

Wages on the Front Burner

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By Annette Bernhardt

On November 7, voters in six states were asked if they wanted to raise their state's minimum wage. The answer at the ballot box in Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Montana, Nevada and Ohio was a loud and resounding yes. In an election of deep partisan divides, the minimum wage was the apple-pie issue, polling up to 70% in red, blue and purple districts. The immediate impact is that starting in January, up to 1.5 million Americans will see a much-needed increase in their paychecks. The political impact, though, could be even greater, as Washington finally realizes that hard-working families are tired of struggling to make ends meet.

At first glance this is a simple story. The federal minimum wage of \$5.15 is at its lowest point in real terms since 1950. Anyone who takes a moment to reflect on that figure understands how ridiculous it is: \$10,000 a year won't even begin to cover the basics of housing, food, transportation and clothing, no matter where you live. Clearly, a minimum wage that keeps families in poverty is deeply offensive to America's collective belief that hard work should be rewarded.

But this is about economics as well as values. Because when the voters cast their ballots, they were telling us about the strain of living through three decades of growing inequality, declining upward mobility, and the unceasing spread of low-wage jobs. With almost no other outlets to voice their economic insecurity, voters are using the minimum wage – and doing so at levels you rarely see in politics.

That's why in public opinion polling in Arizona and Colorado, middle-class families supported raising the minimum wage in high numbers. It won't give them relief from spiraling debt and prohibitive college costs. But there's an intuitive understanding that the bottoming-out of the minimum wage is symptomatic of a broader deterioration in economic opportunity.

These ballot initiatives didn't come out of the blue. It takes sustained organizing to turn out voters, and the living wage movement has been at it for more than a decade. The initial campaigns were hard fought, with opponents arguing that job loss would inevitably result from any intervention in the free market. When the evidence didn't bear them out (as 650 economists including five Nobel prize winners recently summarized in a sign-on letter), we started to see more tenuous arguments. In Arizona, for example, opponents latched onto routine provisions allowing the state to enforce the minimum wage, and somehow cooked up a scenario of massive identity theft. And Coloradans must have been astonished to see TV ads in which a thundering God commands Moses to stop the minimum wage at all costs.

In the end, though, what won out is the core truth that those who do the hard work of our economy – janitors, hotel maids, child care workers, dishwashers, home health attendants – should be able to make a decent living. We now have 28 states with minimum wages higher than the federal level, and 140 cities that have passed local living wage laws. That's a revolution by political standards, and if Congress is smart it will respond soon by finally raising the national minimum wage.

Let's not kid ourselves. Pushing the wage floor to \$7 or \$8 an hour is only a start. What we really need to do is build a strong base of good jobs in our economy, jobs that can sustain working families and knit together communities. This will require better training for workers, stronger labor market standards, smarter economic development, and a

meaningful right to organize. But as we saw in the election, the voters are on board and have been for some time. Now it's up to the policy makers and politicians to deliver.

About the Author

Annette Bernhardt, Ph.D., is deputy director of the Justice Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law. The Brennan Center provided legal and policy support to minimum wage ballot initiatives in Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Montana, and Ohio.