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Right-to-work fight will hurt other goals

If politics and ideology can be set aside, then the arguments for a right-to-work law in Indiana outweigh those against it.

But it's a close call.

It's so close in fact that supporters need to carefully consider whether the political fight that would be necessary to win the legislative battle is worth the cost. Those costs could include scuttling other priorities, such as a legislative vote on a mass transit system for Central Indiana, that will need bipartisan cooperation in the Statehouse this winter.

A sober analysis of the benefits and liabilities of the right-to-work proposal makes it clear that its passage would be neither the boon for economic development that proponents claim it would be nor the bane for employees that opponents fear.

Perhaps the best argument for a right-to-work law is philosophical in nature, a belief that Americans should have the freedom to make their own choices about what organizations they join and support financially.

In Indiana currently, in some places of employment, workers don't have that choice. They must join a union, and they must support the union with a portion of their salaries, in order to keep a job.

In 22 states with right-to-work laws, all workers now have the freedom to choose whether they want to join and support a union. Workers still can – and many do -- join unions in right-to-work states. Unions can still organize in workplaces and negotiate contracts for their members (and for certain nonunion workers).

So right-to-work laws aren't the death warrants for unions that some opponents claim. Many employers, however, do like such proposals because they tend to dissuade union organizing in workplaces where a sizable portion of workers doesn't feel the need for outside representation. For example, a study released this year by researchers Ozkan Eren and Serkan Ozbeklik found that union membership dropped 15 percent in Idaho and Oklahoma, the two most recent states to pass right-to-work laws.

But what of supporters' claims that a right-to-work law is the jolt that Indiana's slumbering economy needs?

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A summary of the research indicates that such a move could help Indiana attract a limited number of jobs in the manufacturing and logistical sectors. But right to work is just one factor in many, and the potential benefits shouldn't be oversold.

"Our results indicate that the passage of right-to-work laws in Oklahoma affected union membership and coverage rates and, possibly to some extent, foreign direct investment," wrote Eren and Ozbeklik in their 2011 study, "Right-to-Work Laws and State-Level Economic Outcomes." "As for manufacturing employment (in Oklahoma), per-capita income and average wage rates, we do not observe any impact. Our findings for Idaho, on the other hand, suggest that the laws increased the manufacturing employment, while it had no effect on per- capita income and are inconclusive for foreign direct investment."

For supporters, the good news from this study is that foreign investment may have increased in Oklahoma and manufacturing jobs likely increased in Idaho because of right to work, and that occurred without the loss in per-capita income and average wages that opponents claim is a side effect of such legislation. Research in other states tends to support those conclusions when geographic and historical factors are considered.

Still, it's a thin bit of new territory for Republicans in the Statehouse to go to war over. Right to work won't destroy unions in Indiana. But neither is it likely to be the strong economic catalyst that supporters

envision.

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