

Lawmakers might introduce 'anti-evolution' legislation to appease religious constituents

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New research from Rice University theorizes that "anti-evolution" education legislation continues to be introduced because lawmakers want to appease religious constituents, not because they expect the bills to be made into laws.

David Johnson, a postdoctoral research associate with Rice's Religion and Public Life Program and the lead author of "Conservative Protestantism and Anti-Evolution Curricular Challenges Across States," studied the relationship between religious characteristics of states and anti-evolution bills passing through state education committees across the country. A key goal of the study was to understand how creationist [interest groups](#), science interest groups, public opinion about evolution and political climate influence the political-reform process related to how evolution is taught in schools.

Johnson and co-authors Christopher Scheitle and Elaine Howard Ecklund conducted a national analysis and found that between 2000 and 2012, anti-evolution bills were introduced 110 times in 26 states. However, only 25 percent of this legislation made it through the respective state education committees for a vote by a state legislative chamber, and the only states where bills were enacted into law were Louisiana and Tennessee.

"The top three states where anti-evolution legislation was introduced were Oklahoma with 13 bills, Mississippi with 11 bills and Alabama with 10 bills," Johnson said. "These three states also have the highest

numbers of conservative protestants (denominations diversely associated with fundamentalist, Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical religious movements) in the United States. In addition, more than two-thirds of the bills were introduced in states with more than 25 percent of the population identifying as conservative Protestants."

Johnson added that while increased conservative Protestant adherence does lead to increased anti-evolution attitudes and activity among creation science interest groups, these outcomes are statistically unrelated to consideration of anti-evolution bills in state legislatures. This led him and his co-authors to theorize that the low rate of success in turning anti-evolution education bills into laws suggests that legislators may continue to push these reforms not because they expect success, but to mollify religious constituents.

"Given the mobilization of creationist interest groups around this issue and anti-evolution public opinion - particularly in [states](#) with a high number of conservative Protestants - you might think that this would lead to greater success in turning these bills into laws, but this has not been the case," Johnson said. "Nevertheless, whether or not a bill is enacted, the introduction of legislation like this can be a symbolic way to reassure evangelical political constituents that their concerns are represented and that their views are legitimate."

Johnson said he hopes the study will help groups who are committed to upholding the integrity of science education in public schools.

"There is no scientific debate about the fundamentals of evolution," he said. "And the best social scientific research shows that religious and nonreligious individuals are, overall, quite similar in their orientation to science. There are better ways to represent the values of religious communities: These bills create a misleading impression of conflict between science and religion and threaten the quality of education in

public schools."

Provided by Rice University

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