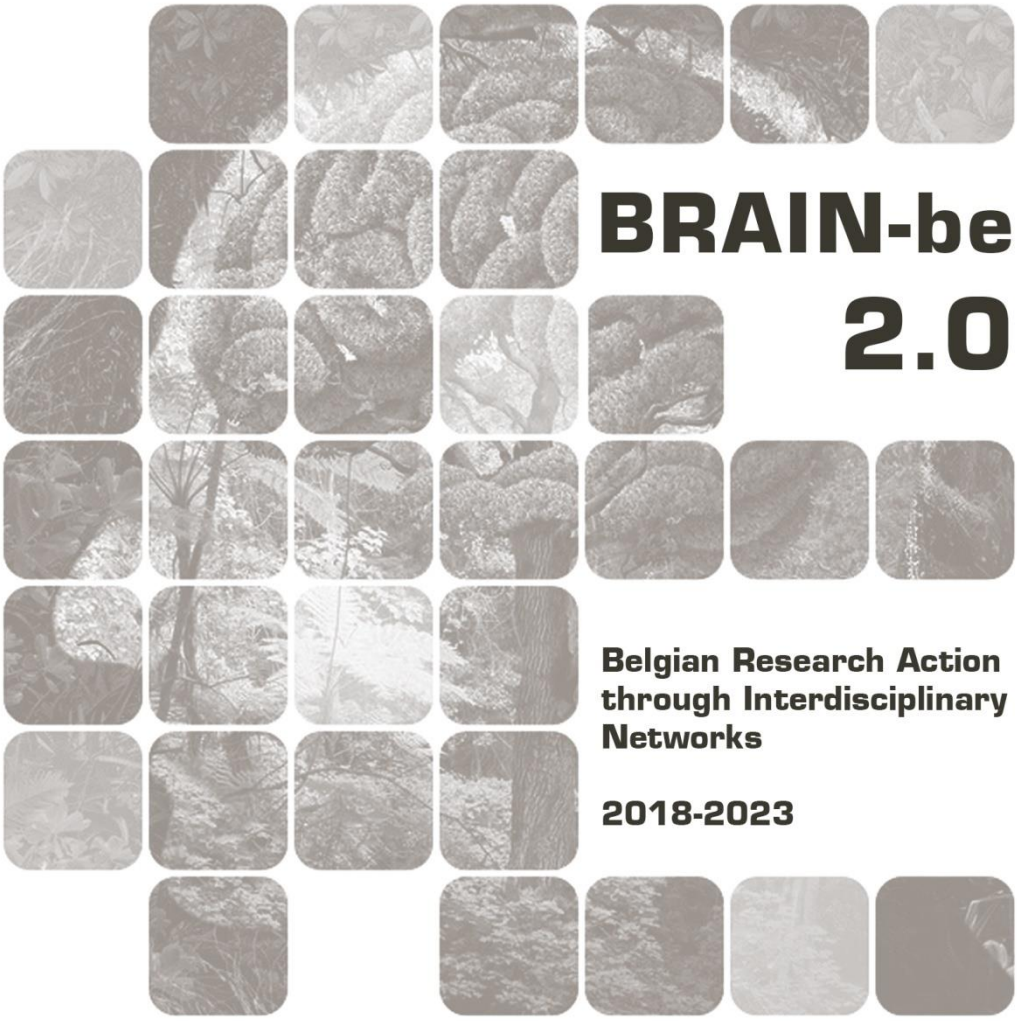


# BABEL
# Basic income in Belgium: stress-testing basic income in the digital era

Wim VAN LANCKER (KU Leuven), Tijs LAENEN (KU Leuven/UAntwerpen), Cyrille FRANCISCO (KU Leuven), Marie-Laure MULAYI (KU Leuven), Adeline OTTO (KU Leuven), Floriane GEELS (UC Louvain), Yannick VANDERBORGHT (UC Louvain), Elise AERTS (UAntwerpen), Toon VAN HAVERE (UAntwerpen/KU Leuven), Ive Marx (UAntwerpen), Gerlinde VERBIST (UAntwerpen), Axel MARX (KU Leuven)

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BABEL

BASIC INCOME IN BELGIUM

NETWORK PROJECT

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## Basic income in Belgium: stress-testing basic income in the digital era

**Contract B2/191/P3/BABEL**

## FINAL REPORT


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## ABSTRACT

### Context

While there is now genuine interest in the idea of basic income to inspire welfare reform in developed welfare states, there is still a large gap between wish and reality. Not only has BI never been implemented at scale, concrete BI policy proposals take many different forms, vary in goals, coverage, benefit levels, entitlement conditions, and implementation trajectories

### Objectives

The main objective of the BABEL project is to shed more empirical light on the redistributive, budgetary, and employment consequences of a variety of BI proposals, and to investigate the extent to which these proposal are politically feasible. It is our assumption that a BI proposal can only inspire real welfare reform in Belgium and beyond if it (1) is likely to garner sufficient support by the general public and by the social partners; (2) leads to better outcomes in terms of poverty reduction at a given budgetary cost; and (3) does not negatively affect employment and encourage idleness.

### Conclusions

The findings suggest that a BI would not lead to a substantial drop in paid employment. However, there is socioeconomic heterogeneity, and increasing gender gaps in paid employment can be expected. All this, however, comes with an important caveat: design matters, and depending on the generosity of BI, whether it is truly universal or not, and how it is financed, the labour market effects are likely to be stronger or non-existent.

A BI is no silver bullet to reduce poverty. The results show that a partial BI scheme at relatively low benefit levels that complements rather than replaces existing systems seems to be a more feasible and cost-efficient way to address poverty. A full BI set at the poverty line would significantly reduce poverty in absolute terms but at the same time also require a budget equivalent to nearly 25% of GDP. Next to the cost-poverty reduction trade-off, there is also a trade-off between social desirability and political feasibility. Tax advantages in Belgium are heavily middle-class biased and the progressive nature of our tax system means that tax increases proportionally impact the highest income quintiles the most. Financing a BI that effectively reduces poverty through the tax system would imply a redistribution of resources from higher to lower incomes.

This, however, would affect popular support for BI. The results show that lower-income and less-educated individuals tend to favor generous BI models, while higher educated and higher income individuals are less likely to support a generous BI. Importantly, a BI that seems to undermine societal norms of reciprocity is least likely to be perceived as legitimate by the public at large. However, the legitimacy of a policy proposal not only stems from public support, but also requires political support from gatekeepers, in this case political parties and trade unions. The results demonstrate that political parties are highly divided among ideological lines on BI, and the trade unions are opposed, rooted in their institutional role within the Belgian welfare state.



### Keywords

Basic income, universality, poverty, employment, political support, welfare legitimacy, trade unions

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Once again, basic income (BI) rose to prominence in debates on the future of societies across the globe. The difference with earlier waves of public interest for BI in the 1980s and 1990s is that the idea now seemed to gain some real political traction in both developing and developed welfare states. In Europe, the recent pilot programmes and experiments with varieties of BI in Finland, The Netherlands, Wales and Poland testify to the surge in attention. That is quite remarkable since, in its essence, BI provides a "*stream of regular cash income to every citizen or resident in a given political community*" (Widerquist et al. 2013: xiiv). An essential attribute of BI is that it is universal and unconditional: for everyone, no questions asked. That is a radical departure from traditional public welfare provisions as it severs the link between contribution and benefit on the one hand and between need and benefit on the other hand. Both are cornerstones of social insurance schemes (Van Parijs & Vanderborght 2017).

It is precisely because of this radical change that opponents fear that a BI will lower work incentives, increase gender inequalities in work and care, and encourage idleness, while proponents believe that it will encourage entrepreneurship, lifelong learning and volunteer work, and empower people to make their own choices in today's labor markets. For opponents, a BI is an inefficient way to spend money since it is given to those with little or no needs while for proponents it bears the promise of combatting poverty and reducing inequality whilst getting rid of poverty traps and the myriad of problems associated with means-tested benefits. Although proponents and opponents are usually dug in at their respective positions, they both make factual claims that can be and should be subjected to empirical scrutiny.

And so, while there is now genuine interest in the idea of basic income to inspire welfare reform in developed welfare states, there is still a large gap between wish and reality. Not only has BI never been implemented at scale, concrete BI policy proposals take many different forms, vary in goals, coverage, benefit levels, entitlement conditions, and implementation trajectories (De Wispelaere & Stirton 2004). Although a BI is usually presented as a "*disarmingly simple idea*" (Van Parijs 2004), discussing concrete policy proposals quickly descends into a dispute of Tower of Babel-like allure. When advocating or criticizing BI, proponents resp. opponents often seem to have different kinds of BI schemes in mind. It is quite obvious that the actual outcomes of BI will be highly dependent on the choices made with respect to entitlement, generosity, financing, and implementation. For example, being in favour of a BI that is sufficiently high to sustain a decent living standard for all as a complement to the current welfare state and all of its services, is presumably something quite different in terms of budget and poverty outcomes than being in favour of a BI at low levels that replaces all welfare state provisions. Details truly matter, certainly so in the case of long-standing welfare states with a highly bureaucratized, complicated and ever-evolving set of fiscal policies, social insurance schemes, minimum income schemes and social assistance benefits in place.

That is the fundamental issue central to the Basic Income in Belgium (BABEL) project. The project provides a comprehensive set of analyses to bridge at least partly the gap between wish and reality in the context of the Belgian welfare state. Simply put, if a BI is to be taken seriously as a blueprint for welfare state reform, a number of key questions need to be answered. First of all, would a BI perform better than the current settlement? European Union (EU) member states spend on average 27% of their GDP on social benefits and services, yet poverty persists and in many instances even increased despite increasing expenditures. Would a basic income help in reducing poverty, and at what cost? Second, social expenditures are usually financed through taxes or social contributions which require a stable tax base and a sufficiently high employment rate. Would a basic income help sustain high levels of employment or would it reduce labour supply? How would it incentivize people to take up socially desirable roles in society, or to become entrepreneurs? Third, major welfare reforms need to

be politically feasible, which requires public and political support. Would BI garner sufficient levels of popular support? What would be the role of gatekeepers such as political parties, trade unions and employer organisations?

The main objective of the BABEL project is to shed more empirical light on the redistributive, budgetary, and employment consequences of a variety of BI proposals, and to investigate the extent to which these proposal are politically feasible. It is our assumption that a BI proposal can only inspire real welfare reform in Belgium and beyond if it (1) is likely to garner sufficient support by the general public and by the social partners; (2) leads to better outcomes in terms of poverty reduction at a given budgetary cost; and (3) does not negatively affect employment and encourage idleness.

In this final report, we first present a brief state-of-the-art review with respect to the key issues outlined above: employment, poverty, public support and political feasibility. Second, we discuss the different data sources used and the innovative and experimental data collected throughout the project, as well as the deviations from the original research plan. Third, we summarize the main results and lessons learned. Finally we provide an overview of all publications, data sources, dissemination events and valorisation activities.

## 2. STATE OF THE ART AND OBJECTIVES

Employment effects of basic income

The first large-scale social science experiment ever conducted tested the potential effect of a Negative Income Tax (NIT), a policy which shares many attributes with a BI (Hum and Simpson, 1993). An NIT is a minimum income floor provided to all citizens without any work requirement but with an income test in the form of an income tax, usually at a fixed rate. Effectively, it redistributes income from high to low-income earners. Some argue that an NIT is a type of BI, taking the form of a refundable income tax credit instead of an ex-ante payment to all (Van Parijs, Jacquet and Salinas, 2000). Between the 1960s and 1970s, five NIT experiments were conducted in the United States of America and Canada, namely the Seattle/Denver Income Maintenance Experiment, the Rural Income Maintenance Experiment, the Gary Income Maintenance Experiment, the New Jersey Graduated Work Incentive Experiment, and the Manitoba Basic Annual Income Experiment. Their objective was primarily to investigate the effect of an NIT on recipients' labour supply, but several other social measurements were also included, such as poverty, income or marital stability (U.S. Government Accountability, 1981).

In recent years, the idea of a BI has also inspired pilot projects with minimum income benefits that share some characteristics of a BI. A few have already been carried out in developed welfare states, for example, the Finnish Basic Income experiment and the social assistance experiments in The Netherlands. Both have primarily been conducted to investigate the potential labour supply effects of a BI. Other variables, such as well-being, and subjective health, were included but remained secondary to the analyses. Heikki Hiilamo (2022) even suggests that the labour supply focus of the Finnish experiment has left it poorly equipped to test well-being effects. For instance, no baseline measurements have been collected, which significantly affects the validity of the well-being indicator. In the case of the Dutch experiments, the focus on labour supply was already present in the legal mandate provided to the municipalities to test alternative social policies. This mandate allows to deviate from existing rules of minimum income attribution to test employment and financing outcomes in an experimental way (Groot, Muffels and Verlaat, 2019).

Lottery winnings are studied as another form of natural experiments to inform about the potential impacts of a BI. Unintentionally, they effectively correspond to an unconditional cash transfer, sometimes transferred periodically. Here again, the study of non-employment outcomes is sparse. A few papers have analysed health and education effects, but this was done in a rather unsystematic manner (Gibson, Hearty and Craig, 2018; Marinescu, 2018).

Another instrument to investigate the effects of a BI are micro-simulations. In social sciences, these are computer programme-based models estimating the effect of public policies and demographic processes on individual units of a population (individuals, households, businesses etc.) More specifically, for each observation in a large-scale survey, the programme simulates outcomes of interest—for example income tax liabilities or social benefit receipt—by applying actual or hypothetical programme rules to the survey data about that observation. This allows an almost unlimited 'what if' testing of overnight policy changes and their first-order distributional and budgetary implications. Microsimulation models are particularly valuable for evaluating distributional and budgetary effects of policy changes, as they can assess the distributional impact of policy reforms on different groups and individuals, and the overall budgetary impact of those reforms. Some attempts have been made to investigate the labour supply effect of a BI this way (Abul Naga, Kolodziejczyk and Müller, 2008; Horstschräer, Clauss and Schnabel, 2008; Browne and Immervoll, 2017; Magnani and Piccoli, 2020). When it comes to the impact of a BI on work incentives, the empirical and theoretical evidence is inconclusive (de Paz-Báñez et al., 2020; Martinelli, 2017; Pareliussen et al., 2018; Verho et al., 2022). Some point to the (expected) positive effects, in the form

of for instance increased economic growth through the enhancement of entrepreneurship, the elimination of inactivity and employment traps, and increased bargaining power. While others often refer to the expected worsening of work incentives, reductions in productivity and associated economic costs.

However, the instrument has several methodological limitations, one of which is that micro-simulations are not well suited to predict second-order effects of an extensive reform as a BI. This means they cannot tell us what other effects income distributional changes in reaction to a BI entail. One can simulate the first-order distributional effects of a specific BI (see further below), but not how changing behaviour in reaction to it drives, for example, labour market policy reforms. This is because microsimulation relies on uncertain assumptions about how individuals behave, which is still unknown, particularly for an unconventional and reformative policy as a BI.

Finally, some policies resembling a BI have been studied as a form of natural experiment. These policies, also called Unconditional Cash Transfers (UCT), provide a periodic, unconditional, and long-term income. The Alaska Permanent Dividend Fund and the Eastern Cherokee Casino Dividend are the most referenced UCTs in the field. We can note that while the Alaska Permanent Dividend Fund has mainly studied economic outcomes, the Eastern Cherokee Casino Dividend has also investigated other outcomes related to health, education and crime results (Gibson, Hearty and Craig, 2018; Marinescu, 2018).

Despite the high degree of variation across the different transfers and the ways of studying the potential effects of a BI, a coherent picture of the labour supply effect emerges. Generally, the results indicate no or a minor impact on recipients' participation in paid work. This is the case for relatively targeted and universal benefits; for lumpsum and periodic payments; for short-term or long-term allocations etc.

The studies also reveal that partnered women are more likely to reduce work than their male counterparts. This observation is underpinned by research about social gender norms and their influence on work, care and household task distribution. For example, the daily schedule of men and women show that men spend more time in renumerated work and leisure than women. By comparison, women spend more time on household and child upbringing tasks (Glorieux and Van Tienoven, 2009; Grossbard, 2015). Social constructivist feminist theory understands this outcome as an effect of social roles attached to masculinity and feminity. Feminity is related to the realms of care with attributes such as "sensitive to the need of others" and "compassionate". Masculinity is linked to the domain of paid work with traits such as "competitive" and "ambitious" (Bem, 1981). Conversely, rationalists believe that household members aim to maximise their utility by attributing labour market participation to primary earners, often men (Becker, 1993). More recent studies evidence this phenomenon (Dalmia and Sicilian, 2008; Grossbard, 2015). Ann Orloff (2013) argues that providing extra income to households through a BI would risk widening the gender division of labour, given prevailing gender norms. Men would retain their work participation, while women would devote themselves entirely to household tasks. This discrepancy could be further accentuated by how socially attributed gender roles influence the type of activity (i.e., social or economic) for which people utilise their work reduction. For example, studies investigating the interplay between gender roles and volunteering, or entrepreneurship have shown a strong gendering of these activities. Ahl (2006) reveals that the traits associated with entrepreneurship are strongly associated with words describing masculinity. This gendering of entrepreneurship is also denoted by an overrepresentation of males among business starters (Warnecke, 2013). Reversely, volunteering and care activities are mainly socially attributed to feminity. Karniol and her colleagues (2003) show that feminine gender orientation was related to higher care ethic and higher participation in volunteering activities.

The effect of BI on entrepreneurship more generally is not well understood. Aceytuno-Pérez et al. (2022) theorize on how and why a UBI might affect (some forms of) entrepreneurship. Building on a

series of theories including the entrepreneurial intention theory, the external enablers framework and social cognitive career theory they suggest that a UBI might shape the transition to entrepreneurship and self-employment via three mechanisms, namely (1) by influencing the perceived desirability of becoming an entrepreneur, (2) by changing the perceived feasibility through a re-balancing of potential costs and benefits and (3) to stimulate the propensity to act and create a business.

Each of the mechanisms is influenced through potential financial incentives. By providing a safety net to entrepreneurs or self-employed people a UBI potentially de-risks the step towards entrepreneurship and self-employment (Aceytuno-Pérez et al. 2023; D'Mello 2019; Delsen 2019). Aceytuno-Pérez et al. (2022) provide an overview of studies which focused on the relationship between implementing an UBI and entrepreneurship. They focus on a few studies (experiments) which have explicitly focused on the relationship between UBI and entrepreneurship. The studies of Feinburg and Kuehn (2020) for Alaska, Davala et al. (2015) for India, Haarman et al. (2019) for Namibia and McDowell and Ferdosi (2020, 2021) for Canada all seem to suggest that the introduction of a UBI stimulates entrepreneurship or self-employment.

Especially the case of Alaska is interesting for further research on UBI and entrepreneurship and self-employment since it also constitutes an example of long-term provision of a UBI-like income through the Alaska Permanent Fund. The Alaska Permanent Fund was established based on revenues from the production and sale of oil and since 1982, a portion of the returns to the fund have been distributed to residents of Alaska in the form of a dividend (APFD). All Alaskan residents, of all ages, who life more than 1 year in Alaska are entitle to the dividend. The nominal value of the dividend was initially low and equaled $331 per person in 1984. However, since 1996 it has exceeded $1,000 and even peaked at $2,072 in 2015. (Jones and Marinescu, 2018) The APFD resembles to a limited extent a UBI with the APFD being below the poverty line and variable per year.

Feinburg and Kuehn (2020) in their study on the entrepreneurial effects of a UBI start from the de-risking perspective and expect that a "safety net" in the form of a UBI-like income such as the APFD would promote entrepreneurial and self-employment activity. They explore the impact of a APFD on small-business entry (including self-employment). Based on state-level and individual-level data, their results suggest that the creation of the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend program has contributed to the entry of small-business and increases in the amounts that were paid out by APFD had statistically significant positive effects on small-firm entry in Alaska. Hence, their analysis suggests that the effect on entrepreneurship vary with the level of a potential UBI. A higher UBI would stimulate more small-business entry and self-employment. They also find that the positive relationship between the APFD and entrepreneurship appears to be driven mostly by the positive effect on men. They find little impact on entrepreneurial activity by women, notwithstanding that they do find a significant labor supply effect for married women in a previous study (Feinberg and Kuehn, 2018). This labor supply reduction effect with married women does not seem constitute a shift to self-employment and entrepreneurial activity.

Understanding the impact of a BI on individuals' labour supply is vital for its social desirability, economic sustainability and political viability. When reviewing the outcomes of various BI or negative income tax trials, lotteries, and UCT studies and despite considerable variation across transfer types and the studies evaluating them, a consistent pattern seems to emerge regarding their labour supply effect. In general, the observed effects are small, if present at all. This is true for generous and modest transfers, targeted and universal benefits, lump-sum and periodic payments, short or long-term allocations (de Paz-Báñez et al., 2020; Hoynes & Rothstein, 2019; Jones & Marinescu, 2018; Simpson, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). However, few publications comprehensively examine the limitations of the various studies and their implications for the validity of related research findings. This raises important questions about any claims based on the existing evidence. To avoid drawing too hasty conclusions on

what a BI would mean for the labour supply of its recipients, it is crucial to assess the methodologies and data employed in existing studies.

**The objectives of the BABEL project in this regard are the following**: 1) flesh out the evidence base on labour supply effects of BI and critically discuss how the current evidence base can be interpreted and improved; 2) collect new data to understand people's intentions in terms of labour market and more broadly social and economic behaviour, including entrepreneurship; 3) use microsimulation to estimate work incentives; and 4) draw on lottery data to observe actual behaviour among winners of a monthly, unconditional lottery winning in Belgium. All of these objectives will enable us to understand the broader social and economic implications of implementing a basic income in the Belgian welfare state in terms of changing employment behaviour.

## The first-order effects of basic income: poverty and work incentives

There have already been several lines of empirical research on the possible effects of BI, particularly on poverty and employment. The aforementioned research on lottery winners or BI-pilots and experiments, for instance. Still, as insightful as these experiments are, they essentially run on money falling from the sky and do not really tell us much about the question of what basic income at the scale of an entire economy could do for poverty.

So, microsimulation studies have entered the debate, seeking to provide an answer to this question. Microsimulation models have a long history in ex-ante policy analysis. They can reveal in detail the possible distributional and revenue implications of current and alternative policies, and cast light on the best approaches to policy design. This makes them fit to explore the trade-offs that arise from a basic income, especially seeing it has not yet been implemented anywhere at the national level. Table 1 gives an overview of recent studies simulating a BI. Generally, there is some evidence that a higher BI tends to perform better in terms of poverty and inequality reduction. But overall, the research results we have at present on the possible outcomes of BI suggest a wide variety of potential redistributive outcomes.

We argue that the lack of consistency in expected outcomes can be ascribed to the multidimensionality of the 'basic income' concept. First, a BI can take many faces (De Wispelaere & Stirton, 2004). Every study about BI seems to assume a different BI scheme, making the comparability of the results hard. For that reason, universal BI should be rather understood as a myriad of schemes that differ substantially along a range of policy dimensions than as one uniform policy. Key design dimensions include coverage, adequacy, uniformity, financing, integration and accumulation. These dimensions interact in complex ways and may lead to unexpected effects. Every choice matters, down to the very last policy detail. Second, BI schemes that are similar in level and design can still produce divergent outcomes depending on the country-specific context, especially the interplay with the tax-benefit system in place.

Table 1. Selection of recent microsimulation studies on BI

| **Study by Browne and Immervoll (2017)** | |
|---|---|
| **Country** | UK, France, Italy and Finland |
| **BI** | - BI amount set at level of Guaranteed Minimum Income of respective countries<br>- Paid to individuals below statutory pension age<br>- Budget-neutral reform, financed by abolishing majority of existing social benefits and some tax benefits, making BI taxable, and raising personal income tax rates |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Outcomes** | - Diverse pattern of winners and losers across countries<br>- Decrease of poverty in Italy only; especially in UK increase in poverty levels<br>- Potential improvement of work incentives, but only for first earners in lower-income households |

| **Study by Boone et al. (2018)** | |
|---|---|
| *Country* | Netherlands |
| *BI* | - Three different BI scenarios that vary in level of generosity (€415/month, €702/month or €982/month)<br>- Scenarios follow closely the approach taken by Browne and Immervoll (2017) |
| *Outcomes* | - Number of winners and losers almost "fifty-fifty" in all scenarios, but completely different profile<br>- Increase of poverty in low and medium amount scenarios; only modest decline of poverty and inequality in high amount scenario |

| **Study by Pareliussen et al. (2018)** | |
|---|---|
| *Country* | - Finland |
| *BI* | - Two possible directions of reform: uniform benefit or uniform tapering rule<br>  - Taxable BI set at €573 per month before tax replacing some existing benefits<br>  - Non-taxable universal credit that merges some working-age benefits into one single benefit tapered against earnings (rate of 65% on after-tax income) |
| *Outcomes* | - BI would improve incentives for many, but would also involve a drastic redistribution of income and an increase in poverty<br>- Single tapering rule would improve work incentives for all, while also decreasing poverty |

| **Study by Badenes Plá et al. (2019)** | |
|---|---|
| *Country* | Spain |
| *BI* | - Radical, taxable BI that eliminates entire existing monetary benefits system<br>- BI set at €295/month (based on total amount of monetary benefits and number of people) |
| *Outcomes* | - As redistributive and almost as poverty-reducing (or more in some dimensions) as current system<br>- Generator of greater welfare |

| **Study by Magnani and Piccoli (2020)** | |
|---|---|
| *Country* | France |
| *BI* | - Budget-neutral BI scheme of €2038 per year coupled with flat income tax of 48%<br>- Replacing existing minimum income benefit, several other conditional benefits and existing progressive income taxation |
| *Outcomes* | - Increase in disposable income of poor individuals<br>- Decrease in income inequalities and poverty<br>Overall increase in labour supply |

| **Study by Martinelli (2020)** | |
|---|---|
| *Country* | UK |
| *BI* | - Range of BI schemes, from full to partial<br>  - Modest partial scheme: existing benefit structure retained and BI incorporated into existing means-tests<br>  - Moderate full scheme: amounts based on existing 'standard' benefit rates<br>  - Generous full scheme: same as moderate scheme, but higher BI amounts |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Outcomes* | - Schemes that aim to replace means-tested benefits either lead to unacceptable household losses (including some falling deeper into poverty) or cost too much<br>- Partial schemes can avoid such losses and be affordable at the same, but fail to achieve many of BI's broader goals |
| **Study by Goderis and Vlekke (2022)** | |
| *Country* | Netherlands |
| *BI* | - BI amount is set at level of either guaranteed minimum income or of state pension<br>- Assigned to individuals as well as households (so that couples receive about 1.5 times as much as singles)<br>- Accompanied by simplification of tax-benefit system |
| *Outcomes* | - Decrease in poverty by respectively 45% and 60%<br>- But involves very high income tax rates and reduction of total employment by 8% |
| **Study by Reed et al. (2022)** | |
| *Country* | UK |
| *BI* | - Three different budget-neutral BI scenarios offset by increasing income taxes and national insurance contributions<br>  - Modest 'lower level' scheme: child benefit and state pension abolished, part of BI disregarded in existing means-tests<br>  - Intermediate scheme: BI amounts are higher<br>  - Highest scheme: BI amount set at level that ensures all families Minimum Income Standard, most means-tested benefits eliminated and income tax allowances abolished |
| *Outcomes* | - Reduction in poverty and inequality for all schemes<br>- More redistribution in higher schemes, with more winners and fewer losers (even with significant increases in marginal income tax rates) |

Source: Aerts et al. (2025) Not that basic: how level, design and context matter for the redistributive outcomes of universal basic income.

BI debates tend to focus on a limited set of issues. Who is entitled? How high is the BI? But these issues merely constitute the proverbial tip of the iceberg, giving the illusion of a disarmingly simple idea. There is much more hidden under the sea line, notably all the policy choices that must be made. Those choices go beyond the mere size of the benefit amount. Unless one is advocating the elimination of the entire existing tax-benefit system, it is especially important to consider which parts of the system remain, and how the BI will then interact with the set of policies remaining in place.

**The objectives of the BABEL project in this regard are the following**: 1) explore how a BI can be designed to reduce poverty in Belgium. Obviously, this is only one of many goals motivating a BI (i.e. promotion of freedom and empowerment, simplification of the system, etc). As such, our work offers two primary contributions. We bring our analysis to the level of fine-grained design and implementation; and we apply a cross-national comparative perspective. This allows us to validate how level, design and context all matter for the poverty outcomes of a BI, a complexity that has been largely ignored in previous studies. Our work thus connects the basic income literature with the social policy literature that highlights the important distinction between level and design of benefits when it comes to gauging their poverty reduction effectiveness (Avram & Militaru, 2016; Popova, 2016; Salanauskaite & Verbist, 2013). And we demonstrate that this literature has a broader relevance than that of family policies on which it has focused until now.

Public attitudes towards basic income

BI runs counter to two core principles on which developed welfare states are built: First, no (work-related) conditions are required to obtain the benefit. Second, a UBI has universal coverage going beyond most existing benefits (Stadelmann-Steffen & Dermont, 2020). Given these specific features, several scholars have raised concerns that a UBI might face considerable resistance from public opinions in terms of political feasibility in Western democracies (Jordan, Ferguson & Haglin, 2021; Simanainen & Kangas, 2020; Vlandas, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to develop a better understanding of the mechanisms that shape the formation of people's attitudes toward a UBI, and especially, what factors are relevant predictors of opposition or support. This will enable us to assess the extent to which a UBI would be considered as politically feasible, meaning that its introduction would not generate massive public opposition.

a. Policy design characteristics

Studies showed that expanding the scope of beneficiaries to include, for example, non-natives – who are often considered less deserving of assistance than native-born citizens – significantly reduces the level of support for a UBI. However, tightening eligibility criteria by imposing specific requirements, i.e. nationality or residency, in turn increased support (Rincon, 2021; Stadelmann-Steffen & Dermont, 2020). Laenen et al. (2022), surprisingly, found no increase in support for a UBI when residency requirements are imposed amongst Belgian citizens. Second, on the conditionality dimension, findings indicate a strong preference for work-related obligations in order receive the benefit (Andersson & Kangas, 2002; Rincon, 2021). Third, Stadelmann-Steffen and Dermont (2020) found that Swiss and Finnish citizens have no clear preferences regarding the (potential) funding of a (generous) UBI, but they tend to prefer proposals that finance potentials costs by cutting back government expenditures (p.13). Fourth, Laenen et al. (2022) observe an increase in the level of support for a UBI that grants a higher amount to those who have worked longer and have hence contributed more to the social security system (p.12). Additionally, the findings of Simanainen & Kangas (2020) showed that support declined significantly when a tax increase was implied, even when the amount of UBI increased. This suggests an aversion for higher taxes, regardless of potential benefits. Along with that, surveys testing the institutional embeddedness of a UBI indicate a preference for the current system as people were more likely to reject a proposal when it suggested that this scheme would completely replace existing social benefits (Rincon, 2021; Stadelmann-Steffen, & Dermont, 2020).

b. Contextual determinants

Although a UBI is usually considered as a form of universal provision, it is uncertain whether its introduction will be readily accepted by citizens who are already accustomed to a generous welfare state, such as those living in Social-Democratic regimes (Baranowski & Jabkowski, 2019; Lee, 2018). It is also questionable whether people living in Liberal or Conservative regimes will be in favor of a UBI. In the former, the introduction of a UBI would mean extending the state's minimum social protection to the general public. In the latter, it would mean that previous contributions are not be considered as a condition of social benefits. Roosma and van Oorschot (2019) found a large variation in the level of support for a UBI between European countries. The highest level of support was, nonetheless, found in Eastern Europe, followed by Continental Europe and the lowest level in Northern Europe, which indicates an association between the institutional context and support for a UBI.

Moreover, the socioeconomic context, such as the unemployment rate, income inequality, and poverty level is expected to influence attitudes toward a UBI, but little comparative research has been done to date to examine the validity of these hypotheses (Baranowski & Jabkowski, 2019; Lee, 2018; Parolin & Siöland, 2020; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020). Nevertheless, Parolin & Siöland (2020) found a "demand-capacity paradox," in which demand for a UBI scheme appears to be greater in countries that are less able to implement one. Specifically, the demand seems to be higher in countries with a

less generous social security facing high unemployment and poverty, whereas UBI seems to be relatively unpopular in countries with expansive welfare states, average or low unemployment and poverty rates.

c. Individual determinants

First, in terms of ideological orientation, studies show that right-self placement is associated with lower support for a UBI and vice versa (Baranowski & Jabkowski, 2021; Parolin & Siöland, 2020). Beyond economic considerations, the difference between right self-placement and left self-placement is also reflected in cultural values, in that the acceptability of a UBI by the public opinion is largely influenced by the level of trust, identification and sympathy with fellow citizens, commitment to egalitarian values, work ethic and/or religious beliefs (Bay & Pedersen, 2006,p.420; Lee, 2018; Vlandas, 2021). A second explanatory path derives from theories of material self-interest, which found that economic insecurity, i.e. having a low income or precarious job, is a strong predictor for support for UBI. Young people are also more supportive of a basic income which could also be explained by their more vulnerable position in the labor market (Baranowski & Jabkowski, 2021; Vlandas, 2021).

**The objectives of the BABEL project in this regard are the following**: 1) study how public opinions on basic income are formed in interaction with design characteristics and outcomes of basic income policies, and (2) investigate how various groups in society differ in their support for (or opposition to) different types of basic income, allowing us to identify relevant political constituencies that favour (or oppose) the policy proposals.

<u>The politics of basic income</u>

Increasing numbers of studies are considering the political feasibility of universal basic income (UBI), and many of them are based on the theoretical framework of De Wispelaere and Noguera (2012). They designed an analytical framework of the political feasibility of BI. They start from two assumptions: first, politics involves agency and political power. It means that policy entrepreneurs with different resources try to influence political outcomes, addressed at either discrete (easily identifiable actors such as policymakers, bureaucrats or social movement elites) or diffuse agents (typically, the 'public'). This constitutes the first dimension of their typology. Second, politics happens in a constrained environment, both before and after the implementation of the policy. Constraints affecting the probability of a measure, namely UBI here, being implemented are prospective, whereas background conditions influencing the functioning of the policy once instituted are retrospective. These two axes combined allow for a multidimensional typology designating four types of political feasibility: strategic, institutional, psychological, and behavioural. This framework formalized the 'pragmatic turn' research on UBI took. Examples of research investigating the politics of UBI, with or without the mentioned typology, are numerous.

Perkiö (2021) uses the strategic feasibility combined with an ideational institutionalist perspective to examine the framing of the UBI theme in the Finnish context and confirms the thesis of cheap support from agents advocating for UBI. 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 UBI scheme has low chances of being implemented in the near future in Europe (Kangas, 2021, for a brief review, see Geels, 2022). Many other publications approach the same issue through the lenses of the policy and political learnings from on-the-ground experiments, in Barcelona (García, 2022) or the Netherlands (Roosma, 2022). The feasibility question of UBI is also analysed at length in the British context in Martinelli's report (2017). Another study, concerning the Belgian situation this time, explores the strategic and psychological feasibility of various UBI proposals in Belgium by uncovering

"the political constituencies and coalitions that may be mobilised in favour of — or against — different models of UBI in the Belgian welfare state" (Laenen et al., 2022, p. 3). The international level is also scrutinised in different studies. Shanahan et al. (2019) use, for example, the same framework and Vlandas (2019) delves into the individual support for UBI in Europe. Alternatively, some authors inspire themselves from the typology to design their own framework and infer on the feasibility of UBI (see, for example, Torry, 2019), while others prefer to complement it with other bodies of literature on institutions and political parties (see Chrisp, 2020).

The notion of multidimensionality of UBI is also key to our understanding of political debates. When analysing political parties' positions on UBI, for example, one has to bear in mind that these positions relate to different forms, and dimensions of UBI. Indeed, UBI is better understood as a family of schemes than as a ready-made policy. De Wispelaere and Stirton (2004) help us differentiate between proposals by highlighting seven dimensions along which UBI can vary, and Laenen and colleagues (2022) complement this frame by adding four others. It has been argued that UBI was 'neither left nor right', as it is difficult to classify a welfare policy on the political spectrum (Chrisp & Martinelli, 2019). Some claim that it could be a "compromise between protective and productive elements of social security" (Martinelli, 2017, p. 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, p. 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 (our emphasis, Chrisp, 2020, p. 47). The concept's amplitude has been highlighted in many analyses. Indeed, Vandamme (2021), Eydoux (2017) or Allègre (2017) insist on the fact that there are at least two ideal types of UBI. One pole is neoliberal, the other includes both social-democrat and social-ecologist versions.

Several research have also demonstrated that left-wing voters were statistically more likely to be in favour of BI (Chrisp & 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 the traditional left-right cleavage does not seem to inform UBI's support in some national contexts, such as in the UK or Finland; in Belgium, left-wing voters are more supportive of all types of UBI than their right-wing counterparts (Laenen et al., 2022). One has, in addition, to acknowledge the importance of the context in the politics of BI. Indeed, it is needed in understanding complex phenomena such as parties' positions on social policies, to consider institutional and historical contexts (Chrisp, 2020).

Overall, we still lack systematic research exploring the positions of main political actors and decision-makers on UBI. There is a whole research field, at the juncture of party politics and UBI literature, waiting to be explored. As Chrisp (2020, p. 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." From another angle, academic literature has increasingly addressed the politics of welfare reforms, some research investigating public attitudes toward a reform (Brooks & Manza, 2008), others studying the position of organized interests or political parties on the issue (Häusermann, 2018). However, very few studies (see Ebbinghaus & Naumann, 2018) have attempted to bring these two strands of evidence together, and even less by investigating the positioning of main actors, such as trade unions, toward the potential BI welfare reform. Identically, very few studies have focused on employers' organizations' positions towards BI. Thus, the study of BI politics still contains many investigation avenues.

**The objectives of the BABEL project in this regard are the following**: 1) investigate which position political parties in Belgium adopt with regards to basic income, and how these positions are determined by design characteristics of basic income; 2) the position of Belgian trade unions towards

basic income, considering the broader institutional, political and socio-economic context, unions' ideologies and values, and their organizational structure and relation to constituencies' attitudes.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for the BABEL project evolved through two distinct stages: the Separate-Tracks Stage and the Integrated-Tracks Stage. The Separate-Tracks Stage involved analyzing each of the three core project areas individually, focusing on: (1) income and poverty effects, (2) labor supply effects, and (3) political feasibility as separate domains. In contrast, the Integrated-Tracks Stage aimed to synthesize these insights, combining methods and findings across the domains to address their interconnections and provide a more holistic understanding of BI's implications in the context of the Belgian welfare state.

First, for the track on income and poverty effects, **microsimulation modeling** was employed to assess the redistributive outcomes of various BI scenarios (see Aerts et al., 2023). This analysis used EUROMOD, a well-established tax-benefit microsimulation model, applied to secondary household data from the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). Microsimulation modeling is a cornerstone of evidence-based evaluation of welfare state reforms, as it enables the simulation of counterfactual scenarios under alternative policy regimes. Unlike BI experiments, which often operate in isolated contexts and involve funding mechanisms detached from real-world systems (Francisco et al., 2024), microsimulation modeling provides detailed insights into the distributional and budgetary implications of BI at the scale of an entire economy. This approach is essential for understanding how BI could impact poverty and inequality within a fully integrated tax-benefit framework.

Second, the Separate-Tracks Stage included the **first wave of the Basic Income in Belgium (BABEL) survey**, gathered in 2021 among a sample of 3000 individuals recruited via the Bilendi web panel (Laenen et al., 2023). The survey investigated both public attitudes and behavioral intentions regarding BI, with the help of an innovative vignette experiment that presented respondents with hypothetical scenarios systematically varying the policy design features of BI (such as its benefit level, universality, conditionality) as well as its potential policy outcomes (for example, in terms of poverty, employment and entrepreneurship). This approach allowed for a detailed examination of public preferences for different BI configurations and their potential impact on labor supply. The randomized experimental design enabled the study to explore how a wide variety of trade-offs in policy design and policy outcomes causally impact both citizens' support for BI and their likely behavioral reactions. As a token of our dedication to open-access science, the data from the first wave of the BABEL survey have been made publicly available at: https://osf.io/7ghfs/. Waves 2 and 3 of the survey (cf. infra) will be added later, after the initial embargo period has ended (i.e., on 31/12/2025).

Third, the Separate-Tracks Stage also incorporated the **Win4Life survey**, which repeated and expanded on a previous study conducted among a group of winners of the Belgian Win For Life lottery (Marx & Peeters, 2008). The survey was fielded in September 2024 among 300 winners of the W4L survey (*infra*). These individuals receive a monthly payment that closely resembles a universal basic income in several respects, including its periodicity and unconditional nature. The newly gathered survey explored changes in behavior such as labor market participation, caregiving, and entrepreneurship among recipients. By investigating real-life scenarios of a BI-like policy, this unique dataset provides valuable empirical evidence on labor supply reactions, complementing the experimental findings from the vignette survey.

Fourth, the Separate-Tracks Stage involved a series of **qualitative interviews with political stakeholders**, focusing on their general positions and arguments regarding BI. More specifically, we interviewed highly ranked politicians (Geels, 2023), trade union representatives (Geels et al., forthcoming) and representatives of employers' organizations. To date, few in-depth interviews have been conducted on the topic of BI in Belgium, making this a unique contribution. The semi-structured format of the interviews provided both comparability across stakeholders through a common

interview grid and the flexibility to explore issues specific to each via ad-hoc follow-up questions. Conducted in a neutral and scientific manner, the interviews encouraged thoughtful and well-developed responses, enabling stakeholders to articulate their positions without the constraints of polarized discourses often present in political debates. This method illuminated the nuanced views and concerns of key actors, offering rich qualitative insights into the political feasibility of BI.

While the Separate-Tracks Stage provided valuable insights into each core area, it also revealed limitations. Analyzing income, labor, and political feasibility separately did not fully capture the interconnected nature of these domains. To address this, the Integrated-Tracks Stage was adopted, incorporating approaches that combined insights from multiple areas. Waves 2 and 3 of the BABEL survey were central to this stage, as they integrated microsimulation-informed data with surveys on public attitudes and behavioral intentions, respectively. Also the integration of wave 1 of the BABEL survey in a second round of qualitative interviews with political stakeholders broadened our understanding of the political feasibility of BI in Belgium.

First, in **wave 2 of the BABEL survey**, conducted in 2024 among a sample of 2500 respondents from the Bilendi panel, the focus shifted to an information experiment based on microsimulation modeling (Laenen & Aerts, forthcoming). Participants were exposed to evidence-based information about the predicted outcomes of various BI scenarios, including their effects on net household income and national poverty levels. This dual focus allowed the survey to disentangle whether respondents' support for BI was primarily driven by personal financial considerations (pocketbook effects) or broader societal impacts (sociotropic concerns). By leveraging (personalized) information derived from microsimulation results, the experiment provided respondents with detailed, credible insights into how BI would affect their financial situation as well as the level of poverty, fostering a more informed and realistic evaluation of the policy. This innovative design also allowed for an exploration of the stability and malleability of public opinion, revealing how specific information can shift attitudes while also identifying the factors that make certain groups more resistant to change.

Second, **wave 3 of the BABEL survey**, conducted in 2024 among a sample of 1500 respondents from the Bilendi panel, built upon this integration by incorporating a microsimulation-informed survey that examined behavioral intentions. Using EUROMOD, personalized information on net income effects under various BI scenarios was provided to respondents, allowing them to make informed judgments about their potential behavioral responses. This approach enhanced the realism of the scenarios and helped to bridge the gap between macro-level policy simulations and micro-level behavioral intentions, offering a nuanced understanding of how BI might affect diverse population segments.

Fourth, the findings from wave 1 of the BABEL survey on public attitudes served as input for a **second round of in-depth interviews**, with Belgian trade union representatives in particular. Union leaders were presented with data on their members' attitudes toward BI, derived from the BABEL survey. This approach was particularly innovative, as it leveraged oversampling of trade union members in wave 1 to provide detailed, representative insights into this critical stakeholder group. By presenting tailored information during the interviews, the research facilitated a more informed discussion about the implications of BI, allowing union leaders to reflect on their organizational positions and strategies (Geels & Mulayi, forthcoming).

The Integrated-Tracks Stage marked a shift toward synthesizing insights from the three core areas. The research explored the interplay between the income and poverty effects of BI and its potential impact on labor supply, investigating how redistributive outcomes might influence work incentives and vice versa. The study also examined how the design of BI, including its redistributive characteristics and labor supply effects, shaped public and political acceptance. These efforts culminated in a holistic analysis that highlighted the trade-offs inherent in implementing a BI policy. In doing so, **the BABEL project succeeded in bridging traditionally siloed research areas**, linking socio-economic impacts with political feasibility.

It needs to be clarified, unfortunately, that the **W4L survey is a surrogate approach** adopted to deal with the legal and practical barriers that affected the original plan. Originally, the idea was to anonymously link information of W4L winners (including data of winning and amount of winning) to longitudinal socioeconomic information from the Datawarehouse Labour Market and Social Protection, under the coordination of the Crossroads Bank for Social Security. This data would include labour market status, household type, sources of income, ownership of firms, etc. This dataset would be accompanied by similar data from a control group, randomly drawn from the Belgian population but stratified by year (to match the year of winning of the W4L winners group). Such dataset would allow for a quasi-experimental approach in which the causal effect of winning W4L on labour supply could be isolated from concurrent events and trends. However, over the course of the BABEL project, it turned out to be impossible to get privacy clearance to anonymously link information of winners of the W4L lottery to the socioeconomic information available in the Datawarehouse. We got final confirmation that the intended approach would not be possible only in the Spring of 2024.

Instead, following the approach established by Peters and Marx in 2004, a survey-based study has been conducted on W4L winners. In collaboration with the Belgian National Lottery, letters were sent to 300 W4L winners in September 2024, providing both printed and digital survey options along with informed consent documentation. The survey collected data on participants' employment changes, socio-economic characteristics, and engagement in alternative activities post-winning. A response rate of 21.3% was achieved with 64 winners participating. Although the small sample size and reliance on self-reported data limit the generalizability and causal inference of the findings, the data provides valuable insights into behavioral changes across demographic groups, including gender, education level, and parental status. This methodology effectively bridges theoretical models, experimental evidence, and observed behavioral responses, contributing to a deeper understanding of basic income’s potential implications.

## 4. SCIENTIFIC RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the BABEL project are presented for each of the key issues outlined above: employment, poverty, public support and political feasibility. We provide summaries of each research activity, with a reference to each relevant paper published within the BABEL project.

Basic income and employment

*Objective 1: flesh out the evidence base on labour supply effects of BI and critically discuss how the current evidence base can be interpreted and improved.*

BABEL research highlights that the evidence on labour supply effects of BI is diverse and often contradictory. This diversity stems from the different contexts, designs, and implementation characteristics of the studies reviewed. For instance, NIT experiments in the 1970s in the United States and Canada showed modest reductions in labour supply, particularly among secondary earners and single parents. In contrast, more recent UCTs in developing countries often show negligible or even positive effects on labour supply. The labour supply effects of BI are not uniform across different demographic groups. BABEL research finds that while some groups, such as single parents and low-income individuals, may reduce their labour supply, others, like young adults and those with entrepreneurial aspirations, may increase their work efforts. This heterogeneity underscores the need for policy designs that consider the specific needs and behaviours of different population segments.

A significant portion of the reviewed studies suffers from methodological shortcomings. These include small sample sizes, short durations, and lack of control groups. Such limitations make it difficult to generalize findings and draw robust conclusions about the long-term effects of BI on labour supply.

To enhance the reliability of future research, we recommend improving study designs. This includes using larger and more representative samples, longer study durations, and robust control groups. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are particularly emphasized as a gold standard for evaluating the causal effects of BI on labour supply, but that proves to be quite difficult in developed welfare states. In any case, much emphasis needs to be placed on robust research designs and generalizability of the findings. There is a need for more longitudinal studies that track participants over extended periods. Such studies can provide insights into the long-term behavioural changes induced by BI and help identify any delayed effects that short-term studies might miss.

Results published in:

- Francisco, C., Otto, A., & Van Lancker, W. (2024). Labour supply reactions to basic income: Insights from 60 years of research. *Socio-Economic Review, 22*(3), 1559-1581.

*Objective 2: collect new data to understand people's intentions in terms of labour market and more broadly social and economic behaviour, including entrepreneurship.*

The questions we ask here are to 1) what extent do BI recipients intend to continue engaging in paid work and/or in activities other than paid work and what combination of activities do they prefer, 2) how does variation in BI characteristics affect behavioural intentions, and 3) what is the social distribution of these alter-work options, i.e., is the benefit serving a particular social group to pursue more diverse human activities? To answer the first research question of what respondents would do if they were to receive a BI, we used data from the first and third wave of the BABEL survey (*supra*). More specifically, respondents were confronted with BI scenarios that varied in design characteristics and asked them what activities they would engage in if they were to receive the BI in the scenario.

Our findings indicate several things: First, most respondents do not wish to change anything about their current situation. This is quite remarkable given that 57% of our sample population is in paid work. The fear of having most recipients moving into some sort of a 'social hammock' seems to be ungrounded.

Second, people's intentions are not constrained to working or not working. Instead, the majority of those wanting to change something aim at combining a reduction of paid work with other economic or social activities. Only a small group would not perform any paid work—a finding that holds for people currently in and outside the labour market. These finding reflects results from previous research indicating no or only a minor work disincentivising effect of a BI.

Third, some socioeconomic characteristics of respondents seem to determine responses on life choices in the event of a BI implementation. Highly educated and wealthy respondents are more likely to aim for work reduction, indicating that already privileged people might benefit the most from a BI in terms of freedom of paid work. This in turn could fire back with regard to public support for the policy, with less-privileged individuals rejecting a BI. It could also cause public finance issues as higher-income earners contribute more to taxes than low-income earners. Furthermore, we observe that women are more likely to reduce work. At first glance, this could be an enabler for spending more time with, for instance, their family and be remunerated. However, a BI could amplify gender inequalities in access to quality work and reassert socially ascribed gender roles in the division of paid and non-paid work. Additionally, female respondents seem to direct work reduction particularly towards social activities, which could prove economically disadvantageous for them. This finding could imply that a BI might increase gender gaps in labour market and in the home. At least, this could particularly be true if a BI is implemented on its own as even BI proponents recognise the need for complementary policies, such as improvements in the availability of part-time work, job security during parental leave, disconnection of access to social benefit from labour market participation, or the availability of care centres for children and elderly .

Finally, the design features of a BI play an essential role in respondents' behavioural intention. More-generous BI amounts increase the probability of respondents aiming at exercising their 'real freedom' for a social purpose, suggesting that only a sufficiently high BI creates the financial space for other, non-economic activities. The source of financing also plays a role, as applying an increase in income tax or a capital tax seems to increase the likelihood of intending to "reduce work only" as opposed to BI financed by a climate tax. Additionally, the result on the universality feature shows that a more-inclusive BI increases the probability of respondents aiming at combining work reduction and social activity. By comparison, the way a BI would be incorporated into the existing welfare state system does not seem to relate to behavioural intentions.

*Objective 3: draw on lottery data to observe actual behaviour among winners of a monthly, unconditional lottery winning in Belgium*

The initial goal of this study was to link anonymized lottery winner identifiers to Belgian administrative employment data which would have allowed for a more comprehensive analysis, providing insights into employment trajectories, income patterns, and other socio-economic indicators over time. Unfortunately, restrictions related to data sharing and privacy regulations prevented us from accessing this information. As a consequence, we had to resort to a more traditional survey approach. In collaboration with the Belgian National Lottery, letters were send to 300 winners of the W4L lottery. The letters were sent by the National Lottery and included printed versions of the survey and a QR code leading to an online survey, an informed consent, and a letter introducing the research, as well as an pre-stamped envelope with a university address. Out of the total sample of about 850 winners, we were able to contact 300, who received both printed and digital surveys. Ultimately, 64 individuals

responded. While the response rate was lower than anticipated, the survey still provides valuable insights into the experiences of lottery winners and their behavioral responses to unexpected financial gains. This section presents a set of descriptive results from this survey.

One of the most salient findings is the overall stability in work behavior among participants, despite receiving sometimes substantial cash transfers up to €2.000 per month. The data showed that 91% of respondents continued working without any changes, reinforcing the notion that unconditional cash transfers do not necessarily lead to mass withdrawal from the labor market. These findings align closely with previous research (see: *state of the art* and objectives 1 and 2). Even among those who did reduce their working hours, many redirected their time towards productive and societally beneficial activities, such as helping others, pursuing training, or even becoming self-employed. This suggests that rather than fostering disengagement, unconditional cash transfers can support diverse forms of personal development and social contribution. The evidence gathered here challenges the common assumption that individuals receiving supplementary income will necessarily opt out of work, suggesting instead that many seek to reorient their labor in ways that align with personal values and community involvement.

Basic income and poverty

*Objective 4: explore how a BI can be designed to reduce poverty in Belgium.*

Our microsimulation exercise demonstrates that the poverty-reducing impact of basic income depends heavily on its design and the country-specific context in which it is implemented. Key design features shaping outcomes include the level of generosity, the taxation structure and the extent to which existing benefits are retained or replaced.

Remarkably, higher levels of BI do not necessarily translate into proportionally greater reductions in poverty. This is due to the trade-offs inherent in scheme design and the considerable budgetary constraints associated with generous schemes. For instance, a full BI set at the poverty line would significantly reduce poverty in absolute terms but at the same time also require a budget equivalent to nearly 25% of GDP. Hence, a partial BI scheme that complements rather than replaces existing systems seems to be a more feasible and cost-efficient way to address poverty.

The poverty outcomes of BI can also vary substantially across countries, even if schemes are similar in terms of generosity and design. We have empirically demonstrated that there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Its effectiveness depends on the broader socio-economic and institutional context. A BI scheme that successfully reduces poverty and inequality in one country, will thus not necessarily have a similar impact in another country.

Moreover, a BI designed to reduce poverty will always come at the expense of a large share of the population incurring significant losses, indicating a trade-off between social desirability and political feasibility. Tax advantages in Belgium are heavily middle-class biased and the progressive nature of our tax system means that tax increases proportionally impact the highest income quintiles the most. Financing a BI through the tax system would thus imply a redistribution of resources from higher to lower incomes, thereby lowering poverty. Yet, a BI scheme that mainly benefits low-income, non-working groups while letting the majority of the high income, working population bear the costs is unlikely to be politically feasible, especially in case of a generous BI where losses can run high. In contrast, financing a BI by abolishing social benefits would create more winners than losers, especially among the working population, but also inevitably lead to an increase in poverty.

Finally, our results highlight the critical importance of considering economies of scale in household consumption. Much of the existing research evaluates BI's impact on poverty at the aggregate level,

which can mask significant losses for specific household types. While a full BI may indeed reduce overall poverty, this would come at the expense of an increase in poverty for single-adult households. And as the majority of single parents are headed by women, there would be more female-headed households coming out on the losing end, undermining basic income's gender egalitarian claims. By treating singles and single parents the same as multi-adults households, BI fails to recognize their inability to pool resources with others and to enjoy benefits of scale in consumption. Although claiming simplicity and equal rights, a BI could thus inadvertently disadvantage these already vulnerable groups and make it harder for them to keep up with the living standards set by dual-income households. Policymakers should therefore carefully consider the desirability of a fully individualized system. Either way, any move towards individualization should be accompanied by targeted family support and labor market interventions to level the playing field between single- and multi-person households.

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that a partial, modestly generous BI scheme that retains at least some of the existing means-tested and household-targeted benefits makes the most potential sense, at least if income inequality and poverty reduction are the goals. Yet, it is unlikely to be a miracle remedy for persistent poverty BI.

Results published in:

- Aerts, E., Marx, I., & Verbist, G. (2023). Not that basic: how level, design, and context matter for the redistributive outcomes of universal basic income. *Journal of Social Policy*, 1-23.
- Aerts, E., Marx, I. & Verbist, G. (2023). Basisinkomen: niemand meer arm? Een studie naar de herverdelende effecten van een universeel basisinkomen in België. In J. Coene, T. Ghys, B. Hubeau, S. Marchal, P. Raeymaeckers, R. Remmen, & H. Van Regemortel (red.), *Armoede en Ongelijkheid: Jaarboek 2023*. Leuven: Acco.
- Aerts, E., Marx, I., & Verbist, G. (2025). Do individualised social rights disadvantage those living alone? The ultimate case of a Universal Basic Income examined. [Manuscript submitted for publication].

<u>Basic income and political feasibility</u>

*Objective 5: study how public attitudes on basic income are formed in interaction with design characteristics and outcomes of basic income policies*

The Basic Income in Belgium (BABEL) survey aimed to investigate several key questions regarding public support for the introduction of a BI in Belgium (and beyond).

Specifically, the survey sought to:

- Assess the extent to which support for BI is influenced by its policy design and outcomes, including features such as benefit levels and the policy's potential effects on poverty reduction.
- Explore how combinations of policy design characteristics and policy outcomes shape public attitudes toward BI, offering insights into its multidimensional nature.
- Examine the interaction between BI design characteristics and individual-level factors such as socio-demographics and political orientation (cf. Objective 6).

The findings of the first wave of the BABEL survey reveal that Belgian citizens are sensitive to most of the BI design characteristics assessed, including its amount, institutional embeddedness, financing, conditionality, and universality. Public support varies significantly depending on how these

dimensions are structured within BI proposals. For instance, support is higher for BI proposals that include strict eligibility criteria, such as residency or nationality requirements, while proposals extending eligibility to non-natives tend to encounter greater opposition. Similarly, there is a preference for BI schemes that impose work-related or reciprocity requirements, such as volunteering or caregiving tasks, suggesting that Belgian citizens lean toward conditional forms of BI rather than the "ideal-typical" BI model emphasizing unconditionality and universality.

In terms of the amount and institutional integration, respondents favor a generous BI—such as €1,500 per month—indicating a preference for a full BI capable of meeting basic needs. However, there is notable reluctance toward replacing the existing social security system entirely with a BI. Instead, citizens express a clear preference for integrating BI into the current welfare framework, ensuring that supplemental benefits remain available for individuals with additional needs, such as disabled people. With respect to financing, attitudes favor progressive taxation mechanisms, such as capital taxes, over regressive options, reflecting broader public support for redistributive fiscal policies.

The interaction between different policy design characteristics further highlights the complexity of public opinion on BI. For instance, proposals that combine strict eligibility criteria (e.g., nationality requirements) with unconditional benefits elicit varying reactions depending on respondents' ideological orientation. Left-leaning citizens are more supportive of this combination, while centrists are less favorable. Additionally, generous BI schemes tend to receive higher support when embedded in a welfare system that provides supplemental benefits rather than replacing all existing benefits. These findings underscore the importance of understanding how multiple policy design elements interact to shape public attitudes.

Beyond design characteristics, public support for BI is also influenced by the perceived outcomes of the policy. Wave 1 of the BABEL survey highlights that support increases when BI is associated with achieving clear social objectives, such as reducing poverty, income inequality, or unemployment. Information suggesting that BI could stimulate employment and promote informal caregiving also enhances favorability. However, respondents are particularly sensitive to negative information, such as predictions that BI could increase poverty. This negativity bias—where negative outcomes weigh more heavily on public opinion than positive ones—underlines the importance of effectively communicating BI's benefits while addressing potential concerns.

Crucially, combinations of policy outcomes also play a significant role in shaping support. Findings from Wave 1 reveal that citizens react most favorably to BI proposals when multiple desirable outcomes, such as poverty reduction, income equality, and employment stimulation, are anticipated simultaneously. However, when conflicting outcomes are presented—for example, a BI reducing poverty but simultaneously increasing unemployment—support decreases sharply, even among respondents who might otherwise favor the policy. Wave 2 further demonstrated that such conflicting outcomes at the personal (household income) and societal (poverty) levels significantly affect public support. Specifically, respondents who anticipated personal financial losses but societal gains (e.g., poverty reduction) were less likely to support BI than those who stood to benefit both personally and societally. Conversely, respondents who anticipated personal financial gains but societal losses (e.g., increased poverty) also exhibited hesitancy, though to a lesser extent. These findings suggest that public acceptance is highest when both personal and societal outcomes align positively and highlight the challenge of managing trade-offs in policy communication.

The interaction between policy design and outcomes further emphasizes the nuanced relationship between these dimensions. Generous BI schemes that are projected to reduce poverty tend to garner stronger support than less generous alternatives with similar poverty-reduction outcomes. Conversely, when poverty is predicted to increase, even well-designed BI models face heightened opposition. Similarly, BI proposals financed through progressive taxation mechanisms are even more favorably viewed when coupled with clear societal benefits, such as reductions in inequality. These

findings highlight the importance of aligning BI's design elements with its communicated societal objectives to maximize public acceptance.

The second wave of the BABEL Survey built on these insights by embedding an information experiment to assess how evidence-based information about the predicted outcomes of BI affects public support. Respondents were exposed to information on two dimensions: the impact of BI on their household income (personal outcomes) and its effect on national poverty levels (societal outcomes). Results demonstrate that public opinion is highly responsive to these outcomes. When individuals were informed that BI would reduce poverty, support increased significantly. Conversely, scenarios predicting an increase in poverty caused sharp declines in favorability. On a personal level, respondents who were projected to financially benefit from BI were more supportive, while those expecting losses were less so.

Taken together, the findings emphasize that Belgian public opinion aligns more closely with conditional and integrated BI models than with the ideal-typical BI model, which prioritizes unconditionality and universality. Policymakers aiming to garner support for BI must carefully consider its design and outcomes, particularly how they are communicated to the public. Highlighting BI's potential to reduce poverty and achieve other tangible social objectives while addressing financial concerns is essential for fostering broader acceptance.

Results published in:

- Mulayi, M. L., Laenen, T., Van Lancker, W., & Meuleman, B. (2023). New directions in research on public support for universal basic income. In: F. Roosma & Laenen, T. (Eds.) *A Research Agenda for Public Attitudes to Welfare*, 81-100. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, US: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Laenen, T. (2023). *The Popularity of Basic Income: Evidence from the Polls*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

*Objective 6: investigate how various groups in society differ in their support for (or opposition to) different types of basic income*

We also examined the extent to which societal groups differ in their attitudes toward different types of BI with the first wave of the BABEL survey. Our findings reveal clear patterns shaped by political affiliation, socio-economic status, age, gender, and regional differences.

Political and Regional Influences: Support for a BI is strongly influenced by political ideology and regional affiliations. In Belgium, French-speaking citizens, particularly in Wallonia, demonstrate higher levels of support for BI compared to Dutch-speaking individuals in Flanders. This regional divide reflects broader ideological differences, with left-leaning voters from political parties like Ecolo, PVDA-PTB, and the Socialist Parties being more supportive of a BI than right-leaning voters from MR or Open VLD. N-VA voters consistently oppose BI, regardless of its design.

Furthermore, support for different varieties of BI varies across party electorates. Left-wing voters (e.g., from green and socialist parties) show stronger support for generous and more universal BI proposals, whereas right-leaning voters (e.g., from liberal and nationalist parties) are more supportive of restrictive and conditional models. Interestingly though, some left-leaning voters also prefer BI proposals with residency or nationality requirements and there seems to be a consensus across partisan lines that a conditional BI is to be preferred.

Perceptions of Social Security: Public attitudes toward the existing social security system significantly shape opinions on BI. Those who believe the current system fails to adequately address poverty tend

to favor more generous forms of BI. Conversely, critics who view the social security system as overly costly lean towards less generous BI proposals.

Socio-Demographic and Socio-Economic Differences: Income and Education: Lower-income and less-educated individuals tend to favor generous and unconditional BI models, as these directly address their financial insecurities. However, their support wanes if BI proposals appear to undermine societal norms of reciprocity.

Benefit recipiency: Benefit recipients are more supportive of BI, particularly when it supplements rather than replaces existing benefits. The degree of support varies depending on the type of benefit received. Recipients of child and working-age benefits, for example, show greater acceptance of BI proposals that maintain or enhance their current benefits, particularly if the BI amount is generous. Pensioners, however, tend to oppose BI, especially fully universal and unconditional versions, as these are seen as potentially undermining their existing benefits.

Age and Gender: Younger people are generally more supportive of BI, particularly models that are generous or partially conditional, reflecting their economic precarity. Women express slightly higher levels of support for BI compared to men, likely due to their disproportionate representation in economically precarious roles and caregiving responsibilities.

Covid-19 experiences**:** Individuals who faced economic or health difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate increased support for generous and unconditional BI proposals. This heightened support reflects their increased vulnerability during the crisis and an awareness of the potential for sudden income shocks. Those who experienced economic hardships (e.g., job loss, financial difficulties) were particularly supportive of BI models aimed at providing a robust safety net.)

These findings highlight the nuanced and multifaceted nature of public attitudes toward BI. Support varies significantly based on the interplay of political beliefs, socio-demographic factors, and perceptions of fairness and reciprocity. Policymakers seeking to implement BI must carefully consider these dynamics, tailoring proposals to balance generosity, universality, and conditionality in ways that resonate with diverse societal groups. This analysis underscores the importance of understanding these variations to ensure the political and social feasibility of basic income policies in Belgium and beyond.

Results published in:

- Laenen, T., Mulayi, M. L., Francisco, C., & Van Lancker, W. (2023). *Wie steunt welk type basisinkomen? Een analyse op basis van de basic income in Belgium Survey/ Quels sont les types de revenu de base le plus soutenus? et par qui? Une analyse basée sur le Basic Income in Belgium survey*. Leuven: Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek, KU Leuven.
- Laenen, T. (2023). *The Popularity of Basic Income: Evidence from the Polls*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

*Objective 7: investigate which position political parties in Belgium adopt with regards to basic income, and how these positions are determined by design characteristics of basic income*

We first examined the positions of political parties in French-speaking Belgium on basic income (BI) (2019 – 2022 timeframe) and explored how these positions are influenced by the design characteristics of BI, providing critical insights into its strategic feasibility.

The positions of the five main political parties for the 2019-2022 timeframe demonstrated substantial ideological and practical differences. The President of the *Mouvement Réformateur* (MR), Georges-

Louis Bouchez, defends a neoliberal type of BI, proposing a "social dividend" that would replace most existing social benefits. This model emphasizes individual autonomy, minimal state intervention, and increased market flexibility. By contrast, the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) opposes a general BI, perceiving it as a threat to the contributory social security system. Nevertheless, the PS supports a youth-focused BI aimed at individuals aged 18-25, which is framed as complementary rather than as a replacement of current social protections. Similarly, the *Parti du Travail Belge* (PTB) strongly opposes general BI proposals, prioritizing the reinforcement of the existing social system and advocating for wealth redistribution. *Ecolo* proposes a two-step model for BI, starting with a youth-targeted version as an incremental move toward a universal BI. This proposal seeks to complement the welfare state while promoting individual emancipation and sustainability. Finally, *Les Engagés* supports a "participation income", which is conditioned on contributions to society. This approach emphasizes reciprocity and aims to integrate BI into the existing welfare framework. The design characteristics of BI play a crucial role in shaping party positions. Key dimensions include universality, conditionality, adequacy, and integration with existing welfare policies. For instance, while MR and Ecolo advocate for unconditional BI, Les Engagés emphasizes conditionality based on societal participation. Financial feasibility and the degree to which BI integrates with the current welfare system further illustrate ideological divides.

The analysis highlights that ideological cleavages, particularly the traditional left-right spectrum, significantly influence BI debates. Left-wing parties such as the PS and PTB prioritize labor-centered policies and the preservation of contributory systems, framing BI as potentially disruptive. In contrast, MR promotes individual freedom and reduced state intervention, aligning with a neoliberal framework. Ecolo and Les Engagés present alternative paradigms, advocating for environmental sustainability and societal participation, respectively. Despite these ideological divergences, certain BI models, especially targeted or partial schemes such as youth BI, appear to have greater strategic feasibility. Full BI implementation faces substantial barriers, including ideological resistance, institutional complexity, and financial constraints. Nevertheless, our study found that political debates surrounding BI have crystallized, and endorsing a position on the topic has become politically advantageous (for the 2019-2022 period). Debates over BI in francophone Belgium reflected broader ideological divisions and highlighted the multidimensionality of the policy. The feasibility of BI depends on reconciling its design elements with existing welfare paradigms.

However, it is important to note that the UBI theme has barely resurfaced on the political agenda for the triple electoral vote in June 2024. It appears that the issue is less salient than it was during the 2019–2022 period mentioned above, and that Francophone political parties have shifted away from their initial advocacy of different UBI proposals. This highlights that the UBI idea is subject to a rather cyclical and shifting political interest, declining at certain times only to reappear a few years later, and that the political momentum of the early 2020s seems to have faded. The positions outlined above regarding UBI are therefore largely dormant within the various political parties. While they may potentially resurface, they have been overshadowed by issues and reforms considered higher priorities by the parties.

Flemish political parties have been for years either sceptical of the UBI proposal or frankly opposed. The *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) opposes UBI on both ideological and practical grounds. The party rejects the unconditional nature of UBI, arguing that it undermines meritocratic principles and disincentivizes work. Instead, the N-VA supports a contributory social security system in which benefits are earned through participation in the labor market, except in cases of disability or other incapacities. UBI is also deemed unaffordable and ineffective at addressing poverty. Instead, the N-VA advocates for tailored, local social support solutions with strong conditionality and a focus on job activation. The *Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (Open VLD) similarly dismisses UBI as a concept with no public or political traction. The party emphasizes that UBI is financially infeasible, particularly in Belgium's current fiscal context marked by significant budgetary challenges. Open VLD’s priority is to reform social security systems in a way that incentivizes work and reduces fiscal burdens,

rather than pursuing experimental policies like UBI. The socialist party *(Vooruit)* adopts a similarly skeptical stance toward UBI, emphasizing its potential risks to the collective welfare state. The party expresses concerns about UBI leading to individualization of social protection, reducing the collective solidarity embedded in Belgium's current system. The high cost of UBI is seen as a critical barrier, with fears that its implementation might result in the dismantling of essential social services. Vooruit also questions whether UBI adequately addresses structural inequalities, arguing that targeted reforms to strengthen the existing welfare system are more effective. The *Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams* (CD&V) also opposes UBI, citing its incompatibility with principles of fairness and efficiency. The party emphasizes that UBI would be inequitable, providing the same amount to all individuals regardless of need, while potentially diverting resources from the most vulnerable. CD&V stresses the importance of maintaining a contributory and solidarity-based welfare state, where benefits are tailored to individual circumstances. They argue for reforms to increase social benefits to meet minimum standards of living rather than implementing an unconditional UBI. In contrast, *Groen* takes a different approach by proposing a 'welvaartsgarantie' instead of a traditional UBI. This welfare guarantee is designed to reduce poverty by targeting those below the poverty line with differentiated benefits, rather than providing a flat, universal payment to all citizens. Groen links this policy to ecological sustainability, emphasizing that financial support should help vulnerable populations transition to climate resilience. This approach reflects the party's focus on combining social and environmental justice.

The design characteristics of UBI significantly influence party positions. Regarding unconditionality, both N-VA and Open VLD oppose the unconditional aspect of UBI, seeing it as incompatible with their ideological focus on work-based solidarity and individual responsibility. Vooruit and CD&V share similar concerns, emphasizing that unconditional payments risk undermining collective protections and ignoring individual needs. Groen, on the other hand, moves away from unconditionality by proposing targeted support based on need. As for universality (in opposition to differentiation), the universality characteristic is widely criticized as inefficient and overly simplistic by N-VA, Vooruit, CD&V and Open VLD. They argue that universality fails to address actual disparities and could dilute resources available for vulnerable groups. Groen introduces differentiation, arguing that benefits should vary based on individual circumstances to ensure resources are directed to those most in need. Besides, all parties agree that UBI poses significant financial challenges. They argue that its implementation would impose unsustainable costs on the Belgian welfare state without sufficiently addressing poverty. Vooruit warns that funding UBI would require cutting critical social services, while CD&V calculates that even eliminating existing benefits would not sufficiently offset the measure's cost. This concern resonates with N-VA and Open VLD's critiques of UBI's unsustainable financial implications. The parties also stress that UBI proposals complicate rather than streamline Belgium's complex social security system.

The research revealed widespread skepticism across the Flemish political parties regarding UBI. The rejection of unconditionality, concerns about affordability, and critiques of universality underscore the barriers to UBI's acceptance. However, the positions also reflect ideological divides. Groen's proposal, for instance, shares UBI's goal of reducing poverty but takes a targeted and pragmatic approach, contrasting with the work-focused policies of N-VA and Open VLD, and the solidarity-driven perspectives of Vooruit and CD&V. This divergence highlights the ideological roots of the debate and suggests that UBI's political feasibility in Belgium currently remains limited.

In summary, while UBI generates limited or fluctuating enthusiasm among Belgian political parties, it has spurred discussions about poverty reduction and welfare reform. However, deeply entrenched ideological values and fiscal constraints shape these debates, making consensus on UBI unlikely in the near future.

Results published in:

- Geels, F. (2023). Assessing Basic Income Feasibility Political Parties' Positions on the French-Speaking Belgian Scene. *Politics of the Low Countries*, 5(2), 136-159.

*Objective 8: investigate the position of Belgian trade unions towards basic income, considering the broader institutional, political and socio-economic context, unions' ideologies and values, and their organizational structure and relation to constituencies' attitudes.*

We also investigated the positions of Belgian trade unions (TUs) regarding the UBI proposal and examined the factors influencing their stance, including the institutional, political, and socio-economic context, unions' ideologies and values, and their organizational structures in relation to members' attitudes. The findings revealed that Belgian TUs largely oppose the introduction of a UBI for a combination of ideological, strategic, and contextual reasons.

Belgium's contributory welfare state, rooted in work-based solidarity, significantly shapes the unions' position. All major TUs strongly adhere to the principle of social insurance, which they see as incompatible with UBI's universal and unconditional design. They argue that UBI would undermine the redistributive mechanisms of social solidarity by providing equal benefits to all, regardless of individual needs or circumstances. Furthermore, union leaders express concerns that UBI would erode their institutional role within the social security system and weaken collective bargaining power. They fear it would tip the balance of power in favor of capital, thus diminishing labor's influence in workplace negotiations. The ideological orientations of Belgian TUs further shape their opposition. The socialist union emphasizes class struggle and collective bargaining, framing UBI as detrimental to worker solidarity and a threat to the labor-capital balance. The Christian union focuses on inclusivity and solidarity, opposing UBI for its inability to address the specific needs of vulnerable groups. The liberal union, while valuing individual freedom, critiques UBI as financially unfeasible and misaligned with its principles of targeted support. Across all unions, the normative rejection of UBI reflects their philosophical commitment to need-based and contributory welfare policies.

Belgian unions' centralized organizational structure also plays a crucial role in their stance on UBI. Despite some survey evidence indicating support for UBI among union members under specific designs, leaders predominantly dismiss these attitudes, claiming a need to educate members about UBI's potential drawbacks. This reflects a tension between the unions' "logic of membership," which seeks to represent member interests, and their "logic of influence," which prioritizes strategic organizational goals. The study identifies a predominantly top-down approach in decision-making, with union leadership prioritizing institutional preservation over grassroots preferences. Strategic considerations also inform the unions' opposition. Leaders critique UBI as fiscally irresponsible and believe it would divert resources from targeted welfare programs. Rather than supporting a universal allowance, they advocate reforms to strengthen the existing welfare state, including de-familialization, enhanced public services, and progressive taxation. These proposals align more closely with the unions' ideological orientations and their commitment to preserving Belgium's contributory social model.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that Belgian TUs' opposition to UBI is rooted in their institutional embeddedness, ideological commitments, and strategic calculations. While some union members express conditional support for UBI, leadership consistently prioritizes the preservation of their institutional role and the advancement of targeted social policies over systemic welfare reforms. These findings provide valuable insights into the complexity of unions' positioning and their broader resistance to transformative proposals like UBI.

Results published in:

- Geels, F., Mulayi, M-L. and T. Laenen (*forthcoming*). What's not to Loathe? A Qualitative Study of the Factors Influencing Belgian Trade Unions' Positioning toward a Universal Basic Income. *Journal of Industrial Relations.*

**Where do we go from here?**

The results of the many research activities in the BABEL project clearly demonstrate that implementing 'a' basic income in a fully-fledged welfare state such as Belgium is far from reality. We started from the assumption that a BI proposal can only inspire real welfare reform in Belgium and beyond if it (1) is likely to garner sufficient support by the general public and by the social partners; (2) leads to better outcomes in terms of poverty reduction at a given budgetary cost; and (3) does not negatively affect employment and encourage idleness.

The results do lend support for the third assumption. Looking at both intentions and actual behaviour, the findings suggest that a BI would not lead to a substantial drop in paid employment. However, there is socioeconomic heterogeneity and increasing gender gaps in paid employment can be expected. At the same time, women are more likely to switch from paid employment to socially valuable activities. All this, however, comes with an important caveat: design matters, and depending on the generosity of BI, whether it is truly universal or not, and how it is financed, the labour market effects are likely to be stronger or non-existent. A BI scheme that is embedded in the current social protection schemes seems to trigger the least intentions to reduce work.

This is in particular relevant for the second assumption. A BI is no silver bullet to reduce poverty. The results show that a partial BI scheme at relatively low benefit levels that complements rather than replaces existing systems seems to be a more feasible and cost-efficient way to address poverty. A full BI set at the poverty line would significantly reduce poverty in absolute terms but at the same time also require a budget equivalent to nearly 25% of GDP. Next to the cost-poverty reduction trade-off, there is also a trade-off between social desirability and political feasibility. Tax advantages in Belgium are heavily middle-class biased and the progressive nature of our tax system means that tax increases proportionally impact the highest income quintiles the most. Financing a BI that effectively reduce poverty through the tax system would imply a redistribution of resources from higher to lower incomes.

This, however, would affect popular support for BI, our first assumption. Indeed, the results show that lower-income and less-educated individuals tend to favor generous BI models, while higher educated and higher income individuals are less likely to support a generous BI. Importantly, a BI that seems to undermine societal norms of reciprocity is least likely to be perceived as legitimate by the public at large. That again points into the direction of a 'partial BI' that underpins instead of replaces the current Belgian welfare state settlement. However, the legitimacy of a policy proposal not only stems from public support, but also requires political support from gatekeepers, in this case political parties and trade unions. The results demonstrate that political parties are highly divided among ideological lines on BI, and the trade unions are opposed, rooted in their institutional role within the Belgian welfare state.

The BABEL project has clearly demonstrated that taking basic income seriously requires a focus on heterogeneity and varieties in terms of design and financing, that the institutional context matters a great deal, and that a focus on political actors and gatekeepers is crucial to assess the potential of BI for welfare reform in a developed welfare state with a path dependent history and a public opinion formed in such context. Details matters, and effects are not to be taken for granted.

## 5. DISSEMINATION AND VALORISATION

Here we list all events, valorisation and dissemination activities we organised in the context of the BABEL project, open data initiatives, as well as all scientific and societal events in which our research team presented BABEL results.

BABEL organisation of events

- Panel session on Basic Income in Belgium (online), inspiratiedag Sociaal Werk en Sociaal Beleid, Leuven, 5 February 2021.
- BABEL public event: "Basic income pilots and experiments around the world: What can be learned for European welfare states" (online), 23 September 2021, https://youtu.be/yhZ_ZJXaCK8?si=C7JSgazEa6WGLqTo.
- BABEL mid-term Conference, Antwerp, 21 November 2022.
- Organization of expert workshop "Public Support for Basic Income: Methodological Advances and Challenges". Leuven, Belgium, 15-16 November 2023.
- Public event: Launch of book "The Popularity of Basic Income: Evidence from the Polls", 16 November 2023, Leuven (speakers: Tijs Laenen, Wim Van Lancker, Philippe Van Parijs). https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=4THEapFy7bA
- BABEL closing event: Findings of four years of research on January 25, 2025

BABEL open data initiatives

- Open access data: https://osf.io/7ghfs/, including codebook of BABEL survey wave 1 and related Data in Brief article: Laenen, T., Mulayi, M.L., Francisco, C., & Van Lancker, W. (2023). Basic Income in Belgium survey: Experimental data on citizens' attitudes toward a variety of basic income policies. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352340923004924
- Open access media report on the political feasibility of basic income in Belgium: https://osf.io/7ghfs/

BABEL media appearances

- Television Intervention: Appearance on LN24's show *Pour Info* discussing "What is Universal Basic Income?", 45-minutes panel with David Leisterh (MR), an economist & the journalist, LN24, Brussels, 22 April 2022.
- Newspaper article: 'Basisinkomen kan tot méér armoede leiden', De Standaard, 22 February 2023, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230221_98195393.
- Interview with Tijs Laenen: Wat is het draagvlak voor een basisinkomen? 'De positie van de kiezers van N-VA is opmerkelijk', 22 April 2023, https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/wat-is-het-draagvlak-voor-een-basisinkomen-de-positie-van-de-kiezers-van-n-va-is-opmerkelijk~b41912e5.
- Interview with Cyrille Francisco: 'Revenu de base : les électeurs les plus favorables sont francophones et de gauche', Trends/Tendances, 25 May 2023, https://trends.levif.be/a-la-une/social/revenu-de-base-les-electeurs-les-plus-favorables-sont-francophones-et-de-gauche/.
- Blog post:The Popularity of Basic Income: Evidence from the Polls. *Social Policy Worldwide,* 2023 (https://socialpolicyworldwide.org/post/the_popularity_of_basic_income-_evidence_from_the_polls_17)

BABEL participation in events

- Conference participation Aerts, E.: 8th World Congress of the International Microsimulation Association (IMA) → 2021, online
- Lezing Mulayi M-L: sPARKs festival in Ieper, 1 augustus 2021
- Presentation Geels, F.: CReSPo research center seminar (Centre de recherche en Science Politique, CreSPo – Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles - 18/11/21). Title of presentation: "The Left Divided on Basic Income: The Case of the PS and Ecolo." 40-minutes presentation of the BABEL project with Yannick Vanderborght, followed by a 1-hour Q&A session.
- Attendance Geels, F.: Colloquium on Negative Tax (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels - 26/11/21). Title: "From Milton Friedman to Thomas Piketty: History and Actuality of Negative Tax".
- Presentation Geels, F.: State of the Federation Congress (organized by the Association Belge de Science Politique, ABSP & the Vereniging voor Politieke Wetenschappen, VPW- online - 17/12/21). Title of presentation: "Political Parties' Positions in French-speaking Belgium," 15-minutes presentation focusing on MR, Ecolo, and PS, first version of a full paper (online panel organized by Alban Versailles and chaired by Min Reuchamps).
- Guest Lecture : Geels, F.: Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles - 17/03/22. Title: "Unconditional Basic Income in Belgium" covering PTB, PS, Ecolo, Les Engagés, and MR positions on UBI, 40-minutes presentation of my research findings in Olivier Paye's course *Work, Employment, and Social Protection*.
- Attendance Geels, F.; Colloquium on Minimum Income (Grande-Synthe, France - 22/03/22). Titled "Towards a Guaranteed Minimum Income? From Local Experiments to National Reform," with Clément Cayol, Nicolas Duvoux, political figures, and civil society representatives.
- Conference participation Aerts, E.: 28th Annual Conference of the Foundation for International Studies on Social Security (FISS) → 2022, Sigtuna (Sweden)
- Conference participation Francisco, C.: 28th Annual Conference of the Foundation for International Studies on Social Security (FISS) → 2022, Sigtuna (Sweden)
- Conference Presentation Geels, F.: 28th Annual FISS Conference (organized by the Foundation for International Studies of Social Security, FISS - Sigtuna, Sweden - 06/06/22). Title: "Basic Income(s): Political Parties' Positions and Cleavages on the French-Speaking Belgian Scene", 15-minutes presentation.
- Panel organization: Laenen T. Panel Session "Stress-testing basic income: Empirical research on the impact and feasibility of basic income". *Annual FISS Conference*. Sigtuna, Sweden, 2022.
- Summer School Mulayi M-L: Factorial Survey Experiments in Cologne from 14 to 20 August 2022
- Conference presentation Mulayi M-L:Network for European Social Policy Analysis Conference in Vienna from 13 to 17 September 2022
- Conference participation Aerts, E.: ESPAnet 2022 Vienna Conference → 2022, Vienna (Austria)
- Conference presentation: Laenen, T. (2022) How popular is basic income? Evidence from the polls. *Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) Conference* (online). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUwTRpw3B1U
- Presentation Geels, F.: State of the Federation Congress (co-organisation ABSP – VPW, Brussels - 22/12/22). Title: "Belgian Trade Unions' Positioning Towards a Universal Basic Income", 15-minutes co-presentation of the working paper on trade unions with M-L Mulayi.

- Conference participation Aerts, E.: 29th Annual Conference of the Foundation for International Studies on Social Security (FISS) → 2023, Sigtuna (Sweden)
- Conference participation Aerts, E.: IAB workshop 'Social policy and the labour market in turbulent times: (no) need for change?' → 2023, Nuremberg (Germany)
- Winter School Mulayi M-L: Researching social insecurity in Europe: measures, drivers, policies in Milan from 28 January 2023 to 2 February 2023
- Guest Lecture Geels, F. : UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles, 17/03/23. Title: "Unconditional basic income in Belgium: definition, main arguments, parties' and trade unions' positions" 40-minutes presentation of my research findings in Olivier Paye's course *Work, Employment, and Social Protection*.
- Conference presentation: Laenen, T. (2023). The Popularity of Basic Income: Evidence from the Polls. *Basic Income Earth Network Congress*. Seoul, Korea.
- Invited talk: Laenen, T.: Health Dividends as a Political Strategy. Brocher Foundation Health Dividend Conference. Geneva, Switzerland, 2023.
- Conference participation Aerts, E.: FRIBIS Annual Conference 'Care & gender' → 2023, online
- Attendance Geels, F.: at the Research Centre Engage Doctoral Days (UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles – 1-2/06/23). Title: "Opening the Black Box of Interpretation and Coding: How to Make Epistemological and Methodological Choices in Communication and Information Sciences and Social Sciences?".
- Conference participation Aerts, E.: 9th World Congress of the International Microsimulation Association (IMA) → 2024, Vienna (Austria)
- Lecture Aerts, E.: Salon de Kade 'Basisinkomen voor iedereen: goed idee of niet?' organised by beweging.net Midden-Vlaanderen → 2024, Ghent (Belgium)
- Two week research Aerts, E.: visit to the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (Fiscal Policy Analysis Team) → 2024, Sevilla (Spain)
- Research Stay Mulayi, M-L: Stanford Centre on Poverty and Inequality (Stanford Basic Income Lab) from March to June 2024
- Conference presentation Mulayi M-L:European Social Survey Conference in Lisbon (Portugal) from 8 to 10 July 2024
- Conference presentation Mulayi M-L: Network for European Social Policy Analysis Conference in Warsaw from 6 to 19 September 2024
- Conference presentation: Laenen, T. (2024). The pocket v. the poor. A survey experiment on how popular support for welfare reform is causally impacted by micro-simulated information about its predicted outcomes. 2024 European Consortium for Sociological Research Conference, Barcelona, Spain.
- Invited talk: Laenen, T. (2024). The pocket v. the poor. A survey experiment on how popular support for welfare reform is causally impacted by micro-simulated information about its predicted outcomes. Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona, Spain.
- Invited talk: Laenen, T. (2024). The pocket v. the poor. A survey experiment on how popular support for welfare reform is causally impacted by micro-simulated information about its predicted outcomes. European University Institute Workshop "Public Institutions and Policies as Drivers of Political Attitudes". Florence, Italy.
- Lezing voor Vereniging Basisinkomen Nederland: Laenen, T., https://denktankbasisinkomen.groenlinks.nl/nieuws/tijs-laenen-over-basisinkomen en https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b37yqzpZQ_4

## 6. PUBLICATIONS


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