



*The Beacon Hill Institute for
Public Policy Research*

News Release

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BHI Survey: Overwhelming majority of state voters oppose a key feature of Project Labor Agreements

(BOSTON) – A new survey conducted by the Suffolk University Political Research Center for the Beacon Hill Institute shows that 69% of Massachusetts voters oppose a requirement under which private contractors who perform public projects must hire workers through union hiring halls. The finding is important because the requirement is a key feature of Project Labor Agreements (PLAs), which are strongly favored by construction unions for conducting public projects.

Last year, President Obama issued an executive order encouraging the use of PLAs on federal construction projects. The order is controversial in part because PLAs require contractors to use labor provided by the unions, whether or not their own workers are union members.

Proponents argue that PLAs guarantee the availability of a skilled workforce and labor “peace.” Opponents argue that nonunion workers are just as skilled as union workers and that the requirement puts nonunion contractors at a competitive disadvantage, penalizes the vast majority of construction workers, who do not belong to unions, and increases construction costs. Worries about labor peace, say opponents, are an empty threat.

Opposition to the idea of requiring construction contractors to hire through union hiring halls runs counter to voters’ otherwise sympathetic attitudes to unions. The same survey showed that a majority (52%) of Massachusetts voters have a favorable opinion of unions. It also found that only 19% of voters believe that public sector union workers are overpaid.

The requirement that construction contractors hire their workers through union hiring halls is opposed by almost every segment of the electorate. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of Republicans, 76% of Independents and 52% of Democrats oppose the requirement. Even among households with union members, 59% are opposed. Opposition is consistent across voters segmented according to age, gender, race and attitudes toward candidates for governor and the U.S. Senate. Only the 15% of voters who have a “very favorable” view of unions support the requirement.

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The survey suggests that public opinion of project labor agreements may be sensitive to perceptions about the degree to which construction workers are unionized. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the respondents estimated that the fraction belonging to unions is 40% or more. In fact, only about 20% of private construction workers in Massachusetts belong to unions. Respondents were given this fact before they were asked about hiring through union hiring halls.

David G. Tuerck, Executive Director of the Institute said that “elected officials who must decide whether to enter into PLAs on public construction projects should be interested in the results of the survey. Apparently, when voters are informed of the facts concerning union membership, they do not support a key feature of PLAs.”

The statewide survey of 500 Massachusetts registered voters was conducted Feb. 21-24, 2010. The margin of error is +/- 4.4 percent at a 95 percent level of confidence. The results summarized have been posted at www.beaconhill.org.

For more survey-related information, contact David Paleologos at 781-290-9310, dpaleolo@suffolk.edu.

The Beacon Hill Institute has conducted research on PLAs and other issues concerning the construction unions. The results of this research can be found at www.beaconhill.org or by calling BHI at 617-573-8750.

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