

# **Implementing a basic income in Belgium?**

## **An experimental study of the impact of argumentation and metaphors on political preferences**

Audrey Vandeleene (UCLouvain), Thomas Legein (UCLouvain),  
Jérémy Dodeigne (UCLouvain & ULg), Pauline Heyvaert (ULg & UCLouvain),  
Julien Perrez (ULg), Min Reuchamps (UCLouvain)

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Language is not neutral when it comes to politics. Political discourses frame the way citizens and elites think of politics. Consciously or unconsciously, narratives influence the political preferences of citizens. For instance, political speeches may be aimed at manipulating citizens' point of view and in this way serve political interests (Leudar *et al.* 2004). One element of language in particular, metaphors, may interact with the perceptions that citizens have of the political world. Metaphors indeed “make meaning of concepts” (Hammack and Pilecki, 2012, p.79). In this article, we understand metaphors as a “cognitive mechanism [which] enables citizens to make sense of the political world by drawing from previous knowledge and experience in non-political domains” (Bougher, 2012, p.145). When citizens have to make political decisions, they may be helped by metaphors recalling them some knowledge structures of other domains which they may be more familiar with. Metaphors may act as reasoning tools for citizens who are less acquainted with the political world (Bougher, 2012). These individuals may rely more on analogical reasoning when facing the need to make a political decision, e.g. standing in favour or in disfavour of the basic income.

This research draws on two parallel considerations. On the one hand, we notice that the topic of the basic income<sup>1</sup> yields tremendous debates. Opposing arguments run against each other in the academic literature but also in the society in general (Tobin, 1965; Belorgey, 2000; Maniquet et Neumann, 2016). Would it be relevant to implement such a mechanism in our societies? And if so, under which conditions? Given the controversial character of the debate, we expect citizens to be easily influenced in their position in favour or in disfavour of the implementation of this project. Besides, the choice of the topic of the basic income allows us to analyse how preferences can be influenced in a debate that is not emotionally connoted, i.e. there is no social desirability to agree or disagree with the basic income. This is for instance not the case of other topics usually studied by analysts of the impact of metaphors, e.g. the policies related to crime or the federalism (see Thibodeau and Boroditsky, 2011; Perrez and Reuchamps, 2015b). On the other hand, as highlighted, research has demonstrated that discourses and metaphors in particular may play a key role in the representation that individuals have of an abstract (political) concept (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1996; Charteris-Black, 2011; Perrez and Reuchamps, 2015a).

On this basis, this article aims at determining to what extent the confrontation of individuals to metaphors illustrating the abstract idea of the basic income does have an impact on the way

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<sup>1</sup> An income paid by a political community to all its members, on an individual basis, without means-test or compensation requirement.

these people apprehend the basic income. More specifically, we tackle the way respondents consider the opportunity to implement or not the basic income in their country.

## Design of the experiment and method of analysis

We conducted a survey among 1069 students at the start of the school year 2015-2016. The response rate was 64.17%. The respondents were all first-year bachelor students in various fields of study (mostly economics and management, but also for instance political science, linguistics and literature, or communication) in two universities in Belgium (Catholic university of Louvain and University of Liège).

**Box 1 : Text displayed to the respondents (translated from French to English)<sup>2</sup>**

Some people propose the idea of a universal allocation, also called – depending on the country – basic income, unconditional basic income or Citizen’s income, which can be defined as: “an income payed by a political community to all its members, on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement”. [We could see it as ...]

Although this idea has long been connected to a gentle utopia entertained by intellectuals (but defended by numerous Nobel Prizes in Economic Sciences), it slowly gained ground. It has punctually been tested in Canada, the United States, India; has been launched by Lula in Brazil; in Alaska, it exists by means of a redistribution of energetic benefits of the state.

In our country, the debate is underway. And you, what do you think?

Since the design of your study was experimental, we randomly allocated each student to one group. In the end, seven groups of about one hundred individuals (for the precise figures, see table 1) were allocated to a different condition. Apart from the control group who received no text at all, each group was assigned with a slightly different text establishing what the basic income is about and what was already achieved in this respect over the world. The second group’s respondents had to read the neutral text (see box 1). From the third group onwards, a different sentence was added at the end of the first paragraph. The text for groups 3 and 4 contain an argument related to the idea of the unconditionality of the basic income while the text for groups 5, 6 and 7 refer to the idea of the freedom that the basic income would offer. Next to the arguments, a metaphor reflecting the basic income was integrated into the texts of the groups 3, 5 and 6. Table 1 presents the seven conditions and their respective group, and the specific sentence that was added to the text so as to make it vary on the argument and on the absence/presence of a metaphor. A translation of the text displayed to the respondents, inspired by a newspaper article published some months before the experiment, is reproduced in box 1. The sentence that varied depending on the condition is indicated into square brackets.

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<sup>2</sup> This text was inspired by an article published in the daily Belgian newspaper Le Soir, 29 July 2015

**Table 1 : Design of the experiment (groups, arguments and metaphors)**

Condition	Additional sentence	Metaphor	N
<b>Group 1: Control</b>	No text	/	98
<b>Group 2: Neutral text</b>	No additional sentence	/	98
<i>Unconditionality argument</i>			
<b>Group 3: Pocket money</b>	“We could see it as <u>pocket money</u> that citizens receive from the State like <u>children</u> receive it by the very fact that they are members of the family.”	POCKET MONEY <sup>3</sup>	95
<b>Group 4: Income- Unconditionality</b>	“We could see it as an income that citizens receive from the State by the very fact that they are members of it.”	/	97
<i>Freedom argument</i>			
<b>Group 5: Base frame</b>	“We could see it as a <u>base frame</u> supplied by the State so that the citizens can <u>build</u> their life freely without having to be concerned about material constraints.”	BASE FRAME	95
<b>Group 6: Springboard</b>	“We could see it as a <u>springboard</u> supplied by the State so that the citizens can <u>freely launch</u> themselves into life without any material constraints.”	SPRINGBOARD	99
<b>Group 7: Income-Freedom</b>	“We could see it as an income supplied by the State so that citizens can <u>freely live</u> their life without having to be concerned about material constraints.”	/	104

The seven groups do not statistically significantly differ from each other in various respects which may influence the way respondents perceive the opportunity to implement the basic income in their country. We tested the differences on political interest (non-significant at 0.993) and political knowledge (non-significant at 0.36). No difference was found on their political opinions. The seven groups were relatively homogenous so as to the left/right self-positioning (non-significant at 0.783), the respondents’ opinions on the current state of the Belgian economy (non-significant at 0.922) and on the issue “the salary has to be correlated to the efforts” (non-significant at 0.558). In addition, the respondents in the seven groups did not differ regarding their previous knowledge of the idea of the basic income. Actually, quite a large share of our sample did not know the concept of basic income before the start of the survey (63.7%)<sup>4</sup>.

The reported ANOVA tests demonstrated that the respondents were homogeneously allocated to the seven groups. Accordingly, potential differences between groups on questions related to the basic income may be attributed with greater certainty to the fact that an argument related to the basic income and a metaphor in some cases were inserted in the text, rather than to an unbalanced distribution of respondents.

<sup>3</sup> Metaphors are indicated in small caps throughout this paper.

<sup>4</sup> This question was obviously asked in the questionnaire before that respondents had to read the text introducing the basic income and *a fortiori* before the confrontation with the arguments and the metaphors – if it be so.

## **Empirical results: political knowledge matters**

The key question related to the basic income obviously refers to the opportunity to implement or not this system in our societies. Accordingly, we surveyed the respondents on their opinion on the setting up of a basic income in their country. They could answer on a five-point scale. It emerges from the descriptive data that almost half the respondents were in favour of the implementation of the basic income (46.9%). Hence, a quarter of the respondents were against this idea (24.8%) while about the same proportion indicated that they could not assert being in favour or in disfavour of this idea (28.3%). Given this distribution of respondents, we ran the multivariate analyses on the basis of two groups, i.e. respondents in favour of the basic income *versus* respondents not in favour of this system, which equals those in disfavour and those with a neutral positioning. The variance among respondents against the basic income was indeed larger than among the respondents with other answers to the ‘opportunity to implement’-question.

This paper tests on the one hand whether the introduction of an argument related to the basic income (its unconditional character or the freedom) plays a role in the positioning in (dis)favour of the basic income. On the other hand, the paper ambitions to determine whether the presence in the text of a metaphor illustrating the basic income may be an explanatory factor of the respondents’ positioning *for* or *against* the implementation of this system. The multivariate analyses aim at explaining why some respondents selected the “not agree at all” or the “not agree” answers on the contrary to the other respondents.

### **The influence of political knowledge**

Previous studies have shown that the level of political knowledge of citizens may exercise impact on their political preferences and behaviour. Political knowledge is commonly depicted in the literature as the “range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996, p. 10). The extent to which individuals are acquainted with factual information on the political system is expected to play a role in the way they react to political issues and express political opinions.

Political knowledge has been proven to be influential in both citizens’ preferences and behaviour. Regarding preferences, research has demonstrated for instance that political trust is influenced by political knowledge. Higher levels of knowledge of the political system also lead to higher levels of political trust, i.e. the extent to which citizens trust the political institutions (Claes and Hooghe 2016). Further than trust, knowing more about a political topic may also strengthen the likelihood to react positively to this topic. For instance, Verhaegen and Hooghe (2015) demonstrated that citizens with a more extended political knowledge about the EU feel a stronger European identity. Citizens’ behaviour is also dependent on the extendedness of their knowledge of politics. This holds true for voting behaviour in terms of abstention. More educated citizens tend to vote more than less educated citizens (De Winter *et al.* 2014). At the societal level, citizens are more likely to engage in civic activities if their level of political knowledge is high (Hooghe and Dassoneville 2011). All in all, what emerges from the literature is that political knowledge matters for political preferences and behaviour. The way citizens act think, feel and act politically is influenced by the fact that they are more or less aware of the functioning of the political system.

We argue in this article that political knowledge may also matter for the way respondents will react to the arguments and to the metaphors, and in the long run it would matter for the positioning in (dis)favour of the implementation of the basic income as a renewed system of

resources allocation among citizens. Accordingly, we presented to the respondents a short multiple-choice questionnaire. Their score on five questions related to Belgian politics<sup>5</sup> gave us a more precise idea of their level of factual political knowledge. Further research might dig deeper into the various types of political knowledge by for instance tackling the issue stance knowledge (in this case, their knowledge on social policy issues) or knowledge structure density (i.e. “the extent to which individuals see connections or relationships among various concepts within the political domain” (Eveland and Hively 2009, p.212)).

Adding the political knowledge variable to the model indeed proves to be highly relevant. What mostly appears through the analyses is that the level of political knowledge of the respondents plays a determining role in the relationship between the positioning regarding the basic income and the type of text that the respondents were exposed to.

## Results

The logistic regression (see table 2) provides few statistically significant results when the interaction between the political knowledge variable and the group of the respondents is *not* added to the scheme. The introduction of interaction variables including the score of the respondents on five questions related to politics delivers numerous statistically significant results, as shown in the regression table. Accordingly, a condition has to be settled to the relationship between the respondents’ positioning and the belonging to a particular group. This means that the level of political knowledge of the respondents influences the way they will react to the confrontation with a text with an argument and possibly a metaphor. When respondents have a medium level of political knowledge, having been confronted with a text with arguments or metaphors holds little effect. However, when their level of political knowledge is either high or low, respondents tend to be influenced by their belonging to a specific group.

Graph 1 presents the predicted probabilities for the disagreement of respondents with the implementation of the basic income in Belgium. A high percentage means that it is very likely that respondents from this group are opposed to the implementation of the basic income. Five groups only are rendered, because they demonstrate higher statistical significance rates.

Respondents who read a neutral text do not seem to behave differently when their level of political knowledge is either high or low. The probabilities for these respondents to stand against the basic income are indeed relatively stable for the six levels of political knowledge (about 85%). In addition, respondents exposed to the text containing an argument (both groups “Income-Unconditionality” and “Income-Freedom”) do equally not change behaviour depending of their level of political knowledge although this seems to slightly influence respondents towards less opposition to the basic income. When an argument is presented, respondents with lower levels of political knowledge tend to lean more towards the position

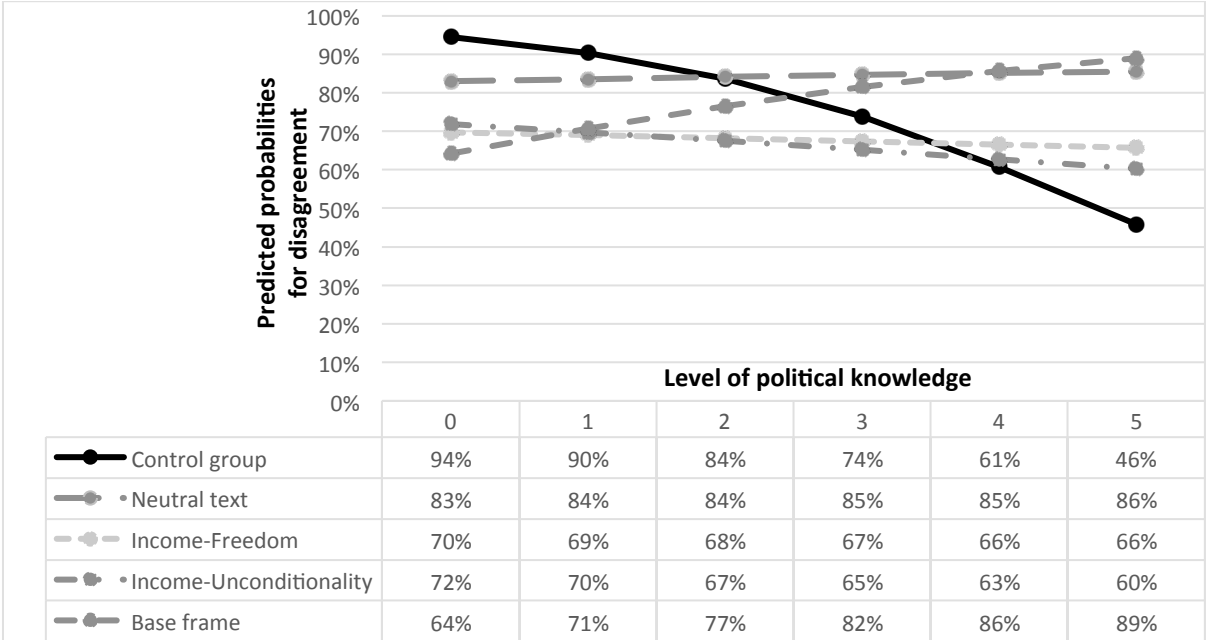
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<sup>5</sup> The level of political knowledge of the respondents has been measured on the basis of the five following questions. 1. What is the Federal Parliament made of? The Chamber and the Government / The Chamber and the Senate / The Chamber, the Senate and the Parliaments of the federated entities / The Chamber, the Senate and the Government / No answer 2. Among the following portfolios, for which is the federal Government not responsible? Foreign Affairs / Justice / Rail / Education / No answer 3. For which of the following political positions does one not need to be elected? The MPs at the federal level / The municipal councillors / The ministers / The regional MPs / No answer 4. In Belgium ... there is an equal share of Dutch- and French-speakers / ... there is a majority of Dutch-speakers / ... there is a majority of French-speakers / No answer 5. What is the most important feature of a market economy? The mandatory membership of a trade union / An extended ruling of the national government on the economy / An active competition between companies / Prosperity for all citizens / No answer

against the implementation of the basic income than the respondents with higher levels of political knowledge. The predicted probabilities reach about 70% for a 0/5 score while they vary between 60% and 66% for the maximum score of 5/5.

The difference between the group not exposed to any textual material (control group) and the group exposed to both an argument and a metaphor (the BASE FRAME group) is striking. This difference materialises through the fact that both curves pass each other on graph 1. On the one hand, respondents from the control group tend to stand against the basic income when their political knowledge is (very) low (the chances to be against the basic income are of 94% if the score is equal to zero). Respondents from this same group who display a high level of political knowledge are likely to position themselves in favour of the basic income. The probability that one member of the control group who would have succeeded on all five political knowledge questions stands against the basic income is indeed below one chances out of two (46% for a 5/5 score). On the other hand, the dynamic is reversed for the respondents who have read a text including the argument of freedom and the metaphor BASE FRAME. When their level of political knowledge is low, the probability is also low (compared to the other groups, i.e. 64% for a 0/5 score) for them to position themselves against the implementation of the basic income. On the contrary, when their knowledge of politics is good, these people will be keener to stand against the basic income, with 89% of chances if their score is 5/5. What could be concluded is that political knowledge is critical. When the value of this variable is average (2 or 3/5), respondents hardly vary on their probabilities to stand for or against the basic income. However, when it goes about extremes – be it very low or very high levels of political knowledge, the impact varies a lot depending on the respondents’ own level of knowledge of political issues.

**Graph 1 : Predicted probabilities (disagreement with the basic income)**



The logistic regression’s results demonstrate that adding in the text an argument linked to the basic income drives the respondents towards being less in disfavour of the implementation of this project. In other words, groups having read the text containing the argument of the unconditionality of the basic income (Income-Unconditionality) as well as respondents to which has been displayed a text with the freedom argument (Income-Freedom) tend to be less

recalcitrant *vis-à-vis* the implementation of the basic income in Belgium. Respondents of the neutral text group do not statistically differ from respondents from the control group. This indicates that the only fact of receiving information on the political topic cannot explain the attitude in favour or in disfavour of the basic income. The argument (be it unconditionality or freedom) plays a role and impacts on the political preferences of respondents. A causal relationship emerges from the data for groups to which a text with an argument was displayed – what means that the argument can make the difference. It has to be noted that a multinomial regression based on a three-category variable splitting the respondents into three groups (in favour, neutral and in disfavour of the implementation of the basic income) delivers similar results. It has been chosen not to develop this model because of the greater complexity to interpret the interactive terms in this type of model, compared to a logistic regression.

**Table 2: Logistic regression (Impact of arguments and metaphors on the probability to disagree with the basic income)**

Mother Occupation (no profession)	0.43	(0.33)
Mother Occupation (worker)	-0.18	(0.48)
Mother Occupation (senior executive)	-0.35	(0.29)
Mother Occupation (accredited profession)	0.23	(0.32)
Father Occupation (no profession)	-0.31	(0.49)
Father Occupation (worker)	-0.24	(0.36)
Father Occupation (senior executive)	-0.04	(0.27)
Father Occupation (accredited profession)	-0.04	(0.32)
No prior knowledge of the basic income	0.36*	(0.21)
Political Interest	-0.05	(0.05)
Evaluation of the Economy	0.05	(0.06)
Salary as reward	-0.10**	(0.04)
State Intervention	0.03	(0.05)
Left-Right self-positioning	-0.15***	(0.05)
Group: Neutral text	-1.25	(1.06)
Group: Pocket money	-0.96	(1.01)
Group: Income-Unconditionality	-1.90**	(0.97)
Group: Base frame	-2.26**	(1.02)
Group: Springboard	-1.57	(1.02)
Group: Income-Freedom	-2.00**	(0.97)
Political Knowledge	-0.60**	(0.25)
Group: Neutral text + Pol. Knowledge	0.64*	(0.35)
Group: Pocket money + Pol. Knowledge	0.27	(0.31)
Group: Income-Uncond. + Pol. Knowledge	0.50	(0.31)
Group: Base frame + Pol. Knowledge	0.90***	(0.34)
Group: Springboard + Pol. Knowledge	0.58*	(0.33)
Group: Income-Freedom + Pol. Knowledge	0.56*	(0.32)
Constant	4.01***	(0.97)
Observations	599	
Log Likelihood	-299.85	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	655.70	

Note: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Beyond arguments, the goal of this article is also to study the specific impact of metaphors on the political preferences of respondents. Out of the three groups having received a text with an argument and a metaphor, only one group is statistically significant. Respondents from the BASE FRAME group tend to react differently to the opportunity to implement the basic income, from respondents of the control group as well as from respondents from the Income-Freedom group. This means that the fact that these respondents were exposed to the metaphor next to the argument plays a specific role in the influence on their positioning in favour or against the basic income. The metaphor impacts respondents' preferences to a more extended extent than the same text without a metaphor. A representation full of imagery is critical to the respondents' preferences – in interaction with their own level of political knowledge. In this case, the metaphor makes the respondents leaning towards the acceptance of the project of basic income when they are not aware of political issues but leaning towards the reject of the basic income when they are acquainted with politics. These results suggest that the framing power of metaphors is not absolute but may instead depend on other parameters such as the level of political knowledge of citizens.

Hence, not all metaphors produce significant results. The group that was exposed to the POCKET MONEY metaphor cannot be significantly related to the binary variable against *versus* not against the basic income. Yet, the text that respondents have read comprised the argument of the unconditionality of the basic income. Our results thus demonstrate that some metaphors may negatively play on the positioning of respondents and by doing so they could cancel the single impact that the argument included in the text may have on respondents. POCKET MONEY is counterproductive compared with a regular text with an argument (group Income-Unconditionality). Put differently, when respondents learn about the unconditional character of the basic income, they are less keen to stand against the implementation of this system. Respondents to which the very same text is displayed, at the only difference that the metaphor of POCKET MONEY is added, do not differ anymore from the control group. The metaphor may thus well withdraw the effect of the unconditionality argument.

The third metaphor introduced to respondents used the image of the SPRINGBOARD. The positioning of this group's respondents from can only slightly related to their belonging to the group. The effect may actually be similar to the effect of BASE FRAME but the N of our sample may be too low to be able to draw conclusions in that respect.

While running the regression analysis, we controlled for a number of variables that could theoretically affect the opinion of respondents towards the opportunity to implement or not the basic income in Belgium. The model takes into account the level of political knowledge of respondents, but also for the extent to which they display some interest in politics. Beyond their relation to the politics in general, we deem that their political opinions may be relevant in explaining whether or not they consider that the basic income is a system that should be implemented. We thus control for the answers of respondents on some political and economical issues, i.e. their self-positioning on the left-right scale, their own assessment of the state of economy in Belgium, their evaluation on the fact that the government should play a more or less restricted role in the management of the economy and on the fact that important differences in salaries are necessary to stimulate the individual effort. We also take into account the potential impact of the familial environment of our respondents, i.e. the kind of professional occupation of both parents taken as a fair proxy of the socio-economic status of the family, as this may influence they way respondents perceive the opportunity to implement the basic income. Finally, we also control for the prior knowledge that respondents had of the basic income before starting filling in the questionnaire because some respondents may had a

preconceived opinion on the basic income and may accordingly not be influenced by the text displayed to them in the experiment. In sum, we may consider that our results are not influenced by this list of variables which may also impact the respondents' answers and that they indeed reflect the impact of arguments and metaphors on the positioning of respondents.

## **Concluding remarks**

The goal of this survey conducted among students was experimental. The idea was to test to what extent the introduction of arguments and of metaphors in a neutral text may influence the political preferences of respondents. A controversial topic with no social desirability on the answers has been chosen so as to force respondents to position themselves in the debate. We surveyed their opinions on the opportunity to implement the basic income in Belgium. The experiment included some groups to which a text with the argument of the unconditional character of the basic income was presented while other groups received a text with the argument of the freedom that the basic income would provide. Some texts contained, in addition, a metaphor reflecting the idea of the basic income in different ways (POCKET MONEY, SPRINGBOARD or BASE FRAME). One group did not receive a text with an argument or a metaphor in order for us to control for the single impact of the neutral text as such. A last group was considered as a control group and was not asked to read any text.

It emerges from our data that respondents confronted with a text including an argument tend more to agree on the implementation of the basic income. The fact of insisting on one advantage of the basic income – i.e. the absence of condition to benefit from it or the freedom – can thus directly influence the opinion of respondents. In addition, the presence of metaphors in some texts played a critical role. Respondents of the groups to which a metaphor was displayed behave differently from other respondents. Regarding BASE FRAME, the effect was to reinforce the positioning in favour of the basic income. This metaphor, which might indeed be positively connoted, influenced the respondents to a larger extent than the single argument on the freedom. On the contrary, the metaphor POCKET MONEY played actually a counterproductive role by reducing the effect of the influence of the argument of the unconditional character of the basic income. Respondents who read the text with the argument and the metaphor were less influenced than respondents who read the text with the argument only. One could consider that POCKET MONEY is infantilising, hence negatively connoted in the citizens' eyes.

These considerations lead us to state that a representation full of imagery of an abstract (political) concept may exercise a direct impact on the political preferences of citizens. Actually, even the labelling of the basic income varies depending of who uses the concept. As underlined by Vanderborght and Van Parijs (2005), choosing to use a specific denomination for this concept holds major consequences on its impact of its political feasibility. The label depicts the way the user considers the concept. In Belgium for instance, the greens tend to use the concept of “universal allowance” – which insists upon the fact that everyone could benefit from it, while the liberals (right-wing parties) would mostly use the concept of “basic income” – which highlights the idea of starting point or of foundation and suggests the entrepreneurship spirit that the people who receive it would have to develop on this basis. Beyond metaphors, the only usage of one term or the other could orientate citizens' preferences towards a support or a reject of the principle of the basic income. Hence, we encourage further research to dig deeper into this aspect and to question the influence of the usage of language on the political positioning of respondents in a given debate. More

specifically, it would be highly relevant to further analyse the reasons lagging behind the fact that respondents express various political preferences after having read a text with arguments related to the debate at hand or even metaphors reflecting the debated political concept.

In addition, our results demonstrate that the influence of arguments and metaphors on the preferences of respondents *vis-à-vis* the basic income would vary depending on their level of knowledge of the political system. If the differences are minor when respondents have an average level of knowledge, weakly informed or strongly informed respondents will behave in a very distinct way. When the level of knowledge is low, the confrontation with a text containing an argument diminishes the chances to stand against the basic income. The insertion of a metaphor in the text reduces even more the probabilities of disapproving the basic income. On the other side of the spectrum, when respondents have a thorough knowledge of the political system, the argument enhances the probabilities of disagreement with the basic income, and the metaphor further increases this effect.

These findings may reveal some considerations of larger impact. It indeed seems that the only reading of a text containing an argument or a representation of the reality full of imagery – hence easing the understanding of a complex concept – may influence political preferences. The insertion of metaphors in political discourses may easily succeed in rallying individuals behind a given cause, and this according to different patterns depending on the extent to which these individuals are acquainted with the debate at hand. One must thus pay peculiar attention to the target group when drafting a political discourse of any type. This research suggests that political discourses have a rosy future given that their content may be determining in conviction processes.

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