

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1quksFa>

Edited by David Leonhardt

Follow Us:

Get the Upshot in your Inbox

The Upshot
EVERYDAY ECONOMICS

An Honest Answer From David Brat

JUNE 11, 2014

Justin Wolfers

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.

Justin Wolfers is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and professor of economics and public policy at the University of Michigan. Follow him on Twitter at @justinwolfers.

The Upshot provides news, analysis and graphics about politics, policy and everyday life. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.