

AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino

**From Utopia to (Social) Policy Option? Attitudes Towards Basic Income and Welfare Legitimacy in Europe**

**This is the author's manuscript**

*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1722060> since 2021-03-15T11:52:57Z

*Published version:*

DOI:10.1424/94247

*Terms of use:*

Open Access

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)

# **From utopia to (social) policy option? Attitudes towards basic income and welfare legitimacy in Europe**

**Sandro Busso, Antonella Meo, and Tania Parisi**

University of Turin

## **1. Introduction**

Basic income, namely a universal and unconditional cash transfer addressed to all citizens independently from their economic and social conditions, is certainly not a new idea, since throughout modern history it cyclically emerged through the thought of intellectuals and politicians of very different orientations. Today, however, as stated by Van Parijs and Vanderborght «the conjunction of growing inequality, a new wave of automation, and a more acute awareness of the ecological limits to growth has made it the object of unprecedented interest throughout the world» (2017, p. 1). Such a visibility grew together with a polarization of the arguments concerning income support – and, more broadly, the welfare systems – that was boosted by the 2008 financial crisis. On the one side, indeed, the growth of poverty rates and the widespread feeling of vulnerability fostered the demand for greater social protection, and in many cases increased the spending in cash benefits for unemployed people (Taylor-Gooby *et al.* 2017). On the other side, the renewed attention for budgetary deficits determined a growing support for the austerity packages introduced in various countries, often including welfare cuts (*ibid*), putting under considerable stress the legitimacy of social expenditure, increasingly depicted as inefficient and addressed to non-deserving people.

The idea that these different perspectives can shape the support for a universal and unconditional cash transfer is at the basis of the research presented in this article, which aims to investigate the relation between the agreement for a basic income scheme and the broader attitudes towards welfare state.

Although several studies analysed the two dimensions, the link that binds them has rarely been explored. This relevant gap witnesses the fact that basic income has always been placed at the margins of the mainstream debate on social policies, which has more often dealt with existing models of income support, characterized by a categorial and means-tested nature, as well as by a strong conditionality. To put it simple, basic income is often treated as a «utopia»<sup>1</sup> rather than as a policy option, and therefore excluded from the concrete debate on the welfare state. It is exactly for this reason that it is

---

<sup>1</sup> As we will show in section 3, there is no contradiction in principle between utopian thinking and practical policy action. However, we refer here to utopia in its common sense meaning, namely that of a desirable though unattainable idea.

worth exploring the existence of a nexus between how basic income and welfare systems are perceived by the public opinion.

The article focuses on two specific research questions, driven by the underlying hypothesis that despite its increased visibility, basic income is still confined in the «realm of utopia». First, is the stance concerning basic income driven by principles about *justice* and *equality* more than by the *perceived consequences* of social policies? Second, is basic income judged in accordance to welfare attitudes, and therefore considered as a matter of social policy?

The research is based on the data derived from the 8<sup>th</sup> round of the ESS (2016-17), which includes a direct question concerning agreement on a basic income scheme and various items that can be used to describe welfare attitudes. ESS also allows for a comparative perspective at EU level, which cannot be disregarded since recent researches showed that the perceptions of welfare legitimacy vary consistently between countries (Kallio and Niemelä 2014).

Our analysis shows that despite the presence of a statistically significant relation between welfare attitudes and the perceived desirability of a basic income scheme, the support for the latter still holds a utopic nature. Indeed, such a relation varies consistently when considering the different dimensions of welfare attitudes. While the nexus with the principles that are at the base of welfare systems is applicable to all the countries observed, the one established with the evaluation of the consequences of social policies is weaker or absent. The comparative nature of the analysis also suggests a resemblance in the nature of the mechanisms underlying the formation of opinions across countries, which emerges despite the different level of approval for the basic income.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the existing studies on the attitudes towards basic income and welfare legitimacy, while section 3 focuses on the theoretical framework that shapes our research questions. The following sections are then devoted to explaining the research design (section 4) and showing the main results (section 5), that will be discussed in the conclusive section.

## **2. Literature review**

Basic income is a universal, non-means-tested transfer with no obligations or conditions attached, paid regardless of other income. According to Van Parijs, it includes, by definition, three characteristics. It is «a form of minimum income guarantee that differs from those that exist in various European countries, as it is paid to individuals rather than households, it is irrespective of any other income from other sources, without requiring any present or past work performance, or the willingness to accept a job if offered» (1992, pp. 1-2).

Popular support for this policy has rarely been investigated empirically. Most analysis on basic income has adopted either a normative (e.g. Van Parijs and Vanderboght 2017) or a descriptive (Torry 2016) approach. In the increasing debate at the academic and political level about the possibility of introducing basic income schemes across Western countries, the attention has so far been given mainly to arguments in favour and against, focusing mostly on issues of justice and feasibility. However, discussions on the pros and cons of a basic income have stayed mainly at the «*systemic level*» (Linnanvirta *et al.* 2018).

As a universalistic and unconditional scheme, basic income has been long represented as a plan for social justice, able to reconcile classical liberal concerns for freedom, efficiency and equality (see Meade 1995; Van Parijs 1995). Basic income supporters stressed that it provides economic security that is a precondition for self-determination and opportunity. Certainly, the most widely cited argument is that of social justice. Recently, however, basic income has also been presented in pragmatic terms as an attractive solution to specific dilemmas and problems related to contemporary labour markets and more traditional welfare policies, and supported with arguments dealing with cost-benefit and efficiency. In fact, unconditional transfers do not incur the costs of verifying and monitoring the eligibility conditions; they do not create poverty traps; and they might promote more autonomy and favour efficient choices in the educational and occupational careers (Barrientos and Lloyd-Sherlock 2002; Standing 2008).

Aiming to be a last-resort support for citizens facing unemployment and poverty, basic income can be seen as a radical extension of the welfare state commitment to ensure the economic well-being of all its residents. As mentioned, there have been comparatively few attempts to understand the constitutive elements and underlying dimensions of people's propensity for the introduction of a basic income scheme. As Lee (2018) noted «this is an important gap to fill because public opinion is a key element to transforming an idea into a public policy». Bay and Pedersen (2006), for example, investigated popular reactions to the basic income proposal in Norway, by considering them as an indicator of support for universalistic welfare policies. A considerable majority of the Norwegian respondents reacted positively to the idea of introducing a basic income, in line with the strong emphasis on universal entitlements and the provision of relatively generous minimum benefits that traditionally characterized the social security systems in Nordic countries. However, negative attitudes towards immigration reduced the scope of support among the Norwegian electorate. Mass immigration and ethnic heterogeneity seemed to be factors that can reduce the demand on social solidarity by abandoning redistributive universalism in favour of a strong focus on income replacement and insurance principles.

Although basic income has been seen as an answer to growing labour market risks and a policy for the precariat (Standing 2011), existing research has not indicated sufficiently whether those in disadvantaged positions in the labour market or facing insecurity would more likely support a basic income (Burgoon and Dekker 2010; Fossati, 2017). Based on survey and interview data, Linnanvirta, Kroll, and Blomberg (2018) explored the perceived legitimacy of a basic income among Finnish food aid recipients, who were assumed to be affected positively by this benefit. Generally, support for some kind of basic income was high, but not everyone supporting it embraced the idea of an unconditional scheme. Despite the likely *objective interest*, a basic income did not seem to be supported by economically vulnerable groups any more than by the general population. Besides interests, normative beliefs and perceptions of deservingness seemed important for legitimacy too.

Looking now at the vast literature on welfare state legitimacy, research analysed what principles and norms people consider important when thinking about a just distribution of life-chances in society, and how strongly they tend to apply these principles and norms when it comes to helping those in need. It showed that there may be «selectivists» and «universalists» or «conditional» and «unconditional» solidarists: people who tend to apply a number of norms quite strictly, and people who do not, or to a lesser degree (Van Oorschot 2000, p. 43). The analysis reflected the existence of two different pillars in the discourse about welfare legitimacy, the moral one and the economic one. Indeed, on one side the support for social policy was attributed to a humanitarian attitude (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001) and to the idea of social justice (Lund 2002), defined in Rawls' terms as «a moral conception worked out for a specific kind of subject, namely, for political, social, and economic institutions» (1985, p. 224). On the other side, the need for a welfare state was affirmed on the basis of its relevance for economic growth, according to a Keynesian perspective (Esping-Andersen *et al.* 2002), and often as a matter of government spending, rather than of individual rights (Jacoby 2000).

The two different approaches to welfare legitimacy are not mutually exclusive, as in many cases individuals may consider social policies as an instrument towards achieving economic development through social justice. However, a value-oriented support for the welfare system may be seen as an obstacle to the efficiency of government action.

Beside this dialectic, many studies focused on the factors that shape individual support for welfare systems, identifying a variety of dimensions related to the evaluation of existing policies and to more general socio-economic factors such as social trust (Gërkhani and Koster 2012). Among many analyses, the three-rationale identified by Van Oorschot and Roosma (2017, see also Laenen 2018) are particularly relevant for this article, namely self-interest, programme performance and deservingness. The first – self-interest – deals with the estimated level of personal gain that may derive from a particular policy or from the welfare system as a whole. The second – performance – concerns the

judgement about the effectiveness and the efficiency in achieving the goals. The third – deservingness – is based on the level of entitlement acknowledged to specific policy-targets. Although the idea of deservingness may be based on many different elements (Van Oorschot 2000), the misuse of services and fraud seem to be the real «Achille's heel» (Roosma *et al.* 2016) of welfare legitimacy.

The last ten years led to a partial reframing of the analysis on the legitimacy of social policies. If early research focused on the degree of consensus enjoyed by welfare systems, and on the factors influencing it (Chung *et al.* 2018), a new wave of research highlighted the multidimensionality of such a consensus, questioning the existence of an overall «welfaristic» attitude (Van Oorschot and Meuleman 2012). Although these studies constituted a minority (Roosma *et al.* 2013), their perspective is extremely useful for this study, since it introduces the intuitive but often neglected idea that «people may well support the welfare state in some respects but have fewer positive attitudes towards other aspects» (Svallfors 2011, p. 809). Overcoming the idea of welfare legitimacy *as a whole* appears even more compelling in the light of the paradigmatic shift that has occurred in the last twenty years in the field of social policies. Indeed, the success of the social investment model went along with a process of depoliticization and de-ideologization that allowed non-coherent evaluations on single issues and policies, based mainly on effectiveness and impact (Busso 2017).

Concerning the dimensions underlying welfare state legitimacy, there is a relative convergence in literature. The identification of such dimensions often starts from theoretical reasoning (Van Oorschot and Meuleman 2012) and is intensified through empirical analysis based on survey data. The recurrent dimensions deal with the principles on which welfare is based, the role of government in the provision of welfare, the implementation practices and the unintended outcomes (Bryson 1997; Roosma *et al.* 2013).

Use and abuse of welfare policies, as well as the welfare state effects and consequences, are subjects often neglected in studies on welfare state legitimacy, but over the last few years, more attention has been devoted to them. Roosma, Van Oorschot and Gelissen (2014) focused on the perceptions of the overuse and underuse of benefits, finding that these are driven by normative ideas and opinions about the administrative effectiveness of the welfare state. Popular perceptions of welfare legitimacy are also shaped by the possible consequences of the welfare, and especially by the unintended moral consequences that have been stressed by neo-liberals, who argued that benefits threaten the will to work and a sense of self-responsibility. Van Oorschot, Reeskens and Meuleman (2012) found that perceptions of welfare state consequences can be traced back to three main areas: negative economic, negative moral and positive social consequences. They found a strong positive correlation between both negative perceptions while perceptions of positive consequences stood alone. People are more strongly opinionated about the negative consequences than they are about the positive consequences.

Furthermore, in comparison with the positive consequences, there is less country-level variation in both negative perceptions.

### **3. Theoretical framework and research objectives**

The arguments in favour of a basic income scheme highlighted in the section above show how supporters' discourses swings from the domain of principles and values to that of feasibility and economic consequences. The alternation of these arguments constitutes the foundation of our first research question, which deals with the shift from an abstract agreement with the general idea of basic income to a more pragmatic approach that considers it as a viable policy option.

A closer look to the current debate seems to support the timeliness of such a research question. One of the main features of this phase of renewed visibility of the issue is indeed the existence of at least three different arenas – namely the scientific, the public and the political one – converging precisely on the need for a reinterpretation in terms of feasible and concrete alternative. Both successful books such as Van Parijs' and Vanderborght's (2017) and less known articles (among others, Painter and Thoun 2015, Reed and Lansley 2016, Woodbury 2017) clearly highlight this trend in the recent academic debate. Many scholars underline the need to reconnect More's Utopia and the thinking of XVIII's century intellectual such as Spence and Paine with the effort towards a practical implementation of «an idea whose time has come» (Reed and Lansley 2016, p.1). The underlying perspective goes far beyond the debate on income support, and calls into question the whole role of social sciences and sociology in particular, whose task should be that of formulating radical policy proposal based on utopian thinking (Van Parijs 2013). In this respect, utopian thinking should not be considered, as often happens in the public debate, as related to desirable yet unattainable objectives. On the contrary, it deals with how politics and discourses work, and more specifically with the complex relation between principles and factual issues. Utopian thinking considers options that usually stay outside the borders of the discursive space, and faces practical problems and factual issues guided by a valued-laden perspective (ibid.).

Moving outside the academia the discourse is more or less the same. In the US, books such as Lowrey's «Give people Money» (2018), or Stern's «Raising the floor» (2016) share the perspective that gives title to Bregman's work, translated in 20 languages, according to which the universal basic income should be considered a «utopia for realists» (2017). Finally, a recent speech by the Un Secretary-General António Guterres created a small opening also in the political debate. In September 2018, in fact, in an address speech to the assembly he invited the governments «to consider stronger social

safety nets, and eventually Universal Basic Income»<sup>2</sup>. The viability of basic income as a policy option is also supported by the existence of a few actual experiences such as that of Alaska and Iran or by the Dutch and Finnish experiments (Reed and Lowrey 2016).

Elements above highlights a very relevant point for our analysis, namely the fact that at least in principle there is no contradiction between utopian thinking and actual political activity, and that basic income «is already now far more than just a philosophical pipe dream» (Van Parijs 2013, p. 175).

However, the small extent of concrete experiences shows that the distance from visibility and agreement «in principle» and the factual dimension is still relevant. A clear example of the pitfalls hidden in the transition into the political arena comes from the Swiss case, where support for civil society organizations promoting a basic income grew rapidly and the petition calling for a referendum collected a high number of signatures in a short time. Nevertheless, when the vote took place in June 2016, the proposal was rejected with nearly 77% of the voters standing against the policy proposal.

Aside from the principle-feasibility nexus, the relation between orientation towards basic income and welfare attitudes can be observed by relying on another theoretical background, which deals with the positioning of basic income within the broader field of social policies. This perspective offers the premises for the second goal of our analysis that is to investigate whether the public opinion perceives basic income as a matter of social policies.

Although on an intuitive level the answer may appear obvious, at least three elements suggest that the issue requires greater problematization. First, basic income is not a measure aimed to combat poverty (Granaglia and Bolzoni 2016; Chicchi and Leonardi 2018), since it involves every citizen irrespective of their income level. Second, as suggested by Standing, «Basic income is not ‘welfare’ by another name; it is income» (2017, p. 23). Its aim, therefore, is to create a new income distribution system, providing citizenship with a «floor» of resources that can restructure the relation between work and revenues. Third, though a basic income can help reduce the fragmentation of welfare provisions, it does not require the abolition of existing benefits, and should be seen as complementary rather than alternative to welfare systems (Standing 2017; Chicchi and Leonardi 2018).

A further element that distances basic income from the domain of social policies is the substantial divergence of its principles from that of the currently implemented income support measures. In fact, the processes of welfare restructuring in Western countries, from the fiscal crisis of the 1980s to the most recent austerity programmes, have led to increasingly limited access to universal protection schemes, strengthening the role of means-testing, welfare to work strategies, conditionality and selectivity (Van Oorschot 2000; Pierson 2001). The emergence of the social investment paradigm has

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://webtv.un.org/watch/secretary-general-addresses-general-debate-73rd-session/5839802857001/>



particularly contributed to endorsing targeting, conditionality, and temporary support (Frazer and Marlier 2016; Bolzoni and Granaglia 2018). The need for policies and programmes that enhance people's capabilities to participate fully in the productive economy and realise their potential and, at the same time, the assumption that individuals are responsible for themselves, undermined the commitment to universal, rights-based welfare systems. A «new conditionality» seemed to have emerged that strongly proposed the crucial welfare question of «who should get what, and why?» (Von Oorschot 2000). The principle that welfare entitlements should be dependent on an individual agreement to meet particular compulsory duties or patterns of behaviour was the cornerstone of conditionality (Deacon 1994). This change was justified because of the pressure to restrict expenditure in an austerity context and to ensure economic effectiveness (Hemerijck 2015; Morel *et al.* 2012).

In this scenario, the period following the international financial crisis and transformations of the various European minimum income schemes further strengthened conditionality and demanding character of policies (Clegg 2014). Demanding elements impose conditions and constraints of behaviour to the enjoyment of the benefit. They include sanctions for violations related to activation, criteria for which a job offer may or may not be refused, or time limits on the use of the measure.

Research showed that in a context characterised by scarce resources, the definition of policy target becomes crucial, and blaming the poor can be an instrument used to support the fairness of welfare cuts. Van Oorschot (2017) found that Europeans share a common and fundamental deservingness culture: across countries and social categories there is a consistent pattern that elderly, sick and disabled people are seen as most deserving, while the unemployed and immigrants are seen as least deserving. Conditionality is greater in poorer countries and where people have less trust in fellow citizens and state institutions. It is interesting to note that in contrast to Korpi and Palme (1998), who asserted that universal welfare states create broad support and high levels of trust in state involvement, Van Oorschot (2006) found no relation between attitudes towards welfare spending and welfare regimes.

The transformations outlined above highlight how the debate on social policies and on income support has drastically moved away from the principles of universalism and absence of conditionality. For this reason, although they may appear intuitively similar, basic income and minimum income may belong to very distant symbolic universes. Following Bay and Pedersen (2006), we argue that public attitudes towards basic income can be considered a key indicator of popular support for universalistic and unconditional welfare policies and the associated redistributive aspirations.

#### **4. Research design**

Our analysis is based on data from the the 8<sup>th</sup> Round of ESS, collected between 2016 and 2017, and is focused on seven Western European countries (see Table 1). The selection of the countries is the result of following choices. The first was to identify a relatively homogenous sample – and hence comparable - in terms of economic development and political discourse on welfare, which led us to limit the analysis to Western Europe. The second choice was to create an independent variable able to reproduce the multidimensionality of welfare attitudes but yet comparable across countries. Achieving a good level of measurement invariance, while granting the diversity of the items included in the analysis, resulted in a further narrowing of the number of countries from 13 to 7. The final configuration of countries satisfies two more criteria, namely to represent all the different welfare regimes and to consider the whole range levels of agreement with the introduction of a basic income scheme. As to the first dimension, we referred to the well-known modified Esping-Andersen typology<sup>3</sup>. As to the latter, the sample varies from Italy - the country with the larger share of people in favour (59%)<sup>4</sup>- to Norway and Sweden, which stand on the opposite side with respectively 65 and 60% of people against this measure.

The choice of the dependent variable was made simple by the introduction in 8<sup>th</sup> Round of the ESS of a direct question on the opinion about the introduction of a basic income scheme. As the large majority of respondents avoided the selection of the more extreme response choices, we recoded answers in two categories: *in favour*, including people who are «strongly in favour» or «in favour», and *against*, including people who are «against» or «strongly against». Since an ordered logit model, though more appropriate, would have required a more balanced distribution, we used a binary logistic model to analyse the link between the opinions about the introduction of a basic income scheme and the attitudes towards welfare state.

Table 1 about here

Independent variables were built referring to the section of the questionnaire devoted to detect citizens' opinions on various dimensions of the welfare state. We tackled the questionnaire in an exploratory perspective, relying on the fact that while multidimensionality of welfare attitudes is now widely shared, there is not yet full agreement on its constitutive dimensions. We then carried out an

---

<sup>3</sup> Which includes four regimes: the social democratic/Scandinavian, the liberal/Anglo-Saxon, the conservative-corporatist/Continental, and the Mediterranean.

<sup>4</sup> At EU level, Portugal has a level of agreement greater than Italy. However, it has not been included in the sample because its covariance matrix was not positively definite. Keeping this country into the sample would have resulted in narrowing the list of items, clashing with the exploratory purpose of this study.

exploratory factor analysis, separately by country<sup>5</sup>, on welfare state-related items and selected ten of them analysing the communalities<sup>6</sup> (Table 2).

Table 2 about here

In all of the countries, three factors reproduce adequately the original correlation matrix<sup>7</sup>. The first, which we labelled «Egalitarianism», is related to principles and values. As Schwartz (2006) pointed out, an egalitarian society is expected to support equality, social justice, and responsibility towards others. The (normative) framework is that of a society imposing equality of outcomes in terms of income and standard of living, regardless of individual talents and merits. The second, «Intended Consequences», refers to (positive) achievements ascribable to the welfare state. It implies an evaluation of welfare systems as effective means to prevent poverty and realize instances of equity, and perhaps this is the reason of its weak association with the previous one. People can aspire to a more equal society but they can, at the same time, promote a «liberal» idea of equality of opportunity (Esping-Andersen 1990), not necessarily achievable through the welfare state. The third, «Unintended Consequences», emphasizes social benefits' negative effects on claimants and their burden on national general finances. These perceptions seem to depend more on cultural beliefs than on socioeconomic position (van Oorschot *et al.* 2012). This factor shows that perceptions of moral and economic consequences are strongly structured along ideological lines and also that «positive and negative perceived outcomes are not in a zero-sum relationship: people may, and many do, combine negative and positive perceptions at the same time» (ibid, p. 193). To facilitate the understanding of the results, the factor scores indicate, in the first case, a pro-egalitarian orientation; in the second and third cases, respectively, a recognition of the usefulness of social benefits, and a low consideration of their potential drawbacks.

To make valid comparison across different countries and compare results in a meaningful way, we then assessed the between-country equivalence of the underlying measurement model. Even if social scientists seldom deal with it (Ariely and Davidov 2012), avoiding this step would have resulted in running the risk of «comparing chopsticks with forks» (Cheng 2008, p. 1012), and considering differences in the measuring instrument as if they were genuine differences among contexts. The most common framework (even if not the sole, see Pendergasta *et al.* 2017) to test measurement equivalence

---

<sup>5</sup> Data weighted by PSPWGHT weight.

<sup>6</sup> The analysis of communality represents a first assessment of how well the factor model performs. The communalities are the proportion of variation in each variable included in the analysis explained by the model. In other words, they show how much variability of each item is explained by the common factors.

<sup>7</sup> The number of factors to be retained has been based on eigenvalues>1. We have also calculated the percentage of cells with more than |0.05| point of difference between original and reproduced correlation matrix. In every country, this value is under 15%.

is Multiple Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Jöreskog 1971). In this framework, it is possible to assess four subsequent levels of measurement equivalence, well described by Vandenberg and Lance (2000, pp. 12-13). At the first level, *configural invariance* (baseline model), it is tested the null-hypothesis of the existence of the same configuration of factor loadings across groups (i.e. the same group of items relates to the same factor in each context). Once achieved this level, it is allowed to say that the latent variable is conceptualised in the same way across countries. The second level is called *metric invariance*, whose null-hypothesis assumes factor loadings to be invariant across groups (i.e. the same relationships between items and factors across contexts). If this model does not worsen the indices of fit in respect of the baseline model, it is permitted to compare the multivariate associations between the construct and other variables across groups. The third level is called *scalar/threshold*<sup>8</sup> *invariance*, and it tests the null hypothesis that intercepts are invariant across groups (i.e. the origin of the scale is the same across groups) and allows to compare factor means across groups. The fourth level is called *residuals invariance*, and it tests the null hypothesis that items' unique variances are invariant across groups.

Table 3 shows the Multiple Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis model<sup>9</sup> and measurement invariance indices of fit. Since we used ordinal data, Satorra and Bentler adjusted Chi-squared has been calculated (Lei 2009). As this measure is sensitive to sample size, its significance is not source of concerning. In the base-model 1, RMSEA, NNFI, and CFI indicate a good fit<sup>10</sup>. Model 2 does not worsen the baseline-model, supporting metric invariance (RMSEA<0.015 and both NFI and CFI <0.01). No more levels of measurement invariance are supported.

Table 3 about here

As we can assess only metric invariance, we proceeded splitting the analysis by country, following the scheme in figure 1. As stated before, we assessed the association between each welfare-related dimension<sup>11</sup> through a binomial logistic regression model.

Figure 1 about here

We carried on a three-step analysis. In the baseline model (M<sub>0</sub>) we included only attitudes towards basic income and each dimension of attitudes towards welfare state. In the second model (M<sub>1</sub>), we

---

<sup>8</sup> The first refers to metric data, the latter to ordinal ones.

<sup>9</sup> Analyses have been conducted on polychoric correlation matrices.

<sup>10</sup> For index cut-off and discussion about this topic, see Bagozzi (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Factor scores were calculated weighting the items by the factor regression scores obtained from the Lisrel MG-CFA.

included a set of background variables: gender, age (up to 29 years; 30-45 years; 46-64 years; 65 and over), education (ES-ISCED I- IIIb lower; ES-ISCED IIIa to ES-ISCED IV: medium; ES-ISCED V1 to MA level: high), and occupational condition (employed, unemployed, student, retired, house-workers). In the third model (M<sub>2</sub>), M<sub>1</sub> was complemented with an indicator of perceived economic condition, as a proxy of self-interest<sup>12</sup> (table 4). Such a choice is justified by the fact that in the questionnaire basic income is described as a measure implying the replacement of some pre-existing benefits. If it is well-known that a measure financed through taxation may be disliked by the wealthiest, this wording could determine an unexpected outcome. Indeed, it may imply a decrease of the level of benefits obtained by individuals with specific needs (such as disability or housing issue) and therefore considered suspiciously also by the poor.

Table 4 about here

## 5. Results

The different levels of agreement shown in table 1 suggest a preliminary consideration. Countries with a strong welfare state tend to be less favourable towards the institution of a basic income scheme, while countries with a less generous welfare state tend to be more favourable. Using ESS data, Lee (2018) investigated the association between favour to basic income schemes, and some macro variables describing countries in terms of welfare state generosity, temporary workers rate, unemployment rate, and individual subjective economic insecurity. In this study, support for basic income seems to be strongly related to unemployment rate and economic insecurity, and negatively to welfare state generosity. As questions specified that basic income would replace current social programs if introduced, Lee (ibid) argued that in the Nordic countries - where social protection is more universal and unconditional - respondents may be afraid of losing the social benefits they already receive. On the contrary, Eastern and Southern European countries are more in favour of basic income, perhaps thinking it would strengthen their present level of social protection.

Turning to the association between attitudes towards basic income and the three dimensions of welfare attitude (described in table 5 in terms of odds ratio), a certain degree of variability emerges. Egalitarian orientations are associated with more favourable opinions toward basic income in all of the countries. The statistical significance of this association remains unchanged from model 0 to model 2. As to the factor that sums up the unintended (moral or economic) consequences, it can be noticed that also the

---

<sup>12</sup> Specifically, people were asked: «During the next 12 months how likely is it that there will be some periods when you don't have enough money to cover your household necessities?».

tendency to minimize the negative consequences plays a role in increasing favour towards basic income everywhere but in Italy. Finally, the factor related to intended consequences of social benefits shows a statistical association with opinion over basic income only in France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

Table 5 about here

Average predictive margins allow an easier interpretation of the relationship between attitudes towards welfare and basic income. Figure 2 shows the average probability of being in favour of a basic income scheme while moving along the continuum identified by each of the considered dimensions. The steeper the curve, the more intense is the association linking attitudes towards welfare and those towards basic income schemes.

Figure 2 about here

Egalitarianism seems to be pivotal in understanding the preferences expressed over a basic income scheme. The same mechanism can be observed in every country: the more intense is the boost to egalitarianism, the more people are likely to display a positive opinion about the introduction of basic income schemes. In Italy, only this dimension is somehow linked to the evaluation of basic income. In this country, then, people agree (or disagree) with its introduction independently from their overall attitudes toward possible positive or negative outcomes of welfare state measures.

The second dimension, «Unintentional Consequences», seems to be a bit less important in shaping opinions over minimum income also in some other considered countries, namely the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden: despite of the statistical significance of the association showed by the odds ratios, in those countries, the curve is flatter than before.

The association between the two is relaxed as to the dimension of «Intended Consequences»: only in three cases (France, Sweden, and United Kingdom), the slope of the curve is consistent with the hypothesis of a relationship linking this dimension to the evaluation of basic income.

In summary, the three constitutive dimensions of the attitude towards welfare state can explain at least a part of people's favour/disfavour to the introduction of a basic income scheme, and the association seems to be stronger in some countries and less in others. In every considered country the opinions over basic income are shaped starting from individual's orientations to values as egalitarianism and social justice. In Italy this dimension is the only one that has an actual role. Abandoning the axiological level, the link between welfare state and basic income attitudes start to weaken in many contexts.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Welfare attitudes have a quite unusual role in the analysis presented in this article. While most comparative studies treat the degree of legitimacy of existing national systems as a research object, fewer studies explicitly use it as an instrument to investigate reactions to potential welfare state reforms or to the introduction of new policies. Though such an approach is not useful in understanding the level of support enjoyed by the basic income, it has proved to be of some help in understanding the mechanisms underlying the formation of opinions. In this final section, we will discuss such mechanisms by focusing on the three main empirical results, namely (1) the existence of a statistically significant nexus between welfare attitudes and inclination towards basic income; (2) the existence of a relation with welfare principles that is stronger than that with welfare consequences; and finally (3) the differences between the observed countries.

As to the first element, a significant relation has been found in each of the observed countries, though varying in intensity and concerning different dimensions of welfare attitudes. This evidence allows us to make a first statement: basic income is a measure that is somehow perceived as belonging to the domain of social policies. Though not surprising, such an assumption cannot be taken for granted if we consider the degree of abstraction of at least part of the debate on basic income and its weak connection with that on welfare systems. Apart from the almost total absence from the political debate, at least two other clues support the existence of such a disconnection. First, arguments in support of a basic income often refer to global transformations of the labour market and of the economic systems, above all the growing automation, and rarely refer to specific countries and include comparison with existing policies. Second, basic income and welfare systems are increasingly becoming the object of two different branches of scholarship. Therefore, basic income has found a way through the domain of social policies (at least in people's perception), but this positioning is still fragile considering the low intensity of the relation and the weak predictive power of the attitudes towards welfare. Our results show that if basic income can be seen as a «matter of social policy», its definition as a «policy option» still requires a certain caution.

Further elements pointing in this direction come from the second result of our analysis, concerning the relation between the inclination towards basic income and the various dimensions constituting welfare attitudes. Indeed, the one with the dimension of principles underlying welfare systems is the only nexus applicable to all the countries observed. On the contrary, the relation with unintended and especially intended consequences of social policies clearly has a weaker intensity and cannot be considered a common trait to all countries. This empirical evidence suggests that the agreement or the disagreement with the introduction of a basic income is shaped by the vision of «how the world should be» (dimension of principles) rather than of «how the world is or will be» (dimension of consequences).

In this sense, basic income is not yet rid of its utopic nature, since people's perception still seems to be far from a concrete thinking, either positive or negative, about the effects of social policies.

Finally, the differences between countries highlight once again the role of the existing structure of welfare states in shaping people's opinions. Our analysis supports the idea that countries with a strong welfare state tend to be less favourable towards the institution of a basic income scheme, but nevertheless shows a certain degree of similarity in the nature (rather than in their intensity) of the mechanisms underlying the formation of opinions. In this scenario, Italy deserves particular attention, being the country with the highest percentage of favourable judgements towards basic income, and the only one in which such orientation is linked exclusively with the dimension of principles. The long history of absence of measures of income support and the low maturity of the debate can therefore foster a utopic support for basic income, disconnected from the evaluation of policy effects.

## References

- Ariely, G. e Davidov, E. (2012) *Assessment of measurement equivalence with cross-national and longitudinal surveys in political science*, in *European Political Science*, vol. 11, n. 3, pp. 363-377.
- Bagozzi, R. P. (2010) *Structural equation models are modelling tools with many ambiguities: Comments acknowledging the need for caution and humility in their use*, in *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol. 20, n. 2, pp. 208-214.
- Barrientos, A. and Lloyd-Sherlock, P. (2002) *Older and Poorer? Ageing and Poverty in the South*, in *Journal of International Development*, vol. 14, n. 8, pp. 1129-1131.
- Bay, A. H. and Pedersen, A. W. (2006) *The limits of social solidarity: Basic income, immigration and the legitimacy of the universal welfare state*, in *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 49, n. 4, pp. 419-436.
- Bolzoni, M. and Granaglia, E. (2018) *Attivazione e politiche di contrasto alla povertà*, Social Cohesion Papers, Osservatorio Internazionale per la Coesione e l'Inclusione Sociale, n. 1.
- Bregman, R. (2017) *Utopia for realists: And how we can get there*, Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Burgoon, B. and Dekker, F. (2010) *Flexible employment, economic insecurity and social policy preferences in Europe*, in *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 20, n. 2, pp. 126-141.
- Busso, S. (2017) *The De-Politicization of Social Policy at the Time of Social Investment. Mechanisms and Distinctive Features*, in *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, vol. 10, n. 2, pp. 421-447.
- Chen, F. F. (2008) *What happens if we compare chopsticks with forks? The impact of making inappropriate comparisons in cross-cultural research*, in *Journal of personality and social psychology*, vol. 95, n. 5, pp. 1005-1018.
- Chicchi, F. and Leonardi, E. (2018) *Manifesto per il reddito di base*, Bari-Roma, Laterza.
- Chung, H., Taylor-Gooby, P., and Leruth, B. (2018) *Political legitimacy and welfare state futures: Introduction*, in *Social Policy & Administration*, vol. 52, n. 4, pp. 835-846.
- Clegg, D. (2014) *Convergence from below? The reform of minimum income protection in France and the UK*, in *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 147-164.



- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990) *The Three Political Economies of the Welfare State*, in *International Journal of Sociology*, vol. 20, n. 3, pp. 92-123.
- Esping-Andersen, G., Gallie, D., Hemerijck, A., and Myles, J. (2002) *Why we need a new welfare state*, Oxford, OUP Oxford.
- Feldman S. and Steenbergen M. R. (2001) *The Humanitarian Foundation of Public Support for Social Welfare*, in *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 45, n. 3, pp. 658–677.
- Fossati, F. (2017) *Who Wants Demanding Active Labour Market Policy? Public Attitudes towards Policies that put Pressure on the Unemployed*, *Journal of Social Policy*, 1-21.
- Frazer, H. and Marlier, E. (2016), *Minimum Income Schemes in Europe. A study of national policies 2015*, ESPN, European Commission, Bruxelles.
- Görxhani, K. and Koster, F. (2012) *'I am not alone': Understanding public support for the welfare state*, in *International Sociology*, vol. 27, n. 6, pp. 768-787.
- Granaglia, E. and Bolzoni, M. (2016) *Il reddito di base*, Roma, Ediesse.
- Hemerijck, A. (2015) *The quiet paradigm revolution of social investment*, in *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, vol. 22, n. 2, pp. 242–256.
- Jacoby, W. (2000) *Issue Framing and Public Opinion on Government Spending*, *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 44, n. 4, pp. 750–767.
- Jöreskog, K. G. (1971) *Simultaneous factor analysis in several populations*, in *Psychometrika*, vol. 36, n. 4, pp. 409-426.
- Kallio, J. and Niemelä, M. (2014) *Who blames the poor? Multilevel evidence of support for and determinants of individualistic explanation of poverty in Europe*, in *European Societies*, vol. 16, n.1, pp. 112-135.
- Korpi, W. and Palme, J. (1998) *The Paradox of Redistribution and Strategies of Equality: Welfare State Institutions, Inequality, and Poverty in the Western Countries*, in *American Sociological Review*, vol. 63, n. 5, pp. 661-687.
- Laenen, T. (2018) *Do institutions matter? The interplay between income benefit design, popular perceptions, and the social legitimacy of targeted welfare*, in *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 28, n. 1, pp. 4-17.
- Lee, S. (2018) *Attitude Toward Universal Basic Income and Welfare State in Europe: A Research Note*, in *Basic Income Studies*, vol. 13, n. 1.
- Lei, P. W. (2009) *Evaluating estimation methods for ordinal data in structural equation modelling*, in *Quality and Quantity*, n. 43, pp. 495–507.
- Linnanvirta, S., Kroll, C., and Blomberg, H. (2018). *The perceived legitimacy of a basic income among Finnish food aid recipients*, in *International Journal of Social Welfare*, n. 0, pp. 1-11.
- Lowrey, A. (2018) *Give People Money: How A Universal Basic Income Would End Poverty, Revolutionize Work, and Remake the World*, New York, Crown Publishing.
- Lund, B. (2002) *Understanding state welfare: social justice or social exclusion?*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Sage Publications.
- Meade, J. E. (1995) *Full Employment Regained? An Agathotopian Dream*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Morel N., Palier B., and Palme J. (eds.) (2012) *Towards a Social Investment State? Ideas, Policies and Challenges*, Bristol, Policy Press.

- Painter, A. and Thong, C. (2015) *Creative citizen, creative state: the principled and pragmatic case for a Universal Basic Income*, London, RSA.
- Pendergasta, L. L., von der Embsea, N., Kilgusb, S. P., and Eklundb, K. R. (2017) *Measurement equivalence: A non-technical primer on categorical multi-group confirmatory factor analysis in school psychology*, in *Journal of School Psychology*, vol. 60, pp. 65–82.
- Pierson, P. (2001) *Coping with Permanent Austerity: Welfare State Restructuring in Affluent Democracies*, in Pierson (ed.) *The New Politics of Welfare State*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 410-456.
- Rawls, J. (1985) *Justice as fairness: political not metaphysical*, in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 14, n. 3, pp. 223-251.
- Reed, H. and Lansley, S. (2016) *Universal Basic Income: An idea whose time has come?*, London, Compass.
- Roosma, F., Gelissen, J., and Van Oorschot, W. (2013) *The multidimensionality of welfare state attitudes: A European cross-national study*, in *Social indicators research*, vol. 113, n. 1, pp. 235-255.
- Roosma, F., van Oorschot, W., and Gelissen, J. (2014) *The preferred role and perceived performance of the welfare state: European welfare attitudes from a multidimensional perspective*, in *Social science research*, vol. 44, pp. 200-210.
- Roosma, F., van Oorschot, W., and Gelissen, J. (2016) *The Achilles' heel of welfare state legitimacy: perceptions of overuse and underuse of social benefits in Europe*, in *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 23, n. 2, pp. 177-196.
- Schwartz, S. H. (2006) *A theory of cultural value orientations: Explication and applications*, in *Comparative sociology*, vol. 5, n. 2, pp. 137-182.
- Standing, G. (2008) *How Cash Transfers Promote the Case for Basic Income*, in *Basic Income Studies*, vol. 3, n. 1, pp. 1-30.
- Standing, G. (2011) *The precariat: The new dangerous class*, London-New York, Bloomsbury Academic.
- Standing, G. (2017) *Basic income: and how we can make it happen*, UK, Penguin.
- Stern, A. (2016) *Raising the floor: How a universal basic income can renew our economy and rebuild the American dream*, New York, Public Affairs.
- Svallfors, S. (2011) *A bedrock of support? Trends in welfare state attitudes in Sweden, 1981–2010*, in *Social policy & administration*, vol. 45, n. 7, pp. 806-825.
- Taylor-Gooby, P., Leruth, B., and Chung, H. (2017) *After austerity: Welfare state transformation in Europe after the Great Recession*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Torry, M. (2016) *The Feasibility of Citizens' Income*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Van Oorschot, W. (2000) *Who should get what, and why? On deservingness criteria and the conditionality of solidarity among the public*, in *Policy & Politics*, vol. 28, n. 1, pp. 33-48.
- Van Oorschot, W. (2006) *Making the difference in social Europe: Deservingness perceptions among citizens of European welfare states*, in *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 16, n. 1, pp. 23–42.
- Van Oorschot and W. Roosma, F. (2017) *The Social Legitimacy of Targeted Welfare and Welfare Deservingness*, in Van Oorschot, Meuleman, Roosma, and Reeskens (eds.) *The Social Legitimacy of Targeted Welfare: Attitudes to Welfare Deservingness*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 3–33.

- Van Oorschot, W. and Meuleman, B. (2012) *Welfarism and the multidimensionality of welfare state legitimacy: Evidence from The Netherlands, 2006*, in *International Journal of Social Welfare*, vol. 21, n. 1, pp. 79-93.
- Van Oorschot, W., Reeskens, T., and Meuleman, B. (2012) *Popular perceptions of welfare state consequences: A multilevel, cross-national analysis of 25 European countries*, in *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 22, n. 2, pp. 181-197.
- Van Oorschot, W., Roosma, F., Meuleman, B., and Reeskens, T. (2017) *The Social Legitimacy of Targeted Welfare. Attitudes to Welfare Deservingness*, London, Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Van Parijs, P. (2013) *The universal basic income: Why utopian thinking matters, and how sociologists can contribute to it*, in *Politics & Society*, vol. 41, n. 2, pp. 171-182.
- Van Parijs, P. (ed.) (1992) *Arguing for basic income: ethical foundations for a radical reform*, London-New York, Verso.
- Van Parijs, P., Vanderborght, Y. (2017) *Basic income: A radical proposal for a free society and a sane economy*, Harvard University Press.
- Van Parijs, P. (1995) *Real Freedom for All. What (if anything) Can Justify Capitalism?*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Vandenberg, R. J. and Lance, C. E. (2000) *A review and synthesis of the measurement invariance literature: Suggestions, practices, and recommendations for organizational research*, in *Organizational research methods*, n. 3, vol. 1, pp. 4-70.
- Woodbury, S. A. (2017) *Universal Basic Income*, in Rycroft (ed.) *The American Middle Class: An Economic Encyclopedia of Progress and Poverty*, Westport, Greenwood Press, pp. 314-315.

# From utopia to (social) policy option?

## Attitudes towards basic income and welfare legitimacy in Europe

Sandro Busso, Antonella Meo, and Tania Parisi

University of Turin

Figure 1. Structure of the relationship between attitudes towards basic income scheme and dimensions of attitudes towards welfare state.

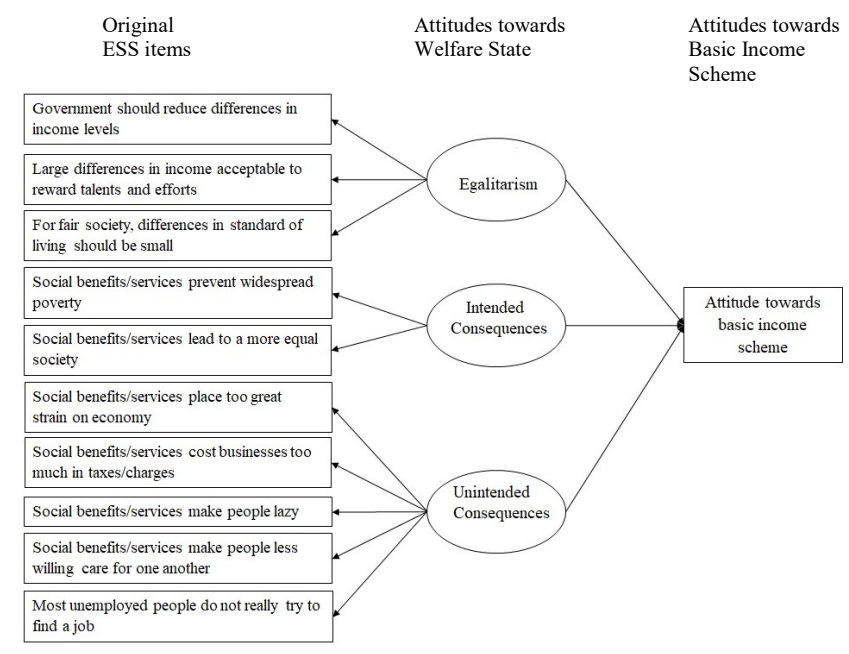
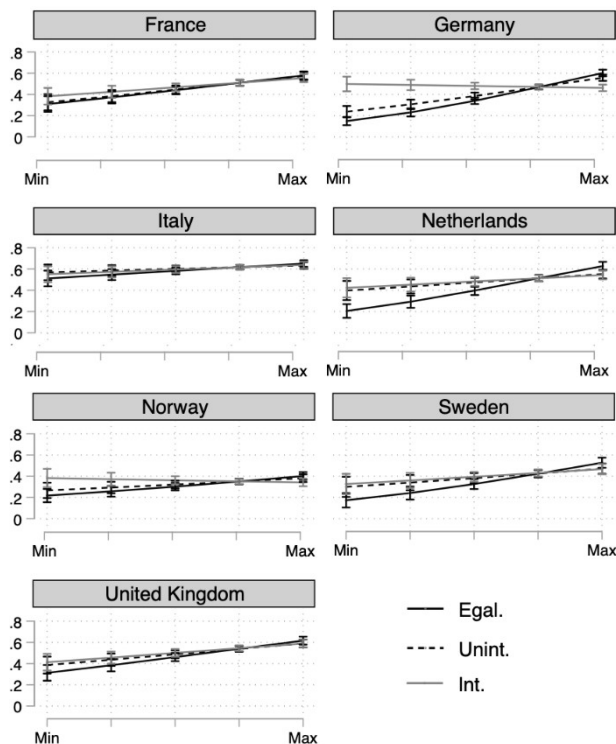


Figure 2. Average predictive margins (model M<sub>2</sub>).



Source: ESS8 (2016-17), own elaboration, poststratification weights applied.