When an MSNBC interviewer asked David Brat, the economics professor at Randolph-Macon College who toppled Eric Cantor in a primary challenge Tuesday, whether he opposed the minimum wage, he responded on Wednesday, “Um, I don’t have a well-crafted response on that one.”

The political class is billing it as a gaffe. But Mr. Brat’s fellow economists would probably be far more generous.

Assessing the evidence on the effects of the minimum wage is a tricky business, and the evidence isn’t strong enough to support the certainties that pundits seem to demand.

A recent survey of leading economists by the University of Chicago’s Initiative on Global Markets makes the point. The survey asked 38 economists — who run the spectrum from left to right — whether they agreed that “raising the minimum wage to $9 per hour would make it noticeably harder for low-
skilled workers to find employment.” Not one of them strongly agreed, and not one strongly disagreed.

About a third thought that such a wage rise would cost jobs; a third thought it wouldn’t; a quarter were uncertain; and the remainder didn’t respond. Sure, this isn’t exactly the same question posed to Mr. Brat. But the larger point is illustrated by the disagreement in the survey: There was a hidden consensus — that there’s a great deal of uncertainty about the issue. When each of these economists was asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 10 the confidence with which they held their view, the average score was 5.

Admitting to being uncertain on an issue isn’t a gaffe; it’s a mark of intellectual honesty.

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