

# According to a Top Economist

## Economist, Expert, or just an Influencer?

Whether a headline from the morning newspaper, a magazine cover story, or the introduction for an evening television news segment, a familiar generic teaser is frequently, “Economist says that . . .” or more specifically, “Economists are dialing back recession risks.” Rarely do sociologists, anthropologists, or other social scientists garner this much media attention.

In addition, there is an implicit assumption or understanding that the person being featured is delivering an important objective message of a scientific nature that reflects his or her academic standing, leadership position in a government agency, or go-to status for reporters. And yet, perusing several of these entries, one would find that the emphasis and conclusions vary substantially across the CNN line-up v. Fox News Channel programs, *The Washington Post* v. *The Wall Street Journal* coverage, and from different sides of the Congressional aisle.

### BY ALLEN R. SANDERSON

And, of course, the cited authority figure or household name could actually be employed at a Federal Reserve Bank, the US Treasury, or another cabinet position in the Biden administration, at a prominent think tank or leading university in this country, where espousing a particular point of view is de rigueur. And, the topic could be inflation, the labor market, a tax proposal, interest rates, an antitrust action, income or wealth inequality, climate change, cryptocurrencies...

This economist featured may in fact be referring to research findings considered in the realm of “positive economics.” That is, what scientific objectivity, making assumptions and analyzing data produce rather than “normative economics,” which emphasizes the “ought” rather than the “is” and reflects differences in the scholar’s values and personal preferences. One is an economist acting as a scientist, the other serving as a paid policy adviser and touting a given point of view.



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It is on this proverbial “other hand” where economists disagree and hold such varying opinions. The annual Nobel Prize(s) in economic sciences is awarded for the former not the latter. But even there we still have the familiar canard that “economics is the only field in which two people can share a Nobel Prize for saying opposing things,” which has happened on more than one occasion since its debut in 1969.

Last Winter Quarter, perhaps out of ennui or desperation, I asked the following midterm exam question of my Principles of Macroeconomics students: “Suppose your best friend or sibling were taking this same course right now at Berkeley, UMass, Yale, or Stanford. How would it have been different from what we covered and you learned from me here at the University of Chicago?” Could students understand that what is treated and promulgated in New Haven is not the same as in Hyde Park?

(There would be far more agreement about what would constitute the truth among these classroom highlights in basic microeconomic principles or international trade than with the role of the central bank, the value or fiscal policy stimuli, or concerns about wealth inequality.)

Rather than watching *The View* and paying attention to the cast or scripts, in

today’s world perhaps one needs to pay more attention to what is being sold—explicitly by the program’s advertisers and hosts, or implicitly by the social media influencers. And, it is worth pointing out that economists are not immune from such opportunities to advance their own profile or income. Academic researchers or top government or industrial officials may purposely mislead their audiences by becoming public influencers in their own right if it furthers their careers. It would be hard to argue that this phenomenon has not had its influence in economics and on economists.

In closing, worth noting is that 2023 is the 300th anniversary of the birth of economics—or capitalism (Adam Smith, the recognized founder of the discipline, was born in 1723 in Kircaldy, Scotland). For readers intent on gaining some factual knowledge and intellectual underpinnings about the field, where it’s been and where it’s headed, here are a few recommendations: Harvard’s N. Greg Mankiw’s bestselling and largely objective *Principles of Economics* text; two much shorter popular paperbacks by Charles Wheelan, *Naked Economics* and *Naked Statistics*; and the classic coverage of the lives and ideas of great economists by Robert Heilbroner in *The Worldly Philosophers*. □