SUMMARY

The purpose of this baseline media analysis was to understand what narratives around minimum wage are being covered in the media, with a particular focus on coverage of the impact of minimum wage on the economy.

An analysis of 273 articles published in 2014, mostly from print media, on raising wages found that:

• The coverage was mostly positive, driven by proponents of raising wages, who were quoted twice as often as opponents.
• The two most dominant narratives were the helpful impact of raising wages on the ability of workers to support themselves and the economic harm that raising wages would do, mostly by increasing unemployment.
• The leading messengers for raising wages were:
  » Elected officials, who made both the “make ends meet” and economic benefit argument.
  » State and local advocacy groups, who largely made the “make ends meet” argument.
• The leading messengers opposed to raising wages, who almost entirely made the economic harm argument, were elected officials and business associations.

The findings emphasize the need for proponents of raising wages to integrate both the positive impact on workers’ lives and the economic boost from raising wages into their messages, so that advocates are not constantly on the defensive with respect to the economic impact of raising wages.

ARTICLES IN DATABASE

We analyzed 273 articles, from throughout 2014. Most were taken from a national compendium of coverage on raising wages, collected by the media firm Berlin-Rosen. In addition, we added clips collected by Citizen Action of New York and Wisconsin Jobs Now. We deleted articles from the trade press.

Outlets: Primarily local print. Three-quarters of the coverage in the database is by local media outlets, almost all newspapers (print and online), in addition to a few local TV and radio stations. This actually understates the amount of coverage on local campaigns, as the subject of many of the articles in national news services and blogs were of local and state minimum wage campaigns.

We analyzed articles from outlets in 34 states. The campaigns which generated the most coverage were in: Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco and San Diego. In addition
Wisconsin and New York were represented more heavily, as we used clips collected by organizations based there.

The database included:
- Local print: 70% (192)
- National news services: 6% (17)
- National TV - cable and broadcast: 6% (17)
- National print: 6% (16)
- Local TV: 5% (15)
- National blogs: 4% (10)
- National radio: 1% (4)
- Local radio: 1% (2)

Subjects: Primarily state and local minimum wage laws. More than half of the articles were about state and local measures to raise the minimum wage. A little less than one-third focused on raising the federal minimum wage. And one-out-of-six were either about organizing aimed at employers (primarily Fight for $15) or employers deciding to raise wages on their own.

Of the 37 articles that talked about a protest or rally, 20 were on the Fight for $15. Looked at another way, 44% of the coverage about the Fight for $15 included protests, while only 7% of coverage on legislation included a protest or rally.

Subjects of coverage:
- 58% focus state or local wage hike
- 30% federal
- 16% Fight for $15
- 14% talk about a rally or protest

MESSengers

Supportive Messengers: Elected officials and organizations supporting raising wages. Two-thirds (68%) of the articles quoted an elected official (or appointee) who supported raising wages. Mayors who were advocating raising the minimum wage in their city led the list, followed by governors and then President Obama.

Half (55%) of the articles either quoted or referenced the support of an organization. A total of 225 supportive organizations were mentioned. The most frequently named organizations were the wide variety of state and local groups and coalitions who support raising wages. National advocacy groups followed, with NELP dominant, mostly because of its release of data on the
number of people impacted. Two think tanks were also quoted for releases of specific data: EPI largely on increasing minimum wage not having an impact on jobs; and CEPR on a report that states which had raised their minimum wage had stronger job growth.

One-fifth of the coverage quoted a low-wage worker. Only 10% quoted a businesses owner or association that supported raising wages.

Here is the complete breakdown of supportive messengers as a percentage of all articles:

- Elected officials: 67% (185)
- State/local advocacy group or coalition: 36% (99)
- A national advocacy group: 25% (57).
  » NELP was referenced in 36 articles
- Worker: 22% (60)
- Think tank: 12% (32)
- Union or worker organization: 10% (27)
- Business owner: 7% (20)
- Economic development or business association: 3% (8)

Opposition Messengers: Elected officials and business trade associations. About one-fourth (28%) of the articles quoted an elected official (or appointee) who opposed raising wages, mostly governors or U.S. Senators.

One quarter (27%) of the articles either quoted or referenced the opposition of an organization. A total of 99 opposing organizations were mentioned, dominated by business associations, notably state branches of the National Restaurant Association. Individual business owners who opposed wage hikes were quoted in 14% of the articles.

Here is the complete breakdown of opposition messengers as a percentage of all articles:

- Elected officials: 28% (76)
- Local business associations: 21% (56)
- Business owners: 14% (39)
- National business associations: 8% (23)
- Think tanks: 4% (12)
- National or state advocacy: 1% (3)
NARRATIVE ELEMENTS

We analyzed the articles: the overall tone; the number and prominence of quotes on either side and the narrative themes. We included a more extensive analysis of the arguments around economic impact.

**Overall Tone:** *Highly positive, dominated by supportive quotes.* As would be expected when supporters of raising wages are running campaigns, the coverage was heavily dominated by quotes in support of raising wages, which were more prominently displayed. There were 621 supportive quotes, an average of more than two (2.27) per article, compared with 281 opposition quotes, one per article on average. The first quote was supportive in two-thirds (68%) of the articles, compared with only 14% of articles in which the first quote was opposed to raising wages. Overall, the researchers characterized two-thirds (65%) of the articles to have an overall positive tone toward raising wages, compared with 25% neutral and only 10% negative.

**Summary of tone:**
- Supportive quotes: 621 – 2.2 per article on average
- Opposing quotes: 281 – 1 per article on average
- First quote positive: 68% of articles
- First quote negative: 14% of articles
- Overall tone:
  - Positive – 65%
  - Neutral – 25%
  - Negative – 10%

**Dominant Narratives:** *Making ends meet and economic impact.* Half (52%) of the articles talked about the impact of raising wages on workers ability to support themselves. In addition half (50%) had some discussion of the economic impact of raising wages. One-third (35%) reported on the number of people who would benefit from raising wages. Only 8% talked about the hard work of low wage workers.

**Summary of narratives:**
- Ends meet – 52%
- Economic impact – 50%
  - Harm the economy – 41%
  - Benefit the economy – 20%
- Many workers impacted – 35%
- Hard work – 8%

**Making Ends Meet:** The argument that being paid low wages makes it difficult to support a worker was made in half of the articles. It was made most frequently made by advocacy organizations and workers, although elected officials also made the argument frequently. Here are some examples:
“It’s entirely impossible to make a budget when living on a tipped income,” said Melissa Fleck, an executive assistant for the activist organization Citizen Action, who spent 15 years working in restaurants until June 2013.

“No one should have to choose whether they have to pay rent or pay for food,” said Alberto Retana, executive vice president of Community Coalition of South Los Angeles.

“It’s a dollar an hour, that’s something,” she [Minneapolis hotel worker] said. “It just gives you a little bit more comfort. You just don’t feel quite as on the edge. You feel like you can fill up your tank and go to the grocery store and not be quite as concerned.

“A wage of $8.25 an hour is a poverty wage and just perpetuates the cycle of poverty.” [Spokesperson for PLAN, Nevada advocacy group]

“In the Lehigh Valley, more than 50,000 workers receive wages so low that they are forced to turn to supplemental nutrition assistance to feed their families, according to a recent report by anti-poverty organization Oxfam America.” Oped by the Pennsylvania Council of Churches.

“Everyone knows you cannot live on the minimum wage, and you cannot make ends meet on $290 a week.” Dan Cantor, WFP.

“Minnesotans who work full time should be able to earn enough money to lift their families out of poverty and achieve the American dream,” Gov. Mark Dayton said in a statement.

**Making Ends Meet vs. Economic Impact:** A common narrative in the articles was that there are two competing narratives: the argument by proponents on “meeting ends meet” vs. the argument by opponents that raising wages will cost jobs. A good example of this dynamic is from an article in the Arizona Republic titled, “Does higher minimum wage stifle job growth?” The lead quote in the article is on the impact on workers. Having dismissed that, the article than turned to the economic question:

The issue is virtually one of morality for people like Tomas Robles Jr., the executive director of Living United for Change in Arizona, a Phoenix-based group that advocates for worker and immigrant rights. The group has joined the chorus calling for raising the federal minimum wage, a move that could affect 500,000 Arizona workers.

“We’re not expecting a $60,000 annual salary out of this,” Robles said. “But you should be able to provide for your basic necessities.”

For Steve Chucri, president and CEO of the Arizona Restaurant Association, the wage issue means greater complexity in an industry often buffeted by heavy labor turnover and volatile food prices.

“It has eliminated jobs in restaurants,” Chucri said of Arizona’s minimum wage. “Some
restaurants have done away with busboys entirely ... and now we’re seeing price increases.”

**Economic Impact:** Opponents of raising wages focus virtually entirely on claims of negative economic impact, particularly reducing jobs as well as raising prices, as typified in the quote above from The Arizona Restaurant Association.

Four-in-ten (41%) of the articles contained this argument, one made by all the various messengers listed above. Of the 113 articles with negative quotes, 86% were about economic harm, mostly job loss.

Most of the time, the argument about harming the economy did not have a counter-argument from supporters; only 30% of the articles that contained the claim of economic harm contained an assertion that raising wages would benefit the economy. On the other hand, in 61% of the articles that included an assertion of economic benefit also included a claim of economic harm. This data is another indication of two competing narratives. Reporters, who almost always want to have quotes on both sides of an issue, are counting advocates argument on “making ends meet” as being opposed by harming the environment.

Quotes asserting economic harm were placed at the top or middle of the articles. The distribution of quotes asserting economic harm and benefit was similar, which makes sense since articles are almost always written to include competing claims next to each other. However, since so many more articles only included the claim of economic harm, the distribution of claims of economic benefit are somewhat lower down than those of economic harm:

**Economic Harm:**
- 30% at top
- 53% in middle
- 17% at bottom

**Economic Benefit:**
- 31% at top
- 45% in middle
- 24% at bottom

**Economic Impact:** Supporters asserted that raising wages would have an economic benefit in 20% of the articles, half the number of the articles that a claim of economic harm was made.

The argument for economic benefit was uniformly around increasing consumer purchasing power:

*The wage increases would pump an additional $22 billion into the economy, Cooper [EPI] says, noting that low-wage workers tend to spend most of their paychecks, while higher-wage employees save more.*
“Every dollar we increase the minimum wage results in 2,800 dollars in additional spending by that working family” said State Rep. Mark Nakashima [HI], citing a study on the subject. “As this money comes to them, it’ll come right back into the economy, and will help spur the economy,” added Governor Abercrombie.

Jobs would be created by raising the minimum wage, not lost, because the added money flowing to workers would be high-velocity money, rapidly spent for food, rent, clothes, health and education. It would boost the entire economy. - Computer Services Consultant

The new law will pump nearly $500 million into the local economy, “proving that a higher minimum wage fuels business and job growth,” said Seattle Union President David Rolf.

Only occasionally were advocates quoted combining the end meets and economic benefit argument, as in:

Linda Meric, national executive director of 9to5, which helped spearhead the 2006 constitutional amendment, says that this small raise “puts a little more money in the pockets of Colorado’s lowest-wage workers to spend on essentials that will help their families and our local economy. But it is still not enough.”

An example of an elected official making both arguments is from former Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley:

“Nobody who works full time should have to raise their family in poverty,” [Governor] O’Malley said, contending that raising the minimum wage also boosts the economy by giving workers more money to spend.

Elected officials were quoted most frequently making the case for economic benefit, in one-third (32%) of the articles with that claim. Most other advocates were rarely quoted making the economic benefit argument.

Messengers for economic benefit argument:
- Elected officials –36%
- Business – 5 or 10%
- Local advocacy groups–8%
- Think tank –12%
- National advocacy – 4%
- Academic –2%
- Asserted without reference to any one group or individual – 26%
CONCLUSION

The goal of this review of 2014 press coverage of raising wages was to understand how the press is reporting the narratives made by advocates for raising wages, with a focus on coverage of the economic benefit of raising wages. The findings confirm that the central narrative thrust of the press coverage is that raising wages will help workers support their families but it may cost jobs.

These findings underscore the need for advocates to:

- More vigorously assert the economy boosting argument and do so in a way that ties to the “make the ends meet” argument, so that we are framing the debate around both arguments, rather than being defensive on the economy. Recommendations on how to do that are contained in How to Talk About Raising Wages: rooseveltinstitute.org/raising-minimum-wage
- Engage more business owners and business groups that support raising wages, as they are credible messengers on that issue, particularly as those are (along with elected officials) the leading spokespeople for the opposing economic argument.
- Work with elected officials to effectively make both the make ends meet and economy boosting argument, as they are the most frequently quoted supporters in press coverage.