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A Moral Minimum Wage

The Democrats should start framing economic justice as a moral issue.

Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele December 6, 2004 | This article appeared in the December 20, 2004 edition of *The Nation*.

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In two so-called "red" states that favored George W. Bush on November 2, voters also overwhelmingly approved ballot measures to raise the minimum wage by one dollar, to \$6.15 an hour. In Florida, where Bush beat John Kerry by 381,000 votes, voters favored the minimum wage increase by 3.1 million votes (a lopsided 71.3 percent to 28.7 percent), despite the opposition of the state's business community and Governor Jeb Bush. In Nevada, Bush narrowly beat Kerry by 21,500 votes, but voters backed the wage boost by 293,328 votes (68.3 percent to 31.6 percent).

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The minimum-wage measures won in every county in both states. In conservative Escambia and Santa Rosa counties in the Florida Panhandle, where military bases and retired military veterans dominate the political culture, more than two-thirds of voters supported the wage boost, about the same margins they gave Bush. In Nevada's richest county, Douglas, near the Lake Tahoe resort area, where Bush garnered 63.5 percent of the vote, 61.5 percent of voters supported raising the minimum wage.

Obviously, many Floridians and Nevadans, including many middle-class voters (and certainly some evangelicals), who voted for Bush also voted to raise the minimum wage. Both states also saw a significant increase in turnout among low-income and working-class voters, thanks to grassroots voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns by coalitions of progressive groups.

"The minimum-wage campaign brought a lot of people out to vote who otherwise might have stayed home," explained Brian Kettenring, an organizer for ACORN, a community group that spearheaded the Florida effort. "Most of those new voters probably voted for Kerry, which narrowed Bush's margin. But we also found that lots of swing voters, who weren't sure how they were going to vote for President, enthusiastically supported raising the minimum wage."

But, although Democrats and their allies mobilized an unprecedented get-out-the-vote operation, they were outsmarted and out-hustled by Republicans. Kettenring believes that Kerry might have taken more votes away from Bush in Florida if he had embraced the minimum-wage campaign, as many labor and progressive activists urged him to do. But he inexplicably ignored the issue. It is imperative that Democrats and progressives start a nationwide debate that frames economic justice as

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In the next four years—and beyond—progressives must create the political space for the president to represent the majority of Americans.

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Bob Fulkerson, director of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada, says that the extensive door-to-door field operations on behalf of the minimum-wage increase by unions, community groups and environmental organizations increased voter turnout in target districts, accounting not only for the wage-increase victory but also

for the Democrats' picking up three seats in the State Assembly and one seat in the State Senate. "The issue tugged at people's heartstrings," Fulkerson said. "They saw it as a basic matter of fairness."

Democrats and progressives are once again going through a wrenching self-evaluation about why they lost the White House again and how they can build a majority coalition to win it back. The minimum-wage victories in Florida and Nevada are a political neon sign blinking brightly. In January, when Bush is sworn in for a second term, the array of people and groups who worked to elect John Kerry (unions, environmentalists, community-organizing networks, civil rights groups, disaffected millionaires and religious organizations) should announce a nationwide moral crusade to raise the national minimum wage to the official poverty level—\$9.50 an hour—which translates to \$19,000 a year.

It has already become conventional wisdom that President Bush won a second term by defending the "moral" values derived from traditional religious teachings. According to a postelection analysis written by veteran pollster Stan Greenberg and political consultant James Carville, "downscale voters" (rural, blue-collar and non-college educated) responded to a conservative "cultural surge" toward the end of the election and tilted toward Bush.

But isn't it a moral issue when more than 36 million Americans live in poverty and more than 40 million people in the wealthiest country in the world lack health insurance? Many major religious denominations support raising the minimum wage. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops says that Catholic social teaching regards work as a reflection of our human dignity, and that receiving poverty wages is an affront to individual self-respect.

And isn't it immoral that Congress—which has given itself a cost-of-living pay raise for the past five years in a row—has allowed the federal minimum wage to lose its purchasing power, so that minimum-wage workers today are worse off now than they have been in decades? At its peak in 1968, the minimum wage was worth the equivalent of almost \$7 an hour today. That was also the last year that the minimum wage was above the nation's poverty line. The effect of the last increase in the federal minimum wage, to \$5.15 in 1997, has been completely eroded by inflation. That figure (which equals \$10,700 a year) is now less than one-third of the average hourly wage of American workers, the lowest level since 1949. If the federal minimum wage were increased to just \$7 an hour, at least 7.4 million workers would receive a wage boost. If the minimum wage were pegged at \$9.50, millions more would be lifted out of poverty. The largest group of beneficiaries would be children, whose parents would have more money for rent, food, clothing and other basic necessities.

Business leaders still trot out economists to claim that raising the minimum wage will destroy jobs and hurt small businesses. But the evidence, based on studies of the effects of past increases in both the federal and state minimum-wage levels (twelve states have minimum wages higher than the federal level), shows otherwise. Because the working poor spend everything they earn, every penny of a minimum-wage increase goes back into the economy, increasing consumer demand and adding at least as many jobs as are lost. Most employers actually gain, absorbing the increase through decreased absenteeism, lower recruiting and training costs, higher productivity and increased worker morale.

The Democrats should give right-wing Republicans a taste of their own tactics. In a mere two

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Congress, legislators and statewide officials who, as writer Thomas Frank, author of *What's the Matter With Kansas?*, suggests, "talk Jesus" when they're running for election but "walk corporate" once they're in office.

Let's put President Bush and his Congressional allies, who gave the richest Americans a huge tax break, in the position of explaining that a nurse's aide with two kids can raise a family on \$5.15/hour or that a worker in a poultry plant doesn't deserve a wage boost.

In addition to a national campaign targeted directly at Congress, ACORN and its labor allies are talking about mounting grassroots initiatives to boost the minimum wage in several key states in 2006 where Republican members of Congress, senators and state legislators are politically vulnerable. The strategy is designed to increase turnout among poor and working-class voters and to provide Democratic candidates with a clear economic justice issue. By doing so, they might also reach some of the God-fearing, church-going white Protestant males who live barely above the poverty line but give their votes to Republicans.

Those who insist on pointing out the widening economic divide in the United States are invariably accused by conservatives of fomenting "class warfare." Well, perhaps a bit of class warfare is just what's needed. There are thousands of new progressive activists who have emerged from this presidential election ready for the next battle. Engaging in a vigorous fight to raise our meager minimum wage is clearly the morally right thing to do. But it may also be the politically astute thing for Democrats to do.

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