# Right-To-Work Laws

It's up to state legislatures to decide whether workers must join a union to get or keep a job. So far, 23 states—along with Guam—have decided workers should have a "right to work" without having to join a union.

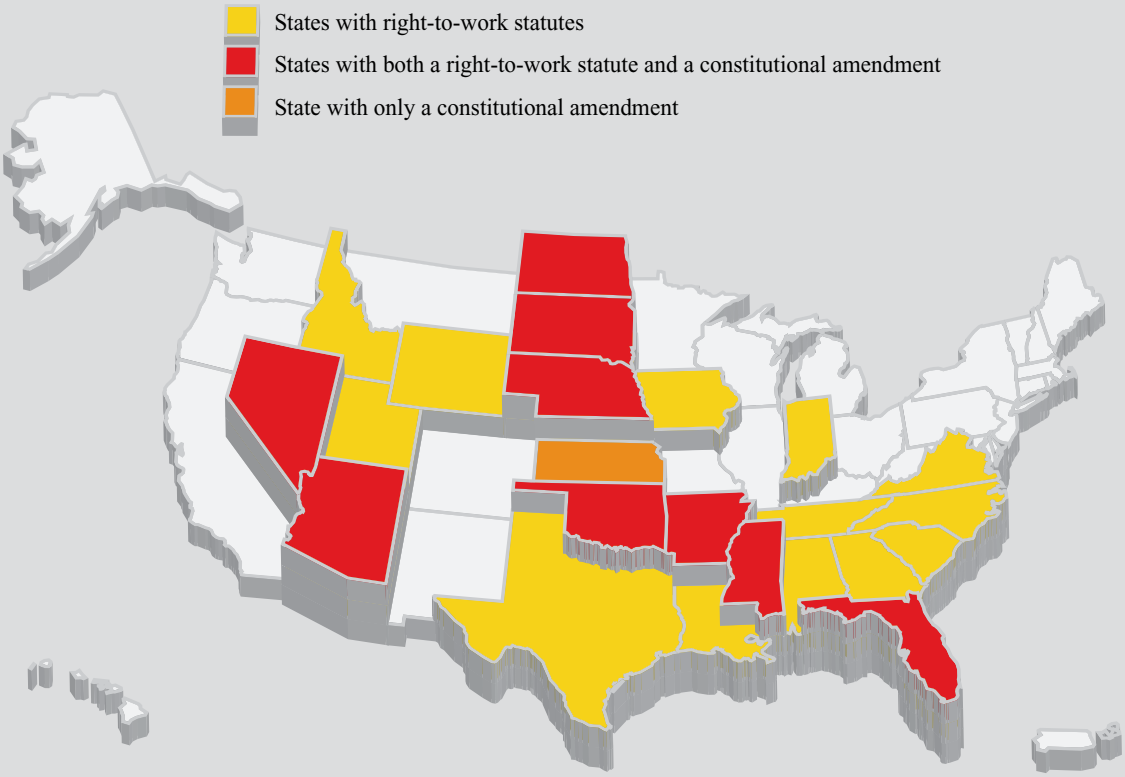
A renewed focus on collective bargaining rights in the last two years has rekindled interest in these laws. Sixteen states considered right-to-work bills last year, although none passed. So far this year, lawmakers in 12 states have introduced bills; Indiana's legislation passed in February.

Proponents of right-to-work laws argue they attract more businesses and create more jobs. Opponents counter that workers in right-to-work states earn lower wages, thereby decreasing consumer demand, resulting in fewer jobs. Right-to-work states tend to have much lower rates of union membership.

The first right-to-work laws were passed in the 1940s and 1950s in response to the growth of unions. There was a surge of interest in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, but only a handful of states have enacted right-to-work laws since that initial wave.

*— Jeanne Mejeur*

## Right-to-Work States




Source: U.S. Department of Labor, April 1, 2012.

## Union Membership

Right-to-work states, in red, tend to have smaller percentages of workers who are members of labor unions or similar types of employee associations.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Alabama** | **10.0%** |
| Alaska | 22.1 |
| **Arizona** | **6.0** |
| **Arkansas** | **4.2** |
| California | 17.1 |
| Colorado | 8.2 |
| Connecticut | 16.8 |
| Delaware | 10.5 |
| **Florida** | **6.3** |
| **Georgia** | **3.9** |
| Hawaii | 21.5 |
| **Idaho** | **5.1** |
| Illinois | 16.2 |
| **Indiana** | **11.3** |
| **Iowa** | **11.2** |
| **Kansas** | **7.6** |
| Kentucky | 8.9 |
| **Louisiana** | **4.5** |
| Maine | 11.3 |
| Maryland | 12.4 |
| Massachusetts | 14.6 |
| Michigan | 17.5 |
| Minnesota | 15.1 |
| **Mississippi** | **5.0** |
| Missouri | 10.9 |
| Montana | 13.0 |
| **Nebraska** | **7.9** |
| **Nevada** | **14.6** |
| New Hampshire | 11.1 |
| New Jersey | 16.1 |
| New Mexico | 6.8 |
| New York | 24.1 |
| **North Carolina** | **2.9** |
| **North Dakota** | **6.3** |
| Ohio | 13.4 |
| **Oklahoma** | **6.4** |
| Oregon | 17.1 |
| Pennsylvania | 14.6 |
| Rhode Island | 17.4 |
| **South Carolina** | **3.4** |
| **South Dakota** | **5.1** |
| **Tennessee** | **4.6** |
| **Texas** | **5.2** |
| **Utah** | **5.8** |
| Vermont | 12.0 |
| **Virginia** | **4.6** |
| Washington | 19.0 |
| West Virginia | 13.8 |
| Wisconsin | 13.3 |
| **Wyoming** | **7.2** |
| District of Columbia | 8.3 |

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011.

## The Pros and Cons

**The Heritage Foundation Says (Pro)**

- Right-to-work states attract more business investment.
- Foreign investment in Oklahoma, for example, increased after the state passed a right-to-work law.
- States that attract more investment create more jobs.
- Unionized firms earn lower profits.
- Right-to-work states have lower unemployment rates.

**The Center for American Progress Says (Con)**

- Workers in right-to-work laws earn lower wages.
- Lower wages decrease consumer demand, resulting in fewer jobs.
- Oklahoma, for example, lost one-third of its manufacturing jobs after the state passed a right-to-work law.
- Workers in right-to-work states are less likely to have health insurance.
- Right-to-work laws undermine unions.