Research report summary

This summer research project started with the goal of gaining insight on opinions elicited by currently available information about the Basic Income (BI) pilot. The premise was that policy changes create public anxiety related to self-interest. The hypothesis of this research was that low income working people who are just above the cut-off criteria of the Ontario pilot may perceive as unfair that BI is not conditioned to recipient’s participation in the labor market.

“Basic income is money paid by government to eligible persons with few, if any, conditions attached. Notably, there is no work requirement.” In 2017, the provincial government of Ontario launched a three-year pilot BI project in three cities; Lindsay, Thunder Bay and Hamilton, to collect local data that could guide policy makers in re-designing and implementing a different model of social assistance. The intent of the research was to study how information on a BI policy could be best conveyed to decrease public anxiety and curb social polarization. However, two events modified this initial intent in two significant ways: a) a lack of public awareness of what BI is; b) the announcement of the cancellation of the Ontario Basic Income pilot and the media coverage that ensued.

The primary focus of this research thus changed to researching the effectiveness of the current definition of Basic Income, as provided by the Basic Income Canada Network (BICN), the main think tank and advocacy group on BI in Canada. The premise is that the definition is inadequate for people hearing about BI for the first time. As it stands, the hypothesis is that the current wording of the definition triggers three main concerns: a) if benefit is not conditional to work, people will not work; b) money to pay for this will result in increased taxes; c) it removes the reward-consequence element for making sensible life choices.

The contemporary socio-political environment in North America demonstrates how people’s fears, based on perceived threats to their self-interest, reduce their altruistic behavior and increase social polarization. Canada is no exception according to the most recent survey on public perspectives on basic income (Ipsos-Reid 2017). Further research is needed to inquire about the political viability of BI policy in Canada from the perspective of public attitudes.

The contributions of my research will inform decisions on communication strategies to curb socio-economic polarization among Canadians in relation to the Ontario Basic Income pilot.

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1 Low Income Measure in Canada is set at 50% of the median after-tax income. See Government of Ontario. Basic Income Consultations: What We Heard.
4 Paola Loriggio, The Canadian Press. Published Tuesday, July 31, 2018 4:34PM EDT
6 Current proposed survey is under Ethics review pending approval.