

Symbols, Self-Interest and Labour Policy Attitudes: Evidence from Saskatchewan

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This article examines the determinants of public attitudes towards labour policy. Using public opinion data on labour standards and essential services legislation from a 2011 Saskatchewan survey, it finds that both self-interest factors (employment in the public sector, and union membership) and symbolic political factors (feelings towards the labour movement and partisanship) structure attitudes toward labour policy in Saskatchewan. Interestingly, the evidence indicates that self-interest may actually trump solidarity within the labour movement, as unionized private sector workers are no more likely than the general public to oppose essential services legislation. The results suggest that researchers should pay attention to both self-interest and symbolic political factors when attempting to understand the relationship between public policy and public opinion.

KEYWORDS: labour legislation, public opinion, public policy attitudes, Saskatchewan.

Introduction

Unions in many Canadian jurisdictions are facing policy changes that limit (or attempt to limit) their practices. The federal government has used “back to work” legislation to end strikes, and some provincial governments have passed essential services legislation and introduced other limitations on union activities (Canadian Foundation for Labour Rights, 2012). Several Canadian provinces have signed bilateral or trilateral internal trade agreements that alter their labour standards in order to promote harmonization with their neighbouring provinces. Critics

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suggest that such policy changes could well initiate or hasten the decline of organized labour in many jurisdictions: “right to work” laws in the United States, for example, were a major contributor to shrinking union density in U.S. states (Hogler, Shulman, and Weiler, 2004; Hogler and Henle, 2009).

To what extent does the general public support or oppose these changes to labour policy? What factors drive public opinion about labour policy changes? This paper uses data from a telephone survey administered after the 2011 Saskatchewan provincial election to explore public attitudes towards labour policy change; specifically, we explore public opinion regarding Saskatchewan essential services legislation and accompanying changes to labour standards. We are particularly interested in the role that symbolic political factors, as opposed to self-interest, play in structuring public opinion when it comes to labour policy.

This study has implications for both theory and practice. At the theoretical level, our results point to the need to consider both symbolic/political factors as well as self-interest when examining the relationship between public policy and public opinion, as we find that public attitudes in the two labour policy areas examined are influenced by considerations related to self-interest (such as working in the public sector, and membership in a union) as well as symbolic political factors (like NDP partisanship and feelings towards unions). At the practical level, the findings suggest that unions might benefit from devoting greater attention to mobilizing broader public support in the face of waning solidarity between public and private sector workers, as the results show that unionized workers in Saskatchewan’s private sector do not necessarily oppose legislation that adversely affects the interests of public sector workers.

Theoretical Framework: Self-interest, Symbols, and Public Policy

Labour studies scholars have documented how public policy changes during the last thirty years in Canada have weakened the ability of unions to organize, bargain, and strike. Panitch and Swartz (2003) argue that Canadian governments have permanently encroached on the freedoms of workers by limiting the right to strike, interfering within internal union affairs, and creating new restrictions on picketing. Provincial governments, they argue, have been at the forefront of weakening union power, restructuring labour laws and frequently imposing back-to-work legislation on striking public sector workers (Palmer, 1992; Smith, 2011; Heron, 2012; Slinn, 2012). Canadian courts have generally reinforced the erosion of workers’ rights (Doorey, 2009; Langille; 2009, Faraday *et al.* 2012; Smith, 2012).

While the labour studies literature has rarely touched on how public opinion reacts to changes in labour policy, given three decades of labour policy change,

it is appropriate to examine public attitudes toward changes in labour policy. Although governments in Canada can occasionally demonstrate considerable autonomy from public opinion (Page, 2006), research shows that governments do respond systematically to public opinion in highly salient policy domains (Manza and Cook, 2002; Petry and Mendelsohn, 2004; Soroka and Wlezien, 2004; Brooks and Manza, 2007). Understanding public attitudes toward labour policies might therefore tell us something about the long-term survival of restrictive labour policies.

In thinking about how public opinion affects policy, one important subject of debate over the last 40 years has been the relative impacts of self-interest and symbols on individual opinions about public policies. As labour policy incorporates both self-interest and symbolic political dimensions, understanding how labour policy attitudes are structured is a valuable step toward a better understanding of how public opinion influences public policy in this area.

It is quite common to assume that the average citizen typically evaluates political objects and options using an egocentric lens. The presumption is that people form rationally self-interested opinions about policy, in that “they choose the best available means to achieve what they understand to be in their interest” (Chong, 1999: 12). The individual, in other words, prefers governments to pursue policies that most optimally achieve his or her desired goals (Chong, 1999). To be sure, there is empirical evidence that self-interest does shape opinions, especially when it comes to matters of fiscal and economic policy (Sears and Citrin, 1985; Sears and Funk, 1991). Chong, Citrin, and Conley observe that self-interest effects are most evident “[w]hen the stakes are clear, and when people have been primed to think about the costs and benefits” (2001).

What strikes many researchers, however, are the relatively modest overall effects of self-interest on policy opinions (Sears and Funk, 1991; Lau and Heldman, 2009). There are certainly examples where self-interest is *not* the pivotal factor in public policy preferences and, instead, symbolic considerations are dominant. Those who emphasize the role of symbolic responses in shaping policy opinions argue that self-interest often takes a backseat to deeply held predispositions toward certain groups, behaviours, values, and political objects (see Sears, 1993; Sears and Funk, 1991). This approach theorizes that relatively early in life, sometime between childhood and early adulthood, people acquire symbolic predispositions through the process of political socialization. These predispositions govern people’s affective responses to different political symbols and attitude objects, including public policies. For example, Sears found that attitudes toward forced school integration via busing were dependent primarily upon “affective orientations toward such symbols as ‘force,’ ‘busing,’ ‘integration,’ ‘whites,’ and ‘blacks’” (1993: 120). The response to these symbols overwhelmed self-interest

considerations, including whether or not respondents were likely to experience busying themselves.

The impact of symbolic predispositions on policy opinions is pervasive. They structure attitudes about racial policies, bilingual education, gender equality, state-funded childcare, crime, and war (Sears and Funk, 1991). Symbolic predispositions also seem to shape individuals' opinions about matters where the personal costs and benefits would seem to be rather clear. Examining 32 years of data on opinions about guaranteed jobs and income as well as national health insurance, Lau and Heldman (2009) find substantial evidence for the influence of symbolic factors. Similarly, in a multi-nation study of public attitudes toward government privatization of electric utilities, Battaglio and Legge (2009) found that symbolic predispositions had stronger effects than self-interest. Sudit (1988) examined U.S. medical students' attitudes toward national health insurance, and found that political ideology was a consistently strong determinant of attitudes, whereas self-interest was not.

In the case of labour unions, individual self-interest is not the only consideration. Using a qualitative research design, Swartz and Warskett (2012) argue that unions socialize workers to have a strong belief in "solidarity" over and above their own individual self-interest. The latter is subsumed in a broader strategy of promoting what can be described as collective self-interest. Through experiences such as striking, the concept of solidarity takes on an important symbolic meaning for unionized workers because it "reminds workers that, as individuals, they can achieve very little; the possibility of realizing common demands rests on the collective mobilization and struggle" (Swartz and Warskett, 2012: 20). It is appropriate, therefore, to bear in mind that self-interest in the case of the labour movement can be understood as issuing from both personal and solidary considerations.

Labour Policy, Unions and Politics in Saskatchewan

If self-interest and symbolic political considerations structure public opinion in various policy domains, what about attitudes toward labour policies? This paper uses an original survey dataset, the 2011 Saskatchewan Election Study (SKES), to explore public attitudes towards labour policy. Saskatchewan is an ideal case study for three interrelated reasons. First, the province has recent experience with important changes in labour legislation. While other provinces have passed essential services legislation, Saskatchewan's legislation is the most restrictive in Canada. In striking down the essential services law on appeal, the Saskatchewan Queen's Bench judge said, "No other essential services legislation in Canada comes close to prohibiting the right to strike as broadly, as significantly, as the [Public Essential Services] act" (CBC, 2012). Second, the controversy

surrounding the policy changes (discussed below) raised the salience of labour policy issues amongst the Saskatchewan general public, making the province an appropriate case for examining public attitudes. Only three percent of the respondents answered "I don't know" to the question in our survey regarding the Saskatchewan government's recent essential services legislation, compared to 12 percent of respondents who answered "I don't know" when asked about the policies of privatizing hospitals and increasing resource royalties.

Third, both interest-based and symbolic political factors can be expected to be present in the province. The province has relatively strong unionization rates: 33.8 percent of the total workforce in 2010 was unionized, making Saskatchewan Canada's fourth most unionized province (Uppal, 2010: 18). It is in the self-interest of these unionized workers to have labour legislation that is friendly to unions.

At the same time, labour legislation in Saskatchewan is symbolically robust. The creation of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) as a "Farmer-Labour-Socialist" Party in the 1930s was a watershed moment in Saskatchewan political history (Wiseman, 2007: 211-235). The CCF, and its successor, the New Democratic Party (NDP), went on to hold power 70 percent of the time between 1944 and 2010, with part of the CCF/NDP's success being owed to the formal financial and organizational support of unions. During this time period, labour legislation was a partisan battleground, swinging like a pendulum between pro-business and pro-union amendments as governments changed.

One of the first moves by the CCF upon its election to office in 1944 was to pass several pieces of ground-breaking labour legislation, such as allowing public sector workers to unionize, that made Saskatchewan the most union-friendly jurisdiction in North America (Smith, 2011). As the main opposition party, the Liberals strongly opposed these alterations, as did Saskatchewan's business community. When the Liberals were elected to power in the 1960s, they infuriated unions and the NDP opposition by significantly revising the Trade Union Act in the employer's favour and introducing the Essential Services Emergency bill that gave cabinet the power to end strikes in sectors that were under provincial jurisdiction by either imposing compulsory arbitration or decertifying the union if cabinet felt the union had not made a sufficient effort to reach an agreement (Archer, 1980: 321).

When it returned to power in 1971, the NDP faced down opposition from the Liberals and Saskatchewan business to implement a large number of amendments to labour legislation that favoured unions: giving construction workers the right to sectorally bargain, reducing the work week to 40 hours, and allowing employees the right to refuse what they believed to be unusually dangerous work (Snyder, 1997). Subsequently, in the face of opposition from the NDP and unions, the Progressive Conservative government dismantled these reforms during the 1980s

and even disallowed unions from disciplining members who crossed picket lines (McQuaig *et al.*, 1991). From 1991 to 2007, the NDP government made a number of controversial changes to labour legislation, such as requiring that companies with at least ten employees pay pro-rated full time benefits to their part-time employees, requiring that Crown Corporations hire contractors who use union labour and pay union wages, and removing references to the employers' right to "free speech" during certification drives and strikes (McGrane, 2008: 148-149). As we can see, labour legislation is a powerful symbol of partisan competition in Saskatchewan and is marked by a history of conflict.

The most recent political developments in Saskatchewan have repeated this familiar pattern. In 2007, the pro-business Saskatchewan Party, under the leadership of Brad Wall, won the provincial election. Early in its mandate, the Saskatchewan Party enacted three laws (the Public Essential Services Act; an Act to Amend the Trade Union Act; and amendments to the Construction Industry Labour Relation Act) that sought to alter or curtail the activities of organized labour unions. The Public Essential Services Act (Bill 5, passed in 2008) established rules regarding public sector strikes in cases where such a strike "could be considered a danger to life, health or safety; could cause destruction of equipment or premises; could cause serious environmental damage; or could cause disruption of the courts" (CBC, 2008). While other Canadian jurisdictions also place limits on public sector strikes, Smith notes that the Saskatchewan government's definition of "essential services" was very wide, resulting in a situation in which:

any worker employed by the Government of Saskatchewan, provincial Crown Corporations, regional health authorities, post-secondary institutions, municipalities, and provincial public services is extremely limited in their right to legally strike (or to be locked out) (2011: 139).

The Act to Amend the Trade Union Act (Bill 6, passed in 2008) changed the rules for the establishment of unions, requiring a majority secret ballot vote to unionize a workplace, with 45 percent of workers needing to trigger the vote, and allowing management to communicate with employees who are considering unionization (CBC, 2008). These changes, argues Smith, "[strengthen] the rights of individual employers while making it more difficult for workers to organize into new unions" (2011: 140), and ultimately "make Saskatchewan one of the most difficult jurisdictions in which to organize new unions, as most provinces have set their thresholds between 35% and 40%" (2011: 141). The Saskatchewan Party's amendments to the Construction Industry Labour Relation Act (Bill 80, passed in 2009) "eliminated the sectoral bargaining provision in the construction industry, opening the possibility of small, anti-union employers being able to enter the industry, and undermine union benefits, wages and safety standards" (Smith, 2011: 143). At the same time, Saskatchewan signed the New West Partnership

Trade Agreement with Alberta and British Columbia. This agreement reduced trade barriers and harmonized labour regulations among the three provinces, resulting in the adjustment of various labour standards in Saskatchewan to facilitate the movement of workers across provincial borders.¹

These changes to provincial labour policy generated considerable and predictable controversy in the province. Unions, the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL), and the Official Opposition party, the Saskatchewan NDP, voiced strong opposition, arguing that Bills 5 and 6 violated the rights of unionized workers. In 2008, Canada's National Union of Public and General Employees and the SFL filed complaints about these pieces of legislation with the International Labour Organization (ILO), a UN agency whose conventions regarding freedom of association have been ratified by all Canadian provinces (NUPGE, 2011). Although the ILO ruled that Bills 5 and 6 were in violation of these conventions, the Saskatchewan Party did not act on the ILO's non-binding recommendations for legislative changes. The SFL, the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union, and 24 other unions also challenged the constitutionality of Bills 5 and 6 in Canadian courts, arguing that the laws were a violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedom's right to freedom of association. In the 2011 provincial election, the Saskatchewan Party government was returned to power. The Saskatchewan Court of Queen's Bench issued its ruling in February 2012, striking down Bill 5 as being unconstitutional, and upholding Bill 6. The Saskatchewan Party appealed the Court's ruling regarding Bill 5; in April 2013 the ruling was overturned, and the Supreme Court heard the case in 2014 (ruling not made as of December 2014). In December 2013, the Saskatchewan government announced new essential services legislation (Bill 126 - Amendments to the Saskatchewan Employment Act) to replace the contested legislation. In terms of the New West Partnership Trade Agreement, the Saskatchewan Party government and the business community have strenuously claimed it makes Saskatchewan more competitive and promotes economic growth. Saskatchewan's unions, in contrast, oppose the agreement, arguing that it creates a "race to the bottom" that lowers labour standards across all sectors (Gilbert, 2010).

Given the high profile of the labour policy issues, the importance of unions to the workforce, and the overlay of labour issues and partisanship in the province, Saskatchewan represents an ideal jurisdiction within which to measure the relationship between labour policy attitudes, self-interest, and symbolic political factors.

We have several hypotheses about the effects of self-interest and symbolic political factors on attitudes toward these two policy changes. The first set of hypotheses concerns the role of symbolic factors. We consider two symbolic predispositions here: feelings toward labour unions and partisan identity. Individuals

who are positively predisposed toward labour unions are expected to be more likely to exhibit labour policy opinions favourable to unions by opposing both policies. Given the NDP's long-established close ties to organized labour, NDP partisans are also expected to be more likely to oppose both policies because these policies are symbols of Saskatchewan Party's dismantling of the labour policy regime built up by successive NDP governments.

The second set of hypotheses concerns the role of interests. Following Chong, Citrin, and Conley (2001), we expect that where interests are sharply defined and the stakes are clear, self-interest will be most evident. Thus, public sector workers ought to oppose removing the right to strike among essential services workers, because that policy directly affects them. But if there is no symbolic content to union membership and the solidarity created by union membership is limited, then union members more generally should hold opinions about essential services legislation that are more or less the same as other members of the general public. The costs and benefits of adjusting labour standards are slightly more abstract because labour standards affect all workers and not just union members. Nonetheless, it is in the interest of union members to maintain high labour standards for all workers as that provides a "floor" of standards from which their collective bargaining begins. Therefore, we hypothesize that union membership should lead respondents to favour maintaining Saskatchewan's current labour standards.

Analysis

The Saskatchewan Election Study (SKES) is a post-election general population survey of 1,099 Saskatchewan residents conducted by the University of Saskatchewan's Social Sciences Research Laboratories (SSRL). Deployed as a telephone survey using WinCATI software, 1,099 Saskatchewan residents, 18 years of age and older, were administered a 15-minute survey on political attitudes and behaviours in the province from November 8, 2011 to November 21, 2011. Results of the survey, which generated a response rate of 23.6%, are generalizable to the Saskatchewan population (18 years of age and older) +/- 2.95 percent at the 95 percent confidence interval (19 times out of 20). Data are weighted according to age, gender, and region of residence.

Measures

Our dependent variables are two questions regarding recent changes in Saskatchewan labour policy. For the "essential service attitudes" variable, respondents were asked:

The provincial government recently passed a law allowing public sector employers, such as hospitals and universities, to declare all or most of their staff to be "essential"

and not allowed to strike. From what you have heard, do you "Favour", "Oppose", or "Neither Favour nor Oppose" the new essential services law in Saskatchewan?

Favourable responses were coded as 1, and "oppose" and "neither favour nor oppose" responses were coded as 0. For the "labour standards" variable, respondents were asked:

People often have different ideas about labour standards. Which of the following two statements comes closest to your own opinion: 'We should make it easier for qualified workers from other provinces to work in Saskatchewan, even if this means changing our labour standards' or 'We should maintain our own labour standards, even if this limits qualified workers from other provinces from working in Saskatchewan'.

The "make it easier" responses were coded as 1 and the "maintain standards" responses were coded as 0. For both dependent variables, don't know and refused responses were omitted.

The key independent variables of study are "self-interest" and "symbolic political factors". For self-interest, we consider union membership ("Do you belong to a union?", coded yes = 1, no, don't know, refused = 0), union household ("Does anyone in your household belong to a union?", coded yes = 1, no, don't know, refused = 0), and public sector employment ("Do you work for a private company, in the public sector, or for a not-for-profit or charitable organization?", coded work in public sector = 1, all others = 0).

For symbolic political factors, we consider self-reported NDP partisanship ("Thinking about provincial politics in Saskatchewan, do you usually think of yourself as a New Democrat, Liberal, Saskatchewan Party, Green Party, or none of these?", coded NDP partisanship = 1, all others = 0) and attitudes towards unions, an index ranging from 1.0 ("anti-union" attitudes) to 4.0 ("pro-union" attitudes). When studying elections, political scientists use the term "partisanship" to denote a respondent's feelings of closeness to a certain party or their lack of close feelings toward any party. Since partisanship tests how much a voter identifies with a party, it represents a stronger attachment than simply voting for a party. The union attitudes index consists of responses to three questions: respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a four-point scale with the statements, "All things considered, unions in Saskatchewan generally ask for too much" and "Strong unions are needed to protect employees' working conditions and wages", and respondents were asked, "When you hear of a strike, are your sympathies typically 'Always for the Union', 'Usually for the Union', 'Usually Against the Union', or 'Always Against the Union'?"² The index was constructed using mean scores, with missing values excluded and with responses recoded to match the index scale (Cronbach's alpha = .802).

The multivariate analyses also include a number of socio-demographic controls that have been found to be relevant to public policy attitudes: age ("In

what year were you born?", recoded into age in years), education ("What is the highest level of education that you have completed?", measured in eleven ordinal categories ranging from "no schooling" to "professional degree or doctorate"), income ("Could you please tell me your total annual household income from all sources in 2010?", measured in ten ordinal categories ranging from "less than \$20,000" to "\$100,000 or more"), employment status ("Are you currently self-employed, working for pay, retired, unemployed or looking for work, a student, caring for a family, or something else?", coded 1 = employed, 0 = other), gender (recorded from voice, coded female = 1, male = 0), and urban size (recorded from postal code, coded 1 = rural, 2 = smaller urban areas, 3 = Regina or Saskatoon).³

Findings

For both labour policy questions, less than a majority of the general public expressed support for policy change. A plurality of respondents (45.2 percent) favoured the essential services legislation, while almost one-third of respondents (31.3 percent) opposed the legislation and one-fifth of respondents (20.2 percent) reported that they do not have a position on this issue. For the labour standards question, opinions were quite split with a small plurality (47 percent) favouring maintaining current labour standards over changing labour standards to allow for more workers from other provinces (45 percent). Eight percent of respondents reported having no position on this issue.

To what extent are labour policy attitudes structured by self-interest and/or political factors? Looking first at the bivariate results (Table 1), we find support for our hypothesis that public sector workers will be more opposed to the essential services legislation than will individuals who are not public sector workers (recall that the essential services law only limited strikes for *public sector* unions). We also find support for our hypotheses that union members will favour maintaining current labour standards, and that both union attitudes and partisanship are related to labour policy attitudes. Overall, at the bivariate level, both self-interest and political symbols influence labour policy attitudes.

In order to assess the independent effects of self-interest and symbolic political factors on labour policy attitudes, we turn to a multivariate strategy, namely, logistic regression analysis (Table 2). In this analysis, positive relationships (as signified by a positive logistic regression coefficient (B) and odds ratio [Exp (B)] above 1.0) correspond with, respectively, increased likelihood of being in favour of the essential services law and in favour of reducing labour standards; conversely, negative relationships (as signified by a negative correlation coefficient and odds ratio below 1.0) correspond with, decreased likelihood of being in favour of these changes to labour legislation.

TABLE 1

Bivariate Relationship between Political Symbols, Self-Interest and Labour Policy Attitudes in Saskatchewan

	Favour Essential Services Law	Sig	Labour Standards: Make Easier for Qualified Workers from Other Provinces	Sig
Interest Variables				
Union	Member – 30.8% Non-member – 51.4%	p<.001	Member – 41.6% Non-member – 50.7%	p<.05
Union Household	Union household – 39.8% Not union household – 48.1%	p<.05	Union household – 52.7% Not union household – 47.9%	Not sig
Public Sector	Work in public sector – 32.9% Do not work in public sector – 50.7%	p<.001	Work in public sector – 48.4% Do not work in public sector – 48.8%	Not sig
Symbolic Political Variables				
NDP Partisan	NDP Partisan – 20.9% Not NDP Partisan – 53.3%	p<.001	NDP Partisan – 38.5% Not NDP Partisan – 51.2%	p<.005
Union Attitudes ¹	Pro-Union – 23.0% Neutral/Mixed – 50.8% Anti-Union – 80.3%	p<.001	Pro-Union – 42.0% Neutral/Mixed – 50.2% Anti-Union – 58.0%	p<.005

1 For the purposes of bivariate presentation, the union attitudes index was grouped as follows: 1.0-1.99 = anti-union attitudes, 2.0-2.99 = neutral/mixed attitudes, 3.0-4.0 = pro-union attitudes.

TABLE 2

Logistic Regression Analysis: Labour Policy Attitudes in Saskatchewan

	Essential Services			Labour Standards		
	B (SE)	Sig	Exp (B)	B (SE)	Sig	Exp (B)
Age	.006 (.005)	NS	1.006	.001 (.005)	NS	1.001
Income	.025 (.029)	NS	1.025	.030 (.026)	NS	1.031
Education	-.038 (.044)	NS	.963	.038 (.041)	NS	1.038
Female	.092 (.170)	NS	1.097	-.192 (.154)	NS	.825
Urban Size	.095 (.090)	NS	1.099	.102 (.083)	NS	1.107
Employed	.301 (.217)	NS	1.351	.002 (.196)	NS	1.002
Public Sector	-.575 (.244)	p≤.01	.563	.175 (.230)	NS	1.191
Union Member	-.003 (.250)	NS	.997	-.503 (.236)	p≤.05	.605
Union Household	-.301 (.224)	NS	.740	.034 (.200)	NS	1.035
NDP Partisan	-.635 (.222)	p≤.005	.530	-.466 (.197)	p≤.05	.627
Pro-union Attitudes	-1.342 (.131)	p≤.001	.261	-.292 (.107)	p≤.05	.747
Constant	2.868 (.588)	p≤.001	17.602	.263 (.528)	NS	1.301
Nagelkerke R ²	0.318			0.064		
N	831			795		

Looking first at essential services policy attitudes, we find that after controlling for other variables, only union attitudes, public sector employment, and NDP partisanship have statistically significant effects on attitudes towards the essential services law. Each of these effects is in the expected direction. Union membership has no discernible impact on attitudes toward the essential services law; union members are neither more nor less likely than anyone else to support the essential services legislation. What matters much more is one's attitude toward unions in general. A somewhat different picture emerges when we consider attitudes towards labour standards. Here union membership, union attitudes, and NDP partisanship influence attitudes. Overall, the symbolic political variables are significantly related to both policy areas, the significant self-interest variable differs between the two labour policy areas, and no other variables are related to labour policy attitudes in the province.

Discussion

Taken together, the results tell us that labour policy attitudes are indeed driven by both self-interest and symbolic political factors. The first key finding is that both NDP partisanship and union attitudes emerge as significant symbolic influences on both essential services policy attitudes and labour policy standards attitudes. The relationship between NDP partisanship and labour policy attitudes is entirely consistent with the province's political and policy history. As noted earlier, the NDP have played a large role in advancing and supporting more "union-friendly" labour policies, and as the Official Opposition party, it serves as the key voice to counter the Saskatchewan Party's current labour policies. The evidence that attitudes towards unions structure attitudes towards labour policies also conforms to expectations. That finding, however, is more intriguing: while this relationship was easy to anticipate when it came to the visible and highly salient essential services law, the relationship between union attitudes and the lower-visibility, low-salience labour standards question demonstrates the power and range of effects generated by these symbolic political orientations. Where pro-union sentiments exist in general, they appear to condition negative responses to any policy that the labour movements would claim could reduce standards within the province's labour market. The mere language of "maintaining" versus "changing" labour standards was enough to elicit negative response within these union supporters.

The second key finding is that, while self-interest does help to explain attitudes towards labour policy, not all union members consider essential services legislation as a direct threat to themselves. Those who work in the public sector, and are directly affected by changes in this policy area, are more likely than others to be opposed to essential services legislation that limits the right of

unionized essential services workers to strike. Many (but certainly not all) public sector workers are union members. However, union membership in general does not translate directly into opposition to essential services legislation.

Interestingly, when we turn to questions of labour standards, an issue that affects the entire workforce rather than public sector workers exclusively, a different picture emerges. Here, union members are more likely to oppose changes to labour standards in order to attract qualified workers from other provinces. Further, the divide between public and private sector workers disappears. Lowering labour standards for all workers may well be seen as an attack on unions, since lower labour standards also put downward pressure on the standards contained in collective agreements.

What are the implications of these findings? On a theoretical level, symbolic political factors and self-interest combine to structure attitudes towards labour policy. Labour policy is one domain in which we might expect economic interests to predominate, but the evidence here shows the pervasive effects of symbolic politics. In this case, self-interest combines with how Saskatchewan residents feel towards such politically charged symbols as the province's historic governing party (the NDP) and unions, which have historically been a large player in the province's politics, to influence attitudes towards labour policy.

The relationship between self-interest and labour policy attitudes has implications for the labour movement itself. It is notable that although working in the public sector is related to opposition to essential services legislation, union membership in general is not. The strategic implication for public sector unions is that they cannot necessarily rely on private sector workers and union members to be sympathetic to legislation that affects public sector workplaces. For the Canadian labour movement as a whole, this finding points towards a divergence in the interests of its private sector members and public sector members, and clear limits to worker solidarity. Such a conclusion supports Swartz and Warskett's (2012) contention that, under pressure from governments and business interests looking to roll back the gains made by unions, the solidarity of Canadian workers has eroded over the last 30 years. The possibility of waning solidarity between unionized workers in public and private sectors poses a considerable challenge for the labour movement as it struggles against the efforts of some governments to impose austerity bargaining on the public sector and to limit the public sector's right to strike.

How can unions expect to exert influence over labour policy in the face of dwindling union density and divided interests? The answer may lie in appealing to public attitudes with respect to unions: individuals who hold pro-union orientations are key allies of the union movement. These "pro-union" individuals are larger in number than union members: whereas one-third of Saskatchewan

is unionized (Uppal, 2010), almost four in ten SKES respondents appear to hold pro-union attitudes. These findings support the arguments of advocates of “social movement unionism” who contend that unions must mobilize citizens who are not members of unions to support their cause (Moody, 1997; Robinson, 2000; Ross, 2007). Perhaps just as significant as those who hold pro-union attitudes are the four in ten Saskatchewan residents who hold neutral or a mixture of positive and negative attitudes towards unions. As Saskatchewan unions continue to struggle with a right-of-centre provincial government, their efforts may be boosted by a strategy aimed at convincing citizens with “ambivalent” attitudes that the government’s labour policies are harmful. Such a strategy could begin by embracing social unionism’s call to publicly promote alliances with community-based groups and frame labour issues within the broader context of their effects on the well being of the province as a whole.

Finally, the analysis suggests that the public may react differently to labour policy that affects the whole workforce and labour policy that only affects the public sector. For governments looking to alter labour legislation, our findings point out that they appear to have more flexibility in changing labour legislation related to the public sector due to an inherent divide in the workforce between the public and private sector. Conversely, it appears that governments may have to be careful when it comes to internal trade agreements or other policy initiatives that are seen as lowering or unnecessarily changing labour standards for all workers. The public appears resistant to arguments in support of altering labour standards in the name of increased economic competitiveness. Our data indicate that there are no obvious socio-demographic groups that are natural allies for a government that wants to change labour standards in the pursuit of policy goals like economic growth and economic development. Resistance to such an idea in Saskatchewan extends beyond just NDP partisans or those who have generally favourable feelings towards unions.

Conclusion

Despite growing pressure on unions as governments restructure labour policies, there is scant research examining public attitudes towards either unions or labour policies. The aim of this paper has been to contribute to our understanding of those public attitudes, and the focus has been on the effects of economic interests and symbolic politics on labour policy opinions. It is easy to assume that labour policy dynamics are driven entirely by the push and pull of economic interests. However, the evidence presented in this paper advises against making that assumption: the Saskatchewan public expresses clear opinions about labour policy changes in the province, and those opinions are shaped by much more than economic interests. Indeed, by examining the role of symbolic politics in

shaping labour policy attitudes in Saskatchewan we are able to see that the longer-term prospects for organized labour in Saskatchewan are not quite as bleak as the recent trends in labour legislation might suggest. Significant numbers of Saskatchewan residents hold pro-union orientations, and many have close attachments to the NDP – both of which are related to policy positions favourable to organized labour. One area for further research is to consider whether other symbolic political factors, such as broader ideological orientations (i.e. views on the role of government) and union loyalty among members also have an impact on labour policy attitudes.

While the scope of this paper is limited to public attitudes towards unions and labour policy in one Canadian province, the implications of the findings extend to other parts of Canada and North America. As labour conflicts are increasingly played out in the public arena, questions about the appropriate public relations strategies of unions, businesses, and governments take on greater importance. The evidence here of a public/private sector division in public opinion on one important labour policy issue in Saskatchewan suggests unions cannot take for granted that they will receive support from workers within the broader labour movement. That finding also provides an intriguing basis for further research. When it comes to unionized workers' positions on labour policy, is solidarity conditional? Do the positions of different workers in different sectors vary from issue to issue, depending on whose interests are stake? In this paper we considered the fault lines between public and private sector workers, but other inter-sectoral cleavages are also possible. As such, while this paper pertains only to Saskatchewan, the research agenda that it maps out is an ambitious one that can be pursued in other North American jurisdictions.

Notes

- 1 While it is outside the research scope of the paper, it should also be noted that in 2013, the Saskatchewan government also introduced Bill 85 – Saskatchewan Employment Act, which critics argue undermines collective bargaining rights.
- 2 The second question was replicated from the 2010 British Election Study, while the third question was replicated from the Australian module of the 1995 International Social Survey.
- 3 Bivariate analysis finds that most correlations between the independent variables are either not significant or weak (below .30). Moderate correlations are found between employment status and public sector ($r = .36$), employment status and union member (.36), employment status and income (.36), NDP partisan and pro-union attitudes (.39), age and employment status (-.47), and public sector and union member (.60). OLS regression was used to generate collinearity statistics and for all variables, the VIF was below 2.0. These results suggest that multicollinearity is not a concern for the interpretation of the multivariate results.

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SUMMARY

Symbols, Self-Interest and Labour Policy Attitudes: Evidence from Saskatchewan

Unions in many Canadian jurisdictions are facing policy changes that limit (or attempt to limit) their practices. Despite growing pressure on unions as governments restructure labour policies, there is scant research examining public attitudes towards either unions or labour policies. To what extent does the general public support or oppose these changes to labour policy? What factors drive public opinion about labour policy changes?

This paper uses data from a telephone survey administered after the 2011 Saskatchewan provincial election to explore public attitudes towards labour policy change; specifically, we explore public opinion regarding Saskatchewan essential services legislation and accompanying changes to labour standards. We are particularly interested in the role that symbolic political factors (attitudes towards unions, NDP partisanship), as opposed to self-interest (union membership), play in structuring public opinion when it comes to labour policy. We find that union membership has no discernible impact on attitudes toward the essential services law; what matters much more is one's attitude toward unions in general, as well as NDP partisanship. However, union membership does influence attitudes towards labour standards, as do attitudes towards unions and NDP partisanship.

Taken together, the results tell us that labour policy attitudes are indeed driven by both self-interest and symbolic political factors. Further, while self-interest does help to explain attitudes towards labour policy, not all union members consider essential services legislation as a direct threat to themselves. The strategic implication for public sector unions is that they cannot necessarily rely on private sector workers and union members to be sympathetic to legislation that affects public sector workplaces. For the Canadian labour movement as a whole, this finding points towards a divergence in the interests of its private sector members and public sector members, and clear limits to worker solidarity.

KEYWORDS: labour legislation, public opinion, public policy attitudes, Saskatchewan.

RÉSUMÉ

Symboles, intérêt personnel et attitudes à l'égard des politiques du travail : résultats dans le cas de la Saskatchewan

Dans plusieurs juridictions canadiennes les syndicats font face à des changements de politiques qui limitent (ou tentent de limiter) leurs pratiques. Malgré les pressions croissantes que vivent les syndicats à mesure que les gouvernements restructurent leurs politiques du travail, il y a peu de recherches qui s'intéressent aux attitudes du public envers les syndicats ou les lois du travail. Dans quelle mesure le public en général appuie-t-il ou désapprouve-t-il ces changements aux lois du travail? Quels facteurs influent sur l'opinion publique dans le cas de tels changements?

Cette étude fait appel aux données en provenance d'un sondage téléphonique mené après l'élection provinciale de 2011 en Saskatchewan pour étudier les attitudes du public face aux changements en matière de politique du travail. Plus spécifiquement, nous nous penchons sur l'opinion publique concernant la législation en matière de services essentiels en Saskatchewan, et de certaines normes du travail qui y sont rattachées. Nous sommes particulièrement intéressés dans le rôle que jouent des facteurs politiques symboliques (attitudes envers les syndicats, partisanerie envers le NPD) par opposition à l'intérêt personnel (adhésion à un syndicat) dans la structuration de l'opinion publique quand il s'agit de la politique du travail. Nous observons que l'adhésion à un syndicat n'a pas d'effet perceptible sur les attitudes à l'égard de la loi sur les services essentiels; ce qui importe davantage est l'attitude personnelle envers les syndicats en général ainsi que la partisanerie politique au NPD. Toutefois, ces deux derniers facteurs de même que l'adhésion à un syndicat influent sur les attitudes face aux normes du travail.

L'ensemble de ces résultats révèlent que les attitudes en matière de politique du travail sont en fait entraînées par l'intérêt personnel et les facteurs politiques symboliques. De plus, tandis que l'intérêt personnel aide à expliquer les attitudes envers la politique du travail, ce ne sont pas tous les syndiqués qui voient dans la loi sur les services essentiels une menace directe. L'implication stratégique pour les syndicats du secteur public est à l'effet qu'ils ne peuvent pas nécessairement compter sur les travailleurs du secteur privé et les travailleurs syndiqués pour les appuyer lorsque des changements législatifs affectent les milieux de travail du secteur public. Pour le mouvement syndical canadien dans son ensemble, ce résultat indique une divergence d'intérêts entre ses membres du secteur privé et ceux du secteur public, ce qui constitue un frein clair à la solidarité syndicale.

MOTS-CLÉS : lois du travail, opinion publique, attitudes à l'égard des politiques du travail, Saskatchewan.

RESUMEN

Símbolos, interés propio y actitudes respecto a las políticas laborales: encuesta en Saskatchewan

Los sindicatos de muchas jurisdicciones canadienses se ven confrontados a cambios políticos que limitan (o intentan limitar) sus prácticas. A pesar de la presión creciente ejercida sobre los sindicatos a medida que los gobiernos reestructuran las políticas laborales, pocas son las investigaciones que examinan las actitudes públicas hacia sus respectivos sindicatos o respecto a las políticas laborales. ¿Hasta qué punto la opinión pública apoya o rechaza estos cambios en la política laboral? ¿Qué factores influyen en la opinión pública sobre los cambios de política laboral?

Este artículo utiliza datos provenientes de una encuesta telefónica administrada después de las elecciones provinciales de Saskatchewan en 2011. El objetivo de este estudio es de explorar las actitudes públicas respecto a los cambios de política laboral, y específicamente, la opinión pública respecto a la legislación de servicios esenciales y los cambios de normas laborales. Un interés particular es puesto en el rol que juegan los factores políticos simbólicos (actitudes respecto a los sindicatos, membresía del NDP), en oposición al interés propio (miembros del sindicato), en la estructuración de la opinión pública cuando esto toca la política laboral. Los resultados muestran que la membresía sindical no tiene un impacto discernible sobre las actitudes respecto a la ley sobre los servicios esenciales; lo que importa sobre todo es la actitud respecto a los sindicatos en general, tanto como la membresía al NDP. Sin embargo la membresía sindical influye en las actitudes respecto a las normas laborales así como las actitudes sobre los sindicatos y la membresía del NDP.

Visto de conjunto, los resultados nos indican que las actitudes sobre la política laboral son influenciadas por los intereses propios y los factores políticos simbólicos. Más aún, mientras los intereses propios ayudan a explicar las actitudes respecto a la política laboral, no todos los miembros sindicales consideran la legislación sobre los servicios esenciales como una amenaza directa contra ellos mismos. La implicación estratégica para los sindicatos del sector público es que ellos no pueden contar necesariamente con los trabajadores del sector privado y que los miembros sindicales pueden ser favorables a la legislación que afecta los medios laborales del sector público. Para el movimiento laboral canadiense en su conjunto, este resultado focaliza la divergencia en los intereses de los miembros del privado y los miembros del sector público, y clarifica los límites de la solidaridad entre los trabajadores.

PALABRAS CLAVES: legislación laboral; opinión pública; actitudes sobre las políticas públicas; Saskatchewan.