

## The Limits of Social Solidarity : Basic Income, Immigration and the Legitimacy of the Universal Welfare State

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# The Limits of Social Solidarity

## *Basic Income, Immigration and the Legitimacy of the Universal Welfare State*

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**abstract:** Does mass immigration and increasing ethnic diversity challenge the legitimacy of the universal welfare state? Assuming that basic income can be seen as a radical extension of the universal welfare state, we pursue this question by investigating whether popular reactions towards a basic income proposal are susceptible to persuasion that invokes attitudes towards immigration. The study is based on survey data covering a representative sample of the Norwegian electorate. We find that a comfortable majority express sympathy with the idea of a basic income, and that the structure of initial support for the basic income proposal is well in line with established findings concerning attitudes towards welfare state institutions and redistributive policies more generally. However, by applying a persuasion experiment, we show that negative attitudes towards immigration can be mobilized to significantly reduce the scope of support for a basic income proposal among the Norwegian electorate.

**keywords:** immigration ♦ legitimacy ♦ public opinion ♦ social policy ♦ welfare state

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## 1. Introduction

In this article, we use survey data to study reactions of the Norwegian electorate towards the idea of introducing an unconditional basic income. In particular, we are interested in finding out whether popular attitudes towards a basic income are sensitive to framing and persuasion with respect to issues related to immigration and the backdrop of increased ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of Norwegian society.

The idea of a basic income granted to all residents has for decades been debated among social philosophers and social policy analysts. According to some of the leading proponents it is a blueprint for social justice that is capable of reconciling classical liberal concerns for freedom, efficiency and equality (see for instance Meade, 1993 and van Parijs, 1995). In recent years, variations of the basic income approach have also been presented in more pragmatic terms as an attractive solution to specific dilemmas and problems associated with contemporary labour markets and more traditional welfare policies.<sup>1</sup> However, despite continued academic interest, the basic income idea can hardly be said to have entered mainstream politics in any European country.

It is widely assumed that various strategies by which to condition the distribution of social transfers are needed to secure continued popular support. Most existing social security systems are designed to appeal to the self-interest of taxpayers and to notions of reciprocity

by linking benefits to prior contributions. They also typically contain features that are meant to discourage and stigmatize 'undeserving' beneficiaries, and the right to withhold benefits from able-bodied individuals of working age who openly refuse to take up paid work is maintained. The introduction of a generous and unconditional basic income would, by implication, put a high demand on the willingness to share economic risks and resources with fellow citizens – in short, on social solidarity. Although there are segments of the population that could be expected to support such a move out of pure self-interest, this will hardly suffice in itself. Sustained support by a majority of the population is likely to require a high degree of trust, identification and sympathy with fellow citizens and/or a strong commitment to egalitarian values. It is therefore highly relevant to ask under what conditions, if any, one can expect that there would be broad popular support for such a radical scheme in the electorates of contemporary nation-states.

The institution of a generous and unconditional basic income can be seen as a radical operationalization of the fundamental commitment of any advanced welfare state to secure the economic well-being of all its residents – a commitment that can be said to have been furthest developed in the Nordic countries. We suggest, in other words, that popular reactions to the basic income proposal could be interpreted as an indicator of support for universalistic income transfers more generally or – if you like – for a Marshallian welfare state ethos.

The social security systems of the Nordic countries have traditionally been characterized by the provision of relatively generous minimum benefits and a strong emphasis on universal entitlements – particularly with respect to child benefits and old-age pensions. It can therefore be argued that they have come closer than most other welfare states to offering something akin to a basic income.<sup>2</sup>

The dominant explanation for the Scandinavian exceptionalism – the power mobilization thesis – holds that the Scandinavian welfare state is the result of a successful mobilization of working-class interests by the social democratic labour movement (Esping-Andersen and Korpi, 1987).<sup>3</sup> According to this perspective, popular support for universalistic welfare policies is the result of a dynamic process where institutional reforms have gone hand in hand with the extension and generalization of working-class solidarity. It has occasionally been suggested, however, that the high degree of ethnic, linguistic and religious homogeneity of the Scandinavian countries is an important historical precondition for the development towards particularly comprehensive and redistributive welfare states (see Ragin, 1994; Rojas, 1999; Kildal and Kuhnle, 2002). This suggestion coincides with the idea that mass immigration and racial, ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity represents a serious obstacle to welfare state development – an idea that has attracted considerable attention in recent years, particularly in connection with attempts to explain the underdeveloped United States welfare state (Quadagno, 1994; Gilens, 1999; Lipset and Marks, 2000; Alesina et al., 2002; Alesina and Glaeser, 2004).

If population homogeneity has been an important precondition for the historical development of the universal Scandinavian welfare state, it is reasonable to assume that the increased immigration from non-Western countries that has taken place (to a varying degree) in the Nordic countries over recent decades could represent a serious challenge to the continued popular support for established universal benefits, not to speak of a further expansion of universal benefits in the direction of an unconditional basic income.

Like the welfare state itself, basic income has traditionally been discussed as a project confined to the citizens of a nation-state. Little attention has been given to problems associated with the precise delimitation of the eligible population, and to the potential effects on mobility and migration that might follow from the introduction of an unconditional basic income in a particular, comparatively rich country (see, however, Pioch (2000)). Should the provision of a generous basic income be accompanied by strict immigration policies, and, if

not, should new immigrants somehow be excluded from eligibility? These are dilemmas that are encountered every day with traditional welfare state policies too, and they only present themselves more sharply in connection with a basic income. The more generous and universal a social programme, the more critical becomes the inevitable demarcation against the external world (Jensen and Poulsen, 1990; Poulsen, 1998).

We therefore investigate the persuasive power of the argument of immigration on people's reactions to a proposed basic income. If it turns out that attitudes towards basic income among the Norwegian electorate are highly sensitive to framing with respect to immigration issues, we believe it has potential implications for the prospects of mobilizing continued support for universal welfare institutions.

## 2. Research and theory on welfare state legitimacy

A vast body of national and comparative research has been undertaken to gain systematic knowledge about which types of welfare arrangements are supported by the general public and under what conditions. Most comparative studies in the field look at attitudes towards existing national institutions and benefits – whether they should be expanded, retrenched or stay as they are – while there are fewer studies that explicitly examine reactions to potential welfare state reforms.<sup>4</sup>

It is a general finding across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) area that the traditional institutions of the welfare state remain surprisingly popular, despite high and soaring tax rates, the advent of the demographic time bomb, and the celebrated triumph of more individualist and post-materialist values, and so on.

Many studies analyse the structure of popular support for the welfare state in an effort to answer deeper questions about why people support welfare, and they tend to evolve around the competing notions of 'self-interest' and 'ideological orientations' as the main motivational factor behind welfare attitudes. The findings are typically ambiguous. Groups that are dependent upon welfare benefits tend to be the most supportive (Pettersen, 1995). However, party preference and ideological orientation are often stronger predictors of welfare attitudes than structural characteristics (Goul-Andersen, 1993).

### *Legitimacy and trust*

In a more recent strand of literature, particular attention has been given to beliefs about the legitimacy of an individual's claim to benefits. Is the recipient to be blamed for his or her misery, or is society or other circumstances outside the individual responsible? Does the recipient behave in accordance with societal norms about being self-supporting or does he or she abuse the welfare system (Feldman and Zaller, 1992; van Oorschot and Halman, 2000)? A strong correlation has been found between suspicions of abuse and support for retrenchment (Øverbye, 2000). Individuals who trust (potential) recipients are in favour of continued or increased public support, while individuals who distrust recipients are in favour of cutbacks.

These findings have ambiguous implications for the debate on the sustainability of universal welfare policies. A key question is to what extent trust in and sympathy for welfare recipients varies across space and time and whether this variation is largely endogenous (for instance the result of institutional design) or at least partly exogenous, i.e. tied to conditions that might vary over time and between countries but are not easily changed or modified by political agency.

According to one interpretation, trust in welfare recipients is largely endogenous. The idea is that universal benefits have an inbuilt capacity for generating support, legitimacy and trust (Rothstein, 1998, 2005). Benefits that are automatically paid out to all members of an objective category cannot be misused – not at least in the formal sense where a recipient misrepresents

his/her situation in order to pass some sort of means test. By contrast, it can be argued that selective and means-tested benefits breed hostility and resentment among recipients as well as suspicion towards the recipients in the general public, and they are therefore likely to be haunted by perpetual legitimacy problems (Rothstein, 2005).

However, misuse can also be interpreted more broadly as failure to comply with social norms – such as the norm to take up work and to be self-sufficient if possible. Universal benefits are expensive, and taxpayers can be suspected of resisting paying for generous welfare benefits that cannot be reserved for citizens who behave in accordance with social norms. If large segments of the population are regarded as undeserving by the majority, the universal welfare state itself could lose legitimacy. It certainly cannot be taken for granted that a generous and unconditional basic income would command broad and continued support, particularly if it is perceived to allow a large minority of the population to refrain from making an active contribution to the larger society.

### ***Population heterogeneity and welfare state support***

As already mentioned, in recent years a rapidly growing body of comparative research has focused on a possible negative relationship between population heterogeneity and mass immigration, on the one hand, and public support for redistributive welfare policies, on the other (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Banting et al., 2004, 2005).<sup>5</sup>

The thesis about a negative relationship between population heterogeneity and welfare state development comes in a strong and in a weaker, less pessimistic, version. According to the strong version, population heterogeneity is an insurmountable barrier to the creation of cross group solidarity and hence at odds with large-scale social redistribution (Becker, 1957). The weaker version holds that population heterogeneity is a potential obstacle because it makes the cultivation of comprehensive class and national identities more difficult and because it offers opportunities for the mobilization of group conflicts by political entrepreneurs that are keen to hamper or reverse welfare state developments. In this weaker version the thesis can easily be combined with competing theories of welfare state development, including variations of the class mobilization thesis (Lipset and Marks, 2000; Alesina and Glaeser, 2004). The weaker version also points to the potential role of framing and political persuasion (see discussion below).

According to Quadagno (1994), the social reforms following Lyndon B. Johnson's 'War on Poverty' were rolled back as the white majority was persuaded by conservative politicians and lobbyists to see the poverty problem in racial terms. Gilens (1999) draws the same conclusion based on an extensive study of American attitudes to welfare. To understand the American public's opposition to welfare, Gilens maintains, it is necessary to understand their perceptions of welfare recipients:

First, the American public thinks that most people who receive welfare are black, and second, the public thinks that blacks are less committed to the work ethic than are other Americans. (1999: 3)

Theories and arguments about the role of population heterogeneity have mainly been used to explain United States exceptionalism, but increasing ethnic heterogeneity of European populations have made these arguments relevant also in a European context (Freeman, 1986; Kitschelt, 1995). In many European countries, non-Western immigrants have severe difficulties becoming integrated within the labour market, they are often residentially segregated, and they tend to be overrepresented among the unemployed and social assistance recipients (OECD, 2003). The influx of non-Western immigrants over the past three decades has been more modest in Norway than in many European countries, including Sweden and Denmark, but the problems with labour market integration of ethnic minorities are on the same level as in other small West-European states (Brochmann and Hagelund, 2005).

It is a well-established finding that immigrants from non-Western cultures tend to be regarded through the lenses of negative stereotypes, and that hostility towards immigrants and lax immigration policies are important sources of electoral support for extreme right-wing parties in many European countries. However, only a few studies have attempted to investigate a possible direct link at the micro-level between anti-immigration attitudes and views on welfare policy. A study of attitudes towards minority groups in the European Union (Thalhammer et al., 2001) finds that about every second EU citizen supports the statement that people from ethnic minority groups misuse the social welfare system. The proportion supporting this statement even increased in the period 1997 to 2000.

A study of Norwegian attitudes to immigrants and immigration concludes that the Norwegian public is less negative towards immigrants than is the general European public (Blom and Lie, 2003). Even so, it is found that 56 per cent agree that it should be more difficult for immigrants to get residence permits, and around 40 per cent support the statement that immigrants misuse the social welfare system. Over recent decades, a right-wing populist party (*Fremskrittspartiet* – the Progress Party) has mobilized a considerable share of the electorate on a political platform on which calls for more restrictive immigration policies play a central role.

### *Welfare attitudes and framing effects*

The design of our study is inspired by a branch within opinion research dealing with political persuasion. As expressed by Mutz et al. (1996: 1):

Politics, at its core, is about persuasion. It hinges not just on whether citizens at any moment in time tend to favour one side of an issue over another, but on the numbers of them that can be brought, when push comes to shove, from one side to the other, or indeed, induced to leave the sidelines in order to take a side.

The tradition relates to Converse's famous theory of non-attitudes and doorstep opinions. In his study of voter attitudes, Converse (1964) found that individuals tend to give different answers at different times to the same questions. Converse saw this instability as an expression of political ignorance within the population. According to Converse, a large number of the respondents answering questions in opinion surveys tend to construct answers to conceal the fact that they have no opinion at all. This conclusion has met with vigorous opposition. Several scholars have argued that the instability of individual citizens' responses to surveys may result from measurement errors, from ambiguous questions or from errors in preparing the data. A successful correction of measurement errors will subsequently reveal people's true attitudes (Achen, 1975; Judd and Milburn, 1980).

Political persuasion as a field of study is an alternative to Converse as well as his critics. Within this school of thought, individuals' attitudes are interpreted as the interplay between situational factors (frames) and individual characteristics. Individuals are assumed to relate to (political) problems by a precoded set of associations, be they beliefs, values or definitions of self-interests. And as these associations may vary not just in character, but also have contradictory implications for the individual's opinion about a problem, the frame of reference for the problem faced may be of decisive importance. Contextual information inclines the individual to evaluate an issue according to one or more specific consideration(s), leaving considerable persuasive power to the media, politicians and other opinion leaders.

The conventional opinion survey will seldom be a suitable tool for exploring framing effects, as the researcher has little control over information respondents have been exposed to (McGraw and Lodge, 1995). Hence, the interest in political persuasion has paved the way for experimental designs within opinion research (Sniderman and Grob, 1996). Experiments allow the researcher to decompose the complex phenomenon information and in a controlled manner to study the effects of it upon people's opinions (Kinder and Palfrey, 1993).

Our study involves a quasi-experimental element as part of a representative population survey. The experimental design is developed by Sniderman et al. (1991) and is called the counter-argument technique. It is intended to grasp the dynamic between political argumentation and people's opinions by creating a situation where the respondent evokes a reaction – a counter-argument – from another. We apply the technique to investigate the persuasive power of immigration arguments on people's opinions on the proposition to establish a basic income in Norway. Respondents who initially express a positive reaction to basic income are asked if they maintain their opinion even if it means that immigrants (non-citizens) will benefit from the scheme. Respondents who initially expressed a negative reaction are asked if a possibility to exclude immigrants would make them change their mind.

### 3. Initial reactions towards the basic income proposal

Despite the Nordic tradition for universal benefits, the idea of introducing an unconditional basic income has not – at least so far – quite made it to the centre stage of welfare politics in any of the Nordic countries. The reason might be that the idea is at odds with other important aspects of the Nordic welfare tradition: the emphasis on work ethics and the belief that full employment and an egalitarian wage structure can be simultaneously achieved by way of adequate economic and labour market policies.

However, as Andersson (2000) has pointed out, there are considerable differences between the Nordic countries in the political salience of the basic income idea. Basic income proposals have received more attention from political elites in Denmark and (particularly) Finland than from political elites in Sweden and Norway, where in particular the powerful Social Democratic parties have been either uninterested or openly negative. Andersson (2000) suggests that the negative position taken by the Social Democrats in Sweden can be explained by the strong tradition for active labour market policies and a strong commitment to social insurance philosophy and the principle of proportional income replacement.

In Norway, a certain academic debate about basic income took place in the late 1970s, but the topic did not attract much attention among the political parties. However, it deserves mentioning that an alleged persistence of financial poverty has become a hotly debated issue in the late 1990s, and this new poverty discourse has led to a stronger political interest in alternative strategies to improve the system of minimum income protection. A small non-socialist party (*Venstre* – the Liberal Party) officially supports the introduction of some form of minimum income guarantee, and in a recent green paper on anti-poverty policies the present centre-right government, in which *Venstre* is a junior partner, has signalled that it will consider a higher degree of standardization of benefit rules across different social security programmes (St.meld. nr. 6 (2002–2003)).

Our survey was undertaken in May 2003 by the Norwegian pollster MMI, and the questionnaire was administered by telephone to a representative sample of 1000 respondents. To tap the respondents' immediate reactions to the proposal of a basic income, the respondents were asked: 'What do you think about a system that would automatically guarantee a certain basic income to all permanent residents?'<sup>6</sup> The question is a direct translation of a question applied in a Finnish and Swedish survey (Andersson and Kangas, 2002), and we are therefore able to compare the initial reactions of our sample of the Norwegian electorate with the reactions of similar Swedish and Finnish samples.

#### *The initial level of support*

As indicated in Table 1, a considerable majority of the Norwegian respondents react positively to the idea of introducing a basic income. Twenty-five per cent say that they find it to be a 'very good idea', while another 41 per cent say that they find it a 'fairly good idea'. Only 30

**Table 1** Initial reactions to the idea of introducing a basic income. Percent. N = 1000

A very good idea	25
A fairly good idea	41
A fairly bad idea	17
A very bad idea	13
Do not know	3
Total	99

per cent of the sample answer that they find this to be a 'fairly bad' or a 'very bad idea'. In other words, when collapsing the first two categories we find that two-thirds of our respondents express a positive initial reaction to the basic income proposal.

The proposal is – we should hasten to admit – quite vaguely defined in the questionnaire. Nothing is said, for instance, about the level of benefits and the mode of financing. Considering in addition the fact that no specific proposal has been publicly debated in recent years, respondents could easily have very different types of arrangement in mind when they answer the question. On the other hand, we should note that the question on basic income follows immediately after a question about financial poverty in the Norwegian population. Respondents are therefore implicitly led to see the basic income proposal in connection with anti-poverty policies. This, we believe, ensures that most respondents will have a substantial benefit in mind and not just a symbolic amount, while they might not be conscious of the distinction between an unconditional basic income and some sort of minimum income guarantee. The sequencing is at the same time likely to have helped to stimulate support from the majority of the Norwegian electorate who appear to believe that poverty is a serious political consideration.

With these reservations in mind, it is interesting to compare the Norwegian responses with results from similar surveys undertaken in Finland and Sweden. Andersson and Kangas (2002) find that a clear majority of the Finnish electorate (63 per cent) support the idea of a basic income, while only 46 per cent of the Swedish electorate express sympathy with such a proposal.

The difference in public support between Finland and Sweden found by Andersson and Kangas (2002) fits well with differences in the attention given to basic income proposals by the political elites in the two countries. But on this background it is all the more puzzling that the Norwegian public appears to be at least as positive as the Finnish and significantly more enthusiastic than the Swedish.

Differences in economic circumstances are one possible explanation for the different reaction between the Norwegian and the Swedish public. The Norwegian oil economy and the extraordinary financial solidity of the Norwegian state may help explain why Norwegians have a stronger appetite for expensive social experiments. One might also point to differences in social policy traditions. While Swedish social policy puts a high and increasing emphasis on income-related social insurance, Norwegian social policy is still partly drawn towards a more universalistic version of the Scandinavian model emphasizing flat-rate benefits and general taxation. It is a repeated finding in comparative studies that egalitarian values hold a very strong position in the Norwegian population (see Aalberg, 1998). A recent comparative study of popular perceptions of poverty shows that Norwegians stand out with a very strong tendency to subscribe to a structural view on poverty and reject the idea that the poor themselves are to be blamed for their personal situation (van Oorschot and Halman, 2000).

Finally, and in the general spirit of the article, we might speculate whether differences in the scale of immigration streams and the size of ethnic minority populations could play a role. Sweden is the Nordic country with the largest immigrant population, while Finland has by



far the smallest. This latter speculation presupposes that public opinion on welfare policy in Sweden has somehow been influenced (or 'coloured', if you like) by experiences with immigration and ethnic heterogeneity.

### ***The structure of initial support***

Turning now to an investigation of the variation in initial support for basic income, our main hypothesis is that it is similar to findings about who supports redistributive policies and the welfare state in general. Therefore, we have included in the analysis a traditional mixture of structural variables (gender, age, education and personal income) as well as variables measuring ideological orientations.

Based on repeated findings from research on attitudes towards the welfare state, we expect women to be more in favour of basic income than men, individuals with low education more than individuals with high education, and people with low income more than people with high income. As for the ideological variables, we have included an index measuring egalitarian value orientations ('egalitarianism')<sup>7</sup> and a dummy variable measuring perceptions of poverty in contemporary Norwegian society ('blame').<sup>8</sup> Respondents who believe that the poor themselves are partly, or totally, to blame for their situation are coded as 1 on this variable, while those who reject an individualistic explanation are coded 0.

Finally, we include a variable measuring the respondent's view on immigration policy. This is based on a question in which respondents are asked to place themselves on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 represents the most restrictive view on immigration policy and 10 the most liberal view.

Although it is our general assumption that anti-immigration sentiments could be mobilized to undermine popular support for a basic income, we do not expect to find a negative correlation with the initial reaction towards the basic income proposal. The main reason is that the political discourses on immigration policy and welfare policy so far appear to have been largely disconnected (see Aardal, 2003). As long as the connection has not been made by the media or by political entrepreneurs, we would not necessarily expect that the public will apply immigration as a relevant consideration in their immediate response to the basic income proposal. In fact, since both preferences for income redistribution and strict immigration policies tend to be strongest among low status segments, one could even expect to find a positive bivariate correlation.

The results of a stepwise multivariate analysis are given in Table 2. In the first step (Model I), we include only the structural variables. Only education and income have significant effects in the expected direction. The predictive power of the model is very much improved by adding the two 'ideological' variables 'egalitarianism' and 'blame' (Model II). Both these variables have a strong and independent effect on attitudes towards basic income and in the expected direction. The inclusion of these two ideological variables leads to a reduction of the independent effect of income, but does not eliminate it altogether. The partial disappearance of separate effects of the structural variables must be interpreted with caution. This only shows that the effects of the structural variables are largely indirect and mediated through their association with ideological dispositions. Even so, the fact that the predictive power of the model is significantly improved by adding the ideological variables can be taken as an indication that there is an important and irreducible ideological dimension to the support for basic income.

This pattern of support for the basic income idea corresponds roughly with the pattern Andersson and Kangas (2002) found for Sweden and Finland, and – as we expected – with the typical pattern of support for redistributive welfare state institutions in general.

Finally, in the last model (Model III), we include attitudes to immigration. Both the bivariate association (not reported in the table) and the multivariate regression coefficient for this

**Table 2** Results of a logistic regression analysis with initial reactions to basic income as dependent variable. N = 802. Logistic regression coefficients #

Variable	Multivariate analysis		
	I	II	III
Sex (D)			
	Male	.234	.343
Age (C)			
	31–45	–.355	–.497
	46–60	–.475	–.687*
	>61	–.013	–.270
Higher education (D)	Yes	–.348*	–.469**
Personal income (ln)(Z)		–.307**	–.201
Egalitarianism (Z)			.511***
Blame (D)	Yes		–.549**
Immigration (Z)			.068
Intercept		1.083**	1.500***
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> (Cox & Snell)		.047	.115

# In this and the following tables (D) indicates dummy variable, (C) a categorical variable, (Z) a standardized ordinal or interval level variable. The reference category for sex is 'female', for age '<30', for education 'lower'. \* indicates that a coefficient is significant at the 5% level, \*\* 1% level, and \*\*\* 0.1% level.

variable show a slight tendency for people with liberal views on immigration to be more sympathetic to the proposal of a basic income. The tendency is very weak, as expected, and far from statistically significant. One might conclude from this that immigration issues are without relevance for the formation of public attitudes to basic income. We believe that such a conclusion is premature, and that this is effectively demonstrated in the following section, where we present the results of our persuasion experiment (Chong, 1996).

#### 4. Sensitivity to the issue of immigration

To test the persuasive power of references to immigration, respondents who initially expressed a positive attitude to the idea of a basic income received the following question: 'Would you also approve of this arrangement if it is applied also to residents who are not Norwegian citizens?' Respondents who initially expressed a negative attitude were confronted with the opposite question: 'Would you still be opposed to this arrangement if it could be applied to Norwegian citizens only?'

It is important to keep in mind the limitations of this experimental technique. The information given is very selective. The respondents are only exposed to a particular aspect of the issue and, contrary to real-life situations, there is no exchange of views. Furthermore, we have attempted to phrase the reference to immigration issues in a way that is not too provocative. Rather than referring to 'immigrants' or 'members of ethnic minority groups' we talk about residents who are not Norwegian citizens. In the following, we nevertheless refer to 'immigrants' although we are aware that these categories are not strictly overlapping and synonymous.

##### *How many are persuaded to leave their initial position?*

First, we look at the total change of opinion that has taken place as a result of the experiment, measured by the proportion who changed their initial standpoint. The results are given in Table 3. In total, 32 per cent of the respondents were persuaded to leave their original position; 34 per cent of the initial 'supporters' and 26 per cent of the initial 'opponents' say that they would change their mind under the circumstances described in the respective follow-up questions.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 3** Percentage of respondents who maintain or change their position on Basic Income after being confronted with the persuasion experiment, by original position and for the entire sample (total sample percentages are given in parentheses)

	Initially in favour of BI	Initially against BI	All respondents
Maintain original position	66 (45)	74 (23)	69 (69)
Change position	34 (23)	26 (8)	32 (32)
SUM	100 (68)	100 (32)	100 (100)
N	663	306	969

One has to note a certain asymmetry here. The wording of the original question already specified that the proposed scheme would apply to all residents in Norway. Therefore, the initial 'supporters' are simply reminded about this aspect of the proposal and its logical implications: that the scheme would include non-citizens residing in Norway. The fact that a third of the initial 'supporters' change their minds when this aspect has been pointed out to them, strongly indicates that (negative) attitudes towards immigration and/or resident immigrants are a potential source of mobilization against basic income. By activating this issue the comfortable majority of the sample who initially express sympathy for the basic income idea disappears. Only 45 per cent of the entire sample are ready to support a basic income scheme that they have been reminded will include non-citizens. In the following, we call this group the 'unconditional supporters' of basic income.<sup>10</sup>

The persuasion that we have applied to the original opponents is of a different nature. Here the respondents are confronted with a suggestion to modify an underlying premise of the original question: that the scheme would apply indiscriminately to all residents. By opening up the opportunity to exclude newly arrived immigrants from the scheme, we persuade almost a quarter of the original opponents to swing towards a more positive evaluation. Only 23 per cent of the entire sample remain firm in their rejection of the basic income proposal, even if non-citizens could be excluded. In the following we refer to this group as 'unconditional opponents' of the basic income proposal.

Of the 32 per cent of the entire sample who have changed their position on the basic income question as a result of the persuasion experiment, 23 percentage points come from the original supporters ('defecting supporters') and 8 percentage points from the original opponents ('defecting opponents'). In the following, we refer to this entire group as 'conditional supporters' of basic income, since either they have expressed an initial positive evaluation that is eventually withdrawn when they are made aware that the scheme would cover non-citizens, or they are willing to consider a basic income scheme that excludes non-citizens. We assume that these two groups tend to hold a negative/restrictive attitude to immigrants/immigration – and that their initial reactions to the basic income question differed primarily because immigration issues were not spontaneously activated for the former group.

Figure 1 confirms that there is a strong bivariate association between defection from the original basic income reaction and attitudes to immigration. Persons with a negative attitude to immigration have been mobilized to shift their standpoint. Among individuals with the most restrictive attitude, more than 50 per cent belong to the group of defectors/conditional supporters, while the share declines to 13 per cent among individuals with a positive attitude to immigration.

However, it has to be recognized that individuals might change opinion without being truly influenced by the substantial content of the argument (Sniderman et al., 1991). In order to

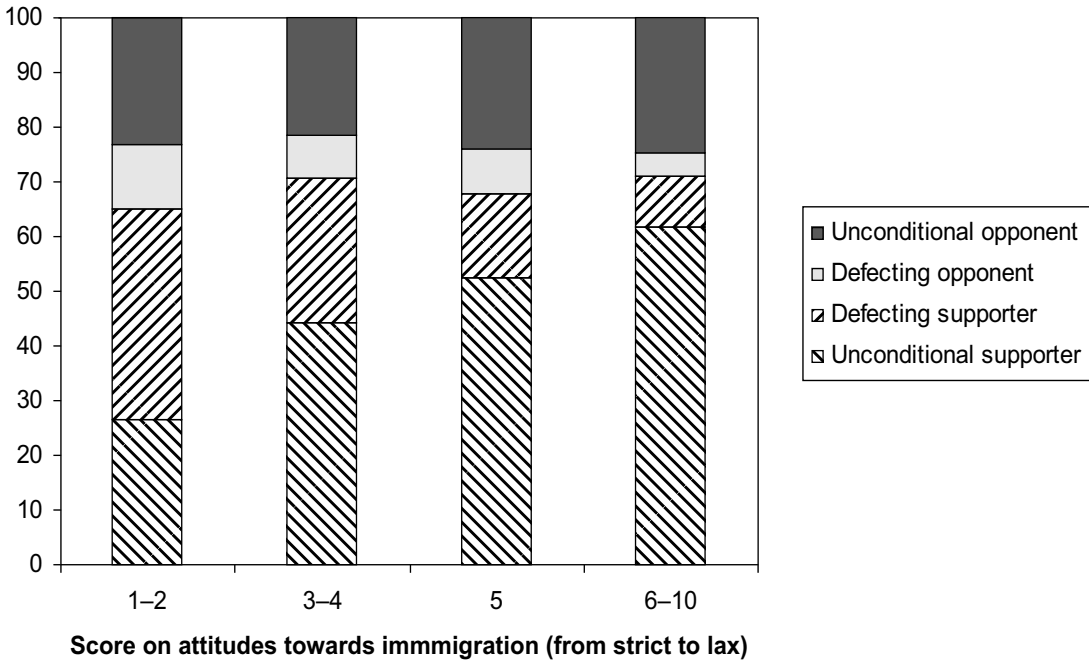


Figure 1 Position on basic income by attitudes towards immigration (N = 954)

throw some light on this issue, we studied in more detail which respondents are persuaded to change opinion.

### *Is change of opinion only spurious?*

The inventors of the counter-argument technique, Sniderman et al. (1991), have formulated a model of persuasibility that can be used in an attempt to check whether it is the actual content of the argument that has had the observed effect. They maintain that there are generally two reasons why individuals change their opinion when confronted with a counter-argument: Either they change their view because they are influenced by the argument in question, or because they have an inclination to accept counter-arguments in general. The first explanation is 'topic-bound', the second 'topic-free'.

The topic-bound explanation leads to the expectation that views on immigration will be a strong predictor of who changes position also when other variables are controlled for. If the topic-free explanation is true, we hypothesize that education and political interest will have a strong bearing on the propensity to change position. In line with Converse (1964) and Feldman and Zaller (1992), we expect that individuals with high education and individuals with high political awareness are difficult to persuade to abandon political standpoints. Counter-arguments may have less effect on them since these have been considered before they adopted their standpoint. They are also assumed to be more anti-authoritarian than persons with low education and/or low political awareness (Inglehart, 1977). Sex and age are included in the analysis as control variables, and the analysis is done separately for the initial supporters and the initial opponents, respectively.

The analysis gives strong support to the topic-bound hypothesis – particularly within the group of initial supporters of basic income. Individuals with a liberal attitude to immigration tend to be resistant to the persuasion experiment, while individuals with restrictive attitudes are much more prone to change position. Political interest has significant effect within this

**Table 4** Results of a logistic regression analysis of the propensity to change position after being subject to persuasion. Regression coefficients (N = 802) #

Variable		Initial supporter	Initial opponent
Sex (D)	Male	.335	.380
Age (C)	31–45	–.178	–.677
	46–60	–.191	–.161
	>61	.126	.565
Higher education (D)	Yes	–.397	–.099
Political interest (Z)		.206*	–.495**
Immigration attitude (Z)		–.938***	–.172
Intercept		–.742**	–1.083**
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> (Cox & Snell)		.145	.090

# (D) indicates dummy variable, (C) a categorical variable, (Z) a standardized ordinal or interval level variable. The reference category for sex is 'female', for age '<30', for education 'lower'. \* indicates that a coefficient is significant at the 5% level, \*\* 1% level, and \*\*\* 0.1% level.

group, too, but contrary to our expectation it proved easier to persuade respondents who report being highly politically interested.

Within the group of initial opponents, only political interest has a significant effect, and here the variable behaves in accordance with our hypothesis. The less interested are easier to persuade. Attitudes to immigration do not have a significant bearing on change of position among initial opponents.

The results presented in Table 4 reveal clear differences between initial supporters and initial opponents. First, it proved harder to persuade the opponents than the supporters. Second, the persuasion experiment particularly affected individuals with negative attitudes to immigration among initial supporters, while it was more neutral in this respect among initial opponents.

The fact that it was easier to persuade supporters could be taken as an indication that a non-topical, methodological explanation is relevant after all. It is a well-known problem within opinion research that some respondents have an inclination to answer 'yes' in opinion surveys (Grovers, 1989; Schuman and Presser, 1996). There may be a group of notorious 'yes-sayers' among the initial supporters, who for the same reason tend to go along with any counter-argument and thereby contribute to the high percentage of defectors within this group. However, our finding that these defectors are not generally characterized by a low score on political interest is inconsistent with this hypothesis.

We believe that the higher rate of change among initial supporters can more convincingly be explained substantively. Invoking issues related to migration and ethnic minorities can primarily be expected to split the group of initial supporters of redistributive welfare policies. Many respondents combine an egalitarian, collectivist outlook with negative attitudes towards immigrants, and it is precisely for this group that the mobilization of immigration issues will make a difference (see Jensen and Poulsen, 1990). Those respondents among the initial opponents who are sceptical of redistributive interventions in general and who happen also to be sceptical towards immigration have no reason to support a basic income scheme – even if it can be withheld from immigrants. Only those among the initial opponents who are initially motivated primarily by considerations related to immigration will have substantial reason to change their mind when confronted with an opportunity to withhold such a scheme from non-citizens.

### *The structure of support after the persuasion experiment*

In line with our hypothesis, attitudes to immigration had no predictive power in the analysis of the structure of *initial* support to basic income. In our final analysis we investigate the structure of positions taken to basic income as a result of the persuasion experiment. The experiment allows us to distinguish among three different positions to the basic income proposal: unconditional support, conditional support and unconditional rejection. In order to analyse the pattern of affiliation to these alternative positions, we conducted a multinomial logistic regression analysis.

As our focus in the article has been on a potential weakening of support for a basic income, we compare unwavering support for the basic income proposal with the two alternative positions: those who change their minds as a result of our persuasion experiment (conditional supporters), and those who insist on rejecting the basic income idea. The independent variables are the same as those used to analyse the structure of initial support for the basic income proposal in Table 2.<sup>11</sup>

The coefficients shown in the first column of Table 5 refer to the contrast between conditional support and unconditional support. A positive coefficient implies that a high score on the independent variable is associated with an increased propensity to be a conditional rather than an unconditional supporter. The second column similarly refers to the contrast between unconditional rejection and unconditional support for the basic income idea.

The results in the first column clearly show that attitude to immigration policy is the most important predictor of being a conditional rather than an unconditional supporter of basic income. Egalitarianism also has a strong and significant negative impact on the propensity to be a conditional as opposed to an unconditional supporter. For a given position on immigration issues, egalitarianism increases the propensity to support a basic income scheme that covers non-national residents, too. The two structural variables – age and education – do not have significant effects. The negative sign for higher education suggests a tendency for the higher educated to show unconditional as opposed to conditional support, but the effect is not statistically significant. Finally, it is interesting to note that the variable ‘Blame’ does not appear to have an independent impact.

Turning to the second column, where unconditional rejection is compared to unconditional support, all the structural and attitudinal variables included in the model appear as significant predictors. Respondents in the two middle-age groups are significantly more inclined to

**Table 5** Multinomial logistic regression analysis of reactions to the basic income proposal and the persuasion experiment. Conditional support and unconditional rejection are compared to unconditional support (the reference category). Logistic Regression coefficients (N = 802) #

Variable		Conditional support versus unconditional support	Unconditional rejection versus unconditional support
Sex (D)	Male	.245	-.141
Age (C)	31–45	-.059	.846**
	46–60	.096	1.015***
	>61	.446	.216
Education (D)	Higher	-.193	.690***
Blame (D)	Yes	.087	.530**
Egalitarianism (Z)		-.444***	-.539***
Immigration (Z)		-.738***	-.272**
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> (Cox & Snell)			.204

# (D) indicates dummy variable, (C) a categorical variable, (Z) a standardized ordinal or interval level variable. The reference category for sex is ‘female’, for age ‘<30’, for education ‘lower’. \* indicates that a coefficient is significant at the 5% level, \*\* 1% level, and \*\*\* 0.1% level.

unconditionally reject as opposed to support the basic income idea, and the same holds for people with higher education. While higher education is associated with a slight (insignificant) increase in the propensity to show unconditional as opposed to conditional support, it significantly raises the propensity to express unconditional rejection. A high score on egalitarian values, however, is the single strongest predictor against unconditionally rejecting basic income, and also views about the sources of poverty (Blame) have a strong independent effect in the expected direction.

Somewhat more surprisingly, views on immigration policy appear to be significantly related also to the contrast between unconditional rejection and support. People who favour lax immigration policies are less inclined to unconditionally reject as opposed to support the basic income proposal. This is particularly surprising, since views on immigration policy appeared to be unrelated to initial reactions to the basic income proposal, as shown in Table 1. The most likely explanation – as we have already suggested – is that the persuasion experiment has removed most immigration sceptics from the supporter camp while many immigration sceptics in the opposition camp remain firm and reject the idea about a basic income for Norwegian citizens only.

## 5. Summary and concluding remarks

In this article, we have investigated public reactions to the notion of introducing a basic income in Norway. We have argued that an unconditional basic income can be seen as a radical extension of the commitment made by the Scandinavian welfare states to secure the economic well-being of all its residents, and we have suggested that popular reactions to basic income can be interpreted as an indicator of support for universalistic welfare policies and the associated redistributive aspirations.

We believe that our findings on the level and structure of initial support for the basic income idea confirm these assumptions. Two-thirds of our representative Norwegian sample express sympathy with the basic income idea, while only one-third are inclined to reject it as ‘fairly bad’ or ‘very bad’. The initial positive reactions towards the proposed basic income most probably reflect the popularity of the universal welfare state within the Norwegian public, and they draw upon contemporary concerns about the persistence of financial poverty among segments of the population. We find that sympathy for the basic income proposal is based on a coalition of interests, beliefs and norms, i.e. similar to the structure of support for the welfare state in general.

The application of our persuasion experiment suggests, however, that part of this coalition is rather frail. By simply pointing out that an unconditional basic income will include non-citizens living in Norway, many initial supporters are persuaded to change their mind. In addition, a group of initial opponents of basic income are willing to consider such a scheme if it can be withheld from non-citizens. In other words, the high degree of social solidarity that could motivate support for a basic income scheme does not necessarily encompass newly arrived immigrants and/or ethnic minority groups. Our study cannot give an answer as to why support for a basic income crumbles when respondents are presented with arguments of including immigrants. The literature on popular support for the welfare state suggests that at least two alternative mechanisms could be at work: (1) People distrust foreigners and suspect that they misuse generous welfare benefits. (2) Solidarity is undermined simply because the ‘haves’ will not share their resources with the ‘have-nots’ among the immigrants. It is up to future research to try and disentangle the relative importance of these alternative explanations.

In any case, the analysis of the positions taken by the respondents after the persuasion experiment shows that the mobilization of immigration issues opens up a new front in the ideological battle over basic income. Proponents of a universal basic income scheme face a

two-front war, with one front against an individualistic, anti-egalitarian camp (the traditional right) and another against a more collectivistic, anti-immigration camp (a new populist right).

We suspect that this is also a relevant scenario for political conflicts over the future of the Scandinavian welfare states. One possible strategy by which to adjust the Scandinavian welfare state to the harsh realities of mass immigration and ethnic heterogeneity would be to try to reduce the demand on social solidarity by abandoning redistributive universalism in favour of a stronger emphasis on income replacement and insurance principles. Another – very different strategy – would be to severely restrict immigration and move towards a two-tier welfare state where the most accessible and generous benefits are withheld from newly arrived immigrants. While Swedish welfare policies can be seen to conform to the first strategy, the second is currently being actively pursued in Denmark (Brochmann and Hagelund, 2005). Of course, these need not be the only available alternatives. The point we want to make is merely that the conditions for mobilizing popular support for universalistic welfare policies have become more difficult than they were with relatively stable and homogeneous populations during the ‘golden era’ of welfare state expansion.

## Notes

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the workshop on ‘Social Policy, Values and Support’ at the First Annual ESPAnet Conference, Copenhagen, in November 2003 and at the 12th National Conference in Political Science, Tromsø, in January 2004. On both occasions we received valuable input from fellow participants. In addition, we are indebted to Jo Saglie and two anonymous referees for helpful comments and suggestions.

1. First and foremost, chronic unemployment and high inactivity rates that continue to haunt many European countries (van Parijs, 1995), but also the growing volatility of labour markets and employment careers (Standing, 2002), negative effects of means testing (Atkinson, 1998: 130–40), and increasing difficulties distinguishing deserving from non-deserving beneficiaries in categorical social insurance (Goodin, 2000).
2. An important difference between universal pensions and child benefits on the one hand and a basic income on the other, however, is that the latter is also granted to prime age individuals and therefore potentially more directly at odds with norms about self-sufficiency through work.
3. Alternative interpretations have emphasized the influence of agrarian interests and a particular path-dependent sequence of interest mobilization and institutional feedbacks (Baldwin, 1990), smallness and the associated exposure to the volatility of world markets (Cameron, 1978; Katzenstein, 1985), and deeper social, cultural and religious roots in Scandinavian pre-industrial societies (Sørensen, 1998; Kildal and Kuhnle, 2002).
4. For an exception, see Jacobs and Shapiro (1999).
5. As Banting et al. (2005) are careful to point out, mass immigration and ethnic heterogeneity are two distinct phenomena. Mass immigration could have negative effects on welfare effort through mechanisms that are unrelated to ethnic heterogeneity and ethnic cleavages.
6. The wording of this question is a direct translation of a question applied in a Finnish and Swedish survey (Andersson and Kangas, 2002). The Norwegian translation is: ‘Hva synes du om et forslag som går ut på at staten automatisk garanterer alle som bor fast i Norge en viss minsteinntekt: En svært god ide, en ganske god ide, en ganske dårlig ide, en svært dårlig ide?’
7. This variable is a simple additive index based on three items measuring preferences for (a) a further expansion of welfare provisions over tax cuts, (b) a more progressive distribution of taxes, and (c) an egalitarian wage structure.
8. The questionnaire contains separate questions about the perceived role (and responsibility) of the poor themselves and society for the existence of poverty. It turned out that almost everybody is inclined to blame society, and the only real distinguishing feature is that a minority is inclined to partly blame the individuals too. Our variable ‘blame’ is therefore based on the latter aspect only.



9. A minority of the original supporters and non-supporters report that they have now become undecided on the issue and this group is included here among the respective 'change' categories.
10. The term 'unconditional' does not say anything about the strength of sympathy towards basic income. In fact, it turned out that the propensity to change opinion as a result of the experiment was not higher among individuals who initially chose the less extreme response alternatives ('a fairly good idea' or 'a fairly bad idea').
11. We have chosen to leave out personal income as this turned out not to have any independent effect in the previous analysis.

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