Right to Work, Left to Struggle: Structural Effects of Right-to-Work Legislation on New Labor Organizing Efforts

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Abstract

Economic grievances in the US have become a focal driver of public unrest across partisan lines. Whereas individuals may form coordinated social groups (e.g., labor unions) to address their grievances, higher-level sociopolitical structures (e.g., labor laws) influence the activity of these social groups in complex ways. In the present study we focus on the long-term effect of Right-to-Work (RTW) laws on workers' material conditions and the emergence of new labor unions. Using hierarchical multilevel models of archival longitudinal data from 2018-2023 ($N = 6{,}174$), we find that RTW laws depress unionization efforts decades after their passing. Moreover, RTW laws produce worse material conditions for workers and weaken the effectiveness of existing labor unions in changing these. Overall, our results suggest that RTW laws trap workers in economic precarity, increase the costs of collective organizing, and reduce unionization to a defensive and less powerful response to worsening financial prospects.

Keywords: Collective Action, Labor, Unionization, Longitudinal Multilevel Modeling

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Open research practices: The present study was not preregistered. Nonetheless, access to all code

and data is available through OSF. The link has been anonymized for the purpose of double-

blind peer review.

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A new report by the American Psychological Association indicates that collective grievances about the U.S. economic system are widespread (APA, May 2025). Although political partisanship can explain some of these grievances (Gerber & Huber, 2010) financial concerns are widespread across the political spectrum (Norton & Arieli, 2011). Moreover, a Pew Research report suggests that in the U.S., most people (74%) expect worsening economic prospects for future generations, while 66% support major changes to the economic system (Wike et al., 2025). Crucially, people from both politically left- and right-leaning camps have rallied behind populist slogans alike (e.g., "drain the swamp," "tax the rich"). This populist fervor can be cogently connected to economic precarity (Benczes & Szabó, 2023; Rodrik 2021; Ocampo, 2019). This trend began after the Great Financial Crisis of 2008 when researchers found that financial precarity predicted opinions on economic policies above and beyond political partisan identity and political ideology (Hacker et al., 2013). Despite people reporting widespread economic grievances, the U.S. has not seen collective movements centering economic policy since the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement apart from a few scattered protests (e.g., No Kings Protests; Holton, 2025). In addition, even with growing interest in labor unionization (Ahlquist et al., July 2024), union membership remains below 10% (Bureau of Labor statistics, January 2025).

These observations pose a key conundrum for work on collective action, as research suggests that collective grievances and the feelings tied to them are key proximal predictors of collective action (Becker et al., 2024; Corcoran et al., 2015; Liaquat et al., 2025; Smith & Ortiz, 2002; van Zomeren et al., 2004, 2008, 2012; Wright et al., 1990). Also important for the study of

collective (in)action is the consideration of individual costs and benefits of participation (Klandermans, 1984; Simon et al., 1998; Stürmer & Simon, 2004). Individual cost-benefit analyses are, in part, tied to the social resources available to the person. Theories of resource mobilization link the rise of social movements to changes in the organization of groups and its resources, because these can reduce the costs of participating in collective action (Jenkins, 1983). For instance, the connection between workers and the presence of prior organizing efforts predicted willingness to participate in action to promote gender equality (Martin et al., 1984). Social resources such as volunteers and organizational spaces created a sense of social cohesion between group members and the expectation that others would also participate. In addition, formal groups and organizations can also facilitate collective action participation through the strategic distribution of information on events and issues affecting group members (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Stürmer & Simon, 2004). Indeed, the direct efforts of the state to provide environmental education to rural residents increased their participation in pro-environmental waste management behaviors (Wu et al., 2024).

Note the emerging nested structure that determines collective action: People are nested within and influenced by the groups to which they belong (e.g., labor unions). But groups themselves are affected by larger institutional structures (e.g., laws). In other words, social structures influence how groups organize and directly impact their capacity for mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Specifically, social structures such as laws, financial safety nets, and social norms form the environment from which resources can be derived and mobilized, and thus can facilitate, constrain, and shape social movements. For instance, proximity to surveillance structures such as checkpoints and military installations decrease people's intentions to resist collectively, because these also undermine expectations that other community members will

support collective resistance (Penić et al., 2024). In the present work, we focus on labor unions in the U.S. as formal groups that have the ability to mobilize workers and resources to address widespread economic precarity and advance people's well-being. In particular, the study focuses on the structural effects of right-to-work (RTW) laws on state-level material and social resources that affect new labor-organizing efforts.

RTW laws are state-specific laws in the U.S. that prohibit employers from agreeing with labor unions on ways to compel union membership among their employees. RTW laws began to pass and take effect across states after the Taft–Hartley Act in 1947, which included provisions to allow the U.S. government to break strikes (Labor Management Relations Act, 1947) and provisions to restrict the actions of existing labor unions, such as the prohibition of secondary strikes, boycotts and pickets. However, not all states implemented RTW laws (See Figure 1).

In the absence of RTW laws, states are "union-shop" states, where employers may establish agreements with labor unions regarding means to compel union membership among employees. In practice, RTW laws imply that the contracts negotiated by unions represent and protect all workers within a given unit, regardless of their union membership status. That is, non-union members in RTW states receive raises and other benefits as negotiated by their union. In contrast, union shop states allow for said negotiated benefits and raises to apply only to dues-paying members. RTW laws thus pose a free-rider problem for unions (Davis & Huston, 1993; Sobel, 1995), where membership is perceived to be more costly than personally beneficial. RTW laws thus tend to produce weaker membership bases for labor unions (Ellwood & Fine, 1987).

Proponents of RTW legislation have suggested that these laws are financially beneficial for state workers, as they incentivize economic growth, economic activity, and increase employment (see Stevans, 2009). Although implementing RTW laws has led to increased wealth

among stockholders via business investments (Abraham & Voos, 2000), there is no evidence of a trickle-down effect (Stevans, 2009). Opponents of RTW laws suggest that, in weakening the membership base of existing labor unions, these laws inhibit the effectiveness of these organizations to mobilize and pursue the political and economic goals of workers. There is evidence to suggest that these laws are indeed damaging to workers' material conditions, because RTW states tend to offer lower wages compared to union-shop states (Sherer & Gould, 2024, cf. Moore, 1998; Reed, 2003).

In weakening worker collectives and collective bargaining, RTW laws appear to create more material precarity for workers of the state. These material conditions may have conflicting effects on the emergence of new labor movements. First, worse material conditions may promote greater collective grievances about workers' material conditions. Following work in social psychology and collective action, these material conditions should produce greater efforts to unionize. However, a structural analysis of worker-employer relations under capitalism suggests that greater economic uncertainty creates environments where collective action against an employer is individually costly, because the employee relies on their employer's unilateral decision-making for survival (Anderson, 2017; Chibber, 2022). This should be particularly true in cases where a worker collective is neither strong nor established. Thus, it is also possible that the worse material conditions that describe RTW states relative to union-shop states, inhibit the emergence of new labor organizing efforts.

Overall, labor unions are critical for the improvement of working conditions, increasing the standard of living for members and non-union members, staving off wealth inequality, and developing a sense of community (Hagedorn et al., 2016; Mishel, August 2001; VanHeuvelen & Brady, 2021; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011). In addition, the mobilization of union members helps

influence policy making, increase political knowledge among workers, and promote political

engagement through the organization of voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns

(Macdonald, 2021). We thus conceptualize labor unions as local social resources, capable of

mobilizing members to advance workers' rights and working conditions, and normalizing

unionization within the state. Under this conceptualization, resource mobilization theory also

points to RTW laws being detrimental to the emergence of new labor unions, as these laws

directly disincentivize union membership and thus reduce the amount of available resources

(e.g., volunteers) available to mobilize.

In the present work, we demonstrate how RTW laws limit the emergence of new labor

organizing efforts. We use national archival data from the United States on labor union

certification elections and state economic data. Using multilevel models, we map the effect of

RTW laws on the emergence of new organizing efforts (regardless of their ultimate success)

between 2018 and 2023. The present work also examines the impact that RTW laws have on the

accumulation of labor unions and the consequences these laws have on worker material

precarity. Our results suggest that RTW states see consistently lower attempts at organizing new

labor unions. Whereas states' political orientation was a significant covariate, our results suggest

that RTW laws have distinct and independent effects on labor organizing separate from

constituents' aggregated political ideology. In addition, RTW states significantly limit the

accumulation of labor unions and reduce the efficacy of unions to produce positive changes in

workers' financial well-being. Our results also speak to the complex relationship between

structural factors and collective grievances in predicting collective action. Although we find that

RTW states produce work environments where worker organizing is more individually costly,

we also find that the relative deterioration of material conditions incites stronger efforts to organize new unions in RTW states than in union-shop states.

Figure 1. Distribution of Union Shop and RTW states between 2017-2023
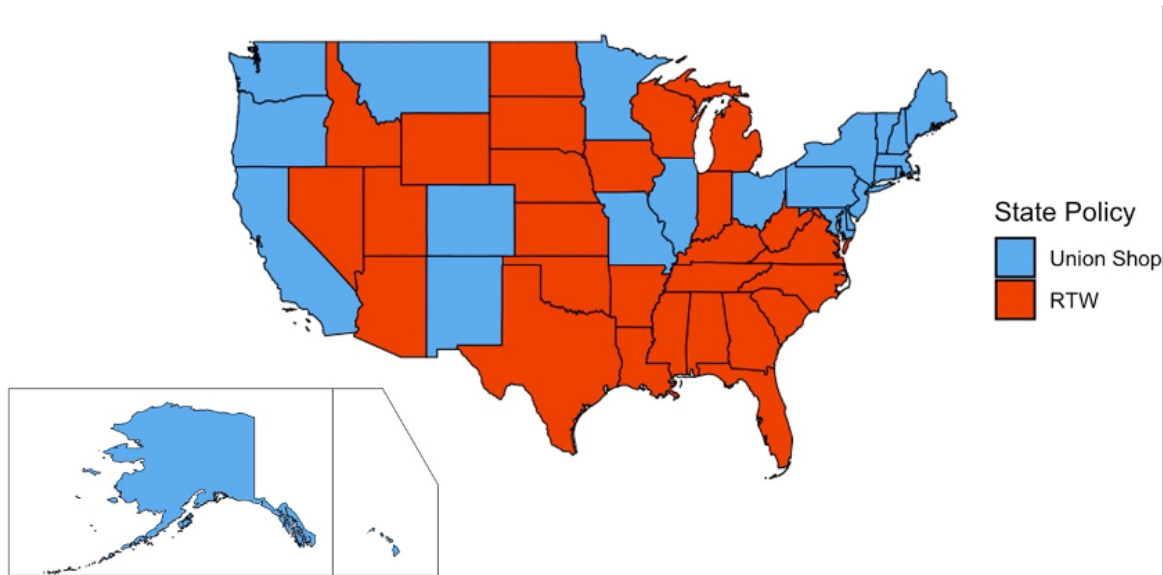
Method

To study the effect of RTW laws on material and social resources available to workers, and its effects on new labor organizing, we combine data from the National Labor Relations Board (n.d.a,b), the Bureau of Economic Analysis (n.d), State Statistics (n.d.), the Economic Policy Institute (Economic Policy Institute, n.d.; Sherer & Gould, February 2024) and the Gallup Poll (n.d.) between the years 2017 and 2023. The dataset also included state-level psychological outcomes from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, n.d.). The data is structured such that yearly estimates are nested within states. The code and detailed notes to obtain the compiled dataset used in this study is available via OSF. In the following section we describe our dataset in detail, along with relevant data cleanup/exclusion steps and latent variable generation rationales.

Organizing Effort

Organizing effort was operationalized as the total number of new labor union filings for each year and state, regardless of whether the filing eventually resulted in a won or lost election. We selected this behavior as the representation of organizing effort because organizing a representation election supposes a higher effort than winning an election, as the former implies collecting signatures from 30% of the expected unit membership, and the latter implies receiving a favorable vote from a simple majority of those who vote, regardless of how many people vote in total. Organizing effort was thus the sum of won and failed election filings for each year, nested within states. Because some states have larger populations and thus a greater share of employed people capable of unionizing, we weighted our raw estimates of organizing effort by the state's employed population for each respective year. The variable was also log transformed to correct for positive skew.

Material Precarity

While several measures of economic hardship exist, they lack certain properties important for our approach. Some only consider employed individuals and income-based data (United for ALICE, n.d.), while others create a simple additive scaled score based on a fixed set of factors (e.g., Economic Hardship Index, United Health Foundation, 2023). To create a contemporary and comprehensive measure of material resources available to people, we obtained public data on multiple dimensions of relevant economic factors for each year and state (including DC). This included (a) the proportion of people with very low and low food security (*food insecurity*), (b) rates of individual *bankruptcy* filings, and (c) rates of people without health insurance coverage (*uninsured rate*) obtained from State Statistics (State Statistics, n.d.). We also acquired data on per capita personal income and regional price parity indices from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (Bureau of Economic Analysis, n.d.). These metrics were used to calculate

(d) *adjusted per capita personal income* (APCPI) estimates: the average personal income of

workers within a given state and year after adjusting for differences in cost of living across states

and time. In addition, we retrieved (e) data on the total amount of dollars spent by employers on

supplements to wages and salaries, including money spent in pensions and insurance funds and

government social security (*contributions*). Employer contributions were also adjusted for each

states' yearly employed population estimates. Finally, we retrieved rates of (f) *part-time*

employment and (g) *underemployment* from the Economic Policy Institute's State of Working

America Library (Economic Policy Institute, n.d.). Prior to data analysis, these variables were

tested for non-normality and corrected using log transformations when appropriate.

We used a confirmatory factor analysis to test and create a state- and time-varying latent

variable of material precarity. The models accounted for data clustering at the state level. The

first model with all variables describing material conditions did not produce a good fit of the

data, $\chi^2(14) = 68.20$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.465, TLI = 0.198, RMSEA = 0.104, 90% CI [0.092,

0.117], SRMR = 0.110. Specifically, part-time employment and underemployment did not load

significantly on the latent material precarity variable. In addition, including the bankruptcy rates

variable into the model forced residual covariances to fit the model. We removed the three

problematic variables, resulting in our final model of material precarity as composed of food

insecurity, APCPI, employer contributions, and uninsured rates. The resulting model produced

an excellent fit, $\chi^2(2) = 1.12$, $p = .575$, CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.064, RMSEA = 0.00, 90% CI [0.00,

0.027], SRMR = 0.023 (Table 1). The latent variable of material precarity was coded such that

higher scores indicated worse material conditions for the average worker within the state at a

given year.

Table 1. Factor loadings

Observed Variable	Loading	R^2
Food insecurity	.708	.502
Adjusted Per Capita Personal Income	-.515	.265
Employer Contributions	-.550	.302
Uninsured Rates	.719	.517

Social Resources

To account for social resources, we computed a variable of cumulative organizing success. For each year between 2018 to 2023 and each U.S. State, we computed the sum of new established unions in the years prior within our dataset. For instance, the cumulative organizing success estimate for 2018 was the total number of new unions established in 2017 within a given state, and the cumulative organizing success estimate for 2019 was the total number of new unions established between 2017 and 2018 within a state. We note that since we did not have data prior to 2017, the cumulative organizing success variable is only computed for the years 2018-2023. Similar to our organizing effort variable, we also weighted the cumulative organizing success variable by the state's working population estimate and log-transformed it to correct for non-normality.

Additional Variables

The dataset also included two state-level indicators of mental health retrieved from SAMHSA. The mental health estimates described average rates of major depressive symptoms and reports of suicidal ideation for years 2016–2023 (excluding 2020 and 2021 because of missing data) for people aged 18 years or older. However, preliminary analyses suggest that these state-level mental health outcomes were not significantly related to state-level estimates of precarity, new organizing efforts, state-level organizing success, or RTW laws, ps > .40. Thus, we do not include mental health outcomes in our analyses. A sensitivity power analysis using G*Power version 3.1.9.6 for a two-tailed bivariate correlation suggests that our dataset can only

be sufficient to detect moderate correlations for state-level variables, $r > .37$, at $α = .05$, and power $= .80$.

In addition, state-level indicator of political orientation retrieved from a 2017 Gallup Poll. State political leaning was coded as a continuous variable ranging from -2 (*Solid Democrat*) to 2 (*Solid Republican*). State political orientation was correlated with state-level estimates of precarity, $r(49) = 0.58$, $p = .008$, cumulative organizing success, $r(49) = -.60$, $p < .001$, new organizing efforts, $r(49) = -.66$, $p < .001$, and RTW Laws, $r(49) = .65$, $p = .002$. Thus, state political orientation was added as a covariate in our analyses.

Excluded Cases

The original dataset (2017–2024) included 8,654 filings for the creation of new labor unions across all 50 U.S. states, DC, and the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands. Nonetheless, given the lack of data on RTW laws and other economic statistics for the U.S. territories, the present study excludes analyses of new labor organizing in these areas. The Virgin Islands, Guam and Puerto Rico comprised 1.07% of the total case pool. We also excluded cases from 2024, as Michigan state repealed its RTW law in 2023, becoming a union-shop state in February 2024 (Sherer & Gould, 2024). In addition, to estimate the effects of cumulative organizing success in our analysis, we further removed cases from 2017, as we did not have data on filings and outcomes prior to 2017. These exclusions left us with a final sample of 6,174 new labor union filings (2018–2023).

Spatial Dependence Tests

Given that political behavior assessed in geographic units can be spatially autocorrelated (e.g., Garresten et al., 2018; Obschonka et al., 2018), we tested whether key variables in our models also varied systematically depending on their location. We used a simple, row-

standardized spatial weight matrix of the U.S. States and the District of Columbia (Ebert et al.,

2023) to capture the states adjacent to each geographical unit. We note that, because Hawaii and

Alaska do not have adjacent states, estimates from these states were removed from tests of

spatial dependence. For variables at the year level, we aggregated the states' yearly estimates and

computed averages. We tested global geographical clustering of our data using Moran's I to

determine whether values between proximal states were more similar to each other than between

distal states. We report no evidence of global geographical clustering (see Table 2).

Table 2. Tests of Spatial Dependence of State-Level Variables

Variable	Moran's I	p
RTW Laws	-.17	0.94
State Political Leaning	-.15	0.92
APCPI	-.17	0.94
Food Insecurity	-.13	0.87
Contributions	-.22	0.99
Uninsurance Rates	-.17	0.94
Material Precarity	-.26	0.99
Cumulative Organizing Success	-.28	1.00
Organizing Efforts	-.28	1.00

Results

In the following sections we conduct a series of multi-level models to examine the effect

of RTW legislation in the development of social and material resources and the emergence of

new organizing efforts. In addition, the models isolate the role of RTW laws from state political

leaning. In all analyses, the variables of cumulative organizing success, material precarity, and new organizing efforts (Level 1) are yearly estimates nested within states (Level 2).

Cumulative Organizing Success

The first set of models predicted our variable of social resources (viz., the accumulation of labor unions that could act as cadres for non-unionized workers, 2018–2023). We first fitted an intercept-only (null) model that served as a comparison for subsequent nested models. The null model indicated that there was a significant amount of between-state ($SD = 0.69$, 95% CI [0.52, 0.83]) and within-state ($SD = 0.56$, 95% CI [0.51, 0.60]) variation in cumulative organizing success.

A substantial amount of between-state variance was explained by the introduction of the fixed effect of RTW legislation in a subsequent model ($SD = 0.50$, 95% CI [0.35, 0.59], $\eta^2 = 0.47$; See Table 3). On average, RTW states significantly accumulated fewer organizing successes (2018–2023) versus union-shop states, $b = -0.94$, $t(51) = -6.15$, $p < .001$. A subsequent nested model introduced the effect of state-level political leaning. This addition improved mode fit, $p = .03$, and explained additional between-state variance in cumulative organizing success ($SD = 0.47$, 95% CI [0.34, 0.56], $\eta^2 = .53$). These results suggest that more conservative states accumulated fewer labor unions during the six-year time period than more liberal states, $b = -0.14$, $t(51) = -2.22$, $p = .03$. However, the effect of RTW laws remained significant, $b = -0.66$, $t(51) = -3.42$, $p < .001$, suggesting that only a fraction of the fixed effect in the prior model could be attributed to ideological differences between states. These results suggest that the difference between states in the accumulation of worker unions cannot be merely attributed to constituent ideology. Rather, RTW laws appear to have an independent and detrimental effect on the growth of worker bargaining power.

Table 3. Fit estimates and comparisons for models predicting cumulative organizing success

Model	AIC	BIC	-LL	R2	χ^2(df)	p
Null						
Intercept-Only	634	645	-314	.67		
State Characteristics						
Fixed effect of RTW Legislation	608	623	-230	.66	228.31 (1)	<.001
Fixed effect of RTW Legislation and State Political Leaning	605	623	-298	.66	4.69 (1)	.03

Material Precarity

The next set of models predicted yearly state estimates of material conditions that afford financial uncertainty. Our composite variable of material precarity captured yearly estimates of average salaries, food insecurity, uninsurance rates, and employer expenses on worker benefits. Again, we first fitted an intercept-only (null) model predicting yearly state estimates of material precarity. The null model established the amount of total variance in the dependent variable and served as comparison for subsequent nested models. The intercept-only model indicated that there was a significant amount of unexplained variance in material precarity between (Level 2: $SD = 0.83$, 95% CI [0.66, 0.97]) and within states (Level 1: $SD = 0.22$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.23]). The null model alone explained approximately 95% of the total variance in material precarity, suggesting that material precarity scores may not vary much between states or years.

A subsequent model (Model 1) included the fixed effect of prior organizing success rates. Including this predictor in the model produced a better fit of the data relative to the null model, $p < .001$ (See Table 4). The results suggest that, on average, higher prior success rates were associated with lower material precarity, $b = -0.24$, $t(263.56) = -12.19$, $p < .001$. In other words, increased presence of labor unions in the state was tied to better material conditions for workers.

The model reduced unexplained variance in material precarity both at the between-state ($SD =$ 0.75, 95% CI [0.61, 0.88], $\eta^2 = .18$) and within-state ($SD = 0.17$, [0.16, 0.19], $\eta^2 = .35$) levels.

A subsequent nested model tested whether the fixed effect of cumulative organizing success varied across states by testing the random effect of cumulative organizing success. In addition, the model allowed for random effects to be correlated. The addition of the random effect significantly improved model fit, $p < .001$. The results suggest that the effect of cumulative organizing success on material precarity significantly varied by states ($SD = 0.14$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.19]). Importantly, we find a significant and negative correlation between random effects, $r = -.51$, 95% CI [-.76, -.12]; the effect of cumulative organizing success on material precarity was *weaker* for states with higher starting levels of material precarity.

The next model included the fixed effect of RTW laws, in addition to the fixed and random effects of cumulative organizing success. The model fit the data significantly better than the previous model, $p < .001$. States with RTW laws offered worse material conditions for the average worker in the state, $b = 0.82$, $t(50.41) = 4.64$, $p < .001$. These results, together with the negative random effects correlation ($r = -.58$, 95% CI [-.81, -.20]), suggest that labor unions in RTW states may have a relatively harder time producing material changes for workers than existing labor unions in union shop states (Figure 2).

In the final model, we introduced the fixed effect of state political leaning to isolate the effect of RTW states on material precarity. The model did not produce a better fit of the data, $p = .07$, suggesting that the effects presented in the model above cannot be accounted for by constituents' political leanings. Overall, the results of the nested multilevel models predicting material precarity suggest that existing labor unions are key for the procurement of better wages, benefits and quality of life of workers in the U.S. These results also capture the weakening of

worker collective bargaining in RTW states, as the effect of accumulating labor unions on

worker material precarity is blunted relative to union-shop states.

Table 4. Fit estimates and comparisons for models predicting material precarity

Model	AIC	BIC	-LL	R2	χ^2(df)	p
Null						
Intercept-Only	164	175	-79	.95		
Cumulative Organizing Success						
Fixed effect of cumulative organizing success	46	61	-19	.97	120.1 (1)	<.001
Fixed and random effect of cumulative organizing success	36	58	-12	.98	14.4 (2)	<.001
State Characteristics						
Fixed effects of cumulative organizing success and RTW Legislation + Random effect of cumulative organizing success	20	46	-3	.97	18 (1)	<.001
Fixed effects of cumulative organizing success, RTW Legislation and Political leaning + Random effect of cumulative organizing success	19	48	-1	.97	3.26 (1)	.07

Figure 2. RTW laws blunt the relationship between cumulative organizing success and material precarity
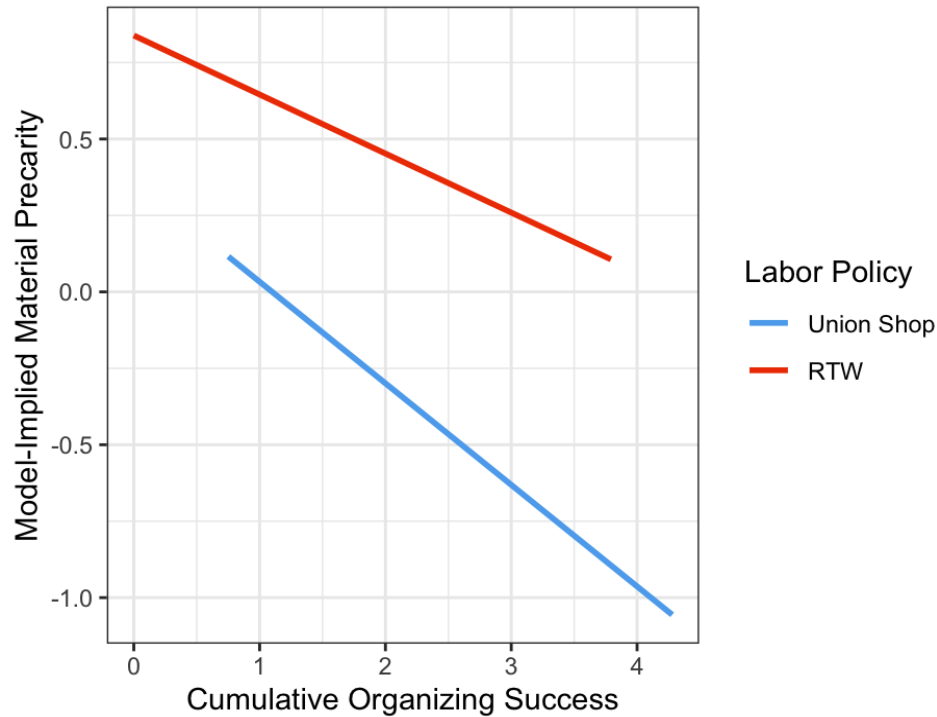
New Organizing Efforts

In the following section, we present a set of multilevel models predicting new organizing efforts from material resources, as denoted by our latent variable of material precarity. We examine the extent to which RTW laws explain and interact with the effect of material resources on new organizing efforts, and separate the effect of this type of labor policy from states' political leanings.

The first model fitted was the null, intercept-only model. The null model indicated that there was a significant amount of unexplained variance in new organizing efforts at the between-state ($SD = 0.55$, 95% CI [0.43, 0.68]) and within-state levels ($SD = 0.41$, 95% CI [0.37, 0.44]). The intercept model explained 70% of the variance in new rates of organizing.

In a second model, we included our time-varying (Level 1) variable of material precarity as a fixed effect. This addition significantly improved model fit, $p < .001$ (see Table 5), and reduced the amount of unexplained between-state variation in new organizing efforts ($SD = 0.43$,

95% CI [0.32, 0.53], η^2 = .38). The results suggested that, on average, higher material precarity

negatively related to new organizing efforts, b = -.29, $t(92.75)$ = -4.50, p < .001; states with

worse material conditions were less likely to attempt to organize new unions. In a subsequent

model, we estimated the random effect of material precarity to test whether this fixed effect

varied significantly by state. This addition did not improve model fit, p =.86. We found no

significant variation between states on the fixed effect of material precarity on new organizing

efforts (SD = 0.10, 95% CI [0.00, 0.33]), suggesting that the negative relationship between

material conditions and new organizing efforts is generalizable across states.

      In the next model, we decomposed the Level-1 effect of material precarity by

independently estimating the fixed effect of states' average levels of material precarity (Level 2)

and within-state deviations from these averages (Level 1). The latter variable was calculated by

subtracting states' average material precarity from the time-varying, Level-1 variable. Thus,

higher scores on this material precarity change variable suggested that, at a given time, workers

in the state were experiencing worse material conditions relative to their state's average. Because

including the state-level average of material precarity and within-state deviations from these

averages to a model specifying the fixed effect of the original Precarity variable would be

redundant, the following model is not nested within prior models and is compared to the null.

The resulting model fit the data significantly better than the null model, p <.001, and explained

between-state variance in new organizing efforts (SD = 0.42, 95% CI [0.31, 0.50], η^2 = .42). We

find that states with higher material precarity averages tended to see less new organizing efforts

compared to states with lower material precarity averages, b = -0.43, $t(51)$ = -5.67, p < .001.

However, we found no significant relationship between within-state changes in material precarity

and new organizing efforts, p = .80.

A subsequent model included the fixed effect of RTW legislation on new organizing efforts. This addition produced an improvement in model fit relative to the previous model, $p < .001$, and significantly reduced the amount of unexplained variance in new organizing efforts at the between-state level ($SD = 0.35$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.42], $\eta^2 = 0.60$). Specifically, we find that relative to union-shop states, RTW states had, on average, lower efforts to organize new labor unions, $b = -0.59$, $t(51) = -4.27$, $p < .001$. The fixed effects results also suggested that state-level material precarity continued to relate to new organizing efforts; however, this effect decreased with the introduction of RTW legislation into the model, $b = 0.21$, $t(51) = -2.51$, $p = .02$. Within-state changes in material precarity relative to the state's average continued to be a non-significant predictor of new organizing efforts, $p = .80$.

As an exploratory test, we examined the interaction between within-state changes in material precarity and RTW laws. The introduction of the interaction term significantly improved model fit, $p = .01$, and slightly reduced the within-state variance in new organizing efforts ($SD = 0.40$, 95% CI [0.36, 0.44], $\eta^2 = .03$). We found a significant interaction between RTW legislation and within-state changes in material precarity. Specifically, for union-shop states, these changes did not significantly relate to the emergence of new organizing efforts, $p = .10$; but for RTW states, relatively worse material conditions for workers did related to increases in organizing efforts, $b = 0.60$, $t(255) = 2.55$, $p = .01$ (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Relatively worse material conditions only predict more efforts to organize new unions in RTW states
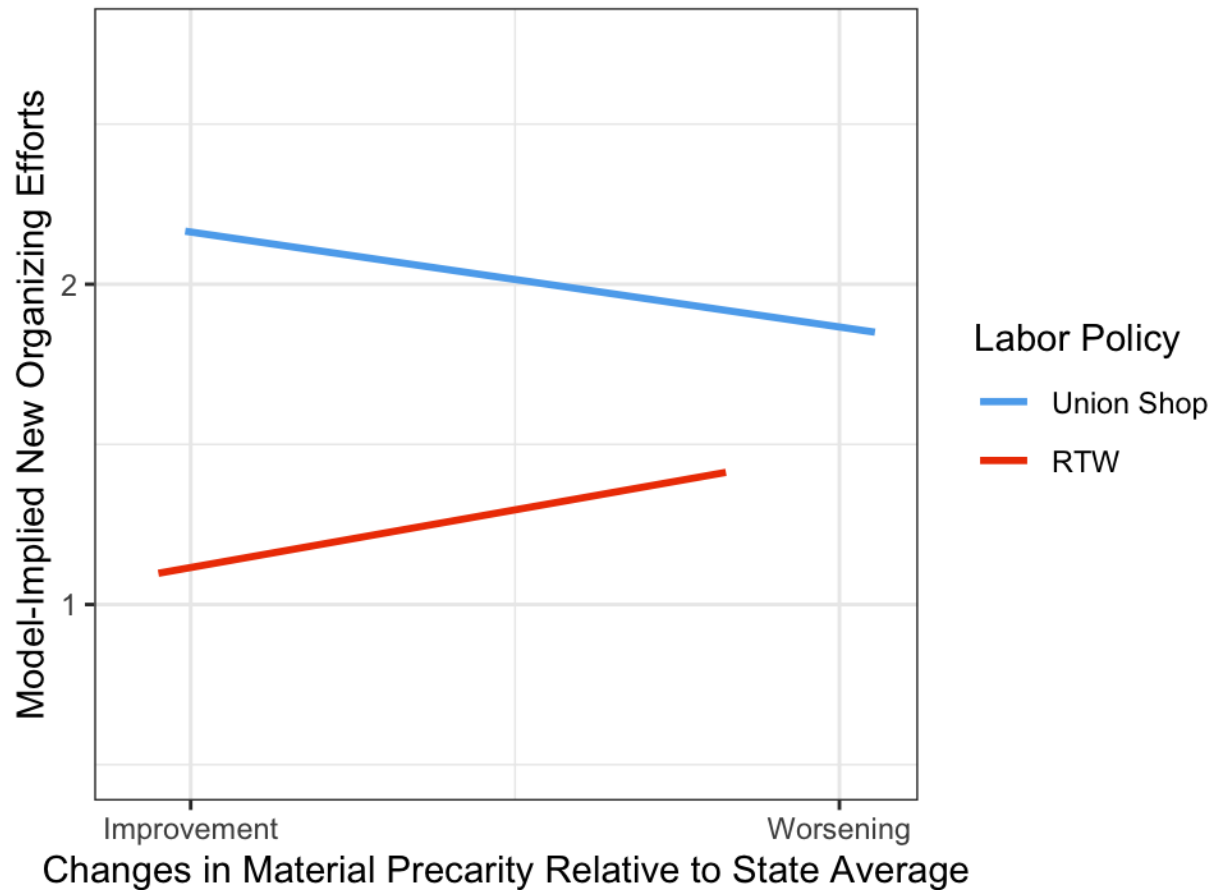
In a final model, we introduced the fixed effect of state political leaning. This addition slightly improved the fit of the model, $p = .02$, and further reduced unexplained variance in new organizing efforts at the between-state level ($SD = 0.33$, 95% CI [0.23, 0.40], $\eta^2 = .64$). The results suggested that on average, more conservative states saw lower efforts to form new unions, $b = -0.11$, $t(51) = -2.35$, $p = 0.02$. Introducing this fixed effect did not undermine the fixed effect of RTW laws, $b = -0.43$, $t(51) = -2.91$, $p = .005$, or its interaction with the change in material precarity variable, $b = 0.60$, $t(255) = 2.55$, $p = .01$. However, adding state political leanings to the model reduced the effect of state-level material precarity to non-significance, $p = .07$.

Overall, the results of these models suggested that the relationship between material precarity and the emergence of new organizing efforts is complex. Whereas, on average, worse material conditions predict lower efforts to organize new unions, relative deterioration of material conditions for workers in RTW states appears to motivate new organizing efforts. Thus, worker organizing in RTW states may be a defensive response to worsening financial prospects, while organizing efforts in union-shop states may be both defensive and preemptive responses to protect workers' financial wellbeing. In addition, the results suggest that the relationship between state-level material precarity and new organizing efforts is tied to both RTW legislation and states' political leanings. In other words, the relationship between material precarity and lower organizing rates is *in part* attributable to conservative ideologies that are likely to emphasize individualism and meritocracy as means to exit financial insecurity, and economic programs of public divestment that are more prevalent in more conservative states (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; Beattie et al., 2019; Girerd et al., 2023). However, it is also in part attributable to structural factors that themselves produce material precarity and inhibit the accumulation of social resources.

Table 5. Fit estimates and comparisons for models predicting new organizing efforts

Model	AIC	BIC	-LL	R2	χ^2(df)	*p*
Null						
Intercept-Only	452	463	-223	.70		
Material Precarity						
Fixed effect of Level 1 material precarity	439	454	-216	.69	14.50 (1)	<.001
Fixed and random effect of Level 1 material precarity	443	465	-215	.70	0.31 (2)	.86
Fixed effects of material precarity change (Level 1) and state material	431	449	-210	.70	24.98 (2)	<.001

precarity (Level 2)					
State Characteristics					
Fixed effects of material precarity change (Level 1), state material precarity (Level 2) and RTW Legislation	417	440	-203	.70	15.59 (1)	<.001
Fixed effects of material precarity change (Level 1), state material precarity (Level 2), RTW Legislation and Interaction	413	439	-199	.71	6.43 (1)	.01
Fixed effects of material precarity change (Level 1), state material precarity (Level 2), RTW Legislation, Interaction, and State Political affiliation	410	439	-197	.70	5.23 (1)	.02

Discussion

Tumultuous economic conditions across the U.S. have not given rise to coherent and sustained mass movements. Extensive empirical and theoretical psychological research on collective action suggests that collective grievances are key predictors of mobilization. However, this work is often detached from empirical analyses of the structural conditions in which grievances and movements are embedded. The present study combined longitudinal economic data across states with data on labor union certification elections between 2018 and 2023 to focus on the structural impediments to labor organizing. This combination allowed us to examine the impact of RTW legislation on the material precarity of workers, the accumulation of labor unions at the state level, and subsequent effects on the emergence of new local organizing efforts. The results of the study suggest that the passing of RTW laws decades ago have had a prevailing effect on workers' material conditions and labor organizing. Over three decades ago, Ellwood and Fine (1987) reported worker organizing was drastically depressed at the state level for 10 years after the passage of RTW legislation, and conjectured that RTW laws could produce

slight decreases in worker mobilization permanently. Our results show that RTW legislation today continues to predict significant differences between states in terms of attempts at forming new unions and the accumulation of labor unions.

We also find that RTW legislation is economically detrimental for the average worker. Whereas proponents of RTW legislation have suggested that these laws promote economic activity and growth, the results of our study suggest that RTW states systematically produce work environments more conducive of financial uncertainty. RTW states tended to have higher averages on our latent construct of material precarity, indicating that these states provide lower salaries (accounting for cost of living and inflation), fewer benefits, and present higher rates of food insecurity and uninsured workers. Our results thus suggest that even if RTW laws stimulate business investment at the state level, these investments do not translate into higher quality of life for the average worker.

Our results depict a problematic cycle within RTW states that entraps workers in worse working environments. Whereas the accumulation of unions is tied to significant reductions in material precarity across states, the rate of decrease is attenuated for RTW states. That is, existing unions in RTW states systematically fail to achieve the material improvements of their union-shop counterparts. We understand this to be the result of the weakening collective bargaining power in RTW states, given the law's inherent deterrence of union membership (Davis & Huston, 1993; Ellwood & Fine, 1987; Sobel, 1995). In creating worse material conditions for workers (including higher food insecurity and uninsurance rates) the average worker in a RTW state is more materially dependent on their employer's decision-making. Thus, the organization of new labor unions imposes a higher cost for workers in RTW states. This dependency can be partially explained by state political leaning, as conservatism is tied to

diminished support for public safety nets and a stronger emphasis on individualism and

meritocracy (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; Beattie et al., 2019; Girerd et al., 2023). Indeed, we find

that the effect of worker material precarity on the emergence of new labor organizing efforts is

explained by both RTW legislation and state political leanings. A direct implication of limiting

the emergence of new labor organizing efforts is that RTW states accumulate fewer labor unions

across time (Ellwood & Fine, 1987; Stevans, 2009). Following resource mobilization theory, this

suggests that unions in RTW states often have less capacity to mobilize resources such as

volunteers that would promote the growth and spread of the movement (Jenkins, 1983). The

present work reveals a host of roadblocks imposed by RTW laws on the development and

success of new labor movements.

In addition, our results speak to the complex relationship between structural factors and

collective grievances as predictors of collective action. As indicated above, we find that RTW

laws create work environments where worker organizing is more individually costly.

Nonetheless, we also find that the deterioration of material conditions predicts greater efforts to

organize new unions in RTW states but not union-shop states. This suggests that worse material

conditions are not always detrimental to worker mobilization. Our current data do not allow us to

conclusively attribute this effect to increased collective grievances stemming from higher-than-

average material precarity. However, these results suggest that there may be tipping points

where, despite unfavorable structural conditions hindering collective action, exceptionally poor

conditions may incite collective action. These findings parallel work on intergroup behavior that

suggest dissatisfaction and feelings of *low* efficacy predict support for radical and non-normative

collective action, as ingroup members adopt a *nothing-to-lose* mentality (Becker & Tausch,

2015; Jiménez-Moya et al., 2015; Saab et al., 2016; Tausch et al., 2011).

This study provides a birds-eye view of the impact that these laws have on the average financial well-being of American workers and their organizing behavior. Whereas the present study cannot directly test the structural effects of RTW legislation on group or individual psychology, the present findings underscore the lasting effects of RTW legislation on the vitality and effectiveness of worker-led democratic efforts to bring about economic change. As such, our work contributes to discussions about the potential to repeal RTW laws, as evidenced by Michigan's recent reversal of RTW legislation (Sherer & Gould, February 2024). In addition, our work offers empirical insight that may aid labor leaders in RTW states in informing workers about the structural barriers they face and how unionization can help overcome these.

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