

(this page has been intentionally left blank)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC BY 4.0) license, which means that you are free to copy and distribute this work in any medium or format, granted that you give appropriate credit to the author(s).

For more information, see

<https://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>.

ISBN 978-94-6485-128-1

DOI 10.26116/6AH3-KK57

Design and Typesetting by Thomas F. K. Jorna

Publishers of Trial & Error

This dissertation has been funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) through a research talent grant. The awarded project was titled “Unravelling the Basic Income Debate” with project number 406.18.531. The data collection required for this project was subjected to ethical review by the Ethics Review Board at Tilburg University and approved under references RP583 and TSB_RP54. The data used in this project are archived and publicly available (partly upon request) in the Tilburg School of Social and Behavioural Sciences Dataverse (<https://doi.org/10.34894/0VEH4V>).

Published by Open Press Tilburg University,
Tilburg, the Netherlands
<https://www.openpresstiu.org>



© 2023 Erwin Gielens.

From Crackpot Idea to Mainstream Debate

The Public Debate and Popular Support for
Universal Basic Income in the Netherlands

Proefschrift ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan
Tilburg University op gezag van de rector magnificus,
prof. dr. W.B.H.J. van de Donk, in het openbaar te
verdedigen ten overstaan van een door het college voor
promoties aangewezen commissie in de Aula van de
Universiteit op woensdag 28 juni 2023 om 16.00 uur door

Erwin Eduard Christiaan Gielens
geboren te Helmond

Supervisor

Prof. Dr. Peter Achterberg

Co-supervisor

Dr. Femke Roosma

Leden Promotiecommissie

prof. dr. I. Marx (Universiteit Antwerpen)

prof. dr. M. Yerkes (Utrecht Universiteit)

dr. J. de Wispelaere (Stockholm school of economics)

prof. dr. R.J.A. Muffels (Tilburg University)

prof. dr. W. van Lancker (Leuven University)

prof. dr. P. Leifeld (Essex University)

Contents

	List of Figures	7
	List of Tables	9
1	Introduction	19
1	1 The Revival of Universal Basic Income	19
2	2 Legitimizing a Radical Policy Proposal	21
3	3 A Dual Perspective on Legitimacy	23
4	4 Research Design	35
2	Dimensions of Controversy	37
	<i>The Structure of Popular Support for Universal Basic Income</i>	
1	1 Introduction	38
2	2 The Dimensionality of UBI support	41
3	3 Data and Methods	48
4	4 Results	52
5	5 Conclusion: Ambiguous but Coherent	61
3	More than a Free Lunch	67
	<i>A Content Analysis of Universal Basic Income Controversies on Dutch Twitter</i>	
1	1 Introduction	68
2	2 UBI debate in the Netherlands	70
3	3 Data and Methods	73
4	4 Results	77
5	5 Conclusion: Fundamental Critiques	87

4	Between Left and Right	91
	<i>A Discourse Network Analysis of Universal Basic Income on Dutch Twitter</i>	
1	Introduction	92
2	The Dutch UBI debate in context	96
3	Data and Methods	98
4	Results	104
5	Conclusion: The Struggle over Interpretation	115
5	Constructing Constituencies?	119
	<i>How the “Struggle Over Interpretation” Affects the Structure of Popular Support for Universal Basic Income</i>	
1	Introduction	119
2	The Struggle over Interpretation	123
3	Persuading Constituencies	125
4	The Role of Prior Knowledge	129
5	Data and Methods	130
6	Results	133
7	Conclusion: Sober up	138
6	Conclusion	141
1	Summary of results	141
2	The Main Takeaway	148
3	A Way Forward	155
7	Endnotes	159
8	References	163
A	Appendices	179

List of Figures

1.1	Monthly volume of newspaper articles and tweets mentioning Universal Basic Income	20
1.2	Conceptual Overview	24
2.1	Conceptual overview of theorized political controversies underlying UBI support	41
2.2	One-dimensional model of UBI support	42
2.3	Two-dimensional model of UBI support	44
2.4	Three-dimensional model of UBI support	46
3.1	Daily volume of tweets and replies mentioning Universal Basic Income	71
3.2	Adoption frequency of arguments per controversy	79
4.1	Daily volume of tweets and replies mentioning Universal Basic Income	100
4.2	Adoption frequency per concept	103
4.3	Example of a connection in the actor-network based on the underlying arguments (one-mode projection)	104
4.4	The clustered actor-network	106
4.5	Discursive positions of each cluster	108
4.6	Concept-network of the UBI debate on Dutch Twitter	112
5.1	The influence of competing frames on political polarization of UBI support (estimated simple slopes)	136
5.2	The influence of prior knowledge on political polarization of UBI support (estimated simple slopes)	137
A.1	<i>Appendix B3</i>	187

A.2	<i>Appendix C4</i>	196
A.3	<i>Appendix E4: Day 1</i>	198
A.4	<i>Appendix E4: Day 2</i>	199
A.5	<i>Appendix E4: Day 3</i>	200
A.6	<i>Appendix C5</i>	203

List of Tables

2.1	Descriptive statistics of UBI aspect indicators	51
2.2	Goodness-of-fit indices of hypothesized models (CFA) .	54
2.3	Estimated factor loadings and correlations of the modified three-dimensional model of UBI support	55
2.4	Constrained factor loadings and unconstrained factor correlations per educational stratum	58
2.5	OLS regression estimates of background characteristics on dimensions of UBI support	60
2.6	Unique influence of support for UBI dimensions on vot- ing behaviour	61
4.1	Preliminary expectations	95
4.2	Proportion of political elites endorsing each substantive position	114
5.1	Arguments illustrating how UBI policy both clashes with and divides political ideologies	125
5.2	Descriptive statistics	133
5.3	OLS regression of competing frames and prior knowledge on support for UBI policy	134
A.1	<i>Appendix A2</i>	179
A.2	<i>Appendix B2</i>	180
A.3	<i>Appendix C2</i>	180
A.4	<i>Appendix D2</i>	181
A.5	Arguments mentioned in each episode of Tegenlicht . .	184
A.5	<i>Continued</i>	185
A.5	<i>Continued</i>	186

A.6 *Appendix C3* 188

A.6 *Continued* 189

A.6 *Continued* 190

A.7 *Appendix A4* 191

A.8 *Appendix A5* 201

A.9 *Appendix B5* 202

Preface

The idea of writing a book was extremely scary to me. I cannot imagine having achieved this milestone without the help of my supervisors, prof. Peter Achterberg and dr. Femke Roosma. They were there to give substantive advice, but more importantly, they made big things small, encouraged me to follow my ideas, and got me back on my feet when I got lost. I know I still owe you a few gin-tonics. Special thanks go out also to my partner in life, Marjan, who helped me to stay sane during lockdowns, and helped build the ideas put forward in this book. Thank you for listening. This is also true for my friends at the Tilburg University Department of Sociology, especially the Juniors. Thank you for the outstanding company during summer schools, conferences, lunch breaks, after-work drinks and for all the help in these past four years. I will see you in Kraków. Finally, I want to thank my family. They helped me escape the academic bubble and put my work – small as it is – into a broader perspective. I dedicate this work to all of you.

Publieke samenvatting

De discussie over het verstrekken van “gratis geld voor iedereen” is in het afgelopen decennium wereldwijd opnieuw opgelaaid. Een onvoorwaardelijk basisinkomen voor iedereen heeft enorme gevolgen voor de bestaande sociale zekerheid: een enkele uitkering vervangt een waaier aan regelingen en toeslagen, de controle op uitkeringsfraude en ook de werkplicht verdwijnt. De invoering van een echt basisinkomen lijkt voorlopig ver weg. Maar het feit dat dit voorstel überhaupt aandacht krijgt en zelfs een rol speelt in de hervorming van beleid opent de deur naar een frisse kijk op verzorgingsstatelijke politiek. Sociaal beleid wordt blijkbaar niet alleen bepaald door onderhandelingen achter gesloten deuren, tussen gevestigde belangengroepen zoals politieke partijen, vakbonden en werkgevers. Journalisten en activisten spelen schijnbaar ook een actieve rol in de totstandkoming van hervormingen. Dit proefschrift bekijkt zowel het politiek-maatschappelijk draagvlak voor het basisinkomen en de discussie op (sociale) media in Nederland, om te achterhalen hoe het basisinkomen een geloofwaardig alternatief werd voor de bestaande sociale zekerheid.

De conclusie van dit proefschrift is drieledig. Allereerst toon ik aan dat draagvlak voor het basisinkomen onder zowel politici als burgers nauwelijks verandert. De politieke kleur van voor- en tegenstanders van het basisinkomen is nauwelijks veranderd sinds de vorige discussie in de jaren 80 (H4). De burger ziet daarnaast dezelfde issues in het basisinkomen als in de bredere verzorgingsstatelijke discussie: de eerlijke herverdeling van inkomens, het gevaar van uitkeringsfraude en het recht op een uitkering (H2). Burgers laten zich bovendien nauwelijks beïnvloeden door argumenten van voor- en tegenstanders, zelfs wanneer ze weinig weten van het beleidsvoorstel (H5). De veranderende

geloofwaardigheid van het basisinkomen lijkt dus weinig te maken te hebben met verschuivingen in het politieke landschap.

In plaats daarvan wijs ik naar de wisselwerking tussen media en (lokale) politiek. De geloofwaardigheid van het basisinkomen heeft alles te maken met de manier waarop het voorstel zelf is veranderd. Het basisinkomen is een paraplu-begrip dat veel verschillende voorstellen – soms met omgekeerde uitkomsten – schaart onder dezelfde noemer. Waar het basisinkomen in de jaren 80 vooral draaide om bestaanszekerheid, draait de recente discussie om het vereenvoudigen van het stelsel en het effectief terugdringen van uitkeringsafhankelijkheid (H3;H4). Het basisinkomen vond opnieuw ingang als een “gederadicaliseerd” voorstel dat aansluit op bestaande beleidsdoelen rondom activering en participatie.

Tegelijkertijd verandert de basisinkomen-discussie ook mede het denken over hetzelfde activeringsbeleid. In de basisinkomen-discussie (en de daaropvolgende experimenten met een regelarme bijstand) worden activerende verplichtingen zoals de tegenprestatie juist gezien als een bron van stress en wantrouwen (H3). Het loslaten van sancties en verplichtingen wordt in plaats daarvan gepresenteerd als een alternatieve vorm van activering. Hiermee heeft de discussie bijgedragen aan de toegenomen aandacht voor de “menselijke maat” in de bijstand. Het basisinkomen heeft zich daarmee in de discussie dus aangepast aan de bestaande beleidsdoelen, maar geeft tegelijkertijd ook een nieuwe invulling aan het begrip activering, en werkt zo door in de ontwikkeling van sociaal beleid.

Summary

Over the past decade, the proposal for an Unconditional and Universal Basic Income (UBI) has gained credibility in policy-making circles, to the surprise of many welfare state scholars. The UBI proposal is “disarmingly simple” but implies radical reforms to existing social security: to provide all citizens with a regular cash benefit with no strings attached – provocatively called “free money for everyone”. In this dissertation I set out to investigate the remarkable shift in the credibility of UBI, apparently turning from a “crackpot idea” to a legitimate policy alternative. This comprehensive study includes both popular support and public debate: whereas popular support is thought to enable and constrain the formation of policy coalitions, the legitimacy of the proposal is also constructed in public (media) debate. I employ a mix of data and methods to explore the legitimization of this radical policy proposal.

The main takeaway of this work is threefold. First, the popular support for UBI is remarkably stable and coherent: constituencies and key demographics are remarkably unambiguous in their support for and opposition to UBI (see Chapter 2), and are not so easily convinced of the competing arguments that are put forward in the public debate (see Chapter 5). Instead, when forming opinions on the UBI proposal, constituencies fall back on the familiar conflicts of social justice that characterize welfare politics – who deserves what and under which conditions. This contradicts the multidimensional perspective on UBI policy, which holds that support for UBI policy is ambiguous because the public is conflicted in their support for various aspects of the proposal. This finding also goes against some framing studies, which argue that frames strongly influence popular opinion. Instead

of support being highly ambivalent and fickle, my analyses show that constituencies draw on the historical conflicts that characterize welfare politics when forming opinions on the UBI proposal. Much like the political coalition for UBI, popular support for UBI is largely gridlocked in institutionalized welfare controversies, a landscape of welfare compromises and frozen conflicts that is hard to change.

Rather than seeking the legitimization of UBI in voter dynamics, my work suggests that the credibility of UBI should be sought in the “struggle over interpretation” in public debate. My analysis of the UBI debate on Dutch Twitter shows a reframing of the radical proposal in terms of activation of and social investment in the unemployed (see Chapters 3 and 4). While the automation narrative is perhaps the best known ‘discursive innovation’ in the UBI debate – envisioning a utopian world without human labour – the role of automation in the Twitter debate has been relatively marginal. UBI proponents instead pushed arguments on activation and deregulation to the centre of the debate: the broadly shared critique of inefficient and perverse welfare bureaucracies – including activation policies – was leveraged to justify a more cooperative and trustful approach to social assistance. On the one hand this turn to social investment shows that the UBI debate shifted away from the radical utopian ideals endorsed by some proponents, towards the accepted language of social investment. On the other hand, the turn to social investment can also be viewed as a gradual step towards the revolutionary ideals underlying the radical case for UBI. The public policy debate seems to have played an important part in justifying a more positive approach towards activating the unemployed, and may over time – with continued attention – amount to a fundamental transformation of power relations embedded in the welfare state.

The ambiguity surrounding UBI and the corresponding lack of political entrenchment seem to have facilitated the social investment turn in the UBI debate. In contrast to many other social policy issues, the proposal can be framed to suit the interests of almost every party on the political spectrum in one form or another. Throughout my work I find that societal elites and the general public are equally ambivalent

towards UBI, both in their ambiguity towards the proposal (Chapter 2) and in their response to competing frames (Chapter 5). While this conceptual flexibility is often presented as an obstacle to the formation of political coalitions, it can also be seen as a strength. In the third chapter of this dissertation I show in detail how proponents framed UBI as “beyond left and right”. While this strategy failed in building a cross-partisan political coalition for the proposal, the ambiguity did allow the framing as a social investment policy. Without strong commitments from political parties and with a range of arguments available, policymakers were able to leverage the momentum for UBI to start experiments with unconditional social assistance under the guise of activating the unemployed. Without the ambiguity in its framing and the division amongst political elites, the policy experiments would have been more likely to strand in the gridlock of welfare politics.

While there is a particular disconnect between public debate and popular support, the public debate at least seems to have some influence on the policy process. Over the course of its legitimation, perhaps thanks to its conceptual flexibility, the concept of UBI was ‘deradicalized’ to fit with the dominant welfare paradigm on activation and social investment. Simultaneously, the ideas about activating the unemployed are also gradually shifting from sanctions and incentives towards cooperation and trust. To build on the analogy by Wright (2012): a fish may alter the ecosystem, but the ecosystem also alters the fish. UBI had an impact on the policy process that may build over time, but the radical wings of the UBI proposal have been clipped as the proposal was fitted into the dominant paradigm of targeted activation. Time will tell whether the genes of UBI are strong enough to make a lasting impact on the social policy discourse.

I Introduction

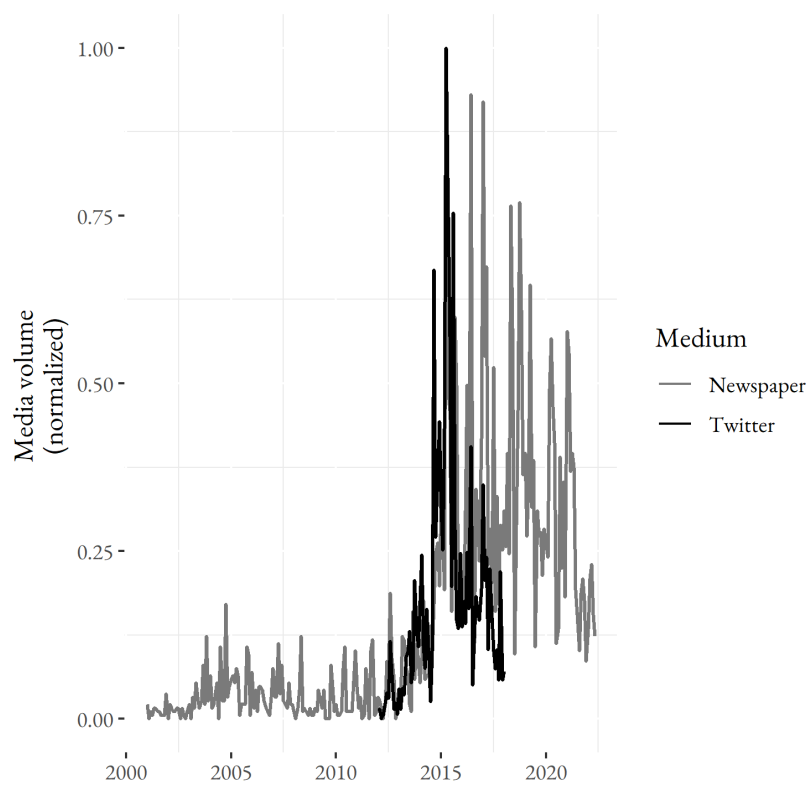
“A pond contains many species of fish, insects, and plants. Sometimes an alien species is introduced to an ecosystem and it thrives; sometimes it does not.”
(Erik Olin Wright 2012:9)

I • THE REVIVAL OF UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

The debate surrounding a universal and unconditional basic income (UBI) has witnessed a remarkable revival in recent years. In the aftermath of the financial crisis the radical welfare reform proposal suddenly gained attention in the media across the western world (e.g. Perkiö, Rincón & van Draanen 2019). Activists brought UBI to a vote in a binding referendum in Switzerland and set up a citizens’ initiative to implement UBI on a European level (Liu 2020). The UBI proposal was featured as a flagship proposal in several political campaigns, most notably in the United States presidential primaries (Yang 2018), and amongst the elected populist parties in Spain and Italy (Bickerton & Accetti 2018:134; cf. De Wispelaere 2016:133). Policy experiments with unconditional social assistance popped up across Europe (Bollain et al. 2019), including in Finland (Kangas 2021), Barcelona, Scotland, and the United States (Rhodes 2018). Even the international policy organization OECD expressed its interest in a policy brief (Browne & Immervoll 2017).

The Netherlands has witnessed a particularly active and consequential revival of the UBI discussion. Following an earlier peak of interest in the 1980s (Groot & Van der Veen 2000), the discussion was revived

FIGURE 1.1 Monthly volume of newspaper articles and tweets mentioning Universal Basic Income



Sources: Newspaper articles retrieved from LexisNexis Academic database in May 2021. Tweets retrieved from the Twitter search engine in January 2018.

by fringe journalism (Tegenlicht 2014) and amplified by Twitter audiences. Figure 1.1 shows a surge in attention around 2015, which stays strong for several years before receding. Groot and Van der Veen (2000) have compared the cycle of attention for UBI to a “peat fire” that reignites in times of high unemployment. This time around, however, in response to the media attention for UBI and the public push

for experimenting with such a policy, a dozen of Dutch municipalities started “basic income inspired” experiments with unconditional social assistance (Groot, Muffels & Verlaet, 2019:280; see also Van der Veen 2019). In many municipalities, these experiments marked a loss of faith in the effectiveness of “stick and carrot” incentives and seem to have set the stage for a more positive approach to supporting and enabling the unemployed (Roosma 2022).

In conjunction with the revival of the discussion, also the community surrounding UBI has become more international and specialized. The UBI proposal has transformed from what was seen as “yet another crackpot idea of the radical left” (De Wispelaere & Stirton 2004:266) to a proposal increasingly discussed – although not always endorsed – by welfare state scholars. Before the turn of the century, the UBI proposal ignited a philosophical debate, sometimes with activist tendencies, on whether or not unconditional and universal benefits constitute some form of social justice (e.g. Van Parijs 1991; for an overview see Widerquist et al. 2013). In recent years, an increasing number of scholars are tending to specialized questions with empirically informed answers such as the redistributive implications of UBI (Hoynes & Rothstein 2019; Browne & Immervoll 2017), policy experiments that test the behavioural effects of unconditional transfers (e.g. Groot, Muffels & Verlaet 2019), the formation of political coalitions (De Wispelaere 2016; Roosma 2022) and the popular support for UBI reforms (e.g. Roosma & Van Oorschot 2020).

2 • LEGITIMATING A RADICAL POLICY PROPOSAL

The surge in attention for the UBI proposal came as a surprise to many scholars of the welfare state. The welfare debate in Europe has revolved around targeting and activation for decades (Gilbert 2002; Taylor-Gooby 2008; Hemerijck 2018). Such policies intend to manage the structural and financial pressures facing social security (see Laenen, Meuleman & Van Oorschot 2020) in ways generally seen as socially just: by targeting welfare provision to deserving groups such as the poor and disabled while incentivizing labour market re-entry amongst