

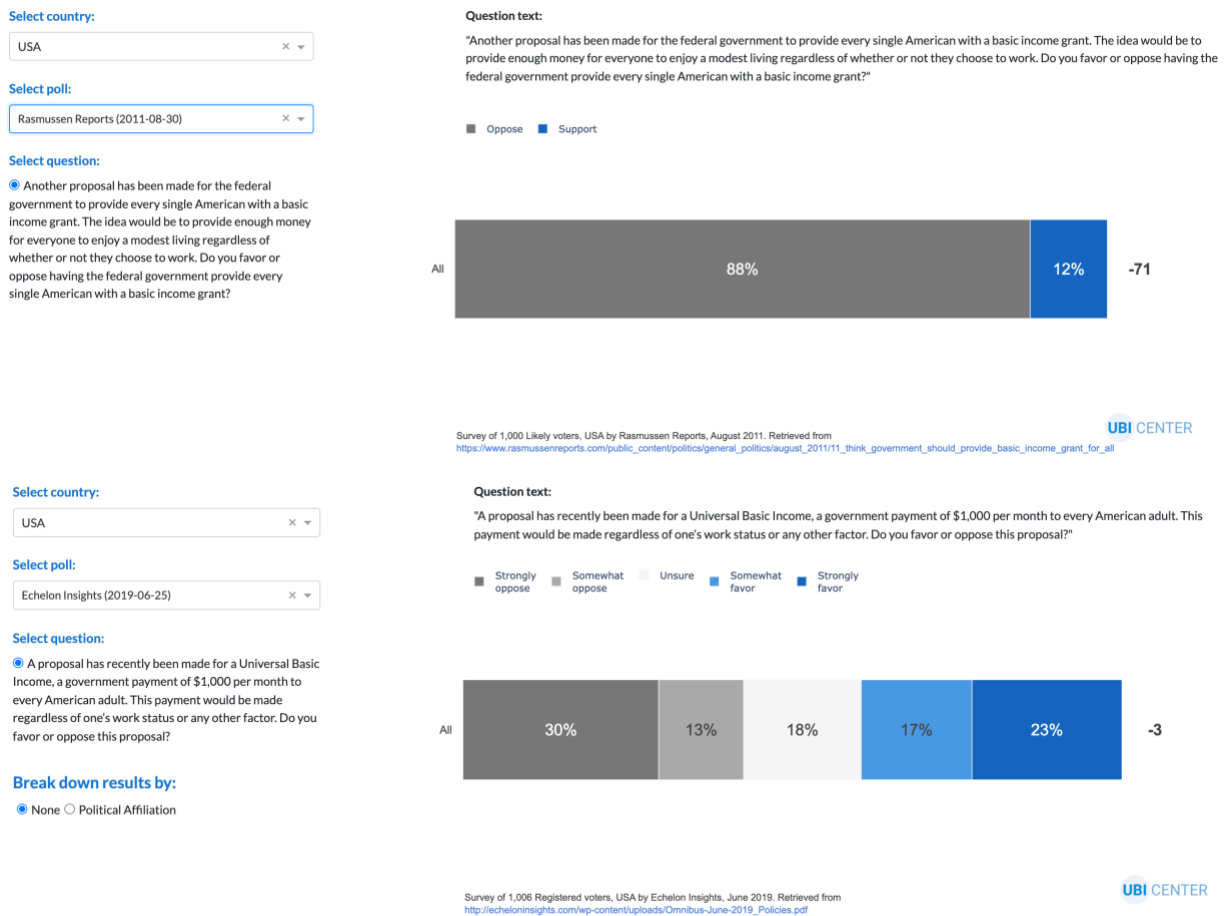
What's Behind Increasing Public Support for UBI in the United States?

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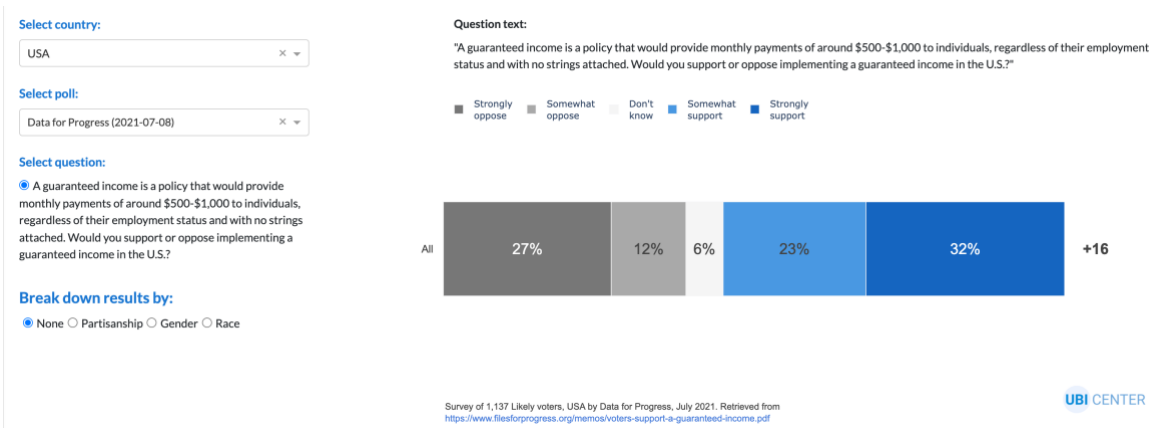
Introduction: increasing support for UBI in the United States

According to available polls, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of likely voters supporting a universal basic income (UBI) since 2011. This trend is clear from polling data available despite some differences in the questions posed (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Polls of likely U.S. voters' support for UBI



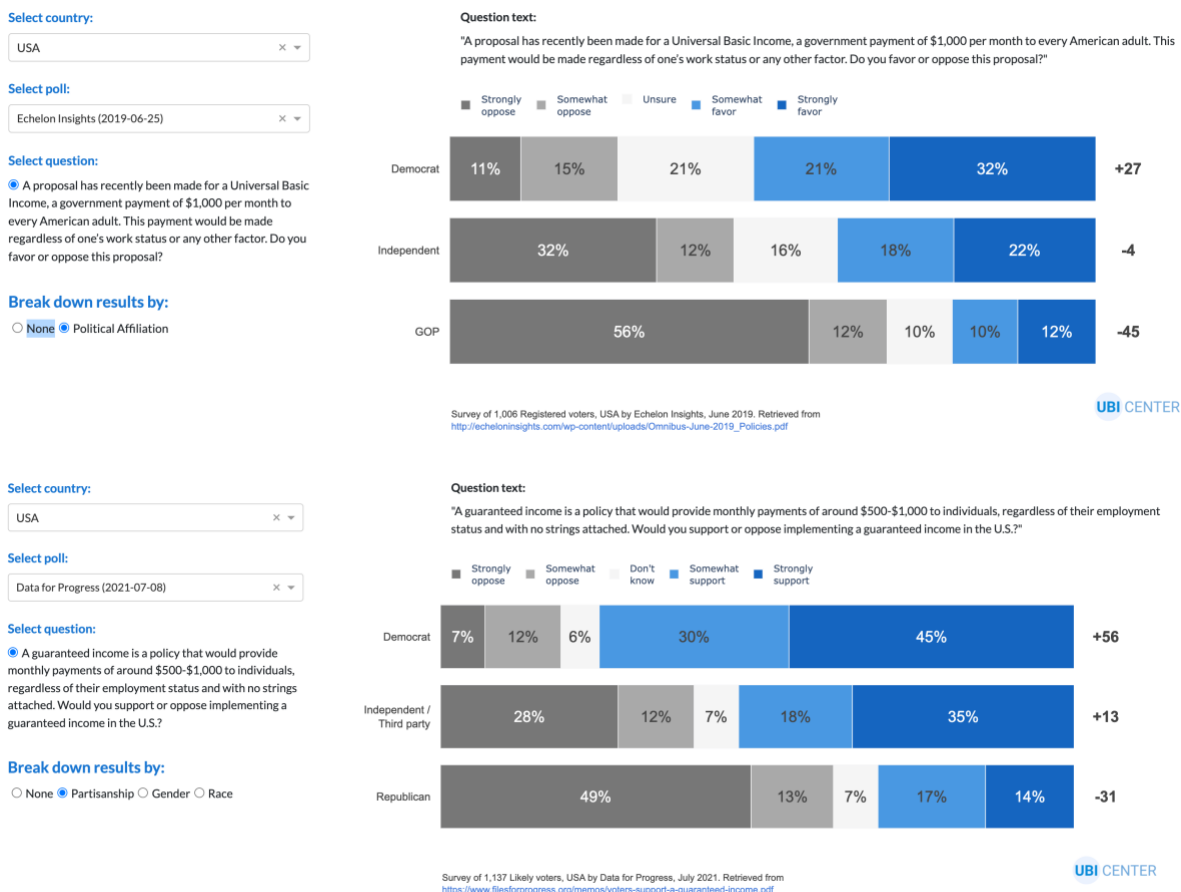
¹ News Editor of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN - <https://basicincome.org/>) and Coordinator of the Sufficiency4Sustainability Network (<https://www.sufficiency4sustainability.org/>). Paper prepared for the Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) conference, June 23-25, 2022.



Source: UBI Center, UBI Poll Tracker (<https://compute.studio/UBICenter/polls/viz/>)

The difference between favorable and unfavorable views on UBI has moved from -71 in 2011 to +16 in 2021. Looking at support broken down by political affiliation (Figure 2), support for UBI is strongest among likely voters identifying as Democrats and weakest among Republicans, with Independents falling in between. But the trend between 2019 and 2021 was upward for all three groups.

Figure 2: Support for UBI by political affiliation, 2019 and 2021



Source: UBI Center. UBI Poll Tracker (<https://compute.studio/UBICenter/polls/viz/>)

What factors may explain this surge in support for UBI? Five stand out: concern for the impact of automation, robotization, and artificial intelligence on employment opportunities, Andrew Yang's campaigns for President of the U.S. and Mayor of New York City, direct cash transfers during the Covid-19 pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic itself, and the growing number of municipal-level pilot programs. An additional factor beginning in October 2021 may be the formation of the Forward Party that has UBI as one of its six core principles.²

Concern for the net impact of computer-based technology on employment

Research on this controversial topic is inconclusive. But most analysts recognize that technological change can be disruptive and that jobs created by new technologies can require different skills and occur in different places from jobs that are destroyed. Further, income and wealth inequalities are increasing (World Economic Forum, 2020). There is particular concern for the impact of robotics and artificial intelligence, technologies driven by exponentially increasing computer power. This has led an impressive number of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, creators of such technologies, to come out in favor of UBI. They see UBI as a policy to mitigate the negative impact of exponential technologies, facilitate adjustment, and even promote entrepreneurship. The support of CEOs like Sam Altman, Richard Branson, Jack Dorsey, and Elon Musk creates a lot of favorable publicity around UBI (Clifford, 2016; Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2016; Weller, 2017).

Andrew Yang's campaigns

Yang's proposal for a \$1,000 a month "Freedom Dividend" during the 2020 Democratic Party primary brought UBI into the US political discourse for the first time since the 1970s (Knight, 2019). Yang based his support for UBI on the impact of technology on employment which he asserted was a fundamental cause of Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential elections (Yang, 2018).

- Yang participated in six nationally televised debates before suspending his campaign for POTUS after the New Hampshire primary.
- While Yang was not given much time to speak during these debates, he did get a chance to advocate for the Freedom Dividend.
- Yang focused on the impact of automation, robotics, and AI on employment in justifying his proposal.
- In his 2021 campaign for Mayor of NYC, Yang proposed unconditional cash payments of \$2,000 a year to half a million of the poorest New Yorkers leading some other candidates to adopt similar positions or call for a federal UBI.

² This paper does not deal with the concept of or justifications for UBI. For these see, *inter alia*, Santens (n.d.), Standing (2020), and Van Parijjs and Vanderborcht (2017).

- In October 2021, Yang founded the Forward Party (<https://www.forwardparty.com/>) focused on reducing partisan polarization by implementing electoral reforms, but included UBI as one of its core principles.

Direct cash transfers during the COVID-19 pandemic – personal and the expanded child tax credit

During the pandemic, both the Trump and Biden administrations sent direct cash payments to individuals and their children.

- *March 27, 2020*: Up to \$1,200 per adult, \$500 per child (CARES Act). The payments were reduced for individuals with adjusted gross income (AGI) greater than \$75,000 (\$150,000 for married couples filing a joint return).
- *December 21, 2020*: \$600 per person cash for those earning \$75,000 or less. The AGI thresholds at which the payments began to be reduced were identical to those under the CARES Act.
- *March 11, 2021*: Direct cash payments of up to \$1,400 for individuals or \$2,800 for married couples filing jointly, plus \$1,400 per dependent. Normally, taxpayers qualified for the full amount of Economic Impact Payment if they had an AGI of up to \$75,000 for singles and married persons filing a separate return, up to \$112,500 for heads of household, and up to \$150,000 for married couples filing joint returns and surviving spouses. Payment amounts were reduced for eligible individuals with an AGI above those levels (American Rescue Plan).

All told, within one year, \$1 trillion in cash was sent directly to the bank accounts and mailboxes of about 85% of Americans, no strings attached.

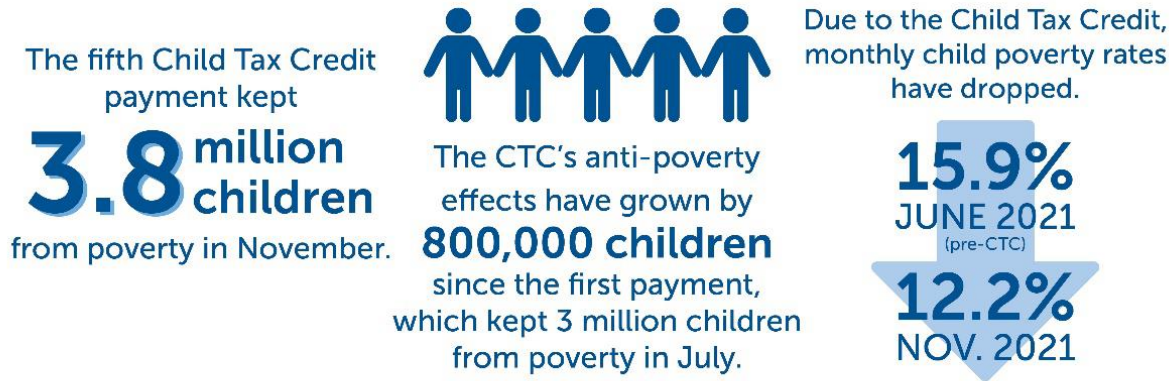
And that was not all. As part of Biden’s American Rescue Plan, the maximum annual Child Tax Credit (CTC) increased from \$2,000 a child to \$3,000 per child ages 6 to 17, and \$3,600 for each child under the age of 6. The increase applied only in 2021. Payments began phasing out for couples making over \$150,000 a year and individuals who were heads of households making over \$112,500 a year.

Beginning in July, the IRS sent six monthly child tax credit payments to about 36 million families for more than 65 million U.S. children – roughly 90 percent of children. According to a Columbia University study (Curran, 2021, p. 3),

- The expanded CTC reached an overwhelming majority of children, but outreach to newly eligible families with low incomes should continue.
- Monthly payments buffered family incomes amidst the continuing COVID-19 crisis.
- Monthly payments reduced child poverty (Figure 3).
- Families spent the CTC on food and other basic needs.
- Monthly payments reduced food insufficiency.
- Monthly payments may have reduced financial stress and other hardships.

- There is no evidence that indicates the monthly payments reduced employment.
- The expanded CTC mattered for racial equity.

Figure 3: The impact of the expanded Child Tax Credit on monthly child poverty



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Source: Curran (2021), p. 8

The monthly payments were simply an advance of the child tax credit taxpayers would otherwise claim on their 2021 tax return. The payments came on top of the stimulus checks/deposits described above as well as enhanced unemployment benefits that were also part of the pandemic stimulus programs of both the Trump and Biden administrations.

The expanded CTC payments did not continue in 2022, as Biden's Build Back Better program did not pass in the Senate. But the success of the program and the ample publicity around it probably have contributed to increasing support for UBI.

The Covid-19 pandemic itself

A recent set of three studies (Nettle *et al.*, 2021) found, in diverse samples of the US and UK populations, substantially more positive attitudes to UBI in the context of the pandemic and its aftermath than in normal times. The authors concluded that what the pandemic does, in respondent's minds, is change the importance of several of the features of UBI: their shift in overall support for the policy then follows. For example, "The pandemic may have accelerated, in people's minds, the process that many pro-UBI commentators have previously attributed to automation: the bringing of greater and greater fractions of the population into a precariousness not of their making, until the point where since the nearly whole population is in this state, universality becomes the only reasonable option."

Rainwater and Dillow (2020) argue that the pandemic makes automation more attractive. Not only do robots never get sick, but they address a public health priority by minimizing human interactions. This, in turn, increases support for UBI – "it may be coming into its time not through the front door of political or ideological revolution but via a backdoor opened wide by an epidemiological crisis compounded by technological disruption."

Thomas et al (2020) found that in two online studies rates of UBI support reached 69-75%, compared to a maximum of 55% pre-Covid-19. Their data “suggest that one factor is the normalization of financial hardship. It appears that, as financial hardship becomes more common, empathy for financial need is growing.”

Pilot guaranteed income programs at the municipal level

Encouraged by a pilot program established in Stockton, California, by then Mayor Michael Tubbs with support from philanthropists, Tubbs founded Mayors for a Guaranteed Income (MGI - www.mayorsforagi.org). As of May 2022, MGI had 70 mayors from cities large and small in 30 states participating with 35 of these cities having pilot programs planned or underway. MGI received a total of \$18 million from Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey to help support these pilots. There are many other pilots launched directly by NGOs, philanthropists, and cities. These guaranteed income pilots are targeted on vulnerable groups like the unbanked, the formerly incarcerated, low-income Black mothers, and people experiencing homelessness. Thus, these guaranteed income pilots are not testing a UBI, but they help build support for UBI.

MGI, together with the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy & Practice has established the [Center for Guaranteed Income Research](#). The goal of the Center is to consolidate the key learnings from the pilots taking place in MGI member cities, to address knowledge gaps in the contemporary understanding of guaranteed income’s impact for Americans, and to allow the organization to layer data with anecdotal evidence in federal advocacy. Pilot projects and research results are getting significant coverage in the print and electronic media, further increasing public knowledge of cash transfers and their effects – for example see <https://www.mayorsforagi.org/newsroom>, Holder (2021), Hess (2021), and Green and Mittal (2022).

Conclusions

Polling data shows that public support for UBI has been increasing since 2011. This paper examines five factors that seem to be contributing to this rise in support: concern for technologically induced unemployment, Andrew Yang’s political campaigns, direct cash payments during the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic itself, and a rapidly increasing number of guaranteed income pilot programs. No research directly links polling results to these factors – that depends on future polls testing these hypotheses.

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³ All links on this page and throughout this paper were active as of May 30, 2022.

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