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Edited by David Leonhardt

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# A Record Drop in the Unemployment Rate for a Midterm Cycle

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**Justin Wolfers**

Midterm elections often end up serving as a referendum on the president's performance. Given this, I've been surprised not to hear Democrats more aggressively trumpeting the improving economy. After all, the unemployment rate has fallen by two percentage points since the last election, and at 5.9 percentage points it is far lower than many had foreseen two years ago.

The decline in unemployment is also the largest ever registered by this point in a midterm election cycle, since the Labor Department started keeping records in 1948.

And unlike in past recoveries, inflation remains muted. There's no sign that the good news on the unemployment numbers is causing bad news on the inflation front.

Of course, voters may be perceiving economic conditions differently. Despite the sharp decline in unemployment, employment growth has been less than spectacular. That slower employment growth partly reflects the fact that the baby boom generation is now approaching retirement, but many people still feel a lack of opportunity. Wage growth remains stagnant. And rising inequality means that fewer people are enjoying the fruits of our economic growth.

All of that said, the unemployment rate remains a pretty good indicator of our economic anxieties. And by any measure, there's much less cause for economic anxiety than there was two years ago. Despite being a dismal scientist, I think there may even be cause for optimism.

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