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ARTICLE

The social legitimacy of basic income: a multidimensional and cross-national perspective. An introduction to the special issue

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Abstract

In this special issue, authors present and discuss the findings of a series of recent national and EU cross-national empirical studies on public support for basic income. As such, the special issue offers new and innovative insights on such support and its individual and contextual drivers. The articles employ heterogeneous data and methods and therefore, as a whole, navigate the multi-dimensional nature of (opinions on) basic income. Three of the contributions use unique survey data to study the levels of support for basic income among various European populations and the complex ideological and social divides that explain such support. The other two contributions use qualitative data, from democratic fora, focus groups and in-depth interviews, to explore how citizens interpret basic income and what types of arguments they use in favour or against the implementation of the policy.

Keywords: Basic income; public opinion; multi-dimensionality; welfare state

The politics of basic income: a new research agenda

An idea with a rich historical heritage; the last few years have seen an exponential rise in interest in a (universal) basic income in political and media circles and beyond (Widerquist, 2017). In 2016, Switzerland held a national referendum on its introduction after a popular initiative received the required 100,000 signatures. In January the following year, the Finnish government launched a 2-year nationwide experiment testing the effect of a €560-a-month basic income on 2,000 individuals who had been long-term unemployed. Subnational governments in Canada (most notably the province of Ontario), the Netherlands, Spain, and Scotland have also started or are planning similar experiments, each with a slightly different design and focus. These all follow experiments with unconditional cash transfers in developing countries, such as India and Namibia, which have continued into the present, involving NGOs. For example, the non-profit organization GiveDirectly is currently running a 12-year experiment with basic income in 44 villages in Kenya. This model of philanthropic basic income experiments is also being replicated in the US, where tech entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley have thrown their weight behind attempts to test the policy.

In many cases, a dramatic spike in public interest has ended in failure for basic income advocates, at least in the short-term. For example, only 23 per cent of Swiss voters backed the proposal in the referendum, the Ontario experiment was cancelled by a new government 2 years earlier than planned, and the Finnish government decided not to expand its initial trial. Prominent cases of political actors expending political capital by throwing their weight behind a basic income proposal, such as Benoît Hamon's 2017 Presidential campaign in France, have also resulted in electoral failure. Thus, despite

abundant interest across the world, there remain some doubts as to the political feasibility and social legitimacy of a policy as radical as a basic income.

Until recently, most academic research on basic income has addressed normative or descriptive questions, reflecting the prominent attention of philosophers and economists. The work of van Parijs (1991, 1995), whose defence of a basic income was rooted in a theory of justice, has stimulated a lively debate among political theorists about freedom, reciprocity and exploitation (Bidadanure, 2019). Economists have focussed on the fiscal and distribution consequences of a basic income, as well as the expected effect on the labour market (Browne & Immervoll, 2017; Martinelli, 2017). However, as basic income has gained an increasing level of policy attention, so too have questions of political feasibility and social legitimacy (De Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012). The availability of cross-national survey data on public attitudes to basic income, most notably in Wave 8 of the European Social Survey (2016), has also reinforced this area of research.

Given the radical implications of introducing a basic income, results of recent survey evidence, which show high support across Europe, have been somewhat surprising. Figure 1 shows the percentage of European Social Survey respondents that indicate (strong) support for basic income by country. It shows that support rates are over 50 per cent in 13 out of the 23 countries surveyed. While there is majority support across different welfare regimes, including countries as diverse as the UK, Finland, Russia, Belgium and Portugal, support for basic income at the country-level is inversely related to the size of the existing welfare state (Lee, 2018; Vlandas, 2019). Similarly, the level of economic insecurity and deprivation within a country is also associated with support for basic income. Indeed, material deprivation may be a better explanation of support as the significance of social expenditure drops out when both deprivation and expenditure are included in a model (Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020). These findings hint at the importance of taking a cross-national perspective on the social legitimacy of basic income.

Other studies have focussed on individual-level determinants of support for basic income (Chrisp & Martinelli, 2018; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020; Vlandas, 2019). This has supplemented earlier studies that used national data to explore which groups were most receptive to the idea (Andersson & Kangas, 2004;

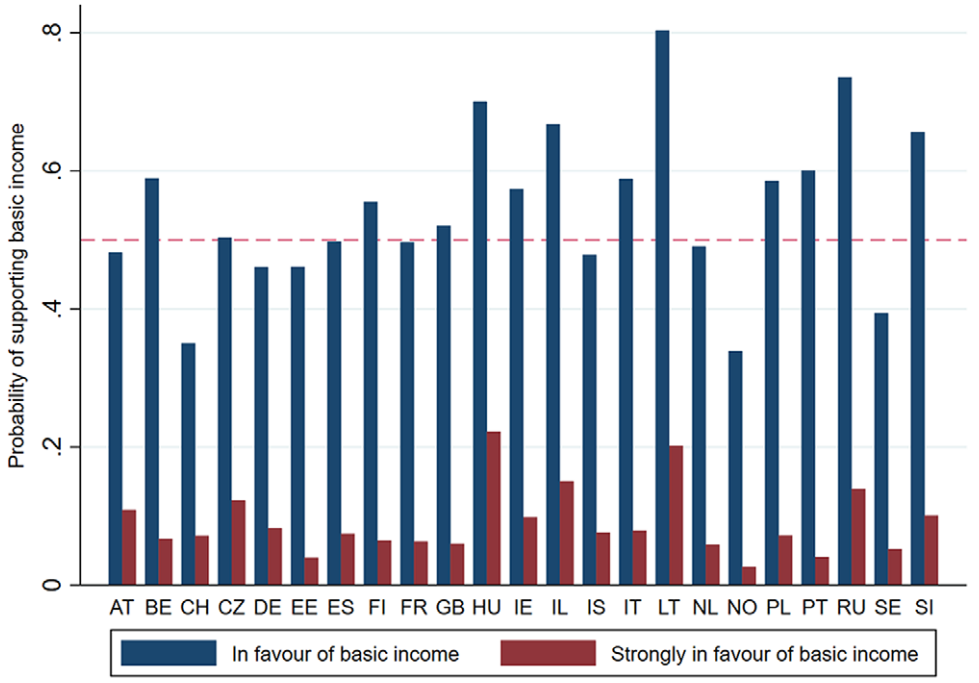

Figure 1. Support for basic income across 23 European countries (European Social Survey 2016, design weights applied).

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Bay & Pedersen, 2006). Most of these studies find that socio-economic vulnerability, whether due to low-income, labour market risk or benefit receipt, is associated with higher levels of support for basic income. Young people are also particularly supportive. Support for basic income also correlates with several other measures of welfare state support, as well as support for redistribution in general and self-placement on the left of the political spectrum. Roosma and van Oorschot (2020) argue that support for a basic income is related to a desire to simplify the system as well as to guarantee a minimum level of income security to all deprived citizens. On the other hand, opposition to a basic income appears to be connected to a logic of (un) deservingness, whereby social protection should not be given to those who can cater for themselves (the need criterion of the deservingness logic) and without any obligations (the reciprocity criterion).

Nevertheless, there are many reasons why assessing the social legitimacy of basic income is likely to be more complicated and requires further empirical scrutiny. For a start, basic income is still a hypothetical policy reform, which has not been fully implemented, meaning that there is ambiguity surrounding the public's interpretation of survey questions. Yet, the most important reason is that basic income as a policy idea is multi-dimensional, which means public support for the abstract idea may not translate into support for specific models of basic income that could be implemented. All the articles in this special issue attempt to grapple with this element of a basic income, which is explained in more detail in the next section.

The various dimensions of a basic income: "disarmingly simple" or "Janus-faced?"

To many, the appeal of a basic income is that it is a "disarmingly simple" policy (van Parijs, 1992): an unconditional income for every individual. Its simplicity promises to provide greater security to recipients and reduce bureaucracy for the government. However, a basic income would also be a radical departure from existing social security arrangements in most countries, given the reliance on all three levels of conditionality in contemporary welfare states[1] (Clasen & Clegg, 2007). First, unlike other "universal" benefits, a basic income would not be restricted to certain categories of people, such as children or pensioners. Second, it would be an individual entitlement, rather than means-tested or modulated at the household-level. Third, entitlement would not be conditional on either past work–related activity (eg. contribution record) or current activity (eg. job search requirements). Relatedly, a basic income would be flat rate and non-withdrawable, unlike most social insurance benefits, which are earnings-related and withdrawn as individuals enter work. Finally, the cash received as a basic income would not be earmarked for specific purposes, such as in the case of housing benefits, childcare credits or food vouchers. These multiple innovations mean that as the idea of a basic income meets the empirical reality of existing welfare provisions, the journey to implementation becomes more complex. Advocates must explain how they will reform entrenched social security systems and which existing benefits a basic income will replace.

This is one of the key reasons why a basic income is so often described as multi-dimensional (De Wispelaere & Stirton, 2004). As with many other policies, a basic income can vary in terms of the level it is paid at, its eligibility criteria[2] and how it is funded. However, it is not just that the policy can be set at the poverty line, at one end of the spectrum, or set at a tokenistic level, at the other. It is also that a basic income's different features (or dimensions), such as its unconditionality, universalism or uniformity, all represent significant innovations to existing arrangements, and thus any one of these features may be emphasized and prioritized by different potential advocates and opponents. Empirically, this makes it challenging to identify which dimensions of a basic income are critical in determining individual support for the policy, particularly when analysing a single survey question. Politically, it also presents a challenge to advocates that seek to transform notoriously sticky institutional arrangements (Pierson, 1996). As a result, pragmatic "stepping-stone" policies or "cognates" that deviate from a pure basic income add to the variety of schemes that fit under the family of basic income policies (De Wispelaere & Stirton, 2004). Under this wide umbrella of basic income schemes, advocates may

[1]Of course, even a "pure" basic income would have some conditions attached, related to either citizenship or residency.
[2]The oft-cited definition does not specify whether it is given to all residents or restricted to citizens (van Parijs, 1995).

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include negative income tax or participation income and even in-work benefits or guaranteed minimum income schemes.

This flexibility in the precise policy features of a basic income lends itself to ideological fluidity. Basic income can be framed as a policy to incentivize work or to hasten a post-work economy. Indeed, the recent political interest in basic income has been driven by both concerns about labour market incentives, as in Finland (Kangas, Simanainen, & Honkanen, 2017), and fears of automation and the end of work (Hughes, 2014). Similarly, basic income can be advocated as a way to strengthen the bargaining power of labour (Wright, 2004) or to enable labour market regulation to be dismantled (Bowman, 2016). This means that support for basic income may not conform to existing theories of welfare state attitudes, with many advocates arguing that basic income is "neither left nor right" (Chrisp & Martinelli, 2019). Calnitsky (2018) describes it, thus, as a "Janus-faced policy proposal": if we want to understand the nuances of public support for basic income, we may need to explore its various dimensions in more detail rather than focussing on a general description.

Two recent contributions to the academic literature on public support for basic income have directly addressed the multi-dimensionality of a basic income using conjoint survey experiments (Rincón & Hiilamo, 2019; Stadelmann-Steffen & Dermont, 2019). This methodological approach facilitates an analysis of which dimensions of a basic income are the most attractive to respondents. However, while these two papers provide vital evidence to this debate, this special issue includes a series of alternatives available to explore these questions from a different angle.

The social legitimacy of a basic income: the special issue

In this special issue, we present and discuss the findings of a series of recent national and European cross-national empirical studies on public support for basic income. As such, the special issue offers new and innovative insights on such support and its individual and contextual drivers. The articles employ heterogeneous data and methods and therefore, as a whole, navigate the multi-dimensional nature of (opinions on) basic income. Three of the contributions use unique survey data to study the levels of support for basic income among various European populations and the complex ideological and social divides that explain such support. The other two contributions use qualitative data, from democratic fora, focus groups and in-depth interviews, to explore how citizens interpret basic income and what types of arguments they use in favour or against the implementation of the policy.

First, Chrisp, Pulkka and Rincón review a list of past survey results, with a focus on recent surveys conducted in the UK and Finland. They find that, broadly speaking, overall levels of support for basic income are high but can vary considerably. The authors argue that survey design and whether a *model* of basic income is specified explains a large part of the variation. Using new survey data in both the UK and Finland, the paper compares the levels and determinants of support for various models of basic income. They find that public support for the idea is fragile and susceptible to "wilting" when more details about the scheme are provided or the costs are specified. In both the UK and Finland, "cognates" of basic income, such as participation income, are more popular. Finally, different models of basic income do not necessarily attract the same groups of people, particularly in the UK where left-wing partisans are more supportive of schemes funded by taxes and right-wing partisans support those that result in cuts to benefits or a participation income.

The second paper of the special issue by Schwander and Vlandas directly addresses the role of ideology in determining support for basic income. To probe the question of why the left is divided on the issue of basic income, the paper theorizes and analyses the empirical relationship between different strands of left ideology and support for basic income in Europe. The authors point to three strands of the left, the Labourist Left, Libertarian Left and Social Investment Left, which correspond to three distinct critiques of capitalism, namely concerns about exploitation, repression and inefficiency, respectively. They theorize that the precise nature of these critiques should explain variation in support for basic income within the left. Using a sub-sample of European Social Survey data to focus exclusively on left-wing individuals, they find that, contrary to their expectations, concerns about exploitation are positively correlated with

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support for basic income, while repression concerns are *negatively* correlated. Inefficiency concerns are also positively correlated with basic income support. The authors suggest that the contradiction between theoretical expectations and empirical evidence calls for more extensive research on the left's support for basic income and the specific characteristics that attract supporters, given that it is unlikely that any government would implement a basic income without the support of the left.

The third contribution, by Simanainen and Kangas, exploits a unique dataset from the Finnish basic income experiment carried out between 2017 and 2018. Directly responding to the issue that basic income is mostly a hypothetical reform for respondents in surveys, the paper provides evidence of support for basic income among individuals that have actually received a basic income. Using data from a telephone survey carried out near the end of the experiment comparing attitudes among those receiving a basic income (the treatment group) and a similar group of people not receiving one (the control group), the findings suggest that participation in the experiment increased support for a basic income. The treatment group were also less likely to be unsure of their opinion. The article also explores the heterogeneity of the effect among different groups.

Moving onto the qualitative analysis, the fourth article, by Rossetti, Roosma, Laenen and Abts, uses in-depth interviews to examine the arguments underneath popular opinions towards basic income in the context of the Dutch welfare state, which recently became the site of a fierce clash between two social policy schemes that are diametrically opposed to each other in terms of work conditionality. On the one hand, the workfare-based "*Tegenprestatie*" allows municipalities to oblige social assistance recipients to perform unpaid, socially useful activities in return for the benefits they receive. On the other hand, a number of municipalities – including the city of Tilburg, where the in-depth interviews were gathered – have initiated so-called "trust experiments" that relieve social assistance recipients from all work-related duties and thereby approximate the basic income idea (which is why they are also known as "basic income experiments"). The findings suggest that respondents' arguments underlying opinions towards basic income and work conditionality can be classified into two major groups. First, they frequently make use of deservingness criteria referring to characteristics of welfare recipients, such as their need and work willingness. Second, they justify their opinions using arguments related to characteristics of welfare schemes, such as their administrative and financial feasibility. These findings are an important source of inspiration for survey researchers examining opinions towards basic income in the broader population and for political actors trying to build (or erode) public support for concrete policy proposals.

Finally, Zimmermann, Boljka, Rakar and Hrast use data from democratic fora and focus group discussions to analyse people's arguments for supporting (or opposing) basic income as an option for a future welfare state. By comparing debates in Slovenia and Germany, they find that the participants' perspectives towards basic income are strongly shaped by the welfare institutions of the countries in which they live and the social justice principles embodied in those institutions. In Germany, participants clearly followed logics typical of the conservative, Bismarckian welfare regime, by using ideas of merit and reciprocity as main arguments against the universality and unconditionality of basic income. Also, in Slovenia, the principle of reciprocity was to some extent used to oppose equality of outcomes under a basic income system, thereby reflecting the conservative tradition of the national welfare state. At the same time, however, the Slovenian participants strongly endorsed the principles of universalism and unconditionality, which are rooted in the collectivism of the past socialist system.

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Notes on Contributors. Joe Chrisp recently completed his PhD on the political economy of basic income in Europe at the University of Bath, having studied at the University of Oxford and the University of Bristol. He is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen, Norway. His research interests span various themes in public policy, comparative politics and welfare states and is currently working on a project examining the growth in public consultations across EU member states. Tijs Laenen is postdoctoral researcher at KU Leuven (Belgium) and coordinator of the 'Basic Income in Belgium' project (BABEL). His main research interest and expertise lies in studying popular attitudes towards

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differently targeted and differently organized welfare state policies. Wim van Oorschot is Professor of Social Policy at the Centre for Sociological Research of KU Leuven (BE). His main interest is in the relationship between culture, as reflected in popular welfare attitudes, and social policy.

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