

Democrats renew fight for \$15 minimum wage as Sanders vows passage

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Sen. Bernie Sanders is one of the lead sponsors of the bill. | Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Democrats on Tuesday reintroduced a [bill](#) to raise the federal minimum wage to \$15, hoping to build on the momentum from President Joe Biden's calls for lawmakers to boost the hourly pay to help revive the economy.

The increase — which would more than double the current minimum of \$7.25 — would deliver on a major priority that organized labor has sought for nearly a decade and put more money in the pockets of tens of millions of workers.

But Democrats face daunting odds: Republicans broadly oppose the measure; the powerful business lobby is lining up against it, and even several key Democrats may be reluctant to support the bill with tough 2022 elections looming.

If Democrats can't get the votes in the Senate, Sen. [Bernie Sanders](#) (I-Vt.), one of the lead sponsors, is threatening to wield his new clout as chair of the Budget Committee to use a process called budget reconciliation — which would allow them to pass it via a simple majority — to get the bill to Biden's desk.

"If we cannot get enough Republicans to vote for this legislation under regular order, we cannot simply take no for an answer," Sanders said during a press call Tuesday.

While it is not at all clear that Senate rules would allow Democrats to use reconciliation, it may be their only option.

Without it, even if every Democrat backed the measure, the party would still have to win over at least 10 Senate Republicans to get the bill to the president's desk.

Business groups argue that forcing small employers to pay higher wages could damage the already struggling economic recovery.

Raising the minimum wage "to \$15 in places where that's going to have a significant cost born on small businesses [while] you're also providing stimulus and relief [in order] to keep them alive is probably not the wisest course of action," said Matthew Haller, senior vice president of government relations at the International Franchise Association. "\$15 may work in New York City and Seattle, but it's not going to work in rural Alabama."

That argument may resonate with Democratic senators up for reelection next year.

Three lawmakers facing campaigns — Sens. [Catherine Cortez Masto](#) of Nevada, [Mark Kelly](#) of Arizona and [Maggie Hassan](#) of New Hampshire — did not sign onto the Senate version of the Raise the Wage Act when it was reintroduced Tuesday.

Kelly has signaled support for "a living wage," but his office did not respond to requests for comment as to what level that should be. Arizona's minimum wage is \$11 an hour.

Six other Democratic senators didn't co-sponsor the bill: [Chris Coons](#) of Delaware, [Joe Manchin](#) of West Virginia, [Bob Menendez](#) of New Jersey, [Jeanne Shaheen](#) of New Hampshire, [Kyrsten Sinema](#) of Arizona and [Jon Tester](#) of Montana. Sen. [Angus King](#), a Maine Independent who usually caucuses with the Democrats, also did not sign on.

The senators did not respond to requests for comment.

Tester's communications director said the senator "has supported raising the minimum wage in the past" but declined to comment on whether he backs raising the federal minimum to \$15.

The other new Democratic senators, Colorado's [John Hickenlooper](#), New Mexico's [Ben Ray Luján](#) and Georgia's Rev. [Raphael Warnock](#) and [Jon Ossoff](#), have all publicly backed raising the federal minimum.

Any effort to employ reconciliation would likely have to be limited in scope to comply with strict budget rules, and some experts doubt the party would be able to use the maneuver.

Jeff Davis, senior fellow with the Eno Center for Transportation and a congressional budget expert, says using reconciliation for the minimum wage could run afoul of the Byrd rule, which limits what can move with the privileged procedure to provisions that produce changes to federal spending or revenue.

"It's a lot of judgment calls for the Senate parliamentarian, but in the past, they've been pretty strict about the level of detail in the Byrd [rule]," Davis said.

Sanders says he is on "very safe grounds" regarding the Byrd rule, citing estimates that raising the federal minimum would provide savings for taxpayers and reduce the deficit by lifting workers out of public assistance programs.

"Raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour will mean that a whole lot of workers now who are receiving one form of public assistance or another will no longer have to be in that position," Sanders said, "which means it will have a very positive impact on the federal deficit."

The latest Raise the Wage Act would gradually hike the federal hourly minimum from \$7.25 to \$15 by 2025 and index future increases to median wage growth.

Democrats are introducing the bill as a standalone, although its sponsors said they would also consider including it in the broader \$1.9 trillion economic-relief package that Biden has called for.

Either way, opposition from business would have to be overcome, though the Chamber of Commerce signaled it would be open to

compromise.

Leaders at the Chamber say they are skeptical that a provision to more than double the current minimum wage would be attached to the next Covid-19 relief package.

“We are still interested in trying to find a deal on this,” said Marc Freedman, vice president of employment policy at the Chamber, suggesting the group might go along with an increase paired with changes to federal wage and hour laws.

The minimum was last updated in 2009. So far, 29 states, the District of Columbia, Guam and the Virgin Islands have raised their wage above the federal level, but only seven states and D.C. have enacted measures to bump it to \$15, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

And while more than three dozen localities are slated to raise their minimum to \$15 or more this year, D.C. is the only territory or state that currently pays the \$15 hourly rate.

In Florida, typically a Republican stronghold, voters approved gradually raising the state’s minimum to \$15 in a ballot referendum last November. The left-leaning National Employment Law Project estimates that with the changes at the state and local level, 42 percent of U.S. workers will be covered by \$15 minimum wage laws by 2026.

Some 1.6 million workers were paid at or below the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 in 2019, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In total, more than 82 million workers were paid at an hourly rate in 2019.

The [nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated in 2019](#) that if Congress were to gradually raise the minimum wage to \$15 by 2026, it could give as many as 27 million workers a raise. But, another 1.3 million would also lose their jobs as a result.

Organized labor and other worker advocates counter that the boost will lift those at the bottom who are struggling the most and put help into the limping economy.

The Economic Policy Institute, which advocates for raising the wage, estimates that raising the minimum to \$15 by 2025 would lift pay for nearly 32 million workers — or 21 percent of the U.S. workforce — and inject \$107 billion in higher wages into the economy.

“We’re in the midst of an economic crisis,” Mary Kay Henry, international president of the Service Employees International Union, said in an interview, “and we want our nation’s leaders to reckon with it and fix it, and a \$15 minimum wage would lift up tens of millions of working families.”

“Our quarrel is not with franchise owners. Our quarrel is with multibillion-dollar corporations who very well know that they can afford to lift those workers out of poverty and allow them to lead a decent life,” Henry said.

Henry argues that these voters stand to benefit the most from the wage boost, as Black and brown workers make up a disproportionate share of those making the lowest pay.

“If they want to be reelected in ‘22,” Henry said, “the best thing they can do is vote to increase … the minimum wage.”

Kellie Mejdrich contributed to this report.

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