repealed or that a national right-to-work law would be passed [35]. Fifty years later, the controversy and the issues surrounding it remain relatively unchanged. Even if Section 14(b) were repealed in favor of the National Right-to-Work Act (H.R. 500/S.370) that was proposed in 2003, the controversy would probably just shift from the state to the federal level. Opponents would still be citing research about the negative economic impacts of the law and its unfairness in requiring union employees to foot the bill for "free riders." Proponents would be citing opposing economic research and the freedom issues. The general populace would probably be confused about their rights under a national right-to-work act.

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