



Cornell University  
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School  
**DigitalCommons@ILR**

---

Conference Proceedings, Presentations, and  
Speeches

ILR Collection

---

6-2012

# The Impact of Case and Arbitrator Characteristics On Employment Arbitration Outcomes

Alexander Colvin

*Cornell University, [ajc22@cornell.edu](mailto:ajc22@cornell.edu)*

Kelly Pike

*Cornell University, [kip3@cornell.edu](mailto:kip3@cornell.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/conference>

Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.

Support this valuable resource today!

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ILR Collection at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Conference Proceedings, Presentations, and Speeches by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact [hldigital@cornell.edu](mailto:hldigital@cornell.edu).

---

# The Impact of Case and Arbitrator Characteristics On Employment Arbitration Outcomes

## **Abstract**

[Excerpt] A major development in systems for the enforcement of individual employment rights is the use of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) procedures to resolve claims by employees. At their best, ADR procedures may hold the potential for greater accessibility by employees to enforcement of substantive employment rights, while avoiding burdens of excessive costs for the public and employers in processing claims. On the other hand, ADR procedures, particularly mandatory employment arbitration procedures, have also been criticized for producing the privatization of justice and denial of effective enforcement of employee rights. In this paper, we present the results of a new empirical study of employment arbitration. Despite the growing importance of employment arbitration in the workplace, empirical research on this phenomenon remains in its infancy and views on arbitration are often characterized by assumptions and anecdotal impressions. In the analysis presented here we attempt to systematically examine some of the common assumptions about the decision-making of employment arbitrators. In particular, we examine three propositions that are often injected into discussions of arbitral decision-making: 1) Arbitrators will tend to favor compromise decisions, proverbially “splitting the baby” between the two parties. 2) Arbitrators will be less inclined to award very large damage claims of the type more sometimes seen in jury decisions. 3) Arbitrators will prefer to award at least some small, token amount of damages to a party bringing a case rather than deny any recovery. We analyze these propositions using a unique dataset developed from analysis of employment arbitration case files of the American Arbitration Association (AAA), arguably the leading provider of employment arbitration services in the country.

## **Keywords**

arbitration, outcomes, alternative dispute resolution, ADR, American Arbitration Association, AAA

## **Comments**

### **Suggested Citation**

Colvin, A. J. S. & Pike, K. (2012, June). *The impact of case and arbitrator characteristics on employment arbitration outcomes* [Electronic version]. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Academy of Arbitrators, Minneapolis, MN.

Retrieved [insert date], from Cornell University, ILR School site: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/conference/22/>

### **Required Publisher Statement**

Copyright held by the authors.

**The Impact of Case and Arbitrator Characteristics  
On Employment Arbitration Outcomes**

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the  
National Academy of Arbitrators  
Minneapolis, MN  
June 2012

Alexander J.S. Colvin and Kelly Pike  
ILR School, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA  
Contact: (607) 254-8206 (Ph); [ajc22@cornell.edu](mailto:ajc22@cornell.edu) (email)

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

A major development in systems for the enforcement of individual employment rights is the use of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) procedures to resolve claims by employees. At their best, ADR procedures may hold the potential for greater accessibility by employees to enforcement of substantive employment rights, while avoiding burdens of excessive costs for the public and employers in processing claims. On the other hand, ADR procedures, particularly mandatory employment arbitration procedures, have also been criticized for producing the privatization of justice and denial of effective enforcement of employee rights. In this paper, we present the results of a new empirical study of employment arbitration. Despite the growing importance of employment arbitration in the workplace, empirical research on this phenomenon remains in its infancy and views on arbitration are often characterized by assumptions and anecdotal impressions. In the analysis presented here we attempt to systematically examine some of the common assumptions about the decision-making of employment arbitrators. In particular, we examine three propositions that are often injected into discussions of arbitral decision-making: 1) Arbitrators will tend to favor compromise decisions, proverbially “splitting the baby” between the two parties. 2) Arbitrators will be less inclined to award very large damage claims of the type more sometimes seen in jury decisions. 3) Arbitrators will prefer to award at least some small, token amount of damages to a party bringing a case rather than deny any recovery. We analyze these propositions using a unique dataset developed from analysis of employment arbitration

---

<sup>1</sup> The Authors would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of the American Arbitration Association, and particularly the staff of its Boston office, in providing access to the arbitration case files examined in this study. Any omissions or errors are, of course, our own responsibility.

case files of the American Arbitration Association (AAA), arguably the leading provider of employment arbitration services in the country.

### **The Rise of Employment Arbitration**

Two trends lie behind the rise of employment arbitration in American employment relations. The first is the growth of statutory employment rights and resulting litigation. The basic rule of employment law in the United States continues to be employment-at-will, a common law rule that an employer may dismiss an employee for good reason, bad reason or no reason at all, with no requirement to provide any notice before dismissal or pay any severance pay. Given the continued adherence by the courts to this principle, employment law in the U.S. has developed around a series of specific exceptions to the general rule. These include things like the prohibitions on dismissals for union organizing activity contained in the National Labor Relations Act and protections for whistleblowers in some limited circumstances involving strong public interests. The broadest area of exceptions to employment-at-will is in the statutory prohibitions against employment discrimination. The initial expansion of individual employment rights came with the enactment of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination in employment based on race, color, sex, religion or national origin. This was followed by the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, prohibiting discrimination against workers older than the age of 40, and later the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, prohibiting discrimination against employees with disabilities. In addition to these federal laws, states enacted a series of parallel laws prohibiting

employment discrimination, some of which expanded the prohibited grounds of discrimination to include things like family status and sexual orientation.

Beyond the substantive grounds of prohibited discrimination, a key to understanding the U.S. system of employment law is the nature of the litigation system and potential remedies available for violation of these statutory rights. Initially, Title VII only provided for trials by judge alone and limited damages to compensation for lost income. However the 1991 Civil Rights Act amendments added provisions for the recovery of damages for pain and suffering as well as punitive damages and allowed for jury trials. These changes increased the potential for larger damage awards for employment discrimination and helped spur an increase in litigation. The relatively large damage awards in U.S. employment litigation are illustrated by a study of federal court cases from 1999 to 2000 that found an average employee win rate of 36.4%, a median damage award for successful plaintiffs of \$150,500, and a mean damage award of \$336,291.<sup>2</sup> Similarly a study of California state court decisions found an employee win rate of 59% and a median damage award of \$296,991.<sup>3</sup> By international standards, these represent very large damage awards, which have served to focus U.S. employers on the dangers of litigation despite the relative limitations of the substantive areas of protection for employees.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Eisenberg, Theodore, & Elizabeth Hill (2003) "Arbitration and Litigation of Employment Claims: An Empirical Comparison." 58(4) *Dispute Resolution J.* 44.

<sup>3</sup> Oppenheimer, David Benjamin (2003) "Verdicts Matter: An Empirical Study of California Employment Discrimination and Wrongful Discharge Jury Verdicts Reveals Low Success Rates for Women and Minorities" 37 *U.C. Davis Law Rev.* 511 (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Colvin, Alexander J.S. (2006). "Flexibility and Fairness in Liberal Market Economies: The Comparative Impact of the Legal Environment and High Performance Work Systems." *British Journal of Industrial Relations.* Vol. 44, No.1, pp. 73-97.

The second trend that led to the rise of mandatory arbitration was a shift by the U.S. courts in favor of deferral to alternative dispute resolution procedures. Beginning in the 1970s and 80s, the U.S. courts took an increasingly favorable view of ADR as a mechanism for reducing litigation levels and clearing up overloaded court dockets. In a series of decisions in the 1980s, the U.S. Supreme Court reinterpreted the Federal Arbitration Act of 1926 to permit the arbitration of claims based on statutes, not just the contractual claims that had previously been seen as the province of arbitrators. These decisions initially dealt with areas such as securities law, anti-trust, and anti-racketeering laws. However in the 1991 case of *Gilmer v. Interstate/Johnson Lane*<sup>5</sup>, the Supreme Court for the first time held that a claim based on an employment discrimination statute could be subject to arbitration. This decision set off a wave of adoption of mandatory arbitration procedures by employers seeking to escape from the dangers of the litigation system.<sup>6</sup> The key feature of these mandatory arbitration procedures is that employees were required to agree to them as a term and condition of employment. Once entered into, they required that all legal claims by the employee against the employer would have to be brought through arbitration and the employee would no longer be able to initiate or appeal claims in the courts. Although some uncertainty remained as to the scope of the *Gilmer* decision, the new model of mandatory employment arbitration received the imprimatur of the Supreme Court in its 2001 decision in *Circuit City v. Adams*<sup>7</sup>, which upheld the enforceability of a mandatory arbitration procedure. Although there is no

---

<sup>5</sup> 500 U.S. 20 (1991).

<sup>6</sup> Colvin, Alexander J.S. (2003). "Institutional Pressures, Human Resource Strategies and the Rise of Nonunion Dispute Resolution Procedures." *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 56, No. 3, pp. 375-92.

<sup>7</sup> 532 U.S. 105 (2001).

definitive accounting of the number of mandatory arbitration procedures, the best survey evidences suggests that around a quarter to a third of all nonunion employees in the U.S. are now covered by mandatory arbitration procedures.<sup>8</sup> With union membership now down to 12.3% of employees in the U.S., this suggests that mandatory employment arbitration has already become a significantly more widespread institution governing employment relations than collective bargaining and labor arbitration.

The rise of mandatory arbitration has sparked vociferous debates between its advocates and critics. Advocates of mandatory arbitration argue that it provides a faster, more efficient and fair alternative to the complex and unwieldy system of employment litigation.<sup>9</sup> They note that the high costs and slow speed of the litigation system mean that few employees will practically be able to benefit from the large damage awards at the end of successful trials, whereas more employees could potentially have access to justice under simpler, more accessible arbitration procedures.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, critics argue that the ability of the employer to design and promulgate mandatory arbitration procedures will result in a system that favors the interests of the employer over the employee and avoid the public scrutiny provided by the court system.<sup>11</sup> They suggest that the supposed benefits of efficiency and accessibility of arbitration will prove illusory as employees

---

<sup>8</sup> Colvin, Alexander J.S. (2008) "Empirical Research on Employment Arbitration: Clarity Amidst the Sound and Fury?" 11(2) *Employee Rights and Employment Policy J.* 405; Lewin, David (2008) "Employee Voice and Mutual Gains", Labor and Employment Relations Association (LERA) Proceedings.

<sup>9</sup> Sherwyn, David, Samuel Estreicher, & Michael Heise (2005) "Assessing the Case for Employment Arbitration: A New Direction for Empirical Research" 57 *Stanford Law Rev.* 1557.

<sup>10</sup> Estreicher, Samuel (2001) "Saturns for Rickshaws: The Stakes in the Debate Over Pre-Dispute Employment Arbitration Agreements" 16 *Ohio St. J. on Disp. Resolution* 559.

<sup>11</sup> Stone, Katherine Van Wezel (1996) "Mandatory Arbitration of Individual Employment Rights: The Yellow Dog Contract of the 1990s" 73 *Denver U. Law Rev.* 1017.



have to grapple with a system over which they lack control and that produces outcomes tending to favor employers.<sup>12</sup> Empirical research on these issues has been relatively limited, in part due to the difficulties in gathering data on what are essentially private dispute resolution procedures.<sup>13</sup>

### **Arbitral Decision-Making Tendencies**

What processes are involved in arbitrator decision-making? Arbitration as a privately ordered process is a creation of the agreement of the two parties. The arbitrator decides the case because he or she has been selected jointly by the two parties to serve as the decision-maker. To the degree that the arbitrator wishes to achieve selection for future cases as an arbitrator, this will create an incentive for the arbitrator to attempt to satisfy both parties in the decision-making process. As a result, arbitrators have sometimes been thought of as having a tendency towards decisions that are compromises between the positions of the two parties. This criticism has been leveled at arbitral decisions in international arbitration.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, others have criticized this assumption and argued that arbitrators do not engage in such proverbial “splitting the baby” (e.g. Drahozal, 2008;

---

<sup>12</sup> Schwartz, David (2009) “Mandatory Arbitration and Fairness” 84 *Notre Dame Law Rev.* 1247.

<sup>13</sup> Colvin, Alexander J.S. (2008) “Empirical Research on Employment Arbitration: Clarity Amidst the Sound and Fury?” 11(2) *Employee Rights and Employment Policy J.* 405.

<sup>14</sup> Juster, Kenneth I. (1999) “The Santa Elena Case: Two Steps Forward, Three Steps Back” 10 *Am. Rev. Int’l Arb.* 371-381.

Keer and Naimark, 2001).<sup>15</sup> In this paper we will attempt to test empirically whether employment arbitrators in fact engage in splitting the baby.

A tendency to engage in the splitting the baby approach to arbitral decision-making could manifest itself in two respects. One is to balance over time who wins each case, so that each side (e.g. employers and employees in employment arbitration) will end winning roughly half of the total number of cases.<sup>16</sup> Here the argument is that arbitrators depending on the willingness of both parties to agree to their appointment for future business, the arbitrator will try to ensure that he or she has a record of regularly ruling in favor of both parties. This is not to say that the arbitrator will make rulings that clearly depart from his or her charge to apply the labor contract to the dispute in question. However in marginal cases, such as those turning on subjective judgments of the import of particular conduct, the arbitrator may have a tendency to balance out who is favored in decisions over a period of time.

A second manifestation of splitting the baby in decision-making occurs in situations where some amount of damages awarded. A tendency to favor compromise decisions could be seen here in the awarding of some, but only part, of the damages claimed.<sup>17</sup> For example, an exact splitting might be manifested in an award of half the amount claimed. Such compromise awards may be justified by the facts of the case, but

---

<sup>15</sup> Drahozal, Christopher R. (2008). "Busting Arbitration Myths" 56 *Kan. L. Rev.* 663-676; Keer, Stephanie E. & Richard W. Naimark. (2001) "Arbitrators Do Not 'Split the Baby': Empirical Evidence from International Business Arbitrations" 18 *J. Int'l Arb.* 573.

<sup>16</sup> Drahozal, Christopher R. (2008). "Busting Arbitration Myths" 56 *Kan. L. Rev.* 663-676.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*; Keer, Stephanie E. & Richard W. Naimark. (2001) "Arbitrators Do Not 'Split the Baby': Empirical Evidence from International Business Arbitrations" 18 *J. Int'l Arb.* 573.

the critique is that arbitrators too often make these types of compromise awards in an attempt to keep both parties reasonably satisfied.

Concerns about splitting-the-baby decision-making are particularly strong in the area of interest arbitration, which is often used in public sector collective bargaining as an alternative to strikes. Where the arbitrator is charged with determining the provisions of the contract as a substitute for bargaining, there is a particular danger that the arbitrator will attempt to achieve the appearance of fairness by splitting the difference between the two parties' final offers. This may create disincentives for the parties to compromise in bargaining and excessive reliance on arbitration. In direct response to this danger, the method of final-offer arbitration, whether the arbitrator can only choose one of the parties' final offers or the other, was developed in interest arbitration settings to avoid split the difference awards.

Drawing on this comparison to labor arbitration, the first proposition about employment arbitration decision-making that we will test is that:

*Proposition 1: Employment arbitrators will tend to favor decisions that compromise between the parties.*

A second starting point for thinking about arbitral decision-making tendencies is to compare employment arbitrators to litigation decision-making a step further and consider whether there is likely to be a difference in how arbitrators respond to particular kinds of claims. A common complaint against litigation, particularly cited by business in justifying adoption of arbitration, is that juries are unpredictable, are more sympathetic to consumers and employees than to businesses, and subject to emotional appeals that lead

to extremely large damage awards not justified by the facts of the case.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, arbitrators are professional neutrals and may be less likely to be swayed by rhetoric or emotional appeals. Instead, as experts in the area, arbitrators may be offended by advocates for parties who make overly inflated damage claims. If this is the case, we would expect to see a process in which arbitrators are much less likely to award most of the amount claimed if there was a large initial claim. If accurate, this phenomenon could provide an important incentive for employers concerned about large damage awards from juries to adopt employer-promulgated arbitration procedures. Conversely the assumption that employment arbitrators will be less likely to make very large damage awards may underlie some of the opposition to employment arbitration by plaintiff employee side groups. It suggests the following proposition:

*Proposition 2: Employment arbitrators will tend to disfavor awarding the full amount of very large damage claims, even where liability is found.*

An alternative tendency sometimes claimed for arbitrators relative to the courts is that they will be more likely to award some smaller amount of damages even when liability might not supported on the relevant legal standard. Litigation in the courts is designed to be an all-or-nothing decision-making process on the issue of liability. For example, absent proof of discrimination, a court should deny any liability to an employee on a claim of employment discrimination, regardless of any issue of general fairness in employment decision-making or however the judge or jury may feel about the propriety of the employer's conduct. Arbitrators are traditionally not bound by the same rules of

---

<sup>18</sup> Drahozal, Christopher R. (2004) "Mandatory Arbitration: A Behavioral Analysis of Private Judging" 67 *Law & Contemp. Prob.* 105-132; Sternlight, Jean R. (1996) "Panacea or Corporate Tool? Debunking the Supreme Court's Preference for Binding Arbitration" 74 *Wash. U.L.Q.* 637.

evidence as courts and may not be as narrowly constrained in the factors they consider in their decision-making. To the degree that fairness norms are incorporated into arbitral decision-making in addition to strict legal standards, employment arbitrators may tend to make at least some amount of an award to an employee claimant in cases where there has been unfairness in the employer's decision even if it does not rise to the level of a statutory or contractual violation that would justify awarding the full claim. If there is a tendency of employment arbitrators to award employee complaints some degree of recovery base on fairness norms, then this would tend to make arbitration a more attractive process for employees and their representatives to choose. Conversely, if there is a fear that arbitrators will tend to incorporate fairness norms into their decision-making and award claimants at least some smaller amount even in the absence of full liability, then this may lead some employers to disfavor arbitration.<sup>19</sup> Put alternatively, if litigation can provide employers with more of a full shield against liability than arbitration, then the incentive to use arbitration will be lower. To investigate whether this is true, we test the following proposition:

*Proposition 3: Employment arbitrators will tend to make small awards in favor of employee claimants rather than full deny any liability in cases.*

## **The Data**

For this study, we analyzed employment arbitration case files for the year 2008 made available to us by the American Arbitration Association (AAA). The AAA is the

---

<sup>19</sup> Porter, Nicole B. (2008) "The Perfect Compromise: Bridging the Gap Between At-Will Employment and Just Cause" 87 *Neb. L. Rev.* 62 at 115.

largest arbitration service provider in the employment arbitration field. Many employers explicitly designate the AAA as the service provider in their standard arbitration agreements with employees and incorporate the AAA's employment arbitration rules into their procedures by reference. Use of AAA employment arbitration case files has the advantage of providing a reasonably large data source for analysis. Given its size and prominence in the employment arbitration field, the AAA's cases can be taken as representative of a significant segment of employment arbitration activity.

At the same time, there may be some limitations on generalizability to the whole universe of employment arbitration. The AAA has played a prominent role in debates around employment arbitration and was represented in the task force that developed the Due Process Protocol to establish basic fairness standards for employment arbitration. The AAA's own rules for administration of employment arbitration cases reflect features of the Due Process Protocol. As an organization, the AAA has indicated that it will not administer arbitration cases under procedures that violate its own rules. However employers are also free to craft procedures that designate their own arbitrators and rules and do not make use of any third party arbitration service provider – what are commonly known as 'ad hoc' arbitrations. It is unknown to what degree these ad hoc arbitrations do or do not operate under procedures incorporating similar due process protections to those provided by the AAA rules. As a result, it is certainly possible that our analysis is examining a segment of the employment arbitration field operating under relatively higher fairness protections.

We obtained basic data on all 440 employment arbitration cases administered by the AAA that were awarded and closed during the 2008 calendar year. This included

information on claim and award amounts. We also coded additional information from a sample of 286 arbitration case files. This allowed us to gather more detailed data on these cases, such as the type of legal claim being made and characteristics of the employee involved.

## **Case Characteristics**

### *Agreement and Plaintiff Category*

In analyzing data on employment arbitration cases, it is important to recognize that there are a number of different categories of cases involved. The first distinction to draw is between cases deriving from employer-promulgated procedures and cases deriving from individually-negotiated agreements. Under employer-promulgated procedures, the employer presents the arbitration agreement to the employee, usually at the time of hiring, on a take-it-or-leave-it basis as a term and condition of employment. In this context, standard procedures are designed to cover employees as a group, similar to general work rules or benefit plans. This type of arbitration agreement is a classic adhesive contract. By contrast, under individually-negotiated agreements, arbitration is included as a provision in an individual employment contract whose terms are subject to bargaining between the parties. Whereas most employees may be employed under the standard policies of the employer, individually negotiated contracts are more common amongst executives and employees with highly valued skills and knowledge that give them enhanced individual bargaining power. For these employees, arbitration may have attractions for resolving contractual disputes due its greater speed and confidentiality.

The AAA administers employment arbitration cases deriving from both employer-promulgated procedures and individually-negotiated agreements. Some early studies of employment arbitration included cases from both categories together in their analysis.<sup>20</sup> However subsequent research has indicated that there may be substantial differences between these two categories of cases, producing differences in the case outcomes.<sup>21</sup> In particular, whereas relatively high employee win rates of 50-60 percent were found in samples including cases based on individually-negotiated agreements, employee win rates appear to be much lower under employer-promulgated procedures.<sup>22</sup> One obvious difference is that employees able to individually negotiate their own employment contract are likely to have greater financial resources and sophistication, including better legal representation, in the event that they become involved in a legal conflict with their employer. In addition, they will often be able to bring claims based on the provisions of their individual employment contract, whereas most employers in the U.S. are careful to draft standard employment handbooks and policies so that they do not alter the default American rule of employment-at-will. Given all of these differences, in our analysis we examine cases based on employer-promulgated procedures and individually-negotiated agreements separately.

---

<sup>20</sup> Bingham, Lisa B. (1998). "An Overview of Employment Arbitration in the United States: Law, Public Policy and Data." 23(2) *New Zealand J. of Industrial Relations* 5; Maltby, Lewis L. (1998) "Private Justice: Employment Arbitration and Civil Rights." 30 *Columbia Human Rights Law Rev.* 29.

<sup>21</sup> Eisenberg, Theodore, & Elizabeth Hill (2003) "Arbitration and Litigation of Employment Claims: An Empirical Comparison." 58(4) *Dispute Resolution J.* 44.

<sup>22</sup> Colvin, Alexander J.S. (2008) "Empirical Research on Employment Arbitration: Clarity Amidst the Sound and Fury?" 11(2) *Employee Rights and Employment Policy J.* 405; Colvin, Alexander J.S. (2011). "An Empirical Study of Employment Arbitration: Case Outcomes and Processes." *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 1-23.



The second major distinction in types of cases in employment arbitration is between those involving claims by the employee and those involving claims by the employer. As in other contexts, such as labor arbitration, the typical employment law case is one in which the employee is making some claim of unfair treatment by the employer. Common examples would be claims such as wrongful dismissal, sexual harassment in the workplace or violation of wages and hours laws. However there are also occasional cases in which the employer is making a claim against the employee. Examples of these types of cases include situations where the employer is attempting to recover wages or other payments advanced to the employee or where the employer alleges that the employee has appropriated intellectual property or trade secrets belonging to the employer. Although less common, these cases where the employer is the plaintiff may have different characteristics from those where the employee is the plaintiff and so we examine them separately in our analysis.

Overall in our dataset, there were 320 cases deriving from employer-promulgated procedures, 293 in which the employee was the plaintiff and 27 in which the employer was the plaintiff. There were 117 cases deriving from individually-negotiated agreements, 98 in which the employee was the plaintiff and 19 in which the employer was the plaintiff. Summary statistics for our sample are presented in Table One.

### *Sample Characteristics*

We begin by examining the characteristics of the employees involved in the cases in our sample. In cases based on employer-promulgated procedures, just over half of the employees were male (56.7%), and around a third involved managerial employees

(31.0%) or professionals (35.7%). Most of these cases (81.5%) involved employees whose salary levels were under \$100,000 per year. By contrast, employees in cases deriving from individually-negotiated agreement were much more likely to be male (86.3%), and managers (66.7%) or professionals (69.8%). These employees also tended to be more highly paid, with 58.7% of them making between \$100,000 and \$250,000, and 18.7% making more than \$250,000.

Another difference between cases in the two categories is that AAA rules provide that the employer must pay the arbitrator and administrative fees under employer-promulgated procedures, whereas in cases deriving from individually-negotiated agreements, the agreement can specify how fees are to be split. Reflecting this difference in the rules, in 95% of the cases deriving from employer-promulgated procedures that we examined, the procedure provided that the employer paid 100% of the arbitrator and administrative fees, apart from small employee filing fees equal to standard court filing fees (\$150 or less). By contrast, although in 58% of the cases deriving from individually-negotiated agreements, the employer paid the full arbitrator and administrator fees, in 35% of these cases the fees were split equally between the employer and employee. Beyond the rule difference, the number of fee-splitting arrangements in the individually-negotiated agreement cases likely reflects the greater ability to pay of these higher salary employees.

An interesting characteristic of employment arbitration cases is the degree to which the claims are based on employment discrimination statutes as opposed to contractual or common law claims. This is an important issue in the debates around mandatory arbitration in the U.S., because the key cases such as *Gilmer* and *Circuit City*

focused on the issue of the arbitrability of claims based on employment statutes. Many of the critiques of mandatory arbitration have focused on the question of whether it is appropriate to allow private arbitrators deriving their authority from an employer-promulgated procedure to have decision-making power over statutory employment rights. Some earlier research on employment arbitration suggested that most arbitration claims were not based on discrimination statutes and so these concerns were misplaced.<sup>23</sup> However that research involved samples with larger numbers of cases based on individually-negotiated agreements and relatively few cases based on employer-promulgated procedures. We classified the cases in our sample based on whether or not they included an employment discrimination based claim. Amongst the cases with employee plaintiffs brought under employer-promulgated procedures, 48.4% included a claim of some form of employment discrimination. This result indicates that statute based claims of employment discrimination are a common element in arbitration under employer-promulgated procedures. The differing earlier research results were likely influenced by the experience of arbitration under individually-negotiated agreements, which is much more likely to be based on claims of breach of the individual employment contract. Supporting this interpretation, we found that in our sample amongst cases based on individually-negotiated agreements with employee plaintiffs only 10.2% included claims of employment discrimination, with breach of contract being the basis for most of the claims.

### *Case Outcomes*

---

<sup>23</sup> Eisenberg, Theodore, & Elizabeth Hill (2003) “Arbitration and Litigation of Employment Claims: An Empirical Comparison.” 58(4) *Dispute Resolution J.* 44.

The key outcomes in an arbitration award are whether the plaintiff is successful in establishing that the defendant was at fault and, if so, what amounts of damages are awarded. On the first element, a simple definition of whether the plaintiff won the case is whether liability was established and some amount of damages was awarded. It is certainly possible to use other definitions of plaintiff success, such as looking at whether the plaintiff won a substantial amount of damages in the context of the case. Indeed, we will later examine the issue of the relationship between claim and award amounts. However for a useful starting point, we examine whether the plaintiff won in the sense of establishing some degree of liability and what the damages awarded were. In table one, we report these outcomes by type of case and whether the employer or employee was the plaintiff.

Situations where there is an employee plaintiff under an employer-promulgated procedure are the paradigmatic example in debates around mandatory arbitration, and the largest category of cases, so we examine these first. The employee win rate in these 294 cases was 25.2%. Amongst the cases where the employee established some degree of liability, the mean damages awarded were \$81,835. This also results in a mean damage award across all cases, including those where zero damages were awarded (i.e. there was no liability established) of \$19,966. We were also able to separate out cases that involved employment discrimination cases. Amongst these discrimination based cases, the employee win rate was 18.8% and the mean damage award including the zero damages cases was \$21,871. Compared to the outcomes of litigation in the U.S. courts, these are relatively lower win rates and award amounts. For example, studies have found employee win rates ranging from 36.4% in federal courts to 57% in state courts, with mean damage

awards for successful plaintiffs of \$336,291 in the federal court cases and \$462,307 in the state court cases.<sup>24</sup> However it is also important to recognize that there may be differences in the types of cases that end up in arbitration compared to litigation, which can affect these outcomes.

Outcomes varied substantially by case and plaintiff type. We present a comparison of outcomes based on these two factors in Table Two. In cases with employee plaintiffs under individually-negotiated agreements, the employee win rate was 64.6%, with a mean damage award amongst successful plaintiffs of \$220,376 and a mean award for all plaintiffs (including zero dollar awards) of \$142,465. There are a number of reasons that may explain the greater success of employees in arbitration under individually-negotiated agreements. The substantive basis for their claims may have a naturally stronger grounding in breach of contract arguments deriving from provisions they negotiated to protect their own interests. By contrast, employees under employer-promulgated procedures are more likely to have to frame their claims around harder to prove allegations of discriminatory treatment or the limited exceptions to the employment at will doctrine. Employees under individually-negotiated agreements are also likely to have greater personal financial resources, as supported by our findings of higher salary levels for these workers. This may allow them to retain better legal counsel, increasing their chances of success. Their greater salary levels are also likely to result in larger damage amounts for lost income. All these factors reinforce the advantages of employees under individually-negotiated agreements compared to their compatriots under employer-

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

promulgated procedures. They also indicate the importance of separating these categories in any analysis of employment arbitration.

Cases in which the employer is the plaintiff may also have different characteristics from the more typical case in which the employee is the plaintiff. We find that amongst the small group of cases under employer-promulgated procedures in which the employer was the plaintiff, these employers won 57.1% of their cases, were awarded mean damages of \$39,002 where they were successful and mean damages of \$21,668 across all cases, including those where zero damages were awarded. One likely explanation for the greater win rate of employer than employee plaintiffs under employer-promulgated procedures is that different types of claims are involved in the two groups of cases. It may be relatively easier for an employer to establish that an employee was overpaid wages or commissions or breached an employment contract than it is for an employee plaintiff to establish that a manager had a discriminatory motive for differential treatment of the employee.

One factor that may be associated with differences in outcomes across cases is the characteristics of arbitrator. In Table Three, we explore two arbitrator characteristics that might be associated with differences in arbitration outcome. We first look at the effect of arbitrator membership in the National Academy of Arbitrators (NAA), the leading professional association of labor arbitrators. Membership in the NAA might be associated with differences in arbitral outcomes if NAA members tended to import into the employment arbitration setting some of the principles or decision-making tendencies from the labor arbitration setting in which its members predominantly practice. This could produce a greater likelihood of favor employees, reflecting the more typical just

cause standard applied in labor arbitration dismissal cases, or perhaps a lower likelihood of award large amounts of compensatory or punitive damages, which are not typically available in labor arbitration. We see little evidence of any effect of NAA membership on arbitral outcomes. Plaintiff win rates and award amounts are relatively similar between NAA member and non-member arbitrators. The most noteworthy difference is that NAA members tend to command higher fees in employment arbitration, on average \$16,641 compared to an average fee of \$12,448 for non-NAA members.

We also investigated whether arbitrator gender had any impact on arbitral outcomes. There is a long tradition of research on decision-maker gender effects on dispute resolution outcome that has looked at both judicial and labor arbitration forums, which has produced mixed findings.<sup>25</sup> We find that female arbitrators are less likely to find in favor of employees than male arbitrators, with a plaintiff win rate of only 20.0% for female arbitrators compared to 27.5% for male arbitrators. This is a surprising finding, which was not suggested by the prior literature. Our sample included a relatively high proportion of female arbitrators (37.1%) compared to past research, which included relatively few female judges or female labor arbitrators. One possibility that needs to be investigated further is whether there are systematic differences in the professional backgrounds of female arbitrators. For example, are female employment arbitrators more likely to come from backgrounds representing management? Do they differ in experience levels from their male counterparts? Given the intriguing findings in this study, further investigation of these questions is warranted.

---

<sup>25</sup> Bemmels, Brian. (1990). "Gender Effects in Grievance Arbitration." *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 29(3), pp. 513-525.

## **Arbitral Decision-Making Process Results**

The first arbitral decision-making proposition we examine is whether there is a ‘split-the-baby’ type favoring of compromise decisions in employment arbitration decision-making. There are a number of different potential indicators of such a tendency that we can look at. First, we can look at whether plaintiff win rates suggest an attempt to approximate a 50/50 split between the parties over time. So for example, a labor arbitrator hoping to seek future selection by both union and management might tend towards balancing out over time how many cases are won by each side. However, if we examine the plaintiff win rates reported in table 1, we see little evidence of this type of a split-the-baby approach by employment arbitrators. In cases under employer-promulgated procedures where the employee is the plaintiff, employees win 25.2% of the time and employers win 74.8% of the time, which does not suggest an attempt to split the outcomes between the parties. Cases employer plaintiffs under employer-promulgated procedures were closer to an even split, with employers winning 57.1% of the time and employees 42.9% of the time. When we look at cases deriving from individually-negotiated agreements, we again see a lack of evidence of 50/50 splitting with plaintiffs winning almost 2/3rds of the cases, whether brought by employees (64.6% win rate) or employers (66.7% win rate).

Second, we can investigate whether the amounts awarded in cases tend to reflect compromise awards. To analyze this question, we looked at the relationship between claim amounts and award amounts in the cases in our dataset. We calculated the percentage of the initial claim that the plaintiff received in the award. For simplicity of presentation, we group the percentages of claim received into six categories: zero



recovery; 1-20%; 21-40%; 41-60%; 61-80%; and >81%. We then tabulated the numbers of cases in each of these categories (see Table Four) and graphed the results (see Figure One). If the arbitrators were engaging in splitting-the-baby, we would expect to see a more normal shaped distribution, with most of the cases clustering in the middle categories. What we find instead in the data is a U-shaped distribution, with most of the cases clustering at either end of the distribution. For cases brought under employer-promulgated procedures, the largest category are cases with zero recovery, but the second largest category is cases where the plaintiff recovered over 80% of the amount claimed. The most sparsely populated categories are those where the plaintiffs recovered between 20 and 80% of the amount claimed. Only 17 of 196 cases (or 8.7%) fell in these categories. The distribution of percentages recovered in cases deriving from individually-negotiated agreements also form a U-shaped distribution (see Figure Two), with the lowest and highest percentage recovery categories containing the largest number of cases. The categories between 20 and 80% recovered are also the most sparsely populated in this distribution.

What these results indicate is that there is a lack of any evidence that arbitrators engage in split-the-baby type compromise decision-making in employment arbitration. Rather than look to labor and interest arbitration based models to understand employment arbitration decision-making, it may make more sense to compare it to the decision-making process in the courts. Judicial decision-making generally involves two distinct phases, determination of liability and determination of damages. Initially the court determines whether there is any legal liability by applying the appropriate legal standard. If there is determined to be liability, then a separate determination is made of what the

damages suffered were and an appropriate award is made. In neither of these stages is there a process of balancing the positions of the two parties as is alleged to occur with split-the-baby arbitral decision-making. The picture we have seen in the data of employment arbitration decision-making much more closely resembles this judicial model than the proposition that arbitrators look to compromise between the positions of the two sides.

The second arbitral decision-making proposition was that employment arbitrators would tend to disfavor very large damage claims. We can test this argument by examining the distribution of percentages recovered for cases with large claims. Table Three presents the same categories of percentages recovered limited to only those cases where plaintiff claimed over \$500,000 in damages. Unlike the U-shaped distribution of percentages recovered we found overall, for cases with large damage claims we find a skewed distribution tapering off at the higher categories (see Figure Three). The largest categories are still zero recovery, but for both the employer-promulgated procedure and individually-negotiated agreement distributions, the second largest category of awards is where the plaintiff recovered between 0 and 20% of the amount claimed. Whereas employment arbitrators do not appear to split-the-baby, this evidence suggests that they do tend to be less likely to grant the full amount on larger damage claims, supporting the second proposition about arbitral decision-making.

The third arbitral decision-making proposition was that employment arbitrators would tend to make some small award in favor of many claimants rather than fully denying liability. Put alternatively, the idea here was that if you go to arbitration, the arbitrator is going to tend to want to give you something rather than entirely rejecting

your claim. Our results do not provide much support for this proposition. There are relatively few small award cases. For example, the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of the distribution of awards in cases brought by employees under employer-promulgated procedures is \$12,770, meaning that only a quarter of awards are smaller than that amount. Indeed, most awards from this type of case were over \$39,609 (the median award amount).

## **Conclusion**

The rise of employment arbitration represents a major institutional innovation in the governance of employment relations in the United States. Rather than simply a development of new ADR techniques to manage conflict, employment arbitration is developing a new institutional structure for how disputes between employers and employees will be resolved. To help understand this new institution of nonunion employment relations, we gathered and analyzed data from arbitration cases administered by the AAA, a leading provider of arbitration services. Our key conclusions are that the characteristics and outcomes of arbitration cases are strongly influenced by the nature of the contractual relationships underlying arbitration and that the outcomes of arbitration reflect a decision-making process more similar to that of litigation than the split-the-baby type compromise processes sometimes ascribed to arbitrators.

We find major differences in outcomes of arbitration depending on whether the case originated from an employer-promulgated procedure or from an individually-negotiated agreement. Arbitration cases deriving from individually-negotiated agreements tend to involve higher paid professional or managerial employees making contractual claims and result in relatively high employee win rates, larger damage awards,

and more compromise awards. Arbitration cases deriving from employer-promulgated procedures tend to involve lower paid employees, commonly are based on statutory claims of employment discrimination, and result in relatively fewer employee wins, lower damages, and fewer compromise awards.

When we look at decision-making processes in employment arbitration, we see more resemblance to a legal process of determining liability and damages than to a labor or interest arbitration process of balancing the positions of the parties through compromise decisions and evening out of the success rates of each side. To the degree that there is a particular effect of employment arbitration decision-making, we find it is more one of reducing large claim amounts rather than splitting-the-baby between the two sides. In addition, we find that there is little evidence that arbitrators tend to hand out small token awards in cases rather than simply denying liability. What this suggests to us is that while it is important for labor relations researchers to bring their research tools to bear on the new processes of nonunion employment relations, they should also be careful not to assume that the lessons learned in the unionized arena transfer easily into the nonunion realm.

Table One  
Summary Statistics for Full Sample and by Agreement Type

	Full Sample	Employer-Promulgated: Employee Plaintiff	Individually-Negotiated: Employee Plaintiff
# of Cases	440	294	99
Claim Amount (Mean)	\$1,201,640	\$833,884	\$1,775,970
Claim Amount (Median)	\$190,000	\$167,880	\$233,427
Plaintiff Win (%)	37.8%	25.2%	64.6%
Award Amount (Mean – wins only)	\$137,869	\$81,835	\$220,376
Award Amount (Median – wins only)	\$47,384	\$36,609	\$75,000
Award Amount (Mean – all cases)	\$51,344	\$19,967	\$142,465
Partial Award (20-80% of claim)	15.6%	7.9%	26.0%
Arbitrator Fee (Mean)	\$14,875	\$12,657	\$19,375
Discrimination Claims (%)	34.1%	48.9%	6.9%
Employment Standards (%)	3.6%	4.8%	1.3%
NAA Arbitrator (%)	13.2%	13.6%	12.2%
Female Arbitrator (%)	37.1%	37.1%	32.7%
Female Plaintiff (%)	35.7%	45.9%	11.2%
Female Plaintiff's Attorney (%)	19.8%	23.2%	10.1%
Employee Self-Represented (%)	25.5%	30.6%	10.1%

Table Two  
Case Outcomes by Plaintiff and Agreement Type

	Plaintiff Win Rate	Average Damages (plaintiff wins)	Average Damages (all cases)
Employer-Promulgated Procedures: Employee Plaintiff	25.2% (n=294)	\$81,835 (n=71)	\$19,967 (n=294)
Employer-Promulgated Procedures: Employer Plaintiff	57.1% (n=28)	\$39,002 (n=15)	\$21,668 (n=27)
Individually-Negotiated Agreements: Employee Plaintiff	64.6% (n=99)	\$220,376 (n=64)	\$142,465 (n=99)
Individually-Negotiated Agreements: Employer Plaintiff	66.7% (n=18)	\$152,947 (n=12)	\$101,964 (n=18)

Table Three  
Case Outcomes by Arbitrator Characteristics  
 (Employer-Promulgated/Employee-Plaintiff Cases)

	NAA Member	Non-NAA Member	Male Arbitrator	Female Arbitrator
	(N=40)	(N=254)	(N=193)	(N=100)
Claim Amount (Mean)	\$1,137,885	\$781,884	\$824,354	\$868,363
Claim Amount (Median)	\$120,313	\$185,333	\$180,000	\$136,512
Plaintiff Win (%)	25.0%	25.2%	27.5%	20.0%
Award Amount (Mean – wins only)	\$96,481	\$80,234	\$83,400	\$78,735
Award Amount (Mean – all cases)	\$18,253	\$20,216	\$22,588	\$14,462
Partial Award (20-80% of claim)	7.7%	7.9%	8.3%	7.1%
Arbitrator Fee (Mean)	\$16,641	\$12,029	\$12,723	\$12,448

Table Four  
Proportions of Claim Awarded

Percentage of Claim Awarded	Employer-Promulgated Procedures	Individually-Negotiated Agreements
Zero	119	38
>0-20%	21	17
20-40%	6	13
40-60%	5	9
60-80%	6	9
80+%	39	25



Table Five  
Proportions of Claim Awarded for  
Cases with Claims Over \$500,000

Percentage of Claim Awarded	Employer-Promulgated Procedures	Individually-Negotiated Agreements
Zero	33	14
>0-20%	7	8
20-40%	1	6
40-60%	1	1
60-80%	0	2
80+%	1	2

Figure One  
Percentage of Claims Awarded in  
Employer-Promulgated Procedure Cases

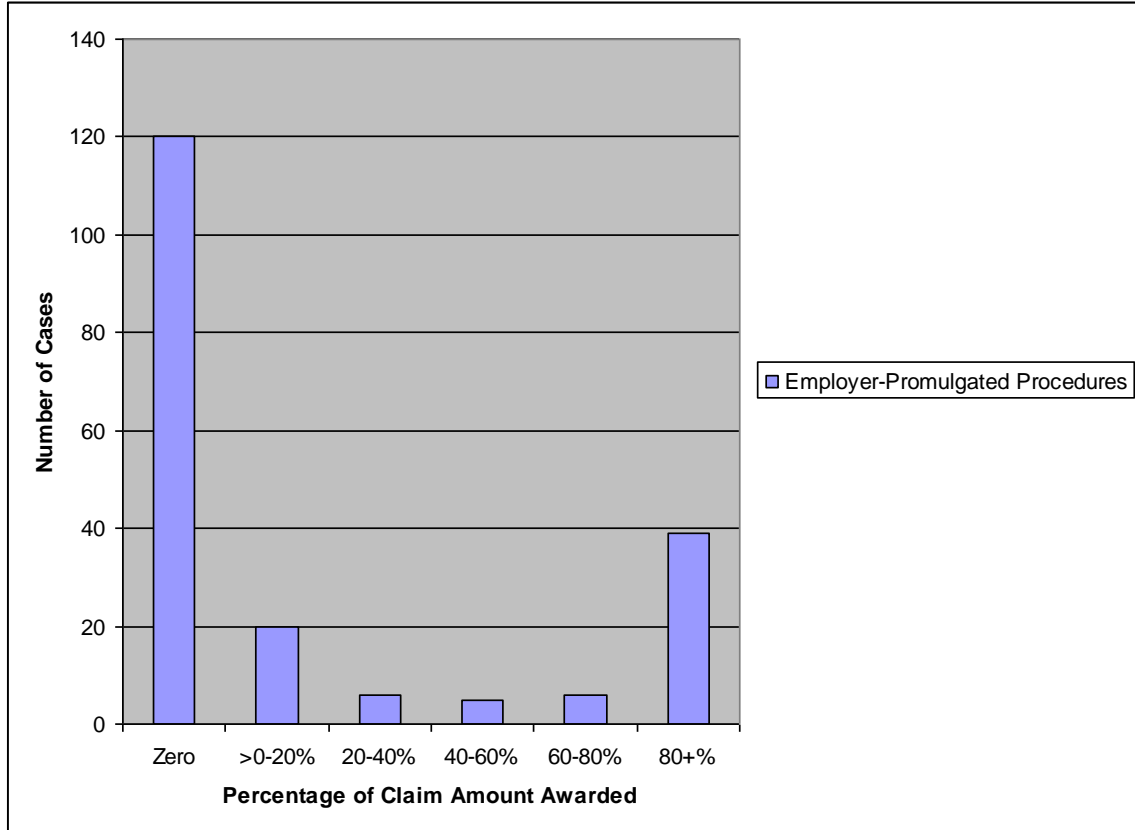


Figure Two  
Percentage of Claims Awarded in  
Individually-Negotiated Agreement Cases

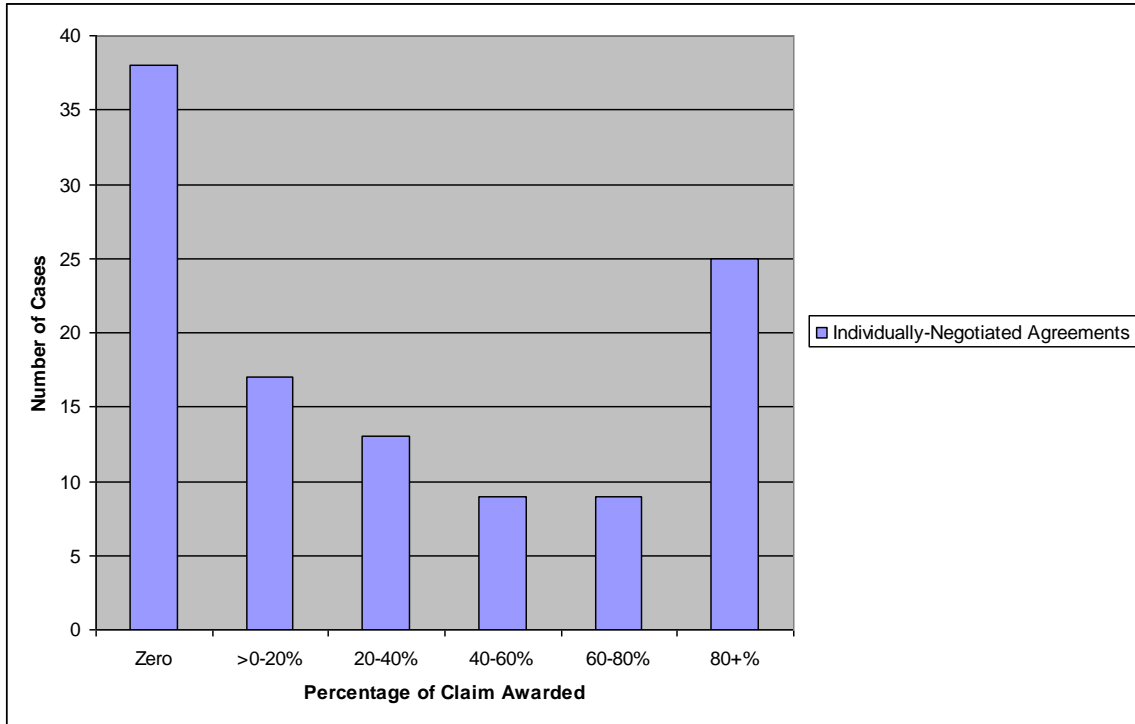


Figure Three  
Percentage of Claims Awarded in  
Cases with Claims over \$500,000

