

Basic Income(s): Political Parties' Positions and Cleavages on the French-Speaking Belgian Scene

Abstract

Social protection systems are under growing pressure and face many challenges. Some argue that a universal basic income has the potential to transcend political cleavages and offer the ground for a welfare reform. While previous literature has increasingly tackled basic income's feasibility, ground-based research is still scarce. This study intends to fill this gap by considering the positions of five French-speaking Belgian parties (PTB, PS, Ecolo, Les Engagés & MR) on basic income. Through a qualitative analysis of grey literature and interviews, the paper shows that basic income proposals coming from liberals, democrats, and ecologists are representative of the left-right cleavage. This is explained by the multidimensionality of the 'basic income' concept but also by diverging visions on work and society. By studying concrete parties' positions, this paper adds to the growing body of empirical literature about basic income and its feasibility.

Keywords: basic income, parties, political feasibility

1. Introduction

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the course of our lives has been thoroughly shaken. In Belgium, amid the first coronavirus 'wave', in spring 2020, the number of employed people benefiting from temporary unemployment allowance has reached the unprecedented rate of forty percent while half of the self-employed workers asked for a compensating allowance (*Banque nationale de Belgique*, 2021: 198). In this context, the public contributions have greatly compensated for the national revenue loss of households, firms, and public authorities, which are estimated at 41 billion euros by the Belgium's National Bank (2021: 73). At the same time, more and more people had to turn to public assistance or charities to be able to cope with the lack of income. The Belgian Red Cross has for

example seen a rise of thirty-two percent of their food aid distribution to meet the exploding demand (*Croix-Rouge de Belgique*, 2021). These exceptional circumstances have raised important questions about Belgium's social protection system and how to make it more resilient to exterior shocks such as pandemics. Among others, the possibility of implementing a universal and unconditional basic income has been brought up as potential solution.

The circumstantial return of this proposal only confirms what appears to be the growing, although cyclical, attention towards basic income projects. Indeed, debates about unconditional basic income have significantly come back on the scene the last few years. Basic income (BI), a cash income paid to all members of a political community, regardless of their revenues and without conditions, is, under its pure form, commonly defined with three unconditionalities (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017; Dumont, 2022). It is universal (every adult in a community gets the same amount), unconditional (no work conditions or restrictions) and individual (the income is given to one person rather than to a household). In Belgium, political parties have been reluctant to take a clear stance on the topic even though theoretical and philosophical discussions have been highly inspiring under the guidance of Philippe Van Parijs, one of the main thinkers of BI. Indeed, BI is an ambiguous topic: it is divisive across population, within political wings and parties, and yet gathers support from opposed political sides.

Discussions about BI's potential effects and benefits in the literature include seemingly contradictory arguments. BI is said both to facilitate exit of labour market (Calnitsky, 2017) and the power to say no to jobs (Wilderquist, 2013); and to encourage labour market participation by removing unemployment and poverty traps (de Basquiat and Koenig, 2014; Friedman, 2013). It is advocated for its emancipatory power, especially for women (Withorn, 2013), but at the same time criticised for its potential gendered effect, pushing back women in the household unquestioning the gendered division of care (Eydoux, 2017). Proponents of BI insist on the freedom and the real opportunities it provides to individuals (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017; Van Parijs, 1995), whereas opponents pretend it is only a way of unravelling social security and abandon citizens to self-maintenance (Alaluf, 2014). On another dimension, it is both said to lead the way towards a non-productivist, frugal society (Pinto, 2020) and to encourage consumerist behaviours (Ackerman and Alstott, 2008). Ultimately, it is impossible to assess the real effects BI would have as it has never been implemented under a pure form. It is, therefore, not surprising that a wide range of arguments are used in the political debate.

In this paper, I will scrutinize the positions of five main political parties of the French-speaking part of Belgium on BI: the liberals (*Mouvement réformateur*, MR), the socialists (*Parti Socialiste*, PS), the greens (*Ecolo*), the far left (*Parti du Travail belge*, PTB) and the democrats (*Les Engagés*, former

Christian democrats, *Cdh*). This study intends to answer the following research question: *what do the different positions of the main French-speaking Belgian parties regarding basic income tell us about its strategic feasibility?*

I will first conduct a review of the existing literature and present the driving theoretical concept of this paper: the strategic feasibility of BI. The second section will offer the opportunity to clarify the methodology and justify the case study by contextualising the Belgian political and institutional scene. In the analysis section, I will present each party's position on BI and investigate how these positions are still telling of the left-right cleavage. The paper shows that not only are MR's and Ecolo's BI proposals informed by very different visions, but also that PS, PTB and Ecolo, behind the BI debate, take common stances on main social reforms. Finally, I will draw my conclusions on the strategic feasibility of BI in Belgium, summarize the main takes of the current study and touch upon potential future research developments in the last section.

2. Theory

This section first presents the theoretical framework of the research by detailing the concepts of left-right cleavage and political feasibility of BI. Then, a review of the BI literature is conducted. Thirdly, I expose how discussions on BI can be complemented by the literature on political parties.

2.1 Strategic feasibility of BI

My theoretical framework is drawn from De Wispelaere and Noguera (2012) as they designed an analytical framework of the political feasibility of basic income (see Table 1). More precisely, they have designated four types of political feasibility: strategic, institutional, psychological, and behavioural. Two dimensions allow for their classification: the nature of the agency and the nature of constraints of the political environment. I use the strategic feasibility here: it combines discrete agents (easily identifiable), the political parties in this case, with prospective constraints, as the study concerns parties' positions on a potential future implementation of BI.

	<i>Prospective constraints</i> (<i>"achievability"</i>)	<i>Retrospective constraints</i> (<i>"viability"</i>)
Discrete agency	A. Strategic feasibility	B. Institutional feasibility
Diffuse agency	C. Psychological feasibility	D. Behavioral feasibility

Table 1: Typology of political feasibility, de Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012, p.21

According to the authors, strategic feasibility implies the search for a strong BI coalition, as the simple enumeration of individual support is not enough. Two obstacles threaten this type of feasibility: the risk of cheap support and of counterproductive support. Support for BI can be cheap following two meanings: it can be of no concrete worth because emanating from marginalised actors with little political power, and/or it can be weak and easily abandoned once the actor is in power, because it has a high political opportunity cost. The fact that support can be counterproductive refers to the existence of a potential “first mover disadvantage” repelling some political groups to take a positive stance because opposed ones already endorsed the proposal (de Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012: 21-24).

These theoretical insights will drive my analysis. The puzzle of cheap and counterproductive support will offer useful criteria of analysis to conclude about the strategic feasibility of BI in the Belgian context. The development of this article thus intends to assess whether such obstacles do exist in relation to political parties in Belgium, and how it affects the probability of different types of BI being implemented.

2.2 Review of the BI Literature

An increasing number of studies are considering the political feasibility of BI, and most of them are based on the theoretical framework just touched upon. The analytic framework of Jurgen De Wispelaere and Jose Antonio Noguera made the BI literature take a more concrete turn. Examples of research mobilising it, under different circumstances, are numerous. Perkiö (2021) uses the strategic feasibility combined to an ideational institutionalist perspective to study the framing of the BI theme in the Finnish context and confirms the thesis of cheap support from agents advocating for BI. The authors of the book “Experimenting with Unconditional Basic Income, Lessons from the Finnish BI Experiment 2017-2018” (2021) elaborate on the four types of political feasibility to make the conclusive claim that, under current circumstances, a genuine BI scheme has low chances of being implemented in the near future in Europe (Kangas, 2021). Another study, concerning the Belgian context this time, explores the strategic and psychological feasibility of different BI proposals in Belgium by uncovering “the political constituencies and coalitions that may be mobilised in favour of - or against - different models of BI in the Belgian welfare state” (Laenen et al., 2022: 3). The international level is also scrutinized through the same framework in several studies (see for example Shanahan et al., 2019). Alternatively, some authors inspire themselves from the different categories to design their own framework and infer on the feasibility of BI (see for example Torry, 2019), while others prefer to complement it with other bodies of literature on institutions and political parties (see Chrisp, 2020).

I follow this perspective: if the framework indeed provides a strong analytic basis, it still needs to be complemented by other concepts and bodies of literature. The notion of *multidimensionality* of BI is key to our understanding of political debates. When analysing political parties' positions on BI, one has indeed to bear in mind that these positions relate to different forms, and dimensions of BI. Indeed, BI is better understood as a family of schemes than as a ready-made policy. De Wispelaere and Stirton (2004) help us differentiate between different proposals by highlighting seven dimensions along which BI can vary, and Laenen and colleagues (2022) complement this frame by adding four others. I will use six of these fourteen dimensions to inform my analysis: universality, conditionality, adequacy, accumulation, financing, and integration. They will be detailed in the analysis part. Depending on how these dimensions are associated, the presumed effects will differ extensively. In addition to this element, it is useful to combine the BI literature with other political science research bodies, as I will now turn to.

2.3 The Interplay Between Party Politics and the BI Debate

It has been argued that BI was “neither left nor right”, as it is difficult to classify a welfare policy on the political spectrum (Chrisp and Martinelli, 2019). Some claim that it could be a “compromise between protective and productive elements of social security” (Martinelli, 2017: 6). However, other pieces of literature nuance this claim, admitting that the left-right divide might well be at stake: “basic income may be neither left nor right on the *economic* dimension but not on the *cultural* dimension” (Chrisp, 2020: 66). This cultural dimension refers to particular welfare policies preferences, linked to values and cultural identities. BI can actually be understood as an “either left or right” policy (Chrisp 2020: 47). The concept's amplitude has been highlighted in many pieces of literature. Indeed, Vandamme (2021), Eydoux (2017) or Allègre (2017) insist on the fact that there are at least two ideal types of BI. One pole is neo-liberal, the other includes both the social-democrat and the social-ecologist versions.

Several research have also demonstrated that left-wing voters were statistically more likely to be in favour of BI (Chrisp and Martinelli, 2019). Studies based on the European Social Survey tend to point at similar results at the European level (Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020; Vlandas, 2019). Empirical studies show that if the traditional left-right cleavage does not seem to inform BI's support in some national contexts, such as the UK or Finland; in Belgium, left-wing voters are more supportive of all types of BI than their right-wing counterparts (Laenen et al., 2022). Several political science theories might help clarify the links between parties' positions, voters' preferences, and policy-setting. While the *vote-seeking* (Storm, 1990) thesis might explain Ecolo's position, it fails to explain PS' position: socialists are not following their voters' inclination towards BI, as will be detailed further. The fact

that we witnessed an intensified debate on the political scene following some “policy entrepreneurs” (Mintrom, 1997) such as the socialist and liberal parties’ Presidents might, on the other side, indicate a *policy-seeking* behaviour. Most of francophone parties were pushed to take a stance on the BI theme. Beyond party behaviours, one has, in addition, to acknowledge the importance of the context. Indeed, it is needed in understanding complex phenomenon such as parties’ positions on social policies, to consider institutional and historical contexts (Chrisp, 2020).

There is a whole research field, at the juncture of party politics and BI literature, waiting to be explored. As Chrisp (2020: 49) mentions: “there is a need for a systematic, comparative approach to explain political support and opposition to basic income. (...) Specifically, insufficient attention has been given to the role of political parties in basic income research.” This is what I intend to do in the present research. I will argue that party ideology matters, and that the left-right divide is a relevant analytical line to understand the BI debate in the Belgian context. A cleavage can be defined as the opposition between political parties arising in a national context (Delwit, 2021a: 7). I here draw the line between the left and the right in a multidimensional perspective, as different types of divisions are interwoven (Delwit, 2021a: 9). The socio-economic division (or the class conflict) is of course decisive, but positions about the state’s role, the neoliberal economic system and inequalities will also be part of the analysis, illustrating the *cultural* dimension of the traditional cleavage aforementioned.

3. Case selection and methodology

3.1 Case selection

Belgium is an interesting case study to investigate the political feasibility of BI through the lens of francophone party’s positions for both contextual and institutional reasons. On the one hand, the BI idea has inspired proposals and discussions for decades by eminent public figures, be they academics or politicians, especially on the French-speaking side. The theme often resurfaces on the public scene and has led political actors to position themselves in the past few years. On the other hand, three main characteristics make the institutional context worthwhile to consider in the analysis, as they influence the BI debate. First, political parties have a decisive and institutional role in the Belgian system. Then, the historical strength of trade unions and the evolution of their relations to parties invites to integrate this dimension in the analysis. Finally, Belgium’s complex institutional structure and the hybrid nature of its social protection system (gathering both assistance and insurance mechanisms, see for example Dumont, 2022) make BI a stimulating proposal.

3.1.1 Belgium's Particratic System

Belgium has at times been described as an ideal type of particracy, e.g., an institutional and political system dominated by political parties (Delwit, 2008). Therefore, studying parties' positions on BI is an unavoidable step in the comprehension of its strategic feasibility. It also means that, as long as parties do not have a clear position on BI, the measure will not be brought on the policy-setting agenda. More specifically, the study focuses on the francophone parties. The reason behind this analytical choice is simple: that side of the linguistic frontier is the most vivid on the BI topic. Since the beginning of 2022, an upsurge of the theme has been witnessed on the mediatic scene, while both individual personalities and parties have remained silent on BI in Flanders.

I will consider here major parties in terms of electoral representations of the French-speaking scene. Three of them are part of the federal majority: PS, MR and Ecolo. At the 2019 federal elections, the PS obtained 32,3% of francophone votes, the MR got 22,6% and Ecolo 21%. The PTB is the strongest francophone party of the opposition with 12,9% of francophone votes and *Les Engagés* had 8% (*SPF Intérieur*, 2019). I leave aside Défi, a centre-right party because it has only two parliamentary seats at the federal level and used to be member of the MR (under the name *FDF* at that time). Analytically, my perspective is to examine proposals coming from the left and the right wings of the political spectrum, to test the idea that universal basic income is transcending political cleavages.

The readiness of parties to take a stance might, in addition, depend on their internal structure. The PS and the MR are traditionally hierarchical with a delegation organisation. Schematically, above the local and regional levels, the main decision-making bodies are the Congress, the Board, and the Presidency (Legein and van Haute, 2021). Informally, within the PS, main political orientations are taken at the "G9" composed of eminent party officials (Delwit, 2021), while the MR is characterized by the predominance of its President (Legein, 2018). The PTB is characterized by a "democratic centralism" (Delwit, 2016) where members are subordinated to the organisation, although very active. To the contrary, the party members of Ecolo, a bottom-up political tradition movement, have an essential role in the internal decision-making process and it is the only Belgian party led by two co-Presidents. *Les Engagés* presents itself as a «positive, citizen-based and participative political Movement» (*Les Engagés*, 2022b), wants to favour civic commitment and internal participation, while being rooted in civil society. It has been claimed (Legein, 2018) that higher intra-partisan democracy might favour the agenda-setting of the BI proposal, it tends to be verified in Ecolo's and *Les Engagés*' cases. Yet, the political power and influence of the PS' and MR's Presidents seem to have an impact on the salience of the BI theme within the francophone political and mediatic scene. In this case, the high level of

intra-partisan hierarchy might in fact influence the party towards a more favourable official position on BI.

Studying parties' positions as unified in this paper does not mean that there is no internal dissensus. Paul Magnette, PS' leader at the time of writing (since 2019), declared in 2016 that BI was "in the direction of history" (Tassin, *La Libre*, 2016) and could lead to an increased universalisation of social allowances (Magnette, *Colloque Picardie Laïque*, 2021), although his party remained opposed to BI. Parties' Presidents are main actors of the political landscape. Analysing their personal position, even if not representing the party's official line, is key for studying BI's feasibility. The positions of the MR's and the PS' Presidents will be especially interesting: internal discussions and power relations are at play.

3.1.2 Unionism and Historical Trajectories of Parties

In Belgium, 'social partners' (trade unions (TU) and employers' organisations) are institutionally designated to lead social negotiations. From originally being dual, this model has progressively turned to a tripartite scheme by including the state in the negotiations. Federal authorities have the final say and the power to enforce a decision in case of non-agreement between social partners. This neo-corporatist model organises the decision-making process between the state and interest groups (Schmitter, 1974) and make TU institutionally strong actors. Besides, Belgium has one of the highest unionization rates in Europe (50% of TU density in 2018, OECD Stats, 2021). While empirical studies are still lacking, most pieces of literature underline TU's traditional opposition to BI. The "strong labourist philosophy inherent to most unions" seem to repel them from the condition-free nature of BI (de Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012: 23) and its individual characteristic might threaten their institutional position and negotiation power (Vanderborght, 2006; Vlandas 2019).

This raises the question whether BI could be accepted despite TU positions and their influence on parties, which is, as I will now turn to, varying from one party to the other, especially in regard to their respective historical trajectories.

The PS, created as a communist party (*Parti Ouvrier Belge*, POB) at the end of the nineteenth century, has strong links with the socialist trade union, the FGTB (*Fédération Générale du travail de Belgique*). The intertwinement between the party and the FGTB is intrinsic at the beginning of the twentieth century. This entangling has changed along the years, but the connection between the two remains strong (Delwit, 2021) and, as will be touched upon later, impacts the party's position on BI. The PTB, established in 1979, can be considered as a Marxist party (Delwit, 2016) and self-identifies as representing a 'consistent left' (PTB, 2022). A big share of FGTB's social base is also PTB activists,

leading to a “growing influence” (Delwit, 2021: 230) of the party within the trade union, further repelling PTB from the BI idea, likewise the PS.

Both Ecolo and *Les Engagés* have links with the Christian trade union (CSC, *Confédération des syndicats chrétiens*). The pluralistic principle of the CSC gained strength along the years and political sympathy among trade union members is now distributed between parties (Biard, 2019). On the one hand, *Les Engagés* is the successor of the Catholic Party (founded in 1884), the ties with catholic organisations were strong in the past but the relations between the party and the CSC have weakened over time and are now informal (Biard, 2019; Pilet, 2011). Ecolo, on the other hand, was created in 1980, in the continuity of the ‘new social movements’ (Touraine, 1982) to federate ecologist activists’ fights and relied on “structural” ties with civil society (Rihoux, 1995). However, it also has informal links with the TU. In both cases, these relationships do not seem to influence the parties’ stances on BI, as they seem to be less bound by TU positions than on the socialist side.

As for the *Mouvement Réformateur*, the oldest party in Belgium (initially created as the Liberal Party in 1846), the relationships with the liberal trade union are distant. It is only after 1950 that the party adopted its current liberal socio-economic line, structured its internal organisation, and became a federative movement, unifying different political components (Delwit, 2019). It has been described as an archetype of *parti de cadres* and was always strongly influenced by its eminent members, rather than by peripheral institutions. We might thus posit that this factor does not influence the MR’s internal discussion on BI.

3.1.3 Belgium’s Social Protection Regime

Belgium’s social protection regime is historically contributory, or bismarckian (Esping-Andersen, 1990), meaning that a big share of public policies is financed through workers’ contributions. But assistance mechanisms have been added along the years: some social allowances are financed through taxes and granted to people in need, no matter their contribution (Dumont, 2022). Thus, from insurance-based, the regime has turned to be hybrid, social contributions amount now for less than sixty percent (SPF Sécurité sociale, 2021b) of the financing of the system. The remaining forty percent are financed through public contributions (state subsidies, VAT receipts). Researchers (Zamora, 2019) as well as field organisations (*Collectif Solidarité contre l’exclusion*, 2018) have denounced this drift away from contributory logics, claiming that assistance cures the symptoms rather than the causes of social and economic exclusion. This phenomenon influences the debate on BI, as parties do not perceive this evolution equally (see *infra*).

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1. *Types of sources*

The present study is based on a qualitative analysis of various grey literature materials produced between 2017 and 2022 (with the exception of three sources prior to this), such as election programmes, publications of party's research centres, press interventions and conferences and personal interviews with party representatives conducted in 2022. This period is especially interesting because although the BI debate seems cyclical, it is during this timeframe that we acknowledged official positioning of the parties in addition to individual accounts. The five-years-frame allows at the same time to provide the picture of a small temporal window (in comparison to decades of BI discussion) and to consider the latest evolutions of the fast-evolving mediatic and political scene. It also permits to collect both pre-electoral, more long-term programmatic documents, and electoral programmes (Belgium's federal elections were held in 2019).

3.2.2 *Methods of analysis*

The conferences, TV interviews and debates were selected because they concerned BI or related to parties' positions on social protection. The grey literature (election programmes, research centres' publications, internal documents) were analysed through a careful and systematic content examination. The interviews were semi-directive. An interview grid common to all interviews was designed and additional questions were added to consider each party's specific position and proposals. The grid constituted the basis, but the interviews were conducted like conversations, with follow-up questions directly linked to the interviewee's answer rather than sticking to a pre-defined order.

4. Analysis: Parties' Positions in the Polarized BI Debate

BI would, according to many proponents, transcend classical cleavages. This potential for compromise would ease the process of coalition-building and form the basis of a new alliance for reforming the Belgian social protection system. On the other hand, BI is a highly divisive topic within parties and within political wings. How, then, to understand the nature of the BI measure potentially reshuffling the traditional understanding of political consensus and disagreements?

After an overview of parties' positions, this section will show that the BI idea is not softening divergences between political wings but rather highlighting them under a new light. The fact that both left-wing and right-wing politicians and parties plead for BI is not a proof of its rallying effect but rather a consequence of the amplitude of the concept, which allows for contrasting versions. Then, I

will indicate how the three leftist parties are converging on social protection themes despite their divergences about BI.

4.1 Understanding Concrete Positions

4.1.1 *Overview of positions*

This section explores the parties' concrete proposals and political lines about BI, summarised in the following table and elaborated on below. One has to note first, that although the BI theme has become salient on the public stage, the parties are still implicated in the debate to varying degrees, implying some asymmetries in terms of arguments and treatment of the topic. Second, the positions can be formal or implicit, as I will expose along the argument.

Table 2: positions of parties on BI and related social measures

Political proposals	PTB	PS	Ecolo	Les Engagés	MR
BI or guaranteed revenue	Extension of social protection	Youth BI (President's proposal)	Youth BI (Short run) Generalised BI (Long-Run)	Participation income	Social dividend (President's proposal)
Individualisation of social rights	In favour	In favour	In favour	In favour but not worsening condition of 'household head'	Not in favour
Automatic guarantee of social rights	In favour	In favour	In favour	Conditionality	Conditionality
Work reduction	Yes, 30h/week	Yes, 32h/week	Yes, 4 days/week	No, chosen working time	No, 38h/week in flexible schedule

Social and unemployment allowances at poverty line	In favour + raise of minimum wage (14€/h)	In favour, 110% of poverty line	In favour	Differentiation between assurance and assistance mechanisms	Only parental leaves and handicap allowances at poverty line
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The objective of the PS and the PTB is to reinforce Belgian social protection system to “sustain the contribution-based funding” (PS, 2019: 17; PTB, 2019: 193). They defend the rising of all social benefits above the poverty line (1.085€ for an isolated person¹, *SPF Sécurité sociale*, 2021a) and a lifting of the minimum wage. The PS and the PTB also oppose the increasing conditionality and controlling logics of the current system and want to strengthen the insurance logic. The PS has expressed its opposition to a general BI but is working on a proposal of youth BI. The PS’s leader, Paul Magnette, has indeed advanced early 2022 the idea of an income granted to the 18-25 years-old that would not suppress current unemployment leaves or social minimums but rather complement them (Hermann, *L’Avenir*, 2022; interview Magnette, 2022). While representatives of the PTB have declared that the proposal could be “interesting”, they reckon “the core fight is to defend social security” and to re-bring the question of wealth repartition on the table (Mugemangango, *Colloque Picardie Laïque*, 2021).

Ecolo is in favour of a youth BI, first step towards a generalised BI as sixth pillar of our social protection system, to fill the gaps of current insurance system. The youth BI, between 460 and 600€ per month, would be granted to young people from 18 to 26 years old, without any conditions of work, studies, or resources. This youth BI is the short-term more feasible ‘political objective’ while a truly universal BI without age condition is the desirable long-term goal. The latter is inspired by a proposal of Ecolo’s former co-President, Philippe Defeyt, defending a monthly allowance of 600€ (300€ under 18 yo) without conditions (Defeyt, 2017).

The liberal George-Louis Bouchez, President of the MR at the time of writing, since 2019, is another personality fuelling the discussions about BI. In his book “*L’aurore d’un monde nouveau*” (2017), Bouchez proposes a ‘social dividend’, of 1000€ for the people aged 18-67 and of 1600€ above 67 years old. This allowance would replace all current social and contributory benefits except for assistance to disabled people and ‘big risk’ health care (surgery, hospitalisation, radiographies, etc.). The insurance logic is, in his view, not needed and not maintainable due to current societal evolutions (ageing

¹ With the poverty threshold at 60% of median net income, people beneath that line being at risk of monetary poverty.

population, increasing debt level or mass unemployment), while BI could maintain the overall level of well-being through taxation (Bouchez, *Colloque Picardie Laïque*, 2021). The official position of the party, however, is not yet clear-cut. The party is having internal discussions about the coming programme for the 2024 federal elections and will have a vote on October 2022 to establish the official position regarding BI. Bouchez estimates the odds of the BI proposal being endorsed at 50-50 (interview Bouchez, 2022).

Finally, the party *Les Engagés*, former Christian Democrats, is the result of a process of political repositioning and programmatic reform, that took place between 2020 and March 2022. This implies that the working documents of the party under its new form are still scarce, and *Les Engagés* has undergone no electoral campaign. Having this in mind, I still intend to include this renewed centrist party in the analysis. The party is not in favour of an unconditional BI but supports the idea of a participation income, e.g., an income conditioned on the beneficiary's contribution to society (Atkinson, 1996). *Les Engagés*, deeply attached to reciprocity, insists on the fact that the system should maintain the contributory principle (De Briey, *Colloque Picardie Laïque*, 2021). The proposal is to grant 600€ to every major resident under conditions of contribution to society (working, voluntary or associative activities, care activities, etc). This taxable income would be a “investment of the state to favour everybody's participation” (*Les Engagés, Manifeste*, 2022: 152).

4.1.2. The Multidimensionality of BI in the Belgian Debate

Previous section indicated that BI proposals could change along different dimensions (designed by de Wispelaere & Stirton, 2004 and Laenen et al., 2022), among which six are useful for the present analysis. *Universality* refers to who is entitled to benefit from a BI: while Ecolo's short-term proposal, as well as the idea advanced by the PS' President are only targeted at the youth (categorical BI), the MR's President's and *Les Engagés*' versions of BI are universal. Second, relating to *conditionality*, only the participation income of *Les Engagés* is conditional on contribution to society. Then, on the *adequacy* dimension, covering the level of benefit, we realize that only Bouchez's BI is of a more consistent amount, while the others remain at a modest level. The *accumulation* criteria help us show that Magnette's form of youth BI is the only one that would not be combinable with other earnings from work or social benefits as it intends to fill the gaps of current system. On the *financing* side, while the liberal BI of Bouchez is mainly financed by the suppression of most of social benefits and by taxing the BI, the versions of *Les Engagés* would be financed by replacing some benefits, the taxation of this income and an environmental tax and Ecolo would finance its youth BI by a redirecting of current resources. Finally, on the dimension of the *integration* within broader welfare policies, only Bouchez's proposal aims at replacing almost all current social benefits.

Against the background of these dimensions, one realizes that parties are referring to distinct poles of BI: the proposals are informed by different ideological perspectives.

4.2 Explaining Parties' Positions

4.2.1. *The Left-Right Cleavage at Play*

Three parties, via some eminent members' proposal or via official position, are vocal proponents of BI. However, the previous section showed that each party was combining different dimensions in their proposal. This changes the perspectives behind the idea. How do these different dimensions illustrate opposed visions on the organisation of society and are, ultimately, illustrative of the left-right cleavage? We will see that Ecolo's and *Les Engagés*' versions can be qualified as social democrat whereas MR's version belongs to the neoliberal pole, according to three axes.

The first concerns Belgium's welfare state. Bouchez's version finds its roots in the liberal thinking that the role of the state should be minimal. Too much state's implication in people's lives would diminish individual freedom, so the idea is to grant a BI to every resident, then each one is responsible for their own care and life plan. Bouchez argues that it would contribute to economic growth and face new societal mutations (*RTBF*, 2017a). The idea is not only to extremely simplify public insurance and assistance mechanisms, but also to reduce 'bureaucracy' and 'state control' to their minimum. The underlying rationale is that the individual should be autonomous and self-sufficient in a meritocratic society. "We thus give back freedom to the individual to follow trainings, to change job, to be entrepreneur." (Bouchez, *Le Libre débat*, 2020).

By contrast, the generalised BI put forward by Ecolo is seen as an income floor, other social benefits would be maintained as well as the general structure of the welfare state. The idea here is to add a protecting tool to the system, which would make it be better equipped to face ongoing challenges such as labour market changes, new forms of interpersonal and familial organisations, new career aspirations or work-life balances. It would also 'fill the gaps' by providing financial protection to the youth that usually falls outside the scope of other social protection schemes (Leroy, *Colloque Picardie laïque*, 2021; interview, 2022). Hence, the justification is to offer the opportunity to individuals to emancipate themselves in meaningful activities, in or outside the labour market. The state would here still have the role of accompanying people (Ecolo, 2017). "By improving freedom of choice of each one of us, basic income is part of an emancipatory project ..." (Ecolo, 2017: 7). *Les Engagés*' proposal is a way to complement the welfare system too, but the state also endorses the paternalistic role of pushing individuals towards participation through the contribution-based scheme.

The PS argues that for a BI to be affordable, it would need to cut on all other social benefits and public services, this “Trojan horse into welfare state” (Di Rupo, *Le Soir*, 2016) is then unacceptable for a party that has long fought for social protection. Besides, the PS has always defended a perspective of accompaniment of social welfare recipients, “with the objective to bring back mutual trust, to make a project with the accompanied person” (PS, 2019: 22).

Then, the second element differentiating both sides relates to the labour market and working conditions. The MR favours a free and flexible market. In this perspective, the BI is a way to facilitate a labour market with fewer regulations and social conventions. Bouchez claims that the BI would have positive impacts on employment: it would facilitate changes in careers, trainings, entrepreneurship, etc. It is interesting to note the MR’s President assesses that “It is possible that the wages would be diminished, but the money in people’s pocket would stay the same” (Bouchez, *Allocation universelle, un revenu de liberté?*, 2021). BI would also sustain the ‘collaborative’ economy, in a ‘flexibilization’ perspective. “Uber is not the problem. The problem is the complexity of our labour law” (Bouchez, *idem*, 2021). It is the best way to avoid unemployment traps, provide incentives to work and ‘activate’ people, deemed to be idle under the current system by MR’s President: “It is the current social system that encourages idleness, there is no mechanism to favour small jobs or volunteering.” (Bouchez, *Allocation universelle, un revenu de liberté?*, 2021). The MR insists a lot on the importance of labour market activities, even under other forms than stable and full-time employment. When Bouchez affirms that it would grant people the real freedom to do something else, it is mainly to favour other, often less protected forms of labour.

The PS and the PTB fear a decrease in salaries, a worsening of working conditions, and an increase in precarious work, that the liberal version of BI might cause: “Wages would be pulled down and we would go towards a weakening of employment” (Daerden, *RTBF*, 2017a). Ecolo, in its advocacy of BI, emphasizes that it could favour entrepreneurship but also the importance of the ‘autonomous sphere’. André Gorz’s notion (2013), mentioned in an internal document (2017), is as a tertiary zone, outside the market and the state, where people can flourish in non-pecuniary activities (voluntary work, caring for close ones, engaging in ecological projects, etc.). This would, in turn, pave the way towards more sustainable ways of life and rebuild a strong sense of solidarity. Besides, relating to the labour market, Ecolo defends its BI proposal in addition to other regulations. They would maintain minimum wage legislations, workers’ protection and keep fighting against precariousness.

Thirdly, at the core of their defence of BI, Ecolo, *Les Engagés* and the MR have ultimately different ideological rationales. The liberal party is concerned by formal freedom, or “equality of opportunity” (MR, 2019) and BI is precisely a means to offer each citizen the same chance in life, by granting the

same amount. However, this leaves apart one of the dearest themes of the left: real freedom (in Van Parijs' sense, 1995), and the fight against inequalities. It is enlightening to observe that socio-economic inequalities are never mentioned by party representatives of the MR in the documents and interviews analysed. On the opposite, Ecolo has been insisting that their BI proposal should be coupled with other public policies in order to establish a general social protection scheme reducing inequalities as much as possible. The participation income of *Les Engagés* is part of a political programme of 'regeneration', questioning the socio-economic and civic organisation. It stands on other theoretical grounds and normative justifications (for example, Atkinson, 1996). It is not individual freedom or autonomy that are emphasized but the importance of the contribution to society, making the community prevail over the individuality, in a "new social contract" emphasizing civic responsibility (*Les Engagés*, 2022a).

We acknowledged in this section that diverging BI versions led to different expected effects. These arguments reflect claims made in the academic literature. Birnbaum and De Wispelaere (2020) stress the danger of the "exit trap for precarious workers", while Calnitsky (2020) emphasizes the fact that a too small amount would at the end be a subsidy for employers, further deregulate labour market and worsen work conditions. This is a risk, but it is not inherent to BI, rather to the concrete form it would take. If the amount is too small and suppresses most of social allowances, people might be forced to accept any job, no matter the wage and the conditions. Proposals such as Friedman's (2013) or Murray's (2012) could indeed threaten social systems. Nonetheless, other scholars argue that a social-democrat version rather than supplanting welfare regime might improve it (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017). It could meet new social risks linked to the transition to a post-industrial model, such as labour market precarity, poor health insurance or wage polarization (Martinelli, 2017).

4.2.2 Ties to Trade Unions and the Question of Productivism

In addition to the traditional ideological cleavage and its impact on parties' positions, other factors influence the BI theme. The relations to trade unions and to the work ethic are not the same across the political spectrum, and they help understand why some parties are keener than others to support BI.

As touched upon earlier, the PS is at the centre of the socialist pillar and has a strong electoral penetration in modest socio-economic categories (Delwit, 2021). The integration of the poorest of society through the defence of social security is central, and work is one of the main channels of integration and a stringent priority of the party. Economic growth is also still an objective (PS, 2019: 121). The importance of contributing to society is thus endorsed by the PS through the prism of employment, without really questioning the capitalist economic system (the PS 2019 election programme does not mention once the term "capitalism"). One can find her role into society by

working: “the heart of social protection’s philosophy is that we work, and by working we contribute and create social rights. We are labourist.” (Interview Magnette, 2022). This explains their commitment to the “guarantee of employment for everybody” (PS, 2019: 124) and their opposition to BI, “a universal allowance would break the link to employment and create a class of forgotten people living with 600 euros” (Onkelinx, *RTBF*, 2017b).

As Marxist party, the PTB is even more deeply engaged in the socio-economic cleavage of labour versus capital. This means that labour and workers are central in their political agenda: “The society is nothing without its workers [...]. Employment remains the most important leverage to get out of poverty and isolation” (PTB, 2019: 5, 33). However, the party insists on the fact that it should be stable and decent jobs rather than part-time or “flexi-” jobs. The party is labourist in the sense that employment still constitutes the main pillar of the economic but also social organisation. Yet, the capitalist economic system is deeply questioned and the importance of wealth repartition and balance of power between labour and capital, are raised in a classist vision. The consequences of capitalism are tackled by the PTB: the flexibilization and competitive logics of neo-liberalism are deemed to have deleterious effects on health (PTB, 2019: 14), the environment (p.48), gender relations (p.190) and global relations of exploitation (p. 245).

In addition to this, both the PS and the PTB have strong ties with the socialist trade union, which is opposed to the BI idea, influencing the two leftist parties’ positions. Indeed, the historical alliance pushes the PS to take into account the trade union’s reluctance towards the unconditional and universal nature of BI. The PS President exposes that there is a strong internal agreement to maintain the insurance nature of the system, but the party is working with unionists and mutualists to move in the direction of a greater universalisation (interview Magnette, 2022). The PTB is also tied to the union’s disapproval.

Now, as far as Ecolo’s position is concerned, contributing to society is also of paramount importance, but working is only one way of doing so. In this perspective, BI becomes a tool enabling citizens to engage in socially (and individually) useful activities, that do not relate to labour market. For the party: “Basic income allows for more freedom by easing back and forth [between classical employment and other forms of activities] and offers an answer to these new aspirations.” (Ecolo, 2017: 8). The party places its BI proposal within a broader “post-capitalist and post-productivist” perspective. Ecolo clearly states that “the pursuit of economic growth as we know it is neither desirable nor even possible” (Ecolo, 2017: 10). BI can, according to them, lead the way towards other, greener models of society, precisely by encouraging the autonomous, non-capitalist sphere, and modes of living where employment is not the centre of our lives anymore. *Les Engagés* contends that “infinite growth is not

sustainable” and that prosperity should be measured with other indicators than GDP to take into account natural resources and human well-being (*Les Engagés*, 2022). Their project aims at reaching an economy of quality, local and digital, which would be more respectful of the living and provide meaningful jobs. Their participation income is inscribed in this perspective: the participation of each one of us makes “employment a key point of the society’s regeneration” (*Les Engagés*, 2022).

It is noteworthy to outline that the MR is open to challenge the value of work-employment in a broader context. Bouchez himself mentions that “there is a big difference between work and employment” (Bouchez, *Le libre débat*, 2020). However, what stands out from this analysis of the liberal discourses is the importance of favouring different forms of pecuniary activities, rather than favouring a tertiary sphere that would escape neoliberal and capitalistic logics.

These views echo different pieces of literature. Some address the presumed flaws of BI: it would encourage indolence and give money to ‘Malibu surfers’ (an expression first used by John Rawls in a controversy with Van Parijs, 1991). Another way of framing this argument is to emphasize the importance of reciprocity in our society. This has been theorized by Marcel Mauss (2012) with his famous essay about gift and counter-gift. The objection against BI on the ground of reciprocity has also been voiced by Atkinson (1996), with his participation income. On the contrary, Pinto (2020) promotes BI as individual form of autonomy in a post-productivist society and Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017) emphasize how BI would help freeing the individual from the obligation of work.

4.3 The BI Debate and Welfare Politics

Until here, the paper has shown that there are strong divergences between Bouchez’s, *Les Engagés*’ and Ecolo’s BI proposals, informed by contrasted doctrinal positions on societal issues. However, as already touched upon, BI proposals only make sense in the broader debate about the welfare system and policies. Here, it is important to note that, despite their different positions on BI, leftist parties share a strong attachment to social protection.

These convergences between the PS, the PTB and Ecolo concern dimensions that are strongly related to BI. Although the measures analysed in this section are not *stricto sensu* BI proposals, they are still part of the broader debate on social protection and welfare politics. They are worth to consider for two reasons: first, as already outlined, the context matters. The BI proposal is not a ‘key on hand’ solution. Many of its advocates insist that it should rather be considered as one policy among others and that it should be accompanied by a package of other measures (such as investment in public services, regulation of working time, etc., Pinto, 2020; Withorn, 2013). Second, side measures are also considered by BI advocates: these reforms might foundations for an unconditional income. The non-

negligible role of these side measures, as well as the importance of seizing opportunities have been highlighted in the literature (Grapperon, 2021; Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017).

Ecolo thus supports social reforms in addition to the implementation of a BI, whereas the PS and the PTB contend that the system should be reformed without it. Here, three measures are being investigated: the working time reduction policy, the individualisation of social rights and their automatic guarantee.

Even if the parties have diverging views on the value of work, understood as employment (see *supra*), the distribution of available employment through working time reduction is a key-parameter for the PS, the PTB and Ecolo. While the latter is in favour of the reduction of working time down to four days, on a voluntary basis (Ecolo, 2021a), the PS asks for 32 hours a week without salary drop (PS, 2019: 121) and the PTB for 30 hours a week (PTB, 2019: 12).

Then, the three parties are in favour of the individualisation of social rights and benefits. “Everyone, individually, should at least have a revenue at the poverty line, the individualisation of social rights is fundamental. It is fundamental that social rights shall be automatically granted.” (Daerden, *RTBF*, 2017a). Ecolo is also in favour of such measure, as their proposal is to “suppress the co-living status and move forward the individualisation of rights” (Ecolo, 2021b).

The same goes with social benefits being automatically granted. As stressed in the last quote by Frédéric Daerden, the PS is in favour of such measure, which is deemed to enhance take up rates by potential beneficiaries. It would also ease bureaucratic procedures and pressure on recipients. The two other parties have similar positions: “The automation of social rights helps fighting against non-take-ups” (Ecolo, 2019: 89). “We implement an automatic guarantee of social rights” (PTB, 2019: 110).

Thus, similar objectives are aimed for but the means to achieve them differ from one party to the other. BI would provide depth to such considerations according to Ecolo, while the PS and the PTB assess that it is more efficient to reform our current system, “an extraordinary invention, a social protection to the needy.” (Onkelinx, *RTBF*, 2017b). By comparison, *Les Engagés* is more reluctant towards such measures. In an interview (*Collectif Solidarité contre l’Exclusion*, 2018), the party stated that the individualisation of social allowances should not suppress the status of ‘family head’. Similarly, they are still in favour of some form of contractualisation of social insurance (*Collectif Solidarité contre l’Exclusion*, 2018: 44). They do not support an imposed work reduction neither, but defend a “chosen working time”, enabling more flexibility in working hours (Prévot & de Borman, *Cdh*, 2019).

5. Conclusion

This overview of the positions of five French-speaking Belgian political parties on unconditional basic income has pointed at the persistent relevance of the left-right cleavage. Indeed, classical themes provoking divisions between the left and the right wings of the political spectrum are also percolating the BI debate. BI, rather than transcending political divisions, is underlining them under a new angle. Indeed, if BI is advocated for simultaneously by liberals, democrats, and ecologists, it is the amplitude and the multidimensionality of the notion that create the illusion of a common defence.

More precisely, the MR's President argues for a neoliberal BI replacing current social system, deemed to avoid inactivity traps and to be better adapted to contemporary mutations. We have seen that the PS and the PTB reject this type of BI proposals on the basis of a work ethic and by fear of the dismantling of the social protection system. Their labourist perspectives, adding the labour-capital question in the case of the PTB, as well as their close and historical links to the socialist trade union impede them to embrace such unconditional proposal. However, the PS seems increasingly open to the universalisation of social security. *Les Engagés* rejects the unconditional character of BI as well, but proposes a participation income integrated in current system, in a perspective emphasizing citizens' contributions to society. Ecolo pushes for a modest BI too, in the perspective of complementing the social system and emancipating the individual, questioning the centrality of employment in our lives, and opening the way towards a more sustainable society. Thus, the main themes making the three proposals irreducible, and re-playing the left-right divide are the following: first, the MR upholds a position with minimal state intervention and the removal of almost all other social benefits whereas the other parties advocate for a reinforcement of current system, with (Ecolo, *Les Engagés*) or without (PS, PTB) BI. Second, Bouchez's proposal is thought to promote a flexible, thus less protected labour market, where workers' adaptability prevails over their social rights. On the other side, Ecolo's proposal explicitly wants to avoid further precarisation and insists on activities outside the market sphere. The participation income of the democrats also stresses the importance of contribution, through work or other activities, and the economic system is to be rethought to respect people's and nature's limits. Finally, the philosophy underlying the three proposals are different: equality of opportunities on the right, personal emancipation within a frame of fight against inequalities on the left and contribution to society in the centre.

We have also seen that BI is to be considered within the broader frame of welfare politics, and that side measures, as well as visions on social protection are at stake in this debate. The left, despite their disagreement on BI do agree on three social policies to improve the system: the reduction of working

time, the individualisation and a more automatic guarantee of social rights. The centre is more reluctant on these elements, and the liberals oppose them.

What does all of this tell us about the strategic feasibility of BI in Belgium? If we go back to the obstacles de Wispelaere & Noguera (2012) identified, the picture might look less unfavourable to BI than it seems at first sight. First, because parties and personalities supporting BI proposals are not marginalised. Ecolo has turned to be central, especially in regional Parliaments and is part of governing majorities of the federal and federate levels. We have seen that parties' leaders are active on the BI theme, and that the whole political scene was shaken by debates about various BI proposals. This can reverse the argument of the political opportunity cost of BI: if it is still a divisive topic, it turns now to be more costly not to have a position than being in favour. The analysis also showed that the authors' final obstacle to strategic feasibility, the 'first mover disadvantage' does not seem to have a strong impact here, as opposed political groups have endorsed the BI idea, although under different modalities. BI has also crystallised debates, and if we take into account cognates and 'steps to' BI, many parties could well agree on a proposal. What we observe is that a pure BI scheme has little chance to be implemented, but partial schemes could well make their way in Belgium. However, even for a partial BI scheme, the road would be long and tedious. It would require first a governmental agreement mentioning BI and most likely starting by the opportunity of *experimenting* a form of BI, following the 'gradual strategy' (Chrisp, 2020: 241). Then, the Dutch-speaking side of Belgium does not seem to be ready to discuss, even less implement, BI proposals.

This paper is only a first step in understanding Belgian political parties' positions on BI. The goal here was to take an exploratory path towards the strategic political feasibility of BI in a specific national context. Three directions for future research could be considered: the study of the positions of Dutch-speaking Belgian political parties but also of trade unions, the salience of the BI theme within broader social reforms and the internal dynamics of parties. To conclude, one should always care for re-inscribing the BI debate within a broader context and analyse it in the light of the evolution of social protection regimes. Accompanying measures and positions on other societal stakes should be regarded as equally important in the understanding of the strategic political feasibility of BI. Basic income is not overcoming ideological divisions but can most definitely help understand them in a renewed frame.

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