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Stop answering centrist questions: the left can only win when it answers the questions it was founded to pose

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Abstract

This article summarises a series of findings from a programme of research on the viability of Universal Basic Income as a transformative public policy. The findings suggest that the left should stop answering liberal questions. This means no longer being preoccupied by who currently votes and their assumed ‘inherent’ values. Instead, as the left’s founding figures thought, it must consider how the vast majority of the population who would benefit from transformative material change can be persuaded of the benefit of voting for left policies. Our findings suggest that workers are keenly aware of the need for transformative material change and can be persuaded to support that change electorally through narratives that demonstrate specific benefits to specific groups. The findings ought to grant hope to progressive policymakers: change is possible and incrementalism is not an inevitable strategy.

Introduction

Across the 20th century, there were myriad examples of profoundly impactful left-wing movements transforming the lives of working-class people. Whether via nationalisation of industry or creation of welfare systems, once radical political projects became mainstream by virtue of the left delivering pragmatic responses to the needs of the vast majority. These were policies that were unthinkable both shortly before their implementation and after their dissolution during the neoliberal reforms from the 1980s onwards. We now find ourselves in a position in which contemporary versions of those policies are the only possible means of dealing with the critical, existential challenges created by neoliberalism. Indeed, there is evidence that people globally are keenly aware of and receptive toward this. In this article, we summarise findings from a recent programme of research (Johnson, Johnson & Nettle 2022; Johnson M et al. 2022a; 2022b; Johnson E et al. Reed et al. 2022; 2023). We outline a cluster of related errors made by policymakers and propose that Universal Basic Income (UBI) – a system of largely unconditional payments to support citizens’ satisfaction of basic needs – is a transformative policy capable of attracting support from the electorate. We use this to emphasise that the left’s relevance depends upon presenting a programme of material change.

The strategic error

All too often, the organised left find themselves constrained by parameters set by those who have an interest in stifling change. Asking ‘who votes for the left’, in terms of their assumed ‘inherent’ values and identities-- at a time in which it is failing to govern or to use power in government to transform lives in ways that previous iterations had done successfully-- is counter-intuitive and misdirecting. In the past, there was a basic assumption that, regardless of people’s self-identification, the shared material needs of workers provide the basis for the relevance of left-wing

politics. The reason that the left has won in the past is that it has assumed that it has the capacity to appeal to the vast bulk of society.

Today, the left has internalised a series of neoliberal tenets that undermine its capacity to uphold its role in advancing history. Weberian classification of social groupings has long underpinned political and psephological analysis (see Breen 2006, 36). It has broken up workers into a range of distinct social organisations each bound by forms of status attendant to skills and education. Likewise, adoption of liberal concern for what Isaiah Berlin (1969) described as empirical, rather than rational, selves, means that the left has been concerned with appealing to people's expressed identities, rather than their fundamental needs.

Asking who is voting for the left is wrong-headed: nowhere near enough people are voting for the left for this to offer any meaningful indication of a pathway to government. When groups are identified, the conclusions drawn are unhelpful. If women in some countries are currently voting in larger numbers for some left-wing political parties is the strategic conclusion that the left ought exclusively to appeal to women or seek to suppress or prohibit male voting? If women in other countries, such as the US, or the UK during Margaret Thatcher's leadership, vote in pluralities for right wing candidates, do we need to appeal to men?

The second question attached to this identitarian analysis is 'what values do voters hold'? Being committed to empirical selves leads logically to tailoring policy to the express values of those selves. As such, the left often focuses not on material policy, but on cultural conflict and cultural struggle. These are often struggles that affect small numbers of people and can only be addressed effectively by progressive government. The biggest error the left has made has been to assume that movements of small groups bound by totally distinct and often contradictory cultural grievances can be more cohesive than movements bound by shared human need. The right will always win in identity politics because it has the capacity to appeal to much larger cultural units. Often, these units overlap with the very groups (e.g., low to middle earning men) who would benefit most by left policies, if they were presented in a meaningful way that appealed to their material interests. Importantly, due to intersectionalities, those who have often been at the sharp end of narratives developed by the right as a result of their characteristics, for example disabled people or minority ethnic groups, would benefit very significantly from the very same policies.

These are questions that lead to strategic dead-ends. They are the consequence of the left's acculturating itself to neoliberal understandings of preferences. The notion that individuals have fully formed, inflexible preferences, that ought to be respected, necessarily inhibits the capacity of progressive policymakers to do what the right, increasingly, has done: persuade people that policies advance their interests. If people are serious about transforming society, we need to return to antecedent questions raised by much more successful historical predecessors.

The right question

The strategic dead-end has been realised in PASOKification across Europe. In the UK, the demise of Labour's historical support among workers is correlated with its inability to present coherent policies by which to secure workers material needs. The loss of traditional, 'red wall' Labour seats in the North of England in 2019 has been presented by commentators such as Paul Mason as evidence of voters in those seats being fundamentally socially conservative and opposed to progressive values. We have argued that viewing electoral preferences in this way presents an 'insurmountable conservative values' hypothesis that reads as facts people's present political preferences and has reduced some progressive politicians to a strategy either of appealing to believers (university-educated, younger, urban-dwelling liberals who support membership of the EU and other

multilateral organisations) or mimicking the putative values of socially conservative working voters. The problem is that this wholly misrepresents the fundamental reasons for the temporary rise of Conservative support in the North of England. Just as in the rise of the Scottish National Party and the rise of Welsh Labour in Wales, that phenomenon related to the party's support for policies that were viewed as increasing material security. Brexit was viewed by many as means of reducing zero-sum competition for resources and for internal redistribution (see MacKinnon 2020). Levelling Up and the Furlough Scheme (HM Revenue & Customs 2021) both produced significant levels of support within these constituencies. Likewise, the Scottish National Party's and Welsh Labour's use of devolved powers to present themselves as resistance against neoliberal reform has ensured and increased their relevance to voters. In each of these cases, in very different political parties with very different express values, the theme is the same: providing material means of preserving security.

The question the left needs to answer is the same question the left was organised to answer: how can we secure for workers the material goods to satisfy our need for security? Some of the means are age-old: only the nationalisation of natural monopolies, utilities, public transport and industry essential to energy independence can mitigate the climate crisis; only socialised public health systems can deliver provision and control spiralling profiteering. Others, coming at a time of ultra-insecurity and ecological crisis, are new. While some have called for job guarantees as a response to financial insecurity, we have examined the prospective role of Universal Basic Income (UBI).

Universal Basic Income

UBI has often been dismissed by virtue of its being unambitious or being a libertarian means of reducing working conditions and pay. However, it is a transformative means of shifting allocation of resources from arbitrary recognition of ability to recognition of universal human need. If set at a sufficient level, it enables workers to satisfy their needs independently of fulfilment of abusive, demeaning labour. That level is the Minimum Income Standard, which is the amount of money identified by the public, with the support of experts, needed to satisfy people's basic needs. While the policy has mixed reception on the left, it is slowly gaining traction among policymakers as a viable response to insecurity. Over the past few years, we have examined its implications for health specifically. Those implications are significant and provide opportunities for genuine transformation of public health. We have also examined its political feasibility in light of claims that 'red wall' voters are fundamentally opposed to redistributive policy.

The research conducted, over a series of survey waves, all presents a picture of an electorate keenly aware of the need for change and highly receptive toward UBI as a redistributive policy. Importantly, wherever we looked, we found overall levels of support of between 68-80%. In 'red wall' constituencies, that support was at the higher end. Voters consistently highlighted as a key attraction the ability of UBI to secure their needs efficiently and urgently at a time in which they were faced by ultra-insecurity. By securing the needs of all, UBI transforms welfare policy from an outgroup issue that benefits only 'scroungers' (as the UK media often refers to people out of work) to an ingroup issue that benefits workers. Concern for welfare fraud reduces accordingly. Importantly, we found that narratives that express the health impact of UBI were more persuasive for older people and that those focused on addressing financial security were more persuasive to young people. These are material concerns that cannot be explained clearly by values or identities.

We (Johnson, Johnson & Nettle 2022) then used a series of narratives co-produced with the small 7-12% of respondents who expressed strong opposition to see if those who opposed UBI could be persuaded of the benefits of UBI. The narratives produced were highly impactful, increasing levels of support from a mean of 13% to 50%. The most impactful narrative was one that presented UBI as a

'living pension' – precisely the sort of conceptualisation consistent with the shift from ability to need:

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a living pension for all adult citizens, providing state support for your basic needs. It would be a safety net during short periods of unemployment, giving you some time to support yourself and your family while looking for employment. This helps to stop you slipping into poverty and ensures that you do not face homelessness. As many infamous cases have shown, this is vital for us, as the current system does not keep us secure. There was the case of the diabetic British War Veteran whose Universal Credit payment lapsed, leaving him with no money to top up his electricity meter. This meant that he could not keep his medicine refrigerated, meaning that he went into a diabetic coma and died. In our country, you should not have the stress of worrying about meeting your basic needs. You should not have to worry that taking on short-term work will leave you unable to support yourself. UBI secures you from the many unpredictable events in modern society.

Even those who oppose redistributive policies can be persuaded of the value of UBI because it shares features with previous programmes of the left: it addresses a fundamental human need; it is universal; it is efficient and, unlike conditional welfare schemes, it supports workers in particular. These are features that underpinned the creation of the National Health Service (NHS) and other successful interventions. Unlike less effective interventions, such as increases in conditional welfare payments, UBI, like the NHS, is resistant to neoliberal reform because it benefits such a large proportion of the population. It is precisely the sort of policy that is likely to transform society and create opportunities for further transformation once enacted.

Conclusion: the historical opportunity

This research indicates two facts that are obscured by adoption of liberal understandings of preferences as being grounded in values and of taking people's empirical selves at face value. First, there is an historical opportunity for the left to transform societies by returning to its founding *raison d'être* of securing material goods for workers. Second, the left needs to stop thinking that voters' preferences are fixed – they simply are not. As such, policymakers should reject any notion of an Overton Window placing transformative policy beyond the pale, or at least only accessible through incremental, conservative, change. Such policy has never been more needed and people have seldom been so receptive. This ought to provide encouragement.

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