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# On the Political Feasibility of Universal Basic Income

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# On the Political Feasibility of a Universal Basic Income: An Analytic Framework\*

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For much of the last two decades, debate around the proposal of a universal basic income (BI) centered on arguing the ethical and economic case for instituting a policy that grants each adult citizen a guaranteed income as a right, without a means test or work requirement (Van Parijs 1992, 1995; Dowding et al. 2003; Standing 2005; Widerquist et al. 2005; Ackerman et al. 2006). The question of how to bring about such a policy—the question of political feasibility—has only recently gained traction amongst BI advocates. Leaving aside some notable exceptions, much work remains to be done to further our understanding of the challenges faced by BI advocates and the strategies available to overcome these. In this chapter, we aim to contribute to this enterprise by outlining an analytical framework to think about the political feasibility of BI in a more systematic manner.

We embrace a broad conception of political feasibility according to which a policy is politically feasible when the background conditions are such that there is a reasonable probability of the policy becoming actualized in the foreseeable future. Viewed this way, “feasibility” covers the broad domain where a policy is neither immediately realizable, nor impossible to realize (Brighthouse 2004; Gilabert and Lawford-Smith forthcoming). In our view, feasibility is aimed at investigating the factors (e.g., social conditions) that hamper a policy from being actualized, and subsequently, comparing how different policies fare in terms of their

probabilities of being actualized given a particular social environment. We adopt a similarly broad notion of “the political” by focusing on those feasibility constraints arising from the human will, as opposed to natural, physical, or technological impediments. The concept of political feasibility embraces the Searlean notion that, not unlike brute natural facts, individual or collective manifestations of the human will are causally relevant in bringing about institutional facts such as BI (Searle 1995, 2010; Brennan and Pettit 2005).

The framework we propose in this chapter is constructed around two key political dimensions that constitute the core of the policy process: agency and constraints. Combined, these dimensions generate a matrix with four types of political feasibility: strategic feasibility, institutional feasibility, psychological feasibility, and behavioral feasibility. Each of these types will be briefly explored in the remainder of this chapter with specific focus on their relevance for BI.

The purpose of the proposed framework is threefold. First, it offers a toolkit to think about political feasibility in a systematic comparative manner, exploring both differences and similarities across types. The proposed typology also allows insight into the dynamic aspects of political feasibility ensuing from the simultaneous or sequential interaction of these different types. Second, when applied to the specific context of BI the insight into these four types of political feasibility offers a better understanding of the many complex challenges faced by those advocating BI schemes. Each type requires a specifically targeted political response, but an appropriate response is complicated considerably by the need to accommodate several types of constraints at the same time, whether simultaneously or sequentially. Third, the typology allows us to assess the current state of knowledge in relation to each type, and identify lacunae (and corresponding research priorities) that need to be addressed in order to better understand the political feasibility of BI. While our aim is to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, this chapter offers a useful tool for exploring [further]<sup>1</sup> the political feasibility of BI policies in the concrete cases discussed in the remainder of this volume.

### POLITICAL FEASIBILITY: A FRAMEWORK

In this section, we outline our proposed framework for thinking about the political feasibility of BI, graphically represented in table 2.1 below. Let us begin by exploring the two dimensions that construct our typology matrix.

We start from the simple axiom that politics implies agency. In one well-known phrase, politics is the purposeful act of deciding who gets

what when (Lasswell 1936). Politics is intimately linked with power, which, in turn, is the ability to produce intentional effects on other people (Dowding 1996). Political power presumes not merely agency in an abstract sense, but concretely at least two agents: those who exert political influence and those who are at its receiving end. On the supply side, different political entrepreneurs—individual, collective, even corporate—employ political resources in an attempt to exert power and influence outcomes. More interesting, however, is the demand side of the equation: those at which political power is addressed and who are the proper subject of specifically designed political strategies. Here, we can distinguish two very different types of agents and agency.

1. *Discrete agency*: Political agency addressed at readily identifiable actors with distinctive interests, roles, capacities, and intentions
2. *Diffuse agency*: Political agency addressed at an amorphous set of actors, a “collective” in the loosest sense of the term, with little or no apparent coordination or collective intention

Discrete agents comprise not only the most visible part of political agents, comprising politicians, policymakers, social movement elites, or bureaucrats, but also clearly identifiable corporate actors such as organizations or distinctive formal institutions (e.g., the executive). By contrast, the typical example of a diffuse agent in the policy process is the general public, which often exhibits the properties of “mass” rather than “collective” behavior. Both types of agencies coexist and interact in a myriad of complex ways to constitute the environment in which political entrepreneurs operate.

The distinction between discrete and diffuse agency is important for understanding the different challenges political entrepreneurs face when exercising political power addressed to each of these groups. Discrete agents are the subject of highly targeted strategies of political power. Strategies aimed at diffuse agents, by contrast, are necessarily less direct and of a broad, “catch-all” format. Where we might think of discrete political agency as similar to a line fisher carefully selecting his bait to capture a particular type of fish, diffuse political agency resembles the trawler fisher who sweeps the ocean floor in the hope to catch as many fish as possible, knowing that much of what he catches may be of little value to him. Nevertheless, even the trawler fisher must carefully select where and when to put out his net to ensure as good a catch as possible. Both approaches require careful strategizing. The main challenge is to simultaneously affect both types of agents.

Moving on to the second dimension, politics takes place between agents in a context that is highly constrained, requiring valuable political

resources—time, effort, money, political expertise, and reputation—to be expended in order to achieve intended outcomes. The constraints that make up a particular political environment are again very diverse and can be usefully characterized by adopting a sequential perspective.

1. *Prospective constraints*: Constraints that affect the probability of a policy being instituted
2. *Retrospective constraints*: Constraints that affect both the functioning and resilience of a policy once instituted

Prospective constraints affect the most familiar aspects of the policy process: agenda setting, policy advocacy, coalition building, political negotiation, and legislation. These are the sort of constraints policy advocates face whenever they attempt to move their proposal from the drawing board to its actualization. Retrospective constraints, by contrast, are those background conditions that affect the outcome variables of a particular policy, including whether a particular policy will be vulnerable to internal contradictions or external shocks that may result in it being a very short-lived event. Of course, as with political agency, both sets of constraints coexist in the political environment and typically influence each other in numerous ways.

The distinction between prospective and retrospective constraints bears some interesting similarities with recent work by Erik Olin Wright (2006, 2010) on emancipatory social theory. Wright makes a helpful distinction between the criteria of viability and achievability, both of which can be regarded as a subclass of the concept of political feasibility. Achievability refers to the practical task of realizing a particular policy outcome (or a social transformation), while the criterion of viability “asks of proposals for transforming existing social structures whether, if implemented, they would actually generate in a sustained manner the emancipatory consequences that motivated their proposal” (Wright 2006: 97). Viability enquires into the policy congruence of a particular proposal, the extent to which its outcomes might cohere with or deviate from the stated (or implied) objectives that constitute the reasons for adopting it in the first place. While most theorists debate the value of constructing proposals that may be viable but not achievable (in the short run), equally interesting questions arise when considering proposals that are achievable but perhaps not viable (i.e., they may lead to results that are, all things considered, less than desirable). Mapped onto our framework, we can see that both achievability and viability are necessary conditions and that, in our phrasing, political entrepreneurs must squarely face up to both prospective and retrospective constraints.

**Table 2.1** Typology of political feasibility

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

The resulting matrix, illustrated in table 2.1, generates the following four types of political feasibility.

- A. *Strategic feasibility*: Discrete agency, prospective constraints
- B. *Institutional feasibility*: Discrete agency, retrospective constraints
- C. *Psychological feasibility*: Diffuse agency, prospective constraints
- D. *Behavioral feasibility*: Diffuse agency, retrospective constraints

Strategic and institutional feasibility share a focus on discrete agency. However, where strategic feasibility requires a direct engagement to further a policy, institutional feasibility directs our attention to preexisting sets of rules and regulations that may affect the performance of a policy over time. Similarly, psychological and behavioral feasibility both concentrate on diffuse agency with the general public. The former addresses the psychological processes that *ex-ante* affect popular support of a policy, while the latter is mostly concerned with how behavioral changes *ex-post* affect the performance or continued survival of a policy. In the remainder of this chapter, we examine each of these with a specific focus on BI in mind.

### STRATEGIC FEASIBILITY: THE SEARCH FOR A ROBUST BI COALITION

When thinking about political feasibility, we customarily have some form of strategic feasibility in mind. Political entrepreneurs engaging in all sorts of strategic interventions to build a political coalition enabling the legislation and subsequent implementation of a policy proposal has indeed become one of the hallmarks of modern politics (Sabbatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). In a very real sense, coalition building constitutes the building block of successful policy advocacy in present-day democracy. Despite this centrality of coalition building, the literature on BI is surprisingly void of systematic discussion of the political strategies required to securing an enduring BI coalition. In this section, we briefly examine a key challenge affecting the strategic feasibility of BI.<sup>2</sup>

When challenged about the political feasibility of BI, its advocates typically refer to numerous instances of individual politicians, political

parties, social movements, or interest groups (e.g., trade unions) on record as supportive of BI. This response rapidly takes the form of a simple numbers game, in which the level of support for BI can be read—more or less directly—off the instances of expressed support elicited from such individuals, associations, or organizations. The idea that increased expressed support for BI from a variety of social and political actors is directly conducive to building a sustained political coalition is flawed, however. The reason is that not all instances of expressed support for a policy imply a sustained commitment to promoting this policy. It is one thing for a social or political agent to vocally express a preference in favor of BI, quite a different matter to actively canvass support amongst constituents, party members, or like-minded associations and groups; build a shared platform across political factions; utilize scarce political resources (money, time, and above all political capital) to further the cause; bargain and possibly compromise on other political goals; and so on. Expressed support without either the commitment or the capacity to engage in the necessary political action to build a sustainable coalition around the policy of granting each citizen an unconditional BI is “cheap”: it seems of little practical worth to BI advocates.

We may find considerable support for BI in individuals or associations that are often marginally positioned in terms of their ability to influence policy. For instance, Green politicians and parties across Europe typically support BI. However, leaving aside one or two exceptions, European Greens are small protest parties comfortably nested on the side of opposing governing coalitions with little or no direct policy responsibility. Irrespective of the strong links between BI and Green values (Birnbaum 2009; Van Parijs 2009), political support from Green political parties offers BI advocates precious little as a genuine political platform to boost their cause. Or consider support for BI amongst certain trade unions (Vanderborcht 2006). Here too, it appears that those unions who support BI are either comparatively small in terms of membership (and thus political leverage) or else operate in a political system in which their policy influence is otherwise constrained; by contrast, larger unions who wield genuine power to engage in policy formation through a variety of corporatist mechanisms appear not to support BI. Counting instances of expressed support might serve a purpose in boosting the morale of those advocating BI, but it remains to be seen whether it produces any further effect.

One might object to this overly pessimistic analysis on the grounds that expressed support from currently marginalized individuals or groups should not be so lightly dismissed. After all, those groups may one day be in a position to genuinely effectuate policy influence, at which point BI support pays off in real terms. However, this argument hinges on the view

that political support is sticky, and that political factions who have once expressly supported BI would continue doing so when their power position improves. Unfortunately, there is little reason to think that groups that move up on the political ladder will necessarily sustain their support for BI. For, in the absence of policy responsibility, one's support for BI is cheap in a second relevant sense: there are few political costs associated with supporting BI in an environment in which one is never put in the position of having to defend one's support against a skeptical—at times even hostile—political base, let alone the electorate. This is even more the case when we consider that furthering the case for BI means precious political capital must be spent at the expense of other political objectives. The political opportunity cost of supporting BI once one has achieved a position of policy responsibility may simply prove too high to be politically sustainable. Thus, we likely find the very same parties or politicians who support BI while in opposition suddenly ditching their support when achieving office, typically as part of a governing coalition. In addition, we may plausibly expect a similar scenario in relation to trade unions who become more powerful, in particular given their internal division about BI because of the strong laborist philosophy inherent to most unions.

The fact that cheap political support for BI may not be sufficiently robust to survive a move of its supporters into a position of policy responsibility is not the only problem, however. Worse still, some instances of political support for BI may even be counterproductive as support from one particular faction or group may prevent others from endorsing the same policy. Because political factions generally use identification with policy positions as an instrument to differentiate themselves from their (internal or external) political competitors, support for BI from faction X may prevent faction Y from endorsing a policy that would otherwise naturally fit their political profile. There exists a “first mover disadvantage” to BI being associated with a political faction that is unable to move it up on the policy agenda, when precisely this association prevents more powerful individuals or groups from offering valuable support. In this case, expressed support is not just cheap but represents a real cost in terms of advancing the case for BI. In many countries (e.g., Ireland, Namibia) BI is promoted by groups with a strong religious affiliation, which may well prevent nonconfessional social movements or associations from expressing support. Similarly, BI advocates who adopt a liberal entrepreneurial perspective (e.g., Vivant in Belgium or Götz Werner in Germany) may find it difficult to curry favor with factions endorsing strong socialist values. Initial effects of the identification of BI with one specific faction, combined with the “reactive reluctance” of other factions to support the policy because of such political identification, may produce a form of path dependency that causes BI to be marginalized by association.

The problem of cheap support, as outlined in this section, poses something of an impasse for BI advocates intent on building a robust political coalition. On the one hand, many (if not most) current instances of expressed support may be of little practical use, and in some circumstances could turn “noxious” when support by some factions leads others to oppose rather than support BI. On the other hand, future support of any impact is unlikely in a political environment reluctant to spend political capital on a policy that remains highly divisive, both internally and externally. This makes it difficult to ascertain whose support to seek, and at what price. The underlying concern is that the very reason why political support is relatively easy to come by from marginal political individuals or groups—it is cheap in the sense of expressing such support having few costs attached—is also the reason why such support is relatively worthless to BI advocates. The main challenge to advocates intent on building a robust BI coalition is to find ways to get powerful political agents to express support and simultaneously, to ensure that such support is no longer cheap in either of the two senses canvassed above. Failure to achieve this is one important way in which the strategic feasibility of BI is hampered.

### INSTITUTIONAL FEASIBILITY: IMPLEMENTING THE BI PROPOSAL

A second type of political feasibility is of a retrospective nature. Securing a robust enacting coalition of political actors in favor of BI is an important stepping-stone for advancing a BI scheme. However, such a scheme would rapidly prove self-defeating if a BI cannot be implemented in a manner that produces outcomes that are highly congruent with the reasons political actors support a BI in the first place. This brings us squarely to the question of what background institutions must be in place for a BI to produce desired outcomes in terms of combating poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, gender equality, and what not. Institutional feasibility affects both the desirability of BI in a very direct sense, as well as its long-term survival or political resilience. As with strategic feasibility, institutional feasibility is a complex phenomenon capturing a host of different issues, but in this section, we briefly focus on an aspect that is largely ignored in the BI debate, namely the implementation challenges to BI administration.<sup>3</sup>

BI implementation is customarily regarded as unproblematic, in large part, because it is believed a BI fares rather well when compared to more selective forms of social assistance. However, this in no way means the detailed design of a BI is not sensitive to the particulars of the institutional context, as we illustrate in this section. While it avoids many of the

complications of selective programs, a BI faces its own set of implementation challenges (De Wispelaere and Stirton 2012). One important practical challenge arises because BI may be unable to piggyback on existing implementation instruments. The sheer size of the program in practice means that few instruments currently in place have the comprehensive reach that a universal BI requires; moreover, the philosophy underlying BI often proves incompatible with the use of instruments closely associated with a “controlling bureaucracy” (Standing 2002; Offe 2005; Handler and Hasenfeld 2006). The impact of all of this, however, implies a “hard choice” between setting up new institutions from scratch or recombining several administrative instruments in novel ways—in both cases, an administrative challenge fraught with complexity and risk—or, alternatively, compromising on the actual performance of a BI in terms of target efficiency or administrative efficiency, more generally (De Wispelaere and Stirton 2011, 2012). Let us illustrate the difficulties with several practical examples.

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Consider first a variant of BI commonly referred to as PI [Participation Income].<sup>4</sup> A PI comprises an individual entitlement that is not means tested but retains a broad participation requirement going well beyond the conditions of formal employment or full-time education typically associated with entitlement to social assistance (Atkinson 1996). The main argument for adopting a PI instead of a BI has to do with the resistance of the public opinion against giving “something for nothing” (Goodin 2001). Retaining a broad participation requirement looks like a clever strategy for building a coalition between various political factions by combining universal income protection with a commitment to a version of the contribution principle.

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Unfortunately, from an implementation perspective, PI rapidly turns into a nightmare scenario (De Wispelaere and Stirton 2007). The notion of a broad participation requirement is difficult to operationalize, leaving us with three main choices. First, introduce a heavy bureaucratic machinery to monitor and control the numerous informal forms of participation that allow citizens to qualify for PI. The administrative apparatus required in this option would exceed anything we witness today in the much-maligned workfare programs.<sup>5</sup> Second, let qualifying conditions for PI mirror existing institutional capacities, effectively reducing PI to little more than entitlement for existing social assistance programs. Third, relax qualifying conditions such that almost any activity is accepted as a valid basis for claiming PI. This solution would turn the participation requirement into a mere formality, and PI would rapidly approximate a genuine BI. While BI advocates naturally favor this third approach (Barry 2001; Van Parijs 2001), other political factions in the coalition may insist on the second or first option. In this scenario,

the challenges of institutional feasibility rapidly break down the political coalition around PI (De Wispelaere and Stirton 2007).

Would a genuine unconditional BI escape such worries? Unfortunately, even the fully unconditional model would face important implementation challenges that directly affect the institutional feasibility of BI. Consider three types of bottlenecks that BI implementation needs to address (De Wispelaere and Stirton 2012a, 2012b). First, since BI is meant to cover the whole of the population, we need an updated list (a “cadaster”) of every single individual who is entitled to receive the grant: those who do not appear on this list will not receive the BI.<sup>6</sup> Countries vary considerably in their institutional capacity to properly maintain such a list. Some countries have national registers of all citizens, others will have to rely on alternative lists that are typically incomplete (e.g., voting registers or health insurance registers), while others still rely on self-registration. Unsurprisingly, different outcomes result from relying on one solution rather than the other. Second, effective payment tools for disbursing the BI may have difficulties as well. Part of the problem arises in finding a suitable instrument that covers every citizen: although institutional capacity varies considerably, in almost every country a significant part of the population does not have access to a bank account or is too transient to rely on regular postal checks. Here again, BI administrators face hard choices between setting up novel disbursement systems (which incur significant costs and risks of error), combining existing systems without clear indication of how comprehensive the coverage is, or compromising on the target efficiency of BI. Finally, where BI implementation is likely to be imperfect, we still require a monitoring mechanism to ensure that all those entitled to the grant effectively receive it. The emphasis on doing away with bureaucratic interventions means BI advocates customarily underestimate the positive role of monitoring in this sense. As before, institutional capabilities vary extensively across countries, with some almost entirely relying on so-called “police patrol” mechanisms of routine surveillance and others operating primarily with “fire alarm” type of monitoring devices in which those who fail to receive the grant themselves sound the alarm (Lupia and McCubbins 2004; De Wispelaere and Stirton 2012a, 2012b).

The extent to which these three types of bottleneck affect the performance of BI depends crucially on the institutional constellation in which the scheme is implemented. Institutional feasibility can be improved in two main ways. One way is by adjusting the details of the BI proposal to not overreach the capabilities of the implementation system. However, this solution may require BI advocates to compromise on the scope of the proposal, and we can expect understandable reluctance to proceed along this route. The alternative is to boost the institutional capabilities

themselves, but this in turn may run into several practical and political problems—not in the least, the cost of upgrading the administrative system. Furthermore, where bureaucratic investments may resolve some of the capability concerns, persistent limits to public administration often defy simple technological upgrades (Hood 2010). In either case, the implementation of BI is an inherently political problem in which institutional limits impose hard choices on decision makers (De Wispelaere and Stirton 2011, 2012a). These choices in turn will affect several individuals or groups differently, and thus also shape the political opportunities for securing a robust coalition in favor of BI. Institutional and strategic feasibility are intricately related: decisions that affect one type will likely affect the other.

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### PSYCHOLOGICAL FEASIBILITY: LEGITIMATING THE BI PROPOSAL

So far, we have covered two types of discrete agency capturing the notions of strategic and institutional feasibility, respectively. However, even if the proponents of BI successfully meet the challenges of strategic and institutional feasibility, the BI proposal must also withstand the test of psychological feasibility, a prospective form of diffuse agency. Psychological feasibility, as conceptualized here, concerns the legitimation of a policy through securing a broad level of social acceptance among the general public. The legitimation of BI is often called into question (Liebig and Mau 2005; De Wispelaere 2009), and the challenge of psychological feasibility is to convince the public at large that BI is a normatively attractive and practically effective policy.

There are three reasons for taking psychological feasibility seriously. First, in a modern democracy, it would be difficult to defend the imposition of a BI against strong opposition of the public opinion. Persistent substantial disagreement about what constitutes a just policy implies that the legitimate institution of a BI would have to win broad majoritarian support. Second, the importance of securing approval of the public opinion is taken very seriously by political agents and decision makers in democratic societies where taxpayers and voters have access to political mechanisms to demand or resist particular policies. Political entrepreneurs will want to make sure that BI has sufficient public support before committing to promoting its case, which directly impacts on the strategic feasibility of BI as previously discussed. Third, illegitimate policies often fail because those subject to them refuse to play by the rules. Individuals could subvert policy outcomes in numerous ways. The PI proposal, briefly mentioned in the previous section, serves as a perfect example of a scheme that would allow many to claim the grant while only

engaging in a “token” form of social participation. Instances of “creative compliance” are likely to increase exponentially where the policy is deemed illegitimate. In the case of an unconditional BI, those who are literally living off their BI face increased social pressure if the scheme itself fails to attract broad social support. This would effectively pervert one of the main reasons why many advocate BI—its capacity to fight social exclusion (Jordan 1996; Van Parijs 1996).

Psychological feasibility entails the capacity to mobilize positive perceptions, emotions, and reasons such that the proposal does not generate strong social opposition. Two types of constraints hamper the psychological feasibility of BI. A familiar type of constraint consists of “contingent” public opinion embedded in a given sociohistorical context. Diverging ideological perspectives on economic distribution, for instance, affect the support for BI or perhaps the particular type of BI supported.<sup>7</sup> A second type of constraint is rooted in the deep structure of human psychology and therefore less fluid, although clever institutional design may be able to manipulate the triggers that activate particular responses. In the remainder of this section, we elaborate a little on the constraints rooted in basic psychological dispositions.

One key disposition that easily conflicts with a BI is the reciprocity norm. Reciprocity is a psychological disposition expressed across different social contexts in the form of the work ethic, the contribution principle, or the deservingness principle. Survey research shows repeatedly that paid work remains a core value among the population in advanced welfare states. This strongly suggests that BI advocates face an uphill battle trying to make the full version of the proposal understood and accepted by the general public. Most people believe work constitutes a central obligation toward society and that social benefits should be restricted to those who really “need” them or “deserve” them (van Oorschot 2000, 2006; Clasen and van Oorschot 2002; Fong et al. 2005; Slothuis 2007). For instance, Liebig and Mau (2005) show that while most people agree that the state should provide a guaranteed minimum income, most nevertheless reject the provision of such an income in the form of a BI independent of level of need or contribution.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, such attitudes appear to be independent of the objective socioeconomic interests of particular social groups. This poses an intriguing paradox for BI supporters, for precisely those social groups whose support we would like to “strategically” enlist based on their objective interests, turn out to be those who are more likely to “psychologically” reject BI. It is for this reason that many propose that BI proposals increase their political feasibility by recoupling income to work (or social participation) and making BI more sensitive to notions of deservingness and need (Atkinson 1996; Goodin 2003; White 2003).

It would be tempting to think that BI supporters should merely regard the existing dispositional context as an immutable wall. “People don’t like free lunches, therefore BI is a non-starter.” However, this sort of argument fails to take into account the many ways in which we can purposefully affect public opinion. How should BI supporters go about resolving the apparent conflict between the idea of an unconditional BI and psychological dispositions that favor reciprocity and deservingness? One answer is provided by the extensive literature on the role of framing in the policy process (Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b; Jerit 2009). Carefully framing BI proposals to avoid triggering negative perceptions, values, and beliefs and instead trigger positive dispositions may significantly improve the psychological feasibility of BI. For instance, framing BI alternatively as a social heritage, a natural dividend, an antipoverty measure, or a citizenship right might produce different levels of social support, while the distributive outcomes of the policy remain unchanged. Equally, the particular implementation of a BI—for example, BI received integrated in the tax rebate or as a social benefit—might also affect the public perception of the scheme. Furthermore, “sequential implementation” might be easier to frame (Vanderborght 2005): separately instituting a universal child benefit, a universal basic pension, a guaranteed minimum income for those under the poverty line, and a tax credit for low-income workers might be acceptable, where a direct move toward a full BI would be opposed.

Framing effects are only one type of psychological mechanism that affects the psychological feasibility of introducing a BI. Many other mechanisms familiar from the literature on heuristics and cognitive biases are applicable to the psychological feasibility of BI (Kahneman and Tversky 2000).<sup>9</sup> Some of these psychological mechanisms can be expected to work in favor of BI, others to work against it; but in each case, clever design and framing of the BI may ensure the reinforcement of positive triggers and the weakening (or silencing) of negative triggers.

### BEHAVIORAL FEASIBILITY: BI EFFECTS ON INCENTIVES TO WORK

The fourth and final dimension of political feasibility we term behavioral feasibility. This retrospective form of diffuse feasibility is concerned with anticipating the potentially negative effects of a BI on individuals’ behavior after implementation. The general idea is that, for a BI to be behaviorally feasible, it must neither produce perverse or counterproductive effects, nor fail to produce key desired outcomes. Similar to institutional feasibility, either of these failures would negatively affect the viability and political resilience of the BI. Behavioral feasibility is of the utmost

importance, for a BI is expected to provoke changes in a vast range of social dimensions: labor-market performance, family composition, education, participation in voluntary work or the shadow economy, tax compliance, and geographical mobility. Behavioral feasibility, as we understand it, is primarily concerned with the incentives affecting the “robustness” of a given policy, where robustness is a form of internal stability in virtue of the capacity to continue functioning when initial conditions change.

Behavioral robustness is achieved when the design of a policy explicitly avoids providing agents with incentives that undermine its existence conditions. In short, behavioral robustness prevents a policy from becoming self-defeating. Self-regulating strategies, such as the indexing of benefit levels or surveillance by external agencies, are examples of mechanisms to increase behavioral robustness in policy design. Unfortunately, a behaviorally robust strategy or policy mechanism may not be attractive in the short term, in spite of its long-term effectiveness or efficiency. Here behavioral feasibility comes into conflict with the dimensions of strategic, institutional, or psychological feasibility, outlined in previous sections. For instance, consider the introduction of a BI with the level of the grant indexed to a macroeconomic performance indicator such as labor-market participation, which effectively operates as a “policy thermostat.” This design may enhance behavioral feasibility when a decrease of productivity or labor-market participation is reflected in a subsequent decrease in the BI level, which then induces (some) individuals to take up formal employment again in order to top up their BI with a wage. However, this thermostat design complicates strategic or psychological feasibility, making it more difficult for BI advocates to find political allies or secure public-opinion support for a benefit whose value may fluctuate considerably with aggregate economic performance.

As the preceding example suggests, the most salient behavioral problem pertains to how a BI will affect labor incentives and labor participation. What if the introduction of a BI engenders a significant surfer effect (Van Parijs 1995) such that a large number of individuals decide to “live off their BI” without making a productive contribution to society. If this number were sufficiently high, the strict economic feasibility of a BI funded through a general income tax would be seriously undermined. Indexing the BI as outlined before only partly accommodates this problem, for a high number of “surfers” would likely drive the BI amount down to a level significantly lower than the subsistence level, which may not realize the many positive effects attributed to BI (Groot and Van der Veen 2000; Groot 2004). One avenue of response to such concerns is to deny that the surfer effect will reach such dramatic proportions. Unfortunately, this may offer the BI advocate little solace, for even a tiny minority of surfers has the potential to deal a serious blow to the

long-term feasibility of BI.<sup>10</sup> For starters, the perception of surfing may have a snowballing effect causing more to engage in similar behavior: “If they can do it, so can I.” More importantly, the perception of surfing will likely foster a public rejection of BI and thus directly affect its psychological feasibility. “There would be no surer way to lose popular and political support . . . than with a few well-publicized cases of young people blowing their grants on cocaine or wild holidays” (Le Grand and Nissan 2003: 37). It is easy to see, then, that far from BI being neutral between different ways of leading one’s life—different conceptions of the good life, as the political philosophers have it—a robust BI is likely to conform to conventions and social norms endorsed by the society.

However, the question remains whether the widespread perception of BI leading to a sustained surfer effect is correct. At this point, both BI advocates and their critics do well to acknowledge upfront significant uncertainty concerning the behavioral effects of a policy proposal that has nowhere been implemented in full.<sup>11</sup> In this context, highly stylized econometric models have serious limitations as macrolevel social dynamics rarely mirror microlevel individual behavior and motivations (Coleman 1990; Hedström 2005; Hedström and Bearman 2009). An interesting alternative is to conduct field experiments like the 1970s and the 1980s Negative Income Tax (NIT) experiments in the United States and Canada (Pechman and Timpane 1975; Robins et al. 1980; Robins 1985). However, the results of these experiments are difficult to interpret and vulnerable to “miscommunication” by politicians and scholars (Widerquist 2005). In addition, the difficulty and costs of replicating the experiments constitutes a major shortcoming of this methodology (Noguera and De Wispelaere 2006). Our preferred method is to explore behavioral feasibility through agent-based social simulations (Axelrod 1997; Hedström 2005; Macy and Flache 2009).<sup>12</sup> Unlike econometric models, agent-based models (ABM) allow us to realistically model the complexity of social interaction and its recursive effects on behavior. Particularly relevant for BI research is that ABM is especially useful for modeling hypothetical situations and answering “what-if” questions.

To illustrate the relevance of ABM for BI research, consider four important behavioral issues. First, the provision of BI funded out of income taxation can be modeled as a social dilemma in which a rational agent with moderate preferences for work (or income) may be interested in “free riding” on a moderate BI, provided the level of BI does not decrease below subsistence following increased free riding by others (González-Bailón, Noguera, and De Wispelaere 2011). In this scenario, rational agents need to pay attention to others’ labor decisions when solving their income-leisure trade-off, and the ABM modeling of BI provision produces important insights in the social stability of different types

of labor strategies. Second, ABM is also well suited for modeling the importance of social influence and the role of social networks in relation to BI. Research has shown that labor-market behavior is strongly affected by social influence (Aronson et al. 1999; Grodner and Kniesner 2006). ABM research usefully supplements econometric studies focused on “isolated agents” by demonstrating how individuals respond to social influence under particular BI conditions.

Third, ABM takes into account the motivational heterogeneity of agents. Instead of assuming that agents have an artificial similarity across the population, ABM allows us to model different types of agents in terms of attitudes to work attitudes. In addition, ABM models variability in agents’ prosocial motivations or attitudes toward distributive justice (Camerer and Fehr 2004; Lindenberg 2006), which interact in complex ways with heterogeneous work inclinations to produce a wide range of labor-market decisions. Even with a substantial BI, it does not automatically follow that a population of heterogeneous agents would produce the disastrous effects on aggregate labor behavior presupposed by the critics. Finally, ABM is a particularly useful tool for evaluating the expected behavioral outcomes of a BI when compared to selective policies such as workfare. Careful modeling of the incentives associated with each type of policy may reveal unexpected findings.<sup>13</sup> In addition, comparing BI with its main competitors through ABM modeling offers important insights that remain obscured by looking at each separately.

The general lesson of this section is that the macrosocial outcomes of BI’s behavioral effects cannot be assumed a priori, but should be tested through empirically calibrated and realistic models of social interaction. Behavioral feasibility clearly constitutes a major component of the overall political feasibility of BI, but in this area, we are barely scratching the surface. Much work remains to be done to find out what effects the introduction of a BI would really produce.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we offer an analytical framework that distinguishes four types of political feasibility applied to the politics of BI.

1. Strategic feasibility challenges BI advocates to carefully consider strategies for building robust political coalitions. In particular, concerns about “cheap” expressions of political support strongly suggest more attention should be spent on political strategizing.
2. Institutional feasibility focuses on the necessary background conditions that must be in place for a BI to deliver desirable outcomes. A BI that turns out to be an ill fit for the institutional capabilities

- to implement the policy runs the risk of becoming self-defeating and, in the long run, not politically resilient.
3. Psychological feasibility is primarily concerned with the legitimacy of the BI idea with the general public. Careful framing of the BI proposal might counter the uneasy connection between an unconditional BI and strong focus on reciprocity, need, and deservingness rooted in basic human psychology.
  4. Behavioral feasibility is strongly affected by individuals' labor-market behavior after a BI is implemented, as small changes in behavior may rapidly unravel the social and political support for BI. However, real questions remain regarding the extent to which introducing a BI will lead to such a collapse. In fact, the most promising methodology to examine these types of questions makes it clear that the answer is likely to be very complex, defying both the simplistic optimism of contemporary BI advocates and the simplistic pessimism of its critics.

This chapter has shown political feasibility to be complex, multifaceted, and highly dynamic, with attempts to affect one type likely interacting with the others. The appropriate response to such complexity is a realization of the big task ahead of us, and perhaps a sense of the urgency with which we should undertake it.

#### NOTES

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1. Inserted by editor.
2. This section builds on De Wispelaere (2011).
3. For a more systematic treatment of the “administrative factor” in BI implementation, see De Wispelaere and Stirton (2007, 2011, 2012a, 2012b).
4. Inserted by editor.
5. Take the example of informal care arrangements, which would require regular home visits by program administrators to check that the PI entitlement is justified.
6. Many BI advocates mistake the negative requirement of “not having to satisfy a condition to become eligible for a BI” with the positive requirement of “appearing on a list of all eligible for a BI.”

- Administratively, the former is only the starting point, while the latter is the one that really matters for the effective implementation of a BI.
7. The differences between so-called progressive and conservative BI models is considerable (compare Van Parijs 1995 with Murray 2006).
  8. Relatedly, in a recent survey in Catalonia comparing social support for BI and several cognate policies, only 40.7 percent of the population supports a pure BI. By contrast, 78.2 percent supports a PI; 82.2 percent, a means-tested guaranteed income; 74.1 percent, a negative income tax; and 70.9 percent, a universal basic pension (Noguera et al. 2011).
  9. In addition, research shows the institutional background also importantly affects the level of support for particular policies (Albrekt Larsen 2006), suggesting that the institutional and psychological feasibility are linked.
  10. A second response of BI advocates—that a BI will likely lead many to contribute to society in numerous informal ways not accounted for in the labor market—does little to alleviate this worry because of the requirement to establish a robust funding source for the BI.
  11. The one exception is the Alaska Permanent Fund, which pays every Alaskan resident a little more than \$1000 each year. However, for various reasons this model cannot tell us very much about the more ambitious BI schemes proposed by its advocates. On Alaska, see Goldsmith (2005) and Widerquist and Howard (2012).
  12. ABM has numerous advantages: modeling a population of heterogeneous agents, emulating the main regulations and circumstances of their environment, and letting them interact autonomously following a set of rules or predispositions; allowing agents to learn and react to social outcomes; identifying social mechanisms that explain how patterns of interaction produce social outcomes at the macro level. One major advantage of ABM is that they can be empirically calibrated to fit a particular case or phenomenon.
  13. For instance, Gneezy and Rustichini (2000) show that when incentives are small, work performance declines below the level reached in a zero-incentive situation. Similarly, research on “crowding out” effects suggest that compliance decreases whenever sanctions or controls are perceived as too strict or unfair (Bowles 2008).

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AQ: Please approve interchanging of 2012a and 2012b labels for alphabetical sorting of titles (ignoring the articles).

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