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# **Mobilizing Support for Basic Income**

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# Abstract

To get a basic income enacted, advocates have to put strong, continuing pressure on elected officials. That requires attracting people's attention, educating potential supporters, and organizing allies. At the Citizen Policies Institute, we find that liberals and conservatives are attracted by the history of related ideas in the United States. Also extremely effective is dialogue, making the idea personal. Our targeted potential allies include labour unions, environmentalists, and senior citizens. Basic income combines the economic security of socialism with the individual freedom of capitalism: a synthesis. Advocates who understand these ideas might soon win campaigns in many countries.

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# 1. Introduction

A story told by political activists in the United States: During the Great Depression of the 1930s, when President Franklin Roosevelt was creating the many programmes and agencies of the New Deal, a delegation went to him with a proposal. He responded, "Okay, you've convinced me. Now go on out and bring pressure on me!" (Alinsky, 1972, p. xxiii.) Good ideas and arguments are not enough. Elected officials rarely act without strong, continuing pressure from their constituents.

In order to put pressure on elected officials, advocates for any reform have to organize effectively, in large numbers. Like the delegation to Roosevelt, advocates must be convincing, so they have to be educated. It is, however, impossible to educate people unless there are people who are interested in being educated. That means attracting people. A way to attract people is to present an idea, formulated clearly, that looks like it will solve their problems. To summarize in order, here are the steps in a reform campaign: formulating, attracting, educating, organizing, and pressuring.

It is useful to see these steps as distinct and sequential. In practice, of course, every step provides insights that sometimes require campaigners to rethink their strategy, revise the formula, attract more or different people, and so forth. It helps if the people who initially formulate an idea do not retreat to any ivory tower but remain actively involved, so long as they are willing to revise.

A major challenge at every step, especially attracting potential supporters, is that people are quite busy. Providing for themselves and their families, trying to enjoy their lives, and other everyday matters usually, sensibly, come first. Relatively few people are really interested in political reform. Countless ideas, products, and services are constantly advertised through diverse media; all of these are competing for people's limited time and attention.

At the same time, reform proposals have to compete in the marketplace of ideas, have to compete not just with other reform proposals but also with the status quo. That playing field is far from level, especially when the proposed reform is something substantive, like a guaranteed basic income. The status quo is familiar, so it seems natural or even necessary. Substantive reform means changes that cannot be predicted, which makes it easy for opponents to attack reforms and scare people. Moreover, defenders of the status quo benefit from delays, such as studies and commissions, and often distract the public with reforms that are mostly cosmetic.

#### 2. Formulating the idea

Basic income has been defined as "an income paid by government, at a uniform level and at regular intervals, to each adult member of society. The grant is paid, and its level is fixed, irrespective of whether the person is rich or poor, lives alone or with others, is willing to work or not." (Van Parijs, 2001, p. 5.)

Noteworthy in this definition is what it leaves out, starting with the actual amount of the basic income. It should be, most proponents' say, adequate for subsistence in the state or country that implements it. Vagueness on this point is useful because it allows for beginning with a smaller amount, one that is more readily affordable. Also important and missing from this definition is any statement about varying the amount when economic conditions change.

Some proponents want to include all permanent residents; others would restrict it to citizens. And some proponents want to include children, although that raises many additional questions: Would the payment for children be the same amount, or less? Start at birth, or at some specific age like six months or seven years? Paid to the parents, or put into some sort of "stakeholder" trust or "baby bond" that can be cashed at age eighteen? What if parents are divorced and custody is disputed?

Discussions about the amount, who would be included, how to begin the programme, and other details are a way to engage and motivate potential supporters. Such discussions ought to be encouraged. However, it makes sense to defer specific answers until after the basic idea becomes popular.

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#### 3. Attracting people's attention

In the United States, Republicans and most Democrats routinely oppose new grants, guarantees, entitlements, and income supports, except those that are directly tied to work. Existing programmes - even for very poor mothers and their young children – are threatened or are being eliminated, as occurred with the 1996 law that ended welfare and replaced it with Temporary Aid to Needy Families. Despite that, at the Citizen Policies Institute, we have found two very effective ways to make basic income attractive. The first is to make the idea personal:

What could you do with the extra money? Would you change your job or other aspects of your everyday life? Your plans for education, vacations, retirement? Of course your spouse and parents and adult children would also receive the basic income. What might it mean for each of them? For your family as a whole?

Advocates have to remember that they, too, will receive the money. And so will everyone they talk with or write to, for, or about. Let us not be shy. Speaking personally may be unfamiliar, even uncomfortable, perhaps especially for academics who are more accustomed to lecturing and discussing ideas abstractly. Yet it can also be fun.

It is an axiom in marketing and public relations that people evaluate products, services, or ideas according to perceived self-interest. Asking people what they might do with a basic income, what it might mean for them and their families, invites them to consider self-interest explicitly. Regardless of any more specific self-interest, almost everyone can use extra income.

Through personal questions and dialogue, advocates for basic income orient people toward the future and encourage a sense of hope. Hope is attractive. And it is missing from most conversations about politics and economics, which focus excessively on the present and often engender resentment, passivity, even despair. Too many would-be reformers ignore the advice of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire: "We must never merely discourse on the present situation, must never provide the people with programmes which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes, and fears." (Freire, 1993, p. 77.) Dialogue, he taught and showed, is an act of personal and social transformation. When it is authentic, participants are inspired and motivated.

Dialogue is also an effective way to respond to people's doubts and concerns, before they harden into objections. The most common of those is the assumption that some people will waste or misuse the money. Speaking personally transforms that conversation. Would you waste or misuse it? Would your friends or family members? Of course not, almost everyone asserts. Besides, what would be wrong with using the money for a vacation? or working fewer hours and spending more time with friends or family members?

Eliminating the fear of hunger and homelessness would leave intact all of the positive reasons to work, earn, and save, to make a better life for oneself and one's family. Yes, some people will spend the money on drugs, alcohol, and gambling. Yes, some will just sit in front of the television or play computer games. But some people do that today. With basic income, the lazy or irresponsible would be able to afford food and shelter, and therefore would not be impelled to beg or steal or depend on some charity or specific government programme. Dialogue and thoughtful questions can help people become aware of their own biases and prejudices; neither class, race, ethnicity, nor national origin causes or explains laziness and irresponsibility.

There is another advantage to attracting potential supporters through dialogue: People can easily continue the conversations with their family members, friends, neighbours, and so on.

#### 4. Educating potential supporters

The second thing we do to attract potential supporters also helps educate them. That is telling the story of previous proposals that are similar to basic income. It is a history that most Americans do not know. Briefly:

**§** In 1776, before writing the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson proposed to the Virginia legislature that it give land to any

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property less individual willing to farm it. Many states subsequently enacted homestead laws. In 1862, Abraham Lincoln called for, and the federal government enacted, the National Homestead Act, which remained in effect until the early 1900s. In 1795, Tom Paine sought a cash payment to everyone at age 21 and yearly starting at age 50.

- § During the Populist and Progressive movements of the 1890s, leading thinkers and authors included Henry George and Edward Bellamy. Each wrote a book that sold more than a million copies. Both wanted to guarantee everyone's economic security.
- § The 1930s brought the passage of Social Security. It was, however, a weak response to two national movements, each of which had millions of supporters. The Townsend Plan called for monthly cash payments to the elderly. "Share Our Wealth" demanded a more general and generous redistribution. Franklin Roosevelt subsequently proposed a "Second Bill of Rights" that would guarantee everyone a decent home, medical care, education, and enough income for food and shelter.
- § In the 1960s, Milton Friedman, James Tobin, Paul Samuelson, John Kenneth Galbraith, and other prominent economists endorsed "guaranteed income" or a "negative income tax". Martin Luther King Jr. called for guaranteed income as an essential step toward ending racism. Richard Nixon presented a plan that passed in the House of Representatives with two-thirds of the vote, but was defeated in the Senate Finance Committee. In the 1972 presidential campaign, Senator George McGovern ran against Nixon and called for a "Demogrant" that was very close to a basic income.

People like a good story, and the rhythm of this one gives it dramatic tension and suggests that resurgence is near. Most of the names are familiar, impressive, and therefore reassuring. We present this history in different ways, depending on the audience. For example, with people who are especially concerned about civil rights and social justice, it works well to start with Martin Luther King Jr. With conservatives, we quote Milton Friedman, plus F. A. Hayek and Peter Drucker, who are among the many significant individuals not mentioned here. In effect, we are inviting readers and listeners to join these figures in making history.

In Europe and elsewhere outside the United States, basic income advocates might use this history in another way. It seems that most people like Americans but resent or distrust the United States government, particularly the Bush administration's unilateralism and militarism. Advocates might cite the 1960s debates as evidence that the government was, and perhaps still is, dysfunctional and out of touch with the people. A majority of Americans favoured Nixon's plan; public opinion polls showed that clearly, and the vote in the House confirmed it. Opponents in the Senate stalled until after the general election, and then defeated it in committee, avoiding the attention that comes with a full public debate.

This history also provides some important lessons. One is that advocates have to keep the pressure on. Another is that advocates have to be willing to compromise. In the Senate committee, moderate Democrats and Republicans voted for the plan. Voting against it were conservatives who opposed any aid to the poor and liberals who wanted something more generous. If the liberals and their supporters had been willing to compromise, it would have passed and they could have started working for an expansion. A third lesson, already learned, involves the specific formulation. Nixon's plan was to give cash payments only to very poor families. It was extremely complicated due to the means testing and the mechanics of reducing the payments to recipients who increased their earnings. In contrast, basic income is simple, universal, and unconditional.

Soon after being introduced to the idea of basic income, many people ask if there is anything like it operating anywhere in the world. That question is an opportunity to talk about Alaska and the Permanent Fund Dividend. Residents receive close to two thousand dollars a year. That is news to almost everyone, and people sometimes joke about moving there. Also quite appealing is the logic of the plan: Alaska's oil belongs to the people, so royalties should be distributed directly, rather than used to fund government.

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# 5. Organizing allies

Mobilizing support for basic income could take a long time if people are only attracted and educated at random. It makes sense to target our efforts. There are many individuals and organizations that can be valuable allies. Our task is to help them see how basic income can help them achieve their goals.

That is easy with organizations working to end hunger, homelessness, and poverty. Conventional political approaches depend on creating jobs. There is, however, no evidence that there will ever be enough new jobs to make a significant difference. With basic income, everyone would have money for food and shelter. People can find or create jobs for themselves. The main obstacle to alliances with anti-poverty groups is that most focus on local, specific, or shortterm goals like funding shelters and soup kitchens or opposing cuts in particular government programmes; they may be reluctant to redirect their efforts. Even so, alliances are definitely worth pursuing. Many of those groups are large, well organized, and skilful at lobbying, public relations, and other ways to put pressure on politicians.

The issue of jobs suggests the possibility of alliances with labour unions. Employers have been reacting to globalization and new technologies by making greater demands on workers. It has become common for employers to keep people in part-time, contract, or temporary jobs; such workers have few or no benefits, and are particularly hard to organize. Basic income would, in effect, provide every worker with a strike fund. Workers with basic economic security would be freer to join unions, organize, and demand better working conditions.

Civil rights organizations can emphasize the fact that the basic income would go to everyone without any regard for race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, or national origin. The most basic civil right, after all, has to be the right to an income for food and shelter. When everyone has that, it will be much easier to focus on other aspects of social justice.

Other potential allies are environmentalists and their organizations. To reduce air pollution and slow global warming, the most effective thing we can do is cut fossil fuel consumption. But politicians balk because substantive cuts would bring widespread economic disruptions. However, the economic security of a basic income would make it easier for individuals to adapt as needed. Voters might even endorse higher gasoline taxes, particularly if the basic income also goes up. When consumers demand more efficient cars, homes, appliances, and so on, businesses will find it profitable to supply them. In that way, basic income will help individuals and businesses pursue our common interest in more sustainable lives and communities. Environmentalists will be better positioned to guide public policy.

Allies might come from many other organizations or populations. Senior citizens, for example, with their politically powerful associations, might see basic income as a way to supplement Social Security, and to make things better for their children and grandchildren. Education reformers could point out that parents with basic income would be able to spend more time meeting with teachers and helping their children with homework. Health care reform proponents might gather or produce research about the public health harms – and costs – associated with hunger and homelessness, which would be eliminated with basic income.

With this strategy of building alliances, basic income advocates can gain enormous leverage. There is no need for any major new organization.

Every reform organization engages in the tasks of formulating, attracting, educating, organizing, and pressuring. Activists agree that the main struggle is to attract people, outreach. Organizations that support basic income and integrate it into their formulations will be able to use it in their outreach efforts. After all, extra income is something we all want, especially if it comes without any work requirement or other conditions. By doing that, allied organizations can increase their membership and their effectiveness.

#### 6. Pressuring politicians

Conventional ways to put pressure on elected officials include petitions, preprinted postcards, personal letters, phone calls, office visits, rallies, and

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demonstrations, and so on up to protests with civil disobedience. It is commonly suggested that activists begin courteously and escalate gradually.

Politicians routinely say they trust, respect, and believe in voters, citizens, the people, and us. On specific issues and generally, we hear such rhetoric from those on the political left and the right. We can use their statements: "You say you believe in X, and want to do Y. Will you support basic income, which would help with X and Y?" With our allies, we can do that with poverty, worker's issues, civil rights, environmental problems, and other issues.

Typical politicians initially refuse to commit themselves. Citing questions of cost and affordability, a common tactic is to suggest a panel or commission to study the idea. That is not good enough. Concerns about cost have to be challenged. When people say we cannot afford some reform, they are in fact fortifying the status quo. They are saying it is okay to leave people hungry and homeless, okay that workers lack economic security, okay that civil rights are violated and our environment is degraded. None of these is okay. It is the status quo that we cannot afford.

We can certainly afford basic income if we start with an amount that is less than needed for subsistence. After we win something, even if the amount is obviously too low, advocates can press for increases. We can pay for those increases by cutting government programmes that become superfluous. It may be necessary to increase taxes, yet it should also be easier to agree on tax policies because everyone will be more able to participate in the debates and everyone will have regular reminders that we are all stakeholders.

When elected officials hesitate - most will; they were elected, we have to remember, as representatives of the status quo - we have to be prepared to work for their opponents in the next election. Challengers are usually more willing to endorse new ideas. In most countries, two political parties dominate; our allies are likely to be Greens, Libertarians, members of other "third" parties, and independent candidates. Basic income is a perfect issue for any third party in the United States. Candidates can talk about the 1960s and the popularity of Nixon's plan, while challenging Republicans and Democrats to explain why their parties abandoned the idea. Such a challenge might provoke an incumbent to endorse it. A goal is to get two or more candidates to debate the amount, mechanics, and other details.

A crucial step in any campaign is to find even one elected official who agrees to sponsor legislation. Advocates can help write the bill, reformulating the idea as necessary. At the same time, advocates and allies have to renew their efforts to attract additional supporters, educate them, and so forth, in preparation for public events when the bill is introduced. That is important because some political organizations only become involved when there is legislation.

In the United States, Germany, Canada, Brazil, and other countries with a federal structure, it may be possible for a state or province to implement a basic income; perhaps a city or county could do it. Candidates for governor or other offices might campaign for it, proposing that their state be the first to demonstrate what it could do and how it would work. For example, Alaskans could expand what they have into a "Permanent Fund Dividend Plus." Most new policies are enacted in cities or states before being implemented at the national level.

#### 7. Citizen policies

The Citizen Policies Institute plan contains several elements that are proving to be quite appealing to ordinary Americans. Each element could, of course, be modified as the plan moves forward. Each might also work in other countries and campaigns.

First, "Citizen Policies" includes only citizens. Basic income would be, many people fear, a magnet for immigrants. That concern is not simply a matter of discrimination or right-wing bias; we hear it from people around the country and across the political spectrum. Permanent residents would have an added incentive to become citizens.

Second, we include only adults. An additional amount for children makes sense, but would complicate things significantly and be much more expensive. Also, payments to parents would mean inequality with the childless. Having

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children is, after all, a choice. For single mothers, some or all of the father's basic income could be redirected to child support.

Third, perhaps because the United States is such a large country, many people ask about variations in the cost of living. There are places where a frugal adult can subsist on \$400 a month; in some cities, however, it is hard to get by with twice that amount. We find it useful to say early on that a national programme would have to mean a national amount. And that cities or states could supplement it from local revenues and that the amount must be variable when economic conditions, such as fossil fuel prices, change.

And fourth, in return for the basic income, we propose that everyone contribute, say, eight hours a month to the community. Some form of reciprocity makes sense; many people are uncomfortable with the notion of "getting something for nothing." That phrase is common, and was also used by opponents of Nixon's plan. Universal community service seems to be especially important to young adults, a large per centage of whom already volunteer.

In our community service proposal, the only mechanism for regulation or enforcement is social pressure. Yes, some people will shirk. But would you? Would your friends and family members? When everyone is receiving the basic income, the social pressure to serve would be enormous. Besides, a regulatory bureaucracy would cost far more than any potential benefits.

Volunteerism has been widely promoted in the United States, by liberals and conservatives, particularly since the terrorist attacks on September 11. Many people, however, are so busy working to provide for themselves and their families that they cannot afford the time to serve. To them, even the call for volunteerism is an added burden and can induce stress, shame, and guilt. Basic income would make universal service possible. The money would, in effect, pay for a portion of everyone's time. Universal community service would be a powerful way to unite and secure the nation. In addition, community service activities could replace many tasks that are currently performed by local government agencies. The money saved can help pay for the basic income.

#### 8. Transforming politics

To be effective advocates for basic income, it is important for people to understand the idea and its power.

For most issues or problems – poverty, pollution, global warming, urban decay, racism, and so on – there are two conventional approaches, along with a middle position that often combines the worst features from both extremes. From the left, liberals think government programmes are necessary. From the right, conservatives want to cut government and rely on the market. Left versus right. Liberal versus conservative. Government versus markets.

An example: To reduce poverty and associated problems, the left liberal approach is to have government build houses, provide food, and create jobs. Right-wing conservatives want all of that to be done by the market; if we cut government and its regulations, they say, people will provide for themselves. (The "moderate" alternative is to give government subsidies to private employers; that distorts markets and corrupts the political process.) Liberals and conservatives want to end extreme poverty, of course. Their disputes are about the means and priorities. Conservatives emphasize personal freedom, initiative, and responsibility, and say it is degrading for people to be dependent on government handouts, "the dole." To liberals, extreme poverty is far more degrading; their priority is to seek equality and social justice.

With basic income, everyone will have enough money for food and shelter, which can be purchased through the market. It will no longer be necessary for government to create jobs or provide food or housing; such programmes can be cut, the money used to pay for the basic income. Everyone will receive the same amount, so there would not be any loss of dignity in accepting it, in contrast with welfare payments that are need-based, means-tested, or conditional. And the distribution would be extremely efficient, with no welfare bureaucracy. Markets and government working together. Conservative means achieving liberal ends. Left and right forming a circle, no longer opposite poles on an ideological spectrum.

Some people, at least in the United States, think basic income sounds like socialism. To the contrary, it would preserve markets and private property. And everyone will still be free to earn as much money as one can. Other people do not worry about socialism, but struggle under capitalism. Socialist governments, even with their inefficiencies and other problems, provide an absolute social safety net. So would basic income. The economic security of socialism combined with the individual freedom of capitalism: a synthesis.

"Democracies" will become more democratic. In many places, one political party dominates. Or there are two major parties that disagree only about certain issues or details, or that campaign mostly on the candidates' personalities. Basic income will give people something to vote for, rather than someone to vote against. Once enacted, it will ensure that everyone can afford the time to participate; for a healthy democracy, after all, voting is not enough. Everyone will have regular reminders that everyone is a stakeholder.

Many countries, of course, are not democracies or are only nominally democratic. And those are some of the poorest and most troubled by disease, pollution, exploitation, and military conflicts. The best that can be hoped for is peaceful revolution, such as occurred in the Philippines under Marcos, Rumania under Ceausescu, Serbia under Milosevic, and East Germany with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Even the most ruthless government cannot long endure when citizens refuse to cooperate. Perhaps the idea of a basic income will inspire people in undemocratic countries, and encourage them to make peaceful revolutions.

#### 9. Moving forward

Basic income, history suggests, is most likely to be enacted first in a poor country that has recently undergone some major political transition. A recent transition means people have experience with substantive reform, and those who profit excessively from the status quo are not so entrenched. Poverty means people with nothing to lose. There are many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that have recently undergone some economic collapse and political transition. In Eastern Europe, it has been only a decade or so since the end of communism, and many countries are struggling with capitalism and democracy.

In the summer of 2002, the best prospect is South Africa, just eight years after the end of apartheid. A national commission has strongly recommended a Basic Income Grant of \$10 a month to everyone starting at age seven. The report is awaiting action by President Thabo Mbeki. Advocates include labour unions, churches, and diverse organizations working on issues affecting children, women, the elderly, and AIDS. Other poor democracies where basic income is being considered, though not yet debated in their national legislatures, include Argentina, Columbia, and Brazil. Several states in Brazil already provide a basic grant to parents to pay for their children's schooling.

Wealthier countries that have a functioning social safety net could introduce a basic income in stages. Existing grants and guarantees can be extended as conditions and restrictions are removed. Leading the way is Ireland, where a plan backed by the Green Party is being widely debated. Supporters held a mass march on Parliament in the winter of 2002. The main antipoverty programme in the United States is the Earned Income Tax Credit. It could be expanded into a negative income tax by removing the link to earnings, and could then be further expanded into a basic income.

Progresses anywhere can help mobilize support everywhere. Implementation in any country can provide a model for other countries.

Here is another way advocates can attract potential allies: by encouraging conjecture about what basic income might mean for the Palestinians and the prospects for peace in the Middle East. Every year, a lot of international aid, mostly from Europe and Arab countries, goes to the Palestinian Authority. What if that money was distributed through a basic income?

For the 2.7 million Palestinians, per capita income has fallen in the past two years by at least 30 per cent. Almost half now live below the poverty line of two

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dollars per person per day. A billion dollars a year distributed directly and equally would mean an extra dollar a day for everyone. That would not by itself bring peace, obviously. Grievances and problems go back years, decades, even centuries, so any resolution will require other reforms and time. But it would be a fundamental change.

Most Palestinians have never had economic security; with basic income, everyone would. People could use the money to rebuild their homes, businesses, schools, and communities. The distribution would be a vehicle for establishing an effective and accountable government that can manage the distribution and related responsibilities. Such a government, built from the bottom up, would be much more capable of stopping terrorism, creating a viable state, and negotiating peace with Israel.

This is all conjecture, you say? Of course it is. But imagining and dreaming are a first step, the way we begin to formulate new ideas. And such conjecture can promote dialogue. Besides, when was the last time you heard anything hopeful about the Middle East?

The power of basic income is that it focuses on individuals and serves people directly. Every individual will have basic economic security guaranteed. As individuals, people will be encouraged to come together to decide what is best for their neighbourhoods and communities. As individuals and together, it will be easier for people to demand that government and markets serve their needs and interests. In contrast, conventional policies and political practices focus on government, the market, and other institutions or abstractions - while overlooking the fact that "government" and "the market" are aggregates of individuals.

Individuals are the key to progress regarding poverty, pollution, global warming, urban decay, racism, and other issues or problems, including war and terrorism. Our situation is clearly unsustainable. Our world is seriously troubled. The sooner we act, as individuals and together, the better it will be for everyone.

Basic income will make it easier for every one of us to participate and do what is necessary. Our children and grandchildren, and our world as a whole, are counting on us. What are we waiting for?

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