
Waging Victory

JOHN ATLAS NOVEMBER 10, 2006

On November 7, voters in six states -- Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, and Ohio -- approved measures to raise state minimum wage levels by \$1 to \$1.70 an hour and index them to inflation. These initiatives not only put more money into the pockets of low-income workers, they also increased voter turnout among urban and working class voters in key states, especially Missouri and Montana, where Democratic candidates for U.S. Senate won narrow victories that put the Democrats in control of both houses of Congress.

The key sponsors of the minimum wage initiatives -- labor unions and the community organizing group ACORN -- view these victories as stepping-stones to getting the new Democratic-controlled Congress and the Bush administration to support a significant increase in the federal minimum wage. The minimum wage proponents also consider the coalitions they forged to mobilize voters around the minimum wage initiatives as building blocks for an even stronger grassroots effort in 2008.

In Missouri, Proposition B -- which will increase the state's minimum wage from the current federal base of \$5.15 an hour to \$6.50 and index it to inflation -- passed in every county, winning 76 percent of the statewide vote. The measure was supported by all age groups and people in all income levels, **according** to an exit poll. Four-fifths of voters earning less than \$50,000 supported raising the minimum wage, and almost three-quarters of those earning over \$50,000 voted in favor. It will boost the minimum wage for at least 256,000 Missouri workers.

At the same time, Missouri Democrat Claire McCaskill narrowly defeated the incumbent, Republican Jim Talent, in one of the nation's most closely contested Senate races. McCaskill won by a margin of less than 2 percentage points. The grassroots get-out-the-vote effort mounted by ACORN and labor unions on behalf of the minimum wage initiative helped put McCaskill over the top. McCaskill enthusiastically supported the wage hike, while Talent took no official position.

According to Lenny Jones, director of the SEIU Missouri State Council and chair of the Give Missourians a Raise committee, early polls showed that 94 percent of "Democratic drop-off" voters -- who voted in the 2004 presidential election but didn't vote in the mid-term election two years earlier -- not only supported a minimum wage increase but ranked it higher than the Senate race or an initiative to support stem cell research as a decisive factor in whether they'd vote.

The campaign focused on increasing voter turnout in the two major urban areas of the state, St. Louis and Kansas City. Proponents spent over \$2 million, but almost none of it on TV or radio advertising. Instead, it focused on what Jones called the "ground game," recruiting union staff and rank-and-file members, ACORN activists, and other volunteers to gather signatures, staff phone banks, and hit the streets.

"We knocked on over 500,000 doors during the campaign -- over 100,000 on election day alone," said Jones. "We had 700 people doing get-out-the-vote."

In the St. Louis and Kansas City metro areas, voter turnout was higher this year than during the last midterm election four years ago, when Talent defeated Democratic incumbent Jean Carnahan. McCaskill also garnered a larger proportion of the vote there than Carnahan had. In St. Louis County, for example, McCaskill beat Talent by about 46,000 votes. Four years earlier, Carnahan led Talent there by only 15,000 votes.

Even in rural areas, where McCaskill spent most of her campaign effort, her support for the minimum wage resonated with voters, noted Jack Cardetti, spokesperson for the Missouri Democratic Party. "The Prop B campaign changed the conversation throughout the state," he explained. "It was about the economy. It helped Democrats differentiate themselves from

Republicans, who looked out of touch because they opposed raising the minimum wage."

Indeed, in both campaigns debates where McCaskill was able to ask her opponent one question, she chose to discuss the minimum wage issue and Talent's opposition to increasing it. "She had Talent on the run on this issue," Cardetti observed.

In its post-election editorial, the *Springfield News-Leader*, which had endorsed Talent but also Proposition B, perhaps summed it up best. "When more than 75 percent of the state approves of something during a big turnout, it's not a Democrat issue or a Republican issue. It's not even a landslide or a mandate. It's a movement."

In Montana, voters passed Initiative 151 by a 73 percent to 27 percent margin. It raises the state minimum wage to \$6.15 and requires annual cost-of-living increases. The overwhelming support for the initiative, led by the state's labor movement, helped contribute to Democrat John Tester's cliffhanger victory over incumbent Senator Conrad Burns. During his campaign, Tester emphasized to voters his past support for a minimum wage hike and Burns's long history of opposition to such measures in the Senate.

Similarly in Ohio, 65 percent of voters approved Issue 2, which will boost the state's minimum wage to \$6.85 an hour. The increase is expected to benefit 720,000 workers. "I'm shouting for joy!" said Yvonne Jackson of ACORN's Cleveland chapter. She was one of the more than 1,000 Ohio ACORN members, volunteers, and canvassers who spent election day talking to voters in low and middle-income urban neighborhoods about Issue 2. In the course of the Ohio campaign, ACORN knocked on almost 500,000 doors. Ohio ACORN also helped 116,366 people register to vote this year.

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"We took action because the people of Ohio knew that raising the minimum wage is the right thing to do, because hard work deserves fair pay," said Mary Keith, Ohio ACORN's state board chair. ACORN gained endorsements of Issue 2 by the city councils in Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus, and Dayton. Meanwhile,



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in the Buckeye State's Senate race, Ohio Congressman Sherrod Brown won a decisive 55 percent to 45 percent victory over two-term incumbent Mike DeWine. During the campaign, Brown hammered DeWine for his consistent opposition to a minimum wage hike, pointing out that since entering the Senate, DeWine had voted to kill or delay at least nine attempts to increase the federal minimum wage. Boxed into a corner, and able to read the public opinion polls showing

Ohioans' views on the matter, DeWine changed his tune in mid-campaign, pledging to support a federal wage hike -- but his turnaround came too late.

Arizonans approved Proposition 202 with 66 percent of the vote. It will give an estimated 345,000 workers, about 13 percent of the private sector work force, a raise to \$6.75 an hour. In Colorado, Amendment 42, which boosts the minimum wage to \$6.85 for 138,000 workers, garnered support from 53 percent of voters. Voters in Nevada endorsed a \$1 increase in the state minimum wage -- to \$6.15 an hour -- by a 69 percent to 31 percent margin.

The key proponents of the minimum wage strategy around the country include ACORN, the AFL-CIO and its state affiliates, SEIU, the United Food and Commercial Workers, the National Education Association, Jobs with Justice, and a variety of church groups.

For ACORN, these ballot campaigns culminate two years of work to collect signatures, place the initiatives on statewide ballots, mobilize public opinion, register voters, and get them to the polls on election day. The group, which has chapters in 110 cities in 37 states, tested the strategy in November 2004 in Florida. Voters there 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 addition to the six minimum wage victories on November 7, the legislatures in another six states -- California, Arkansas, Michigan, North Carolina, and Florida -- raised their state

minimum wages early this year. As a result, 28 states and the District of Columbia have now passed legislation or approved ballot initiatives raising their state minimums above the federal minimum. Several of them -- including all six that passed Tuesday as well as Washington, Vermont, Florida, and Oregon -- include cost-of-living adjustments, which require the state minimum wages to rise with inflation. By January, a dozen states will have minimums topping \$7 an hour.

The success of these state-level battles now gives a boost to the Democrats in Congress who've been frustrated for years by unsuccessful efforts to raise the federal wage. The federal minimum has been stuck at \$5.15 an hour since 1997 -- its lowest amount, in inflation-adjusted dollars, in over 50 years. At its peak in 1968, the federal minimum wage was worth almost \$8 an hour in today's dollars. To raise the national minimum wage to the official poverty level would require increasing it to \$9.50 an hour.

Nancy Pelosi, who will be Speaker of the House in January, has pledged to hike the federal minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour as one of the Democrats' first acts after taking control of the House and Senate. Some unions, community organizing groups, and policy experts believe that with the Democrats now in a stronger position in Congress, they should not only push to raise the federal minimum wage to \$7.25, but also fight to include a pathbreaking cost of living adjustment, so that inflation doesn't continue to erode the purchasing power of the minimum wage.

"That's a basic issue of fairness," said Lenny Jones, the Missouri SEIU leader. "They shouldn't settle for anything less."

John Atlas, president of the National Housing Institute, is writing a book about ACORN. Peter Dreier teaches politics at Occidental College and is coauthor of Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the 21st Century and The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City.

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