



BRIEFING | 003 | 30 OCTOBER 2020

# A POPULAR BASIC INCOME

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC  
ATTITUDES TOWARDS UBI



Over the past decade, Universal Basic Income has become an increasingly mainstream idea. With a high proportion of the public in favour of trials, we put forward a strategy for advocating for the policy in the UK.

## 60 SECOND SUMMARY

This short briefing outlines the findings from the RSA's recent polling on the [future of work and welfare](#) in the Covid-19 era.

We find that by almost three-to-one (46% versus 16%), the public would support a local UBI pilot; but this topline figure masks a cultural gap in who supports UBI, and their level of enthusiasm. What's more, many — including UBI supporters — are concerned about funding and how others would spend the money.

At polar ends, we find there is an “early adopter” pro-UBI core, of 19% of the population — young, urbanite and university educated — who support UBI on egalitarian grounds. Meanwhile, the 16% opposed to trials tend to be older, economically secure traditionalists.

But this masks a large degree of people in the middle, including the 35% who neither agree nor disagree with pilots, as well as the 26% of ‘soft’ supporters (who tend to be more akin to neither agree nor disagree than those who strongly agree). These groups are open-minded but appear to be more persuaded by arguments based on economic security and fair rewards for hard work, rather than appeals to abstract egalitarianism or ‘radicalism’. They are sceptical on funding, whether they would end-up paying, and how others would spend the money.

We argue that increasing enthusiasm among these mainstream groups, and especially those who self-declare as working class and/or Labour supporters, is likely to be a clear path to UBI than mobilising small numbers of Greens or radicals alone. This approach is more likely to gain the political buy-in necessary than appealing to radicalism.

To achieve this, we suggest:

- **UBI campaigners need a stronger voice on broadcast media to make the case for a Basic Income.** This includes both on the national stage, with UBI part of the mainstream debate on the future of work, as well as regional TV and radio through local UBI pilot campaigns.
- The ‘facts’ on UBI should be framed in a **pro-good work narrative**, in order to broaden UBI’s appeal to the working class, those in low-paid work, the precariously or self-employed, and those affected by Covid-19. Appealing to enlightened self-interest is likely to be more effective than appeals to egalitarianism or a future of work involving robots and extensive automation.
- To this end, we suggest (re)framing the funding issue – necessarily technocratic – as an **“initial” UBI: a tax reform which encourages good work and helps people to stay in good work.** This question comes up in almost every interview and it is one pro-UBI campaigners must address using both facts and narrative.



- There is **additional research and capacity-building** needed in terms of building support for UBI pilots outside the big cities – for instance, in smaller post-industrial towns and/or rural areas with high poverty – scaled through research and engagement plans locally. In particular, we call for a ‘rural UBI pilot’ in Yorkshire to help take the idea forward.

Finally, [building on our work in Scotland](#), the RSA will be working with local groups to help explore UBI pilots in the coming months, as part of our future of work programme.

We urge all those engaged in this field to join us in this work.

## The RSA and Universal Basic Income

The RSA (royal society for arts, manufactures and commerce) is an independent charity which believes in a world where everyone is able to participate in creating a better future.

Through our ideas, research and a 30,000 strong Fellowship, we are a global community of proactive problem solvers, sharing powerful ideas, carrying out cutting-edge research and building networks. We create opportunities for people to collaborate, influence, and demonstrate practical solutions to realise change.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a policy that we have explored in great detail at the RSA, [from our first report in 2015](#) through a programme of research, events and engagement leading up to today. An old idea, it is one that has picked up interest across the world during that period, as it offers a response to the challenges of economic insecurity and a changing labour market. UBI is a policy idea worthy of consideration which could contribute to reinvigorating the social contract in the UK – but which also requires challenge and exploration to ensure it is the correct route forward.

## Polling and values

We commissioned Populus to poll 2,000 adults in Great Britain on the future of work and welfare, to help understand how the Covid-19 pandemic has or has not shifted attitudes in this space, and to inform our research and engagement on UBI. In particular, we wanted to look at how support or opposition to UBI is affected by ‘values’ and attitudes.

Populus conducted an online sample of 2005 GB adults 18+ between 15th and 16th September 2020. Data is weighted to be representative of the population of Great Britain. Targets for quotas and weights are taken from the National Readership Survey, a random probability F2F survey conducted annually with 34,000 adults. Populus is a founder member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. For further information see <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/>

### *Why values?*

The ‘cultural values divide’ is one of the most pronounced in modern society. Simply put, where individuals stand on issues like diversity or respect for tradition is a strong indicator of political behaviour – voting, attitudes to public policy, and media consumption.



There is a rich debate as to whether values determine behaviour, or vice versa; and whether the media drives or is driven by its readers' attitudes. The purpose of this briefing is not to settle this debate, but instead to indicate how insights from this debate can improve the communications for those campaigning for a new welfare floor, and specifically for a UBI.

Nor do we suggest that these attitudes are static, or that we should be led by public attitudes alone. Moreover, we see an understanding of public attitudes as a necessary means to change and influence opinion.

## Survey findings

Overall, our survey found general support for the idea and local pilots, albeit with concerns regarding funding and how others would spend the money:

- 46% would support a Basic Income pilot in their local area, with 16% opposed.
- There are concerns regarding who would pay: 53% thought 'people like me' would end up paying due to higher taxes, while just 33% were confident most people would use this money responsibly (with 35% disagreeing).
- Just 24% think they would benefit more from free council housing, public transport and free childcare ('Universal Basic Services') compared to a direct cash payment approach.

### *Demographics*

Below the topline level, however, we found widespread variance in the results, largely affected by attitudes to public policy and politics. For instance, as might be expected, support for UBI varies significantly by political party support — 84% of Greens would support a local pilot, compared to 62% of Labour supporters and 30% of Conservatives.

But some concerns — on funding and how others would use it — remain widespread across all groups: 64% of Conservatives think people like them would end up paying for it, and even 41% of Greens agree. Likewise, 60% of Conservatives and 35% of Labour party supporters think it would discourage work.

An interesting point is that while UBI tests very well among those strongly in favour of diversity, it tests less well (although still stronger than average, with 50% in favour of trials) among those who self-identify as working class.

Meanwhile just 41% of those who say they have 'a lot of respect for traditional British values' would support a local UBI pilot, compared to 63% who think it is a good thing Britain is getting more diverse.

Likewise, C1 and C2 groups — identified as crucial 'swing' voters by both major parties — who would very likely benefit from this, especially the many self-employed in this group, also are slightly more sceptical than average of local pilots, by 45% and 44%. They are also almost as likely as AB groups (the wealthiest as a whole) to think they would end up paying for it rather than recipients, while [RSA research](#) shows low-and-middle income households would benefit more.



This suggests a pressing need to present the 'key facts' about UBI in the context of appealing to this group; and to demonstrate support among this group to policymakers. This means focusing less on the egalitarian reasons for UBI (which are correlated strongly with support for diversity) and more on how UBI aids good work in the present.

### *Media consumption*

Most people's attitudes are still *informed by* and *inform* mainstream media. Our poll found:

- 59% say they consume national TV news on a weekly basis; while older people were more likely to have done so, this still includes 51% of 18-24 year-olds.
- 38% consume local/regional TV on a weekly basis; 21% say the same for local or regional newspapers, print or online.
- Of those who say they "have a lot of respect for traditional British values", 67% consume national TV news at least weekly, while 47% do so for regional radio and TV.
- Only 9% do not consume media news.

The dominance of broadcast media shows the continued importance of this medium for all demographics – its reach is critical for influencing and shaping public attitudes.

Online and print are also important – for reaching specific groups but also setting the agenda for broadcast. A common-sense framework is needed, and pro-UBI campaigners shouldn't forget about explaining the basics of UBI either.

It is worth stressing the role of the public in driving media coverage too: people are not passive. Articles on UBI frequently capture the public imagination and drive huge amounts of traffic. For instance, a 2018 RSA story on a one-off UBI was the most-read story on BBC.co.uk for two days; this was driven entirely by public appetite rather than media producers themselves. It is worth mentioning this to print/online, especially as these pieces go viral quickly locally and can add momentum to your local campaign.

RSA fellows also have access to media engagement tools, and we are planning to work with UBI groups to support their local efforts.

## Who supports pilots?

Our survey demonstrates that the public is warm to UBI – 46% say they would welcome a trial in their area, with only 16% disagreeing. Breaking this down further, 26% say they would ‘slightly agree’, and 19% strongly. There is also a large middle-ground, of 35%, who would neither support nor oppose a UBI trial.

We can map these different group onto the innovation curve – a tool developed to demonstrate how ideas and new technologies spread through society.<sup>1</sup> Different psychographic types adopt new ideas at different speeds. This begins with ‘innovators’ and ‘early adopters’, most open to new ideas, and ends with ‘laggards’ – those most keen on tradition and stability. With 19% of the population strongly in favour of local trials, we can hypothesise that UBI is just beginning to take hold with an early majority.

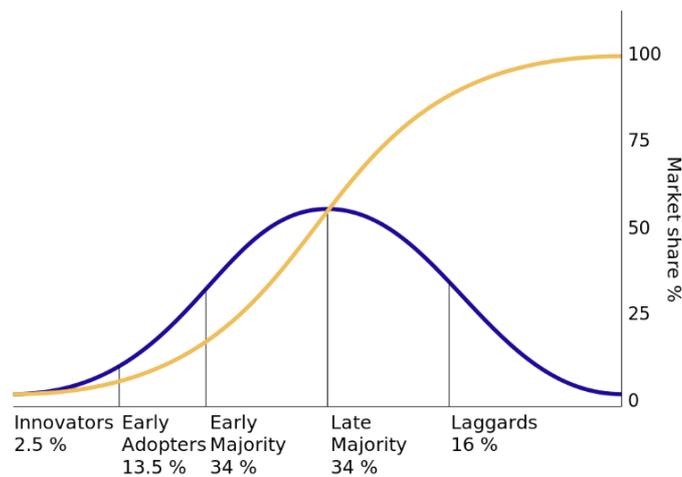


Figure 1. The Innovation Curve

Different groups require different strategies to be persuaded of the benefits of UBI. For those already warm to the idea, this might focus on giving them the tools to advocate effectively. For those interested but not convinced, this means making an emotive case for UBI, appealing to the values of the British public, rather than one couched in technocratic or egalitarian language. And for those who have not made their mind up, it means providing better information and further mainstreaming UBI as an attractive policy.

<sup>1</sup> This theory was first popularised by Everett Rogers in the Diffusion of Innovations (1962). See E.M. Rogers, 2003: The Diffusion of Innovations. Fifth Edition. The Free Press, New York.



### **The pathfinders:**

- 19% of the population are strongly positive about UBI trials.
- This group are Labour supporters (42%), pro-diversity (49%), Green party supporters (14%) and clued-up on issues around the future of work.
- Likely to be young – 39% are between 18 and 34 – and university-educated (50%).

This group very much fit the profile of ‘innovators’ and ‘early adopters’ – 69% say that they ‘love learning new things’, and they are more excited than scared by new technology in the workplace (45%). These early adopters can be powerful advocates for UBI, but are also useful in understanding which groups do not need convincing.

Perhaps due to their age, this group are also likely to be renters (40%), and they are marginally more likely to be in the AB social grade (30%, versus 27% for the whole population).

### Insights:

This group is broadly sold on the idea of a universal basic income, feeling that it would give them greater control over their future (78%) and that it would not disincentivise people from seeking work (57%). The question now is how to turn our ‘pathfinders’ into effective advocates for UBI.

They are more likely to get their news online, and read broadsheet newspapers, such as the Guardian and the Times, and campaigners must think beyond this demographic, and these channels, when advocating for UBI.

### **The curious:**

- 26% ‘slightly agree’ when it comes to trialling UBI in their area
- This group strongly respects British values (47%) but also feel that diversity has made Britain a better place (41%). For context, most people tend to identify with one or the other.
- They are predominantly Labour supporters (36%) but also contain a significant amount of Conservatives (21%) and those who do not identify with any party (17%).
- This group is younger than the overall population, but contains a roughly equal number of 18-to-34-year-olds and over 55s.

This group highlights that that the case for UBI cannot be solely made to the left or right – UBI must be grounded in more universal values, such as tradition, fairness and justice.

This group have egalitarian principles when it comes to welfare: 58% agree that paying benefits to all who qualify, rather than just those on lower incomes, would remove the stigma from claiming them and they believe that the policy would help Britain’s recovery from Covid-19 (66%). But they are split on whether they are willing to pay higher taxes to fund more generous benefits, and fewer than half (45%) feel that most people would use money from a universal basic income responsibly.



This suggests that appeals to ‘fairness’ need to emphasise national identity – for instance, British sense of fair play and rewarding hard work – rather than fiscal redistribution.

#### Insights:

Rather than basing a UBI on radicalism and an uncertain future, as campaigners have done in the past, UBI should be promoted as compatible with British values: of fairness, hard work and justice. This group still needs persuading on certain issues: 40% of this group feel that a UBI would dissuade people from working. UBI should be framed as a means for individuals to obtain **good work**, rather than solely as an appeal to equality.

This group predominantly get their news from national TV (64%) but are also keen on print and online news. Returning to the innovation curve (fig. 1), this group constitutes our ‘early majority’: open to new ideas, but with some reservations.

#### **The undecided:**

- 35% of the population are ambivalent about trialling UBI – neither agreeing nor disagreeing.
- This group are generally more in favour of British values, and less so diversity. They are right-leaning but with a large Labour contingent, with 33% Conservative and 23% Labour.
- Slightly older than the population at large – 42% are over 55, and likely to be DE (38% of the DE population are in this category)

This sizeable group has yet to make up their minds about Universal Basic Income. They are nervous about increasing taxes to fund greater benefits, with only 14% in favour, but they agree that a cash payment would benefit them more than benefits such as free housing, transport and childcare. Across many issues pertaining to the future of work, they are likely to ‘neither agree nor disagree’, pointing to either indecision or a lack of information.

#### Insights:

That a third of the population do not have a strong opinion demonstrates the need to **provide accessible information on UBI to a mainstream audience**. This group is less likely than others to consume many forms of media, including broadsheets, tabloids and online news. But they are not unreachable – 60% still follow TV news, broadly the same as the wider population, and encouragingly for those pushing for regional trials, the ‘undecided’ are the most likely to consume local TV & radio (41%) of any of our groups.

This group shares many of the characteristics of a ‘late majority’ in the innovation curve (fig. 1). They lean further to the right than the ‘curious’ group, which further supports an approach of rooting UBI in tradition and British values, rather than radicalism. UBI should be presented a tried-and-tested idea that has been around for some time, rather than an innovative new solution.



### The stubborn:

- 16% of the population are against UBI trials
- Strongly identify with the Conservative party (39%) over Labour (17%) and value tradition (64%) over diversity (20%)
- Likely to be older – 53% are over 55, with just 15% aged 18-34 - and retired (36%)

In the context of the innovation curve (fig. 1), this group are our 'laggards': keen on stability and difficult to persuade of new ideas. 44% feel that things were better a generation ago than today, and 66% of this group are in favour of benefit sanctions as a means of getting people back in to work – demonstrating just how much ground will need to be won to persuade them of the benefits of UBI.

This group feels more economically secure than others: just 27% worry that they will be worse off in 5 years, compared to 40% among 'pathfinders'. 74% are homeowners, and 55% fall into the C1/C2 category (versus 48% for the whole population). They contain the lowest proportion of DE individuals of any group.

### Insights:

While this is a relatively small group, it is important in understanding opposition to UBI. This group differs from others in its news consumption, for instance being more likely to read the Daily Mail or Daily Express (31%). This group will be difficult to convince, and it is important to be able to provide **hard evidence which proves the benefits of UBI**, and to be able to counter common criticisms. The 'stubborn' demonstrate the close link between economic security and attitudes towards the future of work.

### *The need for narrative*

Broadcast media (nationally and locally) is prevalent across all demographics, demonstrating the need for an overarching strategy to complement any 'targeted' messaging for specific groups.

Likewise, at the local level, there is little point debating between 'traditional' media or social media: both are needed. They serve to amplify one-another: for instance, securing coverage on major regional news platforms can help generate social media momentum.

For the reasons above, we suggest that UBI campaigners focus on convincing the middle-ground of those who would benefit from UBI but are suspicious on cost grounds, on 'what others would do' grounds, or simply skeptical of the need for novelty and experimentation generally.

We suggest the following principles:

- Primarily, UBI campaigners need to focus on the bread-and-butter of UBI. Rather than just outline the facts, the survey suggests that the basics should be framed within the context of UBI as a pro-good work intervention (across work, tax and welfare) which aids economic security, appealing to British identity:



rewarding hard work and contribution (broadly defined), a British sense of fair play, and our heritage of universalism (such as the NHS).

- As a secondary message, it is worth also placing emphasis on the long heritage of UBI, its extensive testing, and why now is the right time to make it a reality: the recovery from Covid-19, the broken link between work and pay, and the failure of Universal Credit and the need to prepare for a new future of work.
- For conservatives, who tend to prefer a contribution-based system, we suggest reframing the debate around the ability to contribute to society – partly through good work, but also other contributions to society (for instance, raising children and/or caring).
- Finally, while opposition to UBI is often not rooted in technocracy, it is important to respond to legitimate concerns, especially on funding. We suggest framing the facts – such as how the tax system could be reformed to deliver an ‘initial’ UBI with minimal additional costs – around a pro-good work, pro-contribution, narrative.

None of this is to argue for an overly-technocratic vision of UBI as a simple tax reform. In fact, we suggest the opposite - focusing on a vision of UBI-enabled good work. Appealing to the public via emotive and values-led framing (such as to good work or to UBI’s long heritage) is more attractive to time-pressed individuals UBI is most likely to benefit.

This approach is also more likely to gain the political buy-in necessary for UBI to become a reality. There is no doubt that now is the time for radical ideas. But the public need convincing – a clear path to a popular Basic Income is necessary to take this idea forward.

### **Next steps**

More generally, there is a specific need to shift the debate from diverse large cities to also encompass UBI in rural areas and post-industrial towns. To this end, we also suggest the UBI movement looks to expand into one or two selected areas, which would also help influence the national level debate on UBI.

The RSA’s [May 2019 report on what a UBI pilot could look like in Scotland](#) provides much in the way of a guide for how local pilots could proceed. We found that an initial UBI of £48 per week, per adult, could be funded by removing all but £1,500 of the personal allowance as well as additional spending, while protecting key benefits such as disability and housing. A full UBI could be rolled out over time.

We want to take this work further in England, Wales and other areas - especially in rural areas, for the reasons outlined previously.

To this end, we strongly welcome feedback on this briefing as well as conversations about movement-building support we can provide.

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