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# The Politics of the Basic Income Guarantee: Analysing Individual Support in Europe

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## Abstract:

This article analyses individual level support for a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) using the European Social Survey. At the country level, support is highest in South and Central Eastern Europe, but variation does not otherwise seem to follow established differences between varieties of capitalisms or welfare state regimes. At the individual level, findings are broadly in line with the expectations of the political economy literature. Left-leaning individuals facing high labour market risk and/or on low incomes are more supportive of a BIG, whereas current union members are less likely to support a BIG, consistent with the insider-outsider literature. However, when controlling for confounding variables, union membership is not statistically significant, suggesting that it is not membership per se, but the characteristics of unionised workers that make them less supportive. In many countries, a coalition between centrist and left-leaning individuals therefore seems most promising, but its political feasibility depends on whether enough union members are favourable to a BIG and on the level of opposition from high income and/or conservative parts of the electorate.

**Keywords:** political economy, basic income guarantee, universal income, electoral politics, European Social Survey, welfare state

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## The missing politics of the basic income guarantee

Despite its long history, a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) providing all citizens with an unconditional and regular income cash benefit without means-test or requirement has rarely been as widely discussed.<sup>1</sup> Mentions in newspapers have soared in recent years, a systematic experiment is taking place in Finland, the French presidential candidate Benoit Hamon made it one of his flagship policy proposal, and Switzerland held a referendum in June 2016.<sup>2</sup>

This widespread interest is not surprising given its political appeal across the ideological spectrum. Thinkers on the Right are attracted to its minimalism and limited scope, and its administrative simplicity and unicity, which contrast with often more complex and numerous existing welfare state arrangements. Since a BIG continues to be paid regardless of whether people are in jobs or not, liberals also emphasise its low adverse effects on work incentives. On the Left, advocates stress its universalism, which reduces the gaps in coverage of existing welfare state policies. Its unconditional characteristic could also decommodify labour more fully, thereby increasing the bargaining power of workers to push for better working conditions and wages, especially at the low-skill end of the labour market. Therefore, there may be tensions in the expectations of left- and right-wing supporters in terms of what they expect from a BIG.

Detractors are also located across the ideological spectrum. Many liberal economists argue that a BIG generous enough to achieve its objectives would be too expensive (e. g. Kay, 2017). It is also inefficient, they reason, as it targets resources to those who may not need them most. Others on the Marxist left see a BIG as a politically dangerous legitimization of capitalism, while social democrats worry that the BIG represents an implicit abandonment of the full employment objective. They also doubt that a BIG can effectively address the many social risks that individuals face in a market economy (Hassel, 2017). Finally, some trade unions, particularly in Bismarckian welfare regimes, may worry that a BIG would replace existing schemes where they yield greater institutional power, such as unemployment benefit systems (for other reasons, see Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017).

This article cannot do justice to the large and excellent literature on the BIG.<sup>3</sup> Instead it explores the potential politics of a BIG by analysing empirically individual level support for the BIG using a recently conducted wave of the cross-national European Social Survey (ESS). Before presenting the findings from an analysis of the ESS, the next section briefly sets out the expectations from existing political economy literatures. The article concludes with some reflections about the political future of a BIG.

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## The politics of the welfare state and the BIG

Previous literature on the BIG has for the most part neglected the question of which individuals are favourable to its introduction in the short term, what resulting social coalition could ensure its political viability in the long term, and how this relates to long standing debates in the politics of the welfare state literature. Ongoing experiments are of course important to understand the effects of a BIG on work incentives and poverty (for a review of existing evidence see Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). However, the positive or negative effects of a policy alone are not sufficient to analyse their electoral appeal and viability. Plenty of good policy ideas and reforms are never introduced because they lack a social coalition to support their introduction. Conversely, governments often make poor policy choices and/or carry out unnecessary and problematic reforms which do have support of parts of the electorate. The fiscal viability of a BIG is also debated.<sup>4</sup> While clearly important, fiscal viability alone can neither rule out nor guarantee the scheme's future. Indeed, fiscal viability is endogenous to the politics of a BIG: whether the electorate is willing and able to pay more taxes, the level at which a BIG is set, and the extent to which it will replace existing welfare state benefits.

Thus, the possible future of a BIG is a political question. There is a large literature in political economy analysing which individuals support welfare state policies. The consensus is that individuals with higher risks of being unemployed are more likely to support unemployment benefits (e. g. Rehm, 2011; Rueda, 2007). But the expectations concerning a BIG are not straightforward because they depend on the extent to which existing unemployment benefits decommodify unemployed individuals effectively. Indeed, the unemployed have in the last two decades been increasingly recommodified and 'activated', which often entails imposing sanctions when they refuse job offers (Clasen & Clegg, 2003; Knotz, 2012; Vlandas, 2013a). This should make individuals at greater risk of unemployment particularly favourable to a generous version of a BIG. However, if respondents expect a BIG to replace unemployment benefits which were very generous,<sup>5</sup> they may be more likely oppose it.

Equally, more precarious workers should be more favourable to a BIG. For instance, several studies suggest that temporary workers may have more supportive labour market policy preferences and choose more left leaning parties than workers with permanent contracts (e. g. Marx & Picot, 2013; Rueda, 2007; Vlandas, 2013b). To the extent that temporary workers sometimes find it difficult to accumulate rights to unemployment benefits, they may be expected to favour a BIG. Finally, education and income should also matter: individuals with higher incomes and/or higher education tend to be less favourable to labour market policies benefiting the unemployed (e. g. Rehm, 2011, p. 282). Partly, they may in some cases need social insurance less as they are better able to cope with labour market risks, and partly they might fear the redistributive effects that certain welfare state policies might entail. While high income earners should therefore be expected to oppose a BIG, highly educated individuals might also value the freedom and protection that a BIG guarantees them, especially high skilled outsiders (cf. Hausermann, Kurer, & Schwander, 2015).

Moreover, trade union members were traditionally found to be supportive of redistribution and welfare state policies, and strong trade unions continue to have equalising effects on the income distribution (e. g. Vlandas, 2016) and to be associated with more generous unemployment benefits (e. g. Gordon, 2015). However, many unions now represent medium to high income workers and the effect of strong unions on redistribution has therefore tended to wane over time (Pontusson, 2013). In addition, the insider-outsider literature expects unions to be increasingly concerned with insiders rather than outsiders (Rueda, 2007). Certain trade unions may also not be favourable to a new scheme that grants them significantly less institutional power than existing welfare state policies (for the case of employment protection legislation, see Emmenegger & Davidsson, 2013).

The extent to which these factors matter in explaining individual level support for a BIG, as well as the overall level of support for a BIG, may be expected to vary across countries. Two prominent streams of political economy literatures on the welfare state contend that European countries differ systematically in the organisation of their welfare state and capitalist economy.

The first approach identifies different welfare state regimes with distinct levels of decommodification and stratification. At least three welfare state regimes can be delineated in Europe – Bismarckian, Liberal and Social Democratic (Esping-Andersen, 1990)<sup>6</sup> – and there is a debate about whether institutional differences reflect various views about the welfare state and redistribution in the population of different regimes. For instance, the decommodifying social democratic welfare regime in Scandinavian countries has been shown to exhibit higher popular support for egalitarianism (e. g. Svallfors, 1997, p. 289). If this logic travels to a BIG, we should expect higher support for a BIG in the social democratic regime, followed by the Bismarckian regime which exhibits medium decommodification, and the liberal regime would come last given that it tends to rely on means-tested and minimalist benefits. However, one could conversely expect that it is precisely in liberal (e. g. UK, Ireland) and more minimalist or limited welfare states (e. g. some countries in central and eastern Europe) that the need, and hence support, for a BIG could be highest.

The second approach, Varieties of Capitalism (VoC), distinguishes between two types of Capitalism. In Liberal market Economies (LMEs), such as the UK, decentralised forms of market coordination shape interactions

between firms, investors and workers in collective bargaining, training and education systems, corporate governance, and labour markets. In Coordinated Market Economies (CMEs), such as Germany, firms, workers and investors coordinate their actions in these spheres through non-market mechanisms (Hall & Soskice, 2001). In CMEs, the incremental innovation strategies of firms depend on workers investing in specific skills, which in turn requires generous unemployment benefits and high employment protection legislation (EPL). By contrast, in LMEs workers have general and highly transferable skills, which do not require generous unemployment benefits nor high EPL. As a result, workers may be more favourable to a BIG in LMEs and trade unions should be particularly opposed to a BIG in CMEs where they currently play a strong role in the welfare state.

## Empirical analysis

### A survey of individual support for a BIG

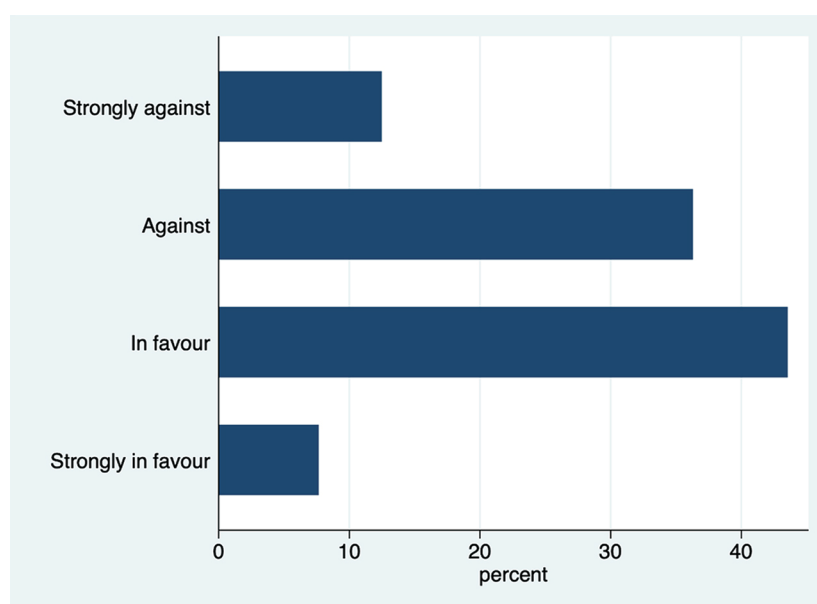
How should one empirically examine the politics of a BIG? This article follows a large and influential political economy literature which posits that individuals' preferences for policies influence electoral politics and in turn the structure and generosity of the welfare state (see Beramendi, Häusermann, Kitschelt, & Kriesi, 2015 for a recent and excellent example). My analysis of individual preferences for a BIG relies on the latest wave of the European Social Survey (ESS, 2016, 2nd Edition), a high quality and widely used cross-national survey of European countries, including: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The survey includes a question about a BIG. Specifically, respondents are asked whether they are "against or in favour of the BIG scheme" being introduced in their respective country, which "some countries are currently talking about", with the following characteristics:

1. The government pays everyone a monthly income to cover essential living costs;
2. It replaces many other social benefits;
3. The purpose is to guarantee everyone a minimum standard of living;
4. Everyone receives the same amount regardless of whether or not they are working;
5. People also keep the money they earn from work or other sources;
6. This scheme is paid for by taxes.

The phrasing of the question has strengths and weaknesses. On the upside, the question is specific, an indication of the level is provided in characteristic (1), the fact that it replaces existing social benefits is mentioned in characteristic (2), the scheme is clearly universal in characteristic (4) and unconditional in characteristic (5), and financing is also clarified in characteristic (6). On the downside, the level remains abstract and the net fiscal effect as well as which exact social benefits will be affected are left unspecified in the question. This is problematic because opposition may be more likely when the expected individual cost of the measure becomes apparent. For instance, social benefits create their own support (Pierson, 2001) which generates opposition if recipients know what they are likely to lose. Indeed, evidence from a UK survey suggests that support drops when a BIG is associated with a cut in welfare benefit spending and even more if it is associated with an increase in taxes (Smedley, 2017). These limitations are important because the validity of the results discussed below is only as good as the survey: for e. g. the quality of the question, the sampling, the ability to translate similar meanings in countries with different pre-existing institutions and languages, etc.

### A large support for a BIG in Europe and differences across countries

Three features of the distribution of the cross-national average responses are noteworthy (see Figure 1). First, few respondents – about 12.5 % (standard error – SE – of 0.17) – are "strongly against" a BIG, but slightly above 36 % (SE of 0.25) respondents are "against" the scheme. Second, the largest share of respondents (about 43.5 % with an SE of 0.26) are in favour of the scheme. Third, total support for the scheme – adding those who are in favour or strongly in favour of the scheme indicates a slight majority (51.2 %) favour a BIG. The intensity of the preferences for and against may matter: there are more people who are "strongly against" than "strongly in favour" and there are more who are "in favour" than "against".



**Figure 1:** Average cross-national support for a BIG. Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2.

Turning to the cross-national variation in support for BIG (see Table 1), we can also observe a significant cross-national variation. Among countries with a majority of supporters, this ranges from very high levels of support in Lithuania, Hungary and Slovenia, with about 80 %, 69 % and 65 % in favour, respectively, to smaller majorities with nearly 56 % in Finland, 52 % in Czech Republic and just above 50 % in UK (and the 95 % confidence interval suggests there might not necessarily be a statistically significant majority in the latter). Among countries with less than 50 % supporters, the percentage support ranges from just under 50 % in the Netherlands and Spain (where the 95 % confidence interval cannot confirm whether it is lower than 50 %) to slightly less than 35 % in Switzerland and Norway.

**Table 1:** cross-national variation in support for a BIG.

Country	Percentage in favour	Standard error
Lithuania	80.61	0.95
Hungary	69.51	1.21
Slovenia	65.03	1.37
Belgium	58.62	1.18
Italy	58.58	1.03
Poland	58.51	1.30
Portugal	58.39	1.43
Ireland	56.01	1.00
Finland	55.74	1.15
Czech Republic	52.20	1.10
Great Britain	50.83	1.17
Netherlands	49.80	1.25
Spain	49.56	1.20
France	48.83	1.13
Estonia	46.72	1.14
Iceland	46.02	1.75
Austria	45.96	1.15
Germany	45.75	0.95
Sweden	37.55	1.27
Switzerland	34.74	1.25
Norway	33.67	1.23

Note: Design weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2.

Moreover, the cross-national variation does not seem *prima facie* consistent with established typologies in the political economy literature. While countries in central and eastern Europe almost all have a majority of supporters (except for Estonia) and the top three countries with the largest support are Lithuania, Hungary

and Slovenia, we can observe high and low support in different CMEs (e. g. Belgium has pretty high support at circa 59 % compared to Germany where it is circa 46 %) and different social democratic welfare regimes (e. g. Norway and Sweden have under 50 % support but Finland exhibits almost 56 % support).

Overall, countries with more limited and less generous welfare states (southern, liberal and central and eastern European welfare regimes) *tend* to exhibit higher support. Among generous welfare regimes, countries with a large number of supporters *tend* to have long standing unemployment problems in their labour market (e. g. Belgium and Finland). Finally, note that even in countries where supporters are not a majority, there is still a non-negligible share of respondents that are supportive of a BIG. In fact, six countries have more than 40 % of support: Netherlands, France, Estonia, Austria, Iceland and Germany. Depending on the political power and electoral participation of these supporters, this could be represent a sufficient coalition. Only three countries have levels of support below 40 %: Sweden and Norway, which are characterised by among the most generous welfare states in Europe; and Switzerland where there has recently been an unsuccessful referendum on a generous version of a BIG.<sup>7</sup>

## Labour market position and support for a BIG

The ESS asks respondents about their history of unemployment: nearly 60 % of respondents who have experienced a period of unemployment and work seeking within the last five years are favourable to a BIG compared to slightly above 50 % for those who have not (see Table 2). While there is substantial cross-national variation in support among respondents with a history of unemployment, in most countries (except for Switzerland and Norway), a majority of these respondents are supportive of a BIG (see Table 3). Employees are slightly more supportive of a BIG (about 51.4 %) than the self-employed (almost 46.6 %) (see Table 4). Thus, a pro-BIG coalition is more likely to rely on employees than on the self-employed, which is surprising given that the latter may often be more insecure than the former. However, this hides a substantial cross-national variation: in only eight countries a majority of self-employed are favourable to a BIG, including four eastern European countries as well as Ireland, Belgium, Portugal, Italy and Finland (see Table 5). The difference between temporary and permanent workers in their support for a BIG is not trivial: 55 % of respondents with ‘limited duration’ contracts favour a BIG compared to 49.4 % for those with ‘unlimited duration’ employment contracts (see Table 6). Only two countries do not have a majority of temporary workers in support of a BIG: Switzerland and Norway (see Table 7). Finally, previous welfare state literature posits that recipients represent strong supporters of existing benefits (e. g. Pierson, 2001) but the expectations for a BIG are less clear since it may difficult to predict what its introduction would mean for existing benefits. The empirical analysis (see Table 8) reveals that support for a BIG is highest among those whose main source is unemployment benefits (63.1 %) and any other social benefits (62.4 %). About 51 % of those deriving their main source of income from wages/salaries are supportive and only 49.5 % of pensioners. By contrast, support is low among those receiving income from self-employment (46.6 %) and farming (47.6 %), and lowest for those receiving main income from investments/savings (about 38.9 %). Figure 2 displays the cross-national variation for wage earners: the three countries where less than 40 % of wage earners are supportive are Norway, Switzerland and Sweden, while the three countries with the highest support among wage earners are all in East Europe (Slovenia, Hungary and Lithuania).

**Table 2:** Any period of unemployment and work seeking within last 5 years and support for a BIG.

Period of unemployment?	Strongly against	Against	In favour	Strongly in favour
No	12.7 (0.4)	36.8 (0.6)	42.6 (0.7)	8 (0.4)
Yes	10.3 (0.4)	29.9 (0.7)	48 (0.7)	11.7 (0.5)

Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2. Standard error in brackets.

**Table 3:** Any period of unemployment and work seeking within last 5 years and support for a BIG across countries.

Country	Percentage in favour
Lithuania	84.62
Slovenia	82.12
Hungary	78.37



Belgium	68.83
Poland	66.33
Czech Republic	65.95
Germany	62.67
Ireland	62.15
Portugal	62
Finland	60.49
Great Britain	60.36
Italy	59.5
Spain	58.62
Austria	56.32
Netherlands	54.92
France	54.08
Sweden	52.81
Iceland	51.26
Estonia	50.75
Switzerland	44.69
Norway	40.67

Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2.

**Table 4:** Employment relation and support for a BIG.

Employment relation	Strongly against	Against	In favour	Strongly in favour
Employee	12.5 (0.2)	36.1 (0.3)	43.8 (0.3)	7.6 (0.1)
Self-employed	12.6 (0.7)	40.8 (1.1)	38.2 (1.1)	8.4 (0.6)

Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2. Standard error in brackets.

**Table 5:** Employment relation and support for a BIG across countries.

Country	Percentage in favour
Lithuania	88.85
Slovenia	68.75
Finland	60
Belgium	57.68
Hungary	52.44
Ireland	51.89
Italy	51.81
Portugal	50.07
Iceland	48.75
Spain	47.52
Poland	47.37
Netherlands	46.18
Great Britain	43.5
Estonia	43.24
Germany	42.7
France	41.6
Austria	39.89
Czech Republic	39.69
Norway	38.05
Switzerland	37.04
Sweden	36.84

Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2.

**Table 6:** Employment contract and support for a BIG.

Employment contract unlimited or limited duration	Strongly against	Against	In favour	Strongly in favour
Unlimited	13.3 (0.2)	37.4 (0.3)	42.2 (0.3)	7.2 (0.2)
Limited	11 (0.5)	34 (0.7)	45.5 (0.7)	9.5 (0.4)

Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2. Standard error in brackets.

**Table 7:** Employment contract and support for a BIG across countries.

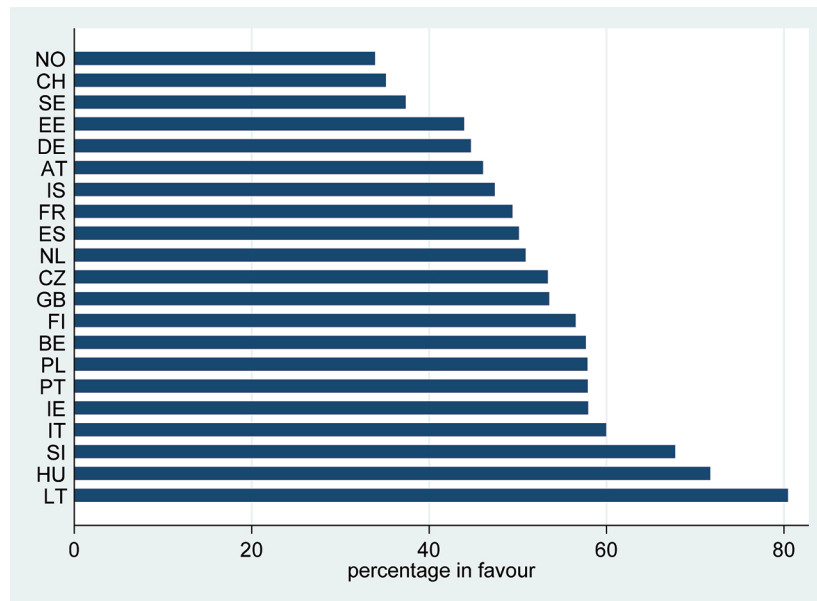
Country	Percentage of support
Lithuania	84.74
Hungary	80.43
Slovenia	77.42
Portugal	65.71
Iceland	65.03
Austria	60.5
Poland	58.8
Italy	58.7
Finland	57.64
Belgium	57.56
Ireland	55.91
Great Britain	54.89
Estonia	54.86
France	54.39
Czech Republic	53.91
Germany	52.38
Netherlands	52.03
Sweden	51.48
Spain	51.13
Switzerland	41.4
Norway	35.55

Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2.

**Table 8:** Main source of household income and support for a BIG.

Source	Strongly against	Against	In favour	Strongly in favour
Wage	12.3 (0.2)	36.1 (0.3)	43.8 (0.3)	7.7 (0.2)
Self-employed	12.6 (0.7)	40.8 (1.1)	38.2 (1.1)	8.4 (0.6)
Farmer	15.4 (1.8)	3.7 (2.4)	40.6 (2.4)	7 (1.3)
Pensions	13.5 (0.4)	37 (0.5)	43.5 (0.5)	6 (0.2)
Unemployed	8.2 (1)	28.7 (1.6)	44.2 (1.8)	18.9 (1.4)
Other benefits	10.6 (0.9)	27.1 (1.4)	51.1 (1.5)	11.3 (1)
Investor	13.7 (2.3)	47.4 (3.3)	32.7 (3.1)	6.2 (1.6)
Other sources	8.4 (1.4)	37.3 (2.4)	45.3 (2.4)	9.1 (1.4)

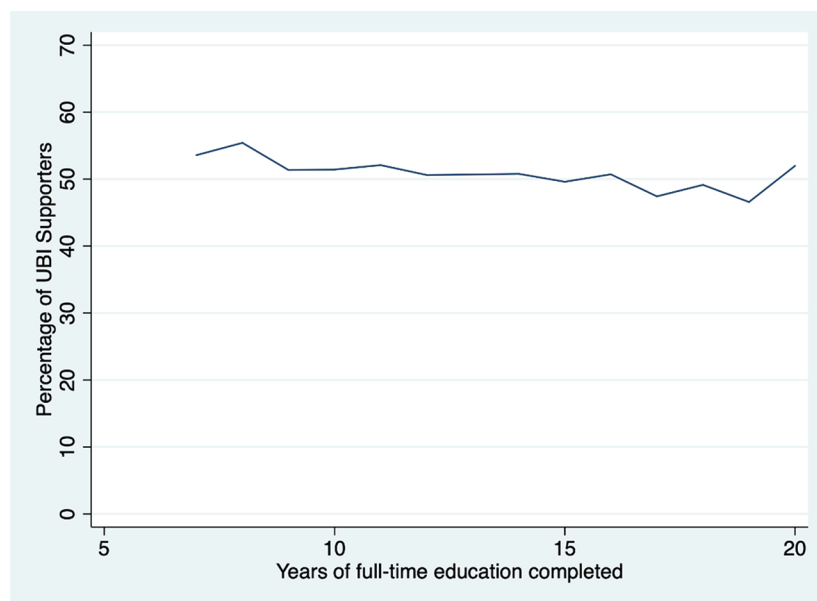
Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2. Standard error in brackets.



**Figure 2:** Cross-national variation in support for a BIG among wage earners. Note: Design weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2.

### Education, sources and level of income, and support for a BIG

With respect to education, support tends to fall slightly with years of education, with an increase in support for the very highly educated, but note that sample size falls (see Figure 3). With respect to income, the position of respondents in the income distribution has a fairly strong effect on preferences for a BIG: almost 58 % of respondents in the bottom 10 % of the income distribution support a BIG whereas 51.3 % support it in the fifth decile, and only 41.8 % in the top decile (see Table 9). The gap between the top and the bottom of the income distribution in their support for a BIG varies greatly across countries as indicated by the ratio of the bottom to the top 10 % support: it is 2.06 in Norway, 1.93 in Switzerland, 1.73 in Germany and Sweden, but less than 1 in Lithuania, Czech Republic and Portugal, suggesting that countries with large overall support have less differences between top and bottom income earners (see Table 10).



**Figure 3:** Years of education and support for a BIG. Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2.



**Table 9:** Household income and support for a BIG.

Income decile	Strongly against	Against	In favour	Strongly in favour
1	10.8 (0.6)	31.4 (0.9)	47.8 (0.9)	10 (0.6)
2	10.8 (0.6)	34.5 (0.9)	45 (0.9)	9.7 (0.5)
3	9.8 (0.5)	36.2 (0.8)	46.3 (0.9)	7.7 (0.5)
4	10.1 (0.5)	35.8 (0.8)	46.9 (0.9)	7.2 (0.4)
5	10.6 (0.5)	38.1 (0.8)	44.7 (0.9)	6.6 (0.4)
6	12.7 (0.6)	39.6 (0.8)	40.9 (0.9)	6.8 (0.4)
7	12.5 (0.6)	37.9 (0.8)	42.5 (0.9)	7 (0.4)
8	14.4 (0.6)	36.8 (0.8)	41.7 (0.9)	7.1 (0.5)
9	13.5 (0.7)	42.5 (1)	38.2 (1)	5.9 (0.5)
10	17.8 (0.8)	40.4 (1)	34.4 (1)	7.4 (0.5)

Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2. Standard error in brackets.

**Table 10:** Ratio of bottom 10% to top 10% income decile support for a BIG across countries.

Country	Ratio
Norway	2.06
Switzerland	1.93
Germany	1.73
Sweden	1.73
Iceland	1.69
Poland	1.53
Belgium	1.52
Estonia	1.48
Spain	1.37
Great Britain	1.32
Netherlands	1.24
Italy	1.20
Finland	1.16
Ireland	1.15
Slovenia	1.05
France	1.05
Austria	1.04
Hungary	1.00
Lithuania	0.96
Czech Republic	0.95
Portugal	0.91

Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2.

### Left-right ideology, trade union membership and support for a BIG

The position of the labour movement on a BIG is likely conflicted. On the one hand, the left has been a strong force behind the emergence and expansion of the welfare state (Huber & Stephens, 2001). On the other hand,

a universal residual safety net may be seen as a threat to existing welfare state arrangements. It is beyond the remit of this article to provide an exhaustive analysis of this issue so the following paragraphs are limited to exploring how left-right self-placement (in an 11-points scale ranging from Left-0 to Right-10) and membership of a trade union are related to support for the BIG.

Starting with self-placement (see Table 11), those on the 'far left' of the scale (0, and 1 in particular) appear much more supportive of a BIG (above 60 % support) and there is still a majority in favour among those who position themselves in the centre left (scores of 3 and 4 on left-right scale). By contrast, the centre (score of 5) has slightly less than 50 % support, and the centre right respondents (scores of 6 and 7) exhibit less than 45 % support. Perhaps more surprisingly, about 50.6 % of respondents who locate themselves on the 'far right' of the scale (i. e. score of 10) are also overall favourable, though note the size of the standard errors.

**Table 11:** Placement on left right scale and support for a BIG.

Left-right scale	Strongly against	Against	In favour	Strongly in favour
0	10.1 (0.9)	29.8 (1.3)	47.2 (1.4)	13 (1)
1	6.4 (0.9)	30.3 (1.8)	45.8 (1.9)	17.5 (1.5)
2	8.4 (0.6)	32.1 (1.1)	46.9 (1.2)	12.7 (0.8)
3	9.6 (0.5)	34.4 (0.8)	46.7 (0.9)	9.3 (0.5)
4	10.8 (0.5)	37.8 (0.8)	45.5 (0.9)	5.9 (0.4)
5	11.8 (0.3)	38.9 (0.5)	43 (0.5)	6.3 (0.2)
6	15.2 (0.6)	40.1 (0.8)	39.6 (0.8)	5 (0.4)
7	16.5 (0.6)	41.4 (0.8)	36.6 (0.8)	5.4 (0.4)
8	17.4 (0.7)	36.1 (0.9)	38.6 (0.9)	7.9 (0.5)
9	19.4 (1.4)	35 (1.7)	37.5 (1.8)	8.1 (1)
10	18.9 (1.1)	30.5 (1.4)	41.2 (1.4)	9.4 (0.9)

Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2. Standard error in brackets.

Turning to the cross-national variation, the majority of respondents who identify on the 'far left' of scale are in all countries (except Norway) supportive of a BIG, although this majority is very slim in France, Iceland, and Italy (see Table 12). One can also calculate the support ratio between 'far left' and centrists (score of 5) which is above 1.5 in Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, Germany and under 1 in Portugal, Slovenia, Poland, and Italy. The highest average left wing support (scores of 0 to 4) can be found in Slovenia, Hungary, Lithuania, Finland and Belgium (all above 65 %). In only two countries is the average support among left wing respondents less than 50 %: Estonia and Norway.

**Table 12:** Placement on left-right scale and support for a BIG across countries (ordered by average support among respondents who choose self-placement on the left, i. e. between 0 and 4).

Country	Left – 0	5	Right – 10	Ratio 0 to 5	Average 0 to 4
Slovenia	55.71	63.17	55.55	0.8819	74.758
Hungary	67.71	60.85	83.88	1.1127	71.618
Lithuania	85.24	78.24	82.81	1.0894	71.382
Finland	70.97	55.87	33.33	1.2702	68.004
Belgium	62.72	56.21	48.02	1.1158	66.12
Netherlands	60.98	52.81	38.77	1.1547	61.866
Great Britain	65.78	50.94	53.03	1.2913	61.86
Portugal	55.99	62.05	48.99	0.9023	61.406
France	51.81	48.24	33.27	1.0740	60.138

Czech Republic	58.59	52.05	51.43	1.1256	59.914
Austria	66.84	39.68	47.12	1.6844	59.866
Ireland	58.47	58.25	36.53	1.0037	59.554
Spain	64.58	49.38	51.51	1.3078	56.942
Germany	66.84	42.85	66.02	1.5598	56.838
Italy	53.76	55.14	46.63	0.9749	55.952
Switzerland	79.55	33.5	31.03	2.3746	54.28
Poland	55.62	56.21	64.72	0.9895	53.372
Iceland	54.81	52.46	23.6	1.0447	52.224
Sweden	59.62	36.99	22	1.6117	51.742
Estonia	60.78	45.67	47.06	1.3308	46.622
Norway	48.51	38.37	25.06	1.2642	40.334

Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2.

Finally, only 46.5 % of current trade union members are supportive of a BIG (see Table 13) which is five percentage points less than support among those who are not members (roughly 51.9 %). This finding is consistent with a literature emphasising that trade unions have over time become more focused on protecting labour market insiders, at the expense of outsiders (Rueda, 2007). In Sweden and Norway there are less than 40 % of trade union members that are supportive of a BIG, while it is between 40 % and 45 % in Switzerland, Germany, Spain, and Italy. Union members in Lithuania (87.5 %) and Slovenia (66.2 %), and more surprisingly in Finland (57.4 %) and Belgium (57.2 %), are the most supportive of a BIG (Table 14).

**Table 13:** Trade union membership and support for a BIG.

Member of union	Strongly against	Against	In favour	Strongly in favour
0	12.2 (0.2)	36 (0.3)	44.1 (0.3)	7.8 (0.2)
1	15 (0.5)	38.6 (0.6)	39.4 (0.6)	7.1 (0.3)

Note: Design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2. Standard error in brackets.

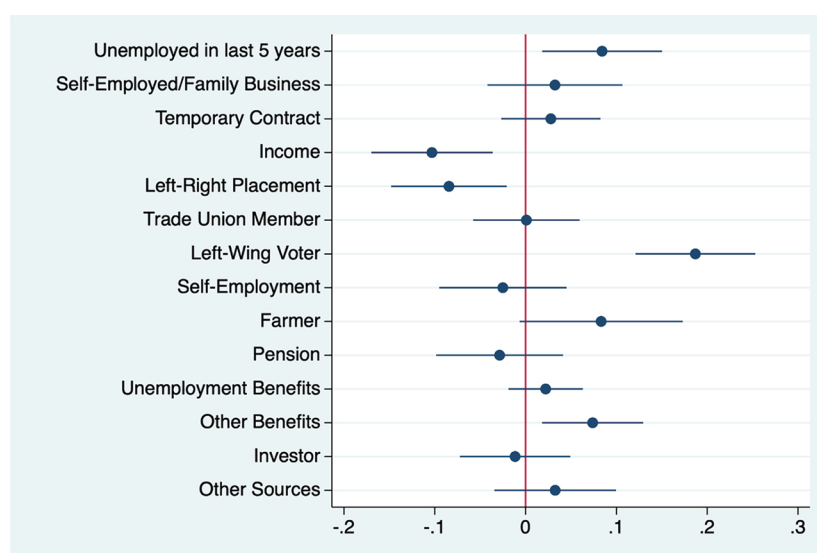
**Table 14:** Trade union membership and support for a BIG across countries.

Country	Percentage support among trade union members
Lithuania	87.55
Slovenia	66.25
Finland	57.44
Belgium	57.2
Poland	57
Portugal	56.25
Netherlands	55.6
Czech Republic	53.25
Hungary	52.6
France	51.32
Ireland	51.24
Austria	49.19
Great Britain	47.84
Estonia	47.26
Iceland	47.1
Italy	44.39
Spain	42.25
Germany	41
Switzerland	40.17
Sweden	36.64
Norway	32.22

Note: design and population weights have been applied to calculate these percentages. Source: ESS8-2016, edition 2.

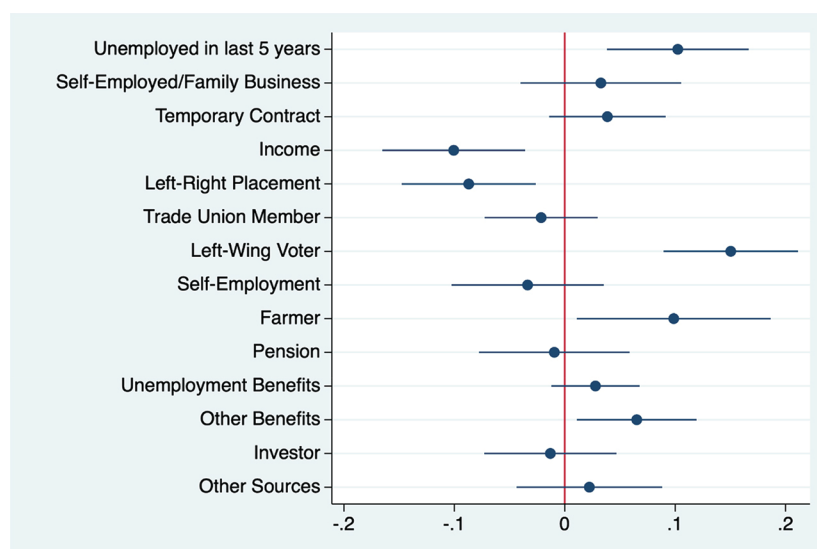
## Regression analysis

While useful for exploring the basic descriptive variation in support for different individual characteristics, the analysis so far cannot neutralise the effect of confounding factors. Therefore, Figure 4 plots the semi-standardised coefficients<sup>8</sup> from a multilevel random intercept logistic regression analysis. This method makes it possible to calculate unbiased coefficients and standard errors when individuals at level-1 are clustered within level-2 units, in this case countries (Guo & Zhao, 2000). The dependent variable is coded 1 if respondents “strongly supports” or “supports” a BIG, and 0 otherwise. Thus, a positive coefficient indicates that an increase in the independent variable increases the probability of supporting a BIG. The results suggest that being unemployed at some point in the past five years, having voted for a left-wing party in the last national election, and being in receipt of other (i. e. non-unemployment and non-pension related) benefits increases the probability of support for a BIG. By contrast, respondents in higher income deciles and/or that identify as more right-leaning are less likely to support a BIG. A number of variables have the expected positive sign but are not statistically significant at the 5% level: receiving unemployment benefits, being a temporary worker, or self-employed. Trade union membership has no statistically significant effect, which suggests that it is the characteristics of unionised workers, rather than membership itself, that makes trade union members on average less supportive of a BIG in previous descriptive results.



**Figure 4:** Results from multilevel logistic regression. Note: Model is a multilevel random intercept logistic regression and coefficients are semi-standardized. 95% confidence interval represented by the line around each point estimate.

Rerunning the analysis with an ordinal model with the full four answers to the question about a BIG in the dependent variable rather than the binary version yields the same results (see Figure 5). The only exception is the coefficient for being a farmer which now is both positive and statistically significant. Note that being a left-wing voter may be correlated with being in a temporary contract, being unemployed, and being on pensions. The stepwise inclusion of independent variables without the left-wing vote variable is shown in Table 15 in the appendix. Being currently unemployed now has a statistically significant coefficient, consistent with the notion that high labour market risks increase support for a BIG. Years of education initially have a negative impact when only gender and age are controlled, but once controls for both income and occupation are included, the coefficient becomes positive and statistically significant. Thus, once the material effects of education in terms of higher income and occupational sorting are taken into account, more highly educated individuals are more supportive of a BIG. Finally, the coefficient for temporary workers is positive and statistically significant in the full model (column 7) and when controlling for occupation instead of source of income (column 8), but not when controlling for both (column 9).



**Figure 5:** Results from ordinal logistic regression. Note: Model is an ordinal logistic regression and coefficients are semi-standardized.

Interesting cross-national variation in country level logistic regressions can be observed (Table 16 in appendix). First, trade union members in Austria and Lithuania are more supportive of a BIG, while they are less supportive in Portugal, Italy, Hungary, and the coefficient is not statistically significant in the remaining countries. This helps explain why the coefficient for trade union membership was not statistically significant when calculating its average effect across all countries in sample. Second, higher income respondents are less supportive in all countries except in the Czech Republic where they are more likely to support it, and Slovenia, Portugal, Lithuania, Hungary, France and Austria, where coefficients are not statistically significant. Third, right-wing respondents are always less supportive except in Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and Portugal. Fourth, temporary workers are more supportive in Germany, Estonia, Hungary, Iceland, Sweden and Slovenia, but less supportive in Poland. Fifth, unemployed respondents are more supportive in Austria, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, and Norway.

## The political future of a BIG

While a BIG has been discussed for a long time, there is currently a revival of interest in this scheme in many European countries. This short contribution has sought to assess the political viability of a BIG by examining which conflict lines between individuals with different labour market status, education, income and ideology are likely to emerge. Based on this analysis, the political feasibility of a BIG should not be ruled out. Despite the many detractors of the scheme and the criticisms that have been levied against it, potential political support for a BIG appears substantial in many countries.

This article has explored empirically how socio-demographic, economic and labour market characteristics shape individual level support for a BIG in Europe, as well as whether and how this varies across countries. The findings are in many respects consistent with the expectations of existing political economy scholarship on the welfare state. Individuals facing high labour market risk and/or on low incomes, especially those that already rely on benefits and/or locate themselves on the left of the ideological spectrum, are more likely to be supportive. The fact that current union members are less likely to support a BIG is consistent with the position of many trade unions, the expectations from the insider-outsider literature and the role that trade unions play in many welfare state systems. However, more systematic multilevel logistic regression analysis reveals there is no statistically significant effect of union membership, consistent with the notion that it is not membership itself that reduces support, but the characteristics of union members. Equally, while there is a slight majority of pensioners that are against a BIG, the effect is not statistically significant.

Finally, one can observe important cross-national variation in support for a BIG. Countries with more limited and less generous welfare states (southern, liberal and central and eastern European welfare regimes) *tend* to exhibit higher support. Among generous welfare regimes, countries with a large number of supporters *tend* to have long standing unemployment problems in their labour market (e. g. Belgium and Finland). However, the extent to which individual factors affect support for a BIG varies widely across European countries and this

cross-national variation is not entirely consistent with established political economy typologies. Future research should therefore further analyse why individual factors have distinct effects on support in different countries.

Notwithstanding these unresolved differences and the need for further research, overall a coalition between centrist and left-leaning individuals seems most likely, but its feasibility will depend on whether most union members are also favourable in these countries and the strength of opposition from high income and/or conservative parts of the electorate.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Michael Ganslmeier for excellent research assistance. For comments on previous versions of this manuscript, I am also grateful to the participants of the ESPANET and Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) conferences in 2018.

## Appendix

**Table 15:** Baseline logistic regression analysis.

Column	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Male	0.008	0.032	0.033	0.065***	0.081***	0.081***	0.076***	0.092***	0.086***
Age	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.008*	—
Age squared	0.020***	0.015***	0.015***	0.009**	0.011**	0.009**	0.011**	—	0.010**
Years education	0.000***	0.000**	0.000**	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	—	—	—	0.007**	0.006	0.005	0.006	0.008*	0.009**
	0.011***	0.008***	0.008**	—	—	—	—	—	—
Self-employment	—	—	—	−0.012	0.001	0.013	0.065	0.034	0.085*
family	—	0.081**	0.084**	—	—	—	—	—	—
Union member	—	—	−0.015	0.046	0.029	0.033	0.039	0.027	0.031
Income level	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	—	—	—	0.065***	0.059***	0.057***	0.052***	0.052***	0.047***
Left-right scale	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	—	—	—	—	0.085***	0.085***	0.085***	0.085***	0.085***
Temporary worker	—	—	—	—	—	0.094**	0.079*	0.081**	0.065
Professionals	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.300***	0.306***
Technician	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.156***	0.159***
Clerical	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.198***	0.199***
Service	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.294***	0.299***
Agriculture	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.159*	0.172*
Craft	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.277***	0.283***
Operator	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.305***	0.309***
Elementary	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.387***	0.383***
Self-employed	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.125*	—	—
(other)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.131**
Farmer	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.159	—	−0.116
Pensions	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.016	—	−0.020
Unemployed	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.303***	—	0.310***
Other benefits	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.270***	—	0.260***
Investor	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.098	—	−0.065
Other sources	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.245*	—	—
	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.257*
Constant	0.899***	0.721***	0.711***	0.730***	1.165***	1.095***	1.088***	0.746***	0.742***
Observations	35,965	33,271	33,173	28,670	26,534	26,534	26,464	26,194	26,124
Number of groups	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

**Table 16:** Country level results.



Column	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Country	AT	BE	CH	CZ	DE	EE	ES	FI	FR	GB
Male	-0.088	-0.008	0.253*	-0.047	0.053	-0.036	0.053	0.144	-0.043	0.364***
Age	-0.007	0.015	0.009	-0.034	—	-0.012	-0.023	-0.005	-0.025	—
Age squared	0.000	-0.000	-0.000	0.000	0.000*	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Years education	0.024	0.016	-0.002	-0.032	0.031*	—	0.000	0.052***	0.014	0.001
Self-employment family member	0.345	0.139	0.115	-0.065	0.192	-0.276	0.404*	-0.023	-0.016	0.181
Union member	0.350**	-0.062	0.071	0.307	-0.088	0.363	-0.015	0.049	0.144	—
Income level	-0.001	—	—	0.047*	—	—	—	—	-0.003	—
Left-right scale	—	0.055**	0.119***	—	0.086***	0.047*	0.066**	0.053**	—	0.056**
Temporary worker	0.111***	0.112***	0.318***	0.134***	0.140***	—	0.110***	0.136***	0.118***	0.101***
Professionals	0.429	-0.172	-0.191	0.172	0.260*	0.396*	-0.173	-0.087	0.132	0.163
Technician	-0.072	-0.024	0.142	-0.019	0.538***	0.317	0.927***	0.426	-0.067	0.710***
Clerical	-0.428	-0.198	-0.105	-0.109	0.313	0.427*	0.833**	0.084	-0.310	0.662***
Service	-0.281	-0.128	-0.465	0.197	0.268	0.389	0.579	0.582*	0.065	0.277
Agriculture	-0.262	0.029	0.234	0.228	0.563***	0.150	0.825***	0.097	-0.312	0.682***
Craft	-0.345	-0.117	-0.779	0.504	0.824**	0.115	1.003**	0.445	-0.559	0.554
Operator	0.126	-0.235	0.334	0.071	0.713***	0.039	0.988***	0.471	-0.377	0.175
Elementary	0.222	-0.379	0.217	0.297	0.355	0.621***	0.567	0.496	-0.377	0.512
Self-employed (other)	0.110	0.136	-0.003	0.122	0.428	0.208	0.685*	0.342	-0.246	0.582**
Farmer	-0.382	0.022	0.046	-0.035	-0.160	0.433	-0.350	0.321	0.079	—
Pensions	0.341	0.083	-0.003	—	-1.307	1.500*	-0.960	0.244	0.121	0.656**
Unemployed	-0.118	0.333	0.275	-0.110	-0.114	0.235	-0.324	-0.065	0.136	—
Other benefits	0.650*	0.250	-0.652	0.666	0.599*	1.181*	0.468	0.087	0.329	0.188
Investor	0.401	0.927**	1.344	1.043*	1.166**	0.462	1.362**	-0.280	0.390	0.238
Other sources	—	0.516	-1.683	—	0.015	2.102**	0.122	-0.131	0.089	0.079
Constant	1.052	-0.122	-1.149	0.887	—	-0.574	-0.582	-0.101	0.350	—
Observations	—	—	—	—	0.872*	—	—	—	—	0.337
Constant	0.226	0.945	1.493**	1.654**	0.652	1.225**	0.811	0.396	1.164**	1.064*
Observations	1,286	1,464	1,105	1,381	2,317	1,564	1,112	1,623	1,570	1,357

Column	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)	(19)	(20)	(21)
Country	HU	IE	IS	IT	LT	NL	NO	PL	PT	SE	SI
Male	—	0.568***	0.323*	0.154	-0.072	0.131	-0.112	0.147	0.497***	0.173	—
Age	0.268	—	-0.033	—	-0.046	0.021	-0.022	—	—	0.002	0.229
Age squared	0.003	0.033	—	0.019	—	—	—	0.022	0.005	—	0.003
Years education	—	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	-0.000	0.000	0.000	—	-0.000	—
Self-employment family member	0.000	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.000
Union member	—	0.014	0.030	0.005	-0.045	0.021	0.045**	—	—	0.036	0.001
Income level	0.026	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.020	0.004	—	—
Left-right scale	—	0.338*	0.458**	—	0.018	-0.039	0.148	—	—	0.541***	0.123
Farmer	0.578	—	—	0.059	—	—	—	0.108	0.054	—	—
Pensions	—	—	0.327	—	1.062**	0.237	-0.111	0.463	—	0.077	0.198
Unemployed	0.836**	0.057	—	0.448*	—	—	—	—	0.580**	—	—
Other benefits	0.002	—	—	—	0.050	—	—	—	—	—	—
Investor	—	0.046*	0.075**	0.079**	—	0.074***	0.043*	0.078**	0.033	0.093***	0.002
Other sources	0.054*	—	—	—	0.099**	—	—	0.043	—	—	—
Constant	—	0.003	0.120***	0.014	—	0.160***	0.079***	—	0.045	0.138***	0.073**

Temporary worker	0.664*	–	0.863***	0.069	0.199	–0.128	–0.137	–	0.093	0.390*	0.643**
		0.066						0.327*			
Professionals	–	0.219	0.143	–	0.731**	0.395*	0.309	0.187	0.489	–0.068	–
	0.226			0.038							0.076
Technician	–	–	0.230	–	0.713*	0.281	0.194	0.294	0.378	0.078	–
	0.129	0.012		0.395							0.137
Clerical	–	0.391	0.673	–	1.043**	0.343	0.107	0.237	0.393	–0.375	0.134
	0.254			0.354							
Service	–	0.723***	0.849***	–	0.868**	0.435*	0.384	0.552*	0.395	–0.051	0.173
	0.335			0.436							
Agriculture	–	–	0.006	–	1.138	–0.175	0.492	0.838**	0.688	–0.355	–
	1.287*	0.501		0.819							0.561
Craft	–	0.521**	0.076	–	0.894**	0.236	0.530*	0.538*	0.134	–0.102	–
	0.070			0.416							0.053
Operator	–	0.029	0.697	–	0.698*	0.077	0.478	0.557	0.560	–0.209	0.392
	0.550			0.021							
Elementary	–	0.271	0.400	–	0.933**	0.656**	0.959**	0.945**	0.598	1.094**	0.194
	0.114			0.388							
Self-employed (other)	–	–	–0.076	–	0.703	0.143	0.189	–	–	–0.461	–
	1.039	0.340		0.257				0.801**	0.392		0.091
Farmer	1.676	–	–1.097	–	0.271	–0.433	0.316	0.218	–		0.572
		0.369		0.282					1.474		
Pensions	–	–	–0.215	–	–0.179	–0.085	–0.078	0.052	0.109	0.024	–
	0.184	0.181		0.238							0.211
Unemployed	–	0.464*	–0.770	–	–0.299	–0.319	1.679**	0.995	–	–0.486	–
	0.290			0.254					0.031		0.479
Other benefits	–	0.515*	0.978	–	–	–0.062	0.095	1.022	0.067	–0.140	–
	0.595			1.628	2.142***						0.150
Investor		–	–0.319			–0.599		–	0.817	–0.448	
		1.134						0.334			
Other sources		–		–	–0.082	–0.780	–0.621	0.957	–	1.903	0.210
		0.194		0.034					0.838		
Constant	1.526	0.766	0.639	1.227	1.128	0.199	–0.268	1.009	0.760	0.322	1.195
Observations	689	1,500	707	827	1,066	1,306	1,318	896	946	1,282	783

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

## Notes

1 The idea has been discussed as far back as the eighteenth century (see: <http://basicincome.org/basic-income/history/>) and in some ways even earlier: for instance, in the writings of Thomas More in the sixteenth century (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). Previous episodes of acute interest took place in the 1920s in the UK, following the 1920 Labour conference, and in the 1970s in the US (Van Parijs, 2017). See also De Wispelaere (2016) for recent policy discussions of the BIG.

2 Since 2016, there were more than 1,800 mentions of “Universal basic income” in newspapers (International Newstream, ProQuest database, accessed on April 16, 2018). For more on the Finnish experiment, see: <http://www.kela.fi/web/en/experimental-study-on-a-universal-basic-income>. For more on Hamon’s proposal, see: <https://www.benoithamon2017.fr/rue/>. The Swiss referendum was rejected by about 77 % of the electorate - see: <https://www.bk.admin.ch/ch/f/pore/va/20160605/det601.html>.

3 For recent contributions, see Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017), Van Parijs (2017), the InterEconomics Forum (2017), and De Wispelaere and Stirton (2012). Chapter 7 of Van Parijs and Vanderborght’s (2017) book provides an excellent overview of previous – mostly national – surveys of the BIG and discusses the position of trade unions on the BIG.

4 For two contrasting perspectives, see Kay (2017) and Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017).

5 Some European countries still have generous unemployment benefit replacement rates (see Van Vliet & Caminada, 2012).

6 Note that the number and characteristics of welfare state regimes is contested (Arts & Gelissen, 2002): some have for instance argued there is a southern European welfare regime (Ferrera, 1996).

7 This was rejected by about 77 % of the electorate: <https://www.bk.admin.ch/ch/f/pore/va/20160605/det601.html>. For the proposed amount see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36454060>.

8 This means that coefficients have been rescaled by the standard deviation of the variable in the data.

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