

Opinion

# Universal basic income idea still waiting on a real test

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

Andrew Yang, a onetime candidate for U.S. president, was widely derided a few years ago when he suggested a monthly universal basic income of \$1,000 to every American adult displaced by automation.



Yet, I wonder if this isn't a conversation we should have? He failed in his bid for the presidency, but he's now leading the pack to become the next Democratic mayor of New York City, not an easy trick in a finicky melting pot like the Big Apple. Something he's saying is striking a chord with people in much the way that the recent stimulus payments have been met with so little national opposition. Though you can't totally compare the idea of lifting people out of a pandemic and the concept of a universal basic income during non-disease times, there are certainly similarities. Both stem from the notion that if a man or a woman has at least enough to survive on, those individuals can also go on to prosper, thereby

making them less of a financial burden to the rest of society in the long run. My conservative friends will want to look in my earhole to see if they see daylight on the other side. And my liberal ones will wonder if infirmities of the age are taking down a guy who's proudly been a lifelong skinflint. So perhaps I should clarify: Giving away taxpayer money is not my style, but it's worth talking about in some situations. Yang's propensity for politics aside, it's notable that a self-made man — a multimillionaire — came to the conclusion that displaced citizens need a regular infusion of cash if they are going to succeed. He has shifted his basic income proposal a bit for New York City. Now, he wants to extend an average of \$2,000 per year to residents living in extreme poverty. To be sure, Yang is getting national notice with the income issue, but his general ideas are not new ones. A state-run basic income dates at least to the early 16th century when Sir Thomas More (later venerated in the Catholic Church as a saint) suggested a guaranteed income. Along the way others espoused the idea but also said recipients must show willingness to work in return for charity. In the late 18th century, English revolutionary Thomas Spence advocated for common ownership of land and equal-

ity of the sexes. American revolutionary Thomas Paine had similar ideas. Paine's "Common Sense" was a written work urging people to fight for a government that prioritized social equality for all people. Interestingly, all three Thomases died in ignominy. Andrew Yang, meanwhile, is still a millionaire. But, I digress. The only way one would know if such a system of income is to work would be to put it to a test, which in today's Congress is not likely. So, let's look overseas. The European Network for Economic and Fiscal Policy Research weighed in last month on a basic income experiment in Finland carried out in 2017 and 2018. The conclusion was that replacing minimum unemployment benefits with a basic income of equal size had minor employment effects at best. The research found three broad policy lessons. First: Improving monetary incentives for employment might not work in hard-to-employ populations. Second: The current practice of filing unemployment benefit claims via the Internet might have become so easy that people continue filing them even when they need not do so. Third: There is a real possibility that a well-intentioned policy exacer-

bates the unemployment problem. The study examined 2,000 benefit recipients in Finland who were randomly chosen to receive a monthly basic income equivalent to \$631. That last entry reminds me of the debate over welfare, which continues 55 years after Lyndon Johnson's Great Society administration enacted the landmark laws. It has been widely suggested that universal basic income might alleviate job polarization and inequality. However, the European research could not find a major impact on the Finnish labor market. (Polarization of the labor force happens when middle-class jobs seem to disappear relative to those at the bottom, requiring few skills, and those at the top, requiring greater skills.) Yang is a modern-day revolutionary in terms of his economics, but I think a lot more experiments are in order before we conclude that his thinking is a great idea. Yang has never had the opportunity to test his theory, and New York City may be in for experimentation.

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# Passage of For the People Act essential to saving American democracy

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

In last month's editorial I opined that, while the general citizenry had been sold Reagan's canard that "government is the problem," others have been working behind the scenes to stack the deck in their favor. "We," I said, "need to work together to return to what Lincoln spoke of as, 'government of the people, by the people and for the people'." We



have an opportunity now to take a big step in that direction. It's HR 1, the For the People Act, that was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in March. Over the last 11 years, a series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions have massively tilted the electoral playing field toward the rich and powerful, and those misguided rulings have opened the door to a host of legislation designed to make it harder for people to vote. Democracy is under attack. In 2010, the Supreme Court struck down century old campaign finance restrictions in the case of Citizens United

v. Federal Election Commission. The majority opinion that corporations are people and therefore have Free Speech rights opened the door to a deluge of money entering the election process via Super PACs. Coupled with 501 c4, 5 and 6 nonprofit organizations, not only is the amount of money massive, it's also hidden so that the general public doesn't know what individuals, companies or groups are trying to influence the outcome of the election or why. The result has been catastrophic for our electoral process. According to a Brennan Center report by Daniel I. Weiner, a very small group of Americans now wield "more power than at any time since Watergate, while many of the rest seem to be disengaging from politics. This is perhaps the most troubling result of Citizens United: in a time of historic wealth inequality the decision has helped reinforce the growing sense that our democracy primarily serves the interests of the wealthy few, and that democratic participation for the vast majority of citizens is of relatively little value." Another distressing court decision was handed down in 2013 in the case of Shelby County vs. Holder in which the court struck down Section 5 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Activists had faced clubs, police dogs and fire hoses in the struggle for the right to vote. Because of the nefarious behavior of some states in

this regard, Section 5 required them to get approval from the U.S. Justice Department before making any changes to their election laws. This requirement went by the wayside with the court decision in 2013 and since then states have closed more than 1,000 polling places, mostly in predominantly minority neighborhoods, cut early voting periods, purged voter rolls and imposed strict voter ID laws. And two years ago, the court gave free rein to partisan gerrymandering in its Rucho v. Common cause ruling. In another 5-4 decision, the majority decided that, while partisan gerrymandering "may be incompatible with democratic principles," it was none of their business. In dissent Justice Elena Kagan wrote, "The only way to understand the majority's opinion is as follows: In the face of grievous harm to democratic governance and flagrant infringements on individuals' rights — in the face of escalating partisan manipulation whose compatibility with this nation's values and law no one defends — the majority declines to provide any remedy. For the first time in this nation's history, the majority declares that it can do nothing about an acknowledged constitutional violation ...". With the extraordinary amount of data that is now available and 2021 computer technology, unless something changes,

gerrymandering will be taken to the nth degree later this year, disenfranchising millions of people for the next 10 years. And, there are now more than 250 bills being considered in 43 states all designed to make it harder to vote and limit who votes in 2022 and beyond. This is why passing HR 1 is so important. I don't agree with every facet of the bill, but the broad strokes are essential to getting our government back. The For the People Act would: - Make it easier to vote by requiring states to offer vote by mail, set early voting standards and make states take actions to reduce wait times on election days to no more than 30 minutes; - Outlaw partisan gerrymandering; - Beef up election cybersecurity; and - Move toward publicly funded campaigns and make other changes to reduce the impact of dark money in politics. HR 1 was sent to the Senate a month ago, but it sits, being held hostage by the minority party. Majority Leader Chuck Schumer needs to do anything and everything he can to pass it, including changing the filibuster rules so it no longer gives 41 senators veto power.

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