



## **Prospects for popular support of basic income (in case of unemployment)**

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## **Abstract**

Based on empirical findings drawn from a qualitative study (in-depth interviews with tax payers) on the acceptance of the unemployment insurance and social assistance in Germany, chances for public support of basic income-schemes are examined. It is shown that, on the one hand, the principle of equivalence is strongly supported; indirectly this supposes rather low support for basic income schemes. On the other hand, evidence is provided that attitudes to welfare programs are deeply influenced by notions of need and equality. Therefore, even the acceptance of public assistance is quite high.

Conclusion: The findings suggest some public support for basic income schemes; but this support would be restricted by the importance (and infringement) of desert criteria.



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## 1. Introduction

In the controversial debates on the promises and perils of basic income schemes the question of public acceptance was rather neglected.<sup>1</sup> This situation has only slightly changed during the last decade. Our knowledge about the public opinion on the welfare state in general, and on basic income in particular, is still very limited. Consequently, we do not know very much (if anything) about the public support for the introduction of basic income schemes.

The object of this paper is the chance of basic income schemes to gain public acceptance, if they were implemented. For reasons explicated below, the available data on public opinion about basic income are insufficient and not easy to understand. For a more comprehensive knowledge about the public support for basic income schemes, it is necessary to look in more detail at the general collective representations and moral beliefs, which simultaneously generate and constrain the individual attitudes toward welfare institutions. Therefore, I will present some empirical findings drawn from an in-depth study on the acceptance of the three income-support programmes for the unemployed in Germany. Of course, these findings do not tell us anything about the concrete quantitative level of support for basic income schemes in Germany (let alone about the acceptance of basic income schemes in other welfare states). But they allow some instructive conclusions about the general cultural and mental preconditions for a supportive public opinion.

## 2. Insufficient empirical knowledge about the acceptance of basic income schemes

The discourse on basic income is predominantly about its supposed advantages and about its normative justification. But at least implicitly, the problem of public support has always been evident. In particular, advocates of

<sup>1</sup> Cf., among others, Atkinson (1996), Goodin (1995), Margalit (1996), Offe (1995), Standing (1992), van Parijs (1992, 1995) and White (1997).

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basic income have been inclined to presume a certain degree of public support for the introduction of basic income schemes.

However, our empirical knowledge about the public attitudes toward the idea of basic income is rather scarce. Much of what is known about the public support of welfare institutions in general and of basic income schemes in particular, is drawn from comparative surveys like the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP).<sup>2</sup> All in all, the general acceptance of the basic income concept seems to be rather high.

For instance, data of the ISSP Modules “Social Inequality I” (1987) und “Social Inequality II” (1992) reveal a fairly high level of support for most of the investigated welfare states.<sup>3</sup> The acceptance scores range from a relatively low support in the United States -in 1987 only a minority of 20.8 per cent of the US-Americans (34.2 per cent in 1992)<sup>4</sup> agreed with the general idea “that the government should provide everyone with a guaranteed basic income” - o a considerable level of support in many other western welfare states. Leaving East Germany aside,<sup>5</sup> the acceptance is the highest in Austria, Italy, West Germany, Norway, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, all with a national average of acceptance above 50 per cent. Even more, there are signs of a slight increase in public support between 1987 and 1992 (see figure below).

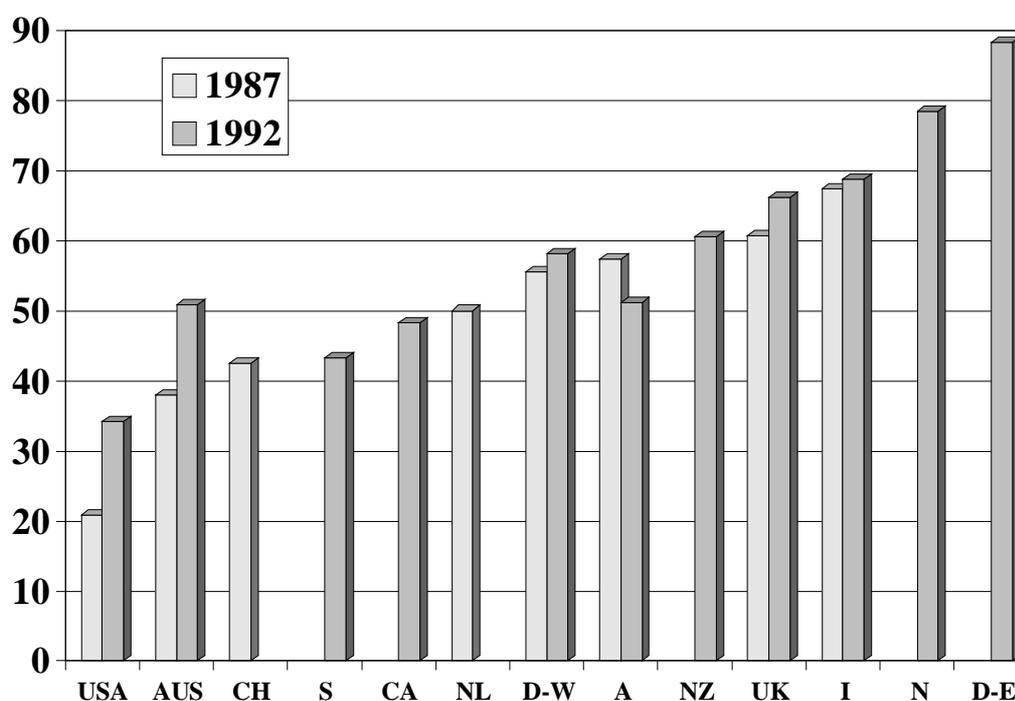
<sup>2</sup> A very intriguing attempt to measure attitudes toward basic income directly has recently been carried out by Liebig and Mau (2002).

<sup>3</sup> The question wording is: “(Please show how much you agree or disagree with each statement:) The government should provide everyone with a guaranteed basic income”. The answer categories are: “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neither agree nor disagree”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree”.

<sup>4</sup> Total percentages for respondents who “strongly agree” or “agree”.

<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, the acceptance is considerably higher in the former socialist countries and mostly above 80 per cent.

Figure 1. Public opinion on basic income



Source: ISSP 1987, 1992

However, the empirical validity - or better to say: the theoretical plausibility - of this finding is open to challenge on a number of grounds. First, the so far available data are altogether insufficient and do not provide a comprehensive picture of the public support for basic income schemes. All the more this is true for the comparative level. Second, there is a considerable lack of new data. Again, this holds more for the comparative level than for national surveys. Finally, the findings are not easy to explain, because there is no clear pattern in the data - at least not for the western welfare states.<sup>6</sup>

One reason for this could be that it might not be quite clear to the respondents what is meant by the term “guaranteed basic income”. Beside the general problems with questions about non-existent subjects, we do not know exactly what the respondents really have in mind while answering this question. It cannot be excluded, for example, that they refer to the existing public assistance schemes

<sup>6</sup> Support patterns would be easier to explain, e.g., if there were more support for basic income in -to use Esping-Andersen's (1990) terms -social-democratic than in conservative and liberal welfare states.

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in their countries. Even more important is that the respondents may have different types of basic income in mind. Therefore, we do not know at all whether high acceptance scores can be taken as evidence for a support of comprehensive basic income schemes or whether it is due to a residualistic conception of basic income. In sum, the applied item formulation seems to be neither valid nor reliable.

One way to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors, which determine the attitudes toward basic income schemes, is to conduct in-depth studies of the individual moral beliefs and self-interests (in the context of social policy). Therefore, I present some findings of a qualitative research project, which was carried out by the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (cf. Hamann et al., 2001; Karl et al., 2002). The central aim of this research project, which was called the "moral economy of unemployment", was a comparative analysis of the acceptance of the three differently structured income-support programmes for the unemployed in Germany. These are unemployment benefit (*Arbeitslosengeld*), unemployment assistance (*Arbeitslosenhilfe*) and public assistance (*Sozialhilfe*).<sup>7</sup> The sample was restricted to employees.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, none of these programmes is a basic income scheme, in that each provides social insurance based and/or means-tested benefits. But a careful and in a way "inverse" re-interpretation of the judgements about the income-support programmes allows to some degree tentative conclusions concerning the respondents beliefs about the "basic rules" of social welfare and societal solidarity - and thus about the cultural factors which will determine the public's reaction to the introduction of basic income schemes. This is possible, because in-depth interviewing strives to uncover and reconstruct the basic "collective representations" underlying the beliefs and judgements of the respondents. To

<sup>7</sup> Unemployment benefit is an insurance payment based on the principle of status maintenance. Unemployment assistance is a tax-financed benefit for the needy unemployed who are not entitled to unemployment benefit or have exhausted their entitlement. Though unemployment assistance is not financed from contributions but from general tax revenues, only members of the unemployment insurance are eligible.

<sup>8</sup> In total, 75 in-depth interviews with employed persons were conducted to investigate the public acceptance of the three programmes. The respondents were selected by theoretical sampling.

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gain a comprehensive picture of the acceptance of the income-support programmes, the respondents were additionally questioned about general structural aspects, such as means testing and equivalence.

### **3. Beliefs about the basic rules of collective welfare and their expected impact on the evaluation of basic income schemes. Evidences from a qualitative research project**

The most general result of this study was a rather high level of support for all kinds of income maintenance benefits. It could be shown that (positive) acceptance is better explained by the moral beliefs of the respondents than by their self-interest. On the other hand, a clear “hierarchy of acceptance” became evident, with unemployment benefit (*Arbeitslosengeld*) on the top and social assistance at the bottom. Additionally, moral beliefs are predominantly related to the different types of welfare recipients (e.g., unemployed youth, elderly unemployed, long-term public assistance recipients). The analysis of the acceptance judgements has further shown that the perception of the different types of recipients and the attributes, which are ascribed to them, are fundamental for the individual beliefs about the investigated income-support programmes.

But this alone gives little or no clue about what degree of acceptance of basic income schemes is to be expected. To find out more about this, we have to take a closer look at the individual judgements on the divergent rules and principles of welfare institutions. Therefore, the succeeding analysis is primarily based on perceptions and judgements on the principles of equivalence and need, on means testing, on “work incentives”, on compliance and cooperation of recipients, and on fraudulent and moral hazard-behaviour.

#### **3.1 Beliefs and “collective representations” supportive to basic income schemes**

First, let me briefly outline the main findings, which substantiate the assumption that the (German) public will consent to the implementation of basic income schemes. There are, altogether, five findings which provide evidence for a

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positive acceptance (or at least for a “contingent consent”) of basic income schemes:

- § First of all, the assumption of a broad popular support for the introduction of a basic income scheme is in some way supported by the high acceptance of the German *Sozialhilfe* (public assistance). Though the *Sozialhilfe* is not at all a basic income scheme, there are some common features (especially legal entitlements). Therefore, it can be assumed that the acceptance of public assistance can only be that high, because some of its elementary principles are well compatible with basic moral convictions of the respondents. Or to put it another way: If there is a substantial amount of public support for public assistance schemes, it is not to be supposed that the idea of basic income will be fully rejected, making no difference between the various types of basic income schemes.
  
- § This already leads to the reasons for the rather high acceptance of public assistance. Most importantly, we found much evidence that the attitudes toward welfare programmes are deeply influenced by conceptions of need and equality. In particular, the divergent criteria of need proved to be of salient interest for the respondents. Most of the respondents view it as a basic right of every citizen to be subsidized by public funds in case of personal hardship, whereas the government is regarded as primarily responsible for guaranteeing a decent living for everyone. Moreover, this citizen's right itself, and that there is such a right, is very often taken for “common sense”. The respective respondents believe that their fellow citizens acknowledge this basic right more or less in the same way as they do. Even more, they often assume that there is no ethical or practical alternative for granting this general right to all citizens.
  
- § The notion of a general entitlement to support by the welfare state already reveals that the judgements of the interviewed employees are not dominated by narrow definitions of self-interest. This result is hardly surprising, since at least a “positive” interest in these systems

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is rather improbable. The reason for this is that most of the respondents do not expect to receive any unemployment or public assistance benefits, not even in the long run. If they judge the income-support programmes for the unemployed at all in terms of self-interest, these are led by very broad and rather “diffuse” interests. For instance, some respondents refer to unspecific “expectations of reciprocity” in case of getting laid off themselves, what they nevertheless believe to be extremely unlikely. The low self-interest in the income-support programmes for the unemployed may be regarded as one of the crucial preconditions for establishing public acceptance of basic income schemes.

§ The judgements on the income-support programmes are mainly determined by the moral beliefs of the respondents. Beside the recognition of a basic right, there are two main types of value orientations, which induce positive attitudes toward the investigated programmes. The first can be called beliefs about justice which can be subdivided into notions of distributive justice and those which deal with the problem of individual blame and liability.

Aspects of distributive justice proved to be fundamental for the acceptance of the examined programmes. This holds, above all, for the belief in the primacy of the need principle. Provided that a need is viewed as legitimate, and the recipients as “credible”, other aspects are often disregarded. In other words: the acceptance of all programmes, but especially of the public assistance depends heavily on the “authenticity of need” and on the perception of the recipients.

Another notion of justice is the image of non-victimisations. Non-victimisations are based on the assumption or perception that the recipients are not to blame for their situation (of being dependent on welfare benefits). First of all, this means that they are not regarded as undeserving. But as I will outline below, only a minority of the respondents shares this view.

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§ The second type of value orientations can be called solidarity motives, because they refer to the solidarity embodied in the income-support programmes. Thus, an acceptance is explicitly explained by a personal “willingness to show solidarity”. Solidarity motives proved to be the most important collective representation for inducing a positive acceptance of all three income-support programmes. Again, two main forms can be analytically distinguished, which are nevertheless often combined by the respondents.

The first one is the “solidarity as collective self-help”. This form of solidarity is motivated by the wish to forestall public evils like anomie, delinquency or political conflicts. The second type can be called “altruistic solidarity”. Here, the respondents feel individually obliged to support the unemployed. The crucial difference to the first form of solidarity is the moral obligation, whereas both types presume the functionality of the current programmes with respect to the proclaimed purposes.

### **3.2 Beliefs and “collective representations” antagonistic to basic income schemes**

All in all, we have found some moral beliefs and definitions of self-interest which make it more likely that the introduction of a basic income scheme could gain broad support in the public. But on the other hand, our findings reveal tremendous evidence for the viewpoint that the majority of the population will reject an implementation of basic income schemes (or even protest against it). The findings supporting this sceptical view are manifold.

§ The first aspect to be mentioned here is the acceptance of the insurance-based programmes. Even though the support for the German public assistance proved to be quite high – the acceptance of unemployment benefit and unemployment assistance is considerably higher. Therefore, one may conclude that while the overall acceptance is rather high, respondents nevertheless clearly prefer the insurance-based programmes to public assistance.

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- § This interpretation of the high acceptance of the insurance-based programmes is sustained by the finding that the principle of equivalence is strongly supported by the respondents. Obviously, the principles of equivalence and desert are deeply anchored in the collective representations and definitions of the situation. Equivalence is not only seen as the dominant logic of all welfare institutions, but also regarded as justified, because it almost perfectly satisfies criteria of desert. Deviations from this principle (like the public assistance) are recognized, only if it is evident that they are unavoidable. Indirectly this holds against public support for basic income schemes.
- § The superiority of the principles of equivalence and desert restricts the prospects of public support for basic income schemes from one side. They are further decreased by a strong support for means testing. On the one hand, many aspects of means testing are criticized, sometimes even sharply, as stigmatising and humiliating. Nevertheless, means testing is viewed as an unpleasant, but absolutely unavoidable gate-keeping device to prevent misuse and fraud. In fact, most of the respondents demand more (and more efficient) means-testing. Many of the respondents even insist that the access to public assistance benefits should be more restricted.
- § It is important to notice that the judgements of the respondents are by far not only determined by the individual moral beliefs and the institutionalized rules like equivalence and means-testing. Additionally, the perception of different types and groups of recipients has a considerable influence on the assessment of the income-support programmes. Though the respondents classify recipients of public assistance mainly, if not exclusively as unemployed people, they nevertheless perceive them in a fundamentally different way compared to the recipients of unemployment benefit and unemployment assistance.

In particular, recipients of insurance-based unemployment benefits are much more believed to be deserving beneficiaries. The main

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reason for this is not that these unemployed have paid contributions. Rather, they are considered as deserving, because they had already been in work for some time. Thus, the crucial criterion is not that they made contributions, but that they have proved their willingness to work. And sometimes it even seems to suffice, if the recipients are only supposed to be willing to work.

In contrast, recipients of public assistance are rarely regarded as deserving in that sense. The question of individual merit, of whatever kind, was of minor importance for the evaluation of these types of recipients. Instead, as already mentioned, aspects of neediness – like the causes of dependency and the generosity of benefits – came out to have the main influence on the acceptance judgements of the interviewed taxpayers. Thus, recipients of public assistance are perceived to deserve, as long as no or only few doubts arise about the legitimacy of the benefits and the claimants. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

§ Indeed, there is a tendency to victimize recipients of public assistance. Many (but by far not all) respondents regard them as undeserving exactly because they assume that at least some of the public assistance recipients are able, but not willing to work and/or have alternative sources, which they do not declare. (Stories about former colleagues, acquaintances or neighbours who prefer to live on social assistance than to work are abundant.) Furthermore, recipients of public assistance are often accused of fraudulent claims, misuse of benefits and other blameworthy behaviour. This is again rather exceptional with regard to recipients of unemployment benefit and unemployment assistance. For these reasons, doubts about the deservingness of public assistance recipient are widespread.

Altogether, the in-depth analysis of the statements about the income-support programmes for the unemployed provides as many arguments in favour of public support for basic income as against it. The main points are summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Beliefs about the basic rules of collective welfare and their expected impact on the evaluation of basic income schemes

Beliefs and collective representations <i>supportive</i> to basic income schemes	Beliefs and collective representations <i>antagonistic</i> to basic income schemes
Relatively high acceptance of public assistance ( <i>Sozialhilfe</i> )	Higher acceptance of the insurance-based programmes ( <i>Arbeitslosengeld und -hilfe</i> )
Basic benefits are viewed as a citizen's right; importance of need-aspects	Belief in the superiority of the principles of equivalence and desert
Low or diffuse and generalized definitions of self-interest	Strong support for means-testing (and demand for more restrictions)
Dominance of the "need"-principle when judging social assistance	Perception of public assistance recipients as less deserving than those of insurance-based benefits
Enlightened and altruistic solidarity motives	Tendency to victimize recipients of public assistance

#### 4. Conclusions: General prospects for public support of basic income

Of course, we do not know for sure whether these findings can be applied to the public opinion on basic income schemes. Neither can we take it for granted that comparable studies carried out in other welfare states would provide similar results. It may be argued, for instance, that the outlined findings are typical, if at all, only for conservative welfare states, and that we would find dissimilar patterns of moral beliefs and definitions of self-interest in liberal and social-democratic welfare states. In this point of view, the generalizability of the findings is rather low. But the analyses of the basic beliefs about social welfare and the role of government in providing for the needy allow more reliable conjectures, if not predictions about the public reaction to the introduction of a basic income scheme. At least, there is no reason to doubt that the reconstructed moral beliefs and collective representations, which guided the judgments about the three income-support programmes for the unemployed, will affect the evaluation of basic income schemes in a similar way.

All in all, we found many clues indicating that there would be more resistance than acceptance, if a basic income scheme were implemented. Mainly, the popularity of the insurance-based benefits in general and of the principles of equivalence and desert in particular, the rather critical perception of the recipients

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of public assistance and, correspondingly, the fondness for means-testing should prompt scepticism. People, so it seems, somehow prefer the institutions and rules, which they already know and to which they are accustomed. This might be an explanation for the different but always positive acceptance of the three income-support programmes.

The beliefs on which these judgments are based are essentially incompatible with the central ideas of the basic income concept. If they are stable and context-independent, as I suppose, they will collide with the normative logic of any basic income scheme. However, as outlined above, there are also many aspects – as the centrality of need concepts and the belief in a citizen's right to receive basic income support – which supports more optimistic assumptions about the public acceptance of basic income schemes.

Therefore, it is not easy to draw definite conclusions from the ambiguous findings. But there is another point to note here: Whether or not there will be public support for the implementation of basic income schemes, will depend heavily on what type of basic income is introduced. As it is well known, basic income schemes differ sharply with respect to, for instance, the level of payment, the unit of assessment and in their relationship to existing social insurance and public assistance schemes.

In sum, the general conclusion that may be drawn from the presented results is that there is a chance to gain public support for introducing a basic income scheme. Considering the German situation, this chance can be enhanced, if certain conditions are met:

First, according to the outlined results, basic income schemes should be morally relatively undemanding, as well as with regard to funding. As it has to be assumed, deviations from the principle of social insurance will only be tolerated as an inevitable supplement, but not as basic rule. Therefore, basic income schemes should be confined to rather narrowly defined purposes.

Second, basic income schemes should not be in conflict with social insurances and other welfare programmes. They need to be underpinning, not

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undermining. As a consequence, insurance benefits should always offer a better alternative and thus set an incentive for potential applicants.

Third, eventually, basic income schemes should be normatively consistent. The prospects for public support will increase, if a basic income scheme complies with its rules and performs its purposes effectively.



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