



Conclusion: Implications for the Political Feasibility of Basic Income

In this chapter, I discuss the implications of the most consistent and important findings from the previous chapters in terms of the political feasibility of introducing a basic income in the real world. More specifically, I identify eight political challenges that advocates of a basic income (in particular, in its fully universal and unconditional ideal-typical form) are likely to face. These are, to paraphrase Guy Standing (2020), ‘eight giants’ that will often have to be battled and defeated by those who seek to establish a basic income in a given context. Most of these relate to prospective constraints that have to be dealt with *before* a basic income could be introduced, in order to increase the likelihood of it happening. There will of course also be retrospective challenges that influence the performance and sustainability of a basic income *after* its implementation (De Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012). Although these are arguably important, I focus on prospective challenges, because the first task at hand for policy entrepreneurs is to get a basic income through the democratic decision-making process.

At the same time, each political challenge also comes with some political opportunities that basic income advocates may—now or in the future—be able to exploit. However, to find out whether these opportunities are likely to materialize, more research is needed. In light of this, I put forward a research agenda that aims to inspire future studies on the popularity and political feasibility of basic income. A key theme, cutting

across the discussion of the political challenges and opportunities, as well as the presentation of the research agenda, is that basic income's popularity and political feasibility is very much context specific, as these things vary between countries, between regions within countries, and over time.

5.1 EIGHT POLITICAL CHALLENGES AND THEIR OPPORTUNITIES

5.1.1 *Political Opportunity Costs*

The empirical analyses presented in this book suggest that basic income (the ideal-typical version of it in particular) faces relatively high political opportunity costs, because it is rarely *more* popular than some of the relevant competing policies. This is especially problematic for the political feasibility of basic income when those competing policy schemes already exist. In that case, policymakers will see little electoral gain from implementing a brand new basic income policy, as it does not offer the competitive advantage of being more popular among the general public. In such a scenario, not implementing a basic income will be free from electoral losses (which would only occur if basic income was considerably *more* popular than the existing policies). As a result, policymakers are more likely to stick to the status quo, since they lack a clear popular mandate to change it. In the event that a basic income is no more popular than a potential policy competitor, there is an equal playing field in which public opinion will not tip the balance to one side or the other. However, if basic income is *less* popular than the policy competitor, it is already fighting an uphill battle, because public opinion and political feasibility will rule in favour of the competing scheme.

Throughout the book, I have compared the popularity of basic income with that of several other policy schemes. Some of these are very different to a basic income. For example, the data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) shows that in most countries, a guaranteed *income* scheme (although admittedly vaguely described) is about equally as popular as a guaranteed *employment* scheme (equally vaguely defined) that promises to provide everyone with a job rather than a cash payment. Accordingly, basic income does not have the competitive advantage of being more popular than a policy that some see as a more suitable alternative (Leff et al., 2019). The same applies to the idea of making the welfare state fully means tested, as data from the European Social Survey

(ESS) shows that in most countries, the popularity of mean-tested welfare is similar to that of a universal basic income. Likewise, the book demonstrates that the ideal-typical version of basic income—which is both fully universal and unconditional—is usually not more popular than other basic income types or cognates, and is often actually less popular. In particular, the survey evidence suggests that targeted types of basic income (that only include poor people or that exclude the rich) are somewhat more popular than their fully universal counterpart. This also applies to a negative income tax, which in the rare cases when it has been included in a survey has proved to be given a somewhat higher level of support than a universal basic income. Accordingly, these targeted versions of basic income have a competitive advantage in that they are more popular and thus politically more feasible. In a similar vein, I find that conditional types of basic income (which make access to the benefit, or the benefit level dependent on work-related or other activities) tend to be more popular than their fully unconditional counterpart. This mainly refers to a participation income (Atkinson, 1996), which is universally accessible in principle but in practice may exclude those who do not comply with the obligation to perform some kind of socially appreciated activity (such as caregiving, volunteering or working). There is also some evidence that (at least in Belgium) people would rather vary the amount of basic income according to work history than pay a flat-rate amount to everyone—as most existing social insurance schemes do. Lastly, it was also shown that basic income schemes for specific age groups—such as the elderly or people with under-age children—are more popular than a basic income for everyone. This suggests that categorically universal schemes, such as a universal child benefit or a people’s pension, have greater political feasibility than a non-categorical, universal basic income.

Taken together, these findings imply that a basic income does not have the competitive advantage of being more popular than competing policies, some of which already exist and would thereby burden the potential policy with high political opportunity costs. Importantly, these include the three constellations that are most common in modern-day welfare states: contribution-based social insurance, means-tested social assistance and universal but categorical schemes (Clasen & van Oorschot, 2002). Given that these types of welfare schemes are not significantly *less* popular than a basic income, it seems unlikely that electorally motivated policymakers would abandon them any time soon. At the same time, the survey findings may also offer some hope to advocates of a basic income, in particular

to those who seek to introduce the ideal-typical version of it. This is because basic income is hardly ever as highly *unpopular* as one may have expected it to be. Surveys often show that about half of the respondents support a basic income, suggesting that there is rarely fierce opposition among the general public. In fact, in some countries (such as Lithuania) or regions (such as the French-speaking part of Belgium), support is significantly higher, which suggests that the political feasibility of basic income is also relatively high there. As I explain below, these contexts are nevertheless often characterized by a demand-capacity conflict, in which popular demand for basic income outweighs the institutional capacity to implement it. The fact that basic income is not inherently unpopular in most contexts does, however, provide fertile ground on which policy entrepreneurs can build to create further support. I will offer some suggestions on how to possibly achieve that in the next sections.

5.1.2 *The Problem of Cheap Support*

Although basic income may be given relatively high levels of support in surveys, this could still turn out to be what De Wispelaere (2015) has called ‘cheap support’. Saying ‘yes’ to a basic income in a survey setting does not necessarily mean also saying ‘yes’ to it in a concrete, real-life context (for example, at the ballot box). The existing survey measurements are also somewhat limited in this regard, as they mostly ask about people’s principled support for the introduction of a basic income scheme in their country, but generally do not ask about their intended political behaviour. For example, would people vote for a political party if it were to propose a basic income scheme, or vice versa, withdraw their vote for that party? Furthermore, are people willing to support (or oppose) basic income through political acts, such as signing or starting a petition, writing a letter to a politician and organizing or participating in a public rally? Unfortunately, the survey evidence presented in this book cannot indicate whether the observed support for basic income is ‘cheap’. There is nevertheless one highly relevant source of information that suggests this may be the case: the 2016 Swiss referendum. In that legally binding referendum, citizens could cast their vote on the possible inclusion of a new article in the Swiss constitution that would guarantee the right to a basic income, loosely defined as a monthly cash payment to all adult residents without any means test or work requirement (in line with the ideal-typical version of basic income). With only 23% of the participants

voting ‘yes’ (Colombo et al., 2016), the outcome was clear: the Swiss did not *really* want to introduce a basic income. However, the relatively low proportion of people voting for basic income in the referendum stands in stark contrast to the numbers observed in surveys that tend to be higher (including in Switzerland: see, for example, Stadelmann-Steffen & Dermont, 2019).

There are at least two possible interpretations of this observation. The first is that surveys overestimate the actual level of popular support for basic income, because of the relative ease with which people can say ‘yes’ to something that has no direct consequences in real life—either for them or for society as a whole. If this interpretation is correct, one could argue that support for basic income as expressed in surveys is indeed to some extent ‘cheap’. The second interpretation is that referenda may underestimate the actual level of support for basic income, because they are usually not representative of the whole population. In fact, only about 47% of the eligible population participated in the Swiss referendum, and voter turnout was disproportionately higher among those who tend to oppose basic income more strongly, such as high-income earners (see Sect. 5.1.6) and older people (Sect. 5.1.5) (Colombo et al., 2016). For now, it is impossible to tell whether one of these interpretations is more accurate than the other, or whether they are both correct. Nevertheless, they do indicate that if and when policy entrepreneurs manage to have some type of basic income assessed at the ballot box rather than in a survey, it is crucial that they put sufficient effort in mobilizing the groups that are most in favour of it. These are often specific to the context and the type of basic income, but—as discussed below—often include young people (see Sect. 5.1.5), those on a low income (Sect. 5.1.6) and left-wing voters (Sect. 5.1.7). If advocates succeed in having these groups represented (and perhaps even overrepresented), they stand a far better chance of winning the popular vote in favour of a basic income.

5.1.3 *The Universality-Unconditionality Impasse*

As mentioned in Sect. 5.1.1, the evidence presented in this book suggests that there is often greater popular support for basic income varieties that deviate from the ideal-typical version. In particular, support seems to increase if limits are set to either the universality or unconditionality of a basic income scheme. With regard to the former, people seem to have a slight preference for basic income schemes that are limited in terms

of universality, because they exclude (newly arrived) migrants by setting residency or citizenship requirements, or because they are restricted to certain income groups by targeting poor people only ('poverty testing') or leaving out the rich ('affluence testing'). With regard to unconditionality, people generally favour schemes that are conditional on socially appreciated activities, such as caregiving, volunteering or working (as in a participation income). This preference for targeted and conditional types of basic income is probably due to the fact that these schemes are able to exclude groups that are generally considered less deserving of social welfare, because they are perceived to make limited contributions to society or are not seen as being in need of assistance (Laenen et al., 2022). Further, having both at the same time—that is, a basic income that is fully universal *and* fully unconditional—tends to be the least preferred option. Importantly, this pattern is not only observed among the public at large, but also among the political constituencies that are most likely to support the introduction of a basic income, such as young people (see Sect. 5.1.5), low-income groups (see Sect. 5.1.6) and left-wing voters (see Sect. 5.1.7). It, therefore, seems that the ideal-typical version of basic income has the least favourable prospects with regard to political feasibility.

This is highly problematic for its proponents, who typically insist that a basic income should be both universal and unconditional in order to reach its full potential (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). At the same time, it also offers political opportunities for those who are willing to compromise on one of these two core components of the ideal type. Advocates who are prepared to accept a basic income that is fully universal but not unconditional (as is the case in proposals for a participation income) stand a better chance of finding political approval for their plan than those who oppose any form of conditionality. Similarly, it seems that a basic income that is fully unconditional but not universal (for example, a negative income tax) has a higher likelihood of being politically feasible. Although the 'full package' will not be attained in either of these scenarios, it would bring most existing welfare systems considerably closer to the ideal-typical basic income as envisioned by its advocates. For the time being, those advocates may—with an eye on political feasibility—be better off if they either give up their demand for full universality or their demand for full unconditionality. This is not to say that the idea of combining full universality with full unconditionality should be abandoned permanently. In fact, this could remain the desired end goal in the long term. In order to reach this goal, it, nevertheless, seems more sensible to promote stepping

stone policies that are more popular and thus politically more feasible than the ideal-typical basic income. For example, one could first argue for the introduction of a conditional participation income, and once that policy is established, try to convince people that it should be made fully unconditional.

5.1.4 *Demand-Capacity Conflicts*

Throughout the book, there are signs of several demand-capacity conflicts, in which popular demand for basic income is likely to be higher than the financial or administrative capacity that is available to implement it. Here, I identify three of these conflicts.

The first is related to the above-discussed finding that a conditional participation income is more popular and thus politically more feasible than a fully unconditional basic income. From this perspective, it seems that a participation income is more likely to be introduced by electorally-motivated policymakers. At the same time, many commentators have described a participation income as an administrative nightmare, as it would require an enormous and costly bureaucracy to monitor whether all its recipients are complying with their obligation to perform some kind of socially appreciated activity (De Wispelaere & Stirton, 2007; Torry, 2016). In other words, while a participation income is popular and politically feasible, it may be highly problematic from an administrative point of view. Hence, there is a situation of high popular demand but limited capacity to meet that demand. There are several potential solutions to this problem. One solution is to do without the strict monitoring of people's behaviour, so that there is a participation income on paper but not in practice. However, this would be likely to stir public opposition as it means that there would in reality be a fully unconditional basic income in place, which was not very popular to begin with because people prefer to exclude those who do not make a supposedly meaningful contribution to society. Another solution would be to improve the administrative feasibility of a participation income, by limiting the number of activities that qualify as 'participation', clearly defining these activities and possibly placing time limits on them (as is the case for many cash-for-care schemes, such as parental leave), and creating well-considered procedures to automatically check the activities. It is clearly beyond the scope of this book to investigate the administrative feasibility of a participation income in detail,

but the main challenge for its advocates is to take steps forward so that the policy is not only popular and politically feasible, but also practical.

The second demand-capacity conflict concerns the generosity and financing of basic income—aspects that are not always aligned in popular preferences. On the one hand, the survey evidence shows that people tend to favour a relatively generous full basic income over a partial one that is well below the current level of subsistence in their country. On the other hand, people do not always support the tax increase or the replacement of existing welfare schemes that may be needed to make a generous basic income financially feasible (Torry, 2016). This is perfectly illustrated by the finding that the respondents in the BIN experiment in the Netherlands preferred a relatively high amount (of €1000), but at the same time also wanted budget neutrality and lacked a clear preference for replacing existing social security programmes. In a similar vein, an Ipsos MORI Survey in the UK found that there was a significant drop in support for basic income (from 45 to 22%) once it was clear to respondents that a tax increase and budget cuts would be required to fund this. Both examples suggest that popular demand for basic income is not always in tune with the available financial capacity to implement it. One possible way out of this would be to increase the capacity to finance a basic income by strengthening the commitment to two of the most popular funding mechanisms: increasing the progressivity of income taxes and introducing or expanding taxes on capital. Both boil down to increasing taxes on the rich in order to redistribute resources to poorer people. It should nevertheless be noted that this is also a risky strategy with regard to political feasibility, as it could well even further strengthen the opposition of high-income earners (a politically powerful group) to a basic income (see Sect. 5.1.6).

The third demand-capacity conflict, originally formulated by Parolin and Siöland (2020), holds that support for basic income is generally greatest in contexts where the administrative and financial capacity to implement it is lowest. At the country level, it was shown that support is in fact greatest in countries with lower levels of economic development and in less mature welfare states—such as Lithuania, Hungary and Slovenia. Here, political feasibility appears to be substantial, but the financial feasibility to actually implement a full-blown basic income scheme is relatively low (Hanna & Olken, 2018; Ravallion, 2009). This demand-capacity conflict also applies to regions within countries, as well as to time periods. With regard to the first, there is evidence that popular

demand for basic income is greater in poorer than in richer regions. For example, the level of support is consistently higher in the French-speaking part of Belgium than in the Dutch-speaking part, and this is probably due to the fact that the former is in a worse economic situation than the latter. A similar story applies to the eastern and western part of Germany, respectively. With regard to time, there is evidence that support for basic income increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among those who already felt relatively deprived and experienced economic or health concerns. However, while popular demand for a basic income may increase in times of crisis, it seems likely that the financial capacity to implement it tends to shrink during economic slumps (De Wispelaere & Morales, 2021). One could argue that this type of demand-capacity conflict will solve itself from the moment a country or region reaches the level of economic development needed to finance a basic income. This, nevertheless, seems somewhat optimistic, as the economic development could also dampen popular demand. In that case, the financial feasibility of basic income would increase, but its political feasibility would decrease. Furthermore, it is also evident that in more-deprived countries, regions or time periods, not only basic income but also other welfare schemes—such as means-tested social assistance—are highly popular. Accordingly, basic income still faces the political opportunity costs discussed above (see Sect. 5.1.1), especially when the competing policies are cheaper to implement.

5.1.5 *Age Politics*

One of the most consistent findings, observed across many opinion polls conducted in different countries and years, is that elderly people (in particular those in receipt of a pension) are markedly less supportive of basic income than their younger counterparts. I have argued that this is mostly due to the fact that elderly people are less likely to believe a basic income will benefit them personally, because most of them are no longer active in the labour market and already receive an old-age pension. This means that elderly people generally have lower levels of job and income insecurity than younger people. Such self-interested opposition to basic income is also confirmed by survey evidence, with elderly people being less likely to see basic income as offering any personal gain to them. For example, a Populus survey in the UK shows that less than 10% of those above the age of 65 thought a basic income would benefit them and their

family (compared with about 30% of those between 18 and 34). This is highly problematic for basic income advocates, because elderly people are a politically powerful group in most democracies, for several reasons. The most obvious one concerns the fact that elderly people constitute—at least in ageing societies—a large voting bloc that could easily veto the introduction of a basic income. Additionally, the elderly are also a stable constituency ('once a pensioner, always a pensioner') whose members have a great deal of time on their hands (because they no longer work) to actively put pressure on policymakers. Further, in many countries elderly people are well represented by strong, organized interest groups (such as the National Council of Ageing in the US) and sometimes even have their own political parties (for example, 50PLUS in the Netherlands). Taken together, this makes it very likely that electorally motivated policymakers will be highly responsive to the opinions of elderly people (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Accordingly, it seems that basic income faces gloomy prospects of being implemented from the perspective of 'age politics' (Pampel & Williamson, 1985).

The other side of the coin is that younger people are generally more supportive of basic income. In fact, it could be argued that all basic income advocates have to do is to wait until generational replacement creates a society that is much more open to the idea. As today's older generations disappear, so too may the persistent idea that welfare provision ought to be conditional and selective. However, this interpretation is premature, given that there is currently no evidence whatsoever that the higher level of support among the young is actually a cohort effect rather than an age effect (as there is no longitudinal data available to test this). If it proves to be the latter, then younger people could well reduce their support in the future as they grow older. Even if it proves to be a cohort effect, this would not necessarily increase the political feasibility of the ideal-typical version of basic income. This is because young people also often prefer basic income varieties that deviate from the ideal type, such as a participation income, a targeted basic income or a basic income that pays a higher amount to those with a longer work record. Interestingly, elderly people tend to have similar relative preferences for different varieties of basic income. Thus, while the old and the young differ in their absolute levels of support, they seem to be similar in terms of which types of basic income they prefer. This offers some opportunities for intergenerational coalition building and could enhance the political prospects of implementing basic income schemes that are preferred by all generations.

Again, these can be considered either as the ultimate end goal or as a stepping stone policy towards the introduction of the ideal-typical version of a basic income.

One strategy to avoid strong political opposition from the elderly and their interest groups is thus to propose basic income schemes that are, relatively speaking, the most popular among this group. One highly relevant candidate in this regard is a basic income that makes the benefit amount dependent on people's work history. For example, it would be possible to put in place a scheme with a basic amount that is equal for all and that is then increased by a fixed amount for every x number of working years. This may weaken the opposition from elderly people, who would typically be paid a higher amount than their younger counterparts in such a system. This strategy of 'reciprocity within universalism' could be especially attractive in countries where the existing old-age pension, or the welfare system more broadly, is organized along the principles of contribution-based social insurance (Laenen et al., 2022). In addition to compensation, there are other strategies of blame avoidance (Pierson, 1994, 2001) that policy entrepreneurs could apply to soften the opposition from elderly people. One is to opt for the long-term implementation of basic income, for example, by introducing a basic income scheme from a certain generation onwards. Importantly, this is not the same as a youth basic income, which can only be received until a certain age and is thus restricted in time. The limited evidence that is currently available—from the BABEL Survey in Belgium—suggests that a basic income limited only to young people is strongly opposed by the elderly, who would rather have a basic pension or a basic income for working-aged people. Furthermore, even though support is higher among young people, they also prefer a youth basic income the least. Accordingly, the introduction of a youth basic income does not rank high in terms of political feasibility. It would possibly make more sense, at least politically, to propose a basic income that is paid for life, but only from today's young generation onwards. This would leave the current older generations—who have more vested interests in the existing social protection system—unaffected, thereby increasing the political feasibility of introducing a basic income. However, this would also mean (at least in pay-as-you-go systems) that some of the younger generations would be burdened with a 'double pay problem', as they may have to pay for the newly established basic income scheme alongside current old-age pensions. Unfortunately, the available survey evidence is unable to determine the degree to which young people

would be willing to accept such a double payment burden in order to introduce a basic income.

Another strategy to break the united front of elderly opposition would be to take away some of the uncertainty that comes with the introduction of a basic income. At the moment, most elderly people seem to believe they would not benefit from a basic income. It is plausible that this is to some extent driven by the fact that it is relatively difficult for them to assess whether their financial situation would improve or deteriorate if a basic income were to replace the old-age pension. Faced with such uncertainty, elderly people may prefer to stick to what they currently have. If policy entrepreneurs could succeed in reducing that uncertainty (for example, by creating tools that help people to evaluate whether they would win or lose financially from a basic income scheme), they may be able to build support among those elderly who mistakenly thought they would be worse off after the introduction of a basic income. This could convert some risk-averse pensioners from opposition to support. At the same time, such an information campaign could also work as a double-edged sword, if the presumed losers start to oppose basic income even more than they did before. According to the new politics of the welfare state theory (Pierson, 1994, 2001), this could have a detrimental impact on the political feasibility of basic income, as people typically react more strongly to the potential losses than to the potential gains of a welfare reform (this is known as ‘negativity bias’, see also Sect. 5.1.8). In light of this, policy entrepreneurs would be well advised to also draw attention to the societal rather than the personal effects of basic income. In particular, elderly people’s opposition could be weakened if advocates stress its potential to revalue unpaid work, such as informal caregiving or volunteering. Survey data shows that the elderly attach a relatively high level of importance to this policy outcome, presumably because it also benefits them personally.

Most of the above is based on the idea that—at least in countries with relatively generous contributory pensions—many elderly people will oppose basic income because it could be perceived as a retrenchment of ‘their’ welfare benefits (Lynch & Myrskylä, 2009). As a natural reaction, basic income advocates may try to counter that perception, by denying or hiding the fact that certain groups within the elderly population will indeed lose out financially. The notion of retrenchment could nevertheless possibly also be used to build support for a basic income, if it is presented as a reform that is needed to make the existing pension system

financially sustainable, which is a commonly shared concern in public opinion (see, for example, European Commission, 2020). Although it is not often recognized, a basic income (or basic pension) could actually cut costs in countries where a large proportion of social spending is allocated to generous pension insurance for people who previously had relatively high wages. As a basic income would effectively put a ceiling on all pension benefits, advocates could also promote the policy as a cost-cutting measure, thereby justifying the fact that it would mean a retrenchment for large groups of elderly people (Green-Pedersen, 2002). This could, nevertheless, also lead to increased opposition from high-income earners, who will be the ones losing out (see Sect. 5.1.6).

5.1.6 *Class Politics*

In addition to age politics, it seems that the introduction of a basic income will also be difficult to achieve from the perspective of ‘class politics’. This is because in most countries and across different types of basic income, there is a considerably lower level of support among high-income earners compared with their low-income counterparts. Furthermore, basic income tends to be supported less by people with stable jobs (the so-called ‘labour market insiders’) and is often less popular among the higher educated. Taken together, this implies that the upper classes are mostly opposed to basic income, while the lower classes are more supportive of it. I suggest that this is mainly because the former see themselves as net contributors to a basic income scheme, while the latter believe they will be net beneficiaries. If a basic income is to be financed by (progressively designed) income taxes, this perception is probably accurate. Additionally, people from the upper classes experience markedly less job and income insecurity than their lower-class counterparts, who are more likely to be without a job or to have a precarious, low-paid one. Accordingly, it makes a great deal of sense that these so-called ‘labour market outsiders’ are *the* prime constituency of a basic income.

With an eye on political feasibility, it may nevertheless be bad news that the upper classes oppose basic income more strongly. In fact, there is mounting evidence that policymakers and the public policies they design are more responsive to citizens with higher incomes and a higher level of education than they are to their lower-income and lower-educated counterparts (Elkjaer & Klitgaard, 2021; Elsässer et al., 2021). In political science literature, this phenomenon is generally known as ‘unequal

responsiveness' (Gilens, 2012) and there are two main pathways through which it comes into being. The first, labelled here as 'descriptive representation', refers to the fact that policymakers themselves are usually members of the upper class. Hence, it is logical that most of them have similar ideas and interests to those of their higher-income and higher-educated citizen peers. The second pathway, which I term 'substantive representation', refers to the fact that wealthy and well-educated people tend to have greater monetary and informational resources at their disposal to persuade policymakers to serve their interests. Furthermore, it is well established that voter turnout tends to be higher among the upper classes (Franko et al., 2016), making them more important to electorally motivated policymakers. With regard to labour market position, there is also evidence that trade unions are more likely to protect the interests of 'insiders' rather than 'outsiders' (Rueda, 2007). Accordingly, if labour market insiders oppose basic income, there is a higher likelihood that the trade unions they are represented by will do the same.

The good news for (at least some) basic income advocates is that the upper-class opposition is not observed always and everywhere. In fact, there are important exceptions. In some countries, high-income earners and higher-educated people are equally or even more supportive of basic income than their low-income, lower-educated counterparts. A case in point is the Netherlands, where several surveys show that those with tertiary education and a high income are relatively supportive of basic income, although not necessarily of the ideal-typical version (see Sect. 5.1.1). In such countries, policy entrepreneurs could exploit the fact that the upper classes are not as opposed to basic income, to make the phenomenon of unequal responsiveness work for instead of against them. The same advocates should also be alert to societal developments that could shift the balance in their favour. Obvious examples in this regard are the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Both have resulted in greater job and income insecurity for millions of citizens who had previously believed they were relatively safe from those issues. This could, in turn, increase popular support for basic income. In addition, the rapidly accelerating flexibilization and automation of labour could provide similar opportunities. At present, there is little evidence that people see basic income as an effective policy to cushion the effects of technological unemployment, and there are no higher levels of support among groups that are more vulnerable to such unemployment (such as low-skilled routine workers) (Busemeyer &

Sahm, 2022; Dermont & Weisstanner, 2020). If automation does lead to massive job losses in the future, this could nevertheless increase support for basic income (as it is independent of work status). However, it could potentially also increase opposition from people whose jobs are largely unaffected by automation (such as high-skilled labour market insiders). In this event, the phenomenon of unequal responsiveness could once again block the introduction of a basic income.

There are several other opportunities for basic income advocates to exploit from the perspective of class politics. Above all, it is important to take note of the fact that there are some groups that are not particularly opposed to basic income, even though it could be expected of them. The first group comprises trade unionists, who according to some should be against a basic income because it could negatively affect the collective bargaining power of trade unions (and thus go against their interests) or because it clashes with the work ethic (and thus conflicts with their ideology). However, strong opposition from trade unionists is not found in most countries. It could, therefore, be that trade unions are also less opposed to basic income than is often assumed (Vanderborgh, 2006), or that they will decrease their opposition once they find out about the opinions of their members (Cigna, 2022). The second group concerns the recipients of social benefits other than old-age pensions (for example, those in receipt of disability or unemployment benefits). From the perspective of the new politics of the welfare state (Pierson, 1994, 2001), one could assume that these welfare constituencies would feel threatened by the idea that a basic income would replace ‘their’ benefits, potentially making them worse off. However, this is not supported by the evidence from polls. In fact, it seems that working-age benefit recipients are generally *more* supportive of basic income rather than less supportive. The third group involves the middle class. Depending on the precise funding mechanism for a basic income scheme, some members of the middle class will be net contributors, whereas others will be net beneficiaries. It is nevertheless relatively difficult for people in this group to determine which side they will ultimately end up on, if a basic income is introduced. In light of people’s general tendency to react more strongly to potential losses than to potential gains (also known as ‘negativity bias’—see Sect. 5.1.8), one could expect the middle class to mainly oppose basic income. The available survey evidence, nevertheless, seems to indicate that middle-class citizens are neither strongly against basic income nor strongly in favour of it. This provides opportunities for

policy entrepreneurs, as the middle class constitutes a large and electorally important constituency waiting to be persuaded of the added value of basic income.

5.1.7 *Party Politics*

From the perspective of ‘party politics’, I distinguish three key difficulties that advocates for basic income will often have to overcome. One of these issues concentrates on reducing the opposition from right-wing voters, while the other two pertain to sustaining the support of left-wing voters.

First of all, the available survey evidence consistently shows that in most countries, support for basic income is considerably lower among right-wing voters than their left-wing counterparts. Even when presented basic income schemes match well with right-wing proposals for a basic income—because they offer a relatively low amount and/or replace many existing social benefits, thereby dismantling the welfare state—there continues to be greater opposition from right-wing voters. This is in large part because right-wingers are less committed to promoting equality of outcomes and because they dislike the idea that a basic income would also be paid to people who they consider undeserving of social welfare (Laenen et al., 2022). In particular, this includes people who are seen as unwilling to work (who are given a ‘free pass’ under an unconditional basic income scheme) and migrants (who could be drawn to the country once a basic income is in place, acting as a welfare magnet) (Borjas, 1999). Right-wing voters are—at least in the UK—also more sceptical about the predicted positive effects of basic income on relevant policy outcomes, such as its potential to increase, rather than decrease, work incentives. Furthermore, it proves somewhat difficult to persuade right-wing people to abandon their opposition to a basic income. Several survey experiments, conducted in Belgium and the US, demonstrate that right-wing voters fail to increase their support for basic income after being exposed to positive frames about the policy. By contrast, they often do react to negative frames by decreasing their (already relatively low level of) support for basic income. This suggests that right-wing voters are susceptible to negativity bias when shaping their opinion about basic income (see Sect. 5.1.8).

All of this is highly problematic for the political feasibility of basic income, as it seems that broad political coalitions are needed for such a scheme to be implemented and sustained (De Wispelaere, 2015). If

right-wing voters—and by extension the political parties they are represented by—continue to oppose basic income after a left-wing government has been able to introduce the policy, it will probably not take long for the scheme to be retrenched after a right-wing government subsequently takes power. There is nevertheless one survey experiment, conducted in the US, that proves some specific arguments can and do convince right-wing voters to (moderately) support the introduction of a basic income (Thomas et al., 2023). In particular, it appears that US conservatives were persuaded by the argument that a basic income would increase people's freedom from the government—a factor they considered as fitting in with their moral values. This finding suggests that if policy entrepreneurs manage to frame basic income as a tool to promote values endorsed by right-wing ideology—such as individual freedom and limited government—there could be a significant reduction in right-wing opposition. This should in turn increase the chances of building the sufficiently large and stable political coalition that is needed to implement a basic income scheme.

It would nevertheless be a mistake to focus exclusively on how to persuade right-wing voters to abandon their opposition to basic income. In fact, there are two political challenges that are specific to left-wing voters that basic income advocates should take seriously. The first of these concerns the fact that left-wing voters' support for basic income is also likely to be susceptible to negativity bias. In fact, there is evidence—from the BABEL experiment in Belgium—that left-wing voters also reduce their support for basic income if they are told that the policy would have negative policy outcomes. In particular, there is evidence of a dramatic decrease in left-wing support if the introduction of a basic income would increase the poverty rate—which some microsimulation studies suggest could well happen under certain circumstances (for example, Browne & Immervoll, 2017). A similar, albeit somewhat weaker, reduction was observed for the policy outcomes of income inequality and employment (but not for entrepreneurship and informal caregiving). Although other survey experiments—conducted in the US—suggest that left-wing voters are immune to the political framing of basic income (because they support it anyway), the Belgian experiment clearly shows that in some specific contexts, particular frames can erode left-wing support. Accordingly, it seems that if the opponents of basic income succeed in convincing left-wing voters that it could also have negative effects, such as an increase in poverty, they will be able to put a serious dent in its political feasibility.

To avoid this, basic income advocates are advised to extensively test the potential impact of basic income with the help of policy experiments and microsimulations in order to provide evidence-based arguments that it will *not* have the negative outcomes that left-wing voters fear the most. Importantly, this means that the predicted outcomes of basic income also ought to be compared with those of its main policy competitors, such as means-tested social assistance (see also Sect. 5.1.8).

There is one other political challenge that advocates of the ideal-typical version of basic income in particular are confronted with: left-wing voters do not necessarily prefer the ideal type. In fact, the evidence from the polls indicates that they often favour basic income types that deviate significantly from the ideal-typical version. In particular, it was shown that left-wing people from different political strands—voting for green or socialist parties alike—prefer a conditional participation income to a fully unconditional basic income. In a similar vein, there is some evidence from Japan (see Takamatsu & Tachibanaki, 2014) that left-wing voters favour a targeted negative income tax over a fully universal basic income. Other evidence (from Belgium) shows that left-wingers do not have a strong preference for either a targeted or a universal basic income, and that they (slightly) favour a scheme that varies the amount according to people's financial needs or work history over a flat-rate payment. Taken together, these findings indicate that the ideal-typical version of basic income is—even among its core political constituencies—not *more* popular than some of the other types with which it will have to compete. This is likely to increase the political opportunity costs faced by advocates of the ideal type (see Sect. 5.1.1). At the same time, it also provides opportunities to build large cross-party coalitions to support other basic income types. One obvious candidate in this regard is a participation income, because this is the more popular option among both left-wing voters and their right-wing counterparts. Accordingly, it seems that it is not—as often suggested (Chrisp & Martinelli, 2019)—basic income but rather participation income that is 'neither left nor right'. However, as noted above (see Sect. 5.1.4), the greater political feasibility of participation income could be offset by its lower administrative feasibility.

5.1.8 *Negativity Bias*

This book shows that people have many different reasons for supporting or opposing basic income. At the same time, most people seem susceptible to negativity bias, in the sense that they are more likely to decrease their support for basic income when they are told that it would yield negative outcomes than they are to increase their support if the outcomes are predicted to be positive. More specifically, support is significantly reduced (among left-wing voters in particular, see Sect. 5.1.7) if basic income is framed as increasing the existing levels of poverty and income inequality. Similarly, support strongly decreases if basic income is claimed to decrease the employment level. This is observed among left-wing voters, but even more so among their right-wingers counterparts (who are also less supportive of basic income if entrepreneurship would decrease). This finding is indicative of the fear that a basic income would reduce labour market participation—a concern that seems to be shared by most of the population. Interestingly, there is nevertheless a clear discrepancy between the predicted impact of a basic income at the macro level and at the micro-level, in the sense that most people believe a basic income will reduce other people's work intentions but not their own.

This negativity bias is problematic for the political feasibility of basic income, because it makes it easier for opponents to discredit the policy in their political framing than it is for proponents to promote it. Furthermore, it comes on top of the previously discussed type of negativity bias, which assumes that people react more strongly to personal financial losses than to personal financial gains. It, therefore, appears that basic income advocates will have to deal with negativity bias at both the personal level and the societal level. With regard to the personal negativity bias, it will be crucial to convince sections of the middle class and the elderly population that they and their families would also gain from the introduction of a basic income. The societal negativity bias could be dealt with by conducting policy experiments and microsimulation studies to provide evidence-based information about the likely effects of introducing a fully-fledged basic income in a given context. It is nevertheless crucial that these experiments and simulations are successful, in the sense that they mostly (perhaps even only) show positive outcomes. At a bare minimum, they should show that labour market participation would not decrease, as this seems to be an important outcome for people from all walks of life. To convince left-wing voters, these scientific assessments should also confirm

that poverty and income inequality would not increase (see Sect. 5.1.7). To persuade their right-wing counterparts, they should probably also be able to take away the fear that basic income would damage the economy and attract new migrants to the country. To win over elderly people, it should perhaps also be shown that basic income will have positive effects on one of the policy outcomes that they attach a relatively high level of importance to: informal caregiving (see Sect. 5.1.5). In that sense, popular support for basic income seems overall to be more practical than principled.

It will also be important to demonstrate that basic income—and the ideal-typical version in particular—does not perform worse, and preferably performs even better, than the existing welfare system. For example, if it can be shown that a universal basic income does a better job of improving work incentives or alleviating poverty than the existing system, public opinion may shift in favour of basic income. There are some hints of this in the available survey evidence; in particular in the UK, where a large proportion of the population already think that a basic income would boost work incentives more than the current (largely means-tested) system. In a similar vein, experiments and simulations will need to compare the predicted effects of the ideal-typical version of basic income with those of its potential policy competitors (such as a guaranteed employment programme, a participation income or a negative income tax). Only when the ideal type can yield demonstrably better results than both the existing system and the competing schemes will its introduction no longer be hampered by the negativity bias discussed here.

This will of course require rigorous scientific testing of the predicted impact of different policy schemes on a broad range of policy outcomes, and this may not always be administratively or financially feasible. It is nevertheless crucial for the political feasibility of basic income that policy entrepreneurs can rely on evidence-based information to refute claims that it will have negative effects, as these claims will surely be put forward by those who oppose the policy. If anything, it seems that policy entrepreneurs should first and foremost advocate basic income *pilots* rather than basic income *schemes*. There is also some evidence—from the Dalia survey conducted in 28 European countries—that citizens would prefer a basic income to be introduced only after it has been successfully tried and tested. In light of this, it is also telling that the participants in the Finnish experiment with basic income—arguably the largest of its type—are considerably more positive about the policy than

their otherwise similar peers who did not take part in the experiment (Simanainen & Kangas, 2020). Taken together, the evidence suggests that—under the right circumstances—pilots can increase the popularity and political feasibility of basic income, and thereby, have a real impact on politics and policy (Chrisp & De Wispelaere, 2022).

5.2 A RESEARCH AGENDA

In this book, I have provided the most comprehensive, detailed and up-to-date overview of the popularity of basic income and have reflected extensively on the implications for its political feasibility. At the same time, I fully acknowledge that—mainly due to limited data availability—current knowledge about the popularity and political feasibility of basic income only represents the tip of the iceberg. In fact, there are still many unknowns to be explored in future research. Here, I sketch out a research agenda to help navigate that journey into the unknown. It serves as a roadmap for future scholars, allowing them to ask new research questions with the help of innovative data and methods. I consider it the task of the academic community to reveal ever more parts of the iceberg that are currently hidden. Additionally, the agenda is also intended as a source of inspiration for policy entrepreneurs who seek to introduce a basic income in the real world. I highly recommend these entrepreneurs to take the popularity of basic income and its political implications seriously in the feasibility assessment of their policy proposals, in addition to analyses of the administrative and financial feasibility. Even proposals that are very well thought out, administratively and financially, can fail to be implemented in the end due to a lack of public and political support.

The research agenda is summarized in Fig. 5.1, which presents a conceptual model visualizing the relationship between the popularity of basic income and its real-world implementation (as described in this book). The model starts from the assumption that—as the different chapters have shown—people’s support for (different varieties of) basic income is associated with individual characteristics, such as their age, income and political ideology. This popular support, in turn, is seen as an important factor influencing the political feasibility of basic income, because it supposedly affects policymakers’ positions towards it through various mechanisms of policy responsiveness. As argued in the introduction, public opinion could also influence the administrative and financial feasibility of basic income (for example, if opposition turns into tax evasion).

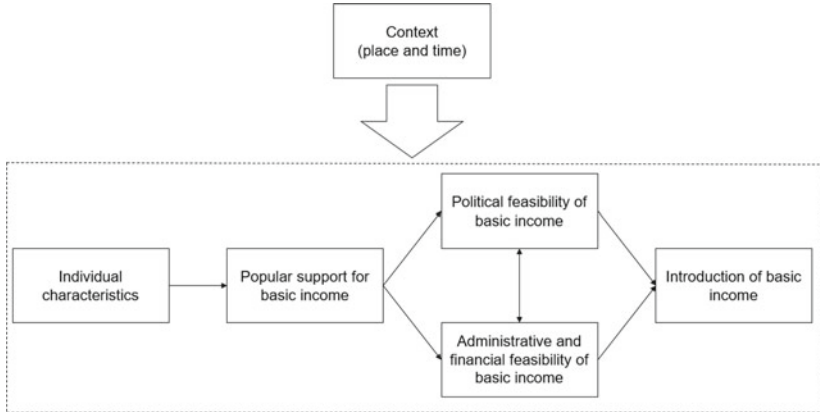


Fig. 5.1 Summary of the research agenda

The different types of feasibility—administrative, financial and political—also feed back into one another and jointly determine whether a basic income can be introduced (and sustained). This whole process is considered to be very much context specific, as it varies across both place and time. In the following, I identify the most pressing knowledge gaps with regard to the different components and relationships included in the conceptual framework, so that these can be addressed in future research.

5.2.1 *Exploring the ‘Causes’ of Support for Basic Income*

This book has tried to identify the determinants or ‘causes’ of popular support for different types of basic income, at both the individual level and the contextual level. With regard to the former, it was shown that people’s socio-demographic characteristics (such as their age and income) and ideological beliefs (such as their political orientations) can influence how they think about basic income. Future research should nevertheless continue the search for new and improved individual-level determinants of support for basic income.

To begin with, there is a need to develop more detailed and precise measurements of some of the individual characteristics discussed in this book. For example, it would be highly relevant to use a more disaggregated measurement of the employment sector to predict support for basic

income than the simple distinction between the private and the public sector. In the public sector, there may be some specific subsectors that are more opposed to the introduction of a basic income, because it threatens to make their jobs obsolete (for example, civil servants working in social security administration, or social workers employed in public assistance agencies). Similarly, some private subsectors may be more supportive of basic income than others, for example, depending on the degree to which automation or flexibilization of labour has penetrated the sector. Another example relates to benefit reciprocity, which is measured rather crudely in most existing surveys, as they rarely ask respondents to indicate *how much* money they (and other members of their household) receive from social benefits. This is nevertheless crucial information, because it determines to a large extent whether benefit recipients will win or lose (financially) from the introduction of a particular basic income scheme. Such information is also needed to test some of the propositions from the new politics of the welfare state theory (Pierson, 1994, 2001). For example, will benefit recipients oppose a basic income and punish the politicians responsible for it at the ballot box if it constitutes a retrenchment of ‘their’ benefits? Further, is it true—in relation to the introduction of a basic income—that these welfare constituencies react more strongly to financial losses than to financial gains, as assumed by the idea of personal negativity bias (see Sect. 5.1.8)?

To better understand who supports basic income and who opposes it (and why), future research should also examine the role of other individual characteristics that have not been accounted for in this book. There are some socio-demographic characteristics that have yet to be explored, but could be highly relevant in understanding popular support for basic income. One relevant example concerns whether people own capital and property assets, such as a house or stocks and shares (Lux & Mau, 2021). Likewise, there are some ideological beliefs that have been paid little attention in prior research. A relevant example in this regard involves conspiracy beliefs about basic income, which some believe are on the rise and pose an eminent threat to its popularity and political feasibility. For the time being, it is nevertheless unclear how prevalent such conspiracy beliefs are and how they relate to people’s support for the policy. There are also some unexplored individual characteristics that lie somewhere in between people’s socio-demographic features and their ideological views. One pertinent example is people’s perceived risk of losing their job due to automation. While some studies have used the

risk of automation (as projected by experts) as a predictor (Busemeyer & Sahn, 2022; Dermont & Weisstanner, 2020), we know little about how people perceive that risk themselves, and how that feeds into their position towards basic income. Although there is some evidence that citizens refuse to accept a scenario in which ‘robots take over our jobs’ and do not see basic income as a good solution if that were nonetheless to happen, the evidence is restricted to a small sample of Hungarian university students (Herke & Vicsek, 2022). We clearly need more research, with larger samples in multiple countries, to understand how perceptions of automation are linked to support for basic income.

Another path for future research to pursue would be the inclusion of intersections between different individual characteristics—for example, between gender and other socio-demographic features. Throughout the book, it is shown that men and women do not differ substantially in terms of their support for different types of basic income, or in the related arguments they endorse or find important. This seems to indicate that gender as such is not particularly relevant for the political feasibility of basic income. However, it could well be that gender plays a more important role when it is linked to other characteristics, such as household composition. For example, a basic income could be particularly beneficial to—and thus supported by—single mothers, as they tend to have greater income insecurity (Kramer et al., 2015). Unfortunately, such intersections are difficult to account for from a methodological point of view, because the number of respondents is often too small to obtain reliable statistical estimates. This is the case for most of the surveys used in this book, as they are designed to represent the general population rather than specific segments of it (such as single mothers). One notable exception in this regard is the BABEL Survey in Belgium, which over-sampled trade union members making it possible to investigate the extent to which basic income is supported by trade unionists from different ideological strands. Future research should further explore how specific segments of the population think about basic income, either by over-sampling these groups in general population surveys or by conducting highly targeted surveys. Other examples of groups that could be important for the political feasibility of basic income but are often under-represented and thus overlooked in survey analyses are radical-right (or left) voters, self-employed people, migrants and ethnic minorities and residents of care facilities. Reaching such ‘hard-to-survey populations’ (Tourangeau et al.,

2014) will add important insights to our current knowledge about the popularity and political feasibility of basic income.

A further task for future research—which is especially relevant for our fundamental knowledge base—would be to expose the theoretical mechanisms that lie behind popular support for basic income. In this book, I have made the assumption that such support is driven by (possibly a combination of) considerations of self-interest and ideology. This assumption is based on decades of research investigating popular attitudes towards the welfare state (van Oorschot et al., 2022). I have been less concerned with testing theories, as the book is not only targeted at scholars, but also at policy entrepreneurs who may be more interested in finding out *who*—that is, which identifiable political constituencies—support (or oppose) basic income, rather than knowing *why*—that is, through which theoretical mechanisms—they do so. For example, while the book clearly shows that elderly people are less supportive of basic income, it does not provide clear-cut evidence for why this is the case. There are some signs that the elderly oppose basic income out of self-interest, but it cannot be ruled out that their opposition is also (and perhaps more strongly) rooted in ideological conservatism. Nevertheless, as an academic, I consider it important that future research further theorizes why people support (or oppose) different types of basic income and puts these theories to the empirical test. Multiple regression analyses with (preferably longitudinal) survey data offer one way of getting closer to the theoretical dynamics behind popular support for basic income. Another promising approach would be to deploy qualitative research methods (such as content analysis of focus groups and in-depth interviews), which can generate valuable insights into the reasoning behind people’s position towards a basic income (as shown in Chapter 4).

The book clearly demonstrates that individuals’ characteristics often influence support for basic income differently in different countries. A case in point is education, which increases support in some countries while in others, it decreases it. Similar observations are found for many other individual characteristics. This important finding has nevertheless remained under the radar in most prior studies, because they were either limited to single countries or lumped all countries together in a pooled cross-national analysis. Nevertheless, it currently remains unclear how and why the impact of individual characteristics differs across countries. I consider it a key task for future research to uncover the factors explaining such cross-national variation. One important aspect could be countries’

existing tax-transfer systems, which are likely to affect citizens' normative beliefs and cost-benefit calculations related to the introduction of a basic income through various mechanisms of policy feedback (Busemeyer et al., 2021; Pierson, 1993). For example, the progressivity of income taxes and social transfers may to a large extent shape the self-interest considerations of different income groups (Korpi & Palme, 1998), which would in turn influence their support for basic income. In a similar vein, varying levels of welfare state generosity could be a factor influencing how particular social groups think about basic income in different countries. For example, it seems plausible that the generosity of pension benefits (or the lack thereof) shapes elderly people's opinions about basic income, and thereby potentially also the size of the gap in support between the old and the young. In addition to existing welfare state policies, it seems likely that economic (for example, the level of unemployment), cultural (for example, the religious heritage of a country), demographic (for example, the degree of population ageing) and political factors (for example, a partisan discourse) will also affect who supports and who opposes basic income in different contexts. This 'context' not only concerns countries, but also regions within countries and developments over time. Accordingly, future research should explore how and why the impact of people's individual characteristics on their support for basic income varies between regions and over time. The element of time is particularly important to consider in future studies. As discussed above, it is consistently found that young people are more supportive of basic income than their elderly counterparts (see Sect. 5.1.5), but we do not know whether this is a cohort effect or an age effect. This is nevertheless hugely important for the political prospects of basic income, as the former implies that popular support is likely to increase in the future due to generational replacement, whereas the latter suggests that the higher level of support among the young is likely to decrease as they grow older. To be able to determine which scenario is most probable, we need longitudinal data allowing us to track how the support for basic income of individuals (or groups) evolves over time. Unfortunately, this data is currently not available.

The context can also influence across-the-board support for basic income. The different chapters have shown that support is higher in some countries, regions and time periods than in others. Using data from the ESS, it was also shown that the level of economic development and of social spending help to explain such contextual variation, with support for the ideal-typical version of basic income being lower

in countries where both the economy and the welfare state are less developed (see Sect. 5.1.4). Future research should, nevertheless, explore other contextual determinants of popular support for basic income, as economic development and social spending do not come near to explaining all the observed variation between different countries. Here, I refer to the importance of the same contextual factors as discussed above. These include other elements of the welfare state (for example, the tax burden), other economic conditions (for example, the rate of inflation), cultural characteristics (for example, the centrality of work), demographic features (for example, the influx of refugees) and political factors (for example, the state structure). With regard to the last of these, it will be particularly important to assess how experiments, pilots and simulations influence support for basic income (before, during and after they are conducted). While we know from the Finnish experiment that the participants in the experimental group were more positive about basic income than a comparable control group, both groups, nevertheless, consisted only of unemployed people. What is needed are studies that investigate how experiments affect across-the-board support among the general population. More research is also needed about the impact that time developments and events—in particular economic, health and other crises—have on popular support for (different types of) basic income, relative to competing policy schemes (such as means-tested social assistance).

At the same time, we should not expect to *fully* explain the variation present between countries, regions and time periods. Empirical analyses usually uncover a number of general patterns, from which there are always context-specific deviations. These deviations can nevertheless be hugely important for the political feasibility of basic income in that specific context. For example, it could be that there are some countries with a high level of economic development *and* a high level of support for basic income. In that case, there is no demand-capacity conflict of the type discussed above. Knowing about the patterns is thus interesting, but not indispensable for policy entrepreneurs who seek to put in place a basic income in their particular context. Instead, I strongly recommend that those entrepreneurs always conduct a context-specific analysis of the popularity of their policy proposal, and reflect on the context-specific implications for the political feasibility of that proposal. In fact, I consider this equally as important as analysing the administrative and financial feasibility of basic income proposals. For policy entrepreneurs in the Global

North (Western Europe and the US in particular), there may already be some survey evidence available to evaluate the popularity and political feasibility of policy proposals. In the Global South, such evidence is largely absent, which I believe is mainly due to a lack of resources and infrastructure to field large-scale surveys, rather than due to a lack of interest in basic income. In fact, there are plenty of basic income advocates in Africa and Latin America (Murray & Pateman, 2012), most of whom are currently in the dark about who supports which types of basic income in their country. Although there is somewhat more information available for policy entrepreneurs in Asian (Japan and South Korea in particular) and Eastern European countries, they are also less well-equipped to assess the popularity and political feasibility of basic income in their specific context. In this light, I seize the opportunity to call for the inclusion of detailed items on basic income in international surveys that also cover the regions that have been underexposed in prior research (for example, the Afrobarometer, the ISSP and the World Values Survey).

5.2.2 *Measuring Support for Basic Income*

Future research should also continue to pay due attention to the proper measurement of popular support for basic income. As a minimum, what a basic income is should always be explained, as citizens often lack prior knowledge about it. This can involve giving relatively broad definitions of the ideal-typical version of basic income (or other types, such as a participation income) to assess support for a general policy *idea*. Alternatively (or additionally), information can be given about the specific design features of a concrete policy *proposal*—such as its amount, eligibility rules, funding mechanism and integration within the existing welfare system. In this book, data limitations restricted me to focusing mainly on the policy design dimensions of universality, conditionality, financing, generosity, integration and uniformity. Future research would benefit from also analysing the effects of dimensions that have remained underexplored in public opinion studies, such as the administration, duration, individuality, frequency and modality of basic income. It is also important to keep taking stock of possible interactions between different policy design features to reveal how people react to trade-offs (for example, between the generosity and conditionality of basic income). Analysing these interactions not only generates fundamental knowledge about the popularity of basic income, but also allows us to identify with greater

accuracy the political constituencies that can be mobilized in favour of (or against) differently designed types of basic income in different countries, regions and time periods.

There is nevertheless a limit to the number of policy design features that can be included in descriptions of basic income in public opinion research. Providing detailed information about the proposed policy scheme is often a good thing, but can also be damaging if the description is so complex that people feel cognitively overburdened. To confirm whether people have understood the definition that is provided and are able to respond to questions about it, I highly recommend that preparatory cognitive interviews and pilot studies should be conducted (see Laenen et al., 2021 for an example). Further, it would also be valuable to assess—preferably in an open-answer format—people’s initial perceptions of basic income, before a definition is provided: what do they *think* it is? This can help to expose the familiarity with the concept of basic income in public opinion and some of the stereotypical images that may be used to describe it. As a general rule, researchers should nevertheless always make a common definition of basic income available to respondents, so that they are at least all ‘talking about the same thing’. The empirical analyses in this book have nevertheless made it very clear that the chosen definition can colour the results. For example, surveys often describe basic income as a solution to a particular social problem (such as poverty or technological unemployment), which in all likelihood increases the level of support—either across the board or among specific groups, such as low-skilled workers—compared with a situation in which no explanation is offered with regard to the problem(s) basic income supposedly solves. Importantly, this implies that the level of support observed in different surveys (which often use differently worded questions) cannot and should not be directly compared unless the differences between them are extremely small. Instead, I strongly advise the development of standardized measurements of popular support for basic income that can be reliably compared (for example, between countries or over time).

Other than that, I formulate five additional recommendations to improve our measurement, and thus our understanding, of popular support for basic income. The first is to conduct—if feasible—surveys among samples that are representative (to the extent this is possible) of the larger population whose support for basic income one aims to measure. If it is the general public that is of interest, the recommendation is to randomly select a (relatively large) sample of the public by using, for

example, population registers. When this is not possible—possibly due to a lack of administrative or financial resources—it should at least be recognized that the respondents are part of a convenience sample that is not representative of the public as a whole. Similarly, even when a survey is targeted at a specific segment of the general population (such as trade union members), it should be evaluated how representative of that segment the sample actually is. This is of course a standard recommendation for any survey research, but is worth repeating for the case of popular support for basic income, which is often gauged in surveys by using convenience samples that are not representative of the entire population (without this being properly acknowledged). For the time being, we, nevertheless, have to make do with the surveys that are currently available, even if they are often not entirely representative of any broader population. This pragmatic approach is also adopted in the book.

The second recommendation is to measure popular support for basic income *relative* to support for other, competing policy schemes, such as conditional and means-tested social assistance (see also Rincon, 2021). This can either be performed directly, by forcing people to rank different schemes, or indirectly, by asking them to rate different schemes separately on a common scale. While the first option has the advantage of uncovering popular preferences with regard to policy priorities, the second also allows people to be equally supportive of—or possibly indifferent about—various policy schemes (because they are not forced to rank them). Although the measurement of relative levels of support is of course not a strict requirement, it does allow evaluation of the potential political opportunity costs involved in introducing a basic income in a particular context (see Sect. 5.1.1). Furthermore, it can help to tackle what seems an obvious reaction from political opponents, who could recognize the fact that basic income is relatively popular but question whether it is also *more* popular than its policy competitors (in particular those that already exist, such as conditional, means-tested social assistance). For this reason, I argue that it should be standard practice to compare the popularity of basic income with that of its main policy competitors. More generally, surveys should also ask people whether they consider the implementation of a basic income as an improvement (or conversely, a deterioration) of the existing welfare system.

The third recommendation is to develop indicators that measure intended political behaviour in relation to basic income. The standard approach in existing survey research is to ask people the extent to which

they support or oppose the introduction of a basic income scheme in their country (as most surveys discussed in this book have done). However, this does not capture people's willingness to *act* in support of (or against) basic income. In light of this, future research should first and foremost ask respondents whether they would vote for (or against) a party or a politician that proposes (or opposes) the introduction of a basic income. Additionally, it would be beneficial to ask people whether they would, for example, sign a petition or take part in a public protest in favour of (or against) basic income, contact a policymaker directly to advocate (or oppose) basic income, vote for (or against) basic income in a referendum if one were to be organized, become or remain a member of a trade union or other interest organization if it would propose (or oppose) a basic income, and so on. This type of information is presumably more relevant for policy entrepreneurs who seek to put in place a basic income, as it allows a more precise assessment of the political implications of public opinion than a simple measurement of people's stated support. It could also help to detect cases of 'cheap support' for basic income (see Sect. 5.1.2), as one could argue that people who state that they support the introduction of a basic income but are unwilling to carry out any political act on behalf of it are arguably not all that supportive of the policy.

The fourth recommendation is to more closely capture the reasons underlying popular support for (or opposition to) a basic income. As shown in Chapter 4, some surveys have probed the perceived convincingness and importance of different arguments and outcomes associated with the introduction of a basic income. While I advise future research to continue along the same path, there are some issues that require specific attention. Most importantly, there is a pressing need to increase our understanding of the impact that different arguments about basic income and its predicted outcomes have on popular support. It is particularly important for policy entrepreneurs to know whether and how they can overcome the negativity bias that was uncovered in this book (see Sect. 5.1.8). That is, which types of arguments are able to persuade people to support the introduction of a basic income, and does this vary between individuals with different characteristics (for example, depending on their political ideology) and across contexts (for example, between countries with diverging levels of economic development). In addition, it is very relevant to investigate whether the *messenger* (rather than the message) of the political framing also has an effect on support for basic income. For

example, do people react differently when the arguments are put forward by scientists or by politicians? If the latter proves to be the case, does it make a difference whether the arguments are communicated by someone who is seen as a political ally or as a political opponent?

For obvious reasons, having this evidence-based knowledge about the impact of political framing is vital for any policy entrepreneur who seeks to sway public opinion to support basic income. It is nevertheless equally crucial for those entrepreneurs to have an accurate picture of the arguments that are already widely supported by (specific parts of) the population, irrespective of the framing. In this light, more research is needed with regard to who endorses which arguments, and in which contexts. The arguments included in surveys should nevertheless not only be determined by people who are experts on the topic of basic income, as they may not be fully aware of the (mis)conceptions that are prevalent among non-experts (who actually comprise the majority of the population). Instead, it is crucial to conduct exploratory qualitative studies that would allow us to uncover the types of arguments and outcomes people *spontaneously* think of in relation to basic income (for example, using in-depth interviews or focus groups). Although the insights gained from such qualitative inquiry can serve as valuable input for quantitative surveys, this bottom-up strategy has rarely been applied in prior research (however, see Chapter 4 for some notable exceptions).

The fifth and final recommendation is to measure people's support for basic income in settings that are (or feel) more 'natural' to them. Most existing studies tend to pull people out of their everyday life and place them in an unfamiliar research environment so that they can be asked about their attitudes towards basic income. This is the case with traditional polls and survey experiments, but also with qualitative techniques such as in-depth interviews and focus groups. I consider it a major task for future research to also investigate people's opinions about basic income in habitats that are much more familiar to them. Promising techniques to achieve this—which have so far rarely been used in research—are (non-)participatory observation and social media analyses (for an excellent example of the latter, see Gielens et al., 2022). Both methods can even be applied in such a way that people are unaware that their opinions about basic income are under scientific investigation, which could severely reduce social desirability bias and allow us to study these opinions as they naturally unfold.

5.2.3 *Exploring the ‘Consequences’ of Support for Basic Income*

Despite its importance, there is surprisingly little research on the ‘consequences’ of popular support for basic income, making it unclear whether and how such support affects the different types of feasibility depicted in Fig. 5.1. Future research should, therefore, investigate how public opinion could influence the administrative, financial and political feasibility of basic income.

With regard to the administrative and financial aspects, a highly relevant question to address in future research is the extent to which people’s support for basic income influences their (actual or intended) tax behaviour: are supporters also willing to pay taxes for it and would opponents try to evade them? Similar questions can be asked about the relationship between people’s support for basic income and their (actual or intended) labour market participation and compliance with possible requirements (as present in a participation income, for example). Questions of this nature can be addressed with the help of traditional opinion polls, survey experiments or qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews. However, it seems likely that these methods will suffer from social desirability bias, especially on the part of those who would indeed evade taxes, stop working or disregard any of the participation requirements. Therefore, future research should also rely on analytical techniques that are somewhat less vulnerable to this bias. These include, first of all, policy field experiments that make it possible to observe—using, for example, administrative records—people’s real-world behaviour. However, ethical requirements mean that participation in such experiments tends to be completely voluntary, and researchers often need participants’ informed consent to use sensitive personal data such as tax and work records. This is problematic, because it tends to exclude the group of people researchers are perhaps most interested in, in view of administrative and financial feasibility: opponents of basic income (who may refuse to participate *because* they dislike the policy) and those who would demonstrate undesirable behaviour, such as tax evasion (who might fear that study participation would expose them and lead to possible sanctions). This is less of a problem in lab experiments, in which participants are aware that the situation is purely hypothetical. Although experiments of this type can potentially reveal some fundamental tendencies of how people

would react to the introduction of a basic income, their greatest weakness is arguably the fact that the situation is not ‘real’, in the sense that the results are fabricated in a controlled laboratory environment (thereby undermining its so-called ‘ecological validity’).

It will be even more important for future research to investigate how public opinion about basic income influences its political feasibility, which no empirical study has done to date. In this book, I have made the assumption that there is in fact a relationship between the two, in the sense that public opinion affects policymakers’ (strategic) positions towards a basic income. Importantly, this assumption is shared by most scholars investigating the politics of basic income (see, for example, De Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012; Laenen et al., 2022; Torry, 2016). It is usually justified by referring to the long-established political science literature on policy responsiveness, as this argues that policymakers tend to take public preferences into account because they want to be re-elected, or they see it as their moral duty to do so (Page & Shapiro, 1983). It can be argued that basic income is—like most other social policies—hugely important to people (and policymakers), because it would directly affect the life of almost everyone living in the society in which it is implemented. Accordingly, this creates great incentives for policymakers to—at least rhetorically (see Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008)—respond to public opinion, making basic income a likely candidate for responsiveness to occur. From this perspective, the case of basic income would simply add to the mounting empirical evidence showing that policymakers are indeed to some extent responsive to public opinion, including in the domain of social policy (Brooks & Manza, 2006; Schakel et al., 2020).

At the same time, basic income could also be seen as a somewhat unlikely case for responsiveness to occur, compared with most other social policies. This is because it performs worse on the three main factors that political scientists have recognized as explaining why responsiveness is more likely for some policy issues than for others: ‘issue salience’, ‘opinion coherence’ and ‘policy radicalness’ (Manza & Cook, 2002; Page & Shapiro, 1983). With regard to the first, it can be argued that basic income is less salient, visible and proximate than most other, existing social policies, because people generally lack direct experience of a basic income (which does not currently exist anywhere; see Chapter 1). Accordingly, it also seems likely that public opinion about basic income is less coherent compared with public opinion about existing social policies. This is again because people lack real, on-the-ground experience of a basic

income, which they do have this with existing policies (for example, as benefit recipients or taxpayers). Furthermore, basic income is to some extent fighting an uphill battle, because most politicians appear to have a strong status quo bias (Gilens & Page, 2014) and much policymaking is a path-dependent endeavour (Pierson, 2000). This makes it less likely that public opinion will be followed when there is a radical overhaul of the existing system at stake, as would be the case with a basic income. If implemented, a basic income (the ideal-typical version in particular) would in fact radically transform ‘welfare as we know it’ in most countries, because it departs from the dominant view of making social benefits conditional on work requirements and/or selectively targeted at low-income groups through means testing. The radical nature of basic income may make it a less likely candidate for policy responsiveness compared with existing social policies, which can be reformed more incrementally.

This makes basic income a challenging case with regard to policy responsiveness, because it confronts us with a theoretical puzzle that has hitherto not been addressed empirically—as no study has ever investigated whether policymakers’ positions towards a basic income are influenced by public opinion. Future research should nevertheless go further than the simple yes-or-no question of whether policy responsiveness occurs. Instead, the broader objective should be to uncover *under which conditions* (that is, who, when, where, why and how) such responsiveness is more likely or less likely to occur. With regard to the ‘who’ aspect, the goal should be to find out whether certain policymakers are more/less responsive to public opinion about basic income than others. More specifically, we would learn a great deal by comparing different types of policymakers with different characteristics and roles, for example, including incumbent politicians, trade union representatives and representatives of employers’ organizations. Furthermore, the ‘who’ aspect should also address the issue of who—that is, which people—policymakers respond to: the general public or specific constituencies? The ‘when’ and ‘where’ aspects relate to the broader context in which policymakers operate. Future research should examine policymakers’ responsiveness to public opinion about basic income in different countries, regions and time periods, as we know from prior research that such responsiveness is context specific (see, for example, Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012). Lastly, the ‘how’ and ‘why’ aspects refer to the micro-mechanisms behind policymakers’ responsiveness (or lack thereof) to public opinion about basic income: *why* are they (un)responsive, and

how do they collect and process information about public opinion? These are also questions that cannot be answered on the basis of prior research and should thus be part of future inquiries linking public opinion about basic income to its political feasibility.

Taken together, this book thus ends by questioning the very reason it was written in the first place; that is, because public opinion is assumed to influence the administrative, the financial and above all the political feasibility of basic income. In the end, however, this remains very much an open question that needs to be investigated further in future research.

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