

Attitudes towards union issues in Saskatchewan: A research brief

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Saskatchewan Election Study team¹

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Introduction

Unionization rates have been declining in Saskatchewan over time. According to Statistics Canada, while 37.9% of the total Saskatchewan workforce was unionized in 1981 (Morissette et al. 2005, 8), by 2010 33.8% of Saskatchewan workers were unionized (Uppal 2010, 21). Despite this decline, Saskatchewan is Canada's fourth most unionized province, following Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec and Manitoba (Uppal 2010, 18). While province-specific data are not available, at the national level public sector employees (including individuals working for governments, Crown Corporations and publicly funded hospitals and schools) are considerably more likely to belong to unions than private sector employees. In 2009, 70.9% of public sector employees and 16.1% of private sector employees belonged to a union (Uppal 2010, 23).

As part of the Saskatchewan Election Study survey, Saskatchewan residents were asked about their attitudes toward unions. This research brief reports these attitudes, and examines how the responses to these questions vary based on the respondent's age, education, sex and union membership status.² Union members, women, youth, and more highly educated residents were the demographic groups that displayed the strongest pro-union attitudes.

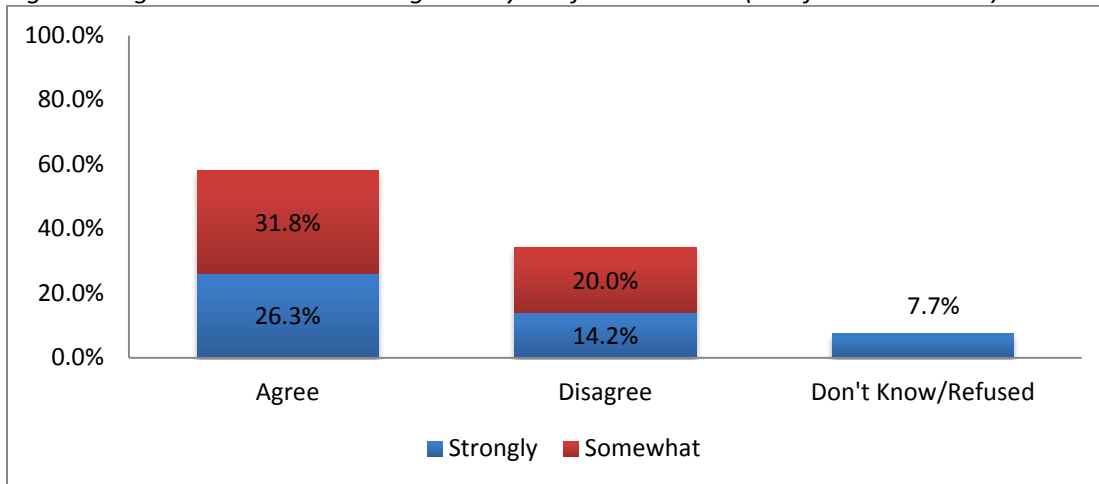
Overall, the results are a 'mixed bag' for Saskatchewan's unions. The public appears to feel union demands can be excessive, but also feels unions are important institutions protecting workers' rights and ensuring appropriate working conditions and wages. While a significant portion of the public said their sympathies are generally with the workers in the case of a strike, there appears to be solid support for legislation that forces unions to provide 'essential services' during work stoppages.

General attitudes toward unions

Saskatchewan Election Study respondents were asked three general questions about unions. First, respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement, "All things considered, unions in Saskatchewan generally ask for too much." Second, they were asked to rate their agreement with the statement, "Strong unions are needed to protect employees' working conditions and wages."³ And third, 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'?"⁴

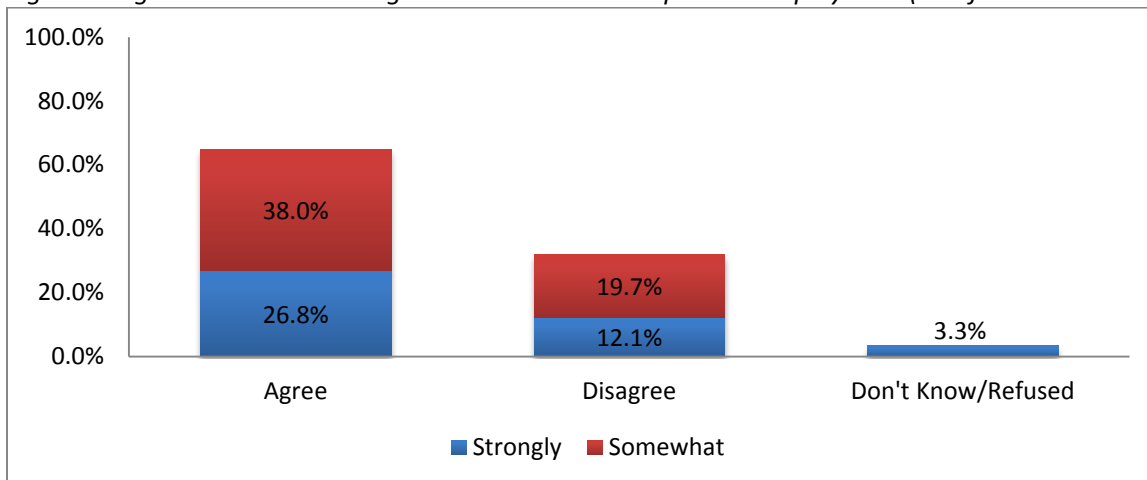
Looking at the first question (Figure 1), it is found that 58.1% respondents agree unions generally ask for too much, while 34.2% disagree with this statement. Union members and non-union members have differing views, with 40.7% of union members agreeing with the statement and 53.1% disagreeing. Among non-union members, 63.1% agree with the statement and 27.8% disagree. Significant differences are also found between men and women, between age cohorts and between educational cohorts. Men (63.4%) are more likely than women (53.2%) to agree that unions generally ask for too much, and agreement also increases with age: respondents aged 18-34 (54.7%) are less likely than those aged 35-54 (57.8%) and 55 and over (62.9%) to agree that unions generally ask for too much. Agreement decreases with education, however, respondents with a high school diploma or less (63.4%) are more likely than those with some post-secondary education (59.2%) and those with a completed university degree (51.3%) to agree that unions ask for too much.

Figure 1: Agreement that “unions generally ask for too much” (All of Saskatchewan)



While many Saskatchewan residents feel union demands can be excessive, the majority also feel unions play an important role in the province, with 64.8% of respondents agreeing that “strong unions are needed to protect employees’ working conditions and wages,” with over one-quarter (26.8%) of respondents strongly agreeing. Conversely, 31.8% of respondents disagree that strong unions are necessary to protect employees, with 12.1% strongly disagreeing. Again, attitudes vary with union membership, with 81.1% of union members agreeing with the statement, compared to 60.2% of non-union members. While women (69.7%) are more likely than men (59.7%) to agree that unions are necessary to protect employees, attitudes do not vary significantly with age or education levels.

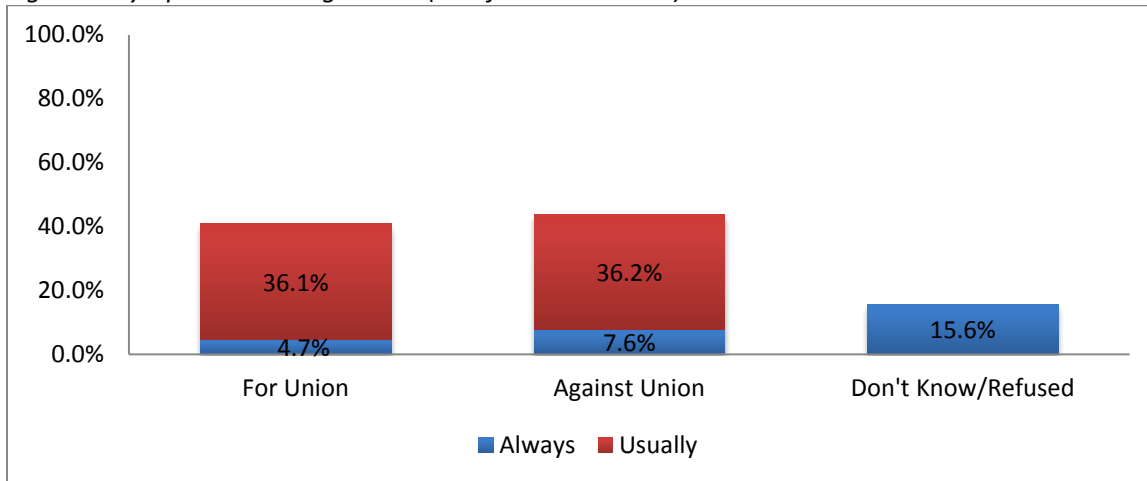
Figure 2: Agreement that “strong unions are needed to protect employees ” (All of Saskatchewan)



These divided sentiments about unions are also evident when Saskatchewan residents are asked about labour strikes. Respondents were slightly more likely to say their sympathies generally lie against the union (43.8%) than with the union (40.8%), but it is important to note that the three percentage point difference between the two positions is barely above the survey’s margin of error. It is also notable that less than 10% of respondents state that they are ‘always’ for or against the union, and that 15.6% of respondents either stated ‘no opinion’ or refused to answer the question. These results suggest that while Saskatchewan residents may have predispositions toward or against union strikes, the public likely assesses labour disputes on a case-by-case basis.

Looking at demographic variations, it is found that union members (56.9%) are more likely than non-union members (36.1%) to state their sympathies ‘always’ or ‘usually’ lie with the union. While responses do not vary significantly with age, women report a more ‘pro-union’ position, with 46.5% of women and 34.6% of men stating that their sympathies ‘always’ or ‘usually’ lie with the union during a labour dispute. Attitudes also vary with educational attainment. While only 37.2% of respondents with a high school diploma or less and 38.4% of those with some post-secondary education are ‘always’ or ‘usually’ for the union, 47.3% of those with a completed university education report ‘always’ or ‘usually’ favouring unions during labour disputes

Figure 3: Sympathies during strikes (All of Saskatchewan)

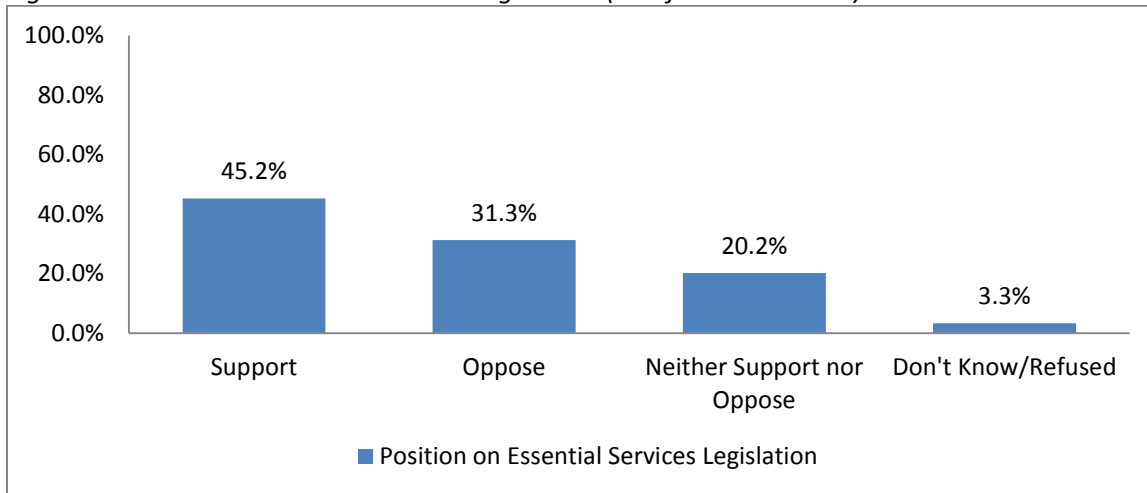


Essential services law

Saskatchewan Election Study 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?” As Figure 4 illustrates, the plurality of respondents (45.2%) favour the essential services legislation, while 31.3% of respondents oppose the legislation and 20.2% of respondents reported that they do not have a position on this issue. The plurality of union members (47.1%) oppose essential services legislation, while 29.9% oppose the legislation and 20.5% neither favour nor opposes it. In contrast, a near-majority (49.6%) of non-union members favour the legislation, 26.7% oppose it and 20.2% neither favour nor opposes it.

Respondents aged 18-34 are less likely than other age cohorts to oppose essential services legislation, and are more likely than other age cohorts to state that they neither support nor oppose the legislation. Support for the essential service law varies with education, but in a non-linear manner: respondents with some postsecondary education (52.9%) are more likely than those with a high school diploma or less (44.7%) and those with a completed university degree (37.0%) to support the legislation. It is interesting to note that respondents with a completed university education are closely divided between supporting (37.0%) and opposing (40.8%) the essential services law. Men and women do not differ significantly in their attitudes toward essential services legislation.

Figure 4: Positions on essential services legislation (All of Saskatchewan)



Methodology of the Saskatchewan Election Study

The 2011 Saskatchewan Election Study was the first study to use the newly-created survey lab in the Social Sciences Research Laboratories (SSRL) complex at the University of Saskatchewan. 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% at the 95% confidence interval (19 times out of 20). The Saskatchewan Election Study was funded by the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, with additional support from LEAD Saskatoon, St. Thomas More College and the College of Arts and Science at the University of Saskatchewan.

Sources cited

Morissette, René, Grant Schellenberg and Anick Johnson. 2005. "Diverging trends in unionization." *Perspectives* April 2005. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-xie, 5-12.

Uppal, Sharanjit. 2010. "Unionization 2010." *Perspectives* October 2010. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 75-001-x, 18-27.

¹ Research team members are listed in alphabetical order. The research team would like to thank Kirk Clavelle for his research assistance.

² Only respondents who reported being employed were asked about union membership. Of employed respondents, 31.3% reported belonging to a union. For the purposes of analysis, the category 'union member' includes those who reported belonging to a union, while the category 'non-union member' includes all others.

³ This question is replicated from the 2010 British Election Study.

⁴ This question is replicated from the 1995 International Social Survey (Australia module only).