

Solidarity and Policy Responses to Automation<sup>1</sup>

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## **Solidarity in Policy**

Automation and economic changes threaten to destabilize the lives and livelihoods of many people. Few would argue that technology is bad. But for American workers automation does not mean liberation from menial tasks. At best, automation means learning how to do a new job. At worst, automation means unemployment and poverty. For Example, self-driving vehicles may displace up to 1.3 million truck drivers within a few years (Kitroeff 2016). Universal basic income is a policy response to the effects of automation, with serious interest by governments, nonprofits, and researchers since the 1970s (Gardner 2016; Weller 2017; Andreß and Heien 2001; Bay and Pedersen 2006). A universal basic income is an unconditional cash grant paid to every citizen regardless of need. A basic income would allow workers displaced by automation to choose to exit or remain in the workforce without the threat of poverty.

Well-designed policy responses to economic changes and poverty often fail. Coal miners, for example, choose to believe mining jobs will return rather than taking advantage of retraining programs (Volcovici 2017). Safety net programs, like welfare, are easily cast in racist terms. Racialization reduces solidarity, diminishing support for the policies and allowing political attacks to reduce their effectiveness (Gilens 2009). To be effective, public policies cannot merely address the symptoms of economic changes like automation. Rather, we must design public policies that build solidarity among workers and grassroots political support. Universal basic income, examined here, is a policy with potential to build solidarity and keep workers politically engaged. Here, we examine how psychological attitudes, especially racial attitudes, differentially predict policy support for basic income compared to welfare and social security.

### **Theory**

People tend not to think about economic or political problems in rational, objective terms or individual interest. Rather, we think in terms of their social identities and group interest (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Experimental evidence shows that people will allocate benefits in a way that maximizes the benefit to their group relative to other groups, even if that means everyone gets less. We also attribute favorable characteristics to our own group, and we evaluate members of our groups positively relative to people in other groups. These social processes can be based on minimal differences, like favorite food or skin color, and they explain how breakdowns in solidarity occur. Politicians are quite adept at preying on people's multiple, intersecting social identities in order to build and destroy policy support coalitions (Bishin 2010). Politicians created the racist stereotype of the black "welfare queen" in order to undermine support for welfare policies among white people. This approach has been hugely successful, despite Americans wanting to help the poor (Bartels 2009). In the case of welfare, politicians play up the latent social identity of employed Americans as smart and hardworking, while casting the unemployed as black, short-sighted, and lazy. Victims of automation are likewise portrayed as uneducated rednecks, who lacked the foresight to prepare for their obsolescence. Policies like welfare, or job retraining, are narrowly targeted to help only the neediest. Because of this, these targeted policies are susceptible to attacks based on social identity. Basic income, as a policy that everyone receives rather than being targeted at the neediest people, may resist such attacks.

In addition to thinking in terms of social identity, people also have a tendency to justify the status quo (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004). We come up with explanations to justify differences between high and low status groups rather than question hierarchies. If a person sees widespread poverty, they are likelier to attribute that poverty to individual failings among the

poor rather than question the economic system in which they live. This tendency is clear when it comes to the racial hierarchy. In order to justify the system of white dominance and black subservience, we create stories that black people are lazy rather than survivors of pernicious discrimination. The tendency of people to engage in system justification makes their exploitation easier, especially in combination with their social identity. If people believe their social systems are just and equitable, it is easier to attribute systemic failures to individuals. If I believe the labor market is meritocratic, and free from racial discrimination, it is easier for me to believe that black people who face structural unemployment are simply and individually lazy. Thus, holding racist beliefs is a form of system justification that reduces support for welfare policies. Racist beliefs are especially powerful, although social identity theory explains how any policy can be cast in terms of group interest.

We believe that universal basic income is more like social security than welfare when it comes to building solidarity. Basic income should be better than social security, even, because more people would receive it. When it comes to fighting the effects of automation, such solidarity is essential to maintain vigorous support for an implementation of any policy. Thus, basic income should be a policy that helps people displaced by economic changes like automation, and indeed all people, in a solidaristic and long-term way.

### **Methods**

Here, we test a narrow set of hypotheses derived from these theories using a diverse sample drawn from Facebook and Amazon's Mechanical Turk service. Specifically, examine how attitudes towards basic income compare to attitudes towards welfare, social security, and raising the minimum wage. We expect that:

- Symbolic racism will negatively predict support for welfare, but not for other policies.
- Perception of meritocracy will negatively predict support for basic income.

Symbolic racism is measures racial attitudes like stereotypes. For example, one question asks whether the respondent agrees that "Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same." The racism inventory has a reliability of  $\alpha = 0.91$ . If a person agrees with this statement, they are implying that individual blacks ought to work harder and systemic racism is not to blame for black poverty. They are justifying the fairness of the system, while shifting blame to individuals. Perception of meritocracy asks questions about how the economic system rewards hard work. For example, one of the questions asks whether respondents agree that "Success is possible for anyone who works hard enough." People who accept the meritocratic ideology of capitalism should endorse such items. We expect people who see the economic system as meritocratic will not see a need for universal basic income, or will see it as an unfair benefit and therefore not support basic income. The perception of meritocracy inventory has a reliability of  $\alpha = 0.91$ .

### **Results and Discussion**

As shown in the supporting table, we find support for both our hypotheses. Holding racist views makes people less supportive of welfare, but does not influence their support for social security, universal basic income, or raising the minimum wage. Also as expected, people who see the economic system as meritocratic are less likely to support universal basic income. Interestingly, social dominance orientation predicts support for existing policies better than perception of meritocracy. These results suggest that universal basic income is in fact a policy that will effectively build solidarity, although future research should determine the limits of this solidarity.

Basic income represents an effective, politically sustainable way to deal with the human costs of automation and economic change.

**OLS Results**

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Welfare Support	Social Security Support	Raise Min. Wage	Basic Income Support
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Modern Racism	-0.423*** (0.072)	-0.051 (0.091)	0.067 (0.083)	-0.030 (0.082)
Perception of Meritocracy	-0.165 (0.109)	0.031 (0.137)	-0.071 (0.124)	-0.249** (0.123)
Social Dominance Orientation	-0.167*** (0.064)	-0.366*** (0.081)	0.350*** (0.073)	-0.179** (0.072)
Political Ideology	-0.098 (0.067)	-0.025 (0.084)	0.155** (0.076)	-0.098 (0.076)
Just World View	-0.011 (0.085)	0.085 (0.108)	-0.039 (0.098)	0.009 (0.097)
Social Desirability	-0.108* (0.064)	-0.138* (0.081)	0.068 (0.073)	0.044 (0.073)
Female	-0.007 (0.087)	0.069 (0.109)	-0.293*** (0.099)	-0.053 (0.098)
Party ID	-0.024 (0.033)	-0.029 (0.042)	0.056 (0.038)	-0.073* (0.038)
Education	-0.061* (0.036)	-0.046 (0.045)	-0.010 (0.041)	-0.060 (0.040)

Income	-0.030* (0.016)	-0.002 (0.020)	0.052*** (0.018)	-0.035* (0.018)
Constant	1.393*** (0.518)	0.753 (0.653)	-0.746 (0.592)	1.763*** (0.588)
Observations	328	328	329	328
R <sup>2</sup>	0.403	0.169	0.315	0.224
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.384	0.143	0.294	0.199
Residual Std. Error	0.737 (df = 317)	0.928 (df = 317)	0.843 (df = 318)	0.834 (df = 317)
F Statistic	21.416*** (df = 10; 317)	6.434*** (df = 10; 317)	14.651*** (df = 10; 318)	9.140*** (df = 10; 317)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01			

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