

Cultural productivism and public support for the universal basic income from a cross-national perspective

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ABSTRACT

It has been hypothesized that the capacity of universal basic income (UBI) to attract wider public support is impaired by the strength of productivist cultural norms and values, common to the majority of developed societies. The paper contributes to literature on attitudes towards UBI by empirically investigating this hypothesis from a multi-level cross-national perspective, using the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 8 data on UBI support for 23 countries. It seeks to determine whether and to what extent the strength of cultural productivism can explain cross-national variation in public support for the implementation of UBI. Two main findings are reported. First, the results demonstrate that the public are less susceptible to supporting UBI in countries where average employment commitment is higher. Second, the results show that, even though employment commitment is a strong predictor of cross-national variation in the public support for UBI, the effect is surpassed and explained by GDP, which itself is negatively related to the outcome. The study argues that the capacity of UBI to appeal to the general public is limited by the prosperity of post-industrial societies, rather than by the cultural attachment of their populations to paid work.


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Introduction

In recent years, there has been renewed public and media interest in universal basic income (UBI). UBI has been debated as an alternative to post-war welfare institutions in the era when employment no longer secures

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financial security while human labour is under increasing risk of replacement by artificial intelligence (van der Veen and Groot 2000). Public and media attention reached its peak between 2016 and 2018 when a campaign in Switzerland resulted in an unsuccessful referendum about the proposal, and the Finnish government launched an experiment with UBI paid to a sample of jobseekers (De Wispelaere 2016). Systematic attention has also been paid to UBI in academia (for an overview, see Widerquist *et al.* 2013). Researchers have investigated a wide range of UBI-related topics, including the proposal's normative justifications (e.g. Van Parijs 1992), the technical aspects of implementation as well as the potential effects on the economy and society (see Gilroy *et al.* 2013; Sommer 2016; Pereira 2017).

A growing research area investigates the feasibility of UBI with respect to public support for its implementation (Andersson and Kangas 2005; Bay and Pedersen 2006; Parolin and Siöland 2020; Vlandas 2019). However, systematic attention has not yet been paid to one ideological factor traditionally perceived as hindering the proposal's public acceptance. At a theoretical level, scholars have argued that the public are unlikely to find UBI normatively legitimate and pointed to the contrast between the non-productivist nature of its underlying principles and the productivist normative foundations of modern societies (van der Veen 1991; Goodin 2001; Offe 2001; Bauman 2005; De Wispelaere and Noguera 2012). According to the argument, citizens of modern work-societies, socialized into beliefs about the individual and collective desirability of paid work (Offe 1992), are unlikely to support a welfare reform which explicitly assumes the decoupling of income and welfare entitlements from income-earning activities (Offe *et al.* 1996).

But is the strength of productivist cultural norms and values really a decisive factor which impairs support for the implementation of UBI? Are societies where paid work carries a stronger cultural importance less prone to being sympathetic towards UBI? If so, does cultural productivism explain the support as the most important factor, independently of other macro-characteristics associated with pro-welfare attitudes?

The article aims to contribute to welfare attitudes research by empirically examining these questions from a multi-level cross-national perspective, using the ESS Round 8 data on 23 developed societies. While not the first analysis of ESS data on public support for UBI, the paper complements existing studies (see Parolin and Siöland 2020; Vlandas 2019) with its specific focus on cultural productivism hypothesis. The paper proceeds as follows. The first part reviews the theoretical argument about why the strength of productivist cultural norms and values may

interfere with the public's support for UBI, putting it in the context of evidence from welfare attitudes research. It then discusses cultural productivism and argues for a distinction between its normative and expressive dimensions. Alternative explanations for cross-national variation in support of UBI are considered next. The analytical part begins with a formulation of hypotheses and a description of data, together with measures of variables. Descriptive results are presented first, followed by multi-variate results from mixed-effects logistic models with country-level random intercepts. The study is concluded by a discussion of the results in light of relevant theories.

Literature review

Cultural productivism and public support for the implementation of UBI

UBI is generally defined 'an income paid by a political community to all its members on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement' (Van Parijs 2004, 8). The main feature which distinguishes UBI from existing welfare arrangements is the non-productivist nature¹ of its underlying principles. While essentially all modern welfare states are productivist, in the sense that they are concerned with ensuring the smooth supply of labour to productive sectors of the economy (Goodin 2001) and assume that all able-bodied persons should be under economic compulsion to perform paid work (van der Veen 1991), UBI asserts a decoupling of income entitlements from income-earning activities (Offe *et al.* 1996). Such a decoupling has been advocated as just and necessary for the maintenance of financial security in precarious economic contexts (van der Veen and Groot 2000). On the other hand, it has been recognized as potentially problematic with respect to UBI's feasibility. Since productivist norms are considered to characterize modern societies as such, it has been hypothesized that the general public may perceive a non-productivist UBI proposal as ideologically illegitimate (Offe 2001; Bauman 2005; De Wispeleere and Noguera 2012). Offe (2001) argues that individuals' expectations have been so fundamentally shaped by hegemonic ideas about the normality of productive activities and the anomalousness of unearned benefits,

¹Some versions of UBI advocated by the political right (e.g., Friedman 1968) may actually be perceived as productivist. These typically assume below-subsistence payments and the abolishment of existing social transfers (De Wispeleere 2016), thus reducing effective marginal tax rates and incentivizing low-paid employment (Gorz 1999). This seems unlikely to be the case in the present study; the UBI conceptualization by ESS assumes the grant covers 'essential living costs' and replaces 'many' but not all benefits.

that the work-centred belief system has become largely immune to any revision attempts. In a similar fashion, De Wispelaere and Noguera (2012) assert that a widely shared belief that paid work is a core value and obligation and that benefits should be restricted to those who deserve them limits UBI's capacity to generate positive reactions among the general public.

Despite these concerns, prior representative polls have revealed that UBI enjoys substantial, albeit varying degrees of, public support in different national contexts.² In 2018, 48% of Americans favoured UBI to compensate workers who had lost jobs due to advances in artificial intelligence (Gallup Inc. and Northeastern University 2018). Similarly, 49% of Britons in 2017 said they would support the UK government in introducing UBI (Ipsos MORI 2017). Results from Scandinavian countries showed that 69% of Finns in 2015 (Kela 2016, 9), 66% of Norwegians in 2003 (Bay and Pedersen 2006) and 46% of Swedes in 2001 (Andersson and Kangas 2005) supported the idea of UBI.

The existing studies have yet to explore whether and to what extent public support for UBI can be related to the strength of productivist cultural norms and values. Some studies have examined the effect of individuals' perception of deservingness of needy groups. Arguably, individuals who believe that neediness is a result of personal failure should also value hard work and effort. Andersson and Kangas (2005) reported that individual blame for unemployment and poverty was the only factor which explained the variance in attitudes concerning UBI in both Sweden and Finland. Bay and Pedersen (2006) also showed that Norwegians who believed that the poor themselves are to be blamed for their situation were less likely to sympathize with UBI.

Useful information can be inferred from studies investigating the impact of productivist norms on preferences for welfare policies based on opposite principles, such as conditionality and targeting. In a Dutch study, Jeene *et al.* (2013) found that the work ethic measured at the individual level increased the emphasis on deservingness criteria for disability pension recipients. Such a relationship was also found with respect to preferences for the design of unemployment benefits. In a study of 24 European countries, Reeskens and van Oorschot (2013) showed that individuals living in societies where economic productivity is seen as important have stronger preferences for a meritocratic system of

²Comparability of those polls is limited due to different wording of the UBI question (see Online Appendix A, Table A1 for an overview).

unemployment benefits, which disproportionally rewards those who contribute to the production of welfare.

Dimensions of productivism

Productivist cultural norms and values have been claimed to characterize virtually all modern societies so profoundly that scholars refer to these as waged-work societies (Offe 1992; Bauman 2005). If exaggerated, this argumentation would imply that the implementation of UBI is equally unfeasible in any developed society. However, cross-national work orientation research has demonstrated that modern societies differ greatly with respect to the strength of various work-related attitudes (Gesthuizen and Verbakel 2011; Stam *et al.* 2013; Turunen and Nätti 2017).

This paper narrows its focus to two dimensions of work orientations, which reflect the main types of the cultural importance of work beyond its manifest income-producing function. If aggregated at the level of countries, they can be used to characterize the strength of the productivist cultural ethos of entire societies.

The first dimension of cultural productivism reflects the degree to which work is considered to be normatively important, i.e. valued as a moral obligation to which individuals are subjected (Furåker 2012). This type of importance corresponds to the sociological category of the work ethic, that is, a conviction that work is primarily a moral duty and not a matter of personal motives, preferences or values (Stam *et al.* 2013). The work ethic is based on values such as hard work, self-denial and avoidance of idleness (Highhouse *et al.* 2010). Previous research has shown that there is a substantial cross-national variation in the work ethic across societies. In the European context, a stronger work ethic was found in countries with a Muslim and Orthodox religious heritage and in societies with a communist past, while a weaker work ethic was found in economically advanced societies as well as in those with generous welfare states (Stam *et al.* 2013).

The second dimension of productivism reflects the degree to which work is expressively important, i.e. valued for beneficial intrinsic properties which motivate the willingness to engage in productive activities. This dimension can be captured by the concept of employment commitment, established in work orientations research. The concept measures people's willingness to work by asking whether they would continue working even if the financial need to work was removed (Furåker 2012). Employment commitment reflects the essence of a new type of work ethic of self-expression which emphasizes values of commitment, personal

growth and self-indulgence (Highhouse *et al.* 2010) and which has been considered to replace the traditional work ethic of duty in post-industrial societies (Méda and Vendramin 2017). Comparative research has found a stronger employment commitment in economically prosperous countries (Turunen and Nätti 2017), country contexts with generous welfare benefits (Esser 2005), and high and activating social spending (van der Wel and Halvorsen 2015).

Alternative explanations

Earlier analyses of the ESS data indicated that stronger support for UBI is found in countries with lower social spending (Parolin and Siöland 2020) and less generous welfare regimes (Vlandas 2019), suggesting that Europeans welcome the scheme mainly as a way to improve their welfare standards (Meuleman 2018). Hence, individuals' preferences for UBI may be also shaped by factors associated with general pro-welfare attitudes.

First, the cross-national variation in UBI support could reflect compositional differences between countries with respect to social categories prone to supporting public welfare. Such categories comprise individuals with utilitarian self-interest in welfare programmes, and/or those whose support reflects an ideological position. Women, young adults, individuals with low skills and income, and the unemployed are typically recognized among the supportive classes. From an ideological perspective, personal values such as egalitarian ideology and trust have been identified among the attitudinal covariates of public welfare support (compare Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003; Gelissen 2008; Dallinger 2010).

Second, support for UBI may be affected by the welfare institutions that are currently in place. Redistributive policies are typically less advocated in countries with high welfare spending, where high tax burdens discourage citizens from supporting further redistribution (Gelissen 2008; Pfeifer 2009). On the other hand, demand for redistribution is higher in societies with higher income inequalities (Midtbø 2018).

Third, cultural context could matter too. Support for universalistic benefits in general requires cultural characteristics, such as trust and a commitment to egalitarian values (Bay and Pedersen 2006). High trusting countries tend to be more supportive of public welfare (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003), while ideologically egalitarian societies are less conditional in terms of their solidarity with those in need (van Oorschot 2006).

Fourth, public support for UBI can also be affected by business cycle phases. Support for redistribution and sympathy for needy groups are

typically higher when unemployment increases and lower in times of economic prosperity (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003; Pfeifer 2009; Dallingier 2010).

Finally, cross-national variation in support of UBI can also reflect differences in socio-economic development. Wealthy countries have a different composition of population in terms of education, family patterns or life expectancy (Midtbø 2018), as well as with respect to the value orientations of their citizens, who tend to prioritize autonomy and self-expression over material security (Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

Contribution, aim, hypotheses

Although cultural discourses about the importance of paid work have been repeatedly considered to pose a challenge for UBI's public acceptance, the argument has been justified mainly at the theoretical level. This paper aims to contribute to welfare attitudes research by empirically examining the argument from a multi-level cross-national perspective. Two general hypotheses are formulated.

If the theoretical logic of the argument holds, support for UBI should be lower in countries where productivist norms and values are more pronounced (H1). Since there are two different dimensions to the cultural importance of work, there are also two alternative versions of this hypothesis. The first version expects to find weaker support for UBI in countries where the social norm to work is high, i.e. in societies with a stronger work ethic (H1a). The second version expects to find lower UBI support in countries where the expressive importance of work is high, i.e. in societies characterized by a stronger employment commitment (H1b).

The second hypothesis investigates the relative strength and robustness of the assumed relationship (H2). If the main obstacle preventing UBI from gaining substantial popular support is cultural productivism, one should expect the effect to be relatively stronger than the effects of other macro-covariates associated with the public's support for welfare and redistribution (H2a). If cultural productivism explains attitudes towards UBI as a factor *sui generis*, the effect is also expected to be sustained when these characteristics are controlled for (H2b).

Data

The paper uses survey data from the ESS Round 8 (ESS 2016). The module was fielded in 2016/2017 and addressed to nationally representative

samples of the following 23 countries: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russian Federation, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. Responses with missing values were list-wise deleted and the pooled sample used in the analysis consisted of 39,016 individuals clustered within 23 countries.

Method

Given the hierarchical structure of the data and the multi-level nature of the research problem, the models were estimated as mixed-effects logistic regressions with country-specific random intercepts. To facilitate the interpretation of results, all predictors were grand-mean centred (Enders and Tofghi 2007). Additionally, quantitative variables were standardized by twice their standard deviation, to allow for direct comparison of their relative effect sizes (Gelman 2008).

Measures of variables

Dependent variable

Respondents' support for the implementation of UBI in their country was used as a dependent variable. A short introductory paragraph explaining the basic principles of UBI was presented first, followed by a question investigating the degree of support for the scheme. The definition of UBI provided to the respondents is specific and makes reference to both its benefits and associated costs. One can thus expect to obtain more realistic estimates of respondents' support for UBI, which was found to be sensitive to the phrasing and framing of the question (Bay and Pedersen 2006; Ipsos MORI 2017). The wording of the question was as follows:

Some countries are [...] talking about introducing a basic income scheme. [...] A basic income scheme includes all of the following:

- The government pays everyone a monthly income to cover essential living costs
- It replaces many other social benefits
- The purpose is to guarantee everyone a minimum standard of living
- Everyone receives the same amount regardless of whether or not they are working

- People also keep the money they earn from work or other sources
- This scheme is paid for by taxes

Overall, would you be against or in favour of having this scheme in [your] country?

Respondents could express their support on a 1–4 scale anchored according to the variants ‘Strongly against’ (value 1) and ‘Strongly in favour’ (value 4). Responses were recoded into a binary variable with the value 1 assigned to respondents supporting the implementation of UBI and the value 0 assigned to those who were against.

Main country-level predictors

The first predictor of cultural productivism captures the normative importance of work in a country, measured as the average work ethic. The index is based on a battery of items from the 2008/2009 wave of the European Values Study (EVS 2015). For Israel, the indicator was aggregated from the 1999/2004 wave of the World Value Study (WVS 2015). Although relatively older, such attitudinal data tend to be rather stable over time and can thus still appropriately capture the work ethic. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with five statements: (a) ‘In order to fully develop your talents, you need to have a job’; (b) ‘It is humiliating to receive money without having to work for it’; (c) ‘People who do not work become lazy’; (d) ‘Work is a duty towards society’; and (e) ‘Work should always come first, even if it means less spare time’. The original response scale was anchored according to the variants ‘Strongly agree’ (value 1) and ‘Strongly disagree’ (value 5). Reverse-coded responses were first averaged at the individual level (Cronbach’s alpha 0.71) and aggregated at the country level using survey weights. The construct’s theoretic range was between 1 and 5, with higher values indicating a stronger average work ethic of a country.

The second predictor captures the strength of the expressive evaluation of work in a country, measured as averaged employment commitment. The measure is based on a two-item indicator of work centrality, aggregated from International Social Survey Work Orientation data from 2015 or from the latest available wave (ISSP Research Group 2017). It is measured in terms of agreement with two statements: (a) ‘I would enjoy paid work, even if I did not need the money’; (b) ‘Work is just a way of earning money – nothing more’. Response scales for both items ranged from ‘Agree strongly’ (value 1) to ‘Disagree strongly’ (value 5). The scales were first harmonized, then the summative scores were averaged at the

country level by applying survey weights. The values of the composite scale ranged between 1 and 5, increasing with a higher average employment commitment in a country.

Individual-level controls

Demographic and socio-structural variables were included as controls for compositional differences in utilitarian self-interest in public welfare. Gender is measured with a dummy variable, where the value 1 is assigned to women and the value 0 is assigned to men. Age is measured in years with a linear and a quadratic term, to capture the potential nonlinearities of its effect. Educational attainment is measured as years of completed formal education. Income is measured subjectively, as a feeling about the household's income expressed on a reverse-coded 1–4 scale. The value 1 corresponds to the response variant 'Very difficult on present income' and the value 4 stands for 'Living comfortably on present income'. Employment status is captured with a set of three dummies based on respondents' main activity seven days prior to the survey. These indicate whether respondents were in paid employment, unemployed or not active in the labour force. For each, the value 1 was given to those who reported the given activity, and 0 otherwise.

Two value orientations associated with support for public welfare were controlled for as well. A measure of interpersonal trust was constructed as the average agreement with three statements regarding whether people: (a) can be trusted, (b) try to take advantage of others and (c) are helpful most of the time. The composite scale ranges between 0 and 10, increasing in the direction of higher trust (Cronbach's alpha 0.76). The measure for egalitarianism is based on agreement with the statement 'For a fair society, differences in the standard of living should be small', indicated on a 1–5 scale. Responses were reverse-coded, so that higher values indicate a higher egalitarian orientation. The value 5 corresponds to the category 'Agree strongly' and the value 1 to the variant 'Disagree strongly'.

Country-level controls

Countries' cultural, institutional and socio-economic characteristics considered to affect welfare preferences were also included as controls. Where possible, the values of covariates were lagged by one year, i.e. they correspond to 2015 or the latest available year. Structural macro-characteristics

typically require time to manifest and impact individual attitudes and behaviours (see Schlueter *et al.* 2013, 673).

The first two macro-controls focus on the national cultural context which is relevant to the support for universalistic benefits: aggregated interpersonal trust and egalitarianism. Both measures are based on corresponding individual-level variables from ESS data, weighted and averaged at the country level.

Total social protection expenditures as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) obtained from International Labour Organization's World Social Protection Report 2017–19 (ILO 2017) is used as an indicator of welfare generosity. Gini index of income inequality is used as a proxy for the extent of redistribution. Harmonized unemployment rate is indicative of a business cycle phase and GDP per head in terms of constant prices and purchasing power parities (currency USD) is included to control for differences in socio-economic development. All three measures were obtained from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2019).

Results

Country differences

Figure 1 shows the weighted proportions of individuals who are in favour of implementing a UBI scheme in their country. Relatively high levels of support are found in the majority of countries, albeit there is a substantial cross-national variation. UBI is supported by more than half of the population in 11 countries, while the majority of citizens in 12 countries are against implementation. Countries with the highest share of those in favour are Lithuania, Russia and Hungary. UBI implementation is most strongly opposed in Norway, Switzerland and Sweden.

Figure 2 suggests that the two types of work importance are related to support for UBI in opposite directions. Israel, Hungary and Portugal, which score highest on the normative dimension of work importance, are all countries with above 50% support for UBI. On the other hand, the expressive dimension of work importance is clearly dominated by countries where the majority reject the scheme, i.e. by Norway, Iceland and Sweden.

Multi-variate results

A series of multi-level logistic regressions was fitted to test the effect of the cultural importance of paid work on support for UBI. A null model

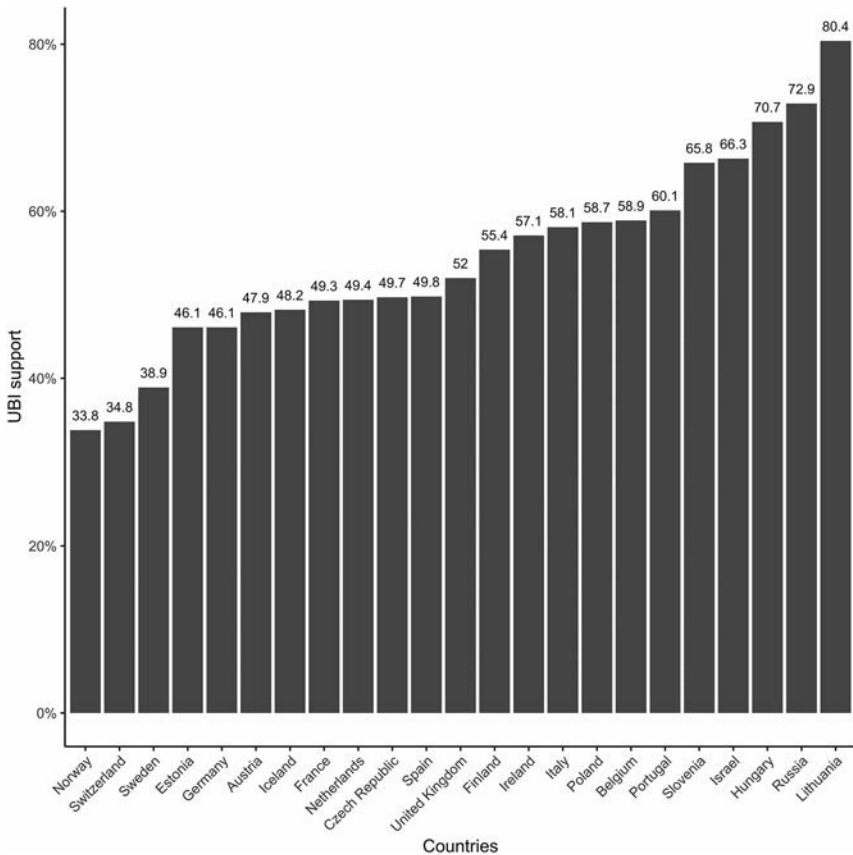


Figure 1. Support for the implementation of UBI in the 23 analysed countries (own calculations based on ESS 2016).

containing only random intercepts was estimated first (A1). According to the intra-class correlation (ICC), 7% of the overall variance in UBI support occurs due to respondents' country-belonging, rather than due to their individual characteristics.

Next, a model including individual-level controls was estimated (A2). With respect to socio-structural variables, individuals supportive of the implementation of UBI are, *ceteris paribus*, younger³, come from less affluent households and/or have a weaker labour market attachment. Looking at the value orientations, the results show that UBI is more likely to find support among egalitarian respondents and those who trust their fellow citizens. All in all, the model shows that the individual

³Although the quadratic term is significant and positive, conversion to unstandardized metric reveals that the effect changes from positive to negative only at 94 years of age.

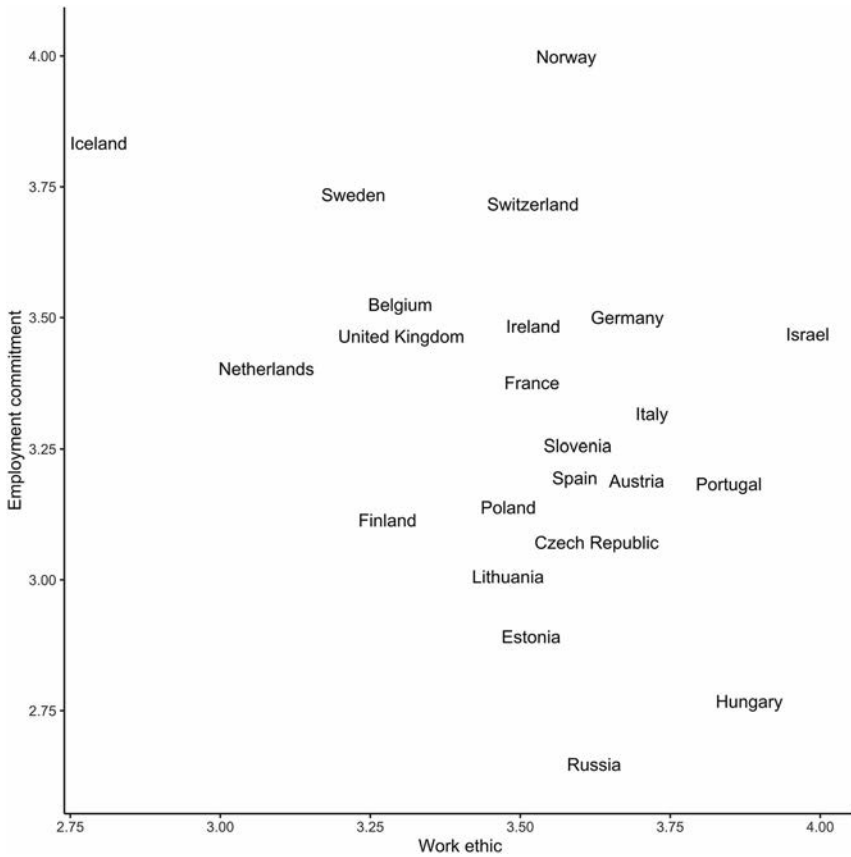


Figure 2. Work ethic and employment commitment in the 23 analysed countries (own calculations based on EVS 2015; WVS 2015; ESS 2016; ISSP Research Group 2017).

characteristics associated with UBI support are similar to the factors related to general pro-welfare attitudes (Table 1).

In the next step, two country-level predictors of cultural productivism were added to the model containing individual-level controls, first alone, then together in one model. Model B1 shows that the effect of work's normative importance is surprisingly positive, albeit relatively weak and insignificant. Nor does it have any substantial explanatory power, as the unchanged ICC value indicates. The results thus provide no evidence in support of H1a. The average strength of the normative importance of work does not seem to affect cross-national variation in preferences for UBI.

The opposite is true for the expressive dimension of work's cultural importance. Its significant effect is stronger and negative (B2) and does

Table 1. Effects of individual-level characteristics on support for UBI; multi-level logistic regression.

Individual-level predictors	A1		A2	
	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE
Intercept	0.17	0.10	0.17	0.10
Woman (ref. man)			-0.03	0.02
Age			-0.73 ***	0.13
Age squared			0.39 **	0.14
Education			-0.00	0.02
Income			-0.28 ***	0.02
Not in labour force (ref. working)			0.10 ***	0.03
Unemployed (ref. working)			0.24 ***	0.05
Egalitarianism			0.53 ***	0.02
Trust			0.11 ***	0.02
Random effects variances				
Individual level		3.29		3.29
Country level		0.24		0.20
ICC		0.07		0.06
N		23		23
Observations		39,016		39,016
Deviance		52,023.605		50,946.215

Note: Statistical significance = * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

SE = standard error; ref. = reference category; ICC = intra-class correlation; N = number of countries.

not change even when the effects of both predictors are estimated together (B3). It also eliminates more than half of the initial share of variance at the country level. The results suggest that citizens living in countries where work is highly expressively valued, i.e. where workers are, on average, more committed to paid work, are less likely to support the implementation of UBI. A higher expressive evaluation of work in a country seems to hinder UBI's capacity to generate more positive reactions among the general public as expected by H1b (Table 2).

How strong is this effect, relatively speaking, compared to the effects of other relevant macro-covariates on UBI support? To address H2a, six country-level controls were included one by one in the model containing only individual predictors. Relative sizes of their effects were then compared with the effect of the employment commitment predictor from a similar model (B2). Table 3 shows that the public's sympathy with UBI is lower in high trusting countries (C1), countries with compressed income structures (C4) and affluent societies (C6). Neither the strength of aggregated egalitarianism (C2), social protection expenditures (C3) nor unemployment (C5) was found to explain country differences in support for UBI. When compared to the effect of employment commitment predictor, it is only the effect of GDP which is relatively stronger. On the other hand, its explanatory power, as indicated by a reduction in the initial ICC, is roughly similar. The results show that, although

Table 2. Effects of main country-level predictors on support for UBI; multi-level logistic regression.

Country-level predictors	B1		B2		B3	
	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE
Work ethic	0.27	0.16			0.08	0.14
Employment commitment			-0.57 ***	0.14	-0.54 ***	0.15
Random effects variances						
Individual level	3.29		3.29		3.29	
Country level	0.18		0.12		0.11	
ICC	0.05		0.03		0.03	
N	23		23		23	
Observations	39,016		39,016		39,016	
Deviance	50,943.656		50,933.145		50,932.851	

Note: Statistical significance = * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. SE = standard error; ICC = intra-class correlation; N = number of countries.

Controlled for individual-level characteristics (Table 1, Model A2).

the cultural evaluation of work is among the most influential macro-factors associated with UBI support, it is not the single most important factor.

Finally, the robustness of the negative relationship between the expressive cultural importance of work and UBI support was put to a test (H2b). Six country-level controls from Models C1-C6 were individually added to the model including individual-level controls, together with the employment commitment predictor (i.e. B2). Since the work ethic predictor was not found to be related to the outcome, it has been omitted from this step of the analysis. Table 4 shows that the negative relationship between the expressive evaluation of work and UBI support holds, even when cultural context (D1-D2), social expenditures (D3), income inequalities (D4) and unemployment (D5) are controlled for. The effect loses a substantial part of its strength and becomes insignificant only when socio-economic development is accounted for (D6). Not only is GDP the strongest macro-predictor related to UBI support, the findings suggest that it is also a mediating factor which simultaneously explains the public's expressive evaluation of work.⁴ Interestingly, GDP also explains away the effects of the other two significant macro-predictors, i.e. trust and inequality, when added as a control to Models C1 and C4 (models not reported).

To conclude, the results provide mixed evidence regarding the productivist hypothesis. While the cultural importance of work is undoubtedly a factor that limits UBI's potential to attract stronger popular support,

⁴Compare with figures D1 and D2 in the Online Appendix D, which show country-level relationships between public support for UBI and employment commitment, and UBI support and GDP.

Table 3. Effects of country-level controls on support for UBI; multi-level logistic regression.

Country-level predictors	C1		C2		C3		C4		C5		C6	
	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE
Trust	-0.53 ***	0.14										
Egalitarianism			0.22	0.18								
Social protection expenditures					-0.32	0.18						
Gini index							0.36 *	0.17				
Unemployment rate									0.10	0.19		
GDP per head											-0.62 ***	0.14
Random effects variances												
Individual level	3.29		3.29		3.29		3.29		3.29		3.29	
Country level	0.13		0.19		0.18		0.17		0.20		0.11	
ICC	0.04		0.06		0.05		0.05		0.06		0.03	
N	23		23		23		23		23		23	
Observations	39,016		39,016		39,016		39,016		39,016		39,016	
Deviance	50,935.328		50,944.832		50,943.303		50,941.990		50,945.953		50,931.933	

Notes: Statistical significance = * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. SE = standard error; ICC = intra-class correlation; N = number of countries. Controlled for individual-level characteristics (Table 1, Model A2).

Table 4. Effect of employment commitment on support for UBI, controlling for country-level characteristics; multi-level logistic regression.

Country-level predictors	D1		D2		D3		D4		D5		D6	
	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE	Log-odds	SE
Employment commitment	-0.39 *	0.17	-0.57 ***	0.13	-0.53 ***	0.13	-0.51 ***	0.14	-0.58 ***	0.14	-0.28	0.21
Trust	-0.27	0.17										
Egalitarianism			0.20	0.14								
Social protection expenditures					-0.21	0.14						
Gini index							0.17	0.15				
Unemployment rate									-0.03	0.14		
GDP per head											-0.39	0.22
Random effects variances												
Individual level	3.29		3.29		3.29		3.29		3.29		3.29	
Country level	0.10		0.10		0.10		0.11		0.12		0.10	
ICC	0.03		0.03		0.03		0.03		0.03		0.03	
N	23		23		23		23		23		23	
Observations	39,016		39,016		39,016		39,016		39,016		39,016	
Deviance	50,930.631		50,931.005		50,930.978		50,931.813		50,933.113		50,930.274	

Notes: Statistical significance = * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. SE = standard error; ICC = intra-class correlation; N = number of countries. Controlled for individual-level characteristics (Table 1, Model A2).

cross-national variation in UBI support seems to be primarily driven by countries' economic affluence.

Two sensitivity checks were conducted to test reliability of the findings. First, to assess whether a significance assessment of country effects was not affected by a relatively low number of countries, country-level models were estimated as Bayesian with weakly informative priors, since they deliver more robust estimates in small-C cases (Bryan and Jenkins 2016). The results of this check were almost identical to those reported (see Online Appendix B). Next, the models were re-fitted without Switzerland, where viewpoints on UBI may be more salient and fixed, as a result of the unsuccessful referendum from 2015. The only difference concerned the negative effect of social expenditures, which became statistically significant. The main findings remained unaffected (see Online Appendix C).

Discussion and conclusions

The main aim of this paper was to contribute to comparative welfare attitudes research by examining the hypothesis about the negative impact of productivist cultural norms and values on public support for the implementation of UBI. The strength of cultural discourses about the importance of paid work has been traditionally hypothesized to impair UBI's capacity to attract wider public support. However, this claim has been justified mainly in the theoretical realm. The paper analysed the 2016 ESS Round 8 data on 23 European societies and empirically explored the question from a multi-level cross-national perspective. There were two main findings.

First, the results demonstrated that respondents living in societies where paid work has a stronger cultural significance are less susceptible towards supporting the implementation of UBI. However, it was not the strength of the normative importance of work, traditionally understood as the work ethic, which was found to affect the preferences. The societies more sceptical with regard to UBI were those where work matters expressively, i.e. where people's average commitment to employment was higher.

Second, the paper sought to determine how the cultural importance of work as an explanatory factor of UBI preferences compare with other country characteristics associated with pro-welfare attitudes. The results showed that, even though employment commitment is a strong predictor of public support for UBI, its effect is, in terms of relative size, surpassed by that of GDP, itself negatively related to the outcome. GDP was also the only predictor which explained away the effect of employment

commitment when both were estimated in one model. In other words, not only are citizens of affluent societies more sceptical about UBI, this affluence is also likely a factor which explains their stronger expressive evaluation of work. According to the results, UBI's capacity to appeal to the general public seems to be limited by the prosperity of post-industrial societies, rather than the cultural attachment of their population to paid work.

A plausible explanation for why socio-economic development simultaneously limits citizens' sympathies for UBI and increases their expressive evaluation of work can be offered by modernization theory. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) assert that, as the prosperity of post-industrial societies increases, individuals tend to prioritize self-expression goals and place a lesser focus on issues of material survival. Since affluent societies have achieved relative material prosperity by other means, UBI may appear to be redundant. Citizens of developed welfare states may also perceive UBI as insufficiently flat, more so if the question specifies that it entails the partial replacement of welfare programmes that currently exist. A stronger expressive evaluation of work is also likely to be brought about by restructuring the labour market brought about by post-industrialization. As new better paid, more autonomous, and generally more desirable forms of immaterial labour proliferate in the service sector of the economy, individuals' opportunities to satisfy their self-expression needs in work become more plentiful (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Hence, the average willingness to work is likely to increase too. This explanation is also in line with the results from work orientation research, where it has been demonstrated that GDP is strongly related to employment commitment (Turunen and Nätti 2017), and that workers' self-expressive work values are impacted by satisfaction of their material needs and/or of their positive experiences with beneficial intrinsic properties of work (Gallie 2007).

The findings are however not without limitations. The first issue concerns the cross-sectional character of the ESS data, which means that the results cannot be interpreted in causal terms. The second issue concerns the reliability of the macro-predictors of cultural productivism. Since ESS data include no measures of work orientations, they had to be aggregated from other earlier sources and could only be used at the level of countries.

Further research is needed to assess the extent to which the relationship between the public's preference for UBI and the cultural importance of work is mediated by socio-economic development. Researchers could

shed more light on the issue by looking at the dynamics of the relationship at the individual level, that is, by examining how individuals' work attitudes impact their propensity to support UBI. Researchers could also examine the issue by investigating preferences for other non-productivist welfare policies. If the explanation offered in the paper holds, support for these policies too should be indirectly related to employment commitment through socio-economic development. Failure to observe such association would, on the other hand, provide additional support to the legitimacy of concerns regarding UBI's specifically problematic relationship with cultural discourses about the importance of paid work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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