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Johnson opposes minimum wage -- except for guest workers

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U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson says he's "100 percent supportive" of a minimum wage for immigrants coming to America for a guest worker program but opposes a federally mandated minimum wage for all.

"The only area that I would agree with minimum wages is in immigration reform, for the guest worker program," Johnson told a WisPolitics.com luncheon Wednesday in Milwaukee in response to an audience question. "I'm 100 percent supportive of a minimum wage, kind of industry specific, maybe regionally specific, for guest workers, so that we're not creating incentives for employers to bring in immigrants to lower the price of labor."

Johnson said various Senate bills have suggested a minimum wage for guest workers of more than \$10 an hour and was open to that. But Johnson, a Republican from Oshkosh, argued that "the guest worker program is totally different from the general economy."

"In the general economy, if you get government involved in making market decisions, first of all, they're going to get it wrong," he said. "A minimum wage will actually reduce the number of jobs available. What you don't want to do, if you're concerned about poverty, if you're concerned about providing opportunity, you don't want to rip the bottom rung of the ladder of opportunity away from people."

The best way to drive up wages is to create a robust economy, Johnson said.

Johnson also told a physician in the audience he doesn't believe in appropriating federal funds for researching various diseases, "no matter how heartwrenching."

Asked by the physician how to improve Americans' health, especially those living in poverty, Johnson cited his contempt for government involvement in health care.

"Here's some unpopular votes," said Johnson. "I don't ever vote to allocate funds to a select disease. As heart-wrenching as it is, whether it's autism, or whether it's ALS or whether it's heart disease or breast cancer, I just don't think 535 members of Congress have got the knowledge. ... We shouldn't be politicizing allocation of scarce research dollars."

With the exception of the National Institutes for Health, which Johnson said he supports, he said the "huge promise in medicine" lies with the private sector.

"You just don't find (a) Steve Jobs in the federal government, you just don't," said Johnson. "I've been really impressed with the federal workforce, I really have. ... But the motivation factor in government just isn't what it is in the private sector," said Johnson.

Johnson, who based his 2010 Senate campaign on fighting the Affordable Care Act, said he no longer advocates repealing Obamacare, explaining, "I don't engage in strategies to achieve an unachievable goal. "

Johnson said his current stand is not a retreat. "It's just recognizing reality. People are on Obamacare right now. What are you going to do? Just repeal the law and what happens to those people?"

Johnson defended his maverick stands on student loans and veterans care.

He said he voted against a recent bill to address delays in veterans medical care because he was told, minutes before the vote, that the program would end up costing \$435 billion over 10 years, not \$620 million, as purported.

"We can't vote for a whole new entitlement," he said.

Johnson said he voted against a bill to allow refinancing of federal student loans because he believes such measures unwisely entice too many young people to rack up college debt.

"Do we want middle income families, say, blue collar workers whose kids aren't going to college, they're just working at nice factory jobs like I provided at Pacur, are we going to take their taxpayer money and pay for scholarships or grants to kids from, let's face it, families who are far more affluent?" he asked, referring to the Oshkosh plastics company he ran.

Johnson also said he supports the U.S. Supreme Court decision to allow Hobby Lobby to deny contraceptive coverage to employers, saying it preserves religious freedom.

But Johnson said he always provided contraceptive coverage for his employees at Pacur and that the ruling wouldn't have affected his business.

[*Listen to the full luncheon.*](#)

*- By Kay Nolan
For WisPolitics.com*