



US: Universal Basic Income is returning to America

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It was a remarkable moment in 1969 when President Nixon offered universal basic income (UBI) legislation that was passed *twice* by the US House of Representatives, but failed to garner enough votes in a Democratic controlled Senate on both occasions. It was defeated despite the intellectual clout of 1200 bi-partisan economists, including Milton Friedman who designed the “guaranteed income” bill, and John Kenneth Galbraith who publicly supported the bill. The irony: a public welfare program proposed by Republicans was stalled by Democrats, who viewed the suggested \$1,600 (\$10,000 in today’s dollars) per year for each recipient as insufficient. While Europe maintained a broad network of intellectuals, publications, and conferences promoting the idea, UBI policy has been largely absent from American political discourse ever since, other than among a committed following on Reddit, some forward thinking academics, and US affiliates of BIEN.

Over the past year, though, growing support from an array of thought leaders suggests a rising tide for UBI in the US. President Obama, in an interview with Bloomberg News this June, discussed the need to “build ourselves a runway” to ease the transition into an increasingly automated labor force. Bernie Sanders has, on multiple occasions, expressed his support of UBI, stating in a 2015 interview that he is “absolutely sympathetic to that approach.” Recently, UBI has received full-throated support from leading thinkers like Berkeley’s Robert Reich, Columbia’s Joseph Stiglitz, INET President Rob Johnson, Google CEO Eric Schmidt, former Zipcar CEO Robin Chase, Judith Shulevitz – writing in the New York Times, and Nobel Laureate Angus Deaton. This June past, my book *Raising the Floor: How a Universal Basic Income Can Renew Our Economy and Rebuild the American Dream* was released, and has helped to expand the discussion of UBI to progressives, unions, and mainstream media outlets like the FT, CNBC, NPR, Fortune, and the New York Times.

The interest in UBI is gaining prominence and commentary in mainstream think tanks across the political spectrum, which is an anomaly in our modern, divided political dynamic. From the progressive to libertarian poles, at places like Roosevelt Institute, INET, OSF, CATO, and AEI, basic income is gaining support as a solution to the economic crises of our present, and future. In the fall, the CATO Institute, whose Michael Tanner is a libertarian thought leader and key discussant in my book, is planning to host a forum in Washington, DC including Charles Murray and myself.

Global developments around UBI should also help to bolster UBI’s place in American political discourse. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has incorporated basic income into the

Liberal Party's platform, and Canada is preparing a basic income experiment for residents of the Ontario province. Following the city of Utrecht's decision, several other Dutch cities will test basic income policies in the coming years. As these trials play out, hopefully with positive results or lessons that allow for improvement, the American public and their elected officials will have solid evidence upon which an American policy, perhaps city or state based experiments, can be built. Already, a small-scale basic income experiment will be carried out by Y-Combinator in Oakland, where unconditional income will be provided to roughly 100 Oakland residents for 6-12 months.

In my book, I state that the American response to the tsunami of job upheaval will look more like the response to the Vietnam, rather than the Iraq War. In the Vietnam era a draft placed the children of middle-class families at risk, as they are again, as present and future technologically motivated job loss does not spare college graduates or white-collar occupations.

During the Vietnam era, the selective service draft mobilized parents from every walk of life to be vocal anti-war activists. Once their own children could be drafted to fight and die, many parents began questioning whether President Johnson had any justification for sending troops there. The draft also mobilized young people: Vietnam did not fit into their college and career plans, nor did the idea of killing people or getting killed in a far-off land.

Job loss has for too long been considered a condition of a more blue-collar, uneducated, and low-skill labor force. Not only is this prejudicial and inaccurate, but it is no longer supported by employment statistics. Unemployment and underemployment among recent college graduates is still significantly higher than pre-Recession levels, indicating that in the New Economy, white-collar jobs are susceptible to job erosion much as blue-collar jobs have been for the past several decades. So while it was easy for legislators, prominent thinkers, and middle and upper class individuals to discuss job loss from the comfort of their personal professional security, as economists still do, they and their children are increasingly affected by the shifting labor paradigm. Job loss and erosion in the white-collar economy has the potential to mobilize a far more diverse and broad political movement to search for solutions to the economic and employment challenges of the future.

While there is a myriad of ideas on how to combat the restructuring of our emerging socio-economic paradigm, none have as of yet enjoyed the broad political support that UBI does. None provide such a simple means of addressing very complex problems: ending poverty; offering stability during any economic transition; or providing for universal assistance as technology creates a tsunami of labor market disruption. In the United States a new conversation has started on UBI, and it is our responsibility to ensure that the momentum does not wane. The time is now, and the solution is simple: make Universal Basic Income an American reality.