

How to Approach What People Think About the Malibu Surfer: Basic Income, Public Opinion, and the Scope of Scientific Methodology

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A lot of things have changed in the last few years. While basic income was once considered a utopian idea, it is now a topic discussed in various forms in public discourse. However, as a social policy, it does not exist in its full form, which sparks significant debate. On the one hand, it is viewed positively in public opinion and even seen as the future of modern welfare. On the other, it is sometimes berated as one of the worst ideas circulating in the policy world. Given these extremes, it is crucial to ask questions about public support for basic income. The growing presence of basic income in discussions extends to broader scientific debates, introducing various methods from a number of subfields.

Following this development, on November 16th and 17th, 2023, an expert workshop was held at KU Leuven. Its focus was expressed in the workshop title, “Public Support for Basic Income: Methodological Advances and Challenges.” The participants looked at ways to study public support for basic income using various methods. To provide some context, imagine putting a group of scientists in a room for two days, providing them with lots of coffee and letting them delve into the topic, exploring various ways of understanding public support for basic income through empirical methods.

On the first day, Tim Vlandas talked about traditional surveys. He categorised survey characteristics, following Sergio Leone in “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.” The good side of surveys is their predictive power. However, they also face problems, such as P-hacking, multicollinearity, and omitted variable bias. The challenges intensify with the “ugly” points, including reverse causality and atomistic fallacy. In the realm of researching public support for basic

income, these issues become even more complex, given that basic income does not exist in its full form. The “uglies” of traditional surveys were linked to the next presentation by Leire Rincon, who discussed conjoint and vignette experiments.

These experiments offer a multidimensional view of how basic income as a social policy might relate to public opinion. Vignette analysis has advantages: high flexibility, detailed information, and realism. However, it has drawbacks such as manipulating variables and lacking trade-offs. Conjoint analysis, on the other hand, excels in considering trade-offs and can identify social desirability bias. It is particularly useful for emphasizing causal relationships, as discussed in the presentation. Despite its potential, there is a challenge however, namely, understanding what influences people’s choices. While impact can be observed, the underlying mechanisms are not always clear.

The first set of presentations was followed by the launch of Tijs Laenen’s new book, “The Populations of Basic Income – Evidence from the Polls.” The follow-up comment was made by Philippe van Parijs. In his presentation, Tijs Laenen highlighted the fact that popular support for basic income depends on four factors: the individual characteristics of the person, the context or the living conditions (for example, the size of the welfare state), policy design, and predicted outcomes. Further, the book discussion revealed various challenges with public support for implementing basic income as a social policy alternative. One of the main takeaways of the book is that asking about public support for basic income is not as straightforward as asking if someone likes “free money.” The first day concluded with the BABEL advisory board meeting.

On the second day, Fabienne Hansen introduced an ethnographic approach to understanding public opinion on basic income.

She emphasized participant observation as a key fieldwork method, highlighting the advantage of observing people's everyday lives as a main source of reasons for supporting or rejecting basic income. However, a significant drawback is that basic income does not exist in its full form anywhere, leading ethnographers to work with approximations. Despite this challenge, this offered a new qualitative perspective on researching public opinion in the context of the workshop. The second talk by Cyrille Francisco and Elise Aerts presented a basic income information experiment using microsimulation and a survey. The goal of the experiment was to observe potential effects influencing public opinion. The presentation demonstrated how these two distinct methods could be meaningfully combined. The strengths and challenges of this approach are found in the way scenarios are constructed for participants. Maintaining a balance between providing choices and avoiding an overwhelming number of options is crucial. In the next presentation, Erwin Gielens discussed the application of discourse network analysis. This method combines quantitative and qualitative data in social media research. When discussing opinions on welfare topics, such as basic income as a social policy, discussions are tied to real-world events. The media acts as a moderator between politicians and the public participants in these discussions. An evident strength of observing media discourses is the high quality of "real-life" data. It is important to remember that social media excerpts may not truly represent public opinion since they often reflect specific bubbles. The final presentation was by Boglárka Herke. She advocated for qualitative data and presented three methods for collecting conversation data: individual interviews, focus group discussions, and democratic forums. Generally, the argument was made that qualitative methods are advantageous for collecting complex data and offering a rich contextual understanding. Through these various methods, qualitative approaches can explore how attitudes change. However, a challenge is the

sample size, especially when compared to survey data.

Finally, after discussing various approaches for two days and considering various perspectives, a few points were agreed upon:

1. When analysing public opinion on social policies scientifically, each single-method approach has limitations and advantages. Related methods can help uncover blind spots in chosen methodologies.
2. The primary challenge in selecting a method for understanding the support or rejection of a social policy lies in the context or setting. The methods range from natural to more formal to lab settings, each providing valuable insights.
3. Applying this to the question of public support for basic income, we return to the fact that basic income does not exist fully as a social policy. It may appear in public discourse for various reasons unrelated to political will. The methods used may reveal discursive positions but not necessarily the multifaceted reasons behind them.

What is the main point here? Generally, using mixed-method approaches for studying public opinion on alternative social policies, such as basic income, is beneficial. Diversifying approaches help overcome limitations in single methods and bring scientists with similar ideas closer than they might think. Specifically, examining how people view basic income as a social policy alternative offers valuable insights into understanding gaps in scientific methods when exploring public opinion intricacies. This also focuses on the connection between discourse and the social protection mechanisms of the welfare state. Just because basic income is not fully implemented anywhere does not mean it does not impact public opinion. People are interested and have varied reasons for supporting or opposing it. To understand this complex discourse, a wide range of methods is necessary, especially if the goal is policy implementation. Lastly, the discussions on methodological approaches from this workshop will be compiled and discussed in a handbook on the topic.

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