

Shades of Red: Assessing the Spectrum of Republican Preferences for Basic Income

Sara M. Constantino¹, Kapu Rao², Marcella
Cartledge³

¹School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, New
Jersey

²Department of Government, Cornell University, New York

³Jain Family Institute & Department of Economics, University of Virginia,
Virginia

Contents

Introduction	3
Brief Methodology	4
Economic Precarity & Support for Basic Income	5
Socio-Demographic Characteristics	5
Liquidity Constraints	6
Value-Based Determinants of Support for Basic Income	9
Support for Which Basic Income?	11
Conclusion	13

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic prompted a growing urgency to reimagine the social safety net. Against this backdrop, there has been a revived interest in cash-based assistance, including universal basic income (UBI). These policies even came to the fore during the 2020 Presidential debate, forming the cornerstone of the platforms of candidates such as Andrew Yang. There are many reasons for the turn towards cash, including the view that a universal basic income policy has broad-base support among constituents in an otherwise polarized environment. Liberal positions often consider it a useful supplement to an otherwise unsatisfactory welfare regime. Conservative thought has considered basic income since the time of Milton Friedman, viewing direct and untargeted cash assistance as one way of reducing the size of the government welfare apparatus. Still, there is much unknown about how the general public perceives UBI. Who supports UBI and why? What do supporters look like? Which policy dimensions can partisans agree on? Which dimensions will be far more contentious?

In a U.S. nationally representative survey launched several months into the Covid-19 pandemic, we assess how cross-cutting socio-demographic and economic characteristics affect support for basic income policies. In particular, we were interested in factors pertaining to economic precarity, and how the specifics of the policy—i.e. financing, eligibility and targeting—are viewed by partisan groups. In this report, we (1) Describe a selection of initial findings from our survey on American attitudes towards basic income and social policy, especially in the context of partisan political identity (2) Identify promising factors that help explain variation in support across party lines and (3) Show how policy details may balkanize or consolidate support.

We find that certain demographic and socioeconomic factors such as age, gender, and income predict support across our sample, regardless of political affiliation. We also identify potential for building strategic coalitions between a subset of Republicans and a majority of Democrats. While few Democrat respondents are strongly opposed to basic income, Republicans are divided between opposition and support, with many on the fence. The diversity of preferences among Republicans is strongly predicted by certain key respondent characteristics; specifically, financial precarity and demographic characteristics that have been associated with increased liquidity constraints. We also find that Republican supporters are much more likely to have dependents than opposers, and, perhaps relatedly, that those who do not believe that the government should provide for the basic welfare of children also tend to dislike UBI. These findings suggest that across-the-aisle coalitions are certainly within the realm of possibility. However, we also

find that the details of policy design can divide Republicans and Democrats—for example, financing. Even if supporters of both major parties have the potential to support cash transfer policies, they may desire fundamentally different versions of those policies.

Our core dependent variable in this shorter report is “UBI Support”, where we asked respondents, “Do you support or oppose UBI?” Preceding this question, we also inform the respondent as to what UBI is: “A **Universal Basic Income (UBI)** is a **regular cash transfer to all Americans** to help **meet their basic needs**. There are **no work, income or other restrictions**—everyone receives the same amount. People who receive the cash transfer can **spend the money as they choose**.” In most of our figures, the y-axis indicates increasing support for a universal basic income policy on a 5-point Likert scale, where 5 is *strongly support* and 1 is *strongly oppose*. Note that this question leaves the details of funding and eligibility unspecified—we include separate questions to get at how these features shift support for a basic income policy. Though most of the analysis in this report uses the term “UBI” (with an emphasis on the *universality* of the scheme), the survey questions themselves switch to “GI” (guaranteed income) when addressing citizenship criteria or other such eligibility restrictions. In short, respondents are informed about and asked their opinion about *universal* basic income just until they reach the citizenship restriction question where we switch to the less-universal, guaranteed income language.

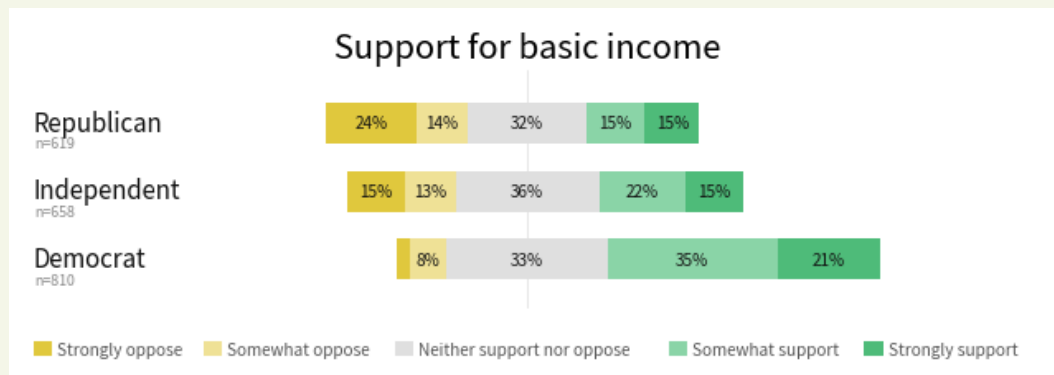


Figure 1. Overall Support or Opposition to Basic Income Policies by Party. Though relatively few Democrats strongly oppose UBI, the flip image is not the case for Republicans. Indeed, many Republicans either support or are on the fence. Support for UBI measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Figure credit: produced by Francis Tseng.

Brief Methodology

Our survey was conducted between May 5 and June 9, 2020 using the Qualtrics platform to collect approximately 2,200 responses across the United States. The sample is representative on age, sex, education, income, political affiliation, region, race and ethnicity using American Community Survey and ANES data to estimate quotas. The survey covers a range of topics, including politics, risk tolerance, and respondents' Covid-19 experience. We coded the data to maintain consistency as follows: first, higher numbers generally imply greater support for or affinity towards a particular variable. Second, for some graphs, we took 5-point Likert scales covering a spectrum of support to opposition and transformed them into binary variables for purposes of visualization; in all of these cases we included those on the fence in the “support” category. For example, those who answered that they were on the fence regarding whether they could afford a sudden \$400 expense were grouped with those who stated that they *could* handle such an expense.

Economic Precarity & Support for Basic Income

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

First, we report some demographic characteristics across the different groups—namely across parties, but also across financial precarity measures among Republicans. These findings will provide the context for questions such as, “What does the modal supporter look like?” or “What could potentially be core motivators for support and by how much?”

Age is negatively associated with support for a universal basic income policy. Here, we placed individuals below the age of 35 as “Younger”; individuals between 35 and 65 a “Middle-aged”; and individuals above 65 as “Older”. Older individuals, regardless of party affiliation, are less likely to support UBI relative to younger individuals (Figure 2). Note especially the sharp decline in support across the board between middle-aged and older respondents. This relationship between mean support for UBI and age is especially strong among Republicans, suggesting either generational changes or life cycle differences in support.

Household composition is also an important predictor of support for basic income. Respondents with dependents, defined as households with children, persons with disabilities, and elderly individuals, are more likely to support UBI. This relationship is

especially pronounced for Republicans. In statistical analyses we conducted (excluded from this shorter report), dependents persisted as particularly important across a wide range of control specifications.

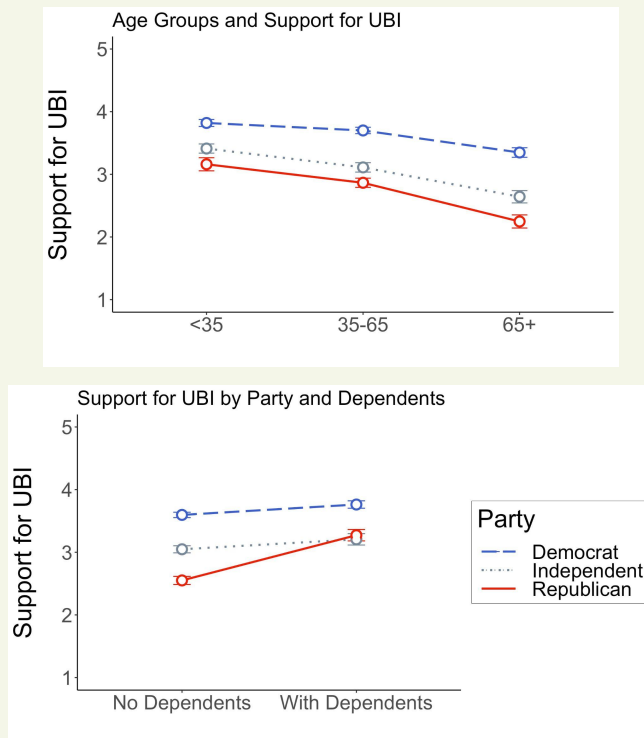


Figure 2. Socio-Demographic Characteristics and Support for UBI. (Left) Mean support for universal basic income across age groups, by party. (Right) Mean support for basic income among those with and without dependents, by party. *Support for UBI* is a 5-point Likert scale where higher numbers imply greater support.

Liquidity Constraints

We also investigate the relationship between liquidity constraints and support for UBI using two questions from the Federal Reserve’s Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking (SHED). First, we ask whether respondents could handle an unexpected \$400 expense, and second, whether it was easy for them to be able to predict how much they would make month to month. Respondents who are unlikely to be able to cover an unexpected \$400 expense—i.e. those who may be liquidity constrained—are more likely to support a universal basic income. This relationship is especially pronounced for Independents. The relationship between financial precarity and support for UBI extends to

income volatility, albeit less strongly for Republicans (but not for Independents) (Figure 3). We also see a predictable trend: higher incomes are generally associated with lower levels of support. We note, however, that for Republicans in lower income brackets, liquidity issues appear to meaningfully correlate with greater support (Figure 4).

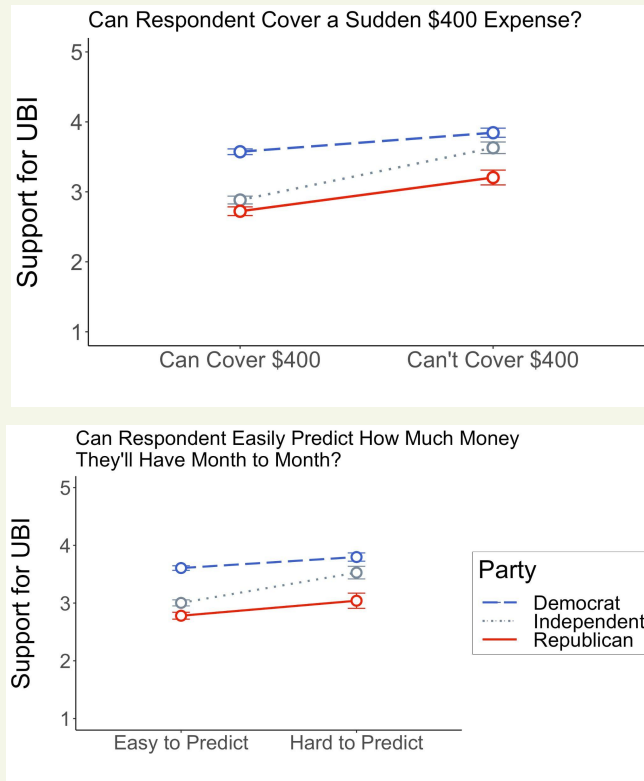


Figure 3. Financial Precarity and Support for UBI. (Left) Mean support for universal basic income depending on ability to withstand a \$400 shock, by party. (Right) Mean support for basic income depending on income volatility. *Support for UBI* is a 5-point Likert scale where higher numbers imply greater support.

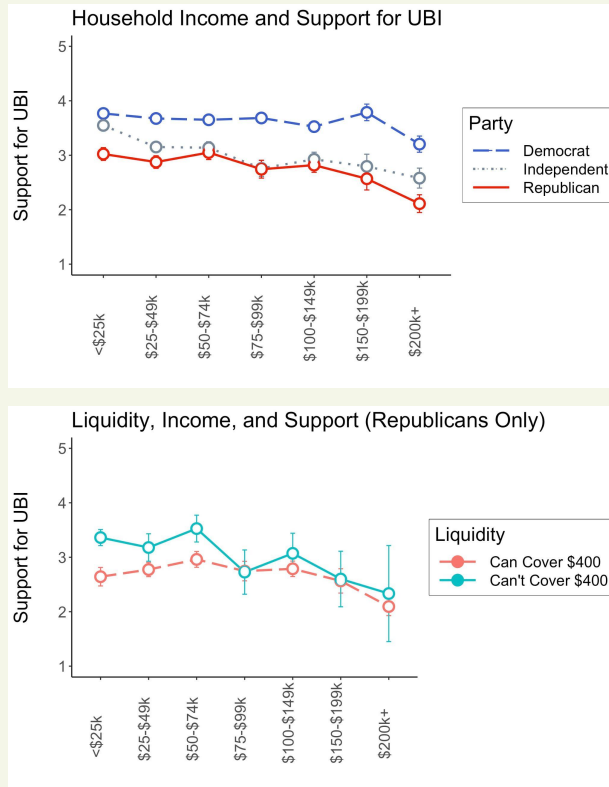


Figure 4. Household Income, Liquidity, and Support for UBI. (Left) Higher incomes are generally associated with less support for UBI. (Right) Looking at only Republicans, we see that higher support at lower incomes is partly driven by those who cannot withstand a \$400 shock. In this Republican sub-sample, about 52% of the respondents fall below the \$75k mark. *Support for UBI* is a 5-point Likert scale where higher numbers imply greater support.

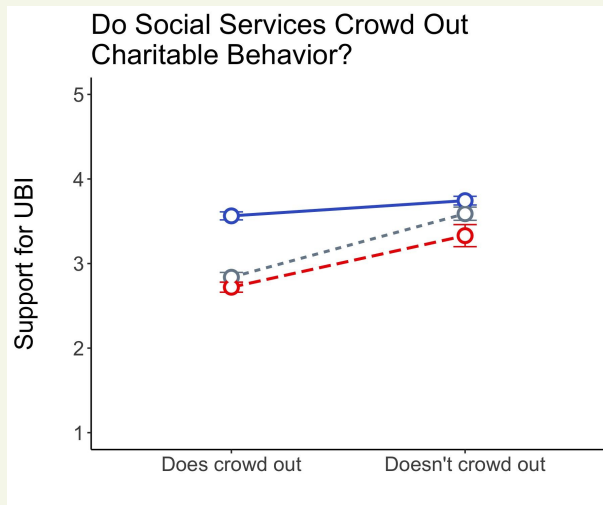
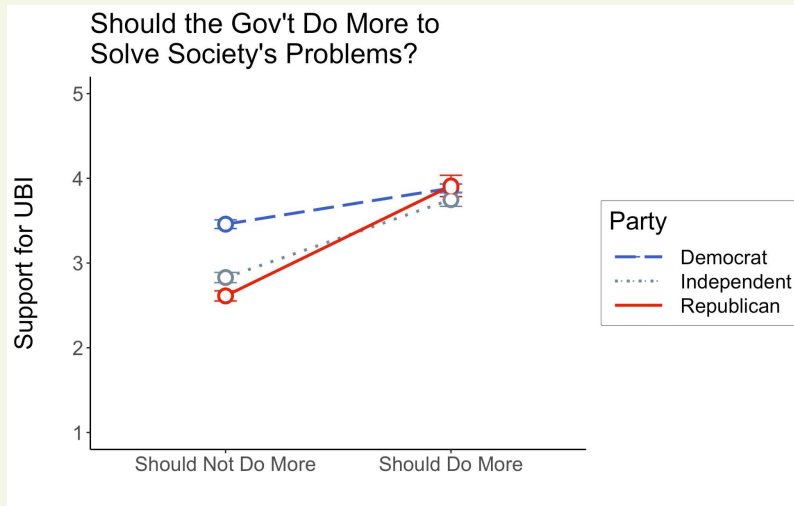
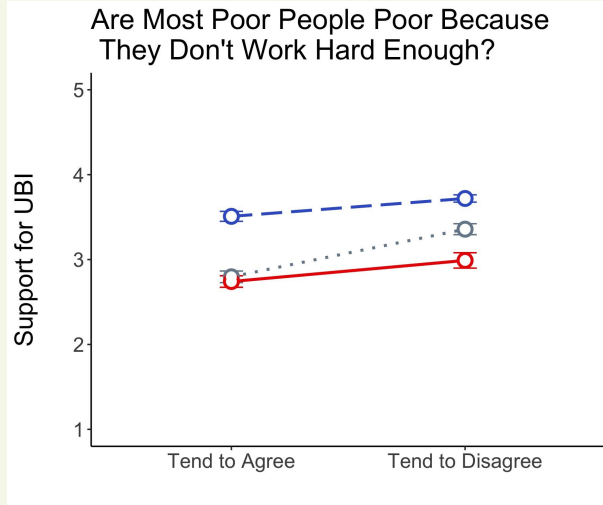
Beyond these standard questions, we asked respondents how much additional cash they would need each month in order to cover basic necessities. We find that differences in the mean monthly “cash gap” are similar across parties for those who support UBI (~\$1,000) and those who oppose it (\$450). We present this cash gap information along with other data to paint a portrait of the modal Republican UBI supporters (versus opposer) (Figure 6). Republican supporters of UBI require an additional \$566 per month compared to their opposing counterparts. These supporters, moreover, tend to be younger, much more urban, more liberal, more financially precarious, and, are especially more likely to have dependents.

<i>Variable</i>	Republican Supporters	Republican Opposers
Average age	41	52
% Married	58%	68%
% with Dependents	60%	26%
% Urban (vs suburban or rural)	46%	15%
Avg Ideology (5-point Likert; higher numbers imply more conservative)	3.14	4.16
Median Income Bracket	\$50k-\$74k	\$74k-\$95k
% Can't Cover \$400	25%	12%
Avg Additional Cash Required to Cover Basic Needs	\$1,122	\$556

Figure 6. Key Demographic Differences. Republicans broken out into *supporters* and *strong supporters* versus *opposers* and *strong opposers* of UBI. Note that in this table, we exclude those on the fence about UBI. Supporters are younger; less likely to be married, but much more likely to have dependents; are more urban; and less ideologically conservative. For the cash gap question, we asked, “How much additional money do you need each **month** to help meet your **basic needs**?” Values above \$10,000 were excluded.

Value-Based Determinants of Support for Basic Income

In addition to needs-based determinants of support for or against UBI, we look at the role of ideological worldviews. The social values and policy preferences that we consider here tend to be polarizing—they are broad norms that tend to divide Republicans and Democrats and are also associated with social policy preferences (e.g., role of the government, nature of poverty, etc.). However, there is also intra-party variation, especially among Republicans and Independents, in their endorsement of these values.



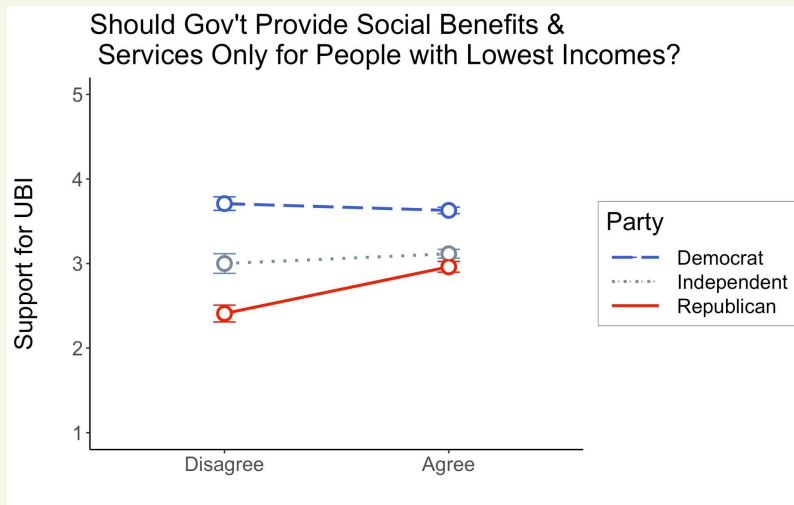
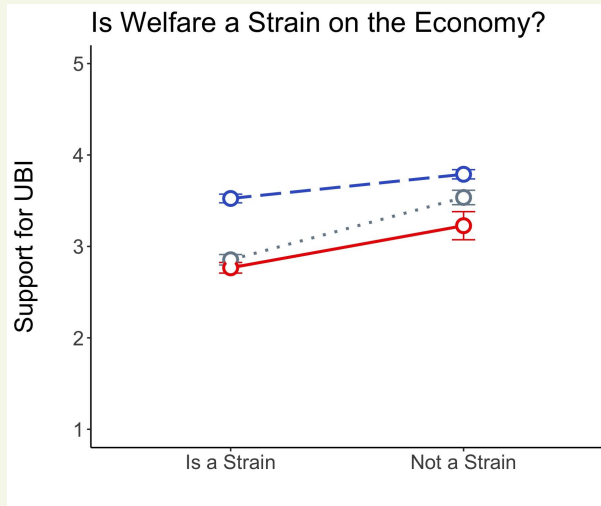
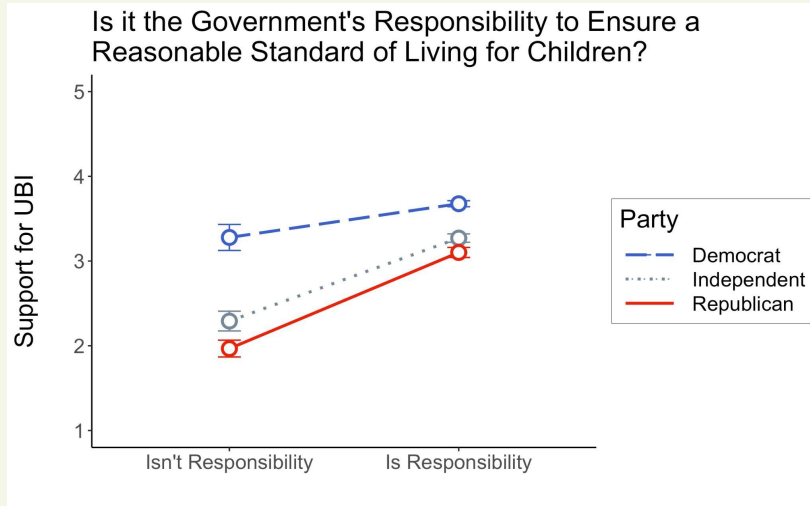
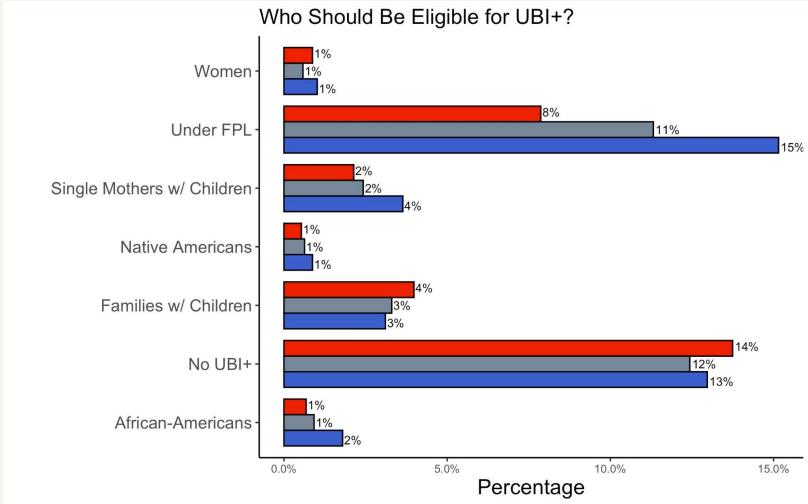
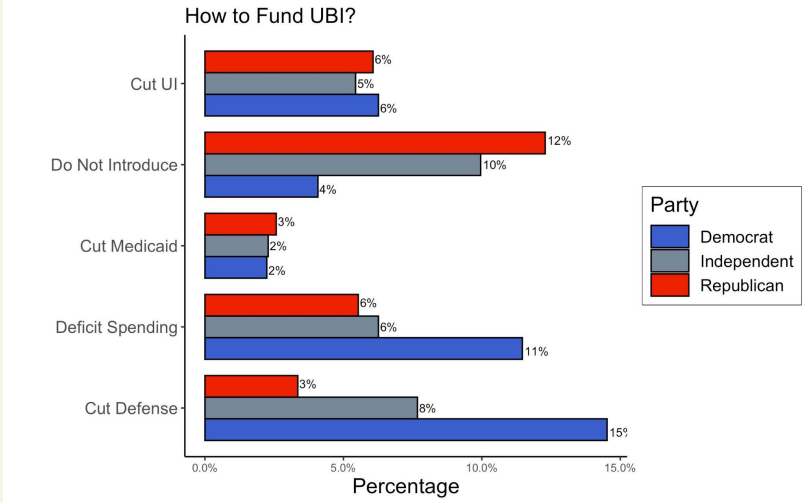


Figure 5. Social Values and Support for Basic Income. Mean support for UBI based on endorsement or opposition to various ideological positions. In order from top to bottom: A. perceptions that people are poor because they are lazy rather than external circumstances; B. support for a larger role of government in solving social problems; C. view that public support crowds out individual efforts; D. view that governments are responsible for child welfare; E. view that welfare is a burden on the economy; F. view that governments are responsible for helping those with poorest incomes but otherwise not providing benefits for those with higher incomes.

As expected, views that support a larger role of government in solving society’s problems, and also in the provision of welfare for the poor and for children, are predictive of support for UBI. Of particular note, Republicans who do not see child welfare as falling under the purview of the government oppose UBI. Republicans who also believe that the government should provide services to only the poorest individuals also tended to show much more support for UBI. The magnitude of change in support for UBI between Republicans who embrace the “poverty is caused by laziness” argument is small relative to those who reject such an argument. Perceptions that poverty results from laziness or that public efforts crowd out individual efforts are associated with lower support for UBI among Republicans and Independents. In our statistical models (excluded from this report, but will be incorporated in more detailed, future reports), many of these variables are significant predictors of support for UBI across all parties, controlling for relevant demographic and socioeconomic variables.

Support for Which Basic Income?

The previous results suggest that a bipartisan coalition for UBI could, theoretically, be formed. However, when looking at the specifics of different plausible basic income policies, differences emerge between partisan groups.



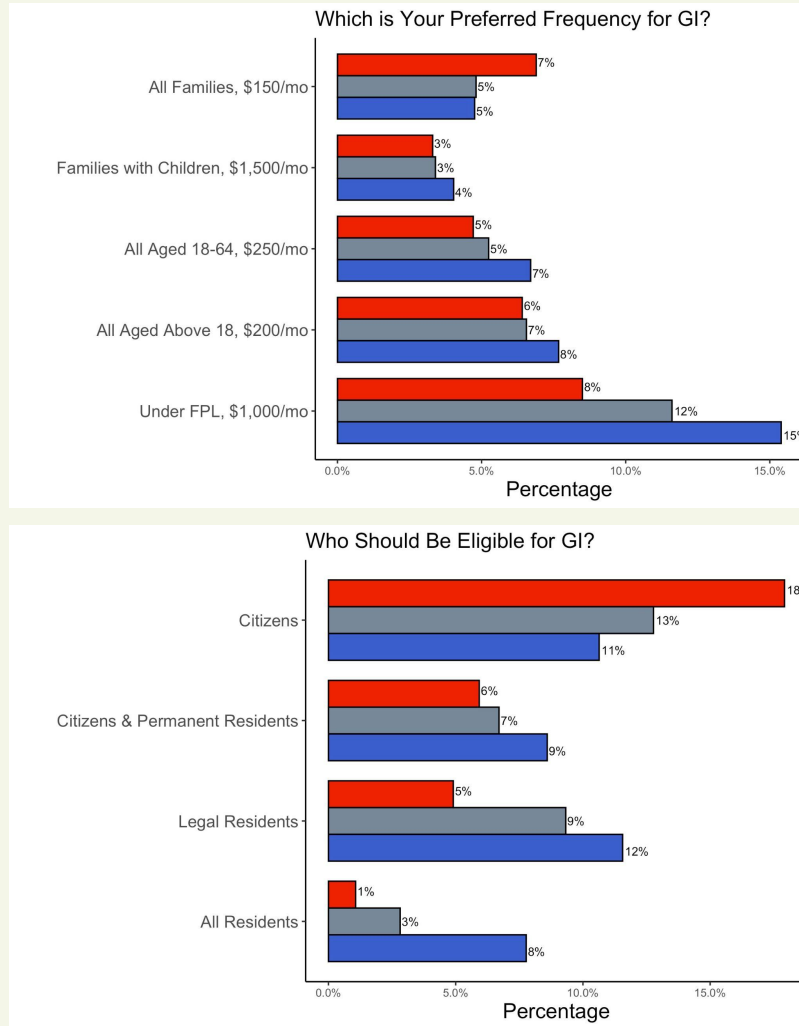


Figure 7. Support for Different Basic Income Policies. Percentages of endorsement for different policy features by party. (Top) How should a basic income be financed? (Second) Who, if anyone, should get additional benefits (a UBI+) (Third) Holding costs constant, which group/amount combination is preferable for a basic income policy? (Fourth) Who should be eligible for a basic income?

Perhaps most divisive is the issue of financing. We find that Democrats tend to favor cuts to military spending and increased deficit spending. Republicans, when they do support the introduction of a UBI, prefer cuts to unemployment or pre-existing welfare programs. For this question, we refer to the total federal government budget of approximately \$4.4 trillion (in 2019), but do not present estimates as to the cost of a basic income policy. We also note that none of the provided options would be sufficient to cover a substantial basic income policy in and of itself. Independents who chose a financing option tended to gravitate towards cuts to the military, increased deficit spending, or the elimination of

pre-existing welfare programs (however, notably our data suggests that independents' views vary widely based on income level and ability to meet a \$400 emergency).

Holding the cost of a policy approximately constant, we observed different responses as to who should receive a basic income. We find general agreement across parties in preference for a basic income of \$1,000 targeted at those under the federal poverty line (FPL), indicating preference for a means-tested policy, or one with an income phase out. However, preferences among Republicans are more evenly spread across the options, with the second highest preference for a universal policy of \$150 for all. Findings for “UBI+” benefits (a normal UBI with specific target groups receiving an additional supplement) are consistent with these findings: Republicans prefer not to have a UBI+ for any distinct groups, followed by a preference for a UBI+ to those under the FPL. Democrats also prefer these two options with the reverse ordering, namely, they prefer the UBI+ for those under the FPL, followed by no UBI+. Notably, we included options for Native Americans, African Americans, and women to receive UBI+, but do not provide any ideological context (i.e., language of reparations). These options, however, are relatively unpopular.

Moreover, Republicans have a strong preference for restricting eligibility to citizens, while Democrats are more or less evenly spread across different citizenship-based eligibility criteria. Citizenship-based eligibility requirements are separate from means-tested requirements, with slightly more endorsement for all legal residents.

Conclusion

Bipartisan coalitions for basic income are possible, though we do observe differences when we consider the nuanced details of the actual policy. We first note that while most Democrats strongly support UBI, we do not find the opposite result for Republicans or Independents. Indeed, these two groups maintain a sizable proportion of UBI supporters, or at least many who do not directly oppose UBI. This support is explained by two collections of factors: ideological views and socioeconomic characteristics. Despite the potential for Republican support of UBI policies in a general sense, policy details may create divisions among supporters. We find that a coalition-building effort should focus more on adroitly navigating policy specifics than make palatable the notion of unconditional cash-based assistance itself.