

Separating Unions from Right to Work laws

The debate over Right to Work legislation is as heated as any, and with good reason—people have very passionate opinions about issues concerning unions. Unfortunately, one's position on unions has become intertwined with one's position on Right to Work legislation. On the one hand, if you are against Right to Work legislation, then this necessarily must mean that you are “pro-union.” Conversely, if you are in favor of Right to Work legislation, then you must be “anti-union.” Such a polarized view is unnecessary and should not be blindly adhered to.

At their inception, labor unions were voluntary associations comprised of like-minded workers. Voluntary associations like unions can provide what are known as “club goods”—goods and services that are most efficiently provided for a number of people collectively as opposed to individuals. Golf courses are a good example of a club good. Not too many people can own their own course, but a lot of people still desire to play golf and clubs fill this need very well. Governments oftentimes try to provide goods for large groups of people, but voluntary associations hold a number of advantages over the government in being able to provide these goods and services privately—not the least of which being the plain fact that they must deliver something of value to their members or risk losing them altogether.

Unions do a great job today of providing valuable services for their members that governments have typically had difficulty producing well. The AFL/CIO provides scholarships, loans and college planning for members looking to further their education. Union members get assistance in purchasing and refinancing homes, retirement services and access to a union-specific bank. The West Virginia chapter of the AFL/CIO has even committed itself to help provide relief during times of natural disasters—and we can't have too many private organizations compensating for the appalling government failure that is FEMA.

Though difficult to measure directly, another advantage of union membership comes in the form of what is known as “social capital.” Social capital is the connections and relationships built through interacting with other members of society. Oftentimes, we think of capital as physical (i.e., machines) or human (i.e., education). Increasing either of these allows a laborer to be more productive and to earn a higher wage. As more machines and more education lead to workers that are able to generate more wealth, so too does establishing connections with other members of society and using these relationships to become a more valuable provider of goods and services. Unions help foster the process of acquiring social capital and, in doing so, help create more productive employees.

Opinions on Right to Work legislation do not concern any of the previous positive outcomes generated by labor unions. The debate concerning Right to Work hinges on the ability of any group in society to coerce individuals into joining their ranks—and paying membership dues—against their will.

While states that have passed Right to Work legislation have been shown to have better economic outcomes (lower unemployment rates, higher rates of income growth, etc.), the discussion need not go beyond the concept of liberty. The same spirit of unions which should be applauded—voluntary association for the benefit of all involved—is trampled by allowing any group, unions or otherwise, to seize money from unwilling individuals. We, as Americans, have the right to the protection of our person and property. Right to Work legislation reinforces the very freedoms that have made America the economic engine of the world.

Furthermore, employment contracts are voluntary in nature. Either side—employer or employee—may terminate the agreement if it is not to their personal benefit. Groups not privy to these employment agreements *do not have the right to determine the structure of these voluntary contracts*. Unions have no more right to impose membership upon new employees than I to determine my neighbor's choice of hair color—yet Right to Highlights laws would seem foolishly redundant. This is not to say that unions are unilaterally bad; as mentioned above, there are many positive outcomes of unions that should be emphasized. But giving any group the power to coerce another is against the ideals set forth in our country, and indeed against the goal of increasing the well-being of any state's citizens.

Regardless of your personal opinion, unions and Right to Work laws are separate issues that need to be judged individually, not together.

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