

Attitudes about Teacher Labor Unions and Collective Bargaining: Results from a National Sample

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Abstract

A national random sample of adults indicates that most respondents support the right of teachers to engage in collective bargaining over terms and conditions of employment. Most also believe that public schools in their state give most students a good education and that schools would not give students a better education if teachers were not unionized. Regression analysis indicates that such attitudes are common across demographic groups. These results suggest that there may not be widespread public support for the legislative attempts in several states to rescind or sharply limit the collective bargaining rights of teachers (and other public employees).

Keywords: Education, Teachers, Collective Bargaining, Unions

For many years there has been considerable criticism of the U.S. system of public education and specifically of the role of teacher unions and collective bargaining in that system. This criticism has appeared both in the mass media and to a significant extent in the academic literature as well. This criticism was intensified by the post-2010 election efforts of a number of newly elected Republican state governors and new Republican majorities in state legislatures to reduce or even eliminate collective bargaining rights for public employees, especially public school and state university faculty members. The efforts in Wisconsin and Ohio were the most widely reported but there have been efforts in other states as well and a number of these (e.g. in Tennessee) have been successful.

Does the public share the view that teacher unionism and collective bargaining are a (or even “the”) major problem with American public education? How do such views relate to age and gender? How do they relate to education and to experience with unionism? These are the kinds of questions we address in this paper.

We approach the topic in the following way. First, we survey the popular and academic literatures to document the criticisms of collective bargaining in public education. Second we explain the source of our data and we analyze those data. Third we discuss conclusions and implications based on the analysis.

Literature

It is obvious that the various discussions of the reasons for the crisis in public education or the failure of our public education system presume that there is a crisis or a failure. While there is little doubt that some school systems, especially large urban systems serving large poor and underprivileged populations, have serious problems, there is considerable reason to doubt that the overall system is failing or in crisis or performing worse than it did in the past and there are considerable data to the contrary. (Lemann, 2010; Rothstein, 2011; Best, 2011).

Much of the popular criticism of public education and the role of teacher unions relates to the difficulties of firing teachers and the way pay is commonly tied to teacher seniority (The Economist, 2008; Newsweek, 2008; Stephey, 2008; Alter, December 2010).

A January 2006 report “Stupid in America: How Lack of Choice Cheats Our Kids Out of a Good Education,” by John Stossel attempted to establish the complete failure of public education (Gabbard & Atkinson, 2007, p. 86-91). One of the best known sets of criticisms comes in a widely watched documentary film, “Waiting for ‘Superman’,” (Ripley, 2010; Corliss, 2010; The Economist, 2010). Many of these criticisms oversimplify the situation at best.

For example, many refer to the limitations which collective bargaining agreements impose on school managers as ‘union rules’. However, this involves the misperception that the collective bargaining agreements were not jointly negotiated with school managers. There is often an implicit (occasionally explicit) assumption that unions can get pretty much whatever they want in negotiations with school managers and that those negotiating on behalf of school districts are helpless to resist. In fact, recent changes in collective bargaining agreements in some major cities and elsewhere belie this assumption, although it remains to be seen whether changes in teacher pay, assignment and layoff systems will have positive effects on student achievement (Wingert, June 2010; Turque, 2009).

In addition, some of the difficulties in terminating teachers (which some analysts would characterize simply as ‘due process’ requirements) derive from state law rather than from collective bargaining agreements (Gross, 1988). In New York, the discipline of tenured teachers, up to and including termination, is governed by section 3020a of the New York State Education Law and many states have similar systems. While there may be other related requirements that are in collective bargaining agreements, state law is often the key.

Evidence suggests that schools in states and locations where teachers are not unionized often use pay, assignment and layoff systems similar to those used in unionized districts including significant reliance on seniority (Donn, Donn, Goldberg, & Kirby, 2014). This suggests that such systems are attractive to school managers regardless of the presence of unions.

Another problem that the critics of public education and teacher collective bargaining tend to finesse is the measurement of student achievement. In practice the measurement of student achievement tends to involve the use of student performance on standardized tests. There is rarely a good alternative to this but the problems of measuring achievement with standardized tests are many and well documented and they can be even more severe when those tests are used directly to evaluate teachers or determine their pay (Newton, Darling-Hammond, Haertel, & Thomas, 2010, p. 19).

The recent ‘Great Recession’ has led to increased criticism of seniority-based layoff systems. The claim is that, as financial limitations force school districts to lay off teachers, seniority-based layoff provisions of collective bargaining agreements prevent districts from retaining the ‘best’ teachers and force them to keep the most long-serving (Alter, May 2010). Clearly this presumes that there are clear metrics that allow a district to determine which teachers are the best, a proposition that even some of the popular media understand is problematic (Gryphon, 2006).

The principal education program of the Obama administration, the ‘Race to the Top’, has created strong financial incentives for states to insist that school districts reduce limitations on charter schools, develop ‘pay-for-performance’ systems for teachers, and develop teacher evaluation plans that depend more heavily on measured student achievement (Wingert, July 2010). It should be noted that while critics of public education frequently complain about teacher pay systems and demand incentive pay, there is very little evidence that such incentive pay systems improve student achievement (The Economist, 2008; Alter, December 2010).

Academic critics of teacher collective bargaining have often made criticisms similar to those in the media. For example, Paul T. Hill, commented in a 2006 volume on developments over the previous forty years, that, “Local school boards have gradually given unions control over teacher placements, performance evaluations, working conditions, and work assignments within the schools.” He concludes that these policies “...are starting to bankrupt school districts and render them unable to adapt education to the needs of a changing population and a more demanding economy,” (Hill, 2006, p. 89-90).

Another widely read academic critic of teacher collective bargaining Terry M. Moe has asserted that teachers’ unions are “the most powerful force in American education,” which he finds regrettable because he believes they are bad for education and for students (Moe, 2006, p. 229-230; Moe, 2009). He asserts that most people who take the time to read a teacher collective bargaining agreement would be shocked by its contents and the limits it places on school managers in attempting to provide for the education of children (Moe, 2006, p. 233-236).

Actual careful examination of collective bargaining agreements between teachers and school districts by scholars have concluded that they are generally less restrictive than the critics of education collective bargaining would have us believe. In particular, the common assertion that teacher collective bargaining agreements tie school managers' hands by requiring that teacher assignment and transfers be determined by seniority is a significant exaggeration (Donn, Karper, & Kirby, 2011; Cohen-Vogel & Osborne-Lampkin, 2007).

In the aftermath of the 'Great Recession' teachers have also been criticized as part of a more general campaign that blames public employees and their pay and benefits for the fiscal problems of state and local governments (Adler, 2010). This line of criticism has focused less on issues of teacher effectiveness and student achievement than on general issues about how teacher pay and benefit levels compare to levels in the private sector.

There is indeed evidence that teacher collective bargaining has few or no negative effects on student learning. An analysis of states based on percentages of teachers that have collective bargaining rights seems to reveal, if anything, a positive relationship between student achievement and rates of teacher unionization, at least if comparisons based on standardized college entrance tests can be believed (Carr Steelman, Powell, & Carini, 2000, p. 448-453). However, there are studies that conclude the opposite and each side has criticized the research methodology of the other (Moe, 2009).

However, the accuracy of the arguments of the critics of public education (or the arguments of the defenders of public education) is not our principal focus. Rather, we attempt to find out how widespread the public acceptance of the arguments of the critics is and which groups are most and least supportive of these arguments.

Data and Analysis

Our data come from the Zogby America Survey, a random digit dial survey of 1202 adults, conducted from December 10, 2008 to December 13 2008 (Zogby, 2008).ⁱ Zogby International weights the data to reflect the U.S. population according to political affiliation, age, race, gender, and education. Approximately 95 questions were asked of each interviewee. We added six questions to their standard survey, questions that were principally designed to determine whether the public shared the critics' view of public education that teacher unionism and collective bargaining are bad for the education of public school students.

The six questions we added to the Zogby survey were as follows:

- 1) Teachers should have the right to join labor unions to negotiate their pay and working conditions.
- 2) Public schools in my state give most students a good education.
- 3) Public schools in my state would give most students a better education if teachers were not unionized.
- 4) Are you, or is anyone in your household, a public school teacher?
- 5) Was your mother or father a public school teacher?
- 6) Have you ever worked in a unionized work place?

The first three questions were answered using a Likert scale consisting of four responses.ⁱⁱ The last three questions required simple "yes" or "no" answers. There was no need for us to add a specific question asking respondents if they are union members since the standard Zogby panel of questions included such a question already.

We had access to the answers to all of the regular Zogby survey questions which provided us with demographic, educational and ideological data about the respondents. We used data on age and educational attainment as well as data on how respondents self-identified politically in our analyses.

The pattern of responses to questions relating to the quality of education provided and the impact of unionization on that quality was quite interesting (See Table 1). While most respondents somewhat (23.9%) or strongly (37.8%) disagreed that 'Public schools in my state would give most students a better education if teachers were not unionized', most respondents somewhat (40.5%) or strongly (30.9%) agreed that 'Public schools in my state give most students a good education'. These results indicate that most respondents see the current system with union representation for teachers as providing satisfactorily for the educational needs of public school students in their states.

However, that leaves some who somewhat (19.7%) or strongly (18.6%) agreed that ‘Public schools in my state would give most students a better education if teachers were not unionized’, and some who somewhat (12.7%) or strongly (15.9%) disagreed that ‘Public schools in my state give most students a good education’.

We conducted analyses using ordinary least squares regression.ⁱⁱⁱ We used our first three questions (whether teachers should have the right to join unions to negotiate wages and working conditions, whether public schools in the responder’s state give most students a good education, and whether schools would give students a better education if teachers were not unionized) as dependent variables coded from 1 to 5 so that higher values indicate stronger agreement. Our regressions include a number of demographic measures commonly expected to be related to attitudes about teacher unions. We include variables for gender (1=male), race (1=white), a continuous measure of age, and a 6 level measure of annual household income ranging from less than \$25,000 to more than \$100,000. We include indicators of education level (college graduate being the excluded category), and political ideology (conservative is the excluded category). The models also include indicator variables measuring the presence of a teacher in the household (1=yes), whether a respondent’s parent was a teacher (1=yes), if the respondent has worked in a unionized workplace (1=yes), and whether the respondent is a union member (1=yes).

We draw several conclusions from the regression analyses presented in table 2. First, the independent variables based on the questions we added to the Zogby survey (questions 4, 5 and 6) were consistently significant at conventional levels. All else being equal, being a teacher or having one in the household is positively related to believing teachers in the respondent’s state give most students a good education or that having worked in a unionized work place is positively related to the belief that teachers should have the right to unionize and negatively related to the belief that schools would educate students better if teachers were not unionized.

Some of the demographic and educational variables were also significant at conventional levels. Thus, holding other factors constant, respondents with at least some college education were more likely than those who had graduated from college to agree that teachers should have the right to unionize and to disagree that schools would give students a better education if teachers were not unionized. Those who had graduated from high school but had no college were more likely than college graduates to agree that teachers should have the right to unionize and that public schools in their state give most students a good education.

When controlling for other relevant factors, respondents who described their political views as “progressive” or “liberal” were also more inclined than “conservatives” to agree that teachers should have the right to unionize and bargain and to disagree that schools would educate students better if teachers were not unionized. Interestingly, self-description as libertarian was not significantly related to those variables.

However, the demographic and ideological variables generally explained very little of the variance in the dependent variables. They seem to explain far less of the variance in the dependent variables than one might have expected. Put differently, demographic, educational and even ideological variables were not very good predictors of attitudes toward unions and public school education. Indeed, perhaps the most interesting observation that comes from the regression results was what a small percentage of the variance in the dependent variables the independent variables included in these equations explains. Having been a school teacher and having worked in a unionized work place, together with conventional demographic and even ideological variables, do not explain the bulk of differences in attitudes toward public education and teacher unionization. Age, race, gender and income level were not significant in explaining any of the dependent variables. It seems that the factors which help people decide their views on teacher unionism and the quality of public education may be too individual to be found in conventional demographic and ideological variables.

The most interesting conclusions to be reached from the survey data are perhaps to be found in the simple descriptive statistics. A strong majority of the respondents (73.1%) agreed with the statement that teachers should have the right to join unions to negotiate pay and benefits with over half of the sample strongly agreeing with that statement. Only slightly fewer (70.6%) agreed that public schools in their state give most students a good education. Even more interesting, only 36.2% of respondents agreed that schools in their state would give students a better education if teachers were not permitted to engage in collective bargaining while 55.5% disagreed with this statement, 35.3% disagreeing strongly.

Conclusions and Implications

First and foremost, it appears that a large majority of the public as of the date of our survey had not accepted the basic premise of the critics of the public education system in the United States.^{iv} Most had not accepted that public schools in their states are failing to provide quality education to their students. Most had not accepted that eliminating unions and collective bargaining would improve the quality of that education. These views seem consistent with data and information that indicate there really is no “crisis” in public education and that public schools are providing an education that is improving.

Nor does it appear that the public was demanding the kind of legislative limitations on public school teachers rights (and those of other public employees) to engage in collective bargaining of the type that was passed in Wisconsin, Ohio and Tennessee and introduced in a number of other states (Nevada and Michigan for example). These results might help explain why voters in Ohio in 2011 chose to rescind the collective bargaining limitations imposed by the state legislature and the governor after the 2010 general elections. It seems clear that in many cases, state election results that produced Republican governors and Republican state legislatures were misinterpreted as a mandate to take on teacher (and other public employee) unions and collective bargaining statutes.

There were differences in responses based on education levels, presence of a teacher in the household, union experience and ideological groups. However, none of that changes the basic conclusion that the notion that public education is in crisis and that unions and collective bargaining are among the causes, if not the principal cause, of that crisis are distinctly minority opinions overall and across most of the demographic subgroups.

Still there is a sizable minority who do accept the critique of public education. Close to 30% of respondents did not agree that public schools in their state give most students a good education. A slightly larger number (over 36%) believed that the schools would give students a better education if teacher collective bargaining were eliminated. This is particularly interesting since only 27% of the sample disagreed that teachers should have the right to unionize and engage in collective bargaining. Clearly there are people who seem to believe teachers should have these rights even though public schools would serve their students better if such rights did not exist!

All of this means that if teacher unions carry on strong campaigns in favor of the right of teachers to unionize and engage in collective bargaining, there is a large audience constituting a majority of the people that may be receptive to that message. This prediction was clearly consistent with the 2011 referendum result in Ohio. On the other hand, there is a significant minority that is receptive to the alternative message, that teacher collective bargaining is problematic and that it damages student education.

Recent controversies about public sector collective bargaining rights in a number of states, particularly Wisconsin and Ohio, seem to indicate that the critics of public education and teacher unions have been more successful in mobilizing those sympathetic to their arguments. If teachers and their unions are going to resist attacks on collective bargaining rights, they need to do much more to motivate and mobilize those who believe in their position. With majorities accepting the position advocated by teacher unions and their members, it seems problematic that they are losing their collective bargaining rights (or seeing those rights under attack) in so many states. Well-publicized research documenting actual differences between unionized and non-unionized school systems could be useful in countering attempts to assign blame to unions for perceived problems with student achievement and for administrative and financial difficulties faced by local school districts.

Endnotes:

- 1 Because the Zogby organization no longer performs the same survey in this same format, it has not been possible to update the data.
- 2 The four responses were 1) strongly agree, 2) somewhat agree, 3) somewhat disagree, 4) strongly disagree.
- 3 The same equations were also run using Ordered Logit regressions. The results were virtually the same.
- 4 These results do conflict with some other publicly reported polling data that seek to answer related questions. (*The Economist*, October 3, 2009. Donn, et al., 2011)

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Table 1 – Descriptive

VARIABLE	Mean	Standard Deviation
Right to unionize	3.84	1.51
Public schools provide good education	3.59	1.47
Education would be better without unions	2.58	1.53
Male	0.49	0.50
White	0.76	0.42
Age	46.79	16.84
Less than high school	0.03	0.17
High school graduate	0.21	0.41
Some college	0.30	0.46
Progressive	0.09	0.29
Liberal	0.21	0.41
Moderate	0.27	0.45
Libertarian	0.03	0.16
Income (imputed)	3.63	1.64
Teacher in household	0.13	0.34
Mother and/or Father was a teacher	0.10	0.30
Has worked in unionized workplace	0.43	0.50
Union member	0.22	0.41
Observations	1104	

Table 2 – Ordinary Least Squares
Regressions
VARIABLES

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Join Union	Good Education	Better Education
Male	-0.114 (0.115)	0.070 (0.122)	-0.224 (0.118)
White	0.153 (0.176)	0.129 (0.175)	-0.201 (0.174)
Age	-0.006 (0.004)	-0.006 (0.004)	0.003 (0.004)
Less than high school	-0.345 (0.383)	0.689* (0.295)	-0.041 (0.380)
High school graduate	0.436** (0.161)	0.435* (0.177)	-0.040 (0.200)
Some college	0.329* (0.151)	-0.003 (0.155)	-0.327* (0.148)
Progressive	0.768** (0.238)	-0.503* (0.246)	-1.152** (0.187)
Liberal	0.814** (0.146)	-0.320 (0.169)	-0.746** (0.177)
Moderate	0.525** (0.146)	-0.024 (0.141)	-0.536** (0.152)
Libertarian	0.155 (0.336)	-0.700 (0.360)	0.418 (0.320)
Income (imputed)	-0.073 (0.038)	-0.016 (0.041)	0.035 (0.038)
Teacher in household	0.322 (0.165)	0.487** (0.150)	-0.417* (0.193)
Mother and/or Father was a teacher	0.126 (0.206)	0.155 (0.227)	-0.097 (0.173)
Has worked in unionized workplace	0.300* (0.123)	0.244 (0.125)	-0.201 (0.133)
Union member	0.406** (0.131)	-0.068 (0.166)	-0.333* (0.166)
Constant	3.490** (0.338)	3.654** (0.367)	3.324** (0.373)
Observations	1104	1104	1104
R-squared	0.126	0.056	0.116

Standard errors in parentheses

** p<0.01, * p<0.05