

# CAN CONSERVATIVES BE PERSUADED? FRAMING EFFECTS ON SUPPORT FOR UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME IN THE US

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# Motivation

- ▶ Universal basic income (UBI) has been proposed as a *policy solution* to rising inequality and job automation
- ▶ **Pilot schemes:** Brazil, Canada, Finland, Netherlands, Spain, USA, etc.
- ▶ Conservative figures endorsing UBI (or similar policy) in the US:
  - Economist Milton Friedman
  - Former President Richard Nixon
  - Republican Senators Marco Rubio and Mitt Romney

# Motivation

- ▶ UBI is met with strong opposition from the right
  - Right-leaning individuals across 23 European countries were much more opposed to UBI ([Parolin and Siöland 2020](#); [Roosma and van Oorschot 2020](#))
  - Most American conservatives opposed UBI ([Pew Research Center 2020](#))
- ▶ Swiss voters *rejected* UBI by a vote of 77% to 23% in 2016

# Motivation

*“The political feasibility of a UBI depends on the existence of a significant constituency that produces a strong political demand for the policy.”*

— [World Bank \(2020, 191\)](#)

# Motivation

- ▶ Is the political prospect of UBI doomed?
- ▶ Opposition from conservatives is not necessarily rigid
  - Political elites can and often deploy *frames* to sway public opinion in specific ideological directions ([Lahav and Courtemanche 2012](#))
- ▶ **Power of issue framing in welfare politics:** [Brooks 2012](#); [Jacoby 2000](#); [Nelson 2011](#); [Nelson and Kinder 1996](#); [Winter 2006](#)
- ▶ Can UBI be *framed* to overcome the strong opposition from conservatives?

Welfare Literature

Framing Literature

# Framing UBI: First Possibility

**One possibility:** frame UBI as a policy that *equalizes opportunity*

- ▶ Conservatives emphasize equal opportunity over equal outcome
- ▶ They tend to favor *self-responsibility* (Chow and Galak 2012; Feather 1984)
- ▶ UBI is universal  $\leadsto$  preempts perception that it only benefits the “undeserving poor” (Bridges 2017; Katz 2013)

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## H1 (EQUALIZING OPPORTUNITY)

Framing UBI as an opportunity-equalizing policy will *increase* conservatives' support for UBI.

# Framing UBI: Second Possibility

**Another possibility:** frame UBI as a policy that *limits government*

- ▶ Conservatives dislike bureaucracy
- ▶ They are much more likely to think that the government is *wasteful* ([Pew Research Center 2019](#)) and favor efficient government ([Lerman 2019](#))
- ▶ UBI is not means-tested  $\leadsto$  smaller administrative efforts



# Framing UBI: Second Possibility

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- ▶ UBI is not means-tested  $\leadsto$  smaller administrative efforts

## H2 (LIMITING GOVERNMENT)

Framing UBI as a policy that limits government will *increase* conservatives' support for UBI.

# Experimental Design: A Survey Experiment

## Survey experiment

- ▶ **Date:** September 2021
- ▶ **Sample:** American adults
- ▶ **Size:**  $N = 2,530$
- ▶ **Recruitment:** Lucid (validated by [Coppock and McClellan 2019](#))

# Experimental Design: Treatments

- ▶ **Design:** between-subjects design
- ▶ **Three experimental groups:**
  - 1 Control group
  - 2 Treatment group that receives an *equalizing–opportunity* frame
  - 3 Treatment group that receives a *limiting–government* frame

# Experimental Design: Treatments

Common vignette (modified from Round 8 of the European Social Survey):

## **Universal Basic Income in the U.S.**

In the United States, some cities are considering—or have already started—to implement pilot programs for universal basic income (UBI). In a UBI program, the government pays everyone a monthly income to cover essential living costs. It replaces many other social benefits. The purpose is to guarantee everyone a minimum standard of living. Everyone receives the same amount regardless of whether or not they are working, and people also keep the money they earn from work or other sources. This program is paid for by taxes.

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**Key:** impartial + detailed

⇒ ensures that respondents have the essential information to form an opinion on UBI

# Experimental Design: Treatments

► **Equalizing–opportunity frame:**

*An important feature of UBI is that it will create a **level playing field** because poor households will also be financially empowered. This encourages people to be more **self-reliant** and **self-responsible**.*

# Experimental Design: Treatments

► **Equalizing–opportunity frame:**

*An important feature of UBI is that it will create a **level playing field** because poor households will also be financially empowered. This encourages people to be more **self-reliant** and **self-responsible**.*

► **Limiting–government frame:**

*An important feature of UBI is that it will **limit government** because some existing government programs for the poor will be cut or replaced by UBI. This helps to **minimize government bureaucracy**.*

# Experimental Design: Treatments

Six nuances of the treatment vignettes

- 1 Explicit mention of key terms  $\implies$  clear treatment
- 2 Real-world relevance to right-wing rhetoric  $\implies$  political relevance
- 3 Similar length and structure  $\implies$  ensure parallelism
- 4 Vague content  $\implies$  isolate from information effects
- 5 No political endorsement  $\implies$  isolate from endorsement effects
- 6 No mention of race  $\implies$  avoid racial priming



# Experimental Design: Measurement

- ▶ **Dependent variable:** “Overall, would you be against or in favor of having universal basic income in the United States?” (7-point scale)
  - ▶ **Conservatism score:** 10 policy statements (economic + social)
    - E.g., “to increase the *minimum wage* to over \$10 an hour.”
    - E.g., “to enforce penalties on women who obtain *abortions*”
- ⇒ 0 = least conservative; 10 = most conservative
- ⇒ conservatism score is 5 or above  $\leadsto$  conservative

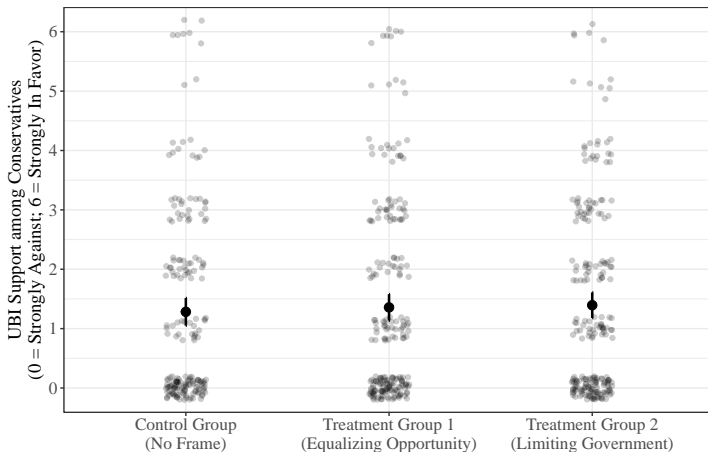
Methodological Advantages

Estimation Strategy

# Main Results

## ► Null framing effects on conservatives

**Figure 1.** Average Support for UBI among Conservatives across Experimental Groups



Robustness Checks

# Open-Ended Responses

- ▶ **Why null?** I use STM to analyze the *open-ended responses*
  - A semi-automated content analysis technique
  - [Roberts et al. 2014](#); [Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley 2019](#)
- ▶ Four topics are identified:
  - 1 General policy analysis
  - 2 Helping the needy
  - 3 Poverty and inequality
  - 4 **Discouraging work**

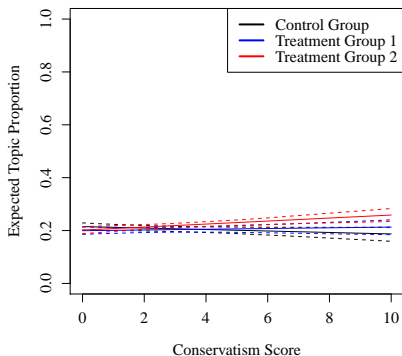
Representative Responses

# Open-Ended Responses

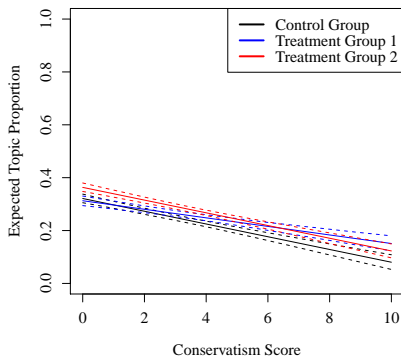
- ▶ How conservatives explained their opposition to UBI *remained unchanged regardless of framing*

**Figure 2.** Expected Topic Proportions Across Experimental Groups and Their Relationship with Political Ideology (Topics 1 and 2)

**Topic 1 (Policy Analysis)**



**Topic 2 (Helping the Needy)**

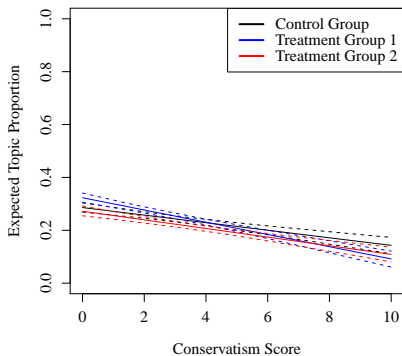


# Open-Ended Responses

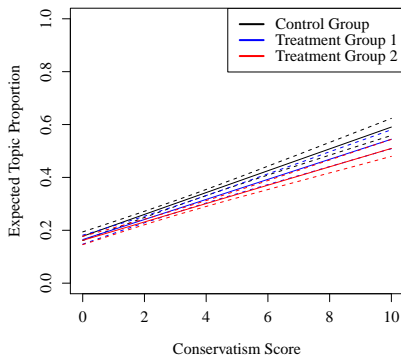
- ▶ How conservatives explained their opposition to UBI *remained unchanged regardless of framing*

**Figure 3.** Expected Topic Proportions Across Experimental Groups and Their Relationship with Political Ideology (Topics 3 and 4)

**Topic 3 (Poverty and Inequality)**



**Topic 4 (Discouraging Work)**



# Takeaways

- ▶ UBI is very unpopular among American conservatives
- ▶ Unlike many past instances where issue framing has proven effective in shaping welfare attitudes...
- ▶ Pro-UBI politicians would likely need to go beyond such tactics to persuade conservatives

# Takeaways

- ▶ UBI is very unpopular among American conservatives
- ▶ Unlike many past instances where issue framing has proven effective in shaping welfare attitudes...
- ▶ Pro-UBI politicians would likely need to go beyond such tactics to persuade conservatives
- ▶ **Some possibilities:**
  - Framing UBI as an *earned right* ([Winter 2006](#))
  - Using *metaphors* ([Legein et al. 2018](#))
  - Providing *facts* to correct conservatives' misperceptions about UBI

# SUPPLEMENTAL APPENDIX



# Welfare Attitudes in the US: Part I

- ▶ That conservatives dislike welfare is a stylized fact in American politics
  - Racial attitudes (DeSante 2013; Gilens 1999; Winter 2006)
  - Opposition to big government (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Free and Cantril 1968; McClosky and Zaller 1984)
  - Individualism ideals (Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989; Kluegel and Smith 1986)
- ▶ American welfare policies are characterized by these sensitive features
- ▶ Most programs are need-based and require substantial targeting efforts by the government

# Welfare Attitudes in the US: Part II

- ▶ But UBI is *distinct* from any welfare programs in the US
- ▶ Two characteristics may make conservatives' dislike of it less rigid
  - ① UBI is *universal*

UBI allows both Black and White working classes to equally benefit

    - ⇒ UBI blurs racial lines
    - ⇒ UBI removes the *racial prime* that often makes American conservatives unpersuadable in welfare policy debate
  - ② UBI *replaces* other existing welfare programs

Most existing welfare programs require substantial targeting efforts

    - ⇒ UBI, by replacing them, reduces bureaucracy and limits government
    - ⇒ UBI fits the *laissez-faire* ideal among American conservatives

Motivation

# Prospects of Framing UBI

*“Public opinion often depends on how elites choose to frame issues.”*

— Chong and Druckman (2007, 99)

- ▶ Americans’ preferences for *government spending* can be powerfully shaped by framing (Nelson and Kinder 1996; Jacoby 2000; Winter 2006)
- ▶ *Ideological predispositions* matter in framing
  - Lahav and Courtemanche (2012, 497): *“Ideology plays an important role in moderating the effect of frames on individuals”*
  - Brooks (2012, 214): *“When framing matters for social policy-related attitudes in the US context, it may tend to do so by getting individuals to rethink welfare issues using ideas to which they already are likely to subscribe”*

Motivation

# Experimental Design: Measurement

## Methodological advantages over a conventional, self-reported scale:

- 1 The self-reported scale assumes that ideology is *unidimensional*
  - Political psychologists: economic *and* social dimensions should be covered
  - E.g., [Carmines and D'Amico 2015](#); [Everett 2013](#); [Feldman and Johnston 2014](#); [Treier and Hillygus 2009](#); [Wood and Oliver 2012](#)
- 2 The self-reported scale assumes that respondents can identify their ideology *accurately*
  - Americans systematically *overestimate* their conservatism ([Ellis and Stimson 2012](#); [Zell and Bernstein 2014](#))
  - Many (Black) Americans are unfamiliar with the terms “liberal” and “conservatives” ([Jefferson 2021](#))
- 3 Measuring ideology using multiple questions *improves precision* ([Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008](#))

# Experimental Design: Estimation Strategy

## ► Estimator:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Support}_i = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{EO-Frame}_i + \beta_2 \text{LG-Frame}_i + \beta_3 \text{Conservative}_i \\ & + \beta_4 (\text{EO-Frame}_i \times \text{Conservative}_i) + \beta_5 (\text{LG-Frame}_i \times \text{Conservative}_i) \\ & + \lambda \Phi_i + \epsilon_i \end{aligned}$$

## ► Estimands:

- $\beta_1 + \beta_4$ : CATE of the *equalizing–opportunity* frame on conservatives (H1)
- $\beta_2 + \beta_5$ : CATE of the *limiting–government* frame on conservatives (H2)

## ► Expectations:

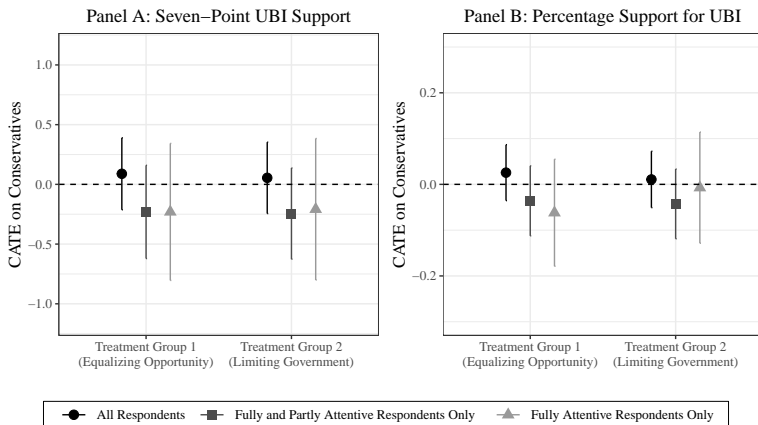
- H1:  $\hat{\beta}_1 + \hat{\beta}_4 > 0$
- H2:  $\hat{\beta}_2 + \hat{\beta}_5 > 0$

Measurement

# Robustness Checks: Part I

- Results are robust to (1) subsetting the sample to only analyze *attentive* respondents and (2) changing the dependent variable to *binary* support

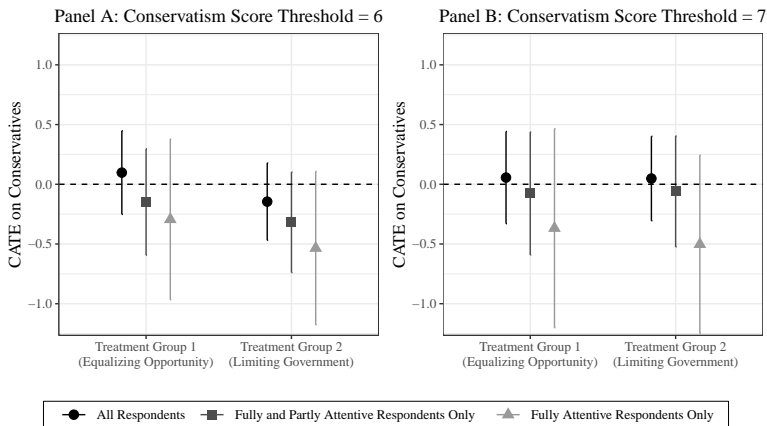
**Figure A1.** Conditional Average Treatment Effects on Conservatives



# Robustness Checks: Part II

- Results are also robust to (3) changing the conservatism score *threshold* to 6 or 7 (rather than 5)...

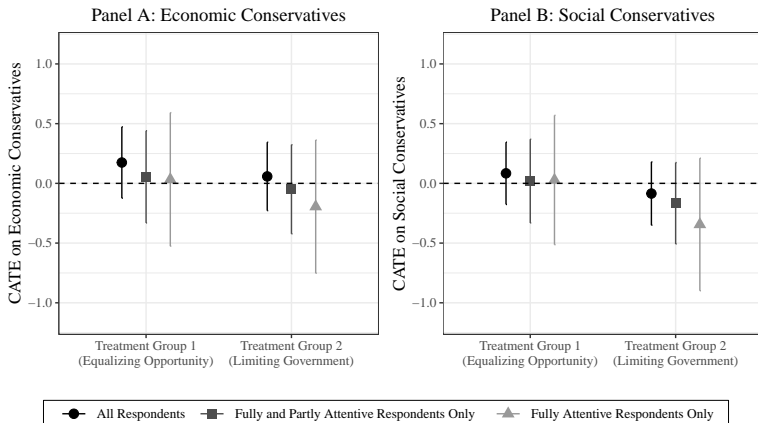
**Figure A2.** Conditional Average Treatment Effects on Conservatives after Redefining the Conservatism Score Threshold



# Robustness Checks: Part III

- ...and (4) shifting the focus onto *economic* or *social* conservatives

**Figure A3.** Conditional Average Treatment Effects on Economic and Social Conservatives





# Representative Responses of Each Topic

**Figure A4.** Representative Responses of Topic 1 (Policy Analysis)

Only because of the teenage unemployment rate. 18–20 specifically. I believe someone who lives on their own should have an advantage when it comes to saving money. (For college/rent/new car as opposed to having to cover ones own gas and food at such a young unstable age. I don't believe it should cover rent and I don't believe there should be enough for something like a phone bill. (Some young adults find it hard to commute, stay alive, and pursue happiness)

-----  
The impact UBI would have on the homeless and extremely poor would be huge. It would also stimulate spending in the economy as people would no longer need to worry about necessities.  
-----

I favor the program because I believe as a society and one of the richest, if not the richest nations we have the ability to spread wealth and resources better and more efficiently. I believe social security, Medicare, and other federally funded programs would be less strained. I'm addition, the thoughts of competition would be more collaborative and we would still produce innovative concepts and resources that will service more people. In addition, more people would be apt to take advantage of more resources circulating our commerce regularly and raise the level of access and ability for all demographics, especially those in distress and have been historically at a disadvantage.

-----  
Government hand outs have never solved any problems long term. More government reliance  
-----  
This way everybody will have some money in your pocket and it's their choice whether they choose to be homeless or not and it will give the thieves less motivation to steal and Rob  
-----  
Technology advancements will make UBI necessary in the near future. I think people will overall find ways to live productive, fulfilling lives with the incentive of direct payments.  
-----  
a lot of violence comes from fear & stress; so this might reduce domestic abuse and petty crimes.

# Representative Responses of Each Topic

**Figure A5.** Representative Responses of Topic 2 (Helping the Needy)

It sounds on the surface like a decent way to begin to close the income gap and battle poverty along with homelessness. I would need to know a lot more before agreeing to such a large, sweeping, program that had some very socialist sounding principles behind it.

-----  
I know I certainly could use extra money a month – I am handicapped.. sounds like a good plan!  
-----

The program should evaluate and offer help only to those who is needed.

-----  
Everyone deserves houseing and food. Its a wonderful idea  
-----

I need to read more aboit it. but it sounds good especially during these tough times  
-----

I feel feel like it's okay but bad at the same time.  
-----

It would help everyone and lighten the stress on their shoulders.

# Representative Responses of Each Topic

**Figure A6.** Representative Responses of Topic 3 (Poverty and Inequality)

Too many are living in poverty. Other countries have better standards of living.

Universal income has no actual track record of increasing wealth or decreasing income gap. It only creates higher prices which eliminate the positive effects proposed by it and creates economic stagnation.

The US has too many people in poverty. Student loans and medical debt cripple too many of us financially

The income equality is not balanced. There are so many people out there that are suffering and struggling even working a 40 hour work week. The cost of living doesn't match up with the wages earned

Ben and many many years decades even since the government have done something to raise the standard of living for the lower echelons of the population about

This program would help out many families who are below poverty or at poverty level and this would help them to make sure they can pay their bills every month and make sure that they have a place to live it would also help the children and make sure children have a stable home and a stable school that they can go to

I can see where it can be beneficial and I can see where it wouldn't be.

# Representative Responses of Each Topic

**Figure A7.** Representative Responses of Topic 4 (Discouraging Work)

More government handouts to people unwilling to work paid for by those working hard, i.e. Democrats.

Just wrong if you work harder or try harder you should be paid accordingly. If you happen to be smarter and your job is harder you should get more

I do not want to depend on anybody as i trust nobody

The government is not your parents! In America you work if you want to live you do not depend on other people to take care of you.

Why should I work my ass off to pay for free loaders who do t want to strive and just settle for getting by while I get taxes more this is communism

Why should i have to pay for some lazy ass who WONT WORK?!?! IM DOING THE IGNORANT SURVEYS ON TOP OF A FULL TIME JOB!!!!

I'm afraid it's going to hurt hurt those people that are working super hard and just give handouts to people who refuse to work