

Popular, but not Pivotal: Why the Minimum Wage Isn't Moving Voters



David de la Fuente

Political Analyst

[@dpdela Fuente](https://twitter.com/dpdela Fuente)



Ryan Bhandari

Policy Advisor, Economic Program

[@rbhandari3](https://twitter.com/rbhandari3)

In the [2016 DNC platform](#), raising the minimum wage is the very first economic promise of the party. Only after seven other promises, including revitalizing the Postal Service, did the platform mention the need to create good-paying jobs.

Raising the minimum wage is a popular stance with both Democratic primary and general election voters. It is also important to do economically, if carried out the right way, and it belongs in any agenda that addresses working class issues. Hillary Clinton, in her race, mentioned raising the minimum wage repeatedly, as did many Democrats. But it didn't appear to sway voters and we wanted to find out if that was indeed true and why.

We found:

- 1) A minimum wage hike is indeed popular.
- 2) However, it didn't elect Democrats. Voters were very comfortable supporting a minimum wage hike and a candidate who opposed a hike on the same ballot.

3) Low salience among voters may indicate voter skepticism and/or voter indifference about the benefits of raising the minimum wage.

We conclude that raising the minimum wage in a responsible way is the right policy choice that can improve the lives of millions of people. Democrats should continue to support state, local, and federal efforts. But it is also not a top of mind voting issue for most people and to attract voters on the economy, job creation, health care security, and creating broad-based opportunity in a digital economy should be higher priorities.

1. Raising the Minimum Wage is Popular

It has been almost a decade since the federal minimum wage has increased. At \$7.25 per hour, Americans feel it's time for an increase. We have our own proposal that would raise the minimum wage to its highest level in inflation-adjusted dollars.

A 2016 YouGov Poll found that 78% of voters favored raising the minimum wage. Majorities supported both a national minimum wage of \$10.10 and \$12.00 (though not \$15.). Even a majority of Republicans supported a raise to \$10.10. So it is clear that Americans are open to raising the minimum wage to some higher level given the opportunity.

Advocates of raising the minimum wage have also said that it's a top voting issue among the public. As NBC put it during the 2016 election, the minimum wage ballot initiatives "could be Democrats' secret weapon." But those hopes always fail to live up to expectations once the polls close.

The combination of the economic justice arguments behind the minimum wage and the contention that is a top voting issue has thrust this policy to the very top of Democrats' economic narrative and agenda. In fact, in our round of focus groups in mid-2017, we found that the only economic message that people could attribute to the Democratic Party was raising the minimum wage.

2. However, Many Voters Who Support Raising the Minimum Wage Vote for Candidates Who Don't

While voters want to raise the minimum wage, there is evidence that it isn't the type of issue that determines their votes for candidates.

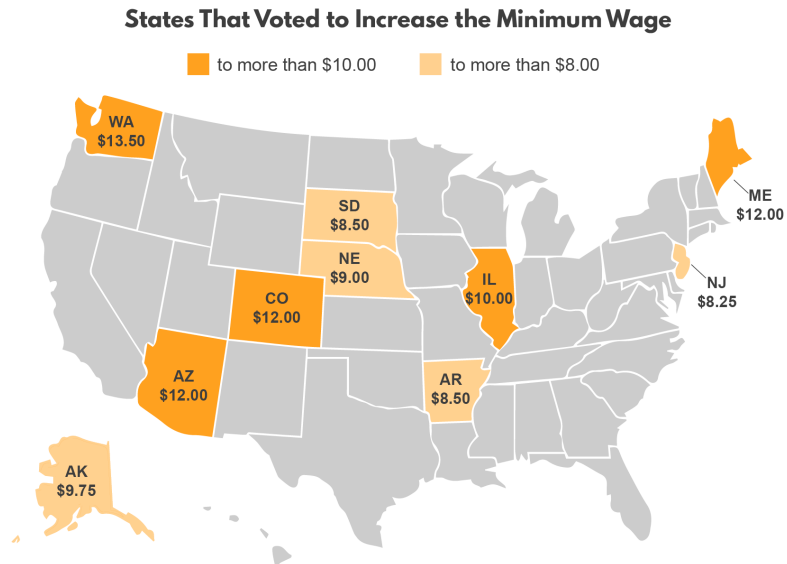
There have been statewide ballot measures about the minimum wage during the 2013, 2014, and 2016 elections. In each one, raising the minimum wage has won. This is true in blue states, purple states, and even red states.

Ballot initiatives to raise the minimum wage passed in Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Maine, Nebraska, New Jersey, South Dakota, and Washington. These 10 states averaged 60% support in favor of raising the minimum wage. Though, it should be noted that only Washington was a measure that pushed the minimum wage past \$12.00, and that was to \$13.50. Arkansas and South Dakota raised their minimum wage to \$8.50 while Arizona and Colorado both went to \$12.00. If we look at just how Democrats performed on the same ballot as the minimum wage ballot measure, we see that while raising the minimum wage passed with an average of 60% support while the average Democrat running for the highest offices in that state received 43% of the vote—a 17 point drop-off.

Voters just aren't making the jump between supporting raising the minimum wage and supporting Democratic candidates. Looking back at the ballot measures above, there is little evidence that Democratic candidates benefitted from a minimum wage initiative being on the same ballot.

Comparing the cycle of the ballot measure with the immediate preceding similar cycle (think 2016 and 2012, or 2014 and 2010), there wasn't any evidence of an increase in Democratic share of the vote, or increase in voter turnout. In fact, there was a small (less than 2%) decrease across the 10 states and 80 elections, and an identical voter turnout percentage based on voting eligible population (53%). Of course, we cannot control for the bigger factors in the cycle,

but this points to a lack of definitive evidence for correlation between voters wanting to raise the minimum wage and increasing Democratic performance and turnout.



3. Low Salience May Be a Sign of Voter Indifference or Skepticism.

Why is this popular policy that is closely aligned with Democrats and consistently opposed by Republicans not moving voters toward supportive candidates?

The first reason seems to be indifference. When asked which issue was their single most important priority, *only 2% of voters cited raising the minimum wage, we found in a 2015 poll.*

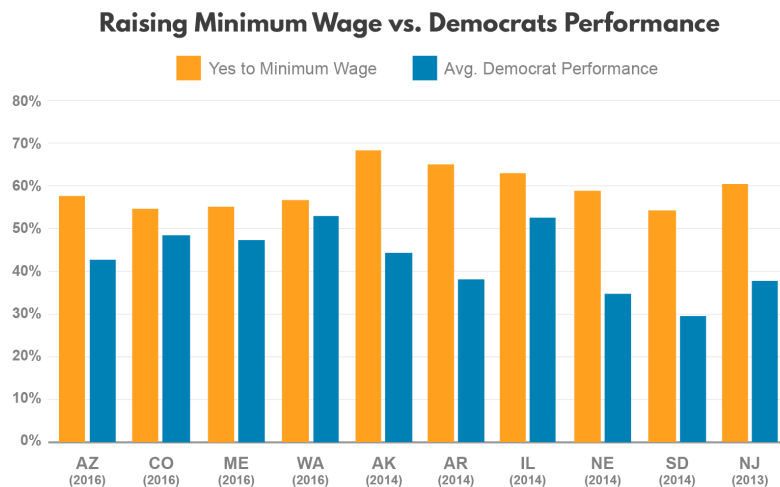
Currently, 1.8 million Americans have jobs that pay at or below the federal minimum wage, which is just *over 2% of workers.*

Nationwide, about 22.3% of households have an income less than \$25,000 a year, which could be a rough approximation of those that could see the most benefit of a minimum wage increase into the \$10–12 range. It's worth noting that in the 104 "Red to Blue" and "Majority Makers" districts that the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has targeted as competitive races for the midterms, 19% of households make less than \$25,000. These are big numbers, but the large majority of households, including two-thirds of those in swing districts, have a middle-class income range.

These voters seem not to be moved by promises around the minimum wage. We saw this in 2016, when exit polls showed Hillary Clinton, a proponent of a national \$12.00 minimum wage, won voters who make under \$30,000 by 13 points, but lost with voters who make between \$50,000 and \$200,000. Democrats can't win in most places without winning voters in that range. In fact, Clinton lost Arizona as the state was easily passing a \$12.00 minimum wage measure on the same ballot.

It may also be the case that a fight for a \$15 minimum wage strikes a sour note with voters in low-cost-of-living states where a wage of that level is near or above the state median. Fourteen states had *median* hourly wages between \$14 and \$16 per hour in 2016. Voters there may feel that raising the minimum wage to \$15 diminishes the value of their work.

These factors indicate that while raising the minimum wage is popular with voters, there are limitations to its appeal. Democrats cannot run on it as a centerpiece without a broader economic message that speaks to more people.



Conclusion

Democrats should support raising the minimum wage because when done responsibly it will benefit a great number of people. But don't expect it to sway voters and excite people if this is the centerpiece of an economic agenda. Democrats need a wider agenda and message that addresses voters' primary concern: will there be a place for them and their kids in this new economy. A minimum wage hike should be a piece

of that agenda, but it is not the magic policy idea that drives voters to the polls or to support Democrats.

TOPICS

21ST CENTURY JOBS 14
