

Secret weapon in race for governor

By Peter Dreier and John Atlas/ Philadelphia Inquirer

Most pundits predict that Gov. Christie will win reelection by a landslide. But they have not factored in the election's sleeping giant: a ballot measure to raise the state's minimum wage.

If liberals and Democrats want to defeat Christie, they must target "infrequent" voters who would be eager to vote to increase jobs and give themselves a raise. Those voters are disproportionately low-income, minority, and young. They often don't believe that elections make a difference, but they would have a big stake in raising the minimum wage by a dollar an hour, to \$8.25. If citizens' groups and Democrats can get them to the polls, they are likely to vote for Christie's opponent, Barbara Buono, who strongly supports raising the minimum wage.

After Christie vetoed a minimum-wage hike, Democrats in the Legislature countered by putting a \$1 increase on the November ballot. Raising the minimum wage is extremely popular not only among Democrats, but also independents and even Republicans, nationwide and in New Jersey. A Rutgers-Eagleton Institute poll in June found that 77 percent of registered New Jersey voters support a dollar-an-hour minimum-wage increase.

Its popularity is not surprising. Common sense and the overwhelming evidence show an increase in the minimum wage benefits workers, boosts the economy, and increases employment.

Nineteen states have minimum wages set above the \$7.25 federal level. The highest is Washington state, where the wage is \$9.19 an hour.

Christie has come out against the wage hike for the working poor. He knows that it is popular, but he's betting that some voters who vote for the increase will also vote for him.

That might be true of some likely voters (particularly Republicans and independents), but it certainly isn't true of most infrequent voters.

The key to beating Christie is mounting a grassroots get-out-the-vote campaign designed to turn alienated citizens into active voters, not only in cities but also in many working-class suburbs. These campaigns have worked in several states when Democratic candidates strongly supported the wage increase.

In 2009, voter turnout reached a record low for a New Jersey gubernatorial race. Only 47 percent of eligible voters went to the polls, while 2.7 million stayed home. Christie beat Gov. Jon Corzine with 48 percent of the vote, compared with the incumbent's 44 percent.

About 11 percent of the state's workers - 429,000 people - would benefit from the wage hike. But raising wages for people who clean our offices, wait on our tables, bag our groceries, and take care of our aging parents would also help the broader economy. It would put \$276 million into the pockets of working families, most of which they will immediately spend on food, rent, clothing, and gas. This would generate about \$175 million in additional economic activity in the state and add between 1,500 and 2,500 full-time jobs in 2014.

Major grocery chains whose unionized employees get paid more than the minimum wage will reap the benefits of consumers having more money to spend on food. Likewise, small retail stores around the state will sell more goods to customers with more discretionary income.

No matter how much money Christie and poverty-wage businesses spend on misleading ads, it will be hard to persuade a mother of two who has been working at McDonald's for five years making \$7.25 an hour to vote against an \$8.25-an-hour minimum wage with a cost-of-living adjustment.

That woman, and workers like her, are the sleeping giant in this year's gubernatorial election. And the best bet to wake them up is a massive get-out-the-vote effort around raising the minimum wage.