

\$1,100. Medicare benefits worth \$640 are automatically included.

The system breaks down in the appeals process, according to the authors. Nearly two-thirds of initial applications are denied because the applicant is found not to be totally disabled. More than 83 percent of the denials are appealed, most with the assistance of lawyers who specialize in disability litigation. Appeals are made, first, to an alternate team of evaluators, then, successively, to an administrative law judge, the Social Security Appeals Council, the U.S. District Court, and finally the U.S. Court of Appeals. The Social Security Administration, which cannot be represented by a lawyer in the appeals hearings (the judge is supposed to represent both the applicant and the public interest simultaneously), loses nearly three-quarters of the appeals. In 1997, the last year for which figures are available, the government paid nearly half a billion dollars to attorneys representing disability applicants.

What has changed since the disability program began is not the incidence of poor health and injuries, but the nature of the labor market, the authors believe. Jobs for low-skilled workers are disappearing, and workers who would have been able to find something two decades ago are now unemployable.

Disability insurance reform has been tried and failed. When the system ran out of money in 1977, eligibility criteria were tightened and 380,000 beneficiaries were tossed off the rolls. The backlash was overwhelming, prompting Congress to establish the current system of far easier access for significantly more numerous impairments.

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

Ready, Set, Agree

THE SOURCE: "Do Economists Agree on Anything? Yes!" by Robert Whaples, in *The Economists' Voice*, Nov. 2006.

"I'M TIRED OF ECONOMISTS who say, 'On the one hand . . . and then on the other hand,'" complained President Harry S. Truman when his fiscal advisers were waffling, as usual. "Send me a one-armed economist."

Today, Truman might get a straighter answer. Economists, despite appearances in the media to the contrary, overwhelmingly agree on a surprising number of issues, according to Robert Whaples, chair of the economics department at Wake Forest University.

They agree on free trade, the freer the better, Whaples found in a survey of 84 Ph.D.-holding economists selected randomly from the ranks of the American Economic Association. Tariffs and agricultural subsidies should go, as should subsidies to professional sports franchises. Two out of three economists favor vouchers that parents can use for either private or public schools; four out of seven would junk the U.S. Postal Service's remaining monopoly on mail delivery. Six out of 10 believe that the United States should broaden its use of nuclear power and increase energy taxes. Nearly half favor the elimination of the minimum wage. Eight out of 10 think that the gap between Social Security income and payout will become unsustainable in 50 years unless policies are changed.

Of four possible ways to fix Social Security—raising the retirement age, cutting benefits, moving to mandatory personal accounts, or boosting payroll taxes—there is widespread, if tepid, accord. More than 75 percent of economists agree that an increase in the retirement age (now 67 for those born after 1959) is the best plan, but very few "strongly agree."

But even halfhearted consensus collapses over the impact of rising levels of greenhouse gases on the economy. On that issue, the economists' views were scattered like birdshot. The largest single cluster of economists (36 percent) thought that allowing greenhouse gases to increase throughout the century would have little economic impact. About 21 percent of those surveyed thought that increased greenhouse gases might reduce gross domestic product by one to five percent. More than 16 percent thought that such a situation might *increase* GDP by the same amount. The issue, Whaples writes, is so complex that the question on greenhouse gases had the lowest response rate in the survey.

Most professional economists recognize that great swaths of economic turf have been conquered by one argument or another. But the public watching a televised debate between two economists on the elimination of the estate tax, for example, might wonder what *most* economists think, writes Whaples. More than 60 percent are opposed, but on the other hand, 35 percent are in favor.