



The Political Economy of Guaranteed Income: Where Do We Go From Here?¹

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¹ This title pays tribute to Martin Luther King Jr.'s final book "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?" in which Dr. King made a case for guaranteed income. We posit that the movement for guaranteed income 55 years later stands at an important crossroads for this same question.

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Introduction

In the years 2019 to 2022, guaranteed income² policies have grown in popularity and public awareness globally, albeit by varying [names](#) and varying parameters. The global COVID-19 pandemic and its particular toll in the United States [spurred](#) a host of expansive [fiscal](#) and [monetary](#) policies at every level of government. Cash transfer policies aimed to prevent widespread economic precarity and food insecurity amid extensive job and income loss, and to lift spending amid the [first “services” recession](#) and wider economic downturn. The pandemic panic and downturn presented a particular imperative for elected officials and government agencies to respond, and public assistance was largely accepted as common sense — although differently conceived within the political debates over multiple cash transfer [proposals](#) that preceded the CARES Act, the HEROES Act that never passed, the CASH Act³ and later the American Rescue Plan Act. This paper concerns the durability of that support for cash policy.

We know that support for public assistance, and cash transfers in particular, expanded dramatically during the last few years in part because of its [widespread \(albeit temporary\) implementation](#) worldwide. We can observe rising support in public polling data, proxy cash transfer policies, and the wider landscape of advocacy, media and philanthropic interest in the policy. A central question of this paper is whether and how support for cash policy in the United States can sustain beyond the pandemic and as unemployment returns to “normal.” Indefinitely stalled “Build Back Better” legislation may indicate waning popularity for extensive social spending, including for the largest US guaranteed income policy to date, the expanded Child Tax Credit. However, it stands to be seen whether this political stalemate among the elected is a reflection of public opinion or instead illustrative of a broader disconnect between popular, effective policy and the agendas of the politically and financially empowered—who may be unaccountable or ambivalent to public demand. Indeed, a motivated minority of (well-organized) voters can be sufficient to move policy even against broader public opinion. This fact offers both peril and promise to those pushing for reform of our cash safety net.

Advocates stand at a crossroads: the past two years highlighted various forms of cash policy and saw the emergence of over 60 guaranteed income pilot initiatives across the U.S., but polling suggests that despite widespread pilot efforts, grassroots organizing for cash policy is limited and public narratives linking public benefits to work persist (and

² Throughout this text, we define “guaranteed income” as any regular, unconditional and unrestricted cash transfer to individuals or households. More definitions can be found [here](#).

³ Passed as part of the [Consolidated Appropriations Act](#) in December 2020.

thereby, ideas of deservedness over need). A shift to permanent policy will likely require not only narrative work and message testing in public opinion polls, but more active advocacy campaigns driven by long term grassroots organizing. In addition, some versions of a guaranteed income have proven more sustainable or viable in the post-pandemic economy of continued low and middle-class precarity and dramatic inequality. In a similar vein, this paper points not only to ways to build a sustainable majority of support for guaranteed income, but also what lessons emerge from other movements that reflect ways to build grassroots support and to wield adequate political power and capital to change public narrative and policy. We also discuss what lessons emerge from movements that managed to change policy even without fully transforming popular narratives. Finally, we discuss the importance of effective framing as key to advocates' efforts to extend cash policy beyond crises, as part of efforts for a more robust safety net. In sum, while past white papers in this series have explained some of the practical questions involved in "getting to guaranteed income," this paper instead focuses on operationalizing the recommendations of the previous papers, suggesting ways to navigate the complex political and public spheres at this turning point for guaranteed income policy.

Part I: Public Opinion on Guaranteed Income

Polling Data Shows Increased Support, Though Imprecise

1) Support for cash is up, but polls and opinions vary on policy parameters.

Polling data on guaranteed income suggests mixed public perceptions of cash transfer policy, largely mirrored by the lukewarm and largely partisan support voiced by elected officials. Many surveys of public support use the term "universal basic income" to refer to a regular income support of \$500 to \$1000 a month to every adult. Using that term,

support for the policy has [ranged](#) from 31% to 77% in nationally-representative surveys⁴ over the past five years, with the most recent [survey](#) from Data for Progress finding 55% of likely voters support guaranteed income policy (July 2021). In August 2020, a national Hill-HarrisX [survey](#) found equally high support, noting a jump of seven percentage points from late 2019 among Republicans and a significant increase in support among older voters. While support has risen, the numbers overall reflect an uncertain political landscape of support for cash.

In 2020, JFI researchers (Constantino, Rao) also tested support for “UBI” through a nationally-representative survey, looking for potential impacts of the pandemic’s cash support policies on perceptions of long term cash policy. Further analysis of those surveys is forthcoming, but the data pointed to similarly mixed public sentiment on guaranteed income. Some key insights from [that survey](#) included:

- Democrats are more supportive of guaranteed income policies, but Republicans with lower incomes or with dependents are also more likely than other Republicans to support some cash policies. Among Republican [supporters](#), those with dependents and those that report being unable to cover a \$400 emergency are more supportive.
- Lower income households, younger age groups, and residents of urban areas are more likely to support guaranteed income policies.
- On amounts and targeting of a guaranteed income program, respondents were more supportive of larger amounts (\$1000/month) targeted to those below the federal poverty line (FPL), but these results were not tested for statistical significance and are inconclusive.

There is much less available data on that last bullet: That is, there have been few polls that measure public support for programs targeted exclusively to those experiencing poverty, programs targeted to particular populations or recession measures, or support for a more modest guaranteed income (e.g. \$300). There’s also limited data on the naming and framing of guaranteed income, though these attributes may significantly affect political feasibility (more in part V). To understand public support for targeted policies, the Economic Security Project (ESP) in particular, along with polling groups like Lake Research and Data for Progress, has conducted private polling in 2017 and 2018, and more [recently](#) examined the expanded Child Tax Credit and continued stimulus payments. ESP released a [survey](#) in late 2020 showing 61% overall support for “regular relief payments” until the end of the COVID-19 crisis. A similar [poll](#) from Data for Progress in late 2020

⁴ Importantly, in the 31-77% range, the larger figures rely on an aggregate of “somewhat support” and “strongly support” responses. Average support overall between 2017 and 2021 fluctuates around 45%, +/- 10 points depending on the survey.

found 65% of voters supported monthly, \$2000 checks for the duration of the pandemic.⁵ Despite the public support, [legislative proposals](#) to enact monthly, \$2000 or \$1000 checks during the pandemic or linked to month-over-month recession indicators like the [Sahm rule](#) did not pass the House or Senate, even as other cash policies did eventually squeeze through a largely deadlocked and contentious federal policy landscape in 2020. Surveys from Data for Progress in the summer of 2020 [showed](#) continued “direct cash transfers” were more popular than other policies like infrastructure or funds for struggling industries—and most respondents supported further government spending despite the deficit.

Support for cash policy was clear in early pandemic polling, though a permanent shift toward unconditional, untargeted cash was less sustained in the prolonged political gridlock over multiple benefits policies. Still, polls surveying voter opinion during this period reflect a five to 10 percent increase in support for guaranteed income policy, particularly linked to the “crisis” or pandemic emergency. More recent [polls](#) suggest that a guaranteed income targeted to children and to address income inequality is supported by a majority of voters. Data for Progress’s newest [poll](#) found roughly equal support, 55-56%, for a guaranteed income to all and for making the expanded Child Tax Credit permanent — although notably, independents favored the expanded Child Tax Credit by an additional five points over a guaranteed income for all.

One persistent challenge across all polling is public awareness of guaranteed income. A private poll in 2021 showed most respondents had not heard of UBI before and that additional explanatory information about the policy increased support for it significantly (although potential for acquiescence bias here is noteworthy). Voters are not likely to be agnostic on the details, as reflected in multiple polls since. Defining coalitions of public support for guaranteed income becomes even more difficult given significant variation in support by political party, demographic, economic class, household composition, and geographic region. A private 2017 poll showed that support for cash policy varied depending on the financing model, with greater support for a policy financed by increasing taxes on the wealthiest households, and less support for estate taxes or taxing companies that use natural resources like oil or gas. The same poll also showed greater support for cash policy targeted to lower-income households.

⁵ See more topline support numbers from Data for Progress [here](#), with monthly and weekly polls about government response to the pandemic as part of the “Coronavirus Response Tracking Poll” [series](#).

The Expanded Child Tax Credit As Proxy Support for Guaranteed Income

In 2021, with the change in presidential administrations and Senate leadership, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) introduced a widely-popular guaranteed income policy—the fully refundable Child Tax Credit, made available as an advance tax credit (a check or deposit) on a monthly basis to most US households with children, in increased dollar amounts of \$300 to \$350 per child each month.⁶ Guaranteed income advocates were elated by what seemed like a culmination of efforts to move the cash policy from the sidelines to mainstream federal policy. The expanded Child Tax Credit, a Democrat-supported proposal first [introduced](#) in 2017 and gaining overwhelming Democrat support by [2021](#), had found its policy window. Guaranteed income advocates, and coalitions of advocates and researchers like the Children’s Budget Coalition, Cash War Room, Automatic Benefit to Children Coalition, and Guaranteed Income Community of Practice, were eager to mobilize around this viable overture to federal guaranteed income policy, although not all of them with a view towards making the policy universal. Those groups that were focused on more universal conceptions of guaranteed income policy and financial security or mobility dedicated their efforts to the CTC as a stepping stone to larger policy. Philanthropy opened its coffers for Child Tax Credit research, experts on tax policy and administrative burdens took up their bull-horns on longstanding issues of IRS tax credit implementation and access, and technology and software [companies worked to address](#) clunky government filing websites and benefits delivery platforms. This form of guaranteed income for kids had jumped to the forefront of public debate, lobbying efforts, and elite buy-in.

Advocates for cash policy hoped that such pandemic-time cash assistance might create the political buy-in for more permanent policy, particularly as a rallying cry of beneficiaries themselves. However, “policy feedback” literature⁷ suggests that extensive means testing,

⁶ By making the credit fully refundable and available as an advance credit, the CTC would no longer have to be received as a lump-sum check at tax time based on the prior year’s reported income, but could be accessed immediately based on existing income tax returns and a non-filer portal for those without returns. The typical lump sum was increased, and 50% of the benefit was then divided over a series of monthly benefit payments. The latter 50% of the sum was received at tax filing.

⁷ This concept of a “policy feedback,” or the degree to which certain policies impact politics, or, more particularly, increase or decrease political participation, has been studied for several decades, often around the policy feedback loops created by social policies like Medicaid, SNAP (food stamps),

[administrative burden](#) surrounding enrollment and continuance in a given social program, and benefit reduction can negatively impact political participation broadly defined—including voting.⁸ As a result, state-level variations in safety net administration can also affect levels of support for a policy,⁹ something researchers may be able to examine further as some states implement their own cash assistance expansions through state-level Child Tax Credits or Earned Income Tax Credit programs. Likewise, the literature suggests that policy parameters can create path dependency and dictate what forms of policy are "viable," while embedding particular opinions about deservedness, or cementing the political and societal marginalization of certain groups. This limitation should factor into advocates' long term strategies. In keeping with this, many child welfare groups have held steadfastly to full refundability (no income phase-in) in any "compromise" CTC proposals. The National Welfare Rights Organization's historic rejection of Nixon's Negative Income Tax (NIT) was founded on similar grounds—that such a limited policy would not lead to a more substantial one.¹⁰

2) The Child Tax Credit increased support for and familiarity with cash transfers, but was hampered by lack of awareness

Child Tax Credit public opinion data [suggests](#) a majority of voters were in favor of the policy, though support from parents varied across party lines (80% of Democrats, 62% of Independents, and 37% of Republicans). Still, that level of support outstrips that of universal cash support policies. A recent survey of Data for Progress and Mayors for a Guaranteed Income [found](#) 61% of likely voters supported the expanded Child Tax Credit, and 56% supported making that expansion permanent.¹¹ That same survey also showed

or others. See: Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Campbell 2003; Mettler 2005; Pierson 1993; Soss 1999 & 2000; Weaver and Lerman 2010; Beland 2010; Campbell 2012; Schneider and Ingram; Campbell 2015; Cook and Barrett 1992.

⁸ See Moynihan and Soss 2014; Cook and Barrett 1992; Michener 2018; Grogan and Patashnik 2003 among others.

⁹ Jamila Michener's work is illustrative here. *Fragmented Democracy* examines state-based variation in Medicaid expansion to show that "state policy arrangements can boost or dampen political action among... beneficiaries." (81)

¹⁰ Jill Quadagno's book *The Color of Welfare* describes the NWRO's rejection of the Nixon Family Assistance Plan (FAP)'s NIT proposal to give low-income families a \$1600 guaranteed income annually: "In the eyes of the NWRO, FAP was 'anti-poor, and anti-black...a flagrant example of institutional racism.'"

¹¹ Margin of error is +/- 3 percentage points. Other polls suggested just ~~43~~ - 47% of voters support making the policy permanent. The higher number (47%) comes from a MorningConsult poll administered in December 2021, right before the last of the payments went out. The latter poll (43%), from YouGov, was administered just a couple days after the credit began to go out. In the YouGov poll, among those who reported receiving the credit, 57% supported extending it and

that voters in both parties lost trust in leading Congressional Democrats due to the expiration of the ARPA Child Tax Credit this year. Many advocates hoped that receipt of the CTC would engender greater support for its extension. Indeed recipients, and those who knew a recipient, were [more](#) likely to support extending it (although perhaps not as their primary voting issue, as we discuss in part IV). The weaker support for extending the policy (compared to support for its immediate implementation) points to a similar trend found with stimulus checks: support is greater for “emergency” payments than a standalone policy. Despite 61% support across political parties, CTC popularity did not adequately activate a base to hold Democratic leadership accountable on extending the monthly CTC beyond 2021. We discuss this gap in advocacy in later sections.

Polling Methodology is Limited: Caveats in Public Polling Results

While repeated public polling and message testing through what some call “persuasion randomized control trials (RCTs)” has greatly informed advocacy campaigns across political parties and may give us a glimpse into the “true” state of public opinion on an issue, it is by no means a perfect source of evidence. A few important issues emerge in public opinion polling and persuasion RCTs: broadly, the difficulty of achieving a representative sample or testing environment to mimic the real world.¹² Researchers typically attempt to account for these issues through repetition over time, multiple overlapping survey methods, in-field message tests, and weighting results by degrees of known uncertainty or error. Even with corrective methods such as these, pollsters and messaging consultants often set high thresholds of support (well above 52%) to constitute sustainable campaign popularity in order to reliably predict a policy or candidate’s success when oppositional campaigns present in-field. As a result, we must be careful to assume that support for guaranteed income at [55 percent](#) plus or minus 3-5 points would constitute certain evidence of majority support for the policy. Two relevant filters (though not disqualifiers) for these results are 1) methodological issues with public polling including lack of external validity, lack of comparability across testing protocols, among others, and 2) demographic considerations and their relevance to voter turnout statistics.¹³

support for the credit expansion was higher among those receiving or who knew someone receiving the credit.

¹² We discuss these issues in more detail in the appendix.

¹³ This analysis is fundamentally informed by the more extensive examination of election polling from Michael Podhorzer and the [Independent Strategic Research Collaborative](#). On the importance of demographic data, a secondary consideration—for policy communications experts interpreting

While we discuss these issues more completely in the appendix, a few key points are relevant:

- Representative samples are crucial, but virtually impossible to achieve perfectly in modern public opinion polling, biasing responses in a variety of ways. Some of these issues of external validity occur because of survey timing, lack of oppositional framing, tendency of respondents to agree (acquiescence bias), no time to change one's mind, and no influence of either repetition or particular (partisan) messengers.
- In the case of guaranteed income polling, such extensive messaging testing is still nascent and in-field testing is virtually non-existent.
- GI is supported increasingly by demographic and generational groups that are a growing percentage of the voting public. This includes Gen Z, Millennials, voters of color, and some support among younger seniors. A look at polling by key voting blocs can sometimes be more indicative of shifted political landscapes than summary support statistics.

Polling to date provides some positive signals and clues on effective messaging frames, but their limitations point to the importance of both further testing and careful engagement with social policy narratives and frames (see next section).

Careful Framing is Crucial to Narrative Change

As advocates of guaranteed income policy work to close the gaps in public support for the policy and build winning political constituencies, many have turned to the question of “narrative change.” Narrative change means shifting the “common sense” understandings and mental models present on any given issue in public discourse. In the case of economic policy and the appropriation of shared resources, shared narratives help the public diagnose problems and either support or oppose a solution. This is why experts like [Anne Price](#) of the Insight Center for Community & Economic Development, and [Rashad Robinson](#) of Color of Change—among [others](#)—emphasize narratives as means to build and maintain power. Operationalizing that understanding of narrative requires interrogating

polling data—is the way demographic groups may overlap across race, age, and place, producing categories more meaningfully understood as subgroups with shared experiences and/or aspirations. For more on interpreting demographic categories through the lens of collective, generational experiences, see [here](#) and [here](#). Also see New America's [projections](#) of political shifts given generational demographic changes.

who they serve, who they blame, and for whom they create empathy and moral imperative to take action. In that vein, to build a sustainable movement for guaranteed income policy, it is crucial to describe the ways in which perceptions of poverty, government, and social welfare inform the support or opposition found within both public opinion polls and direct organizing work. Guaranteed income advocates and researchers often point to the issue of persistent and cynical ideologies on deservedness, and particularly work requirements, as an obstacle to the policy's success. Still, ideas of deservedness are often inconsistent; they are elicited when a policy is meant for an unknown, often racialized "other" rather than one's own community. This is why it is sometimes more salient to address conceptions of poverty and the origins of poverty¹⁴ rather than focusing on reversing or appealing to ideas of deservedness which can be mired in race, gender, and class bias.¹⁵ It is also why personal stories and personalization of broader economic issues and their solutions has proven effective across multiple social welfare campaigns.

A diverse array of literature and disciplines speak to underlying perceptions of poverty and what motivates support for social welfare or humanitarian policy.¹⁶ Some attempts at narrative change have tried to address conceptions of a shared social contract with the government. Others aim to address concepts of what constitutes "work" and economic prosperity. Still, others aim to tackle racist, sexist, or classist narratives¹⁷ within perceptions of both poverty and who is served by poverty alleviation programs. Absent a

¹⁴ Anne Price's 2020 Roosevelt Institute [report](#), "Don't Fixate on the Racial Wealth Gap: Focus on Undoing Its Root Causes" addresses this point in more detail, with lessons for narrative and messaging framing of inequality to the extent those frames impact policy design.

¹⁵ The Insight Center and Mayors for a Guaranteed Income's [report](#), "Why All Guaranteed Income is Narrative Work: Best Practices for Centering Dignity, Race, and Gender in Cash-Based Programs" provides advocates some sample language and talking points to contextualize the role of racial or gender inequity in speaking about the problems guaranteed income and other social policies may solve for.

¹⁶ For example, Didier Fassin's *Humanitarian Reason*, the classic essay "The Gift" by Marcel Mauss, or similarly in political science of welfare states: Rosenthal et al 2008, Laenen 2008, Oorschot et al 2017, Meuleman et al 2020, Dromi 2016, Lakoff and Johnson 2003, and in social psychology literature Montada & Lerner 1998, Fausey & Boroditsky 2010, Pardeles 2002 among many others across social science disciplines.

¹⁷ Racialized and gendered narratives of poverty played a major role in "welfare reform" and the "war on poverty" of the 20th century, becoming the antecedents to modern "dog-whistles" in public debate and punitive or burdensome social policy administration. These narratives are ubiquitous and influence even those accessing safety net programs or in need of them. For further reading on this backdrop, see *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (2004); *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor* (2002); *Shifting the Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State* (2000); and *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (1994).

comprehensive recap of such literature, the guaranteed income campaigns often center one or two of the following ideas in their narrative framing:¹⁸

- Guaranteed income is good for the economy, either supporting economic growth as a stimulus and enabling human capital development, or as a solution to counter-cyclical economic crises, whether individual or across the market; an antidote to “civilize” capitalism
- Guaranteed income is a solution to the future of worker displacement and job scarcity; therefore guaranteed income may be seen as a form of security, a right to freedom from harm
- Guaranteed income as a share in common prosperity, community, and in some iterations, as a dividend on shared natural resources
- Guaranteed income is a tool for tackling poverty and inequality; this problem-driven frame sometimes includes arguments to grant greater power for those who experience domestic violence or harmful or exploitative work conditions, those experiencing racial inequity, and to center specific examples of inequality in compensation for care work.
- Guaranteed income is a policy to enable individual freedom; while this frame often elicits a vision of individual and collective flourishing, conservative usage can also invoke the weakness of government programs and welfare programs seen as “wasteful.”
- A guaranteed income should be the right of all people by virtue of their humanity, removing work as a condition for basic well being and dignity. This frame is focused particularly on universal implementation.

It is important to scrutinize each narrative frame for both an appropriate diagnosis of the problem that guaranteed income seeks to solve, and a positive vision for the future guaranteed income is seeking to create. Some problem frames can reinforce cynical ideas of government and social policy broadly, working at cross purposes for a policy that would require immense federal investment and that would likely be harmful as a standalone policy if replacing existing safety net measures. Likewise, some frames can imply fear (social conflict caused by poverty or inequality) or scarcity (too few jobs, which can be manipulated as fear of those taking jobs or fear of innovation, etc.), or reinforce a

¹⁸ This summary draws on our expertise within the guaranteed income research community and having worked with pilots across the country on messaging and media approaches. It also draws on Anat Shenker-Osario’s 2016 review of UBI messaging for the Roosevelt Institute, “[Money is Nothing](#).” JFI researchers have also published on these frames in our guaranteed income pilots’ [toolkit](#), and our literature [review](#) of guaranteed income messaging research highlights specific frames that fall into these categories. For examples of these frames’ usage in broader media, see this [compilation](#) of media on UBI and guaranteed income from the Economic Security Project.

relationship between a basic income and work (unpaid labor as a measure of worth and deservedness). Language matters immensely when describing the problem, and advocates must take care not to reinforce the very mental models that might lead to opposition of broader social policies and a more equitable vision of a shared future. On the vision for the future, some frames are more effective at highlighting what may be gained from a society-wide guaranteed income, and making the benefit feel at once personal and shared. The same thinking [informed winning messaging among organizers](#) in the 2020 elections, using extensively-tested progressive messaging. The final frame centered a diagnosis of economic precarity as the result of extreme inequality and corporations not paying their fair share. It emphasized that the economic system was not working for the vast majority of people, “[regardless](#) of where they come from or what they look like.” This frame was the backdrop for campaigns that supported policies and candidates emphasizing social welfare spending as a shared investment in “our communities.”

In [previous work](#), JFI researchers have also highlighted that ideas of deservedness¹⁹ are ubiquitous in bipartisan messaging, particularly in conservative political frames for public benefits and welfare reform. These approaches have a long legacy entrenched in racialized depictions of a deserving and undeserving poor, and have been used to curtail cash assistance programs since the first establishment of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), the mothers’ cash support program within the Social Security Act of 1935. A breakdown of deservingness frames can be used to adjust messaging of guaranteed income policy and move beyond deservedness. Progressives have pointed out workers’ disproportionate contributions to a tax system that favors employers and the ultra-rich, or emphasized that most people work hard for their families but do not reap the benefits of their contributions. This [messaging](#) has also centered on one’s broader community as beneficiaries of tax investments, and explicitly invokes race and ethnicity in statements of shared values or a universal right to “pursue [one’s] dreams.” Such language moves beyond abstract ideas of those in need, which are prone to racist and “othered” notions of

¹⁹ Mueleman, Roosma, and Abts (2020) provide a useful typology to systematically analyze the distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” of poverty alleviation in public discourse. Their “CARIN” deservedness principles scale encapsulates five factors they identify as key to an individual’s assessment of whether another is deserving of aid: Control, responsibility for the situation that necessitates aid; Attitude, whether the aid recipient displays appropriate gratefulness; Reciprocity, whether the recipient is perceived as doing socially useful work or activity in exchange for aid; Identity, whether the recipient is a member of the in-group and thus more deserving; and, Need, the depth of hardship experienced. These factors are interrelated. For example, Identity interacts with Control through the cognitive bias known as fundamental attribution error: individuals are more likely to ascribe failure to the personal shortcomings of outgroup members and to excuse the failures of ingroup members as originating in forces outside of their control. This is one way in which historic racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in the US has shaped the development (or lack thereof) of its safety net.

the poor, and centers well being for everyone “whether you’re Black or white, Asian or Latino, Native or newcomer.” Instead of a gift for a deserving or undeserving other, successful frames suggest the benefit as a shared right to well-being and prosperity.

The most popular and stable safety net policies in the US are its social insurance programs like Unemployment Insurance or Social Security. Universal programs—programs that serve as countercyclical measures and in emergencies, or that provide benefits to enable long-term productivity, like federal education grants, public education, and housing—also often sit outside of regular debates regarding deservedness. The lesson from such programs is that it is helpful for advocates to appeal to a broader American promise of life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and equality of opportunity.²⁰ These frames suggest that everyone has a right to participate in the shared prosperity of the nation through social benefits. In fact, leaning into that frame of a shared, universal right was also the basis for the campaigns of the National Welfare Rights Organization, as an example of an early groundswell grassroots campaign for universal cash benefits—in that case, the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program and the NWRO’s later basic income proposal. It was arguably more straightforward to rally individuals around a universal benefit they were being excluded from (AFDC) than to advance a program targeted to them alone; their fundamental case was against the failure of the government to live up to its shared welfare promise. Whether welfare was deserved was a foregone conclusion.

Since 1996, the United States has not had any unconditional cash income support programs. Its voucher programs (with restrictions on how the benefit is spent) are unconditional for some populations, but able-bodied adults without dependent children are generally [subject to work requirements](#). Thus, the ARP CTC expansion, passed as part of the Biden administration’s pandemic relief bill and which made the credit fully refundable and removed its income requirements, represented a major shift in the federal government’s approach to combating (child) poverty. This was made possible partly due to the unusual circumstances of a public health emergency. But public and policy-maker opinion, at least on the left, has, as noted, also shifted in recent years; support for unconditional benefits, at least those directed at children, is now well within the political mainstream. That doesn’t mean, however, that the battle for a guaranteed income will be won the next time the Democrats assemble a governing coalition. While unconditional aid to families with children may now be part of serious discussion among policymakers, the same cannot be said for aid to so-called Able-bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs). There are serious proposals for EITC reform including an increase in the

²⁰ In fact, Franklin Roosevelt specifically structured his fledgling social security policies as payroll-tax financed insurance programs, specifically to account for the politics around deservingness. (Konczal, 2021)

benefit amount for ABAWDs, a more rapid benefit phase in, and a more gentle phase out. But proposals to remove the phase-in entirely, turning the EITC into something like an adult analogue of the Child Tax Credit (CTC), are relegated to the political periphery and have gained little traction. The CTC has managed to escape similar critique.

What makes the CTC different? Advocates have deployed various strategies to make the case for cash for kids. Not all frames used may serve a long-term narrative strategy for unconditional cash. Some argue that children should not be held responsible for the labor market outcomes or decisions of their parents. Others have instead argued that, whether or not parents are employed, parenting is socially desirable labor uncompensated by the market. Importantly, neither of these argumentative strategies does away with the deservingness framework that UBI and GI advocates typically dispute.²¹ The first essentially creates a carve-out for children, leaving it otherwise intact. The second reinforces the framework, arguing that it is correct to expect reciprocity from public benefits recipients but that CTC opponents are focused too narrowly on earnings as an indicator. Thus we should be skeptical of the claim (advanced by opponents as well as some advocates) that establishing a CTC or a child allowance will inexorably lead to a more general guaranteed income policy (which, incidentally, did not occur in countries that developed their own child allowance programs over the previous decades). The CTC expansion has not transformed public thinking on all forms of cash.

Effective narrative change requires consistent messaging and framing across ubiquitous media of all kinds, and consistency in that messaging over time. This is a persistent challenge for Democrats, although it has been shifting as polling research [groups](#) coordinate messaging and its use by grassroots organizers nationwide.²² When it comes to guaranteed income, some advocates have been partial to using flexible messaging to fit varieties of target audiences, whether conservative or progressive. This can result in inconsistent frames, a diluted message, and metaphors that activate fundamentally different mental models around responsibility versus rights and freedoms. Instead of seeing audiences within fixed political frames and values, advocates for guaranteed income can understand their targets as “biconceptuals,” the many people who have both progressive and conservative moral values within their political views.²³ If progressives

²¹ Even beyond guaranteed income policy, advocates for more distributive economic policy broadly critique the reliance on narratives of personal responsibility and its implications for broader social safety net reform. See Jhumpa Bhattacharya and Anne Price’s [writing](#) on “The Power of Narrative in Economic Policy.”

²² This issue is now recognized as a persistent challenge for Democrats due in part to the research of political scientist George Lakoff and his book *Don’t Think of an Elephant*.

²³ *Ibid.* 54. This idea draws on cognitive psychology that indicates that language and imagery used with greater frequency strengthens the mental circuitry it invokes.

can invoke language that reinforces public investment and social policy as key to freedom and shared prosperity, they can appeal to conservatives and progressives alike. This does not preclude guaranteed income advocates adapting messaging to their contexts, but does suggest that the use of conservative deservingness frames may work against long term efforts to create unconditional cash policy. As Shenker-Osario has said, “The job of a good message is not to say what is popular. The job of a good message is to make popular what we need said.” More particularly, advocates for guaranteed income may popularize notions of cash within frames that serve a wider safety net agenda and messaging that reinforces widely shared “progressive” values across political party lines.²⁴

The evolving names and definitions of guaranteed or basic income—and the varying policies in focus from the CTC, to EITC, to recurring stimulus checks, to re-entry checks, and “GI for Students”—may also sometimes confuse a wide public that is still largely unaware of these policies. The past few years have seen GI advocates shift messaging while also competing with the popularized notions of “UBI ” advocated by 2020 presidential candidate Andrew Yang. Advocates for guaranteed income find themselves tasked with both raising awareness about guaranteed income—including policies like the Child Tax Credit—and the task of framing or reframing such unconditional social benefits.²⁵ Different from the time-intensive power-building work of organizing, some narrative change work can be more readily influenced by advocates or funders applying concerted resources and funding to national media campaigns that repeat names, definitions and frames across multiple platforms. As a policy less naturally emergent from the mouths of its potential beneficiaries, less an automatic rallying cry of grassroots groups, but favored by evidence and wonky policy circles for its poverty impacts, guaranteed income is ripe for this form of narrative change through messaging and awareness campaigns. However, some forms of narrative change do not translate to political power or action, and indeed, lack people-powered organizing. If, according to recent polls, a majority of voters already support cash policy, what measures of support would be adequate to effect a successful, longer-term change? We discuss this more fully in the following sections—in particular, the importance of grassroots organizing to build both narrative change and successful advocacy efforts.

²⁴ Catherine Thomas’s [survey](#) of guaranteed income messaging using frames of basic income as “freedom” are an important addition here, and corroborate Lakoff’s work which suggests progressives may successfully appeal to biconceptuals using “freedom” frames on anti-poverty policy.

²⁵ For more on the question of naming guaranteed income policies, see our [review](#) of messaging literature and Stanford Basic Income Lab’s report, “[Universal Basic Income: What’s in a Name?](#)”

Part II: The GI Movement

Pilot Piggybacks - The Role of Pilots in Building Buy-in

Have pilots contributed to elite and public support for the CTC and other reforms to the cash safety net (e.g. the perennially debated expansion of the EITC for ABAWDs)? The pilots were (sometimes) presented as an opportunity to test unconditional cash assistance and see whether it produced positive outcomes or whether it had adverse effects like job quitting or alcohol/drug use. There are two important points to consider:

- There is already significant evidence that shows that cash does produce positive outcomes, and has few adverse effects. Those questions have [already been answered](#) and do not need additional pilots to address them.
- There are other questions [that pilots can answer](#), but such research is not typically part of how policy gets passed, except indirectly.²⁶ Certainly the big policy pushes of the past were not preceded by such research and it is not clear that expectations have since changed to require it.

The pilots are also opportunities for marketing, increasing salience and fighting misconceptions. Though academics know about the impact of unconditional cash on employment and alcohol/drug use, that knowledge has not necessarily been absorbed by the public more broadly. **Perhaps the most important role pilots could play is in organizing to push for policy change.** In the run up to several prominent pilots, organizers convened task forces composed of local community, business, and faith leaders; non-profit service providers; and charitable foundations. The task forces discussed the pilot, but also the gaps in the safety net that the pilot could draw attention to, as well as the legislative changes that might help. In the few years prior to the founding of Mayors for a Guaranteed Income in 2020, task forces such as those in [Chicago](#), [Atlanta](#), [Newark](#) and elsewhere drew on such collective place-based input in combination with wider policy analysis that created a shared understanding of the need for direct cash policies to supplement gaps in the federal and state safety nets. In 2020, several pilots were conceived of more fundamentally as grassroots advocacy campaigns as well as social science research endeavors, particularly in efforts to enable city funding allocations as a show of support for these cash policy initiatives. A few examples demonstrate the growing push to mobilize around pilots: [Moving Nashville Forward](#), [Marin MOMentum](#), [San Diego for Every Child](#), and the [Compton Pledge](#).

²⁶ Research can be helpful when getting elite buy-in and after elite buy-in during legislative design.

Despite some examples of community organizing efforts around recent guaranteed income pilots, many pilots are forced to spend most of their time on their private fundraising efforts and practical administration of cash benefits. Local organizing is a secondary focus, at best. These examples are not a complete picture of organizing around pilots but they show some promising models:

<p>Moving Nashville Forward</p> <p>Rooted directly in grassroots organizing among North Nashville residents, the pilot focused efforts on the zipcode of 37208 where a historically Black community faced displacement and economic disruption by a city highway project as well as long standing poverty, underinvestment and mass incarceration. The Nashville Economic Justice Alliance and Moving Nashville Forward have been conducting community conversations led by local organizers for political education and to mobilize around pilot fundraising (including through small-dollar donations); the pilot is seen as a proof of concept for basic income as reparative policy in North Nashville. These efforts have led to a preliminary pilot for 25 residents and a series of local events and public testimonies, a YouTube series of “Sunday School” on community needs and basic income, and a growing awareness of the pilot as a community-driven solution to persistent problems.</p>	<p>Marin MOMentum</p> <p>The Marin MOMentum pilot began through multiple community conversations, including individual and group discussions with close to a hundred mothers in Marin County, California, aggregating input to inform if a cash transfer program could meet their needs and what it should look like if so. This paved the way for the ongoing pilot focused on mothers which was approved unanimously by Marin County Supervisors, while committing \$400,000 in local dollars for the project that serves 125 mothers over two years. The pilot’s work to engage mothers directly to speak to their needs forms the basis for their broader aim to build public discourse around guaranteed income as a viable ask led by mothers of color in the community. That approach also leans on the program design of Magnolia Mother’s Trust of Springboard to Opportunities, an early national model for participant-centered efforts in GI piloting.</p>
<p>Compton Pledge</p> <p>The Compton Pledge has built its program around community input while also linking to national organizing efforts for racial justice, in particular calls for reinvesting public dollars in the wake of George Floyd’s murder in 2020, and the consensus policy positions put forward by the Movement for Black Lives thereafter (the BREATHE Act as an umbrella for those positions). Working in collaboration with local grassroots groups the Compton Pledge formed a pilot program that would rely on local networks and media to build understanding of the program, eliminate existing barriers for eligibility like citizenship status, and create events like a periodic community resource fairs to ensure coalition organizations can amplify their services within Compton in conjunction with efforts for a guaranteed income. Joining wider efforts to end heavy policing and mass incarceration in the historically Black community of Compton, now a majority Latinx neighborhood, the Compton Pledge has continued to carve out its guaranteed income pilot effort as part of a wider push for community investment and public safety through economic empowerment, including supporting the passage of a local resolution of the BREATHE Act. The approach of working through existing grassroots organizations and coalitions for economic empowerment in Compton and within larger Los</p>	<p>San Diego for Every Child (SDFEC)</p> <p>This initiative started as an idea to tackle childhood poverty in a new way, addressing the needs of over 40% of children in San Diego County who live in poverty. Housed under Jewish Family Services, SDFEC established an advisory board of community leaders, including direct service organizations; policy think tanks specific to San Diego; ACCE, an organizing campaign for housing rights; labor unions and other groups that work directly with working class families; and the local chapter of Local Initiatives Support Corporation, a major community development investment group; and groups representing parents and families. Drawing from the template of direct aid provided to caregivers during the pandemic, the group sought to build a similar program in guaranteed income. However, this committee of leadership found they required deeper engagement with parents and community members to authentically design and deliver a program in ways connected to and informed by those closest to the problem. They sought to create a “Community Cabinet” that would not just share stories in a vacuum of media, but create a space for regular storytelling and collective understandings of childhood poverty across the city. Income Movement supported SDFEC in designing a series of focus groups, film showings and community conversations in late 2021. Taking part in different</p>

Angeles makes the Compton Pledge an important example of ways the guaranteed income movement may in fact become a movement led by those least served by existing systems and public benefits.

parts of the city, SDFEC's sessions captured various demographics and income brackets. SDFEC found these events highly generative, raising issues of stigma in social programs, foregrounding ways the program would help most, and seeing community members move from hesitation to excitement as they saw their experiences reflected in the film, discussion, and no-strings design of cash support programs.

A key player in many of these examples is [Income Movement](#), a national umbrella organization for advocacy groups pushing for a federal basic income guarantee. Income Movement has begun to shape the landscape of guaranteed income advocacy through a model of nationwide member-led chapters, annual basic income marches and conferences, quarterly convenings of individuals across the emerging guaranteed income movement, political organizing around ongoing cash policy legislative debates. Their new [toolkit](#), released in June 2022, focuses on their community engagement models, meant to enable wider base-building and community-led political education among pilots nationwide. Alongside groups like Economic Security Project (ESP), Income Movement has been working to connect guaranteed income advocacy to broader anti-poverty and economic security organizing. Income Movement's early organizers were among those mobilized by Andrew Yang's presidential bid on a basic income policy, but the organization now represents a broader campaign for basic income. In the case of Economic Security Project, the convening of a "[Guaranteed Income Community of Practice](#)" served as a form of "grasstops" organizing — bringing together practitioners of pilots, funders, and a variety of researchers including JFI to create a forum for problem-solving and momentum-building among those practically enabling these guaranteed income pilots nationwide. Still, this work has stopped short of more traditional base-building efforts and organizing.²⁷

Still, to date, guaranteed income is primarily a solution-driven policy idea of the political class and less a natural demand of those who would most directly benefit from it.²⁸

²⁷ Traditionally, organizing may be defined as creating a shared understanding of common problems and working toward commonly-supported solutions, then strategizing to build collective power to enact that shared vision. At the grassroots level, this involves collective and one-on-one storytelling, trust-building, political education, and then translating that effort into collective demands and strategic action (mobilization) over time.

²⁸ This argument is speaking to the last ten years of advocacy in particular. Importantly, in the 60s a call for basic income from Martin Luther King Jr. could be characterized as grassroots driven, as was the push for an expansion of the cash "Aid to Families and Dependent Children," driven by the National Welfare Rights Organization (NRWO) — a part of the broader civil rights movement and a push for more universal and equitable benefit to African American mothers as part of existing programs.

Indeed, many of the economically vulnerable for whom a guaranteed income could be particularly reparative and empowering are instead more [likely](#) to say that their top priority is [higher wages](#), healthcare, affordable [housing](#), and education. Major guaranteed income movement players and organizations have attempted to connect with communities through periodic storytelling in news and social media as well as periodic events targeting a wider public. This approach indicates a largely elite donor-driven movement with fewer direct pipelines to communities, particularly communities of color, which stand to gain most from the policies. Public support in polling and policy organizations must also translate to community-led organizing and mobilization for the policy. Part of the challenge (and perhaps opportunity) of grassroots organizing for guaranteed income comes from the wide variety of individuals who would be served by the policy—beneficiaries may have few shared experiences and/or shared identity markers—but local efforts to engage in base-building are crucial for the future of the movement. On this point, it is important for advocates to turn to other successful movements in the history of organizing for broad-based social policies. We turn to such examples in the next section, and have convened previous [events](#) to highlight further discussion of this topic from international experts such as Anne Price in the US, Tatiana Roque in Brazil, Barb Jacobsen in the UK, among others.

Part III: What’s Missing for Cash Policy Advocacy: A People-Powered Movement

Saru Jayaraman, One Fair Wage Executive Director

While those advocating for cash transfer policies have succeeded in some localities, scaling these efforts would require building the public and political will for change. Organizing has historically been one of the most effective means to build public will, and the local policy victories achieved by advocacy for cash transfer programs could be made stronger, more effective, longer-lasting, and more reflective of the needs of communities through the use of organizing techniques.

Organizing is collective action by the people most affected by an issue—most often people with limited resources (these could be financial resources, but also education, time, and/or influence)—to take direct action targeting people who have power over the issue and thus win concrete improvements in people’s lives. Organizing includes developing a permanent base of members made up of those most affected who develop and lead campaigns to win private or public policy changes. This permanent base of members regularly demonstrates its collective power through direct action mobilization that is contentious in nature, and leaders among that base of members who regularly recruit their fellow affected individuals and agitate them to mobilize. When organizing rises to the level of a social movement, this direct action mobilization is consistent, sustained over many years, and widespread among a larger swath of society than any single social movement organization alone.²⁹

In the case of policy advocacy for cash transfers, ‘the people most affected’ is clear—people with limited means who might most benefit from a regular cash transfer. If these “people most affected” were engaged in organizing for cash transfer policy, they would first collectively determine their goal; professional organizers might facilitate them determining this goal, but ultimately, they themselves would determine it. Their collective goal could be to secure greater funding for cash transfers of different kinds, or it could be a broader goal around economic security that includes cash transfers along with other policies they choose to prioritize. An organizing approach would facilitate those most affected to determine the goal and shape the policy, not the advocates or those in power.

After determining the goal, these ‘most affected’ stakeholders would then take direct action targeting people who have power. In this case, those in power would be legislators who could make the decision to allocate more funding or otherwise change policy around cash transfers. Taking direct collective action to target these legislators would mean the ‘most affected’ stakeholders collectively directly confronting legislators in person, even if the legislator or legislators do not welcome the confrontation, to make the demands collectively agreed upon. Confrontation of those in power who do not welcome the dialogue thus must often mean a protest of some kind—but it could also mean confronting legislators collectively at a town hall meeting or in their office; it could mean sitting in or standing up at a legislative session or in a legislative building; or it could mean a press event that publicly calls out or calls upon a legislator to act.

Organizing can be distinguished from advocacy, which involves representatives of the people most affected (not necessarily those directly affected themselves) speaking on

²⁹ Tarrow, Sidney, *Power in Movements*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

behalf of those most affected to legislators or in a legal setting such as a courtroom or administrative proceeding. Advocates may also organize rallies, press events, and other activities that mobilize people most affected, but the organizing approach is distinct from the advocacy approach in three distinct ways:

1. Organizing involves having the ‘people most affected’ first collectively decide upon goals and demands, rather than having advocates or other representatives of the people most affected determine the goals and demands or consulting people most affected in developing the goals and demands.
2. Organizing involves having ‘people most affected’ collectively determine and execute the direct action to be taken to accomplish these goals and demands.
3. The direct action is contentious – it must confront those in power and demand change, rather than asking for it politely. It is contentious because in organizing, the collective of the people most affected are contending for power – they are not asking legislators who have power to give them something; they are asserting their collective power and demanding change from their elected officials through disruptive activity that exemplifies or highlights the tension that affected people experience through the policy – by bringing that tension to those in power. It is also contentious because contention involves sacrifice and risk – ‘people most affected’ sacrifice their time and potentially, relationships, to engage in protest activity, and face risks with regard to their reputation, their employment, and sometimes arrest when they engage in protest activity. It is the demonstration of that willingness to sacrifice and risk by a large collective of people most affected that has the greatest ability to demonstrate their collective’s power. Social movement history shows that the greater the number of people with limited means who are directly affected engaged in contentious direct action, the more transformative the change that can be achieved.³⁰

Organizing is also distinct from mobilization, which can occur without the permanent base-building work of organizing. Affected people may be asked to attend press conferences, rallies or demonstrations or other forms of direct action—even actions that are collective and contentious—without actually joining a base-building group engaged in organizing. **Organizing can be distinguished from this kind of episodic mobilization in that, as described above, it involves developing a base of stakeholders that actually determines the goals, demands, and direct actions to be taken.** But organizing is also different from mobilization alone in that organizers see each mobilization not as an end in and of itself, but rather as an opportunity to further develop and grow a base of members and leaders who lead the overall campaign strategy and will engage in the next

³⁰ Tarrow, Sidney. 1998.

mobilization. Base-building includes developing leadership among those most affected so that, over time, they not only participate in direct actions but also mobilize their peers to attend and participate as well. In this way, organizing that involves permanent base-building is intended to develop leaders who constantly grow the base and ultimately achieve and monitor long-term gains beyond any single policy victory.

Many advocacy organizations regularly call networks of affected populations to mobilize to attend lobbying visits, rallies, or even direct actions targeting legislative targets. However, these activities do not constitute organizing or base-building unless these affected groups are invited to become members of an organization led by their peers ('people most affected'), and then developed as leaders to help define campaign strategy and the events themselves, and also to recruit fellow members to participate in these events.

Case Study: Organizing Restaurant Workers with One Fair Wage

I have been organizing restaurants and other service workers for over twenty years. The restaurant industry is currently one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors of the US economy but continues to have the lowest wages for frontline workers.³¹ This phenomenon is the result of the power and influence of the National Restaurant Association (NRA), which paid millions in lobbying dollars to keep the federal minimum wage for most workers at \$7.25 per hour, and at \$2.13 per hour for tip-earning workers.³²

Perhaps the greatest power corporations have over our democracy is the influence they have had on public understanding of an issue, even on advocates' understanding of an issue. Many advocates accepted that tipped workers could receive a lower minimum wage from their employers because tips supposedly made up the difference. As organizers, when we trained workers to conduct surveys of their fellow workers about their concerns and needs, we found in survey results that subminimum wages led to economic instability for these workers. However, as organizers we at first thought our campaign would be focused on raising that subminimum wage, not ending it all together.

³¹ Jayaraman, Saru, *Forked: A New Standard for American Dining*, (Oxford University Press, 2016)

³² *Ibid.*

After training restaurant workers to conduct thousands of surveys with their peers on their wages and working conditions, we learned that, as long as the subminimum wage existed in any form, it would create economic instability and sexual harassment for a population that is in vast majority women who must tolerate inappropriate customer behavior to obtain tips. As long as tips were a portion of their base wage, these women had to tolerate the highest rates of sexual harassment of any industry to get tips to feed their families. We thus organized local and national meetings of workers around the country to design a campaign calling for “One Fair Wage” for tipped workers – the full minimum wage, with tips on top - and to conduct direct actions, events, publications, legislative visits, town hall meetings and much more, lifting up stories of thousands of tipped workers across the country – stories of economic instability, sexual harassment, and racial discrimination. In these ways, workers have corrected our own misperceptions as advocates, as well as much of the misinformation spread by the NRA, and together we have shifted public discourse on the issue. We were also able to then gain support from ‘high road’ employers, who learned from the workers voicing their concerns and needs on the subminimum wage, which resulted in our ability to build a ‘high road’ restaurant association of almost 3000 restaurant employers nationwide.

Engaging in direct actions of workers to push back on the NRA, lifting up worker voices to change the public perception perpetuated by the NRA, and dividing the employer voices within the NRA, all resulted in a questioning of their dominant narrative on the issue of food worker standards, and ultimately, in legislative progress in multiple states and passage of the Raise the Wage Act in the US House of Representatives. We have found that the key to winning, against the great odds of money and power, is collective, direct action of stakeholders across class, race, and issue. In our case, workers educated traditional minimum wage advocates in 43 states that they needed to change their stance on the issue – that we should not be simply advocating to raise the minimum wage, but that we also needed to eliminate the subminimum wage for tipped workers. Our experiences prove that individuals of all backgrounds, alongside institutions, can successfully stand up to the most powerful actors through protest, direct action, litigation, coalition development, research, public education, and much more. Through organizing, we learned that it needed to put forward a more ambitious demand – a full minimum wage, rather than simply raising a subminimum wage – and was then able to advance that more ambitious demand by organizing restaurant workers to engage in direct actions calling for One Fair Wage.

Lessons for the Effort to Win Cash Transfer Policy

There have been many base-building groups engaged in campaigns for cash transfer policy at various times in various geographies around the country. If the community advocating for cash transfer policy sought to scale these efforts over the long-term, it might consider what it would take to build a permanent, long-term base of affected people to initiate and lead a long-term campaign for cash transfers. This might involve either building a new base or bringing together existing membership bases of various local organizations to build a national base of people affected by cash transfer policy to organize and advocate together for federal policy. However, advocates would need to be prepared for the base informing and potentially changing the policy or even the goals of the campaign. A good first step would be to consider participatory research: potentially a national survey that affected people are trained to conduct with one another to understand people's priority needs and concerns with regard to cash access and economic stability. Such a project would serve multiple purposes at once: 1) it could inform advocates and help shape the campaign going forward; 2) it would develop leaders who, after conducting surveys with their peers, become the best spokespeople on the issues facing their communities; and 3) it could produce data that could be published to support policy change. Above all, advocates would need to be prepared to relinquish some amount of control to the people most affected in order to allow them to lead—in order to build the political will needed to win at scale.

Part IV: When and Where Public Opinion and Mobilization Matter

The Child Tax Credit's Lessons for Policy Change

The Biden CTC expansion is an example of a policy push that occurred largely due to elite buy-in, not popular pressure. The expansion was modeled on Colorado Senator Michael Bennet's [American Family Act](#), and [touted](#) during prior years by prominent economists like Jared Bernstein, now member of the Biden Administration's Council of Economic

Advisors. But the idea of a fully refundable tax credit to support families is much older. The National Commission on Children, a bipartisan commission created by Congress, released a report in 1991 calling for the creation of an unconditional, fully refundable tax credit for children to combat child poverty. A more limited child tax credit became part of George HW Bush's reelection platform and later Newt Gringrich's 1994 Contract for America.

The CTC was ultimately passed as part of the 1997 Taxpayer Relief Act, albeit as a smaller non-refundable credit for families with annual earnings above \$12,500—and directly following the 1996 dissolution of Aid to Families with Dependant Children (AFDC) to a state-determined block grant, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. From there the CTC evolved through a series of incremental steps: George W. Bush passed an increase to \$1,000 per child; Barack Obama first temporarily and then permanently brought the phase-in start point down to \$3,000, and, Senator Marco Rubio successfully pushed for the inclusion in the 2016 Tax Cut and Jobs Act (TCJA) of a provision that slightly decreased the phase-in start point to \$2,500, increased the credit value to \$2,000 per child, and pushed the phase-out start point to \$200,000 for single and \$400,000 for married joint filers. This is where the CTC stands today after the expiration of Biden's expansion under the American Rescue Plan (ARPA), though the TCJA provisions are themselves due to expire at the end of 2025. Throughout this process there were politicians and scholars pushing for a more generous benefit, with less restrictive eligibility, a faster phase-in, and greater refundability. During the debate over ARRA, for example, The Center for American Progress pushed the Obama administration to make the CTC an unconditional and fully refundable \$1,000 credit. And that is clearly the direction the benefit had been heading through these reforms toward something closer to what the original proponents had envisioned.

The CTC's desirable features and strong evidence base made it appealing not only to scholars and policy makers on the left, but also to those on the center and center right. It is relatively simple to administer, cost-effective from a tax payer perspective as an "early intervention strategy," and while it can be transformative for recipients, it is not politically radical; like other [income support programs](#), it simply empowers households to engage with markets.

Prior to the pandemic there was no large-scale popular movement pushing for a child allowance. But there were advocacy organizations, policy researchers, and politicians that were eager to see one enacted once Democrats gained a "trifecta" government. After it was enacted as a temporary pandemic relief program, advocates pushed for it to be made permanent, pointing to the large reduction in child poverty it generated. Public polling for

the CTC showed that the program was, however, not quite as popular or widely known as expected given its reach. [Roughly 97](#) percent of all children were eligible for the monthly cash benefit, but surveys of parents found fewer ([~66%](#)) reported receiving the benefit (either because of delayed payment, filing errors, or lack of awareness). Individuals without dependent children generally opposed making it permanent and the proposal garnered only lukewarm support from parents of dependent children. Ultimately the extension failed to pass due to opposition from West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, whose vote was pivotal due to the requirement to pass legislation through the reconciliation process and avoid a Republican filibuster. There was limited public uproar and insufficient pressure by his constituents to support the policy, despite advocacy [efforts](#) on the Hill, [among](#) West Virginia-based child support [coalitions](#), and wide [critique](#) in [national](#) and [West Virginia-based media](#). Importantly, while some [polling](#) found that West Virginia parents benefited from the policy and supported it, those parents would not consider the CTC their primary voting issue.

What does the case of the CTC expansion show about the importance of public opinion? If there is broad buy-in from legislators and no significant push back from their constituents (either because the issue is low salience or not something individuals feel strongly about), grassroots mobilization may not be necessary. The CTC expansion may well have become law if Democrats had had a single additional senator in their caucus. But public pressure might be a deciding factor in passing (or voting down) legislation if a small number of persuadable legislators stand between passage and defeat. A motivated minority, often one that bears concentrated costs or benefits of a policy, can in some situations be sufficient.³³

No such motivated minority was effective at exerting its influence over the child tax credit policy debate, perhaps most notably in West Virginia. This could be because the policy did not evoke strong reactions and that the policy did not emerge from existing grassroots

³³ The economist Mancur Olson [argued](#) that in cases where a minority receives concentrated benefit from a policy while its costs are diffused across a much larger group (or vice versa) that minority may be able to coordinate to exert significant control over legislation. Gun control laws are a famous example of this. Large majorities favor policies like background checks, training and cool-off periods, etc. But the benefits of such policies are diffuse; any given voter would benefit only slightly and, while they may grumble, generally will not change their voting behavior based on politicians' stances on these issues or failure to deliver on promised reforms. On the other hand there is a motivated minority who own guns who strongly oppose such legislation and would bear the concentrated costs associated with passage. Such individuals have been able to coordinate their activities through organizations (e.g. the NRA) involved in lobbying, campaign contributions, and other direct action, enforce discipline from their members, and can credibly threaten to withhold the voters of their membership from politicians in primaries or general elections. Hence proposed gun control reforms typically die despite broad public support.

demands of those the policy was designed to benefit (we discuss this difficulty for guaranteed income advocates in part II). There are other possibilities as well. The program had only been in existence for a few months before its expiration came about. That is not much time to organize and mobilize to save it. Recipients also had trouble identifying their payments as a separate “child tax credit” rather than a continuation of pandemic stimulus efforts. In nationally [representative polls](#), only 59-66 percent of eligible parents indicated that they had received or were receiving the CTC, but administrative records show that roughly [92 percent](#) of eligible households were receiving the benefit during that time. And perhaps most importantly, those who benefited most from the program were among the most disadvantaged households and thus the least able to coordinate an effective response to the threat of expiration.

For better or worse, general public opinion does not translate directly into policy change. Advocates can, with the support of a motivated minority of voters, push through (or kill) policy reforms that are broadly (but shallowly) (un)popular. The guaranteed income movement does not necessarily need a supermajority of voters supportive of cash welfare to make headway in safety net reform, but it can accelerate its efforts at elite persuasion with grassroots organizing to build a coalition of voters that will withhold support from candidates that do not vote for necessary reforms. And if passage comes down to support from one or two pivotal legislators, such efforts may mean the difference between victory and defeat. But organizing the poor and dispossessed can be a difficult task given their limited resources and time. Opponents of GI, already armed with status quo bias, can assemble their own motivated minorities to block reform.

Part V: What Systems Could Serve as a Basis for Further Progress?³⁴

Policy analysts regularly deal in ideal types: the optimal policies one would implement if starting with a clean slate and without regard to the political or logistical challenges associated with their adoption. Of course, legislative reform must also take into account existing policies, interest groups, and the political climate. What can be accomplished typically depends on what can be built upon or modified and what can survive the political gauntlet; it is both path-dependent and decidedly second best. This section thus briefly explores three ways a national guaranteed income could be built within or on top of existing systems. Although we offer some comment on administrative challenges associated with each approach, in keeping with the theme of this paper, the focus is on the political challenges associated with altering existing programs (CTC and EITC or SNAP), or in the case of the carbon tax approach, ensuring that the funds are distributed as a dividend rather than earmarked for other purposes.

A Note on Financing

Before delving into the specifics of programs that could serve as a basis for future guaranteed income policy, we must address the issue of financing, common to any approach. This is not because a guaranteed income program would necessarily be [expensive](#), rather it is because the choice of how to fund a new or expanded program has its own implications for political viability. For example, the Child Allowance plan proposed

³⁴ In this section we consider programs that could serve as the basis for a (near) universal guaranteed income benefit. Thus we do not look at programs that are designed to be targeted and temporary support for a population (re)entering the labor force such as those designed to support returning citizens, youth aging out of foster care, or the long-term homeless. Unconditional cash shows promise as a means to help each population achieve stable housing and employment and to avoid future criminal justice involvement. But the temporary, hyper-targeted structure of these policies make them a poor basis to build a true (expansive) GI.

by Senator Mitt Romney was funded primarily by ending the federal income tax deduction for state and local taxes paid (the “SALT” deduction) and by ending the federal TANF block grant (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families). The SALT deduction is a program that benefits a small and motivated group of voters who have pressured their representatives to protect it and, indeed, remove the deduction cap imposed by the Tax Cut and Jobs Act (TCJA). This was one of many points of contention during the development of the House “Build Back Better” bill and would certainly have been so if the Romney plan received serious policy consideration. TANF, though a small program, has several constituencies that support it, including advocates for the poor, the federal and state bureaucracies that administer it, and state governments themselves, which have benefited from the flexibility to spend these funds granted to them through The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. And as noted above, different financing options have different levels of general public support. Raising funds by increasing or creating new taxes is bound to create difficulties separate from any misgivings about a program in abstract; even quite popular programs may lose appeal when lawmakers and voters begin to consider the “pay-fors.” With the exception of the carbon tax dividend, which obviously has an intrinsic funding mechanism, we do not discuss financing options for the programs we consider below. Negotiation over financing will add further complication to legislative momentum in each case.

CTC and EITC

Despite the political setback described in Section IV, the CTC remains a strong contender for future policy reform as it has strong buy-in from the intellectual and political class. Although the federal government faced challenges in administering the program, the IRS showed that it was possible to distribute tens of millions of “checks” on a monthly basis and achieve relatively high take-up. As a federally administered program the CTC also dodges issues with federalism. There is no concern that states might reject funding or place their own conditions on receipt as has happened with other programs that rely on federal carrots and sticks to incentivize states to implement desired programs

One could imagine a guaranteed income built by reforming and consolidating the CTC and EITC, creating a federal advance tax credit system that would provide a benefit to all legal residents or citizens. Even a benefit roughly the size of the ARP child tax credit would have a [major impact on poverty](#) at a feasible cost. Guaranteed Income advocates typically suggest a benefit administered by the Social Security Administration and fully divorced from the tax code, or more recently, an office dedicated to benefits administration within

the IRS. A tax credit-based system is more difficult to administer; ensuring enrollment of the most disadvantaged households would require [major investments in data linkages and outreach](#). But given the path-dependent nature of policy, it's likely the tax credit system provides a more viable path; we can build on what has already been done.

The main roadblock to a GI implemented in this manner is political opposition to unconditional/unearned benefits. As discussed earlier in the section on framing, this limitation may also inform strategies centered around expanding existing benefits or broadening targeting programs as a pathway to policy success before and alongside long term narrative change.

SNAP (already a digital payment system but with strings attached)

SNAP (and WIC) are distributed through the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) system, a debit card that is automatically recharged monthly. Some states have also integrated their TANF payments systems with EBT. During the pandemic some cities and states created a pandemic EBT program to distribute aid, including to some households that don't typically receive SNAP benefits. Building off these preexisting digital payments systems, which provide monthly benefits to millions of households, is tempting, but there are both administrative and political challenges.

These are separate state-level systems that don't link to federal databases. Expanding the system to cover individuals that do not already receive state-level benefits would require data sharing with, for example, the SSA and the IRS. There are also risks to relying on states to administer a benefit paid for through federal grants. Some states may refuse the funds, just as they did with Medicaid expansion.³⁵ Others may have administrative challenges in getting the money out. The pandemic revealed that the US unemployment insurance system was overall dilapidated but some state systems fared worse than others. That is likely to be the case here as well. And, of course, the same issues with deservingness would apply here; legislators (including those in each state legislature) would have to be comfortable with unconditional cash for a much larger segment of the population. SNAP is currently a restrictive voucher system that (usually) has a work

³⁵ See Jamila Michener's [work](#) for more on federalism's breakdown of Affordable Care Act effectiveness, among other social policies administered variantly at the state level.

requirement for ABAWDs and a steep phase out that can punish recipients for increasing their earnings.

Carbon Tax and Dividend

Environmental advocates argue that the carbon tax (along with other action) is necessary to combat climate change. But a carbon tax, even if structured as a tax on producers, will lead to higher prices for consumers. Like a VAT, a carbon tax will be regressive; a tax that leads to rising consumer prices will disproportionately burden poorer households. As we have learned during the later part of the pandemic, price increases in gas, food, and other products that would be covered by a carbon tax, are quite unpopular. But some environmentalists and UBI advocates see a potential win-win in using the proceeds of a carbon tax to fund a cash benefit.

Safety net programs in the US are typically funded through payroll and (progressive) income taxes. Importantly, although not always recognized as such, benefits phase-outs, whether in the form of front-end means-testing or backend clawbacks are also a form of income tax, and indeed a more onerous form since they are borne only by program recipients rather than taxpayers more broadly. These taxes are distortionary as they can cause individuals to substitute away from work they would otherwise do by reducing the net benefit of further work and thus decreasing the opportunity cost of “leisure”. Some UBI or GI advocates (and social scientists) see a carbon tax and dividend policy as a way to provide a valuable benefit while minimizing the negative side effects associated with its funding.

Distributing the proceeds of a carbon tax as a dividend could also make the tax more palatable and thus viable³⁶. It is possible that the politics around that benefit would also be more similar to those around social insurance programs; the payment may be seen as compensation rather than a handout. Individuals would be paying into the program with every purchase so potentially there would be fewer calls for other forms of reciprocation.

But a carbon tax elicits questions around other proposals for using the revenue. Would use of the funds on a dividend be more popular than use on green investment, childcare, police, schooling, or even deficit deduction? While we already know that a carbon tax with a dividend is more popular than a carbon tax alone we do not yet have good data from

³⁶ Though see for [example](#), “Limited impacts of carbon tax rebate programmes on public support for carbon pricing” by Mildemberger et al, 2022.

surveys comparing alternate uses of the funds. In other words, should a carbon tax become the subject of serious discussion it is not a given that it would be paired with a dividend. Legislators and policy analysts are likely to propose other uses of the funds and public opinion and interest group pressure could ultimately push toward a different pairing. Similarly, As mentioned earlier, private polls have shown that a guaranteed income funded by taxation of the ultra wealthy is more popular than cash programs financed through other means. However, increased taxation of the wealthy is widely [popular](#) as a funding mechanism for a variety of policies, drawing the ultimate question of voter priorities; such taxation [may not](#) raise enough for a universal cash policy.³⁷

Lastly there is some tension between the goals of a carbon tax, which is designed to reduce the amount of carbon produced to socially optimal levels (but not less) and of a guaranteed income, which is designed to reduce poverty and material hardship. A socially optimal carbon tax may produce only a small basic income (especially if there are competing priorities for expenditure as above) and a socially optimal basic income might necessitate a carbon tax set too high. There is some work considering how these two goals can be balanced. The UBI Center has released a [proposal](#) for a carbon tax and dividend that increases by a fixed percentage each year and is adjustable according to environmental needs. Though it starts quite small it would eventually generate a substantial monthly cash payment. Whether this payout would be sufficient to shepherd a new tax through the legislative process or to win the support of advocates for the poor is an open question.

Conclusions

This paper is the fourth and final in a series on “[Getting to Guaranteed Income](#),” analyzing the research to date on practical questions related to guaranteed income policy design at the federal level in the US. In the midst of July 2020 pandemic cash assistance, the first

³⁷ A somewhat similar dynamic can be seen playing out in the discussion around the legalization of recreational marijuana sales at the state level. In states like New York and Maryland, passage of the law to legalize, regulate, and tax the sale of recreational cannabis was repeatedly delayed over disagreements about how to spend the tax revenue. In each instance, advocates successfully argued for setting aside a portion of the tax revenue to reinvest in communities that suffered under drug war policies (the specifics of this reinvestment are still under discussion with some arguing for direct cash payments to those formerly incarcerated for drug-related offenses). It is likely that discussion of a carbon tax would lead to calls to use the tax revenue for programs to repair environmental damage or bolster defenses against climate-change related ills (e.g. flooding, drought). This could reduce or eliminate space for an associated dividend.

paper underscored targeting and disbursement challenges within the existing social safety net, and what changes might fix the “plumbing” for cash to reach individuals and families on a regular basis. The second paper considered the interplay of guaranteed income within existing benefit programs like food stamps, TANF, Social Security Income (SSI), refundable tax credits, housing vouchers, and—separately—public insurance systems like Medicaid, unemployment insurance, and otherwise. The third paper reviewed macroeconomic models for cash, applying those findings to the expanded Child Tax Credit of the American Rescue Plan Act to underscore long term projections for impacts on work, savings, business investment, education, and larger economic indicators like GDP. Several of these papers, including this one, point to areas for further research. This final paper captures a key moment in the quickly evolving movement for cash policy, with a retrospective on the past few years’ acceleration in cash policy legislation and public debate, and an analysis of the opportunities and challenges for guaranteed income to become national policy in the years to come.

While we do not take a position on a final or even intermediate form for a national cash policy, we do outline the landscape of public opinion on cash (part one) and some of the emergent frameworks for a national guaranteed income (part five) that may serve as a basis for progress. In between, we discuss the role of dozens of pilots nationwide, considerations for grassroots organizing and mobilization, critical elements of narrative change, and models from existing movements for more just income and safety net policies. A few key takeaways from these sections include:

- Public support has shifted positively on guaranteed income, but not only do we need more testing of public support, organizers should also strategize around the demographic coalitions and parameters that are both most likely to succeed and that align with long term goals for an unconditional benefit.
- The CTC and stimulus checks had stronger public support and mobilized greater numbers of cash-supportive players, with public, philanthropic, researcher, and advocacy coalitions. To model after successful campaigns, guaranteed income advocates need greater grassroots organizing. Pilots can be a starting point for that organizing, but only if these efforts are designed with this advocacy in mind and not only around research.
- Narrative change—and its role in catalyzing policy change—requires careful, consistent framing. While multiple talking points may be employed, underlying frames should be in service of the ultimate policy advocates hope to see, delinked from ideas of deservingness and creating a shared understanding of historic and present problems with GI as a solution. Likewise, policy that is implemented will also play a role in narrative, intermediate policy solutions need to be mindful of not ceding ground on ideas of deservingness, work, conditionality, or some forms

of targeting. (The movement for eliminating the subminimum wage for tipped workers and the history of the National Welfare Rights Organization provide important examples of this.)

- The history of the recent CTC expansions is telling of the limits of public support without organizing, and despite elite buy-in. The CTC also demonstrated the longer arch of time needed to see unconditional safety net reform—successful, universal cash policy may take decades.
- Looking forward, some policies may prove more politically feasible as starting points for a GI within the existing systems—the EITC and CTC, SNAP expansion, or carbon dividends—while keeping in mind the feedback loop of policy to narrative change. Advocates should be mindful of the path dependency of working through existing systems that have long been designed to keep more people out than in.

The guaranteed income movement is at a critical juncture. As this paper and the series has noted, guaranteed income may play a major role in addressing economic precarity in the US. While the federal debate on some form of guaranteed income has been stalled with 2022 Build Back Better legislation, proponents have continued to move forward with unconditional cash programs at the state and city level across the country. We hope this series proves instrumental in advancing that debate further through a deeper examination of the political dimensions of guaranteed income policy.

Appendix

Further Methodological Considerations for Public Opinion Polling

On the importance of demographics:

Public polling on a range of cash policies—UBI, guaranteed income, and the Child Tax Credit—shows broadly increased popularity for the policy, as discussed in Part I of this paper. The degree of that positive increase is less precise. Still, positive shifts in support among younger voters, seniors, conservative women, independents, and communities of color are particularly noteworthy if we take recent election data into account. Among 46 million new presidential election voters in 2020³⁸ (28-29% of all voters), over 60% of them were between the ages of 18 and 29. In addition to the surge in Millennial and Gen Z voters, there was some increase in turnout among seniors, though to a lesser extent. Likewise, dramatic upticks in voting [occurred](#) among voters of color. Looking at these demographics generationally, groups whose economic fortunes have been defined by two recessions, historic student debt burdens, greater economic insecurity writ large, and/or an experience of economic and racial injustice—these voters turned out more heavily in favor of a Democratic agenda and asserted their power as voting groups. These voters are also more supportive of guaranteed income policies. At the same time, seniors have long represented a key constituency given stronger relative voting patterns among the elderly; seniors largely supported GOP candidates in 2020 but have also [reported](#) greater support for UBI policies since the onset of the pandemic. Beyond widespread public support for a policy, a dramatic increase in support among key constituents can constitute a significant and adequate political shift that is less captured by more generalized, national statistics on policy support.³⁹

On reliability & pitfalls of polling methods:

Representative samples are crucial in accurate public opinion polling, but virtually impossible to achieve perfectly. This leads to the methodological considerations—and

³⁸ Compared to 2016 electorates in each state ([Catalist](#)); some of these voters may have moved to a new state and some registered in 2018 so a smaller number, 14% were first-time voters in any election.

³⁹ We discuss the influence of motivated minorities further in Part 4.

limitations—in public opinion data discussed in Part I of the paper; the data should be used cautiously in informing messaging or narrative campaigns. In terms of external validity, or how well the study participants represent the wider population, poll respondents tend to be more politically aware than an average member of the public. Moreover, regardless of method — by phone, on the internet, in social media, or in-person — polls are limited by significant response bias (the ways the poll’s design, context or presentation may bias responses). In addition, issues of external validity occur within the scope of a survey: with immediate response to sometimes fresh information and no oppositional framing (and related acquiescence bias), with no influence of a particular messenger who may represent greater or lesser trust for that study participant (or a particular party), and no further room to seek explanation of the presented concepts (except in focus groups). All of these ensure the survey cannot accurately mimic the impact of a message or question framed “in the wild” in trusted media, through personal networks, within the context of highly politicized or partisan issue campaigns, and within the relevant context of identity and lived experience-driven politics that shape message delivery and receipt in reality.

Timing of a survey can also have bearing on the study’s external validity — support for an issue in the heat of a campaign often fades months later, much like post-election polls differ from pre-election polls taken in a context of concentrated campaigns and competing information. Similarly, an immediate response to a poll’s specific framing (in the case of framing experimentation and split sampling) can misrepresent what may be a respondent’s later view. In addition, a messaging frame or idea within a poll cannot benefit from repetition—as all good messaging campaigns do. Therefore, ideas that may become popular through repetition and widespread amplification cannot adequately be represented by a single question framed to an individual in the scope of a survey, perhaps underrepresenting powerful frames and messages.

Notably, some of these concerns are better addressed by “in field” surveys that mimic repeated exposure to an ad, visual, or other messaging campaign — running ads through social media and surveying those exposed and not exposed to such material, but some issues with external validity persist across public opinion surveys of all kinds. In the case of guaranteed income polling, such extensive messaging testing is still nascent, and existing polls cannot fully capture public opinion on the issue or how the policy will be perceived by voters in various contexts. However, it is fair to say polls show some promising signals among key voting constituents and offer early clues as to messaging frames that may prove more popular with continued testing and tweaking. Moreover, the limitation of public polling points to the importance of direct grassroots organizing and narrative campaigns to change prevailing views on poverty and the social safety net (see Parts II and III).