

## ARTICLES

# Assessing Basic Income Feasibility Political Parties' Positions on the French-Speaking Belgian Scene

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### Abstract

*Social protection systems are under growing pressure and face many challenges. Some argue that a universal basic income (BI) has the potential to transcend political cleavages and offer the ground for a welfare reform. While previous literature has increasingly tackled BI's feasibility, ground-based research is still scarce. This study intends to fill this gap by considering the positions of five French-speaking Belgian parties (PTB, PS, Ecolo, Les Engagés and MR) on BI. Through a qualitative in-depth analysis of semi-structured interviews and grey literature, the article shows that BI proposals coming from liberals, democrats and ecologists are representative of the left-right cleavage. This is explained by the multidimensionality of the 'basic income' concept but also by diverging visions on work and society. By studying concrete parties' positions, this article reveals the barriers and ways forward the path to BI's strategic political feasibility in Belgium.*

**Keywords:** basic income, parties, political feasibility.

## 1 Introduction

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the course of our lives has been thoroughly shaken. In Belgium, amid the first coronavirus 'wave', in spring 2020, the number of employed people benefitting from temporary unemployment allowance has reached the unprecedented rate of 40 per cent while half of the self-employed workers asked for a compensating allowance (*Banque Nationale de Belgique*, 2021, p. 198). In this context, the public contributions have greatly counterbalanced the national revenue loss of households, firms and public authorities, which are estimated at 41 billion euros by Belgium's National Bank (2021, p. 73). At the same time, more and more people had to turn to public assistance or charities to be able to cope with the lack of income. The Belgian Red Cross has, for example, seen a rise of 32 per cent of their food aid distribution to meet the exploding demand (*Croix-Rouge de Belgique*, 2021). These exceptional

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circumstances have raised important questions about Belgium's social protection system and how to make it more resilient to exterior shocks such as pandemics. Among others, the possibility of implementing a universal and unconditional basic income (BI) has been brought up as a potential solution.

The return of this proposal only confirms what appears to be the growing, although cyclical, attention towards BI projects. Indeed, debates about unconditional BI have significantly come back on the scene the last few years. BI, a cash income paid to all members of a political community, regardless of their revenues and without conditions, is, under its canonical form, commonly defined with three unconditionalities (Dumont, 2022; Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). It is universal (every adult in a community gets the same amount), unconditional (no work conditions or restrictions) and individual (the income is given to one person rather than to a household). In Belgium, political parties lingered before taking a clear stance on the topic even though theoretical and philosophical discussions have been highly inspiring. Indeed, BI is an ambiguous theme: it is divisive across the population, within political wings and parties, and yet gathers support from opposed political sides.

Debates about BI's potential effects and benefits in the literature include seemingly contradictory arguments. BI is said both to facilitate the exit of the labour market (Calnitsky, 2017) and the power to say no to jobs (Widerquist, 2013); and to encourage labour market participation by removing unemployment and poverty traps (de Basquiat & Koenig, 2014; Friedman, 2013). It is advocated for its emancipatory power, especially for women (Whithorn, 2013), but at the same time criticised for its potential gendered effect, pushing back women in the household unquestioning the gendered division of care (Eydoux, 2017). Proponents of BI insist on the freedom and the real opportunities it provides to individuals (Van Parijs, 1991; Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017), whereas opponents pretend it is only a way of unravelling social security and abandoning citizens to self-subsistence (Alaluf, 2014). On another dimension, it is both said to lead the path towards a non-productivist, frugal society (Pinto, 2020) and to encourage consumerist behaviours (Ackerman & Alstott, 2008). Ultimately, it is impossible to assess the real effects BI would have as it has never been implemented under a pure form. It is, therefore, not surprising that a wide range of arguments are used in the political debate.

In this article, the author scrutinises the positions of five main political parties of the French-speaking part of Belgium on BI: the liberals (*Mouvement réformateur*, MR), the socialists (*Parti Socialiste*, PS), the greens (*Ecolo*), the far left (*Parti du Travail belge*, PTB) and the democrats (*Les Engagés*, former Christian democrats, *cdH*). This study intends to answer the following research question: *what do the different positions of the main French-speaking Belgian parties regarding BI tell us about its strategic feasibility?*

The author first conducts a review of the existing literature and presents the driving theoretical concept of this article: the strategic feasibility of BI. The second section offers the opportunity to clarify the methodology and justifies the case study by contextualising the Belgian political and institutional scene. In the analysis section, the author uncovers each party's position on BI and investigates

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how these positions are still telling of the left-right cleavage. The article shows that not only are the liberal, democrat and green BI proposals informed by very different visions, but also that PS, PTB and Ecolo, behind the BI debate, take common stances on alternative social reforms. Finally, the author draws conclusions on the strategic feasibility of BI in Belgium, summarises the main takes of the current study and touches upon potential future research developments in the last section.

## 2 Theory

This section first presents the theoretical framework of the research by detailing the concept of strategic political feasibility of BI. Then, a review of the BI literature is conducted.

### 2.1 Strategic Feasibility of BI

The author's theoretical frame is drawn from De Wispelaere and Noguera (2012) as they designed an analytical framework of the political feasibility of BI (see Table 1). They start from two assumptions: first, politics involves agency and political power. It means that policy entrepreneurs with different resources try to influence political outcomes, addressed at either *discrete* (easily identifiable actors such as policymakers, bureaucrats or social movement elites) or *diffuse* agents (typically, the 'public'). This constitutes the first dimension of their typology. Second, politics happens in a constrained environment, both before and after the implementation of the policy. Constraints affecting the probability of a measure, namely BI here, being implemented are *prospective*, whereas background conditions influencing the functioning of the policy once instituted are *retrospective*. These two axes combined allow for a multidimensional typology designating four types of political feasibility: strategic, institutional, psychological, and behavioural. The author uses the strategic feasibility here: it combines discrete agents, political parties in this case, with prospective constraints, as the study concerns parties' positions on a potential future implementation of BI.

**Table 1** *Typology of political feasibility, adapted from De Wispelaere and Noguera (2012, p. 21)*

|  | <i>Prospective constraints</i><br>(before implementation) | <i>Retrospective constraints</i><br>(after implementation) |
|--|---|--|
| <i>Discrete agency</i> (easily identifiable) | <b>Strategic feasibility</b>                              | Institutional feasibility                                  |
| <i>Diffuse agency</i> (dispersed actors)     | Psychological feasibility                                 | Behavioural feasibility                                    |

According to the authors, strategic feasibility implies the search for a strong BI coalition, as the simple enumeration of individual support is not enough. Two obstacles threaten this type of feasibility: the risk of cheap support and of counterproductive support. Support for BI can be cheap following two meanings: it can be of no concrete worth because emanating from marginalised actors with little political power, and/or it can be weak and easily abandoned once the actor is

in power, because it has a high political opportunity cost. The fact that support can be counterproductive refers to the existence of a potential 'first-mover disadvantage' repelling some political groups to take a positive stance because opposed ones already endorsed the proposal (de Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012, pp. 21-24).

These theoretical insights will drive the author's analysis, the agents the author is concerned with here are parties. The puzzle of cheap and counterproductive support will offer useful criteria to conclude about the strategic feasibility of BI in the Belgian context. The development of this article thus intends to assess whether such obstacles do exist in relation to political parties in Belgium, and how it affects the probability of different types of BI being implemented.

## 2.2 Review of the Literature

Increasing numbers of studies are considering the political feasibility of BI, and many of them are based on the theoretical framework just touched upon, which was the reason for the BI literature to take a more concrete turn. Examples of research investigating the politics of BI, with or without the mentioned typology, are numerous. Perkiö (2021) uses the strategic feasibility combined with an ideational institutionalist perspective to examine the framing of the BI theme in the Finnish context and confirms the thesis of cheap support from agents advocating for BI. The authors of the book *Experimenting with Unconditional Basic Income, Lessons from the Finnish BI Experiment 2017-2018* (2021) elaborate on the four types of political feasibility to make the conclusive claim that, under current circumstances, a genuine BI scheme has low chances of being implemented in the near future in Europe (Kangas, 2021, for a brief review, see Geels, 2022). Many other publications approach the same issue through the lenses of the policy and political learnings from on-the-ground experiments, in Barcelona (García, 2022) or the Netherlands (Roosma, 2022). The feasibility question of BI is also analysed at length in the British context in Martinelli's report (2017). Another study, concerning the Belgian situation this time, explores the strategic and psychological feasibility of various BI proposals in Belgium by uncovering "the political constituencies and coalitions that may be mobilised in favour of or against different models of BI in the Belgian welfare state" (Laenen et al., 2022, p. 3). The international level is also scrutinised in different studies. Shanahan et al. (2019) use, for example, the same framework and Vlandas (2019) delves into the individual support for BI in Europe. Alternatively, some authors inspire themselves from the typology to design their own framework and infer on the feasibility of BI (see, for example, Torry, 2019), while others prefer to complement it with other bodies of literature on institutions and political parties (see Chrisp, 2020).

I follow this perspective: if the framework surely provides a strong analytic basis, it still needs to be complemented by other concepts and bodies of literature. The notion of *multidimensionality* of BI is key to our understanding of political debates. When analysing political parties' positions on BI, one has to bear in mind that these positions relate to different forms, and dimensions of BI. Indeed, BI is better understood as a family of schemes than as a ready-made policy. De Wispelaere and Stirton (2004) help us differentiate between proposals by highlighting seven dimensions along which BI can vary, and Laenen and colleagues (2022) complement

this frame by adding four others. I will use six of these fourteen dimensions to inform my analysis: universality, conditionality, adequacy, accumulation, financing, and integration. They will be detailed in the analysis part. Depending on how these dimensions are associated, the presumed effects will differ extensively. In addition to this element, it is useful to combine the BI literature with other political science research bodies, as I will now turn to.

It has been argued that BI was ‘neither left nor right’, as it is difficult to classify a welfare policy on the political spectrum (Chrisp & Martinelli, 2019). Some claim that it could be a “compromise between protective and productive elements of social security” (Martinelli, 2017, p. 6). However, other pieces of literature nuance this claim, admitting that the left-right divide might well be at stake: “Basic income may be neither left nor right on the *economic* dimension but not on the *cultural* dimension” (Chrisp, 2020, p. 66). This cultural dimension refers to particular welfare policies preferences, linked to values and cultural identities. BI can actually be understood as an ‘either left or right’ policy (my emphasis, Chrisp, 2020, p. 47). The concept’s amplitude has been highlighted in many analyses. Indeed, Vandamme (2021), Eydoux (2017) or Allègre (2017) insist on the fact that there are at least two ideal types of BI. One pole is neoliberal, the other includes both social-democrat and social-ecologist versions.

Several researches have also demonstrated that left-wing voters were statistically more likely to be in favour of BI (Chrisp & Martinelli, 2019). Studies based on the European Social Survey tend to point at similar results at the European level (Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020; Vlandas, 2019). Empirical studies show that the traditional left-right cleavage does not seem to inform BI’s support in some national contexts, such as in the UK or Finland; in Belgium, left-wing voters are more supportive of all types of BI than their right-wing counterparts (Laenen et al., 2022). Several political science theories might help clarify the links between parties’ positions, voters’ preferences and policy setting. While the *vote-seeking* (Storm, 1990) strategy of parties might explain the ecologists’ position, it fails to justify PS’s position: socialists are not following their voters’ inclination towards BI, as will be detailed further. The fact that we witnessed an intensified debate on the political scene following some “policy entrepreneurs” (Mintrom, 1997) such as the socialist and liberal parties’ presidents might, on the other side, indicate a *policy-seeking* behaviour. Most francophone parties were pushed to take a stance on the BI theme. Beyond party behaviours, one has, in addition, to acknowledge the importance of the context. Indeed, it is needed in understanding complex phenomena such as parties’ positions on social policies, to consider institutional and historical contexts (Chrisp, 2020).

There is a whole research field, at the juncture of party politics and BI literature, waiting to be explored. As Chrisp (2020, p. 49) mentions: “there is a need for a systematic, comparative approach to explain political support and opposition to basic income.... Specifically, insufficient attention has been given to the role of political parties in basic income research.” This is what the author intends to do in the present research. The author argues that party ideology matters, and that the left-right divide is a relevant analytical line to understand the BI debate in the Belgian context. A cleavage can be defined as the opposition between political

parties arising in a national setting (Delwit, 2021a, p. 7). The author here draws the line between the left and the right in a multidimensional perspective, as different types of divisions are interwoven (Delwit, 2021a, p. 9). The socio-economic division (or the class conflict) is, of course, decisive, but positions about the state's role, the neoliberal economic system and inequalities will also be part of the analysis, illustrating the *cultural* dimension of the aforementioned traditional cleavage.

### 3 Case Selection and Methodology

#### 3.1 Case Selection

Belgium is an interesting case study to investigate the political feasibility of BI through the lens of francophone parties' positions for both contextual and institutional reasons. On the one hand, the BI idea has inspired proposals and discussions for decades by eminent public figures, be they academics or politicians, especially on the French-speaking side. The theme often resurfaces on the public scene and has led political actors to position themselves in the past few years. On the other hand, two main characteristics make the institutional context worthwhile to consider in the analysis, as they influence the BI debate. First, political parties have a decisive and institutional role in the Belgian system. Then, Belgium's complex institutional structure and the hybrid nature of its social protection system (gathering both assistance and insurance mechanisms, see for example Dumont, 2022) make BI a stimulating proposal.

##### 3.1.1 Belgium's Particratic System

Belgium has at times been described as an ideal type of *particracy*, for example, an institutional and political system dominated by political parties (Delwit, 2008). Therefore, studying parties' positions on BI, as *agents* influencing political outcomes (de Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012), is an unavoidable step in the comprehension of its strategic feasibility. It also means that, so long as parties do not have a clear position on BI, the measure is less likely to be brought on the policy-setting agenda (influence of the *prospective* constraints). More specifically, the study focuses on the francophone parties. The reason behind this analytical choice is simple: that side of the linguistic frontier is the most vivid on the BI topic. Since the beginning of 2022, an upsurge of the theme has been witnessed on the media scene, while both individual personalities and parties have remained silent on BI in Flanders.

The author considers here major parties in terms of electoral representations of the French-speaking situation. Three of them are a part of the federal majority, and hence have stronger political power regarding policy implementation: PS, MR and Ecolo. At the 2019 federal elections, the PS obtained 32.3 per cent of francophone votes, the MR got 22.6 per cent and Ecolo 21 per cent. The PTB is the strongest francophone party of the opposition with 12.9 per cent of francophone votes. *Les Engagés* has been recently created and was not the identity of the party competing for these elections, but its predecessor, the *cdH* had 8 per cent. The author leaves aside *Défi*, a centre-right party because it has only two parliamentary seats at the federal level and used to be a member of the MR (under the name *FDF*).



One has to note that the party *Les Engagés*, former Christian democrats, is the result of a process of political repositioning and programmatic reform, which took place between 2020 and March 2022. This implies that the working documents of the party under its new form are still scarce, although its manifesto, officially approved in May 2022, includes relevant elements for the present analysis. *Les Engagés* has undergone no electoral campaign, nor does it have an electoral programme *stricto sensu* yet and is still undergoing a process of organisational change. This might somewhat limit the comparative work here. However, the author still intends to include the position of this renewed centrist party in the analysis, as it is already visible on the media and political scene.

The readiness of parties to take a stance might, in addition, depend on their internal structure. The PS and the MR are traditionally hierarchical with a delegation organisation. Informally, within the PS, main political orientations are determined at the ‘G9’ composed of eminent party officials (Delwit, 2021b), while the MR is characterised by the predominance of its President (Legein, 2018). The PTB is characterised by a ‘democratic centralism’ (Delwit, 2016) where members are subordinated to the organisation, although very active. To the contrary, the party members of Ecolo, a bottom-up political tradition movement, have an essential role in the internal decision-making process. *Les Engagés* presents itself as a ‘positive, citizen-based and participative political movement’ (*Les Engagés*, 2022b). It has been claimed (Legein, 2018) that higher intra-partisan democracy might favour the agenda setting of the BI proposal. It tends to be verified in Ecolo’s and *Les Engagés*’ cases. Yet, the political power and influence of the PS’s and MR’s presidents seem to have an impact on the salience of the BI theme within the francophone political and media arena. In this case, the high level of intra-partisan hierarchy might in fact influence the party towards a more favourable official position on BI.

Studying parties’ positions as unified in this article does not mean that there are no internal dissensions. Paul Magnette, PS’s leader at the time of writing (since 2019), declared in 2016 that BI was ‘in the direction of history’ (Tassin, *La Libre*, 2016) and could lead to an increased universalisation of social allowances (Magnette, *interview*, 2022), although his party remained opposed to BI. Parties’ presidents can be ‘policy entrepreneurs’, influencing other discrete or diffuse agents, and analysing their personal position thus helps study BI feasibility.

Besides, within the neo-corporatist (Schmitter, 1974) Belgian system, trade unions are institutionally strong actors. While empirical studies are still lacking, most pieces of literature underline trade unions’ traditional opposition to BI. The “strong labourist philosophy inherent to most unions” seems to repel them from the condition-free nature of BI (de Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012, p. 23) and its individual characteristics might threaten their institutional position and negotiation power (Vanderborght, 2006; Vlandas, 2019). As these structures have been historically tied to political parties in Belgium, their reticence towards BI could influence the parties, especially in the socialist case. However, the links between parties, trade unions and their positions on BI would require an article by itself. For the purpose of analytical clarity, the author will thus keep the focus on political parties here.

### 3.1.2 *Belgium's Social Protection Regime*

Belgium's social protection regime is historically contributory, or Bismarckian (Esping-Andersen, 1990), meaning that a big share of public policies is financed through workers' contributions. But assistance mechanisms have been added along the years: some social allowances are financed through taxes and granted to people in need, no matter their contribution (Dumont, 2022). Thus, from insurance-based, the regime has turned out to be hybrid, social contributions amount now for less than 60 per cent (SPF Sécurité sociale, 2021b) of the financing of the system. The remaining 40 per cent are funded through public contributions (state subsidies, VAT receipts). Researchers (Zamora, 2019) as well as field organisations (*Collectif Solidarité contre l'exclusion*, 2018) have denounced this drift away from contributory logic, claiming that social assistance cures the symptoms rather than the causes of social and economic exclusion. This phenomenon influences the debate on BI, as parties do not perceive this evolution equally (see *infra*).

## 3.2 *Methodology*

### 3.2.1 *Types of Sources*

The present study is based on a qualitative analysis of grey literature materials produced between 2017 and 2022, such as election programmes, publications of parties' research centres, press interventions and conferences. In addition to this review, the author conducted interviews with party leaders or members in 2022. To do so, the author contacted by email 'relevant' party members on the BI theme, meaning either in charge of social protection topics or having a high position within the structure and thus interviewed two parties' presidents: George-Louis Bouchez for the liberals, at the party's headquarters in Brussels on the 4th of March, and the socialists' leader Paul Magnette, at the PS's headquarters in Brussels on the 3rd of May. For *Les Engagés*, the author met Laurent de Briey, who was responsible for the programmatic renewal campaign of the party, in Namur on the 15th of March. Concerning the Greens, the author had a conversation with Marie-Colline Leroy, chairwoman of the social affairs committee of the house of representatives. The interview was conducted online on the 8th of February. These discussions lasted between 50 minutes and 1 h 20 minutes and were all in French. Unfortunately, after different trials, nobody from the PTB accepted to meet the author, their refusal is itself indicative of the salience of the BI theme within their party.

The 2017-2022 period is especially interesting because although the BI debate seems cyclical, it is during this time frame that we acknowledged official positioning of the parties in addition to individual accounts. The five-years-frame allows at the same time to provide the picture of a small temporal window (in comparison to decades of BI discussion) and to consider the latest evolution of the fast-evolving media and political scene. It also permits collecting both pre-electoral, more long-term programmatic documents, and electoral programmes (Belgium's federal elections were held in 2019).



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### 3.2.2 *Design and Analysis Methods*

The conferences, TV interviews and debates were selected because they concerned BI or were related to parties' positions on social protection. The grey literature (election programmes, research centres' publications, internal documents) was analysed through a careful and systematic content examination. The interviews were semi-directive. An interview grid common to all interviews was designed and included six themes: the interviewee's personal position on BI, the main arguments behind the party's position, the internal dynamics (potential dissent or debates on the proposal), the link between BI and other social policies, the interviewee's opinion on the political feasibility of BI and the influence of the party's position on BI within the broader political landscape. As interviews were informed by the grey literature review, more precise questions were added to consider each party's specific position and proposals. For instance, the author asked G-L. Bouchez how he ended up with his BI proposal, and P. Magnette why his party still highly favoured the insurance principle. In sum, the grid constituted the basis, but the interviews were conducted like conversations, with follow-up questions directly linked to the interviewee's answer rather than sticking to the predefined order of the grid questions.

## 4 **Analysis: Parties' Positions in the Polarised BI Debate**

After an overview of parties' positions informed by different dimensions, this section will explore the logic behind these positions. Two factors can help understand them: the persistence of the left-right cleavage and diverging lines on productivism. Then, the author indicates how three leftist parties converged on social protection themes despite their disagreements about BI, illustrating how the BI debate had to be crossed with discussions on welfare reforms.

### 4.1 *Understanding Concrete Positions*

#### 4.1.1 *Overview of Positions*

This section explores the parties' concrete proposals and political lines about BI. One must note first that, although the BI theme has become salient on the public stage, the parties are still implicated in the debate to varying degrees, implying some asymmetries in terms of arguments and treatment of the topic. Second, the positions can be formal or implicit, as the author exposes during the argument.

First, on the left side, the objective of the PS and the PTB is to reinforce the Belgian social protection system to "sustain the contribution-based funding" (PS, 2019, p. 17; PTB, 2019, p. 193). They defend the rising of all social benefits above the poverty line (1.085€ for an isolated person,<sup>1</sup> *SPF Sécurité sociale*, 2021a) and a lifting of the minimum wage. The PS and the PTB also oppose the increasing conditionality and controlling tendency of the current system and want to strengthen the insurance logic. The PS has expressed its opposition to a general BI but is working on a proposal of youth BI. The PS's leader, Paul Magnette, has indeed advanced in early 2022 the idea of an income granted to the 18 to 25 year-olds that

would not suppress current unemployment leaves or social minimums but rather complement them (Hermann, *L'Avenir*, 2022; Magnette, *interview*, 2022). While representatives of the PTB have declared that the proposal could be 'interesting', they reckon 'the core fight is to defend social security' and to bring back the question of wealth repartition on the table (Mugemangango, *Colloque Picardie Laïque*, 2021).

Then, Ecolo is in favour of a youth BI, as short-term feasible 'political objective', potentially the first step of an incremental strategy (Legein, 2018), while a truly universal BI without age condition, as the sixth pillar of our social protection system is the desirable long-term goal. It intends to fill the gaps of the current insurance system (Ecolo, 2017; Leroy, *interview*, 2022). The youth BI, between 460 and 600€ per month, would be granted to young people from 18 to 26 years old, without any conditions of work, studies or resources. Their proposal is inspired by the idea of Ecolo's former co-President, Philippe Defeyt, defending a monthly allowance of 600€ (300€ under 18 years of age) without conditions (Defeyt, 2017).

The liberal George-Louis Bouchez, President of the MR at the time of writing (elected in 2019) is another personality fuelling the discussions about BI. In his book *L'aurore d'un monde nouveau* (2017), Bouchez proposes a 'social dividend', of 1000€ for the people aged 18-67 and of 1600€ for those aged above 67 years. This allowance would replace all current social and contributory benefits except for assistance to disabled people and 'big risk' health care (surgery, hospitalisation, radiographies, etc.). The official position of the party, however, is not yet clear-cut. The party is having internal discussions about the programme for the 2024 federal elections and will have a vote in October 2022 to establish the line about BI. Regarding the chances of the BI proposal being endorsed, Bouchez states that "if I should do an estimate, I would say the odds are 50-50" (Bouchez, *interview*, 2022).<sup>2</sup>

Finally, *Les Engagés* is not in favour of an unconditional BI but supports the idea of a participation income, for example an income conditioned on the beneficiary's contribution to society (Atkinson, 1996). The party, deeply attached to reciprocity, insists on the fact that the system should maintain the contributory principle (De Briey, *interview*, 2022). The proposal is to grant 600€ taxable to every major resident under conditions of a contribution to society (working, voluntary or associative activities, care, etc.).

We already realise that, in contrast to theoretical assumptions from De Wispelaere and Noguera (2012), we do not observe 'a first-mover' disadvantage here, as three parties from various ideological stances endorsed a version of the BI idea. Neither are these actors marginalised. These elements could be encouraging regarding BI strategic feasibility.

#### 4.1.2 *The Multidimensionality of BI in the Belgian Debate*

The previous section indicated that BI proposals could change along different dimensions (designed by de Wispelaere & Stirton, 2004; Laenen et al., 2022), among which six are useful for the present analysis. *Universality* refers to who is entitled to benefit from a BI: while Ecolo's short-term proposal, as well as the idea advanced by the PS's President are only targeted at the youth (categorical BI), the MR's President's and *Les Engagés*' versions of BI are universal. It is interesting to

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note that there seems to be a consensus regarding beneficiaries' nationality: all proposals concern all permanent and legal residents on the Belgian soil (without requirements of duration of stay on the territory). Second, relating to *conditionality*, only the participation income of *Les Engagés* is conditional on a contribution to society. Then, on the *adequacy* dimension, covering the level of benefit, we realise that only Bouchez's BI is of a more consistent amount, while the others remain at a modest level. The *accumulation* criteria help us show that Magnette's form of youth BI is the only one that would not be combinable with other earnings from work or social benefits as it intends to fill the gaps of the current system. On the *financing* side, while the liberal BI of Bouchez is mainly financed by the suppression of most social benefits and by taxing the BI, the versions of *Les Engagés* would be financed by replacing some benefits, the taxation of this income and an environmental tax and Ecolo would finance its youth BI by a redirection of current resources. Finally, on the dimension of the *integration* within broader welfare policies, only Bouchez's proposal aims at replacing almost all current social benefits.

Against the background of these dimensions, one realises that parties are referring to distinct poles of BI: the proposals are informed by different ideological perspectives.

## 4.2 Explaining Parties' Positions

### 4.2.1 The Left-Right Cleavage at Play

Three parties, via some eminent members' proposal or official position, are vocal proponents of BI. However, the previous section showed that each party was combining different dimensions in their proposal. This changes the perspectives behind the idea. How do these different dimensions reflect opposed visions on the organisation of society and are, ultimately, illustrative of the left-right cleavage? We will see that Ecolo's and *Les Engagés*' versions can be qualified as social democrat whereas MR's version belongs to the neoliberal pole, according to the three axes.

The first concerns Belgium's welfare state and the *integration* dimension (and indirectly, the financing). Bouchez's version finds its roots in the liberal thinking that the role of the state should be minimal. Too much state's implication in people's lives would diminish individual freedom, so the idea is to grant a BI to every resident, then each one is responsible for his or her own care and life plan. Bouchez argues that it would contribute to economic growth and face new societal mutations (RTBF, 2017a). The idea is not only to extremely simplify public insurance and assistance mechanisms, but also to reduce 'bureaucracy' and 'state control' to the minimum. The underlying rationale is that the individual should be autonomous and self-sufficient in a meritocratic society. "We thus give back freedom to the individual to follow training, to change job, to be an entrepreneur." (Bouchez, *Le Libre débat*, 2020). Besides, the insurance logic is, in his view, not needed and not maintainable due to current societal evolution (ageing population, increasing debt level or mass unemployment), while BI could maintain the overall level of well-being through taxation (Bouchez, *Colloque Picardie Laïque*, 2021).

By contrast, the generalised BI put forward by Ecolo is seen as an income floor, other social benefits would be maintained as well as the general structure of the

welfare state. The idea here is to add a protecting tool to the system, which would make it better equipped to face ongoing challenges such as labour market changes, new forms of interpersonal and familial organisations, new career aspirations or work-life balances. It would also 'fill the gaps' by providing financial protection to the youth that usually falls outside the scope of other social protection schemes (Leroy, *Colloque Picardie Laïque*, 2021; Leroy, *interview*, 2022). Hence, the justification is to offer the opportunity to individuals to emancipate themselves in meaningful activities, in or outside the labour market. The state would here still have the role of accompanying people (Ecolo, 2017), "It is an emancipatory project, it is part of Ecolo's DNA" (Leroy, *interview*, 2022). *Les Engagés'* proposal is a way to complement the welfare system too, but the state also endorses the paternalistic role of pushing individuals towards participation through the contribution-based scheme. This taxable income would be an "investment of the state to favour everybody's participation" (*Les Engagés*, 2022a, p. 152).

The PS argues that for a BI to be affordable, it would need to cut on all other social benefits and public services, this "Trojan horse into welfare state" (Di Rupo, *Le Soir*, 2016) is then unacceptable for a party that has long fought for social protection. Besides, the PS has always defended a perspective of accompaniment of social welfare recipients, "with the objective to bring back mutual trust, to make a project with the accompanied person" (PS, 2019, p. 22). Yet, the party leader advanced the youth BI idea. There might be here a phenomenon of weak support, as the political opportunity cost of this youth BI might be high in the party wherein "we are very committed to the insurance principle, it is difficult to enter BI's philosophy" (Magnette, *interview*, 2022).

Then, the second element differentiating both sides relates to the labour market and working conditions. The MR favours a free and flexible market. In this perspective, the BI is a way to facilitate a labour market with fewer regulations and social conventions. Bouchez claims that the BI would have positive impacts on employment: it would ease changes in careers, training, entrepreneurship, and so on. It is interesting to note the MR's President assesses that "it is possible that the wages would be diminished, but the money in people's pocket would stay the same" (Bouchez, *Allocation universelle, un revenu de liberté?*, 2021). BI would also sustain the 'collaborative' economy, in a 'flexibilisation' perspective. "Uber is not the problem. The problem is the complexity of our labour law" (Bouchez, *idem*, 2021). It is the best way to avoid unemployment traps, provide incentives to work and 'activate' people, deemed to be idle under the current system by MR's President: "It is the current social system that encourages idleness, there is no mechanism to favour small jobs or volunteer." (Bouchez, *Allocation universelle, un revenu de liberté?*, 2021). The MR insists a lot on the importance of labour market activities, even under other forms than stable and full-time employment. When Bouchez affirms that this amount would grant people the real freedom to do something else (*adequacy* dimension), it is still mainly to favour other, often less protected forms of labour. This BI proposal is the only one getting close to a 'full BI' scheme, which might decrease its feasibility and acceptance.

The PS and the PTB fear a decrease in salaries, a worsening of working conditions, and an increase in precarious work, that the liberal version of BI might

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cause: “Wages would be pulled down and we would go towards a weakening of employment” (Daerden, *RTBF*, 2017a). Ecolo, in its advocacy of BI, emphasises that it could favour entrepreneurship but also the importance of the ‘autonomous sphere’. André Gorz’s notion (2013), mentioned in a Ecolo’s internal document (2017), is as a tertiary zone, outside the market and the state, where people can flourish in non-pecuniary activities (voluntary work, caring for close ones, engaging in ecological projects, etc.). This would, in turn, pave the way towards more sustainable modes of living and rebuild a strong sense of solidarity. Besides, relating to the labour market, Ecolo defends its BI proposal in addition to other regulations. They would maintain minimum wage legislation, workers’ protection and keep fighting against precariousness.

Third, at the core of their defence of BI, Ecolo, *Les Engagés* and the MR have ultimately different ideological rationales. The liberal party is concerned by formal freedom, or “equality of opportunity” (MR, 2019) and BI is precisely a means to offer each citizen the same chance in life, by granting the same amount. However, this casts aside one of the dearest themes of the left: real freedom (in Van Parijs’ sense, 1995), and the fight against inequalities. It is enlightening to observe that socio-economic inequalities are never mentioned by party representatives of the MR in the documents and interviews analysed. On the opposite end, Ecolo has been insisting that their BI proposal should be coupled with other public policies in order to establish a general social protection scheme reducing inequalities as much as possible. At the centre, the participation income of *Les Engagés* is part of a political programme of ‘regeneration’, questioning the socio-economic and civic organisation. It stands on other theoretical grounds and normative justifications (for example, Atkinson, 1996). It is not individual freedom or autonomy that is emphasised but the importance of the contribution to society, making the community prevail over the individuality, in a “new social contract” highlighting civic responsibility: “There is a social sense to recreate” (de Brie, *interview*, 2022; *Les Engagés*, 2022a).

We acknowledged in this section that diverging BI versions led to different expected effects. These arguments reflect claims made in the academic literature. Birnbaum and De Wispelaere (2021) stress the danger of the “exit trap for precarious workers”, while Calnitsky (2020) emphasises the fact that too small an amount would at the end be a subsidy for employers, further deregulate the labour market and worsen work conditions. This is a risk, but it is not inherent to BI, rather to the concrete form it would take. If the amount is too small and suppresses most social allowances, people might be forced to accept any job, no matter the wage and the conditions. Proposals such as Friedman’s (2013) or Murray’s (2012) could indeed threaten social systems. Nonetheless, other scholars argue that a social-democrat version rather than supplanting welfare regime might improve it (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). It could meet new social risks linked to the transition to a post-industrial model, such as labour market precarity, poor health insurance or wage polarisation (Martinelli, 2017).

#### 4.2.2 *The Question of Productivism*

In addition to the traditional ideological cleavage and its impact on parties' positions, other factors influence the BI theme. The relations to the work ethic are not the same across the political spectrum, and they help understand why some parties are keener than others to support BI.

The PS is at the centre of the socialist pillar and has a strong electoral penetration in modest socio-economic categories (Delwit, 2021b). The integration of the poorest of society through the defence of social security is central, and work is one of the main channels of integration and a stringent priority of the party. Economic growth is also still an objective (PS, 2019, p. 121). The importance of contributing to society is thus endorsed by the PS through the prism of employment, without really questioning the capitalist economic system. One can find her role into society by working: "the heart of social protection's philosophy is that we work, and by working we contribute and create social rights. We are labourist." (Magnetite, *interview* 2022). This explains their commitment to the "guarantee of employment for everybody" (PS, 2019, p. 124) and their general opposition to BI, "A universal allowance would break the link to employment and create a class of forgotten people living with 600 euros" (Onkelinx, *RTBF*, 2017b).

As Marxist party, the PTB is even more deeply engaged in the socio-economic cleavage of labour versus capital. This means that labour and workers are central in their political agenda: "The society is nothing without its workers.... Employment remains the most important leverage to get out of poverty and isolation" (PTB, 2019, pp. 5, 33). However, the party insists on the fact that it should be stable and decent jobs rather than part-time or 'flexi-' jobs. The party is labourist in the sense that employment still constitutes the main pillar of the economic but also social organisation. Yet, the capitalist economic system is deeply questioned and the importance of wealth repartition and balance of power between labour and capital are raised in a classist vision. The consequences of capitalism are tackled by the PTB: the flexibility and competitive logic of neo-liberalism are deemed to have deleterious effects on health (PTB, 2019, p. 14), the environment (p. 48), gender relations (p. 190) and global relations of exploitation (p. 245).

In addition to this, both the PS and the PTB have strong ties with the socialist trade union, which is opposed to the BI idea, influencing the two leftist parties' positions. Indeed, the historical alliance between the socialist party and union pushes the PS to consider the trade union's reluctance towards the unconditional and universal nature of BI. The PS President exposes that there is a strong internal agreement to maintain the insurance nature of the system, but the party is working with unionists and mutualists to move in the direction of a greater universalisation (Magnetite, *interview*, 2022). The PTB is also tied to the union's disapproval, in light of the increasing mutual influence (Delwit, 2021b) between the two organisations (a growing share of The General Labour Federation of Belgium (*Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique* in French) social base are also PTB activists).

Now, as far as Ecolo's position is concerned, contributing to society also is of paramount importance, but working is only one way of doing so. In this perspective, BI becomes a tool enabling citizens to engage in socially (and individually) useful activities that do not relate to the labour market. For the party: "Basic income



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allows for more freedom by easing back and forth [between classical employment and other forms of activities] and offers an answer to these new aspirations.” (Ecolo, 2017, p. 8). The party places its BI proposal within a broader “post-capitalist and post-productivist” perspective. Ecolo clearly states that “the pursuit of economic growth as we know it is neither desirable nor even possible” (Ecolo, 2017, p. 10). BI can, according to them, lead the way towards other, greener models of society and modes of living: “BI allows for a reduction of working time to spend time to other activities and attain a better alliance between professional and private life” (Leroy, *interview*, 2022). *Les Engagés* contends that “infinite growth is not sustainable” and that prosperity should be measured with other indicators than GDP to take into account natural resources and human well-being (*Les Engagés*, 2022b). Their project aims at reaching an economy of quality, local and digital, which would be more respectful of the living and provide meaningful jobs. Their participation income is inscribed in this perspective: the participation of each one of us makes “employment a key point of the society’s regeneration” (*Les Engagés*, 2022b), but participation is also about associative commitment for the centrist party (*Les Engagés*, 2022a, p. 153).

It is noteworthy to outline that the MR is open to challenge the value of work-employment in a broader context. Bouchez himself mentions that “there is a big difference between work and employment” (Bouchez, *Le Libre débat*, 2020). However, what stands out is the importance of favouring different forms of pecuniary activities contributing to economic growth, rather than favouring a tertiary sphere that would escape capitalistic logic: “We have nowadays many people contributing to economic growth without taking part of ‘the loop’ ... with actions non-materially evaluated.” (Bouchez, *interview*, 2022).

These views echo different pieces of literature. Some address the presumed flaws of BI: it would encourage indolence and give money to ‘Malibu surfers’ (an expression first used by John Rawls in a controversy with Van Parijs, 1991). Another way of framing this argument is to emphasise the importance of reciprocity in our society. This has been theorised by Marcel Mauss (2012) in his famous essay about gift and counter-gift. The objection against BI on the ground of reciprocity has also been voiced by Atkinson (1996), with his participation income. On the contrary, Pinto (2020) promotes BI as an individual form of autonomy in a post-productivist society and Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017) underline how BI would help free the individual from the obligation of work.

### 4.3 BI and Welfare Debates

Until here, the article has shown that there are strong divergences between Bouchez’s, *Les Engagés*’ and Ecolo’s BI proposals, informed by contrasted doctrinal positions on societal issues. However, as already touched upon, BI proposals only make sense in the broader debate about the welfare system and policies. It is important to note that, despite their different positions on BI, leftist parties share a strong attachment to social protection.

These convergences between the PS, the PTB and Ecolo concern dimensions that are strongly related to BI. Although the measures analysed in this section are not *stricto sensu* BI proposals, they are still part of the debate on social protection

and welfare politics. They are worth considering for two reasons: first, as already outlined, the context matters. The BI proposal is not a 'key on hand' solution. Many of its advocates insist that it should rather be regarded as one policy among others and that it should be accompanied by a package of other measures (such as investment in public services, regulation of working time, etc., Pinto, 2020; Whithorn, 2013). Second, side measures are also considered by BI proponents: these reforms might lay foundations for an unconditional income. The non-negligible role of these side measures, as well as the importance of seizing opportunities have been highlighted in the literature (Grapperon, 2021; Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017).

Ecolo thus supports social reforms in addition to the implementation of a BI, whereas the PS and the PTB contend that the system should be reformed without it. Here, three policies are being investigated: the working time reduction policy, the individualisation of social rights and their automatic guarantee.

Even if the parties have diverging views on the value of work, understood as employment (see *supra*), the distribution of available employment through working time reduction is a key parameter for the PS, the PTB and Ecolo. While the latter is in favour of the reduction of working time down to four days, on a voluntary basis (Ecolo, 2021a), the PS asks for 32 hours a week without salary drop (PS, 2019, p. 121) and the PTB for 30 hours a week (PTB, 2019, p. 12).

Then, the three parties are in favour of the individualisation of social rights and benefits. The PS still wants to consider principles of equity and avoid unemployment traps: "The difficulty is to combine the principle of individualization of social rights, suppressing different status (household head and cohabitant) and to take into account household's revenues" (Magnetite, *interview*, 2022) Ecolo is also in favour of such a measure, as their proposal is to "suppress the cohabitant status and move forward the individualization of rights" (Ecolo, 2021b). Leroy insists: "We should stop making people dependent upon a family scheme from the 19th century" (*interview*, 2022).

The same goes with social benefits being automatically granted: the PS is in favour of such a measure, deemed to enhance take up rates by potential beneficiaries and ease bureaucratic procedures and pressure on recipients. The two other parties have similar positions: "The automation of social rights helps fighting against non-take ups" (Ecolo, 2019, p. 89). "We implement an automatic guarantee of social rights" (PTB, 2019, p. 110).

Thus, similar objectives are aimed for but the means to achieve them differ from one party to the other. BI would provide depth to such considerations according to Ecolo, while the PS and the PTB assess that it is more efficient to reform our current system, "an extraordinary invention, a social protection to the needy" (Onkelinx, *RTBF*, 2017b).

In comparison, *Les Engagés* "invites to individualize social rights" in its manifesto (2022a, p. 143; de Briey, *interview*, 2022) but did not take a stance on the other policies.

Building on the analysis just exposed, the findings are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2** *Positions of parties on BI and related social measures*

|                         | <b>Political proposals</b>                         | <b>PTB</b>                                    | <b>PS</b>                                      | <b>Ecolo</b>  | <b>Les Engagés</b>  | <b>MR</b>                                      |
|-------------------------|--|---|--|---|---|--|
| Basic income schemes    | Proposal   | /   | Youth BI (President's proposal)                | Youth BI (Short run)<br>Generalised BI (Long-Run)           | Participation income  | Social dividend (President's proposal)         |
|                         | Type of BI (full/partial)                          | /   | Partial<br>Targeted<br>Unconditional           | Partial<br>Targeted<br>Unconditional                        | Partial<br>Universal<br>Conditional on participation        | Full<br>Universal<br>Unconditional             |
| Related social policies | Dimensions of BI                                   | /   | Modest amount<br>Complementing current schemes | Modest amount<br>Complementing and adapting current schemes | Modest amount<br>Complementing and adapting current schemes | Consistent amount<br>Replacing current schemes |
|                         | Individualisation of social rights                 | Favourable                                    | Favourable                                     | Favourable  | Favourable  | Not favourable                                 |
|                         | Automatic guarantee of social rights               | Favourable                                    | Favourable                                     | Favourable  | Unclear   | Conditionality                                 |
| Rationales              | Work reduction                                     | Yes, 30 h/week                                | Yes, 32 h/week                                 | Yes, 4 days/week  | No, chosen working time                                     | No, 38 h/week in flexible schedule             |
|                         | Social and unemployment allowances at poverty line | Favourable + rise of the minimum wage (14€/h) | Favourable, 110% of the poverty line           | Favourable  | Differentiating assurance and assistance mechanisms         | Only parental leaves and handicap allowances   |
|                         | Strengthening protection system                    | Strengthening protection system               | Strengthening and adapting protection system   | BI as emancipatory tool                                     | BI for enhanced participation                               | BI for more individual freedom                 |

## 5 Conclusion

This overview of the positions of five French-speaking Belgian political parties on unconditional BI has pointed at the persistent relevance of the left-right cleavage. Indeed, classical themes provoking divisions between the left and the right wings of the political spectrum are also percolating the BI debate. BI, rather than transcending political divisions, is underlining them. If BI is advocated for simultaneously by liberals, democrats, and ecologists, it is the amplitude and the multidimensionality of the notion that creates the illusion of a common defence.

More precisely, the MR's President argues for a neoliberal BI replacing the current social system, deemed to avoid inactivity traps and to be better adapted to contemporary mutations. We have seen that the PS and the PTB reject this type of BI proposal because of a work ethic and by fear of the dismantling of the social protection system. Their labourist perspectives, adding the labour-capital issue in the case of the PTB, as well as their close and historical links to the socialist trade union impede them to embrace such unconditional proposal. However, the PS seems increasingly open to the universalisation of social security. *Les Engagés* refuses the unconditional character of BI as well, but proposes a participation income integrated in the current system, in a standpoint emphasising citizens' contributions to society. Ecolo pushes for a modest BI too, in the perspective of complementing the social system and emancipating the individual, questioning the centrality of employment in our lives, and opening the way towards a more sustainable society. Thus, the main themes making the three proposals irreducible, and replaying the left-right divide are the following: first, the MR upholds a position with minimal state intervention and the removal of almost all social benefits whereas the other parties advocate for a reinforcement of the established system, with (Ecolo, *Les Engagés*) or without (PS, PTB) BI. Second, Bouchez's proposal is thought to promote a flexible, less protected labour market, where workers' adaptability prevails over their social rights. On the other side, Ecolo's proposal explicitly wants to avoid further precariousness and insists on activities outside the market sphere. The participation income of the democrats also stresses the importance of the contribution, through work or other occupations, and the economic system is to be rethought to respect people's and nature's limits. Finally, the philosophy underlying the three proposals is different: equality of opportunities on the right, personal emancipation within a frame of fighting against inequalities on the left and contribution to society in the centre.

We have also seen that BI is to be considered within the broader frame of welfare politics, and that side measures, as well as visions on social protection are at stake in this debate. The left, despite their disagreement on BI do agree on three social policies to improve the system: the reduction of working time, the individualisation, and a more automatic guarantee of social rights. The centre is more reluctant on these elements, and the liberals oppose them.

What does all of this tell us about the strategic feasibility of BI in Belgium? If we go back to the obstacles De Wispelaere and Noguera (2012) identified, the picture might look less unfavourable to BI than it seems at first sight. First, because parties and personalities supporting BI proposals are not marginalised. Ecolo has

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turned out to be central, especially in regional Parliaments and is part of governing majorities of the federal and federate levels. We have seen that parties' leaders are active on the BI theme, and that the whole political scene was shaken by debates about various BI proposals. This can reverse the argument of the political opportunity cost of BI: if it is still a divisive topic, it seems now to be more politically costly not to have a position than being favourable. The analysis also showed that the authors' final obstacle to strategic feasibility, the 'first-mover disadvantage' does not appear to have a strong impact here, as opposing political groups have endorsed the BI idea, although under different modalities. BI has crystallised debates, and if we take into account cognates and 'steps to' BI, many parties could agree on a proposal. What we observe is that a full BI scheme has little chance to be implemented, but partial schemes could possibly make their way in Belgium. However, even for a partial BI scheme, the road would be long and tedious. It would require first a governmental agreement mentioning BI and most likely starting by the opportunity of *experimenting* a form of BI, following the 'gradual strategy' (Chrisp, 2020, p. 241). More importantly, the Dutch-speaking side of Belgium does not seem to be ready to discuss, even less implement, BI proposals. Knowing that social policies are still mainly a federal competence, this further complicates the political feasibility of BI in Belgium.

This article is only a first step in understanding Belgian political parties' positions on BI. The goal here was to take an exploratory path towards the strategic political feasibility of BI in a specific national context. Three directions for future research could be considered: the study of the positions of Dutch-speaking Belgian political parties and also of trade unions, the salience of the BI theme within broader social reforms and the internal dynamics of parties.

To widen the perspective, one might reflect on the lessons on strategic feasibility to be withdrawn from the Belgian case. First, in plurality voting systems characterised by a high number of political parties, the first-mover disadvantage seems less likely to happen, as the study showed, whereas one might presume that majoritarian voting systems might well face this obstacle. Then, the BI concept is never univocally adopted, each proposal is a combination of different dimensions, one should thus pay attention to the concrete version proposed and the politicisation that accompanies the process. To conclude, one should always care for re-inscribing the BI debate within a broader context and analyse it in the light of the evolution of social protection regimes. The Belgian case showed that accompanying measures and positions on other societal stakes should be regarded as equally important in understanding the strategic political feasibility of BI. BI is not overcoming ideological divisions but can most definitely help understand them in a comprehensive frame.

## Notes

- 1 With the poverty threshold at 60 per cent of median net income, people beneath that line are at risk of monetary poverty.

- 2 The BI idea was not endorsed at the Congress held in October 2022, but a proposal of 'guaranteed but capped social aid' was advanced (Bruckner, *Bx1*, 2022). However, in view of the uncertain status of this proposal as it is not part of an official programme yet, we will leave the analysis aside.

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