

Abstract

A presidential candidate currently running his campaign on a Universal Basic Income platform in the United States shows how much traction the idea of a guaranteed, unconditional income as a government transfer to all citizens has gained in recent years. While it is definitely a highly controversial topic it seems remarkable that in an increasingly polarized political environment support for this idea can be found across in other regards antagonistic ideological camps. Analysis of the debate around UBI might find that its appeal originates in the fact that the core idea doesn't promote a full political program but rather is a strategy of rethinking welfare – with different political perspectives leading to an assemblage of specific UBI plans. Perplexion in this debate arises when these concrete concepts are considered or suggested to be inherently equivalent policies.

In order to enable readers to engage in a more nuanced debate around UBI I want to propose four distinct categories of UBI plans distinguished by the amount of income they provide and to which extent the transfer is granted in addition or as substitution of current welfare. In this paper I want to discuss how Data Visualization can help clarifying differences of UBI plans across categories, by showing which distinct socio-economic problems they focus on and which re-allocation of resources they propose. Furthermore I want to investigate if this way of pragmatic presentation can be complemented by a questionnaire that engages the reader to reflect on the opinion formation process by giving individual feedback and allowing a comparison to the overall collected data.

Introduction

While historically there has been recurrent interest in the idea of a guaranteed money transfer by the government to all citizens, proponents in recent debates have suggested that technologic and socio-economic developments in recent decades render implementation of UBI feasible for the first time thanks to growing automation, if not necessary in anticipation of higher levels of unemployment and growing inequalities threatening to unravel the fabric of society. These different notions already introduce a bandwidth of perspectives on UBI where common ground still has to be found. Apart from the fact that it is a central issued money transfer one has to acknowledge that there is no universal definition of basic income as a political program yet. While this ambiguity sparks interests of thinkers of different orientation on the political compass, it can confuse arguments when the innovation of rethinking how to distribute welfare is tightly interwoven with answers to questions like which resources should be (re-)allocated, why a basic income should be considered a right and when different answers to these questions are conflated. In this paper I want to suggest that it can be beneficial to temporarily separate these concerns, undoubtedly admitting their inherent connections.

Therefore, I want to suggest four categories that offer a specific enough answer to the question what level of basic income should be granted and whether it complements or (partially) replaces current welfare programs: First, a UBI replacing current welfare entirely where current spending determines the amount of the transfer. Second, models where the basic income only partially replaces welfare (health care and education are provided to the same extent) and the amount helps to ease situations of hardship but is not enough to sustain a living. Category three builds on the second one but raises the income just above the poverty line, making it possible to sustain a modest living in areas where the cost of living is below or around the average. The last category marks the end of this spectrum where the level of basic income would be comfortable enough to render work optional.

Within each of these contexts, I try to identify the main concern the UBI models in this category want to address either in comparison or in addition to UBI models in the other categories. I want to show how Data Visualization can illustrate these concerns and the proposed solutions but also allows a unique comparison of these categories by introducing a visual method to illustrate the (re-)allocation of resources. In extension of a broadcasting paradigm I want to use the possibilities of user interaction as an opportunity to invite the user to reflect on the opinion formation process regarding the presented arguments and (re-)introduce the notion that UBI, when translated into a concrete political implementation is more than a cross-ideological distribution mechanism: like every political program it then also becomes a broader vision of “obligations we have to one another, the origins of property, the ends of human life, the shape of our society”¹ Nevertheless my hope is that the separation of these concerns (and contexts) helps to emphasize in which regards UBI can be regarded a tool of innovating welfare and once clarity over broader visions is established might even offer new compromises in a highly polarized political environment.

¹ Battistoni, Alyssa. “The False Promise of Universal Basic Income.” *Dissent Magazine*, Spring 2017. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/false-promise-universal-basic-income-andy-stern-ruger-bregman>.