

Congress and the Passage of the Federal Minimum Wage: Fractured Labor and Southern Resistance

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Motivation for Paper

This paper is part of a broader project to examine how changes in Congressional organizations affect the 'starting point' and development of public policies. Specifically to this paper I examine the passage of the federal minimum wage as leverage for understanding how intraparty factional conflict impacts policy creation.

Motivation for Paper

There are some other nice motivations for this paper:

- ▶ Ira Katznelson's call to more fully integrate Congress into the American Political Development Literature
- ▶ May lend some insight into factors at passage that increase or decrease the durability of a program
- ▶ The federal minimum wage is relatively understudied from a political science position

Argument

What I argue in the paper is that a split labor constituency within the Democratic Party was a major overlooked factor in determining the shape of the wage.

Where it exists, the conventional wisdom is that the North/South split was critical, and Barbara Sinclair argues that the passage of the wage led directly to the rise of the 'Conservative Coalition.'

Relevant Constituencies

There are four groups, but some are more relevant than others:

- ▶ Business
- ▶ AFL Interests
- ▶ CIO Interests
- ▶ Southern Interests

Session One: Strong AFL Opposition & Southern Blocking

The AFL and their House allies, of which the majority of northern Democrats were, felt that any form of federal wage floor would strip away their power.

Big philosophical differences between the CIO and AFL and the CIO was the pro-Roosevelt splinter group.

The burgeoning Conservative Coalition refused to grant a special rule to a relatively weak bill which only covered industries without strong collective bargaining agreements.

Session Two: Death by AFL

This go around, Northern Democrats pushed through a discharge petition – one of the first – to get the bill to the floor.

The floor fight became a full scale debate on the nature of unionization. This split allowed Southern Democrats, who remained extremely hostile, to side with AFL Democrats to send the bill back to committee.

Session Three

Finally a bill passes that has a weak wage that only applies to around 20% population. The AFL's opposition was softened due to the weak coverage provisions.

Southerners remained opposed due to the principle of regulating the southern political economy, even though African Americans were disproportionately excluded.

Death by thousands of specific individual industrial exemptions.

Take Away Points

Like I said, three contributions:

- ▶ Developed a somewhat new perspective on Democratic politics during the New Deal which maybe highlights intraparty conflict
- ▶ Stressed the role Congress played in developing a program
- ▶ The lasting impact of strategic choices necessary for passage in a program's life.

Wrapping Up

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