

Let's Debate Universal Basic Income in the U.S.

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Denis Balibouse / Reuters

Nearly 80 percent of Americans say they live from paycheck to paycheck. Economic inequality is metastasizing in America. Many people are rallying around universal basic income, or UBI, as part of the answer to these challenges. This concept—which takes many forms but generally means the government gives citizens money—has leapt from a fringe abstraction to a mainstream proposal with real political viability, although there are significant questions about whether and how it could work.

In our forums, Masthead members have been discussing the pitfalls and promises of UBI, so we thought we'd pick up that debate for the broader community. Today, two members lay out arguments for and against a universal basic income: Anna, a member from Dauphin, Canada, argues for it; Ron, a member from Huntsville, Alabama, argues against it. **And then we'd like to read rebuttals from you.**

As you share your rebuttals, we'll bring in Annie Lowrey, an *Atlantic* contributor who recently published a book on UBI, to add insights from her reporting on the issue.

A Case for Universal Basic Income

By Anna Wilde

In 1974, a town in my home province of Manitoba, Canada, experimented with a universal basic income. The experiment, nicknamed “Mincome,” ran for five years. Then political winds changed and researchers abandoned the project. No final report was ever written, but preliminary research from the test suggested that families used the income to weather unforeseen gaps in income, keep children in school longer, and plan for the future. One woman, a single mother at the time, recounted using the checks—which, unlike welfare, had no spending restrictions—to get job training and transition to full-time work.

As policy makers and business leaders explore the idea of UBI, I'd make two different arguments for it, to appeal to different philosophies.

- **The Moral Argument:** UBI helps ensure that individuals maintain autonomy and dignity without falling through the cracks in our economy. It would recognize the value of all citizens as important members of society with much to contribute, without subjecting them to an unwieldy, bureaucratic system of benefits that come with strings attached, like drug tests or work requirements. While many pilots are in early phases and still ongoing, studies suggest that people tend to make “good” choices with supplementary income, such as investing in education and job training. Likewise, there is scant evidence to suggest that “loafers” will take advantage of society’s largesse.
- **The Logical Argument:** Lifting people out of poverty early in their life is less expensive than paying for costly interventions (such as medicine for chronic illnesses, elder care, and incarceration) later on. On a societal scale, inequality breeds class resentment. Any policy maker looking to avoid this might look to UBI as a mitigating force.

Where will the money come from? One idea is to reverse this country’s pattern of regressive tax policies. As Annie Lowrey writes, these policies have helped Amazon’s CEO, Jeff Bezos, amass a \$150 billion fortune, catapulting his net worth to nearly 2 million times that of the average American family. If we accept that the United States is a deeply and increasingly unequal society, and that it shouldn’t be, there are two remedies for policy makers: Manipulate the market to keep prices low, or raise incomes. Manipulating the market, through rent controls, for example, may aggravate those who value free markets and is probably a no-go. That leaves one clear prescription: Supplement incomes and give all citizens the power to participate in the economy.

A Case Against Universal Basic Income

By Ron Klein

There are at least two arguments against UBI.

- **Equity:** A society’s capacity to provide goods and services is constrained by its resources. Our nation’s ability to provide goods and services requires that we efficiently employ our available resources. UBI would undermine or negate the need for individuals to contribute their labor in order to receive society’s goods and services. Do we want to enact laws which may enable more Americans to choose a life of pure leisure rather than professional purpose and self-development? We need public policies that help people work, not ones that discourage work.

- **Politics:** There are millions of Americans who are diligently working and deferring immediate consumption for future financial security. When they see capable people receiving money—their hard-earned money, paid in taxes—they are riled. They are angry at those they perceive as “deadbeats,” but even angrier at politicians who have enacted policies to transfer money from taxpayers to UBI recipients without any expectation of work.

There are arguments that UBI would replace other forms of public assistance and, in doing so, be more efficient. But the fact is, we’ve rarely ended a major social-support program in America. If the objective of UBI is to provide for the poor or address the inequality of income or wealth distribution, there are better ways to achieve that end, such as increased property and inheritance taxes.

Universal Basic Income in *The Atlantic*

By Caroline Kitchener

Here’s what a dive into our coverage of UBI taught us about the issue.

- **Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the policy’s first major champions.** In “A Freedom Budget for All Americans,” originally published in 1967 and reprinted with annotations in a special edition of *The Atlantic* earlier this year, King and other civil-rights leaders proposed basic welfare for all U.S. citizens. Eradicating poverty was a priority for King, who, in his final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, called previous U.S. anti-poverty efforts “piecemeal and pygmy.” Other programs, King wrote, attempt to “solve poverty by first solving something else.” He sought a more direct solution that would guarantee an income “pegged to the median of society”: Make sure people have not only what they absolutely need, but a little more. The cost of such a program, King argued, would not have exceeded by much the costs of the ongoing war in Vietnam.

- **Versions of UBI have been popular among conservatives.** A few years after King published his UBI proposal, President Richard Nixon advocated for a “negative income tax” that would essentially provide a UBI for poor Americans. In his 2006 book, *In Our Hands*, the conservative intellectual Charles Murray published his own version of a UBI proposal. The government, he said, should eradicate all existing social-welfare programs—including Medicare, Medicaid, and unemployment benefits—and give every American adult \$10,000 annually. (“Why Murray’s Big Idea Won’t Work,” [read](#) an *Atlantic* headline from later that year.) Conservatives, Noah Gordon [wrote](#) for *The Atlantic* in 2014, gravitate toward UBI proposals because “they reduce government and offer citizens more control, at least in theory.” But conservatives and liberals tend to support different versions of the policy: While conservative backers of UBI generally view it as a replacement for the welfare state, liberals tend to see UBI as one component—a universal foundation for a basic standard of living.
- **Globally, many localized experiments with UBI have been carried out, but as of yet there are no nationwide policies.** Last October, Michael Tubbs, the 27-year-old mayor of Stockton, California, announced that his city would start the country’s first municipal UBI pilot program, using funding from the Economic Security Project, a tech-industry-supported initiative to end poverty through universal basic income. At its inception, Alexis Madrigal [wrote](#), the program would provide Stockton residents with \$500 a month. The Dutch city of Utrecht [implemented](#) a similar experiment around the same time, providing 250 of its residents with \$1,100 a month. (Canada and Finland have also performed their own trials with UBI, as Anna’s case above illustrates.) But in 2016, when Switzerland [became](#) the first country to hold a nationwide public referendum on UBI, 77 percent of voters went against it. Luzi Stamm, a member of the right-wing Swiss People’s Party, summarized his opposition to the proposal: “If you would offer every individual a Swiss amount of money, you would have billions of people who would try to move to Switzerland.”

Today’s Wrap-Up

- **Today’s Question:** Would you like to see your home country institute a universal basic income? Why or why not? [Jump into the debate on our forums.](#)
- **What’s Coming:** On Friday, the *Atlantic* staff writer Spencer Kornhaber will update us on the biggest news in the music industry this summer.
- **Your Feedback:** How are we doing? Click on the button below to let us know.

We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter](#) to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.