

# Basic income trials and the politics of scale: A research agenda

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## Abstract

The growing popularity of basic income has led to extensive trials of the policy in numerous settings across the world. However, analysis of the politics of basic income, and in particular the political dynamics preceding and resulting from trial programs, lags. In response, we propose a research agenda that uses political scale to investigate where basic income trials emerge, how individual trials' design and implementation parameters vary, and how those trials influence subsequent policy development. By focusing on the previously omitted variable of political scale, our approach addresses a number of key challenges in evaluating basic income trials. First, we provide a means of identifying negative and partial cases to remedy the small-N problem at the national and regional scales. Second, focusing on a given scale helps to identify specific incumbent programs and policy possibilities influenced by basic income trials. Third, our framework draws attention to the importance of distinct, scale-based political dynamics in both securing basic income trials and converting trial programs into future policy changes.

## KEYWORDS

basic income, cash transfers, political scale, social experiments, trial programs

## INTRODUCTION

A new wave of social experimentation with basic income has mushroomed within the timespan of a long decade. Building on the foundations of the Negative Income Tax (NIT) experiments conducted in the US and Canada in the late 1970s (Widerquist, 2018), a lone project in Madhya Pradesh in 2011 has grown into a global movement of basic income trials<sup>1</sup> spanning more than two dozen countries (Davalat et al., 2014). The total number of basic income trials runs well into the triple digits, with more than 100 pilots launching in the US alone (Doussard, 2024).<sup>2</sup>

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Social research on recent basic income trials focuses primarily on questions of optimal design and implementation, as well as the evaluation of the outcomes on a vast range of economic, social, and behavioral variables (Castro & West, 2022; Laín, 2022). Importantly, this fast-growing cohort of studies focuses on evaluating individual or community effects, largely neglecting questions about the impact of basic income trials on support for the adoption of subsequent public policy changes (Chrisp & De Wispelaere, 2022).

Our point of departure is to analyze key decisions in the structure of basic income trials (i.e., term, target population, payment method) and in their subsequent influence on policy as endogenous to underlying political conditions. The standard politician's claim that basic income trials provide evidence to inform policy-making masks an analytically crucial set of pretrial political negotiations. The decision to launch a trial itself marks an outcome of contested politics, as time-limited trials defer pressure for permanent policy. The mechanics of a trial—its focus on large or small payment amounts, on the general public or a particularly vulnerable population—likewise constitutes an accommodation to jockeying within a trial's authorizing political coalition. Politics penetrates key decisions during the trial itself, as necessary adjustments for budgets, eligibility, and evaluation both appease dissenters and postpone politically difficult program decisions. This makes the neglect of politics in research on basic income trials both surprising and analytically wasteful.

At present, there exists no sustained account of how, when, or where basic income trials emerge, or what factors explain their specific design and implementation features. The limited research available veers between either highly generalized accounts of “politics matters” (claims that rarely specify intermediate drivers or mechanisms) and exceedingly detailed and idiosyncratic accounts that functionally treat each basic income trial as a standalone case (Merrill et al., 2021; Widerquist, 2018). What is missing, and urgently needed, is movement from the general recognition that trials vary significantly to a structured understanding of where and why they differ on everything from conditions of emergence to design and rollout features to subsequent policy impact (however subtle). In addition to providing a framework for learning from basic income trials, our approach should also add to the political study of policy experiments more broadly (Peck & Theodore, 2015; Reddy, 2012; Rogers-Dillon, 2004).

In this short paper, we argue the case for a research agenda grounded in the *politics of scale*, setting out an approach that uses common dynamics in and features of national, regional, and local politics to identify structural similarities and contingent differences in the basic income trials proliferating globally. Basic income trials emerge at different levels or what we refer to as *political scales*: federal/national, regional, and local/municipal. The analytically crucial feature distinguishing these scales is not the physical location of cash transfers, but the political governance unit responsible for initiating, funding, and conducting any given trial. This is what explains the crucial distinction between program constraints that arise because of the scale at which a trial takes place—for example, how to accurately recruit a representative sample in small cities or municipalities—and a very different set of challenges associated with the *political dynamics* inherent to a specific scale, such as setting a trial's duration to ensure conclusion within an election cycle. The relevant political dynamics differ both across scales and across countries, implying that what follows should not be read as an attempt at comprehensive analysis but more modestly as illustrating the salience of political scale as part of a comparative research agenda for understanding the politics of basic income trials. Accordingly, our analysis starts from the understanding that the scale at which a trial takes place structures the transformation of political support for basic income trials into extensively but *systemically* varied approaches to central questions in program design and a trial's subsequent influence on policy.

## VARIETIES OF BASIC INCOME TRIALS

Basic income trials come in “varieties” comprising extensive variation across three policy stages, which are also connected through multiple feedback mechanisms. Absent a means of organizing trials or

developing a basis for comparison, this variation will impede systematic evaluation. To foreshadow a key insight explained in more detail below, the diversity of basic income trials should not be regarded as a discrete feature but better understood as a configuration of characteristics. A framework intended to provide real insight into the politics of basic income trials needs to address the distinctiveness and interplay of three key stages in the policy process: emergence, design/implementation, and policy impact.

## Emergence of basic income trials

To begin with, consider the ontological question: basic income trials emerge in a multiplicity of locations representing a tiny minority of jurisdictions. What explains the emergence or nonemergence of basic income trials? Rising and widespread inequality, insecurity, and precariousness combined with ineffective, insufficiently responsive, and unsustainable social protection schemes have pushed decision-makers to scan for policy alternatives (Atkinson, 2015; Peck & Theodore, 2015). Crisis explanations, especially the coronavirus pandemic, also feature prominently in explanations for the surge in media and policy attention towards basic income. Yet, Covid-centered explanations must confront that the new wave of basic income trials predates COVID-19 by several years (De Wispelaere et al., 2024). In other words, the pathways from interest in shoring up social protection schemes aimed at countering immediate crises or systemic social problems to initiating trials require further explanation.

Centering the political negotiations and jockeying that create pressure for trials proves essential for accurately conceptualizing the range of outcomes between the binary extremes of “no trial” and “completed trial.” The seemingly simple outcome of *no trial*, for example, bundles together cases where basic income never surfaces in policy debates, cases where it makes the agenda but stalls, and places where trials are part of the established policy debate or even approved but fail due to procedural barriers (Scotland) or political shifts (Catalunya).<sup>3</sup> Evaluation of places where trials become reality likewise needs to distinguish between trials that were completed as planned (Finland) and those that were prematurely canceled (Ontario) or downgraded or reduced in scope (Ireland).<sup>4</sup> Answering questions about why basic income trials (only) emerge where they do requires a framework that takes advantage of, rather than erases, the multiplicity of possible outcomes to proposing a trial.

## Design and implementation of basic income trials

The design and implementation features of basic income trials also vary in ways that shape their outcomes. Here, as with the emergence of trials, underlying politics shape that variance. As basic income trials, by definition, cannot accurately test a permanent, universal basic income (Widerquist, 2018), the design concessions made to accommodate budgetary, practical, and political constraints influence a trial's measured effects and political valence.

In terms of experimental design, many use a randomized control trial (RCT) model (Finland, Los Angeles), while others employ a saturation site design (Dauphin in Manitoba, Canada).<sup>5</sup> None of the trials test for a genuine universal basic income, but amongst the more targeted designs, the specific population runs the gamut from artists (Ireland), the unemployed (Finland), care leavers (Wales), and people experiencing homelessness (Denver).<sup>6</sup> In addition, variation also extends to payment amount, duration of the trial, and recruitment of subjects—ranging from automatic compulsory enrollment to recruitment via mail, lotteries, and personal outreach.

Trials also focus on a large and heterogeneous set of outcome measures, ranging from social measures such as labor market and civil society participation to sleep, health, and educational attainment (Widerquist, 2018). In addition to catering to the specific political context, this variation in outcome measures can be tied to the implementation architecture supporting basic income trials. Generally speaking, we can distinguish the extent to which basic income trials are piggybacking on existing

implementation systems (e.g., Finland) compared to setting up bespoke infrastructure (e.g., the Open Research trail in 19 counties across Texas and Illinois).<sup>7</sup> Offering insight into what determines the manifold of decisions—or perhaps *lack* of decisions—that shape the specific design and implementation of basic income trials is a second key objective of policy frameworks.

## Policy impact of basic income trials

Finally, the policy impact of basic income trials typically materializes long past the final evaluation report. On the surface, most trials appear to share in policy failure—none has led to the immediate introduction of a permanent basic income.<sup>8</sup> Advocates blame political resistance for the failure to turn what they see as substantial evidence for basic income's positive effects into standing policy.<sup>9</sup> But full and immediate adoption of basic income is an extremely exigent standard, and one that ignores both the incremental nature and the long time frame of policy adoption. Rather than look for “Eureka” moments, we can learn by scrutinizing the subtle and indirect ways trials shape subsequent policy development.

Adapting the work of Marsh and McConnell (2010) and Checkland et al. (2023), we can distinguish between three broad categories of policy impact: process, program, and politics. *Process impact* relates to the production and dissemination of high-quality scientific or procedural knowledge about the effects and operation of basic income schemes, aimed at raising awareness amongst key stakeholders and the general public. *Program impact* features the incremental introduction of policy change, either by small changes in existing policy or initiating new programs that include some basic income-like characteristics.<sup>10</sup> *Political impact* can be measured in terms of a trial providing additional forums for debating basic income, increasing support among the public, politicians, and stakeholders, and providing an avenue for coalition-building around basic income policy development.

While much of the policy impact of basic income trials goes unnoticed, it is real and varies importantly from one case to another. Disaggregating policy impact into its process, program, and politics components allows us to appreciate the uneven patterns of policy impact that emerge when comparing across cases (Chrisp & De Wispelaere, 2022). Assessing and explaining how basic income trials engage each of these three impact dimensions provides a third key challenge for policy frameworks.

## From discrete variation to configuration

The emergence, design/implementation, and policy impact of basic income trials are distinct in that there will be idiosyncratic factors that may explain one or two of these stages but not the third. However, they should also not be analyzed in isolation, as they interact in complex ways and cannot be adequately captured as entirely separate phenomena. We propose to adopt a configurational approach (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009) in which combinations of factors explain the extensive variation observed across basic income trials.

To illustrate, the Finnish Basic Income Experiment outwardly presents a success story, having been completed as planned (De Wispelaere et al., 2023; Kangas et al., 2021). But it achieved this feat by compromising significantly on design and implementation, which in turn drastically reduces its subsequent policy impact (Hiilamo, 2022). By contrast, the Ontario Basic Income Pilot had a significant political impact—for example, raising public awareness and increasing public support (Irons & Perrella, 2023)—in large part by being more ambitious despite being prematurely canceled. The case of Scotland shows that it is even possible to link the *discussion* of basic income trials to social policy developments, even when institutional and political obstacles prevent the trials from transpiring (Chrisp & De Wispelaere, 2022). Taxonomizing the components of trials carefully and analyzing them configurationally fashions the capacity to ask the right questions about the pathways they take.

## THE POLITICS OF SCALE: NATIONAL, REGIONAL, LOCAL

The political antecedents, design choices, and policy impact of basic income trials vary tremendously from one jurisdiction to the next. This poses an analytical challenge, as no social-scientific classification can perfectly encompass these differences without discarding large pieces of relevant political detail. In what follows, we focus on the omitted variable of political scale as the best possible means of grouping basic income trials to organize inquiry into their political antecedents and consequences. This speaks to and draws on literature that critiques the methodological nationalism of comparative welfare research (Ciccia & Javornik, 2019; Greer et al., 2023; Pearce & Lagana, 2023), emphasizing the territorial politics of the welfare state, as well as the literature stressing the importance of (de)centralization and central-local government relations to policymaking and delivery (Page & Goldsmith, 1985; Sellers & Lidström, 2007).

### Basic income trials at a national scale

At present, only two cases fit the characteristics of a national basic income trial.<sup>11</sup> Finland is the most famous case of a national trial run in the form of a nationwide RCT, with 2000 individuals receiving a basic income for 2 years (2017–2018). Analysts compared payment recipients to a large control group on metrics ranging from employment to health, well-being, and a range of social attitudes (Kangas et al., 2021). The Finnish Basic Income Experiment was initiated and funded by the government of then Prime Minister Juha Sipilä and conducted and evaluated by a consortium of organizations coordinated by the Finnish Social Security Institution, Kela (De Wispelaere et al., 2023).

More recently, Ireland began a national trial currently in process. As in Finland, the pilot was initiated, funded, and run by a national ministry, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media (Johnston, 2022). The Irish Basic Income for the Arts Pilot is also designed as a nationwide RCT but differs markedly from the Finnish trial in its focus on artists as opposed to individuals receiving unemployment benefits.

Finland and Ireland share several characteristics relevant to basic income policy development. Both are small countries that recently transitioned from agrarian to technology-focused economies. However, there are also notable differences, particularly in the design of the welfare state and tax structure, with Finland being a social democratic welfare state with strong universal and redistributive social policies, while Ireland features a liberal welfare state with more residual policies and a strong emphasis on low taxation (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

In recent years, both countries typically governed through coalitions that draw from parties across the political spectrum. However, in Finland, the trial was proposed by the Prime Minister's party, the liberal-agrarian Centre Party, whereas in Ireland, it was the junior coalition partner, the Green Party, that pushed for a basic income trial as part of the 2020 Programme for Government (De Wispelaere et al., 2023; Johnston, 2022). Thus, the internal political dynamics of ostensibly very similar countries can differ substantially, something which should feature prominently in any perspective on the politics of national-level basic income trials.

### Basic income trials at a regional scale

At the regional scale, we encounter a small set of basic income trials predominantly but not exclusively situated within Europe. Political conflict and interruption appear repeatedly at the regional scale, as illustrated by the now infamous case of the Ontario Basic Income Pilot, initiated by the then Liberal Provincial Government of Kathleen Wynne and conducted from 2019 in Hamilton, Thunder Bay, and Lindsay. A mere 10 months following the electoral defeat of Wynne in the 2018 election, the new Ontario government canceled the trial without an official impact evaluation.<sup>12</sup>

Political conflict derailed two additional regional pilots before the first payment was made. In 2017 a coalition of several municipalities backed by the Scottish Government embarked on a Feasibility Study of basic income for Scotland, which included plans for conducting a trial that never materialized because of the institutional dependence on and the lack of collaboration from Westminster (Cantillon & O'Toole, 2022). More recently, in 2021 the Catalan government embarked on a project for a large basic income trial across Catalunya, but this project was effectively defunded in March 2023 in a tumultuous budget voting round in the Catalan Parliament. This leaves the project drastically altered, with a new director and heavily reduced budget, as well as narrowed design parameters that reduce its relevance for basic income policy development. To buck this negative trend, the most stable regional trial to date focuses on a significantly narrower population. In Wales, a trial providing approximately 500 care-leavers a basic income for 2 years has proceeded without hiccup or major controversy (Holland et al., 2024).

Gyeonggi province in South Korea is a final regional case, where from 2019 a Youth Basic Income has been paid to all 24-year-olds that met specific residency requirements for a year (Young, 2019). Its status as a trial is debatable given the policy was not time-limited and is still ongoing, but the clear intention of the project was to use the Youth Basic Income as an opportunity for research and advocacy with the aim of rolling it out more widely. The Governor of Gyeonggi province, Lee Jae-myung, who instigated the policy, also subsequently ran as the Democratic Presidential candidate on a platform that included a commitment to implement a nationwide basic income scheme.

These five regions (Ontario, Catalunya, Scotland, Wales, and Gyeonggi) vary considerably in political context, notably settled versus contentious regional politics. They also vary in size, economic background, as well as the policyscape within which trials are operating. The challenges and constraints facing basic income schemes also run the gamut, from institutional to political factors, with some regions highly dependent on national government collaboration for running a trial (e.g., Scotland) while others are comparatively autonomous in terms of financial, administrative, or legislative capabilities (e.g., Catalunya).

## Basic income trials at a local scale

A large majority of basic income trials transpire at the municipal level, where analysis must contend with greater heterogeneity in design, politics, and funding. Here, we need to make a distinction between pilots *initiated* at the local scale and trials *run* at that scale. Many trials identified with cities are planned, funded, coordinated, and most likely evaluated at the national or regional scale.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, genuinely local trials, according to our conceptual framework, are entirely run by local jurisdictions (municipalities or counties) with little to no input (or intervention) from regional or national authorities. Municipal trials are completed, ongoing, or planned in numerous locations around the world, ranging from India, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, and even Costa Rica and Guatemala. However, the most prominent cases of municipal basic income trials are found in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

Three broad analytical issues stand out among municipal trials. First, their funding sources and levels vary tremendously, and in ways that influence the politics of translating trials into policy. For example, the Barcelona city council partly financed its 2017–2019 B-Mincome project through an EU grant (Riutort et al., 2023); municipalities in the Netherlands financed their own trials (Roosma, 2022); and the 150-plus U.S. trials are funded by a range of pandemic-era stimulus programs, state grants, not-for-profit organizations, and own-source revenue (Doussard & Quinn, 2024).

Municipal trials also have a variable relationship to the regional and national political scale, with U.S. pilots winning extra resources or facing policy pre-emption dependent on the political composition of the State government (Doussard & Quinn, 2024). Dutch trials, by contrast, have political stability but variable relationships with the national government around design and implementation (Groot et al., 2019; Roosma, 2022). B-Mincome operated entirely independently, with the Barcelona city functionaries in charge eschewing engagement with either the Catalan or Spanish government (Riutort et al., 2023).

Finally, municipal trials appear to have a high capacity to generate policy spillovers, as evidenced by the propagation of additional, geographically clustered trials in the Netherlands and the U.S., and the growing addition of cash stipends and relaxed means-testing to locally administered U.S. welfare, education, and jobs programs. Spillovers can also leap scales, as in the case of Catalunya adopting a trial following Barcelona's B-Mincome (Rincón, 2022). The coincidence of similar policymaking and fiscal powers in municipalities nested within a given region also facilitates lateral spillovers. The propensity for policies to spill over within a given scale can be clearly seen in Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil. There, a permanent, municipally financed basic income (not a trial!) paid to more than 50,000 individuals in the city of Maricá has been emulated by 10 (and counting) additional municipalities across the state (Balakrishnan et al., 2024; De Wispelaere et al., 2024). While much about these neighboring municipal policies differs, they share extraction revenue (typically from offshore drilling) as a financing mechanism and the unique payment method of a digital e-currency (Berman et al., 2024).

## POLITICS, SCALE, AND TRIALS: AN EMERGING RESEARCH PROGRAM

From the political negotiations in which they originate, through design, implementation, and subsequent policy impact, basic income trials vary so substantially that drawing systematic conclusions from the relatively small number of pilots undertaken to date requires extra methodological ingenuity. We argue that organizing analysis through the lens of political scale within a broadly configurational approach (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009) provides the most reliable pathway to cataloging and systematically comparing the multiple, interlocking factors that shape the key dimensions of difference in basic income trials. Systematically inventorying these differences, and understanding them as structured variations rather than randomly given variables, proves essential to the follow-up project of understanding how trials influence subsequent social policy.

Far from identifying clear and predictable regularities in the construction and trajectory of trials, organizing the evaluation of trials by political scale first and foremost helps to *avoid* superficial and spurious correlations. Consider, for example, the apparently smooth sailing of national-level trials in Finland and Ireland, compared to the political contestation that upended planned trials in Catalunya and Scotland. Comparing cases within a political scale focuses our attention on crucial political preconditions and previously unobserved differences which upend any first-glance conclusion about the ease of national trials. At the national scale, Finland and Ireland completed trials whose divergent foci (the unemployed vs. artists) resulted from underlying political differences in the authorizing coalition. At the regional scale, the complicated and varied fortunes of trials suggest a different conclusion than the headline-generating cancellation of Ontario's trial. Regional pilots exist in a web of complicated political relationships that can both upend trials *and* provide political resources to salvage or extend them.

Finally, centering scale helps to direct attention to the necessarily greater heterogeneity of local trials. Cities and local jurisdictions vary more extensively than nation states: They are individually wealthier or poorer, driven by particular and sometimes peculiar economic specializations, and by definition more fiscally constrained, particularly in an era of systemic "fiscal dumping" from higher scales of government (Dosi et al., 2020; Xu & Warner, 2016). Consequently, local trials differ on more dimensions, particularly in their propensity to use private, hybrid, or pass-through funding, and in the functional targeting of spatially, demographically, and economically clustered populations. Scale can guide researchers toward searching for particular types of trade-offs, conflicts, and constraints for a given trial.

A scale-based research agenda can immediately advance research on basic income trials in simple ways. First, scholars can seek out partial and negative cases to address the small-N problem at the national and regional scales. Additional cases, such as the British Labour Party including a basic income trial in its 2019 general election manifesto and stalled efforts to initiate regional trials in places such as British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, and Corsica, all provide badly needed data to begin to trace theories and processes of trial formation. The dynamics of these failed attempts to launch trials are

also likely to play out in distinctive ways depending on the scale. At the national scale, for example, it is typically smaller left-liberal and Green parties that campaign for basic income trials in parliaments (Chrisp, 2020).

Second, analyzing basic income trials through the lens of scale supports the important work of tracing basic income trials' policy consequences (Chrisp & De Wispelaere, 2022). Major changes to national-scale welfare state arrangements are expensive, politically contentious, and consequently rare, a reality that accentuates the small-N problem for national and regional trials. Regions and localities, however, typically have greater budgetary discretion (if smaller budgets) and more latitude for bureaucratic policy entrepreneurs. This appears to make a range of policy consequences possible, from local-scale emulation/serial reproduction of basic income programs (as in Rio de Janeiro state) to centering cash transfers on the regional and local policy agenda (as in the mass adoption of state-level child tax credits in the U.S.) to local trials providing a direct impetus for regional initiatives (as in the troubled Catalan trial following B-Mincome).

Third, coalition-building plays a vital role in all trials.<sup>15</sup> Significantly, the mechanics of coalitions and the problems they negotiate also vary by scale. Negotiations by an authorizing political coalition shape much of the variance in basic income trials: who receives benefits, how they receive them, how much they receive, and how unconditional cash is framed as a political issue. Those same coalitions provide channels through which trials (fail to) influence subsequent policy. Yet the prospect of basic income looks distinctly different for coalitions at each scale of government. At the national level, coalition-building is intricately linked with the political competition of parties, which also filters through to the bureaucratic apparatus through political appointments, while key stakeholders and interest groups compete for the attention of elected politicians. The fate of basic income trials critically depends on the strength of advocates inside parties and inside political coalitions.

At the regional scale, political competition is partly mediated by the contentious politics of regional competition, often (but not always!) filtered through the politics of nationalism. Here, the fate of basic income can become intertwined with the political tensions of the nationalist aspirations of key political actors. Finally, at the local, municipal scale, politics takes on a distinctive pragmatic and problem-solving bent, with political coalitions having to deal with numerous local problems, often while having to bypass interference from regional or national political actors trying to advance their own agendas. Here, the politics of basic income trials is more about taking advantage of external opportunities, and coalition-building is often more specifically tied to very local issues and problems.

A final advantage to this approach is that politics and coalition-building help to make sense of the extensive design and implementation differences characterizing basic income trials. Critically, variation in design or implementation cannot be *directly* tied to the difference between national, regional, or municipal scale. For instance, the case of nationwide RCT design vs. localized saturation studies is likely an artifact of the size, resource, and implementation capabilities of national administration compared to municipal government rather than a deliberate political decision—effectively a feature of “scale” rather than “politics of scale.” Thus, it is essential to pay closer attention to the differences as well as the similarities between trials both within and across political scale. The Finnish and Irish trials both adopted an RCT model but are otherwise very different, notably in targeting the broad category of unemployed (Finland) compared to a very specific group of artists (Ireland). This difference is neither accidental nor a research strategy but is the political consequence of the driving forces in the specific political coalitions in each country.<sup>16</sup> Differences in design and implementation are even more outspoken across trials at the municipal level. The key point here is that while some design constraints follow key differences between national, regional, and municipal trials, extensive variation remains at each scale.

Our approach to research on basic income trials, politics, and scale provides the means to chart a middle path between overdetermined and underspecified social policy research. It avoids, on the one hand, the facile and spurious interpretation of the distinctive features of national, regional, and municipal basic income trials. On the other hand, it sidesteps the problem of treating basic income trials as radically idiosyncratic policy phenomena that defy systematic political explanation. Instead, we propose



that future research should focus on precisely conceptualizing and empirically validating the different factors that determine how the politics of scale operates as a moderator.

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The authors have nothing to report.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT


Jurgen De Wispelaere serves on the Executive Committee of the Basic Income Earth Network and on the Scientific Committee of the Catalan Basic Income Pilot.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Not applicable as this article does not use primary empirical research.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>We use the term trials throughout as a more encompassing concept than oft-used terms such as experiments and pilots, which in our view, are more prescriptive about the type of project. We should also note the ongoing conceptual debate surrounding when exactly a trial sufficiently meets the standard basic income definition to count as a “basic income” trial. For discussion, see Widerquist (2018).

<sup>2</sup>Many of these projects operate under the radar while others are highly visible and widely cited in research as well as media and policy debates. The Finnish experiment combined a high profile start with going virtually silent during the experimental phase while its final report again received much media and policy attention (De Wispelaere et al., 2023; Kangas et al., 2021).

<sup>3</sup>For Scotland, see Cantillon and O’Toole (2022), while the Catalan case is briefly discussed in Rincón (2022).

<sup>4</sup>See Hiilamo (2022) for Finland, McDowell and Ferdosi (2020) for Ontario, and Johnston (2022) for Ireland.

<sup>5</sup>Calnitsky (2019) discusses the differences between the RCT and saturation design of basic income experiments. See also Kangas et al. (2021) (Finland), Doussard (2024) (Los Angeles) and Calnitsky and Latner (2017) (Dauphin).

<sup>6</sup>See Johnston (2022) (Ireland), Kangas et al. (2021) (Finland), Holland et al. (2024) (Wales), and Doussard (2024) (Denver).

<sup>7</sup>See Kangas et al. (2021) (Finland) and Vivalt et al. (2024) (OpenResearch).

<sup>8</sup>It is notable that the quasi-basic income schemes actually introduced as policy did not involve a pilot or trial phase. This applies to, amongst others, the municipality of Maricá in Brazil (De Wispelaere et al., 2024), Alaska (Widerquist & Howard, 2012), and Iran (Tabatabai, 2012).

<sup>9</sup>Widerquist (2005) suggests that the problem is one of failing to appropriately communicate the evidence of basic income experiments.

<sup>10</sup>In the U.S. context, basic income trials have succeeded in building support for other cash transfers, such as child tax credits, and for relaxing eligibility criteria for strictly means-tested programs (Doussard, 2024).

<sup>11</sup>While the centrality of national welfare systems in the potential development of full basic income programs makes these essential sites for starting inquiry into basic income trials, the regional and local scales feature both substantially larger program counts and greater heterogeneity in trial goals and composition.

<sup>12</sup>Researchers at the University of Ryerson and McMaster University conducted a series of independent postcancellation evaluations (Ferdosi & McDowell, 2020; McDowell & Ferdosi, 2021).

<sup>13</sup>In the case of the OpenResearch trials, a private organization funded, designed and evaluated a trial taking place in 19 counties across two separate U.S. States (Texas and Illinois) (Vivalt et al., 2024).

<sup>14</sup>Major U.S. pilots include randomized control trials enrolling thousands of recipients in Los Angeles and Chicago (Doussard & Quinn, 2024).

<sup>15</sup>This is of direct relevance to publicly funded trials whereas privately funded trials such as OpenResearch in the US (Vivalt et al., 2024) appear to partially bypass this problem. However, large-scale private trials still need buy-in and cooperation from key public actors and the lack of preestablished public channels may furthermore negatively impact any subsequent policy impact.

<sup>16</sup>See Halmetoja et al. (2019) (Finland) and Johnston (2022) (Ireland).

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