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SOME REPUBLICANS BACK STATE MINIMUM-WAGE INCREASES

By Reid J. Epstein
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In Washington, Republicans are allied against President Barack Obama's call to raise the federal minimum wage. But in the five states where voters will have a say on wage floors this fall, GOP candidates in competitive races say they favor an increase.

In Alaska and Arkansas, Republicans running for Senate seats oppose a boost of the federal minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour, from the current \$7.25. But they back state ballot measures that would raise their local wage floors more modestly.

Meanwhile, no group with significant funding is fighting the proposed increase in any state where the minimum wage is on the ballot. In Nebraska, the competition is so lopsided that the main group opposing a state minimum-wage increase says it has to borrow time on a copy machine to print fliers, and it hasn't registered to raise money under state regulations. The principal group backing the wage increase raised \$833,000 as of a July financial filing.

The developments signal that states are likely to continue to raise their minimum wages while legislation stalls in Congress. Since 2002, wage increases have appeared on the ballot 10 times, in nine states, with voters opting to raise the wage every time, usually by lopsided margins.

All in Favor

Ballot initiatives raising the statewide minimum wage are undefeated since 2002, most passing by substantial margins. States with the ballot questions and share of the vote supporting the increase:

State (year)	Support	Details
Oregon (2002)	51.3%	Raised to \$6.90, indexed to inflation
Florida (2004)	71.2	Established minimum of \$6.15/hour
Arizona (2006)	65.4	Raised to \$6.75, indexed to inflation
Colorado (2006)	53.3	Raised to \$6.85, indexed to inflation
Missouri (2006)	76.0	Raised to \$6.50, indexed to inflation
Montana (2006)	72.7	Raised to \$6.15 with cost-of-living adjustment
Nevada (2006)	68.7	Raised to \$5.15 (with benefits) or \$6.15 (no benefits), indexed to inflation*
Ohio (2006)	56.6	Raised to \$6.85, indexed to inflation
New Jersey (2013)	61.3	Raised to \$8.25, with cost-of-living adjustment

Five states with minimum-wage measures up for a vote this year:

Alaska: Would raise minimum to \$9.75/hour from \$7.75, index wage to inflation and require minimum to exceed federal minimum wage by \$1

Arkansas: Would raise minimum to \$8.50/hour

Illinois: Would raise minimum to \$10/hour

Nebraska: Would raise minimum in steps to \$9/hour from \$7.25

South Dakota: Would raise minimum to \$8.50/hour from \$7.25 and index it to inflation

*Second vote of a two-vote process; first approved in 2004
Source: John Matsusaka, Initiative and Referendum Institute, University of Southern California

Republicans' backing of the measures in states with ballot questions suggests Democrats will have trouble using the issue against GOP candidates. Polls show a wide majority of Americans support raising the minimum wage.

Alaska Sen. Mark Begich, like other Democrats this year, is campaigning on a plan to raise the federal minimum wage to \$10.10, a proposal backed by Mr. Obama. Republican challenger Dan Sullivan said during his primary campaign that he opposes both a federal and a state increase.

But Mr. Sullivan now says he plans to vote for Alaska's ballot measure, which would increase the state's hourly minimum wage to \$9.75 from \$7.75, index it to inflation and set Alaska's wage floor to always be at least \$1 more than the federal minimum.

"Because it is a state-driven initiative, I do support the motion to place a minimum wage question directly to the people of Alaska, and I personally intend to vote for it," Mr. Sullivan said by email last week. He said he would continue to oppose a federal minimum-wage increase.

A spokesman said Mr. Sullivan shifted his stance because he "had a chance to read the minimum wage initiative" and now believes "Alaskans are better positioned to decide for themselves what the prevailing wage should be in their state."

In Arkansas, Democratic Sen. Mark Pryor and his opponent, GOP Rep. Tom Cotton, oppose the proposed \$10.10 federal minimum wage, but they both support an effort to raise the Arkansas hourly wage floor to \$8.50.

"I'm going to vote for that initiated act as a citizen," Mr. Cotton said this month on a local radio show. Asa Hutchinson, the Republican candidate for Arkansas governor, is also for the state wage boost.

As in Washington, opponents of state minimum-wage increases say the change would take jobs away from the people it is intended to help, as higher wage costs would prompt businesses to pare hiring. A higher wage would also hurt businesses that operate on thin margins, they say. Supporters say there are broad economic benefits to people earning more money.

Voters in Nebraska and South Dakota will decide whether to increase their states' minimum wages, though the floor would be below the \$10.10 federal minimum. Voters in Illinois will decide on a nonbinding referendum to boost the hourly wage to \$10, after an increase failed in the legislature. Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn, a Democrat, backs raising the minimum wage. Republican challenger Bruce Rauner, who in the past has suggested the federal minimum wage should be lower, is for a state increase "if it comes with pro-business reforms," an aide said.

Some Democrats believe putting the minimum-wage issue to a vote will attract voters to their candidates who would otherwise stay home but are inclined to back liberal candidates. "I hope that the voters really come out and vote in their own self-interest," said Katelyn Johnson, a member of the Raise Illinois coalition that is backing the nonbinding measure there.

But while each statewide ballot measure boosts turnout by 1%, there is no evidence that ballot questions drive voters to one party or the other, said John Matsusaka, executive director of the Initiative and Referendum Institute at the University of Southern California.

"I'm not saying it's a ridiculous idea....It's just hard to find that these things are really pushing around races," Mr. Matsusaka said.

Florida voters in 2004 passed a minimum-wage increase with 71% of the vote while choosing President George W. Bush for re-election over John Kerry, suggesting that the issue didn't significantly drive Democratic turnout. Last year in New Jersey, Republican Gov. Chris Christie won a landslide re-election on the same ballot that included a minimum-wage increase that he opposed. The wage increase passed with 61% of the vote.

In Alaska, the task of fighting the ballot measure has fallen to Denny DeWitt, the part-time Alaska state director for the National Federation of Independent Businesses. Mr. DeWitt has no budget to oppose the measure and hasn't gotten any help from the state's leading Republican politicians. He said he is resigned to fighting a lonely battle.

"It gets to be one of those things where it's all about O.P.M.—other people's money," Mr. DeWitt said. "And as long as folks can vote to spend somebody else's money and they don't think it impacts them, it makes it a tough uphill battle."