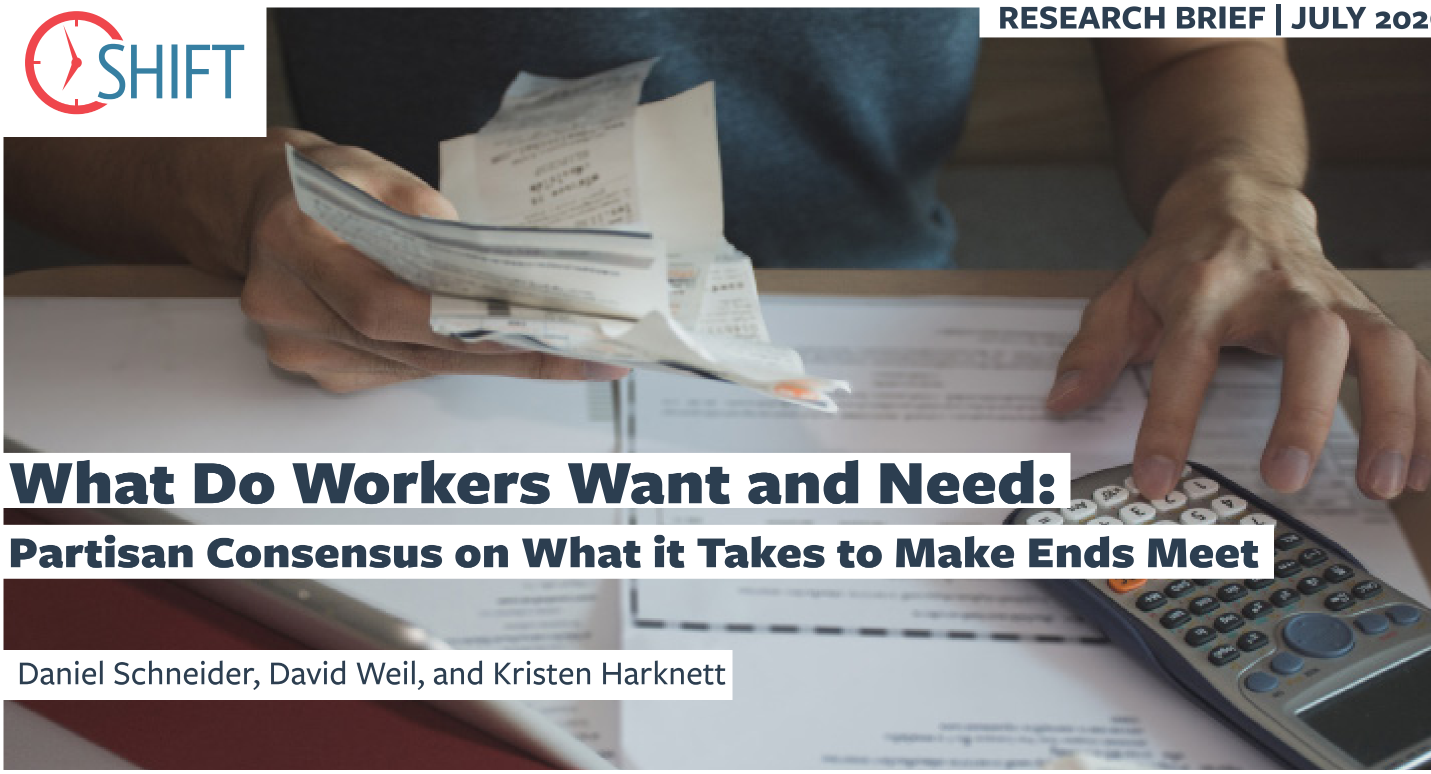

What Do Workers Want and Need:

Partisan Consensus on What it Takes to Make Ends Meet

Daniel Schneider, David Weil, and Kristen Harknett

Executive Summary

The service sector is at the heart of the American economy. Hourly workers – from Starbucks baristas to Walmart Associates to Amazon Flex Drivers – ensure that the shelves stay stocked, packages are delivered, and everyone is caffeinated.

While we might imagine that these jobs offer a first rung on the job ladder or just a way to pick up discretionary income, the reality is that for millions of hourly workers, jobs in the service sector can be a dead end and fall far short of workers' needs to provide for their families.

These economic challenges are likely to be especially acute in our current "K-Shaped" economy (TransUnion 2026) where consumer spending is increasingly driven by a small share of super affluent households at the very top, while the base of millions of working people struggle with housing costs, transportation, and grocery bills.

It's easy to point the finger at rising prices, and prices have indeed risen, but every household ledger has two sides – what is spent, and what is earned. Jobs in the service sector, including at some of the United States' largest and most profitable firms, appear to be falling far short of providing what workers need to get by.

We surveyed 9,644 hourly workers employed by 67 of the largest firms in the service sector – from Walmart to Waffle House – to understand the economic gaps that these families face and the role that economic and labor policy can play in helping to close rifts in the household budget. One theme comes through above all: What workers want and need in terms of basic labor conditions—pay and hours—is remarkably consistent across all demographic groups, and, most strikingly, across political lines. Workers across the board say that it would take earning $24 an hour and at least 40 hours a week to make ends meet. And whether in the last Presidential election they supported Democratic or Republican candidates (or chose not to vote at all) they support policies that would substantially raise the minimum wage and provide for more hours of work.

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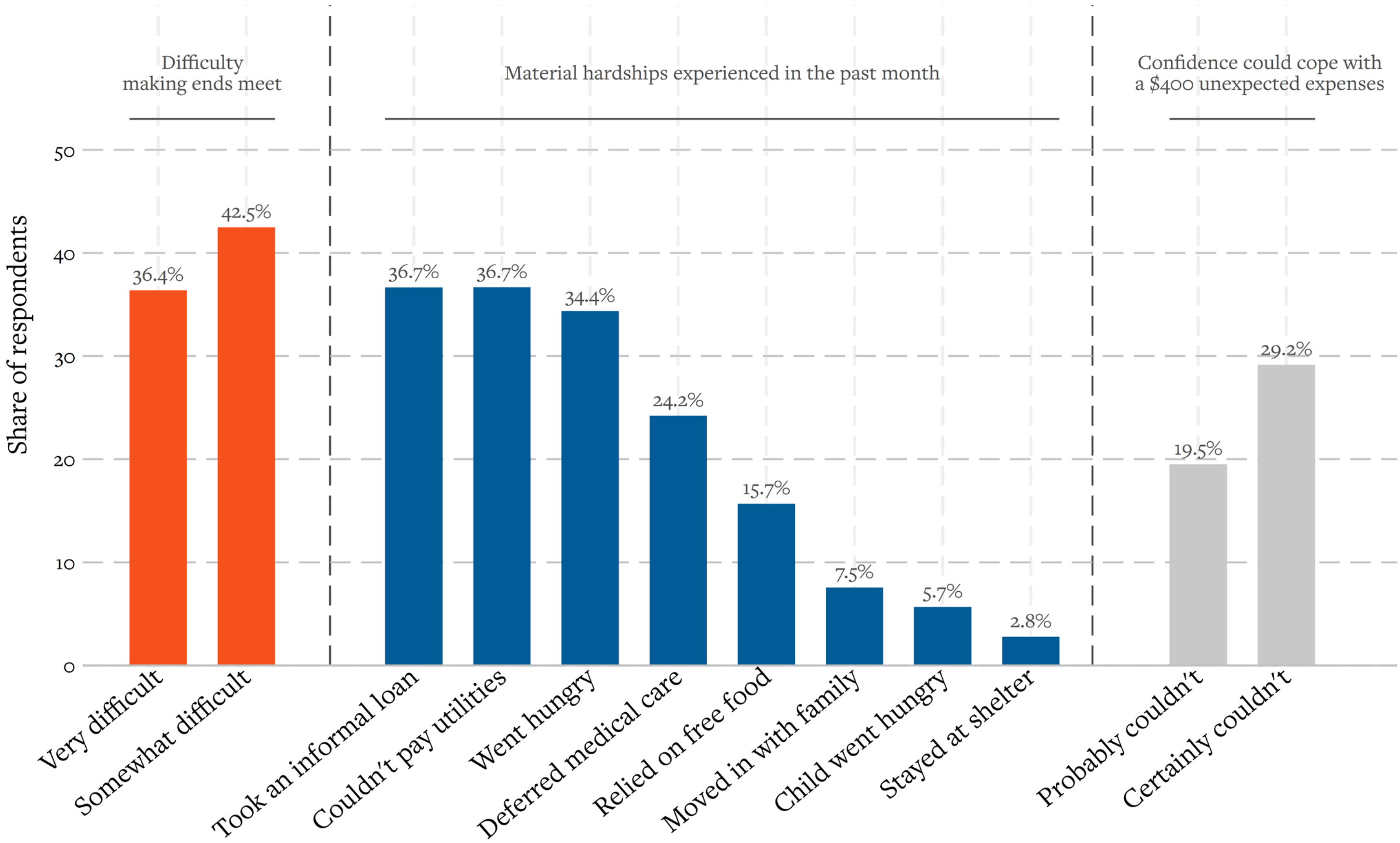
Hourly Workers Struggle to Make Ends Meet

A majority of the hourly workers at the large firms we surveyed are working, but poor. Thirty-six percent reported that it was very difficult for them to make ends meet each month and an additional 42% reported it was somewhat difficult to make ends meet. This financial strain wasn't just hypothetical – large shares of workers told us that they had experienced significant material hardships, in just the last month. For example, one in three workers reported that they couldn't pay their full utility bills and one in four reported that they deferred needed medical care due to the cost. A third of workers reported that there was a time that they went hungry in the past month because they couldn't afford enough to eat. It's no surprise then that workers are financially fragile – half are not confident they could come up with $400 to cover an unexpected expense.

Figure 1. Economic Insecurity and Material Hardship



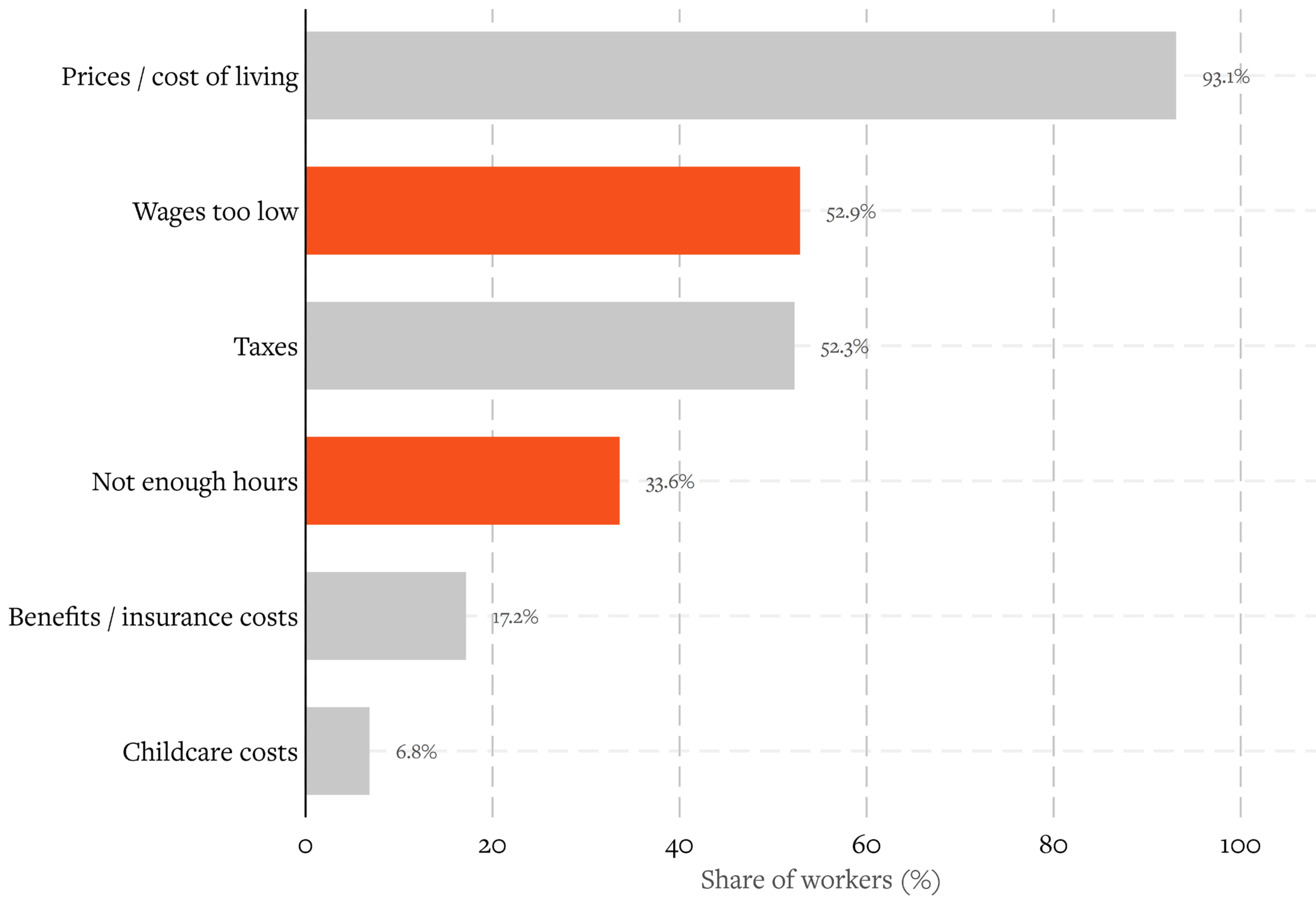
N = 2,747 (ends meet); N ~ 2,709 (hardships, varies by item); N = 2,589 ($400 emergency).
Child went hungry among parents with children: 8.1% (N = 1,609).

Prices are Only Part of the Story

The story of rapidly rising prices putting everyday household necessities out of reach is well known. Among the nearly 80% of workers who reported that it was hard to make ends meet, almost all (93%) reported that part of the reason why was that prices are too high. But workers don't stop there when describing what is often called the "affordability crisis." The majority said that one reason why it was hard to make ends meet was that their wages were too low and a third reported that it was at least in part because they didn't get enough hours at work.

Workers in the service sector contend with multiple challenging job conditions – from unstable schedules to insufficient paid sick leave – but wages and hours loom large. Alongside chronically low wages, workers struggle to get sufficient hours, running up against management that rations out work hours, both to

Figure 2. Why Workers Say They Can't Make Ends Meet



N = 2,161 (workers who struggle to make ends meet). Respondents selected all reasons that apply.
Child care: 49.0% among workers with a child under 5 (N = 194).

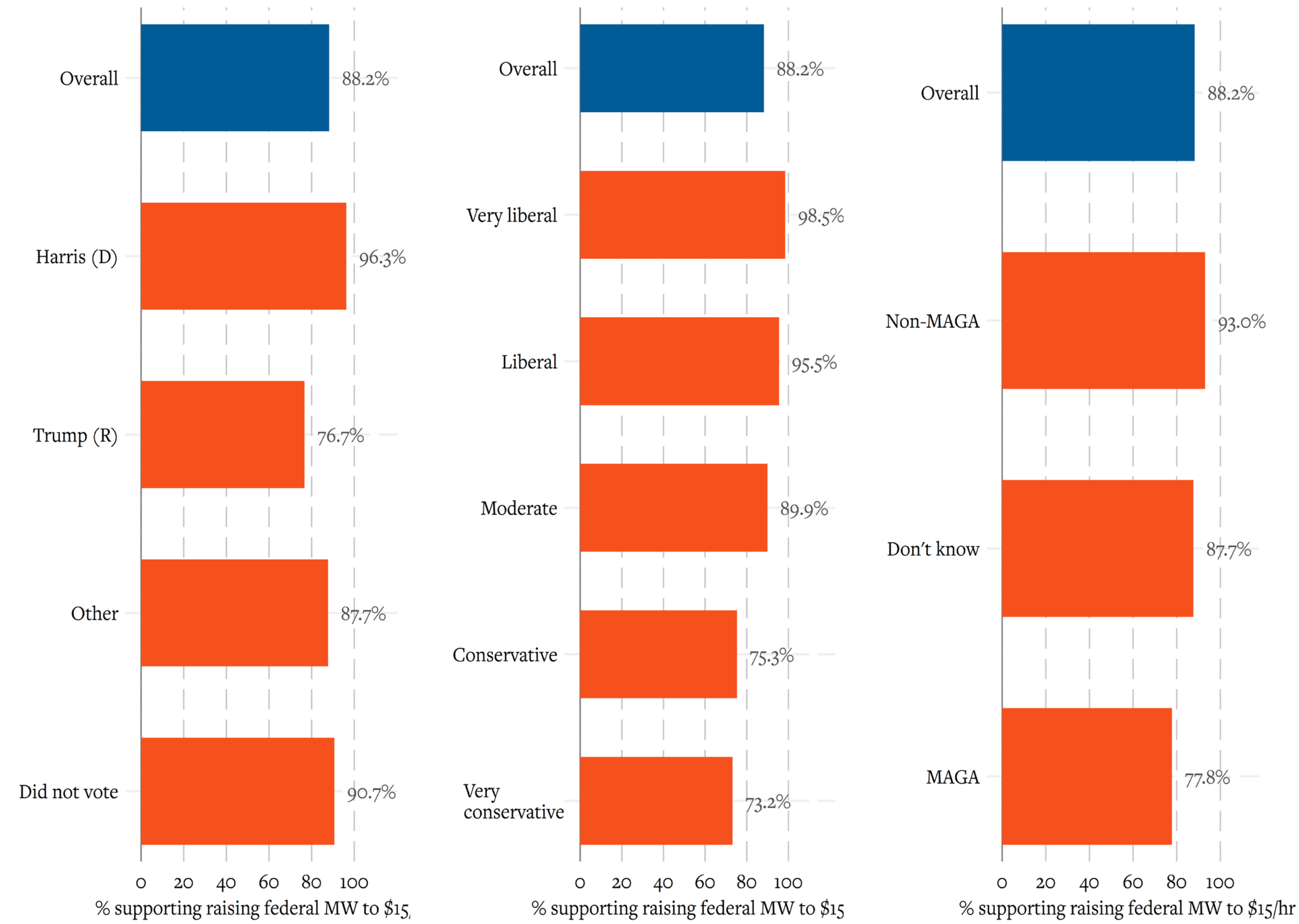
avoid shared responsibility for providing health insurance (Aboulafia and Schneider 2025) and to ensure a large on-call workforce that can be "flexed" to meet shifting customer demand (Lambert 2008). The clear implication: it's not just how much you earn per hour, but also how many hours you can get, that is the key equation for balancing the household budget.

Broad Support for a $15/hr Minimum Wage Across the Ideological Spectrum

The hourly workers we surveyed overwhelmingly supported a $15/hr minimum wage. 69% strongly supported a federal minimum wage at that level and an additional 20% would somewhat favor it. This deep support for a $15/hr federal minimum wage is not out-of-line with the 65% of Americans who supported such a policy when polled in 2023 (Program for Public Consultation 2023), but it is higher still, reflective of the personal stakes of such a wage increase for this particular workforce.

What's really striking is that at a time where eight-in-ten U.S. adults believe Republican and Democratic voters cannot agree on policy or even basic facts (Shearer 2025), the personal experience of laboring for low wages eclipses partisanship. While 99% of self-described very liberal workers supported a $15/hr minimum wage, so did 90% of moderates and 73% of "very conservative" workers. This broad consensus held no matter how we measured workers' politics. 96% of 2024 Harris voters supported a $15/hr minimum wage, as did 77% of Trump voters. Even more striking, the vast majority of voters –78%–who identified as being part of the MAGA movement backed a $15 minimum wage, as did 91% of those who sat out the last Presidential election.

Figure 3. Bipartisan Support For A $15/Hr Minimum Wage



N = 2,567. Support = 'strongly' or 'somewhat' support. Blue bar = overall sample. Orange = subgroups.

$15/hr is Far from Enough: $24/hr x 40 Hrs/week

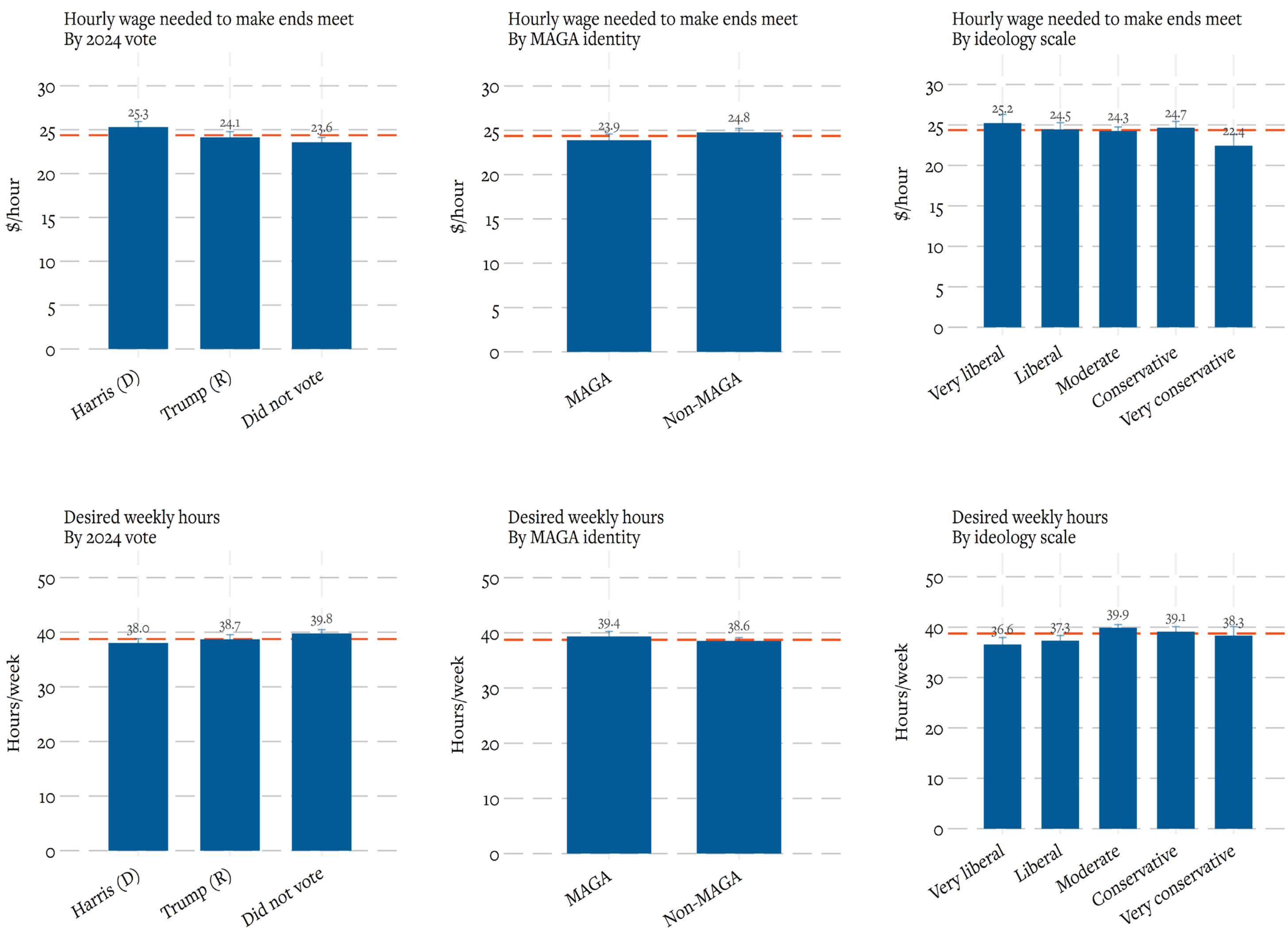
Supporting a $15/hr wage is one thing, but what wage it would actually take to get by is another. To figure out what workers thought it would really take to make ends meet, we asked workers two questions.

First, we gauged how many hours workers wished they could get assigned to work at their job. When workers and advocates talk about involuntary part-time work, they are often met with the response that the reason workers are at low hours levels isn't due to employer practices, it's about workers' caregiving obligations, class schedules, or other personal conflicts. So, we asked workers directly, **"if you could get as many hours as you wanted from your employer, how many hours would you work each week at your current job?"** On average, workers told us that they would work 40 hours a week. And, much like the broad support for the $15/hr minimum wage, this goal was broadly held. Workers who backed Harris wanted 38 hours a week and so did Trump voters. Very liberal workers wanted 37 hours a week, very conservative voters – 38, and those who identify as MAGA supporters - 39. The demand for full-time hours is broad and deep.

Second, we wanted to know how much workers thought that someone (not just themselves) would need to make per hour to make ends meet, if that person was working full-time hours. On average, workers told us that it would take an hourly wage of $24. And the consensus we find here across the usual partisan divides is also striking. 2024 Trump voters told us it would take $24/hr while 2024 Harris voters came in a little higher at $25. Workers who identified as MAGA said $24 and non-MAGA said $25. What do we make of this unusual consensus? People working hourly jobs for all-too-low wages know what it takes to make ends meet and, for this bread-and-butter issue at least, personal experience again eclipses partisan polarization. Achieving better basic conditions at work matters for all working people.

Let's be clear. $24/hr and 40 hrs/week isn't what workers think it would take to achieve the old American dream of upward mobility or a white picket fence. It's just the minimum, it's maybe just enough to make ends meet in today's economy.

Figure 4. Broad Consensus on Wages and Hours Needed to Make Ends Meet

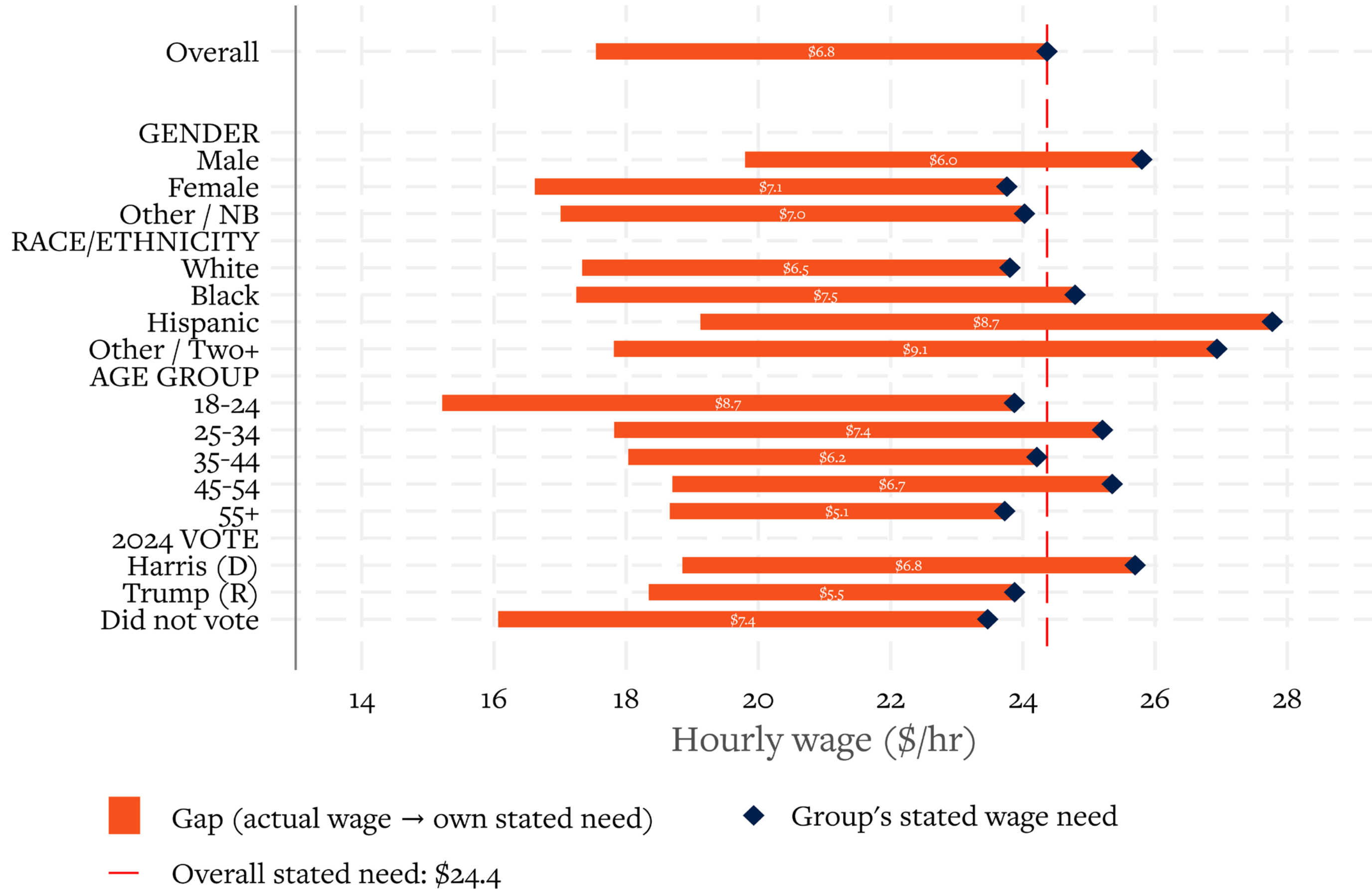


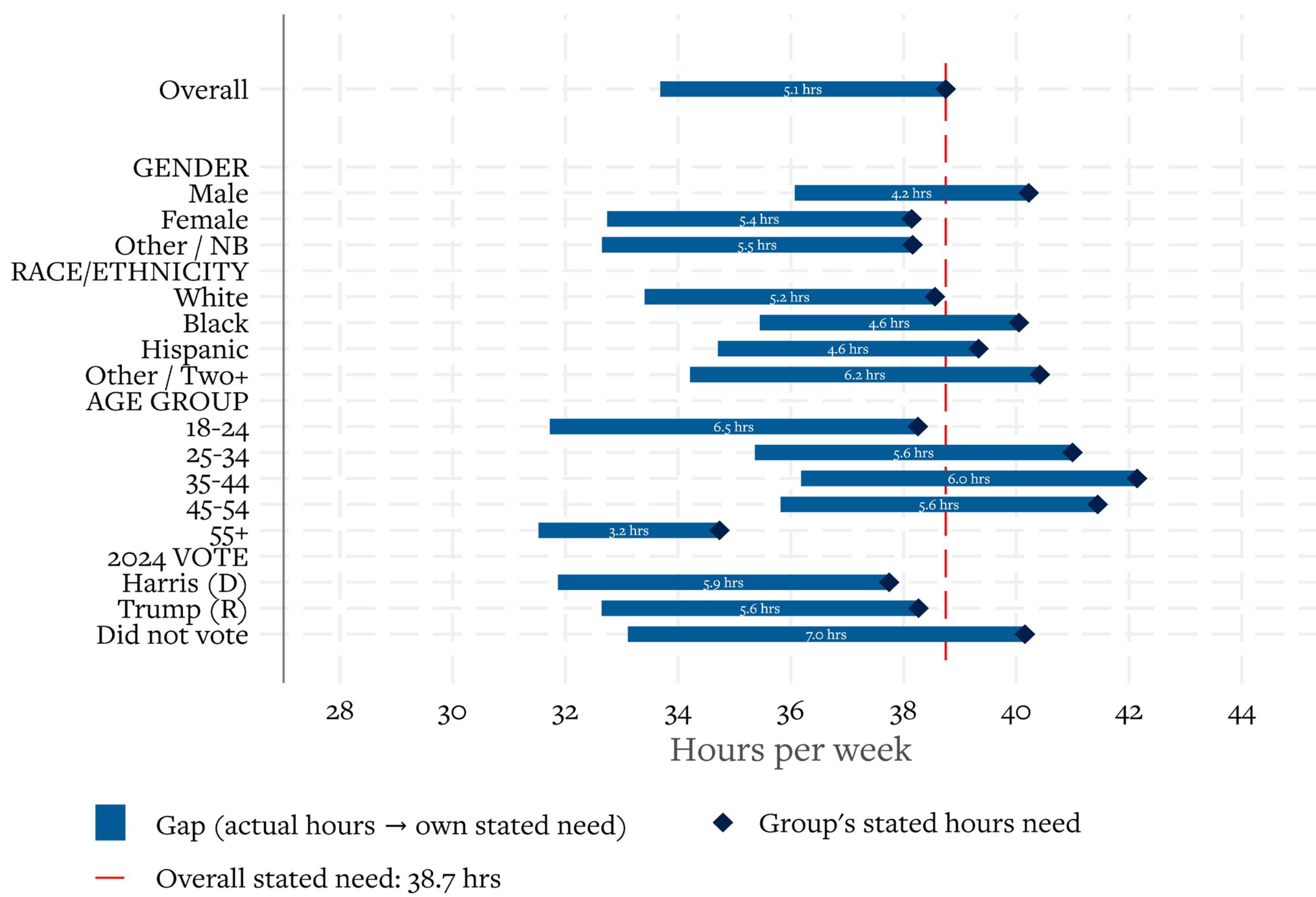
N = 2,473. Bars = 95% CIs. Orange bar shows overall mean ($24.37/hr wages; 38.7 hrs/week desired).

Workers Are Falling Short

How many hours workers actually get and how much they are actually paid per hour falls far short of this sufficiency standard. On average, workers earn $7/hr less than the $24/hr they say it would take to make ends meet. On average, workers get 5 fewer hours a week than the forty they say are needed to make ends meet. These gaps hold across gender, race/ethnicity, age, and partisanship. The story is not one of some groups of workers in this sector doing comparatively well at the expense of others, but rather of millions of hourly service workers in a shared struggle to get the wages and hours they know it takes to get by.

Figure 5. Gap Between What Workers Say They Need And What They Get





~ 2,536 (workers with valid wage and hours data; varies slightly by item).

Who is Responsible Here? An Important Word of Caution

Raising the minimum wage works for workers. A vast body of rigorous research shows that when minimum wages go up, workers earn more, without negative consequences for overall employment (Cengiz et al. 2019; Dube and Zipperer 2024), and don't suffer from unintended consequences that lead employers to, say, cut benefits or worsen schedules (Dube and Lindner 2024). And research demonstrates that corporate beneficence in the shape of voluntary minimum wage increases that have been common in recent years are insufficient to achieve broad-based increases (Derenoncourt and Weil 2025).

But state and local minimum wages don't necessarily build political constituencies. One piece of evidence that should give us pause is that when we asked workers who thought their wages were unfairly low who was to blame, almost everyone blamed their employer, their manager, or their boss. But that doesn't translate into instant beliefs that better wages arose from public policies like the minimum wage or outside advocacy from unions or other organizations. Across the board, workers who thought their wages were fair overwhelmingly credited their employer, their manager, or their boss (50%), with just 10% crediting the government.

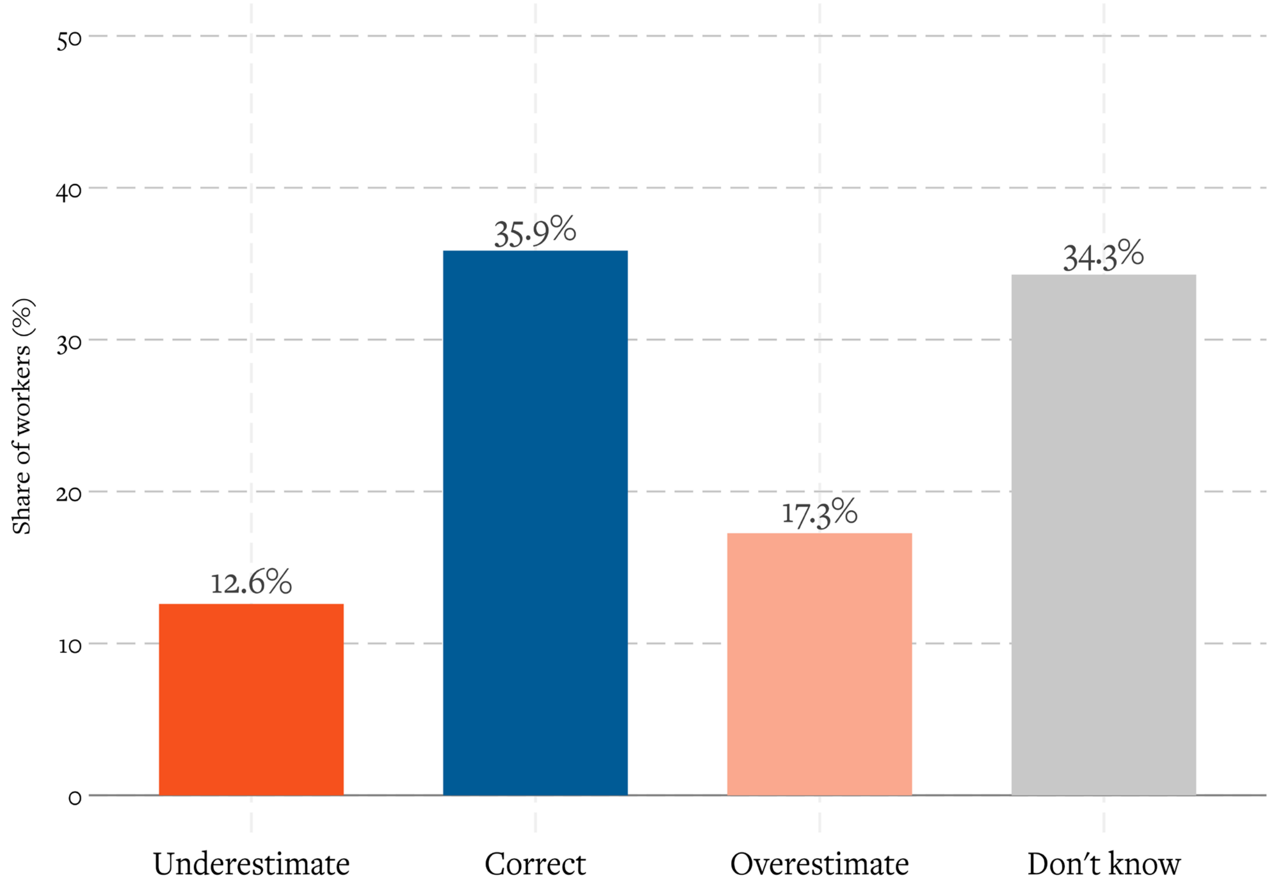
Under current conditions, even when the State requires employers to pay more via the minimum wage, workers still see their employer and not government policy as the responsible party. Whether it's because at the end of the day (or the week or the month), every workers' paycheck comes from their employer or because of the absence of clear communication about how government policies affect wages, it is the employer who gets the blame, and the credit.

We even see this dynamic in states and localities where workers have experienced recent large minimum wage increases. Comparing workers in the cities and states that have recently raised the minimum wage by at least $0.25 or 5%, versus workers for whom the minimum wage remained stable, workers who credit government for their wages being fair rose by just 7 percentage points – from 6% to 13%. In other words, recent minimum wage increases make workers more likely to credit the government for wage fairness, but only a little more likely.

We suspect that part of what is going on here is that many workers lack good information about prevailing minimum wages and so don't connect this progressive effort to raise the floor to what shows up in their paycheck. Based on where respondents in the survey worked, we assigned them to their prevailing minimum wage – the highest of the local, state, or federal. We then compared that to what workers reported they thought was the prevailing minimum wage. Overall, 36% of workers got the minimum wage about right – at least within $0.25 of the actual. But, about 13% thought the minimum wage was lower than it actually was, 17% thought it was higher, and 34% simply reported that they did not know the prevailing minimum wage.

Workers' knowledge of the prevailing minimum wage is even lower exactly when elected officials have acted to raise the minimum wage. Rather than increases in state and local minimum wages driving awareness, it appears that workers' knowledge doesn't keep up with shifting labor standards. While 46% of workers get the minimum wage about right when it has been static, just 26% do so when there has been a recent large change in the minimum wage. These results suggest that future minimum wage and related policies need to consider worker knowledge about standards and rights rather than take that for granted.

Figure 6. Minimum Wage Knowledge: Worker-Reported vs. Actual Minimum Wage



N = 7,382. Underestimate = below −$0.25 of true MW; Correct = within ±$0.25; Overestimate = above +$0.25.

Conclusion

In the U.S. service sector, four out of five workers struggle to make ends meet. Rising prices have made the challenges of wage stagnation and insufficient hours even more acute. At a time of extreme political polarization, these economic realities have led to a remarkably strong consensus around the need for higher minimum wages across the political spectrum. Whether Harris voters or MAGA supporters, the vast majority of workers support a $15 minimum wage but also agree that even $15 per hour is not nearly enough. Across the partisan divide, workers told us that it would take at least $24 per hour to be able to make ends meet in this economy. Yet, these workers' actual wages fell far short of these levels. The yawning gap between what workers need and what they get is a shortfall of $7 per hour. Workers across the ideological spectrum also report falling short on the number of hours they need and the number of hours they get. A century ago, the labor movement fought to contain the work week to 40 hours. These days, the struggle is to raise the workweek up to the needed 40 hours.

The high level of consensus about the need and support for higher wages and more hours however comes with a notable political challenge for progressive policymaking efforts: Even when wages are increased by minimum wage legislation, workers still largely credit or blame employers for their wages, rather than the policies and movements that fought for wage increases. Part of that attribution arises from knowledge gaps about prevailing minimum wages. Many workers were unaware of the minimum wage they were entitled to, especially when wages had recently increased, suggesting a real need for campaigns to inform workers about their rights.

But more fundamentally, the connection between prevailing wage standards, employer practices, and ultimately paychecks is just too submerged and too opaque for credit to always be given where credit is due. And, workers may reasonably remain preoccupied by the daily economic realities arising from the gap between what they need and what they get, rather than spend time on attributing the gains that have been achieved to policymaking and advocacy.

Together, our findings show that a preponderance of workers need and want higher wages and underscore the need for continued efforts to ensure workers are aware of the rights they already hold.

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Acknowledgements

Funding for the collection of data used in this publication was provided by Workshop and Harvard Impact Labs. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the aforementioned organizations. We are grateful to Henri Jackson and Alessandra Soto for their assistance with this research.

Suggested Citation

Schneider, Daniel, David Weil, and Kristen Harknett. 2026. “What Do Workers Want and Need: Partisan Consensus on What it Takes to Make Ends Meet.” Shift Project research brief.

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