

# Teacher unions that have lost collective bargaining will flex political muscle with money

June 13 2011

---

While several states have recently limited the ability for teacher unions to collectively bargain for their members, teachers will continue to flex their political muscle in a way scholars of policymaking have overlooked: through their pocketbooks, says a Baylor University political scientist.

Traditionally, the influence of teacher unions has been measured by the size of their membership or how active unions are in collective bargaining, said Patrick Flavin, Ph.D., assistant professor of [political science](#) at Baylor. But in a recent study, he found that teachers' unions — even in many Southern right-to-work states with weak or non-existent collective bargaining laws — have increased their political power by ratcheting up campaign contributions to candidates for state office.

"You don't often think of [teachers](#) as having a lot of money to throw around to campaigns. But when you have a lot of people each giving a little, it adds up," Flavin said. "Combine that with the fact that teachers vote at much higher rates than the general public, and you have a potent political force.

"It will be very interesting to see how state legislators who opposed collective bargaining rights for teachers fare when the next round of statewide elections roll around. It's likely that teacher unions will actively seek incumbents' defeat by mobilizing teachers to get to the polls to

support opposing candidates and by contributing to their campaigns."

His study, which has been presented to the National Council on Teacher Quality in Washington, D.C., will be published in the fall issue of State Politics & Policy Quarterly. It is titled "From the Schoolhouse to the Statehouse: Teacher Union Political Activism and U.S. State Education Reform Policy."

On June 1, Tennessee added its name to the list of state governments that have recently sought to limit the power of organized labor in public schools. Other states that have taken action in recent months are Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, Idaho and Michigan.

While teacher activism has been well chronicled, only a handful of scholars have actually examined the effect organized teacher interests have on education policymaking in the states, Flavin said. He found that the usual measures of political influence were not significant in predicting state education reform policy, mainly because collective bargaining and political activism are different.

"Just because the collective bargaining powers of teacher unions has been curbed doesn't mean they don't have power to influence teacher pay and evaluation policies as well as policies regarding charter schools and voucher programs for private schools," he said.

One example is Alabama, where state law does not explicitly require that school districts empower teachers with [collective bargaining](#) rights, Flavin said.

"Although this may lead some to conclude that Alabama teachers are politically weak, it would be a serious mistake to assume that the state's largest teachers' union — the Alabama Education Association — plays an insignificant role in state politics," he said. "The AEA is considered

one of the state's most powerful interest groups by Alabama policymakers because it contributes a larger percentage of campaign contributions to state candidates than any other organized interest in the state."

The study uses data from the National Institute on Money in State Politics to measure teacher union giving in each state from 1998 to 2006. The top five states for teacher union political contributions as a percentage of total giving are Oregon, Indiana, Nebraska, Wyoming and Illinois. The bottom five states are Alaska, South Carolina, Maine, Mississippi and Vermont. The study finds that in states where teacher unions contribute at a greater rate to campaigns, teacher unions have been more successful in opposing greater public school choice and reforms for teacher pay and evaluation.

Besides their influence in state politics, teacher unions have a strong advantage in local education politics because the policies they seek to influence are decided largely by public officials in low-turnout, low-interest elections, Flavin said. For example, local school board elections typically report voter turnout of no more than 15 percent of eligible voters. Even in states that elect chief state school officers and a state board of education, teacher union interest groups typically expect little public awareness. Consequently, teachers make up a disproportionately large segment of voters in these elections and exert considerable influence on the direction of policy, Flavin said.

"My prediction is that in upcoming state elections, teacher unions will be very active in getting their members out to vote against legislators who have supported these recent reforms curbing the ability of teacher unions to collectively bargain," he said. "The bottom line is that teachers will remain politically powerful."

Provided by Baylor University

Citation: Teacher unions that have lost collective bargaining will flex political muscle with money (2011, June 13) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-06-teacher-unions-lost-bargaining-flex.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.