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U.S. | NEW YORK | NY POLITICS

Behind Cuomo's Shifting Stance on Minimum Wage

How governor went from dismissing NYC mayor's proposal for \$13 wage floor to calling for \$15 himself



Gov. Andrew Cuomo listens as Vice President Joe Biden speaks Thursday in support of raising the minimum wage in New York state to \$15 an hour. PHOTO: ANDREW BURTON/GETTY IMAGES

By **ERICA ORDEN** and **JOSH DAWSEY**

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Earlier this year, after New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio floated raising the minimum wage to \$13 or more an hour, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo was dismissive.

A “non-starter” with lawmakers, the governor’s aides said publicly. Privately, their language was even more colorful.

Yet in a speech on Thursday, Mr. Cuomo, a Democrat, proposed raising the state’s minimum wage to \$15 per hour, up from \$8.75 now. The raise, which would give New York the highest pay floor in the nation, heartened liberals while delivering an unpleasant surprise to many Republicans and upstate residents who had seen him as embracing a more conservative economic orthodoxy.

The governor, in fact, turned to perhaps some of the most lauded words in Democratic politics—from the address of his late father, Gov. Mario Cuomo, to the 1984 Democratic National Convention—to help make his case.

“Let’s build my father’s ‘shining city,’ ” Gov. Andrew Cuomo said at an event in Manhattan, where he was joined by Vice President Joe Biden, “a city where the bright sunlight of opportunity shines on all those left in the shadows for too long.”

A confluence of factors seemed to bring him to that moment: accusations from liberals in New York that he had strayed from Democratic principles, polls demonstrating growing support for a higher wage, a sense the national Democratic Party was shifting left and the belief that Mr. Cuomo could make the issue a defining part of his legacy.

It cemented the image for many that Mr. Cuomo is a master of triangulation, picking and choosing issues while zigging and zagging across the political spectrum.

Besides, said a former Cuomo aide who still advises the governor, Mr. de Blasio's imprint on the issue had tarnished the matter for state Senate Republicans, and Mr. Cuomo believes that he can pressure those in swing districts to support his own plan during an election year.

"I'm sorry to see the mayor be the sacrificial lamb, but it looks pretty clearly the mayor is the sacrificial lamb for the low-wage New Yorkers," New York City Council Member Brad Lander said. "That is a positive thing."

Said the former Cuomo aide: "Now he can go to [Senate President John] Flanagan and say, you're not passing de Blasio's minimum-wage increase, you're passing Cuomo's minimum-wage increase or Biden's minimum-wage increase."

A spokeswoman for the mayor didn't respond to a request for comment when told of those remarks.

But it isn't clear whether any of those appeals will assuage the plan's detractors.

"There's no path to passage right now with the Republicans," said Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science at the State University of New York, New Paltz. "They can't give on this issue and hope to sustain their majority."

In a statement Thursday, Mr. Flanagan, a Republican, didn't shut the door to Mr. Cuomo's proposal. But he said that "raising the wage floor in New York that far, that fast, could lead to unintended consequences," such as layoffs, and he urged the Legislature to proceed "cautiously and deliberatively."

Mr. Cuomo's proposal had more to do with lingering liberal dissatisfaction with the governor, according to Mr. Benjamin. "He was a little embarrassed to the degree by which he lost support and he has to repair those relationships," he said.

If he is successful, Mr. Cuomo would oversee the implementation of the highest minimum wage of any state in the country and cement a stronger reputation among liberals, who supported his push for gay marriage in New York but have grown disillusioned with his more centrist positions on issues such as charter schools and lower tax policy.

Liberals heartened by the governor's proposal said time will tell how serious he is. They are watching to see if he will support flipping the state Senate to Democrats, who would support the wage increase, or put money behind a minimum-wage campaign. Some privately already worried that he will strike a compromise for a far lower minimum wage.

But others see Mr. Cuomo's move as something of a *fait accompli*.

"Raising the minimum wage is an obvious lever for the governor to pull in response to frustration with income inequality among many of his constituents," Kathy Wylde, president of the Partnership for New York City, a business group, said in a statement, even as she urged gradual implementation.

Or as a former aide to Mr. Cuomo's father put it, "it's a legacy item."

"Same sex-marriage, gun control, minimum wage," he said. "It's a trifecta."

Write to Erica Orden at erica.orden@wsj.com

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