



Factors Influencing Canadian Public Opinion Toward Basic Income: A Critical Review of Literature

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ABSTRACT

The disruption to employment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and introduction of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit has reignited debate about Canada's social safety net and the welfare state in general. The idea of a basic income is not new but has never been implemented at a federal or provincial level. This paper critically examines some of the literature on basic income in Canada as it relates to public opinion on such a policy in theory. There are many academic arguments both in favour of and opposed to basic income, but significantly less research is available on levels and variance of voter support for such a benefit. Most of the literature synthesized is broadly focused on a basic income framework, basic income support in Europe and attitudes toward social assistance in Canada. Drawing almost entirely from peer-reviewed journal articles, this review considers some of the key economic and moral themes surrounding a hypothetical basic income. It also explores how variables, such as region and income, as well as the use of specific terminology in political communication, influence public perception of various social assistance schemes. From a policymaking lens, it is evident that further research - and further education on the part of the public - is required for a clearer understanding of a post-COVID Canadian perspective on basic income.

Keywords: Basic income, welfare, public policy, public opinion, literature review

Introduction

Even before the pandemic, many academics, policymakers, and politicians have floated the idea of a universal basic income (hereafter referred to as 'basic income') to address the precarity of the working poor and people living on fixed incomes (disabled, unemployed, or senior citizens).

There is substantial research on basic income in Canada, but very little about public opinion toward it. Like Roosma and van Oorschot (2020) and one of the few opinion polls available (Angus Reid Institute, 2016), Calnitsky pins the presumed failure of basic income adoption on its ambiguity: “Insofar as popular opinion is a collection of many conflicting interests, support is likely to shatter on the rocks of the policy details” (2018, p. 269). In its current incarnation – i.e., a notional cash transfer without precedent in Canada or elsewhere – basic income is an intangible concept not only to citizens but also to policymakers. The constitution of any future basic income program is a topic of discussion predominantly found in advocacy efforts and the occasional op-ed, rather than legislative or consultative arenas. Consequently, it is unlikely that many voters feel informed enough to strongly support or oppose any such program.

After feedback and a preliminary review of literature, I modified my initial research question, “*What is the level of voter support for a means-tested guaranteed minimum income for Canadians above 18 years of age and does it vary across income levels and provinces?*” to exclude the second independent variable (region) and the means-tested qualification. As demonstrated in this paper, several variables have been shown to impact support for basic income outside Canada and welfare within Canada and this cannot always be decoupled from political theory. To qualify the research question at this stage would add unnecessary complexity to an already obscure topic.

Key Debates and Themes

What basic income would look like in practice is the subject of much uncertainty and academic inquiry. Empirical analysis is largely drawn from similar social security programs, such

as welfare, and thus transposed partially in some hypotheses. A review of literature shows that the key debates, and consequently, the major influences on public opinion, focus on economic impacts (government expenditures, taxes, existing social benefits, and the labour market) and ideological or value-based arguments (how framing and metaphors shape public opinion, the moral character or 'deservingness' of recipients).

Government Economics, Labour, and Basic Income

In addressing the costs of a prospective basic income, many scholars consider any scheme that would raise government expenditures or taxes to be politically inexpedient. Kesselman (2018) argues the financing of basic income in Canada would disproportionately burden middle-income taxpayers and be less efficient than other anti-poverty measures. Stevens and Simpson (2018) counter this with the argument that existing benefits and non-refundable tax credits can be adjusted to 'self-finance' a basic income to address poverty more efficiently than existing benefits. Such academic discord would no doubt replicate itself in the public sphere, especially since rhetoric on what is best for low-income people is often crafted in charitable terms. For example, Clavet et al. (2013) belong to the camp that argues that basic income keeps people poor, rather than increasing incomes.

While employability is used less frequently as an argument against basic income, the effect of a basic income on recipients' *desire* to work is shown to be negligible. This is predicted by some to be the case even in a post-COVID context (Segal et al., 2021; Ståhl & MacEachen, 2021). In Calnitsky's (2018) analysis of Canadian and American business opinion toward basic income, it is the spectre of a potentially smaller labour pool and disincentivization of paid work

that accounts for opposition to basic income. Some view voluntary disengagement from paid labour as a danger of basic income, while, for those espousing conventional jobs as simply a means to an end, it is a benefit to society if people can reject low-paying, unsatisfying and demeaning work (Widerquist, 2001). If we were to view support for basic income using Widerquist's seminal texts, public opinion would fall somewhere on the spectrum between self-actualization (freedom) and material self-interest (survival).

Basic Income and The Welfare State

Using data from the European Social Survey Round 8, Roosma and van Oorschot (2020) and Baranowski and Jabkowski (2021) found broad assumptions about the effect of region, political orientation, class and, to a lesser degree, age and gender, on support for basic income were mostly correct, and in line with classic theories about self-interest, egalitarianism, and personal security (2021). In their two hypotheses, Baranowski and Jabkowski's independent variables were economic stability of a country, *as judged by region* (i.e., northern or southern Europe) and socioeconomic status according to the European Socioeconomic Classification or ESeC (2021). They observed an inverse relationship between income or labour market position and support for basic income, while region had less bearing (Baranowski & Jabkowski, 2021). Interestingly, Alberta showed similar results in Gazso and Krahn's (2008) analysis of public opinion toward social assistance, where income and support were inversely related.

Stereotypes, Government Rhetoric and Public opinion

Another European perspective comes from Legein et al. (2018), whose mixed methods experiment on French-speaking Belgian university students analyzed the influence of "cognitive

linguistics,” in particular how policies are framed and assigned metaphors. The authors found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the use of metaphors in informative texts created to shape public debate on basic income can influence opinion (Legein et al., 2018). Matthews and Erickson (2008) similarly draw attention to the “language of public opinion theory” (p. 428) as applied to both selective (employment insurance) and universal welfare programs (health care and pensions) - to endorse the hypothesis that the latter attracts far more support. Although there is a paucity of comprehensive research on the *degree* to which class affects support for the continuum of means-tested government assistance to universal benefits, the authors speculate that self-interest conditions middle-class recipients’ acceptance of universal entitlements for which they are eligible, such as health care, whereas direct cash transfers to the poor that are labeled redistributive are seen as less justifiable (2008).

In the Canadian context, prejudicial attitudes were observed when the recipients of cash benefits were portrayed as minorities, specifically Indigenous Peoples (Harell et al., 2014). Roosma and van Oorschot (2020) found similar attitudes toward immigrant and refugee recipients of a hypothetical basic income in Europe. The Alberta study also found that the government’s characterization of welfare recipients as flawed, making poor life choices, and undeserving of support led to further stigma (Gazso & Krahn, 2008). Most of these findings line up to some extent with social, political and economic theories and left-right divisions surrounding the lengths to which government should go to prevent extreme inequality - specifically, invocation of deficits and other budgetary language to curtail reliance on so-called “handouts” (p. 156). However, the full range of rationalizations for and against basic income is difficult to

synthesize using any research method. The debate around basic income is more nuanced than can be gleaned from any number of charts or graphs.

Theory and Methodology in the Literature

That being said, for policymaking and evaluation purposes, it is more efficient to measure public opinion quantitatively, and the authors cited in this paper largely stick to those methods. If there is a role for qualitative research in exploring public opinion toward policy, it is likely to be fraught with suspicion. In a historical analysis of the landmark 1970s MINCOME experiment in Dauphin, Manitoba, Forget (2011) notes a distrust by quantitative researchers of ethnographic methods used to assess the societal impact of the pilot.

Calnitsky (2018) also used qualitative methods to retroactively assess social stigma experienced by recipients of the Manitoba social experiment (2016) and employed content analysis to analyze business opinion toward basic income. It is sometimes necessary to cross the limits of empiricism and interpret interpretations; the mixed methods approach used by Legein et al. (2018) is helpful in understanding how language can alter the public's perception of a proposed policy. Such a constructionist approach is, however, unlikely to be taken seriously at a high level, given the time and cost constraints associated with qualitative research.

Research Gaps and Justification

Europe presents an interesting case study, as its economic, geographic, and cultural diversity in some ways mirrors that of Canada. While research on European public opinion toward basic income shows theories of self-interest and rational choice to be in effect to some extent, to

extrapolate it to Canada would be to overlook vastly different histories, and economic and social conditions.

It is therefore worth asking for a post-COVID Canadian perspective on basic income. While a large-scale restructuring of the social safety net is unlikely anytime soon, widening inequality, particularly regarding housing affordability and wages, is certain to generate debate on current levels of income support and assistance.

Research from Europe and Alberta shows a negative relationship between income and support for basic income. Data showing lower support for basic income in countries with higher social expenditure lead Roosma and van Oorschot (2020) to conclude that “in generous welfare states, there seems less reason to support an alternative social model” (p. 202). This would be an interesting hypothesis to test in Canada by replacing European countries with provinces and measuring social spending levels against support (beyond the scope of this paper). It might complicate data collection, but it would provide a clearer picture of Canada’s fiscal diversity by region.

Discussion and Conclusion

For the purposes of public administration in general, a quantitative approach to determining public opinion on basic income is the most sensible starting point. It is clear, however, that attempting to gauge public opinion on a non-existent program using quantitative methods requires a set of clearly defined questions (or statements in a Likert scale) to avoid presenting basic income as binary. Among authors who are both supportive and critical of basic income proposals in Canada, there is an agreement that public opinion - whether for or against basic



income - is uninformed. Most policy questions are not black and white - it is therefore crucial to strike a balance in designing a research project that recognizes this. It is equally important not to read, without further research, a lack of support for basic income as a repudiation of an expanded social safety net in general. As Kesselman (2018) observed, those who are skeptical toward basic income may well emphasize that existing cash transfers and programs be reformed or supplemented with in-kind transfers or tax credits. This echoes Roosma and van Oorschot's (2020) earlier description of basic income as an "alternative social model" (p. 202) and introduces yet another hypothesis worth testing.

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Appendix A. Keywords and Search Process

| Keywords | Authors | Database (via Novanet) | Subject areas |
|--|--|--|---|
| Basic income AND Canada AND opinion OR policy | Calnitsky (2018) Roosma & van Oorschot Legein et al. Baranowski & Jabkowski | JSTOR SAGE Journals | Sociology Social policy Basic income Economics |
| Canada AND COVID AND basic income AND opinion OR public opinion OR support | Segal et al. | JSTOR | - |
| Canada AND public opinion AND welfare | Gazso & Krahn | Project Muse Premium Collection | Canadian studies |
| Canada AND welfare AND support | Harell et al. | Taylor & Francis CRKN Social Science and Humanities | Ethnic and racial studies |
| Guaranteed income AND Canada AND opinion OR support | Matthews & Erickson | Wiley Online Library | European politics |
| Minimum guaranteed income AND Canada | Clavet et al. Stevens & Simpson Kesselman | JSTOR | Canadian public policy |
| Cited in other sources | Forget Calnitsky (2016) Ståhl & MacEachen | U of T Press Journals Canadian Research Knowledge Network SpringerLink Current Taylor & Francis CRKN | Canadian public policy Sociology Occupational |

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|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Widerquist Angus Reid poll | Social Science and Humanities | rehabilitation Economics |
|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|

I accessed Novanet through Dalhousie libraries and limited my search to peer-reviewed journal articles to ensure credibility and authenticity. I deviated from this strategy only to include the Angus Reid poll. While not an academic source, it is one of the few formal polls on Canadian public opinion toward basic income and therefore warrants inclusion. I found the poll through a journal article and did not use Google or any other non-academic search engines at all.

I was initially skeptical of FACETS Journal, as the article by Segal et al. (2021) seemed light on quantitative data and the journal itself is relatively new and lacking in scholarly prestige. As well, Hugh Segal is a former politician and, to my knowledge, not an academic or researcher. That does not discredit his work or ability, as he has been one of the most prominent political figures calling for a basic income. However, it was the credibility of his co-authors that convinced me to include the article. FACETS is an open-access journal, which seems positive in terms of improving accessibility, but I am unsure of how its standards are viewed in academic circles.

Upon realizing most of the research on basic income was centered on its effectiveness and behavioural and economic impact rather than public opinion, I expanded my search to include public opinion on social assistance and welfare in Canada, to see what parallels exist.