The Elasticity of Policy Preferences to Information: Evidence from a Field Experiment

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Abstract

This document describes the analysis plan for a field experiment evaluating the effects of direct mailing on preferences for redistribution. We consider the case of the vote on the unconditional basic income (henceforth UBI) which takes place in Switzerland in June 2016. Approximately one week before the vote, different types of letters are sent to almost 2/3 of the swiss municipalities with less than 750 households. These municipalities receive either a placebo letter which reminds them to go voting, or a letter containing the same content as the placebo letter, but also information about inequality, poverty and likely labor supply responses to the UBI. This document outlines the econometric methods that will be used to assess the effect of the letters on our main outcome variables.

1 Motivation

People have been shown to have biased beliefs about income and wealth inequality (Norton and Ariely, 2011). Recent evidence suggests that people around the globe are dissatisfied with the high levels of inequality (Kiatpongsan and Norton, 2014). Recently, Kuziemko et al. (2015) have provided laboratory evidence that exposing subjects to information regarding the prevailing degree of inequality can affect their preferences for redistribution.

However, evidence documenting the effects of (economically relevant) information on voting behavior is still lacking. We plan to fill in this gap using a field experiment. We consider the case of the vote on the unconditional basic income (henceforth UBI) taking place in Switzerland on of June 5th 2016. We plan to test whether providing people with accurate information about income inequality, poverty, and labor supply responses to the introduction of the basic income will affect their voting behavior in the upcoming referendum on the UBI.

We will send information and placebo letters to a random subset of small swiss municipalities, i.e. municipalities in which the number of mailboxes per village does not exceed 750. We will then use publicly available data on voting outcomes at the municipality level on the support of the basic income to examine whether the letter containing information had a significant effect on voting outcomes relative to municipalities receiving the placebo letter or receiving no letter at all. We will also investigate whether the information and placebo letters affect voter turnout and the support of the pro-public service initiative.

The use of field experiments in the context of political decisions is not new. For example, field experiments have been used to assess the effects of newspapers and their particular ideological leanings on voting (Gerber et al., 2009), the effects of televised advertisement on voting (Gerber et al., 2011), the role of information on politicians' performance and qualifications on voting (Banerjee et al., 2010), and the effects of social pressure on voter turnout (Gerber et al., 2008).[1]

Previous work has been devoted to study the elasticity of policy preferences to information (Gilens, 2001; Kuklinski et al., 2003; Kuziemko et al., 2015; Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). We improve upon this literature by conducting a field experiment with an incentivized behavioral outcome measure, i.e. people's voting behavior in the referendum. Our approach alleviates one concern plaguing the evidence in the previous literature: that subjects change their stated preferences in order to please the experimenter rather than actually changing their policy preferences.

[1]For a review of the literature on field experiments and voter turnout, see Green et al. (2013).

2 Experimental Design

The aim of this experiment is to assess the effect of information on preferences for redistribution. We investigate this question by sending different types of letters to a randomly chosen set of swiss municipalities. Among all the 2286 Swiss municipalities, we focus on the smallest 1033 municipalities that have less than 745 mailboxes in their municipality each. We randomly assign approximately 31% of these municipalities to an information treatment, approximately 31% to a placebo treatment, and the remaining municipalities to a control group.

Each household in each municipalities in the placebo condition receives a letter which says, in substance, that[2]

- the vote on the UBI takes place on the 5th on June.
- this vote is "an important opportunity to expand the economic opportunities of many people, to effectively diminish poverty and to achieve a higher life quality for everyone."
- the UBI is supposed to enable the whole population to live a life in decent conditions and to enable them to take part in public life.
- each citizen's vote can make a difference.

Each household from the municipalities in the information condition receives a similar letter containing additional (truthful) information about:

- income inequality in Switzerland. In particular people are told the share of the total labor income earned by the top 10% in the income distribution and by the bottom 10% in the income distribution.
- expected labor supply response to the UBI in Switzerland. Specifically, people are told that according to a recent survey almost all Swiss citizens plan to continue working after the introduction of the basic income.
- the absolute number of swish citizens living below the poverty line. People are told that more than 500,000 households in Switzerland have an income below the poverty line.[3]

[2]The two German letters can be found at the end of this document, as well as an english translation. Each letter was also translated into Italian and French, in order to address french and italian speaking municipalities.

[3]Sources to the statistics displayed in the letter are taken from the Swiss administration (items a and c) and from an online survey commissioned by the initiative committee (item b)

The letters contain the logo of the UBI initiative and the signature of two members of the UBI-initiative committee. Finally, households in the control municipalities do not receive any letters.

2.1 Stratified randomization

To increase power, we restricted our attention to municipalities with less than 745 mailboxes. We randomly assigned circa 31% of municipalities to receive the information treatment, approximately 31% to receive the placebo treatment, while the rest of the municipalities did not receive any letters.

We stratified our randomization along three dimensions:

- A dummy variable taking value one for communities with above median income.[4]
- A dummy variable taking value one for communities with above median social assistance take-up.
- A dummy variable taking value one for communities with above median support for left-wing policies in previous popular initiatives.

This results in eight different strata. All of the above information on income, social assistance and previous outcomes in popular initiatives comes from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office.

3 Setting, Sample Size and Power

3.1 Setting and Sample Size

We conduct a cluster-randomized controlled trial with Swiss municipalities with less than 745 mailboxes. We have in total 1033 municipalities that are part of our sample. Out of those 321 are treatment municipalities, i.e. they receive the letters with information; 316 are placebo municipalities, i.e. they receive the letters without any information; the remaining 396 municipalities are pure control municipalities.

3.2 Power

When we compare the mean support in municipalities in receipt of the information treatment relative to municipalities not receiving any letters we have power of .8 to detect effect sizes

[4]We have missing income data for seven municipalities. We treated those municipalities as though they had a below median income.

of .21 of a standard deviation at α=0.05. In our preferred specification including strata fixed effects, Canton fixed effects, as well as additional controls[5], we will have a power of .8 to detect effect sizes of about .18 of a standard deviation at α=0.05.

When we compare the mean support in municipalities in receipt of the information treatment relative to municipalities which receive the placebo letters, we have power of .8 to detect effect sizes of .22 of a standard deviation at α=0.05. In our preferred specification including strata fixed effects, Canton fixed effects, as well as additional controls, we will have a power of .8 to detect effect sizes of .19 of a standard deviation at α=0.05.

4 Main Hypotheses

We have three main hypotheses:

- Municipalities in the information treatment will increase the support for the basic income relative to the municipalities receiving the placebo letters.
- Municipalities in the information treatment will increase the support for the basic income compared to the municipalities that do not receive any letters.
- We hypothesize that municipalities that receive the information and placebo treatments will have higher voter turnout relative to the pure control municipalities.

5 Outcome variables

Our main outcome variables are voting outcomes (acceptance rate of the initiative on the UBI) and voter turnout at the municipality level. These data will be publicly available on the website of the Swiss statistical office shortly after the vote takes place. In addition, we will also look at the acceptance rate of the pro-public service initiative which takes place the same day and which proposes – among other things – to cap the pay of chairmen of public companies in Switzerland.

6 Empirical Specifications

6.1 Baseline balance

We test for baseline balance for the following variables:

[5]These controls are expected to account for approximately 50% of the overall variation. This estimate is based on data from a previous referendum on the minimum wage.

- Mean municipality income
- Share in municipality that received any social assistance
- Population size
- Population density
- Number of households in municipality
- A dummy variable taking value one of the municipality is french-speaking.
- The average share of people in the municipality in favor of the popular initatives on the minimum wage, the 12-1 initiative and the initiative about capping the pay of CEOs.
- The share of people in the municipality in favor of the popular initiative on the minimum wave
- The share of people in the municipality in favor of the popular initiative on 12-to-1 initiative
- The share of people in the municipality in favor of the popular initiative in favor of capping the pay of CEOs.
- Average voter turnout for the popular initatives on the minimum wage, the 12-1 initiative and the initiative about capping the pay of CEOs.
- Percentage of people employed in the agricultural sector
- Percentage of people employed in the secondary sector
- Percentage of people employed in the tertiary sector
- Percentage of foreigners

We regress each of these variables on the information treatment indicator as well as the placebo treatment indicator, while controlling for strata fixed effects, to see if there are imbalances. We account for multiple hypothesis testing by regressing the information treatment indicator on all of the variables, and we will conduct a joint F-test, to see if the coefficients are jointly different from zero. Similarly, we regress the placebo treatment indicator on all of the variables, and we conduct a joint F-test, to see if the coefficients are jointly different from zero.

In Table 1 in Appendix B we show that we have balance in a large set of community covariates conditional on strata fixed effects. We also display the p-values of the joint F-tests outlined in the previous paragraph. The p-values of the joint F-tests when comparing the treatment with the placebo group and when comparing the treatment and the pure control group are .68 and .99 respectively. We are therefore confident that our randomization worked well.

6.2 Main specification

Our main analysis will be focused on comparing the average acceptance rates for the UBI municipalities in the Information and the Placebo groups. Our basic specification is

$$\text{ShareyesUBI}_m = \beta_1 \text{Information}_m + \beta_2 \text{Placebo}_m + \Gamma \mathbf{X_m} + \phi_k + \text{strata}_j + \varepsilon_m$$

where ShareyesUBI_m corresponds to the acceptance rate of the UBI initiative in municipality m, Information_m is a dummy variable taking the value 1 if the municipality received a letter containing information, and Placebo_m is a dummy variable taking the value 1 if the municipality received a placebo letter. $\mathbf{X_m}$ is a vector of control variables which includes average municipality income[6], share of citizens in the municipality receiving social assistance, and the average share of people in the municipality that in previous referenda supported the introduction of the minimum wage, to control executive pay of companies listed on the stock market as well as the initiative to limit executives' pay at twelve times that of their lowest-paid worker. Finally, our specification also includes strata fixed effects, strata_j, and canton fixed effects, ϕ_k. We do not cluster our standard errors as the level of randomization is also the level of observation.

Our two main tests of interest are the following:

- Did municipalities receiving information about the UBI see higher levels of support of the UBI relative to municipalities not receiving any information: $\beta_1 > 0$
- Did municipalities receiving information about the UBI see higher levels of support of the UBI relative to municipalities just receiving the placebo letters: $\beta_1 > \beta_2$

6.3 Additional specifications

We will also investigate whether the letters affected voters' support of the "pro-public service initative" (ShareyesPPSI_m). We will estimate an equation with the same set of controls as in

[6]We have missing income data for seven municipalities. To deal with this issue, we will impute income for these municipalities based on a set of observable characteristics

the specification above: fixed effects

$$\text{ShareyesPPSI}_m = \beta_1 \text{Information}_m + \beta_2 \text{Placebo}_m + \Gamma \mathbf{X_m} + \phi_k + \alpha_j + \varepsilon_m.$$

In addition, we will examine whether the letters affected voter turnout in the popular initiative on the UBI, turnout_m:

$$\text{turnout}_m = \beta_1 \text{Information}_m + \beta_2 \text{Placebo}_m + \Gamma \mathbf{X_m} + \phi_k + \alpha_j + \varepsilon_m.$$

X_m is a vector of control variables which includes average municipality income, share of citizens in the municipality receiving social assistance, and the average municipality voter turnout in the popular initiatives on the minimum wage, the initiative on capping CEO pay and the 12-1 initiative. As above we also control for both strata fixed effects, α_j and canton fixed effects, ϕ_k.

As a robustness check we will also show the results from our regressions not controlling for Canton fixed effects and not including the vector of controls for all of our main three outcomes of interest.

6.4 Heterogeneity: Primary Analyses

We will also see whether there are heterogeneous treatment effects caused by our information treatment. For all of the heterogeneity analysis, we will look at the three outcome variables from above. Specifically, we will estimate the following equation, where $interaction_m$ refers to the interaction variable:

$$y_m = \pi_1 \text{Information}_m \times \text{interaction}_m + \pi_2 \text{Placebo}_m \times \text{interaction}_m +$$
$$\pi_3 \text{Information}_m + \pi_4 \text{Placebo}_m + \pi_5 \text{interaction}_m + \Gamma \mathbf{X_m} + \phi_k + \alpha_j + \varepsilon_i$$

We will explore heterogeneity along the following dimensions:

- Mean municipality income
- Mean share of social assistance at the municipality level
- Share of people in favor previous referenda of left-wing policies.[7]

[7] Specifically, initiatives on the introduction of the minimum wage, the control executive pay of companies listed on the stock market as well as the initiative to limit executives' pay at twelve times that of their lowest-paid worker.

We correct for multiple hypothesis testing in these three tests (for each outcome variable separately) by using the "sharpened q-value approach" (Benjamini et al., 2006; Anderson, 2008). In particular, we will adjust our p-values for a false discovery rate of .05. We will also report the unadjusted p-values.

6.5 Heterogeneity: Secondary Analyses

We will explore heterogeneity along the following dimensions using the exact same specification as in the previous subsection.

- Share of people in favor of minimum wage
- Share of people in favor of controlling executive pay of companies listed on the stock market
- Share of people in favor of the initiative to limit executives' pay at twelve times that of their lowest-paid worker
- Population size of village
- A dummy taking value one if the municipality is french-speaking

We correct for multiple hypothesis testing in these five tests by using the "sharpened q-value approach" (Benjamini et al., 2006; Anderson, 2008). In particular, we will adjust our p-values for a false discovery rate of .05. We will also report the unadjusted p-values.

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A Appendix: The letters

The German, French and Italian versions of the INFORMATION and the PLACEBO letters as well as their respective english translations can be found on the next pages of this document.

Volksinitiative für ein Bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen

10. Mai 2016

Sehr geehrte Bürgerinnen und Bürger,

Am 5. Juni findet die Abstimmung über das bedingungslose Grundeinkommen statt. Die Einführung des Grundeinkommens ist eine wichtige Gelegenheit, die wirtschaftlichen Möglichkeiten für viele Menschen zu erweitern, Armut effektiv zu verringern und mehr Lebensqualität für alle zu erreichen. In diesem Brief möchten wir Sie auf ein paar Fakten aufmerksam machen, die in der öffentlichen Debatte oftmals übersehen werden.

- **Wussten Sie, dass fast alle Schweizer auch nach der Einführung des bedingungslosen Grundeinkommens weiterarbeiten möchten?** Laut einer repräsentativen Umfrage planen 98% der Schweizer weiterhin zu arbeiten.

- **Wussten Sie, dass das bedingungslose Grundeinkommen dazu beitragen kann, die hohe Einkommensungleichheit in der Schweiz zu reduzieren?** Die 10% Bestverdienenden erhalten derzeit mehr als 34% des gesamten Haushaltseinkommens der Schweiz; dagegen erhalten die am wenigsten verdienenden 10% der Bevölkerung weniger als 1% des gesamten Haushaltseinkommens. Die Bestverdienenden 10% verdienen ca. 70 mal mehr als die unteren 10% der Bevölkerung.

Das Grundeinkommen soll der ganzen Bevölkerung ein menschenwürdiges Dasein und die Teilnahme am öffentlichen Leben ermöglichen, insbesondere auch jenen 500.000 Menschen in der Schweiz, die derzeit unter der Armutsgrenze leben.

Bitte erfüllen Sie Ihre bürgerliche Aufgabe und gehen Sie wählen. Ihre Stimme kann einen Unterschied machen.

Christian Müller Daniel Straub

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Christian Müller Daniel Straub

Initiative populaire fédérale pour un revenu de base inconditionnel

10 mai 2016

Chère citoyenne, Cher citoyen,

Le 5 juin a lieu la votation sur l'initiative pour un revenu de base inconditionnel. L'introduction du revenu de base est une occasion importante d'élargir les possibilités économiques de beaucoup de personnes, de réduire la pauvreté de manière efficace et d'augmenter la qualité de vie de chacun. Dans cette lettre, nous souhaitons attirer votre attention sur plusieurs faits importants qui ont souvent été négligés dans le débat public sur le revenu de base.

- **Saviez-vous que presque chaque Suisse prévoit de continuer à travailler après l'introduction du revenu de base inconditionnel?** D'après un sondage représentatif, 98% des Suisses continueraient à travailler.

- **Saviez-vous que l'introduction du revenu de base inconditionnel contribuerait à réduire les larges inégalités de revenu présentes en Suisse ?** Les 10% de la population ayant les revenus les plus élevés gagnent plus de 34% du revenu total des ménages suisses, alors que les 10% de la population ayant les revenus les plus faibles gagnent moins de 1% du revenu total des ménages. Les 10% de la population ayant les revenus les plus élevés gagnent environ 70 fois plus que les 10% de la population ayant les revenus les plus faibles.

Le revenu de base doit permettre à l'ensemble de la population de mener une existence digne et de participer à la vie publique, en particulier aussi aux 500'000 personnes qui, en Suisse, vivent actuellement sous le seuil de pauvreté.

Veuillez s'il vous plaît accomplir votre devoir citoyen et aller voter. Votre vote peut faire une différence.

Christian Müller Daniel Straub

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Christian Müller Daniel Straub

Iniziativa popolare
federale per un reddito
di base incondizionato

10 maggio 2016

Caro cittadino, Cara cittadina,

Il 5 Giugno sarete chiamati a votare la proposta sul Reddito di Base Incondizionato. L'introduzione del Reddito di Base è un'importante occasione per ampliare le opportunità economiche per molte persone, per ridurre efficacemente la povertà e per ottenere una migliore qualità della vita per tutti. Con questa lettera vogliamo informarla su un paio di punti, che spesso vengono trascurati nel dibattito pubblico.

- **Sapeva che quasi tutti gli svizzeri vorrebbero continuare a lavorare anche dopo l' introduzione del reddito di cittadinanza?** Secondo un sondaggio rappresentativo, il 98% degli svizzeri ha intenzione di continuare a lavorare.

- **Sapeva che il reddito di cittadinanza può contribuire a ridurre la grande diseguaglianza di reddito in Svizzera?** In Svizzera, il 10% della popolazione che guadagna di più percepisce il 34% del reddito famigliare nazionale, mentre il 10% della popolazione che guadagna di meno ne percepisce meno dell'1%. Il 10% della popolazione che guadagna di più percepisce un reddito circa 70 volte maggiore del 10% della popolazione che guadagna di meno.

Il reddito di base incondizionato è pensato per garantire a tutta la popolazione un' esistenza dignitosa e per rendere possibile la partecipazione alla vita pubblica, in particolare anche alle 500.000 persone che attualmente vivono al di sotto della soglia di povertà in Svizzera.

La preghiamo di compiere il suo dovere di cittadino andando a votare. Il Suo voto può fare una differenza.

Christian Müller Daniel Straub

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Christian Müller Daniel Straub

Volksinitiative für ein
Bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen

10 May 2016

Dear citizens,

On June the fifth the vote on the unconditional basic income will take place. The introduction of the basic income is an important opportunity to expand the economic opportunities of many people, to effectively diminish poverty and to achieve a higher life quality for everyone. In this letter we would like to draw your attention to several facts that have often been overlooked in the public debate.

- **Did you know that almost all Swiss People still want to continue working after the introduction of the basic income?** According to a representative poll, 98% of the Swiss still plan to continue working.
- **Did you know that the unconditional basic income can contribute to decrease the high income inequality in Switzerland?** The top 10% of earners receive more than 34% of the total household income in Switzerland; however the bottom 10% of earners receive less than 1% of the total household income. The top 10% earners therefore earn approximately 70 times as much as the bottom 10% of earners the population.

The unconditional basic income is supposed to enable the whole population to live a life in decent conditions and to enable them to take part in public life – in particular also those 500,000 people in Switzerland who live below the poverty line.

Please do fulfill your civic duty and go voting. Your vote can make a difference.

Christian Müller Daniel Straub

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Bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen

10 May 2016

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Christian Müller Daniel Straub

B Appendix: Baseline Balance

Table 1: Randomization Check

	A Treatment	B Placebo	C Control	D P-val(Diff A and B)	E P-val(Diff A and C)
Yearly Income	76094	75422	76594	0.410	0.738
Share of social assistance	1.36	1.27	1.29	0.258	0.424
Share in favor of pro-redistribution	41.49	41.75	41.63	0.490	0.674
Share in favor of CEO pay cap	69.11	69.13	69.17	0.932	0.874
Share in favor of 1-to-12 initiative	35.34	35.55	35.32	0.658	0.987
Share in favor of minimum wage	20.48	20.57	20.56	0.881	0.863
Population size	657.88	670.66	665.46	0.688	0.803
Population density	142.10	149.15	155.48	0.630	0.323
Share of immigrants	11.69	11.08	12.04	0.301	0.538
Number of households	267.04	273.58	269.16	0.620	0.877
Share of employment: Agriculture	49.36	48.13	50.51	0.440	0.454
Share of employment: Secondary	0.24	0.22	0.25	0.182	0.226
Share of employment: Tertiary	0.49	0.51	0.48	0.060*	0.527
Average turnout (Previous referenda)	55.28	55.83	55.52	0.337	0.650
Observations	321	316	396	634	717
Strata Fixed Effects				Y	Y
P-value (joint F-test)				0.684	0.9911

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$