

# Economic Opportunity Institute

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## The 1998 Minimum Wage Initiative in Washington State, a Case Study

Contact: [John Burbank](#), Executive Director, Published October 1998

*"We believe that all these efforts on behalf of the minimum wage helped to generate important additional marginal votes that otherwise would not have been cast. As mentioned, the minimum wage campaign did not require much spending for a statewide initiative. The campaign spent \$300,000 in all. **The issue stood by itself as a natural draw for voters.**"*

### A Case Study for Progressive Policy Development

The Economic Opportunity Institute (EOI) is a pragmatic, progressive public policy institute. We are focused on developing new public policies in Washington State to create ladders for low-income people to move into the middle class and to plug holes so that middle class families do not fall into poverty. In 1998, one of our major issues was increasing the minimum wage. Two-thirds of the electorate supported this initiative, making the minimum wage the most popular ballot issue in 1998. Indeed, the minimum wage initiative was the only initiative to win in every single county in our state.

At EOI, we strive to engage the citizenry in a discussion of economic security issues and to broadcast our public policy proposals to, in particular, two groupings in the electorate: swing, independent voters, and disengaged low income people. We want to put together compelling messages and public policies about economic security issues that resonate with both these groups and address shared economic security concerns. We want to make sure our messages resonate in rural areas, the suburbs and the cities, and up and down the income ladder. So we look for public policy which 1) is incremental in nature but move toward universal benefits or has positive economic ramifications across income, race, and gender, and 2) can be embraced by a popular majority of the electorate. The minimum wage issue met both of these objectives.

Thanks to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), we were able to aggressively define the policy debate about the minimum wage initiative. EPI asked one of their economists, John Schmitt, to join us in a statewide media tour about the minimum wage. John worked with us in shaping our message and adding policy and intellectual legitimacy to our work. This media tour was one part of our overall media strategy, which resulted in 66 contacts with reporters, over 20 news stories about the minimum wage, seven radio interviews, meetings with 6 editorial boards, and lead op-ed pieces in the Seattle Times, Tacoma News Tribune, Bellingham Herald, and the Yakima Herald-Republic. Some of the news stories we generated are posted on our web site.

The minimum wage issue sparked an interest in the media about EOI and our overall policy strategy and policy issues. We have since developed the policy parameters for the early childhood education career development and wage ladder pilot project. We have collaborated in the design, implementation, and evaluation of Community Jobs, a waged-work welfare-to-work initiative. We have developed a comprehensive state-based policy discussion and defense of Social Security. We are now pursuing policy for family leave insurance, universal pension access, a low-income job advancement system, and expansion of the state's Basic Health Plan.

#### Some further notes of interest on the minimum wage initiative follow:

- EOI was instrumental in bringing this issue to the initiative process. In 1997 John Burbank and State Representative Frank Chopp convened a series of meetings in which we began to

consider how to enact progressive policies in light of the stranglehold that conservatives had on the Legislature. Ballot initiatives quickly rose to the top of the list. Both the minimum wage initiative and an initiative to expand the Basic Health Plan were put forward as popular and majoritarian issues. In the fall of 1997, we conducted a poll on the minimum wage and the basic health plan. Given the positive results of this poll, the Washington State Labor Council took the lead in organizing and funding the minimum wage initiative.

- As a policy institute EOI shaped the political discussion for the minimum wage initiative and delegitimized the opponents' arguments. As a legitimate and media-focused voice, EOI countered and debunked the inaccurate and intellectually dishonest claims about job loss, inflation, and negative economic impacts resulting from a minimum wage increase. This, in turn, deflated our opponents' attempts to wage a campaign against the initiative and isolated the National Federation of Independent Business and the Washington Restaurant Association in opposition to the initiative. In the absence of the policy/media component contributed by EOI, the opponents may have chosen to put more money and time into fighting the issue.
- The minimum wage issue helped to define the policy debate of the 1998 elections. It did so by adding a progressive, populist, broadbased, and majoritarian issue about economic security to the ballot.
- The minimum wage initiative contest drew the most votes (total votes: 1,904,205: yes-1,259,456, no-644,749) of all the ballot issues and candidate contests in the election, including the U.S. Senate race. The pro-initiative vote was the highest vote-getter for all candidates and issues, outdistancing Senator Murray's vote by 156,000 votes and the next highest vote for a statewide initiative by 137,000 votes.
- The initiative created a draw for voters. Polling indicated that turnout may have increased by as much as four percentage points, thanks to the minimum wage initiative. That is, when people found out that the minimum wage initiative was on the ballot, the turnout of voters increased by 4%. This was even more pronounced among voters with poor voting histories, who accounted for 52% of the drop-off voters who were moved by this issue.
- The Seattle Post-Intelligencer noted in its lead editorial on November 5: "Murray's better-than-expected showing may have been boosted by the presence on the ballot of Initiative 688, which raised the state's minimum wage and made Washington the first state to link future minimum wage increases to inflation. That initiative doubtless produced an extra measure of voters who line up in Murray's camp....The initiative passed with a higher approval rating, 67%, than any other statewide issue."
- The Democrats unexpectedly won 50% of the contests for the state House of Representatives, picking up 8 seats, moving from a 57-41 minority to a 49-49 tie, while the State Senate switched from a 26-23 Republican majority to a 27-22 Democratic majority. Of the contested seats, 4 seats were won with less than 2 percentage points separating the Democrat from the Republican, 1 seat was won with a margin under 3 percentage points, and 1 seat was won with a margin of less than 5 percentage points. We attribute these victory margins to the draw of the minimum wage initiative.
- While the initiative campaign raised and spent only \$300,000, the Economic Opportunity Institute pursued a statewide media strategy which resulted in 66 contacts with reporters, over 20 news stories about the minimum wage, seven radio interviews, meetings with 6 editorial boards, and lead op-ed pieces in the Seattle Times, Tacoma News Tribune, Bellingham Herald, and the Yakima Herald-Republic.
- The minimum wage issue was used as a prime motivator for turnout activities, especially in phoning for voters among labor households. The Washington State Labor Council placed 200,000 phone calls with union members. The script of these phone calls focused on pulling people out to the polls to vote for the minimum wage initiative. Get-out-the vote mailings from the Washington State Labor Council and the King County Labor Council, as well as the Teamsters, OPEIU, and other unions to union households used the minimum wage initiative as their opening theme.
- The minimum wage campaign itself went up on television for the last 8 days of the campaign in the metropolitan Seattle area and through cable in the Vancouver Washington area. The

campaign aired strategic radio and television spots in Bellingham in two tight legislative races in which Democratic candidates prevailed.

- Washington Citizen Action conducted persuasion phone calls, GOTV literature drops, and post card mailings featuring the minimum wage issue in three key legislative districts. Progressive allies won in each of these districts in tightly contested campaigns.

### Related Link(s)

- [EOI Economic Security Policy - Minimum Wage](#)

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