Securing the Right to Work: The History and Future of Job Guarantees

Alex Hoffman

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Sanford School of Public Policy
Advisor: Matthew Johnson
Duke University
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ABSTRACT

For over a century, politicians, economists, and activists have struggled to sustainably reduce unemployment. Several policymakers have begun to advocate for a bold solution that has only recently returned to the mainstream of American politics: a federal job guarantee where the government eliminates unemployment through direct job creation for workers excluded from the labor market. Discussions surrounding the program’s practical details, including how it would be structured and how central tradeoffs would be mitigated, have significantly lagged conversations about the guarantee’s macroeconomic principles. This thesis will examine five case studies to identify variables that influence operational success and tradeoffs that must be addressed. These variables and tradeoffs will inform the design of a job guarantee optimized for the United States. Three of the case studies have been implemented: the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the United States, National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) in India, and Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados (Jefes) in Argentina. The other two are recent proposals for the United States by Paul et al. (2018) and Tcherneva (2018). Each implemented program was shielded from addressing the difficulties associated with universal coverage because variables specific to its national political-economic environment limited the program’s scope. Furthermore, current proposals neglect significant details like training and rehabilitation and ignore potentially compromising tradeoffs. An optimal guarantee would strike a balance between decentralized and centralized models, empowering local communities to design projects best suited to meet their needs while providing uniform oversight and resources to address disparities and combat discrimination.
INTRODUCTION

The labor market on its own has never achieved full employment or eliminated poverty wages in any nation. While the myriad root causes of unemployment remain incompletely understood, millions of Americans would prefer to work more and at higher wages to combat inflation and other sources of economic precarity (Card, 2011; Laurinas, 2022). In 2018, 48% of surveyed voters reported facing serious problems finding a “decent job with good wages” (Center for American Progress, 2018).

In response to entrenched joblessness and poverty, a growing chorus of policy experts and elected officials have called for a federal job guarantee: a program where the federal government provides employment to anyone who wants it. A job guarantee would theoretically address both unemployment and deprivation by eliminating involuntary joblessness and paying a minimum wage of $15 an hour, which lifts 7.6 million people above the poverty line (Acs et al., 2022). Senators Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Cory Booker of New Jersey, and Kristen Gillibrand of New York each voiced support for a job guarantee during their presidential campaigns (Lowrey, 2018). Representatives Ayanna Pressley and Bonnie Watson Coleman, along with nearly two dozen cosponsors in total, have each introduced bills in the House to begin pilot programs (H.R. 145, 2021; Federal Jobs Guarantee Development Act of 2019). Neither proposal is highly detailed, but both programs include paying workers a minimum wage in exchange for working on socially beneficial projects as defined by the bill authors.

While no federal job guarantee has ever provided employment without eligibility requirements, three countries have implemented job guarantees enrolling millions of workers each. During the Great Depression, the United States created the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a federal agency that oversaw the country’s largest and only job guarantee. In 2005,
India’s Parliament passed legislation creating the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) to provide guaranteed employment for rural workers. Finally, Argentina’s Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Security enacted a guarantee titled Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados (“Unemployed Heads of Households,” henceforth “Jefes”) in 2002 to reduce unemployment and provide income support during the country’s economic crisis. There are currently two proposals for an American job guarantee that move beyond theoretical arguments and examine how the program would work in practice. One plan, written by three professors—Mark Paul, William Darity Jr., and Darrick Hamilton—in 2018 and titled “The Federal Job Guarantee - A Policy to Achieve Permanent Full Employment” (henceforth “Paul et al.”) was commissioned by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Professor Pavlina Tcherneva wrote the second proposal (henceforth, “Tcherneva”) for Bard College’s Levy Economics Institute. Together, these five examples form the case studies used throughout this thesis.

In recent years, the concept of guaranteed employment has gained traction among progressive politicians and inspired fierce debates between pundits, but commentary has remained abstract. While both Paul et al. and Tcherneva’s proposals have given the concept of a job guarantee newfound relevance and credibility, neither explains in detail how their program would create new jobs, ensure the jobs meet the needs of local communities and unemployed workers, and prevent the demand for employment from exceeding supply. Critics have dismissed a job guarantee as administratively infeasible, while supporters have stressed the program’s potential benefits. Despite writing legislation for a pilot program and invoking it during campaigns, policymakers lack a detailed understanding of how an American job guarantee could be organized and the fundamental tradeoffs that underpin these decisions. This thesis aims to fill this gap in the existing literature and political discourse. Its goal is to design a feasible and
effective job guarantee program informed by both previously implemented guarantees and current proposals while remaining tailored to the unique elements of U.S. labor markets and political institutions.

This thesis’ primary research question is: How can previously-implemented job guarantees and current proposals inform the design of an optimal American program? To answer the question, this thesis qualitatively analyses all five case studies and identifies three tradeoffs inherent to any iteration of a job guarantee. These tradeoffs inform five variables that capture the essential elements of each job guarantee’s design and allow for standardized comparisons between the five case studies. Each variable for every case study is scored on a 1-5 scale. Finally, this analysis informs the design of an optimized American program (henceforth the “Hoffman Proposal”) organized using the same variables and scored in the same manner. Section I of this thesis will outline the theoretical arguments for and against a job guarantee, as well as the political and intellectual history of the idea. Section II introduces the methodology used to answer the thesis’ research question. Section III features qualitative analyses of the five case studies. Section IV conducts the numerical program evaluation of each case study. Section V adapts the analytical framework of the case study evaluations to sketch out an optimal job guarantee for the United States. Section VI concludes.
BACKGROUND

Impact of Unemployment

Job loss is often economically devastating. Unemployment can lead to short-term income reduction and long-term increases in poverty (Brand, 2015). During the Great Recession, family incomes for long-term unemployed workers fell by 40% (Johnson & Feng, 2013). In 2011, long-term unemployed workers were nearly twice as likely to be poor as those unemployed for less than six months and almost four times as likely to be poor as those who never lost their jobs (Nichols et al., 2013). Similarly, the unemployed suffer from permanently lower wages. During the 1980s, reemployed workers earned between 5% and 15% less than workers with comparable skills and backgrounds who never lost their jobs. Half of the displaced workers in some communities remained unemployed for over nine months (Jacobson et al., 1993; Ruhm, 1991; Hamermesh, 1989). In 2019, before the COVID-19 outbreak, low-wage workers comprised 43% of the workforce. Two years later and one year into the pandemic, they comprised 52% of all workers who lost their job, suggesting that low-wage workers have seen the least recovery (Bateman & Ross, 2021).

Unemployment exacts acute health costs as well. Job loss leads to large declines in self-reported physical and mental health (Burgard et al., 2007). The mortality consequences of displacement, defined as involuntary job loss due to economic downturns or structural changes within a firm, are likewise severe (Quintini & Venn, 2013). Death rates increase between 50% and 100% after one year in communities with high sudden displacement and increase 10% to 15% for the next 20 years. For a 40-year-old worker, that is equivalent to a 1-to-1.5-year decline in life expectancy (Sullivan & von Wachter, 2009). Research suggests that layoffs also negatively affect fertility rates (Del Bono et al., 2008; Lindo, 2010).
Unemployment inflicts deep and long-lasting wounds on entire communities. Persistent joblessness in concentrated areas leads to divorce, increased use of public assistance, and high crime rates (Wilson, 1987). Recent scholarship has emphasized unemployment’s social exclusionary effects. Job loss affects how individuals perceive their social connections, happiness, access to resources, and mental health. These exclusionary effects further reduce motivation and self-confidence (Pohlan, 2019). Unemployment thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy by preventing the fulfillment of psychosocial needs like social status and higher self-efficacy typically associated with work. These effects grew more significant the longer the length of unemployment and remained even when individuals eventually found new jobs (Pohlan, 2019). Unemployment has intergenerational effects as well. Children suffer when their parents are laid off. Parental job loss lowers children’s school performance and the likelihood they graduate high school (Rege et al., 2011; Wightman, 2012).

Unemployment also exacerbates longstanding racial and gender inequalities. Persistently high unemployment rates among women and minority communities both reflect and shape discriminatory labor market practices that increase wealth and income inequality between specific social groups (Neumark, 2018; Quillian, 2017). Black Americans have consistently had an unemployment rate twice as high as white workers, even after controlling for educational background (Paul et al., 2018). Unemployment’s harms include more than temporary earnings decreases. Job loss hurts individuals, scars communities, and widens existing disparities.

Measuring Unemployment

Unemployment is also more pervasive than commonly perceived. There are several ways to measure unemployment. The official rate, as provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), defines unemployment as actively seeking work in the past four weeks without success
The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) tracks several unemployment rates. The U-3 rate is the number of unemployed individuals who have looked for a job at least once in the past year but not in the previous four weeks. The BLS also tracks a more comprehensive rate, the U-6. The U-6 includes total unemployed, marginally attached, and involuntary part-time workers. Marginally attached workers are not in the labor force, want and are available for work, and have looked for a job at least once in the past year but not in the previous four weeks. Involuntary part-time workers refers to people working less than 35 hours per week who would rather work full time, are available to do so, and give an economic reason for working part-time such as having their hours cut or being unable to find full-time employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Together, these variables constitute the U-6 underemployment rate.

As of November 2022, 3.7%, or 6 million, workers remain unemployed. An additional 5 million people have part-time employment despite wishing to work more, resulting in an underemployment (U-6) rate of 6.7% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Neither the U-3 nor U-6 rates capture people who have given up on employment and have not sought work in at least a year. The Employment-Population Ratio, defined as the number of working-age people divided by the total population, captures these workers but, in aggregation, also obscures the myriad of reasons why people who could work choose not to. Nonetheless, the Employment-Population Ratio reveals disparities that the topline figures do not. While 71.7% of working-age people with a bachelor’s degree or higher are employed as of September 2022, only 54.1% of non-college-educated workers have jobs (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2022).

Even this expanded view does not include workers who are permanently employed but cannot earn a living wage—one that covers their basic needs. Accounting for low-wage work provides the fullest possible picture of labor market precarity. As of October 2022, over 30 million Americans, 23.6% of the labor force, are currently unemployed, underemployed, or
annually earn less than $20,000 pre-tax, a figure the Ludwig Institute of Shared Economic Prosperity (LISEP) estimates is required to cover basic expenses in communities with the least expensive standards of living (Ludwig Institute for Shared Economic Prosperity, 2022). Because many communities are more expensive, this figure is an underestimate. In 2018, 53 million Americans, or 44% of all workers, qualified as “low-wage” in that they earned less than two-thirds of the median annual wage for full-time work when adjusted for local living costs and gender pay disparities (Ross & Bateman, 2019). In 2017 nearly 12% of workers were paid a wage that would leave a full-time worker below the federal poverty guideline if they were the sole earner in their family (Cooper, 2018).
I. BENEFITS, CRITICISMS, AND HISTORY

Advocates argue a job guarantee would provide three primary benefits: eliminating unemployment and reducing poverty, stabilizing the economy, and directing work to meet social needs. Critics, however, ranging from conservatives (Bourne, 2018) to moderate liberals (Bhandari, 2019), and progressives (Bivens, 2018), have argued that a truly universal program would suffer from four principal flaws: cost, crowding, corruption, and inflation. Opponents of the guarantee contend the program’s theoretical foundations are inherently flawed. The relative success of previously implemented federal job guarantees, they argue, is due to their limited scope, not despite it. Debates surrounding the efficacy of a federal job guarantee program are not new. The idea of a job guarantee traces its roots back to 19th-century France and has evolved considerably in response to new social movements and economic disruptions.

Benefits

Eliminating Unemployment and Reducing Poverty

Most supporters claim a job guarantee would virtually eliminate unemployment by directly hiring unemployed workers and significantly reduce poverty by paying a uniform wage high enough to lift enrollees above the poverty line (Paul et al., 2018; Tcherneva, 2018; Mitchell, 2017; Wray, 2018) If a job guarantee successfully reduced unemployment close to zero, it would virtually eliminate the physical and psychological ailments associated with joblessness. Providing every American access to a job that pays a living wage would also combat racial injustice. Communities with large minority populations disproportionately suffer from high unemployment. Providing jobs and income proportional to demand for employment would, in effect, be targeted investments in minority communities (Tcherneva, 2018). In addition to
straightforwardly reducing or eliminating involuntary unemployment, a job guarantee would theoretically also reduce inequality and economic exploitation by establishing a meaningful wage floor to put upward pressure on the private sector to increase wages. Raising the income of millions of low-wage workers in the private sector would, all other factors remaining constant, decrease working poverty in the United States.

**Fiscal Stabilization**

A job guarantee may also mitigate the most harmful effects of boom-and-bust cycles that are inherent to financially complex capitalist economies. The economist Hyman Minsky famously argued that financial crashes were the rule, not the exception, for industrialized nations. According to Minsky, during economically stable periods, firms, banks, and households are incentivized to take on increasing levels of debt, gradually shifting from a position where their income pays off their debt to one where it can only meet the interest payments on it. During moments of instability, when firms and people lose or see reduced income, over-leveraged borrowers borrow simply to meet their interest payments. Small disruptions escalate and bust becomes inevitable (Minsky, 1977). During busts, banks are not the only losers. Millions of Americans lose their jobs and suffer severe social and physical consequences. Job guarantee proponents build on Minsky’s conclusion that recessions are an inevitable feature of financial capitalism by arguing that guaranteed employment would mitigate economic crises by serving as a macroeconomic stabilization tool that benefits firms, workers, and consumers.

The job guarantee would serve as an automatic fiscal stabilizer during economic crises by maintaining full employment and high aggregate demand. During more prosperous periods, workers could leave the job guarantee and begin working in the private sector. During a downturn, the job guarantee would automatically expand as the private sector contracts and
workers enroll in the guarantee to receive employment. While workers’ purchasing power would decrease during a recession, the guarantee would provide a buffer to incomes and prevent sharp decreases in effective demand (Paul, et al., 2018). Workers who maintain a steady source of income, as opposed to falling into unemployment, will maintain total consumer spending levels at a rate, if not equal then at least comparable, to pre-recessionary periods. This spending will support businesses and private-sector employment which will stimulate the economy. The job guarantee would thus, its proponents argue, act as a countercyclical mechanism superior to current inflation stabilization methods like Federal Reserve rate hikes. The job guarantee would expand and contract as the economy contracts and expands, protecting workers from losing a source of income and preventing downturns from growing into recessions. Workers in the job guarantee would consume more goods and services than if they were unemployed. In this way, a job guarantee would buttress aggregate demand, helping to stabilize economic growth and prices (Tcherneva, 2018).

**Directing Work to Meet Social Needs**

A job guarantee could also direct work to meet social needs in ways the labor market and contemporary public sector cannot or do not. Proponents claim that both markets and public sector investments fail to adequately provide a range of community services including environmental protection, care work, and restoration of public spaces. Supporters of a job guarantee argue there are no developed markets for these services and that current public investment is insufficient to compensate. A universal job guarantee spanning the entire country has significant potential to build and expand public goods both traditionally and broadly defined. A job guarantee could invest in infrastructure like roads and bridges, but also include public parks, civic buildings, and community spaces. A job guarantee could also provide socially useful
goods and services such as medical care, childcare, education, and professional training which would all help develop both human and physical capital. Most radically, however, the guarantee could redefine the utility of work away from profit-maximizing activities, whether calculated in the short-term or long-term, to creating resources simply because they meet the needs of a community. Tcherneva argues this reinterpretation of work would benefit society by providing individuals and communities the financial ability to invest their time and resources in work that is more meaningful, healthy, and useful than private employment. According to her, communities know many of their needs better than the market (Tcherneva, 2018).

**Criticisms**

*Cost*

Many critics charge proponents of job guarantees with minimizing the true costs of their proposals. Earlier proponents of job guarantees calculated the total cost of the program simply by multiplying the total number of underemployed workers by the minimum wage (Minsky, 1986; Gordon, 1997; Wray, 1998). Both recent proposals (Paul, et al., 2018; Tcherneva, 2018) predict a budget the size of $543 billion, or 2.5% of GDP; and $514 billion to $749 billion, or 2.2% to 3.3% of GDP, respectively.

Neither of these totals is precise. Both proposals underestimate the cost of their respective programs by assuming zero administrative costs including paying for the salaries of federal, state, and local officials implementing the program. At the same time, investments in the job guarantee may reduce federal spending on other social programs and increase tax revenues. The number of people requesting unemployment benefits would likely decline as the job guarantee expands and previously unemployed workers gain jobs. Similarly, increased incomes for poor
Americans would decrease enrollment in programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Additionally, both Paul et al. and Tcherneva briefly allude to the fact that a job guarantee would increase tax revenues across the country by improving infrastructure and developing human capital through job training programs and soft skill development. Neither proposal attempts to quantify the potential cost savings of spending reductions and increased revenue, but both suggest the true cost of their programs would be lower than the price tag they provide. Regardless of the specific numbers, both proposals acknowledge that an annual budget ranging in the hundreds of billions of dollars is a nontrivial sum to fund, even through a combination of deficit spending and taxes that both plans propose.

**Crowding**

Critics argue that by offering highly favorable pay and working conditions relative to low-wage private sector positions, a job guarantee could drain the private sector of tens of millions of workers (Bourne, 2018). This would hurt private companies and restrict investment from firms dependent on cheap labor. A job guarantee with a baseline wage would set a floor in the labor market effectively equivalent to a minimum wage. This baseline wage has the potential to decrease the number of workers in the private sector. This could happen either because workers are incentivized to leave the private sector for superior pay in the job guarantee, or because private sector firms—needing to raise wages to compete with the guarantee—face higher labor costs and thus decrease total employment.

No contemporary developed economy has enacted a job guarantee that might provide direct insights into its impact on private-sector employment, but research on other large public-sector employment programs may inform predictions of how a guarantee would affect the labor
market. Several studies examining the relationship between public sector job creation and unemployment have found that government hiring displaces a larger number of private sector workers in developed but not developing countries, creating a net increase in unemployment in more developed labor markets (Behar 2019, Faggio & Overma, 2014). Other research is less conclusive, finding that the net impact on unemployment can be either positive or negative depending on the levels of wages provided by public sector bodies and other institutions like unions that influence wage-setting across the entire economy (Craigwell & Jackman, 2014). Importantly, no public sector hiring program examined in the studies targeted unemployed workers. Often the workers best able to meet the needs of the individual agencies were already employed in the private sector. As a result, the public agencies surveyed competed with the private sector for educated or experienced workers to a degree that a job guarantee optimizing primarily for full employment may not.

Recent contributions to the academic literature on minimum wages help provide U.S.-specific insight on whether a wage floor would decrease private sector employment. Most recent scholarship finds that minimum wage laws, including $15 wages, do not significantly impact total employment, although they may have a small negative impact on low-wage employment (Card et al., 1995; Ashenfelter et al., 1982; Dustman et al., 2022; Cengiz et al., 2019; Derenencourt et al., 2021). The job guarantee might have other crowding effects beyond its guaranteed wage, however. Low-wage jobs frequently have inconsistent hours, abusive bosses, and are impermanent (Sorensen et al., 2019; Akram et al., 2019). Guaranteed employment might attract low-wage workers even if it does not provide a higher wage.

In India, researchers studied how both crowding dynamics—public employment and wage pressure—were influenced by NREGS, the country’s job guarantee program. They found
that India’s job guarantee does not, on balance, crowd out jobs. Instead, the guarantee increases private sector earnings and employment. The authors attribute this result to widespread uncompetitive labor markets throughout the country and argue that the crowding out hypothesis should be reexamined in developing nations (Muralidharan et al., 2022)

**Corruption**

Corruption is a threat to the efficacy and legitimacy of any public agency and a job guarantee program would be no different. There are several ways both project sponsors and program administrators could engage in corrupt practices. Nongovernmental organizations that receive funding to hire workers from a job guarantee could overcharge the government for materials, overbill hours, and provide false information about their organization’s social impact. Administrators, meanwhile, could be bribed to fund certain organizations or receive kickbacks to ignore other abuses (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2014).

A job guarantee also poses other administrative issues. Under a universal program, a project team can fire a worker for creating an unsafe or bothersome work environment, but little else (Tcherneva, 2018). If an employee does not show up for work, he or she is not paid. A job guarantee that prioritizes completing socially valuable work would have to establish if slacking employees were to be disciplined or if there would be any type of consequences for low-quality work. These questions must be answered for any job guarantee to be viable.

**Inflation**

In the likely event that a job guarantee raises wages for low-income workers in the private sector, a sudden increase in the cost of labor for businesses could lead to inflation throughout the economy. Higher business costs may be passed on to consumers. Additionally, if workers at the bottom of the income distribution received a de facto raise to the new private
sector floor of $15 an hour, workers making slightly more might advocate for a corresponding raise, and so on (Bhandari, 2019; Baker, 2018). Eventually, this could lead to a wage-price spiral that could hurt low-income workers the most.

Similarly with a job guarantee’s potential to crowd out private employment, empirical studies on the impact of minimum wage increases can provide clarity over the program’s potential inflationary impact. Wage spillover effects do exist; however, researchers have calculated their range to extend no more than $3 above a new minimum wage of $15 (Cengiz et al., 2019). The authors find that successive bargaining becomes more difficult beyond the minimum wage. A worker making $18 an hour would require roughly all nearby workers making $15, $16, and $17 to progressively negotiate for higher wages to have any leverage over their employer. If any workers are making $17 an hour who would gladly fill the employee’s position, their threats would ring hollow. The exact size of wage spillover may vary between labor markets but it is unlikely to be significant.

The job guarantee does possess two complementary features different from a minimum wage, however, that may have inflationary impacts. First, unlike a minimum wage, the job guarantee provides employment to workers outside the labor market. This would increase the total supply of money in the economy which would stimulate demand and put upward pressure on prices. Similarly, while a minimum wage is a transfer from owners and consumers to workers, a job guarantee would be fully funded by new government spending. This too, however, could be redistributive depending on if the program is financed by taxes instead of deficit spending. The degree of the guarantee’s inflationary impacts may depend on the structure of these taxes and the marginal propensity to consume of the taxed groups. Taxes on the wealthy that fund increased consumption for lower-wage workers may very well present inflationary pressures.
Evidence from the current inflationary environment suggests that wage gains for low-income workers are not presently a significant driver of inflation. In 2022, real wages have fallen by a median of 8.5% as workers’ bargaining power has proved insufficient to raise wages on pace with price increases (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2022). This is likely reflective of the longstanding decline in unionization rates and absence of other labor market institutions that strengthen worker power (Mishel, 2021). Without widespread collective bargaining, a job guarantee would be unlikely to trigger a wage-price spiral.

**History**

The idea of a formal government job guarantee traces its roots back to the utopian socialists of the 18th and 19th centuries (Blind, 1906). Louis Blanc, a reformist French politician who oversaw the country’s post-revolutionary provisional government, first implemented a job guarantee through the National Workshops, a program that provided guaranteed employment for unemployed workers in at least one national works project. After several months, however, the government failed to design enough new projects to match demand, leading to large-scale riots in Paris. While the Workshops proved unsustainable, Blanc successfully adapted an existing natural rights framework that emphasized economic liberty and free competition to advance an alternative jurisprudence centered on the “right to employment” (Splenger, 1968). This new legal and philosophical tradition persisted even after the provisional government fell, and the concept of a universal right to work become permanently associated with socialist politics.

Across the Atlantic, the legacy of the job guarantee originated during Reconstruction after the Civil War as Black intellectuals and activists fought for guaranteed employment in an explicitly exclusionary labor market. W.E.B. Du Bois described the right to a good job as a
central component of “abolition democracy,” recognizing its ability to lift newly freed slaves out of poverty (Aronoff, 2018). Decades later in 1966, Philip Randolph was inspired by DuBois to become one of the century’s most dedicated advocates for a job guarantee alongside other civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King (David Stein, 2017).

The job guarantee gained academic and electoral legitimacy, however, in the years before the Second World War. In *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, John Maynard Keynes (1936) wrote that simply stimulating effective demand, when aggregate demand is equivalent to aggregate supply, through active monetary policy and indirect state investment is insufficient to achieve full employment. Employment imperfectly follows increases in effective demand, he argued, because increases in demand may produce products with a relatively low elasticity of employment. Thus, he wrote, “if the first impulse towards the increase in effective demand comes from an increase in consumption, the initial elasticity of employment will be further below its eventual equilibrium-level than if the impulse comes from an increase in investment” (Keynes, 1936, 143). During the Great Depression, Keynes recommended this investment take the form of building “public works” and funding direct, targeted employment programs which rendered elasticity questions moot (Keynes, 61-66).

In Washington, Keynesian principles provided fuel for an American Left invigorated by the apparent collapse of capitalist principles after the Great Depression. Together, they combined to produce a political consensus centered around heavy state intervention in the economy. Direct job creation was the heart of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s program and ideologically connected to his Second Bill of Rights which raised employment to the level of speech and assembly as inalienable American rights (Roosevelt, 1941).
In the decades following World War II, Democrats had three opportunities to make temporary New Deal job programs like the WPA permanent. The first was with legislation that would eventually become the Employment Act of 1946. Left-wing Congressional Democrats, who were veterans of the Roosevelt administration and riding the coattails of a postwar consensus on the benefits of economic planning, drafted a bill that promised to directly fund the employment of workers who were not hired by the private sector (Atwell, 2018). Initially titled the “Full Employment Bill”, the legislation was stripped of its enforcement mechanisms by the combined efforts of businessmen and anti-communist Republicans alongside moderate “fiscal Keynesian” Democrats who advocated for limiting state intervention in the economy to countercyclical adjustments of monetary and fiscal policies (Weir, 1993). The watered-down bill, ultimately passed as the Employment Act of 1946, called for “maximum” rather than “full” employment, did not provide for the “right to a useful and remunerative job” that the original bill mandated, and, ignoring Keyne’s advice, lacked provisions requiring the government to leverage fiscal policy to ensure full employment (Atwell, 2018).

The War on Poverty was another missed opportunity for supporters of a federal job guarantee. The Johnson administration adopted two strategic approaches for eradicating structural poverty, neither of which focused on job creation (O’Connor, 2001). One centered on correcting labor-market failures, supporting labor organizing in low-wage industries, and bolstering the increasingly stretched welfare state. The other strategy blamed cycles of deprivation on a “culture of poverty” (O’Connor, 2001, 21). By framing its analysis of poverty’s underlying causes in psychological terms and avoiding a commitment to providing employment, the Johnson administration did not use its historically large Congressional majority to adopt a job-focused approach to fighting poverty.
The 1978 Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act, known as the Humphrey-Hawkins Act, was the closest Congress came to implementing a post-war job guarantee. Acknowledging the inclusion of the right to work in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the Act authorized the government to create a buffer stock of public employment in case private firms did not provide enough jobs to lower the unemployment rate below 3%. These jobs were required to be low-skilled and low-paying to not draw the workforce away from the private sector. At the last minute, however, the Act was made nonbinding and merely authorized, not mandated, a public job program (Atwell, 2018). To date, the U.S. government has not implemented any such program, even though the unemployment rate has predominantly been above 3%. The Act’s call for full employment and balanced growth remains enshrined in law, however.

Following these failures, support for a job guarantee faded as the neoliberal revolution of the Reagan years encouraged states to retreat from labor markets. Once in office, Reagan cut spending on many War on Poverty and Great Society programs, passed significant tax cuts, and rolled back environmental, healthcare, and banking regulations, amongst others (Garry, 1992). Although Reagan failed to cut Social Security, his military buildups and deficits prevented the expansion of social programs for a generation and reduced the capability of the state to fund, much less manage, ambitious economic programs (Garry, 1992). Just as significantly, Reagan’s consistent messaging against central planning relegated proponents of bold labor market intervention to the fringes of the political mainstream (Wilentz, 2008).

Despite the Reaganite consensus’ sustained intellectual and electoral prominence, persistent poverty, inequality, and unemployment have led several groups, including leftist post-Keynesian economists, climate activists, and successors to the civil rights movement, to continue
demanding the government operate at full employment. The survival and quiet refinement of the theoretical principles behind the job guarantee has provided fuel to a newly invigorated progressive movement that has gained political prominence over the last half-decade.
II. METHODOLOGY

This thesis’ methodology uses both a comparative case study analysis and policy analysis tools to qualitatively measure the structure and impact of each case study. The analysis of the five guarantees is a comparison of similarity and difference. Each program shares key features with each other, and each differs in the ways they adapt to the political-economic environment of their countries. To properly ground an analysis of a program as complex as a job guarantee, this thesis identifies three tradeoffs inherent to any universal job guarantee. The tradeoffs, described in further detail below, can be summarized as flexibility versus job quality, universality versus social impact, and guarantee versus non-guarantee public sector enrollment. These tradeoffs capture the relationships between competing goals, structures, and incentives within any iteration of a universal guarantee, regardless of its design or context. This thesis also identifies five variables that capture the basic elements of a job guarantee’s design and mission and allow for standardized comparisons between all five case studies. The five variables are the guarantee’s purpose, distribution of power and responsibilities, types of jobs provided, wage structure, and training and rehabilitation programs. As described further in the variables section, the tradeoffs inform how the five variables interact with each other by illustrating how the value of one variable may come into tension with another.

The five case studies are then qualitatively analyzed. The qualitative analysis describes and evaluates the historical context, structural features, and goals of the three implemented programs and two proposals. The qualitative analyses are then complemented by a numerical evaluation of each case study. Each variable for every case study is scored on a 1-5 scale. For example, for the first variable, purpose, “1” represents total optimization for full employment within mandated constraints and “5” represents total optimization for socially useful work. After
operationalizing every variable for all five job guarantees, the data is sorted into a 5x5 table.

Finally, the qualitative analyses inform the design of an optimized American program (henceforth the “Hoffman proposal”) organized using the same variables and scored in the same manner.

The tradeoffs are not numerically evaluated alongside the variables because they are not present in every case study. As described in further detail below, all three tradeoffs are only inherent to universal job guarantees in developed nations. None of the three implemented federal programs provided universal access and the two American proposals are not detailed enough to convey how they would address the tradeoffs. Instead of serving as a measurement tool like the variables, the tradeoffs inform the design of the Hoffman proposal in Section VI by clarifying the consequences of different values for each variable.

Tradeoffs

Every universal job guarantee, real or theoretical, faces three tradeoffs: 1) the tradeoff between allowing workers full flexibility to leave the guarantee and ensuring they can positively contribute to jobs that require longer-term commitment or community ties; 2) the tradeoff between providing enough jobs for all workers who need them and ensuring those jobs benefit society as a whole; and 3) the tradeoff between allowing government agencies to participate in the program and incentivizing them to substitute their employees off their payrolls and into the job guarantee. Because these tradeoffs are inherent to any universal guarantee, failing to intentionally address them has the potential to limit the efficacy of the entire program. None of the tradeoffs are identified, let alone addressed, in either the literature surrounding the job guarantee or the proposed American programs.
The first tradeoff captures the tension between the flexibility promised by a job guarantee and the quantity and quality of the work created by the program. All countercyclical job guarantees allow workers to freely leave the program to enter the private sector and vice-versa. Some roles, like social workers, afterschool program leaders, and community artists, to name a few, require consistent training and experience on the job or social embeddedness, that is, preexisting personal connections with members of the community. Unlike in many conservation jobs, constantly rotating teaching assistants, for example, would adversely impact the quality of the work.

The second tradeoff facing a job guarantee is between the universality of the job guarantee and the social impact of the jobs it provides. A job guarantee may not be able to both completely satisfy demand from workers who want a job and direct them into jobs that meaningfully benefit society. Long-term unemployed workers who face the most difficulty securing employment in the labor market would most benefit from a job guarantee. These workers face a variety of obstacles to private sector employment that may prevent them from participating in projects ranging that require previous experience, specific skills, or certain mental and physical capabilities. These requirements would preclude some long-time unemployed workers from participating in healthcare, education, and construction jobs, to name a few. If a job guarantee prioritizes universal coverage and seeks to provide employment opportunities for the most challenged workers, it may have to create jobs that are not socially useful. If community groups, municipalities, or state governments have not created enough socially useful jobs to meet the demand from unemployed workers at any given time, the program may have to rapidly create make-work projects to maximize employment.
The third tradeoff refers to the tension between allowing public agencies to hire workers through the job and encouraging those agencies to substitute their employees onto a job guarantee. Both Paul et al. and Tcherneva’s proposals argue many local public agencies are understaffed and engage in work critical to their local communities. Both plans allow for public agencies to request funding from the guarantee to expand their staff. However, if agencies employ workers making an equivalent or lower wage than that provided by the guarantee, then they will be incentivized to fire workers and rehire them through the job guarantee. This would shift the agencies’ wage burden onto the guarantee without creating any new work. None of the implemented guarantees dealt with this issue because they all operated in high-unemployment environments and did not have to compete with a large network of public agencies for workers (Sturgess, 2016). In this respect, implementing a job guarantee in a developed nation like the United States with a more robust public sector poses the unique challenge of avoiding incentivizing public agencies to cut labor costs knowing the job guarantee would pick up the slack.

**Variables**

The most important features of the five case studies can be summarized using five variables. They include 1) the purpose of the job guarantee; 2) the distribution of power and responsibilities between the federal, state, and local levels; 3) the type of work provided by the job guarantee; 4) the job guarantee’s wage structure; 5) and how the job guarantee handles employee training and, if necessary, rehabilitation.

The first variable has two categories. The purpose of the job guarantee can be to 1) serve as a permanent or semipermanent tool for large-scale social planning akin to that of the proposed Green New Deal or 2) act merely as a tool for full employment and financial stability during
recessions without any regard for social planning. These two ends rest on a continuum and a guarantee could balance between both priorities. For example, a job guarantee that encourages, but does not strictly require, socially useful work and swells and contracts countercyclically would fall between either end of the spectrum.

This variable is informed by the first two tradeoffs: between the flexibility of the guarantee and the quality of work done, and between the scope of the guarantee and the social impact of its projects. A guarantee that optimizes for socially useful work may lock workers into pre-determined contracts to minimize turnover and the resulting deterioration of project quality. Doing so would limit enrollees’ flexibility and disincentivize workers who require short-term employment while they search for other jobs from signing up. Conversely, a job guarantee that prioritizes full employment and thus maximum accessibility will allow workers to enter and leave the program at any time, potentially harming the quality of some projects. The second tradeoff between universality and social impact, meanwhile, is captured directly in the possible range for a guarantee’s purpose.

The second variable covers the balance of power and funding authority within the program. The job guarantee will involve actors from the federal, state, and local levels. The central question this variable seeks to answer is how are responsibilities and powers distributed between agencies at each level? Together, this variable can be analyzed along a spectrum ranging from a highly centralized program where all projects are chosen and funded by the Department of Labor in DC, to a highly decentralized one where local communities decide which programs get approved to be funded by Washington. Any federal job guarantee, as compared to a state or municipal program, would be completely or primarily federally funded.
What could differ between federal job guarantee proposals, however, is where decisions are made.

The distribution of authority in the guarantee is informed by the third tradeoff between allowing public agencies to participate in the program and incentivizing them to shift employee wages onto the guarantee. A highly centralized program that creates its own projects would be less impacted by this tradeoff than a more decentralized guarantee that is dependent on a larger number of stakeholders to propose projects.

The third variable covers the types of jobs provided by the guarantee. There is no definitive list of categories of jobs and some proponents say the number is near limitless. Commonly included examples of work include cleaning up vacant properties, restoring public spaces, establishing school gardens, growing urban farms, building co-working spaces, deploying solar arrays, building community theaters, constructing playgrounds, restoring historical sites, organizing carpooling programs, starting recycling, reusing, and water-collection initiatives, managing food waste programs, and leading oral histories projects (Tcherneva, 2018).

The second and third tradeoffs influence the types of jobs a guarantee provides. A guarantee with jobs that have fewer prerequisites could increase the program’s scope by restricting as few unemployed workers as possible from enrolling in the guarantee and avoiding competing with state agencies performing similar non-market-oriented work. Previous research on public employment programs finds prioritizing accessible projects maximizes unemployment reductions (Crépon & van de Berg, 2016). A guarantee that optimizes for providing more complex jobs may, however, provide more types of benefits to local communities. Additionally, the third tradeoff between allowing public sector involvement and preventing agencies from shifting payrolls onto the guarantee informs the types of projects a program funds. If jobs
provided by the guarantee overlap or compete with nearby public sector work, then agencies could feasibility fire and rehire employees for the same job. If the jobs provided by the guarantee engage in different work than local public agencies, they will not be able to rehire their workers through the guarantee.

Wages, the fourth variable, are another key element of any job guarantee. Both proposals and all previously existing job guarantees have a minimum wage. This variable evaluates whether the program contains a multi-tiered wage structure. The job guarantee’s wage floor will become the de facto minimum wage across the entire country and a ceiling (in the existence of a multi-tiered system) may influence the degree to which private employers are crowded out by the guarantee. The wage level of the guarantee, like the types of jobs offered, is informed by the third tradeoff concerning public sector involvement. The higher wages the guarantee pays and the more opportunities for advancement the program provides, the more public sector jobs it will compete for—incentivizing agencies to shift more workers’ wages onto the guarantee.

Finally, the fifth variable is the degree to which the job guarantee provides training or rehabilitation for its employees. Guarantees can train or rehabilitate workers in-house, incentivize local businesses to train or rehabilitate workers, or not deal with training or rehabilitation at all. This question is important for two reasons. First, the existence of a training commitment may help employees better transition to work in the private sector and out of the job guarantee. Providing training to workers may grow the overall economy and reduce the cost of the program. Second, unemployed workers may have special obstacles such as substance abuse disorders and behavioral issues that require counseling or rehabilitation. The extent to which the job guarantee provides these services may influence the quality of its projects and success in providing permanent employment for unemployed workers.
The first tradeoff between flexibility and job quality and the second tradeoff between universality and social impact put the implications of providing training and rehabilitation in context. Investing extensively in training and rehabilitation could allow a program to provide both flexibility and high-quality work by encouraging workers to remain in the guarantee as they gain new skills or treatment that helps them perform better on their projects. This variable may also influence the scope and social impact of the guarantee. Investing in training and rehabilitation may allow workers who otherwise might be excluded from certain jobs to apply and improve mental health outcomes and human capital development in local communities. At the same time, however, training programs could incentivize workers to leave the job guarantee faster and apply their newly acquired skills to higher-paying jobs in the private sector.

**Program Evaluation of Proposed and Implemented Guarantees**

All variables are evaluated on a scale of 1-5. Plans that do not address a variable are labeled “N/A”. For purpose, the first variable, “1” represents a total optimization for full employment within mandated constraints and “5” represents total optimization for socially useful work. For the second variable, the distribution of power and responsibilities, “1” represents extreme devolution and “5” represents extreme centralization. For the third variable, the type of work provided, “1” represents jobs not requiring skills, qualification, or social embeddedness while “5” represents jobs requiring skills, qualifications, or social embeddedness. For wage structure, the fourth variable, “1” represents a flat structure and “5” represents a multi-leveled hierarchy. Finally, for the fifth variable, training and rehabilitation, “1” represents minimal training or rehabilitation while “5” represents a significant investment in training or rehabilitation.
III. CASE STUDIES

While both developing and developed capitalist economies have overseen dozens of local and national public direct job creation programs targeting specific communities, industries, or seasons over the last century, no country has ever implemented a universal federal guarantee. For the purposes of this thesis, a job guarantee is universal when it provides permanent employment without significant restrictions. Among the list of implemented public job programs, three stand out. India, Argentina, and the United States have enacted the three largest and most comprehensive job programs, and the only federal job guarantees, in history. No other country has attempted programs as demographically or geographically comprehensive. Contemporarily, many theorists have explored the possibility of a job guarantee, but only Paul et al. and Tcherneva have provided specific proposals that describe the structure of a guarantee within the context of the American labor market. These two plans form the fourth and fifth case studies.

United States (WPA)

Context

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was the largest New Deal agency, and it employed a total of 8.5 million people from 1935 to 1943 (Tymoigne, 2014). The agency was established through Executive Order 7034 on May 6, 1935, and was designed to replace the existing Federal Emergency Relief Administration which provided direct payments to unemployed citizens (Executive Order 7034, 1935).

The economic environment at the time was dire and to provide relief and revive the economy, the Roosevelt Administration decided to provide direct employment to a maximum of 3.55 million workers. The government arrived at this figure by calculating the number of
economically insecure Americans and adding successive restrictions. In 1935, 20 million people received some form of direct financial assistance from the United States government. Of the 20 million, 8.3 million were children younger than 16, 3.8 million were between 16 and 65 and not seeking work, including housewives, students, and incapacitated persons, and 750,000 were citizens older than 65. Thus, of the 20 million people receiving benefits, the government deemed 13 million ineligible for employment. Of the remaining 7 million theoretically employable workers between the ages of 16 and 65, 1.65 million were farm operators or had obtained some form of private employment and another 350,000 were, despite being already employed or seeking a job, labeled as incapacitated by the government. In total, the government determined there were 5.15 million working-age laborers able and interested in working. The WPA further restricted eligibility to one worker per family, reducing the total of 5.15 million by 1.6 million—the estimated number of workers with families containing two or more employable workers. Thus, the government arrived at its maximum of 3.55 million workers (Howard, 1973). An average of 2.3 million workers a year enrolled in the WPA between 1935 and 1943. The program reached its maximum employment of 3,334,594 in November 1938 (Fishback et al., 2020).

**Structure**

The WPA, like most other New Deal agencies, was highly centralized. Workers applied to the program and the WPA Division of Employment located in Washington, DC placed applicants into projects based on their previous experience or training. Community organizations, private citizens, and local public officials could all make formal proposals for project designs to the state WPA office. State-level administrators, who were federal employees, reviewed the proposals. If the state administrators determined the proposals met federal guidelines, they would convert the proposal into a formal application to the Washington office of
the WPA, where they were accepted or denied. Project proposals were required to identify a community sponsor, estimate the total cost of the proposed work, the percent of the cost the sponsor would bear, the amount and kinds of labor required, and preliminary engineering plans and sketches in the case of construction projects. Sponsors were required to cover a portion of the cost of every project, but the federal government set no specific minimum. After completion, the projects belonged to the sponsors who agreed to maintain and operate the completed project at their own expense (U.S. Government Print Office, 1947).

Worker pay was determined by three variables: regional average wages, population density, and the applicant’s skill. Wages varied from $19 to $94 per month, equivalent to $411—$2,032 in 2022 dollars (Gjenvick Archives, 2000; CPI Inflation, 2022). The WPA limited work hours to 8 hours a day or 40 hours a week (Howard, 1973). Most WPA employees were unskilled workers who received minimum wages. Sponsors frequently needed to use their own funds to hire skilled workers to oversee complex projects like constructing schools and other public buildings (U.S. Government Print Office, 1947).

The WPA had four levels of administration: the central office in Washington, regional offices, state offices, and district offices. The central administration contained the Divisions which set WPA policies. Regional offices acted as liaisons between the federal and state offices and coordinated state programs with federal regulations. State administrators were responsible for the general operation of the WPA within their state. State offices distributed federal funds to District offices and reported project data and complaints gathered by District offices to regional offices. District offices directly managed project operations, including assigning certified workers to projects, recording labor hours, and scheduling the initiation, termination, and
completion of projects. At its peak in the fall of 1938, the WPA employed nearly 36,000 administrators at all four levels (U.S. Government Print Office, 1947).

WPA project applications were approved by the agency’s Division of Engineering and Construction and Division of Professional and Service Projects. The Division of Engineer and Construction approved construction projects and the Division of Professional and Service Projects approved projects serving female, technical, or clerical workers, as well as for projects that helped public agencies maintain community services. The Division of Training and Reemployment, established in 1941 to link workers with defense industries, was responsible for planning and regulating WPA training projects. The Division of Employment regulated the eligibility, classification, and termination of workers, the wages and hours of project and supervisory employees, and the agency’s relationship with labor unions (U.S. Government Print Office, 1947).

The Division of Investigation, an independent committee located in Washington, was responsible for oversight. The Division’s responsibilities included handling complaints alleging that funds were diverted for private benefit, false statements were made in obtaining federal funds, payrolls were padded, false compensation claims were made by employees, fraud existed in bidding for government contracts, and that vendors were not delivering contractually obligated goods or services. The Division also investigated more traditional allegations of extortion, kickbacks, theft, embezzlement, and bribery. The Division was authorized to bring especially serious complaints to the Attorney General who could then fine project sponsors a sum equal to the program spending on the land, buildings, and projects used as part of the scheme (U.S. Government Print Office, 1947, 82).
During its existence, the Division investigated 17,352 cases and found 8,811 to be substantiated. Of these, the Division directed project sponsors to issue dismissals, demotions, suspensions, or reprimands for 4,496 cases. A further 2,215 were referred to the Attorney General. The remaining 2,100 workers had already left the program and had their employment records amended to include the complaint (U.S. Government Print Office, 1947). In total, these cases accounted for slightly over 0.1% of all enrollees.

Cost

The WPA’s annual expenditures totaled roughly 2.2% of GDP, or $1.9 billion. During the WPA’s existence the agency spent a total of $11.4 billion—the equivalent of $230 billion today (Tymoigne, 2014, CPI Inflation Calculator, 2022). Of the $11.4 billion, 81.4% was spent on personnel, including both workers and administrators, and the rest on servicing costs for projects such as machinery and transportation (U.S. Government Print Office, 1947). While a considerable sum, the program’s costs could have been much higher because its wages were set significantly below industry averages to avoid competing with private firms. Over 80% of WPA workers received wages lower than a government-defined “emergency budget”, itself insufficient to support a frugal lifestyle. The federal government supplied between 70% and 90% of funds per individual project and state and local governments contributed the rest.

Impact

The WPA oversaw the construction of thousands of schools, parks, hospitals, airfields, trails, roads, sewers, and other valuable infrastructure like museums, swimming pools, parks, community centers, playgrounds, zoos, city halls, and university unions. Most were still in use decades later (Leighninger, 1996). The WPA financed and oversaw the construction of 40,000 new and 85,000 improved buildings. These included 5,900 new schools; 9,300 new auditoriums,
gyms, and recreational buildings; 1,000 new libraries; 7,000 new dormitories; and 900 new armories. WPA workers also built 2,302 stadiums, grandstands, and bleachers; 52 fairgrounds and rodeo grounds; 1,686 parks covering 75,152 acres; 3,185 playgrounds; 3,026 athletic fields; 805 swimming pools; 1,817 handball courts; 10,070 tennis courts; 2,261 horseshoe pits; 1,101 ice-skating areas; 138 outdoor theatres; 254 golf courses; and 65 ski jumps (Leighninger, 1996). WPA workers also built 325 and renovated 2,384 fire stations and installed 20,000 miles of water mains, increasing fire protection across the country (Leighninger, 2007). By the onset of the Second World War, every American county but three was the site of a WPA project.

The priorities of the WPA changed with need. At its inception, the program prioritized building critical infrastructure, extending electricity to rural areas, and improving water conservation, sanitation, and flood control capacity. The Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1936 directed the WPA to build more public facilities including parks, public buildings, utilities, airports, and transportation projects. WPA projects became increasingly defense-related in the buildup to the Second World War (Leighninger, 2007).

A significant component of the WPA, and distinct from its explicit focus on manual labor, was Federal Project Number One. Federal One, as the program was called, was the name for a group of projects employing jobless artists. The initiative was divided into five areas: the Federal Art Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers' Project, and the Historical Records Survey, and received an approbation of $27 million in 1935. At its peak, the program employed 40,000 writers, musicians, artists, and actors (Mutnick, 2014).

Federal One sought to democratize art by exposing wider audiences to artistic productions, incorporating regional and ethnic traditions, and making art more relevant to contemporary issues. The Federal Music Project, comprised of 300 ensembles, established
orchestras in states such as Oklahoma and Utah, where none had existed previously. The Federal Theatre Project established production companies in 40 states, organized 16 units comprised solely of Black performers, and performed plays in languages other than English. Its Living Newspaper productions addressed contemporary issues like the state of the country’s slums, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and the suffering of American farmers. In total, the Federal Theatre Project organized roughly 1,200 productions that reached 25 million Americans, 65% of whom attended the theater for the first time. The Federal Art Project provided free art classes for 60,000 people each month. The Federal Music Project employed 6,000 music teachers who organized programs in schools, parks, and hospitals, developing the music skills of 14 million students (Mathews, 1967). The Federal Writers Project famously documented the experiences of 2,300 former slaves between 1936 and 1938 (Adams & Goldbard, 1995). Federal One attracted intense scrutiny from Republicans alternatingly concerned about potential communist influence on American culture, the possibility of federal censorship, and the wastefulness of ostensibly unproductive spending (Cole, 1983).

Limitations

The WPA was not a universal job guarantee. Due to limited funding, the program set enrolment limits to one worker per household and the program did not pay workers a minimum wage (Gordon, 1997). Additionally, despite explicit promises to the contrary, Southern states administering the program heavily discriminated against nonwhite workers and states across the country excluded workers with disabilities (Fishback et al., 2020). New York City’s Home Relief Bureau, for example, labeled physically disabled applicants as “PH” (“physically handicapped”) who were then subsequently not hired by the WPA. Protests from disability advocacy groups helped pressure the WPA to create specific jobs for physically disabled workers in the city.
Despite these significant restrictions to access, the WPA was and remains the largest permanent work program implemented in a developed country. In addition to the physical legacy of its projects, the WPA set a standard of high public sector employment. For a decade after the program ended, the U.S. government remained the country’s largest employer (Tymoigne, 2014).

The WPA was criticized by contemporary lawmakers, journalists, commentators, and project supervisors for serving the political interests of Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. Some high-profile allegations included that the WPA administrators provided workers for Democratic campaign staffs, distributed fliers for Democratic candidates, encouraged workers to register as Democrats, and provided names of employees for Democratic canvassing operations (Howard, 1973; High, 1939; Leupold, 1975; Clement, 1971). These allegations prompted the passage of the Hatch Act in 1939 which barred executive branch employees outside the President and Vice President from engaging in political activity. Researchers have also argued that the distribution of WPA funds was politically motivated. Western states, the majority of whom were not reliably Democratic-leaning, received 75% more funding per capita than the reliably Democratic South, the poorest region of the country (Bradford, 1982).

India (NREGS)

Context

India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) is the largest public employment program in the world. By October of 2022, NREGS had issued over 160 million job cards covering roughly 310 million workers since the beginning of the year. Of those, 68 million have currently participated in a job (NREGA At a Glance, 2022). The program was created by
the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) of 2005 and entitles any rural household to at least 100 days of paid employment. The program is administered by the Ministry of Rural Development in partnership with state governments. Authority is further devolved into 734 Districts, 7,155 Blocks, and 269,765 Gram Panchayats, or village cabinets.

**Structure**

Households must register with a local employment officer at their Gram Panchayat who is responsible for identifying and providing them with work contracts. The household’s application is accepted when the employment officer matches the household to a project and issues job cards. Any adult member of the accepted household may work, so long as the household’s total number of workdays does not exceed 100 per year. Women are required to hold at least one-third of all jobs made available under the Act. Currently, women constitute roughly half of NREGS workers (Ministry of Rural Development, 2022). Gender parity is likely due to purposeful government efforts to provide equal wages to male workers and promote inclusive hiring policies (Vij, 2013). The program employed over 45 million workers in its first year of nationwide implementation in 2005 (Haque, 2011), rising to a peak of 112 million workers in 2020 before falling in subsequent years (Ministry of Rural Development, 2005).

NREGS mandates that a minimum of 60% of funding must be spent on wages as opposed to project materials. The scheme also stipulates the provision of accredited engineers, adequate worksite facilities, and weekly reports from supervisors. NREGS pays an equal flat minimum wage to both men and women either on a time-rate or piece-rate basis. Gram Panchayats must create a single bank of NREGS projects which are made publicly available. NREGS must provide work within 5 kilometers of an applicant's residence. If the program does not provide work within 15 days, applicants are entitled to an unemployment benefit from the central
government. Thus, employment under NREGS, as mandated by Article 41 of Part IV of the Indian Constitution, is a legal entitlement. NREGS is the only job guarantee constructed with a rights-based framework (Ministry of Rural Development, 2005).

**Limitations**

While NREGS is theoretically open to all of India’s 600 million rural workers, funding constraints limit both its capacity and uptake among approved workers. Despite increasing demand due to the pandemic, the program has been successively defunded to ensure that expenses rarely exceed 0.5% of GDP (Muralidharan et al., 2021). In 2019, NREGS’ budget was 122,000 crore rupees, or roughly $14.8 billion. The program budget in 2022 was 98,000 crore rupees, or $11.9 billion, and the proposed 2023 budget is 73,000 crore rupees, or $8.9 billion (NREGA At a Glance, 2022). As a result, 70% of poor households registered with the program do not participate because there are no nearby available jobs (Muralidharan et al., 2021).

Additionally, while the program is supposed to guarantee 100 days of work, the lack of long-term projects has kept the average time of employment low among workers that can secure a job card. Workers averaged 38 days of employment in 2022 (NREGA At a Glance, 2022). Project availability is positively correlated with participation, which varies heavily by region and village. In the five states with the most projects, over 60% of poor households seeking work obtain employment (Jha and Gaiha, 2013). Assuming monthly trends continue, NREGS will provide jobs for roughly 90 million workers in 2022. This would represent a decrease from 106 million employed workers in 2021 and 112 million in 2020 (NREGA At a Glance, 2022).

NREGS’s wages are fixed to the national Consumer Price Index-Agriculture Labour (CPI-AL) and have grown since the program’s inception. Despite an increase, wages are less than the minimum wage for all states and union territories except Nagaland (DownToEarth,
From 2011-2016, the wage payment method was changed to the National electronic Fund Management System (Ne-FMS), a digital payment system designed to cut out middlemen. This change has been successful in decreasing wage siphoning by local officials and project managers, effectively increasing workers’ wages (Narayananmoorthya & Bhattaraib, 2013). Between 2017 and 2021, 935 crore, or $113 million, of funds were reported stolen through bribes, ghost accounts, and fake rates for materials. While this amounts to a tiny percentage of the program’s budget over the four years, the undocumented graft is likely significantly higher (Indian Express, 2021).

**Impact**

In communities where NREGS provides jobs, the program has reduced poverty by 32%. In total, NREGS has kept 14 million people above the poverty line while also reducing rural-urban migration (Muralidharan et al., 2021; Shome, 2011). Much of this reduction in poverty comes not from direct payments to program enrollees, but from positive spillovers onto the private sector. The poorest private sector workers saw pay increases proportional to the presence and wage levels of NREGS projects (Muralidharan et al., 2021). Members of designated Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), particularly marginalized groups, saw the largest increases in the spring, during the agricultural lean season.

NREGS likely generated these indirect economic effects by raising the private sector wage floor and increasing the marginal value of labor by improving infrastructure quality. Muralidharan et al. (2021) find that NREGS projects substantially raised private-sector wages in surrounding communities, finding evidence for previous theories that the program acts as a wage floor for certain private-sector work (Haque, 2011). Raising wages for workers both in and outside the program increased demand for locally produced goods and services which in turn
stimulated the local economy. This virtuous cycle helped increase total employment in addition to incomes as firms enjoyed more consumers for their products (Muralidharan et al., 2021). This evidence contradicts the standard prediction that employment declines in response to a minimum wage increase and suggests that many local Indian labor markets resemble oligopsonies than perfect competition. Indeed, Muralidharan et al. (2021) locate the source of labor market power in the only demographic that lost income in response to NREGS: large landowners who had to pay increased wages for hired farmers.

In addition to providing direct employment, one of NREGS’s main objectives is to create and maintain durable assets for rural communities. NREGS permits exactly 260 different types of projects which are categorized as either Natural Resource Management (NRM) or Asset Creation (AC) projects. Most permissible jobs are labeled AC. These include building roads, sanitation facilities, and granaries; creating plantations, poultry shelters, cattle shelters, and fish drying platforms; designing water tanks and ponds; checking dams and irrigation channels; and renovating existing agricultural infrastructure. The projects require minimal to no formal job experience. When necessary, project coordinators and contracted experts help train workers (Ministry of Rural Development Government of India, 2005).

NRM projects include earthmoving, digging and breaking rocks, reforestation, soil conservation, and small agricultural projects (Allen and Pellissery, 2006). Of these, the program prioritizes water conservation and drought-proofing projects (Reddy et al., 2010). Some of these projects overlap with the work done by private firms, but most are directed to performing activities not currently provided by the market (Reddy et al., 2010). Researchers have calculated that certain NRM projects significantly increase biodiversity and environmental security (Sebastian & Azeez, 2014). NREGS also produces substantial environmental benefits.
Researchers at the Indian Institute of Science have estimated NREGS captured 102 million tons of carbon dioxide (MtCO2) in 2018 through plantation construction and soil quality improvement. The researchers predicted that the scheme’s capacity to sequester carbon dioxide may rise to 249 MtCO2 by 2030, assuming no further budget cuts (Ravindranath & Murthy, 2021).

Critics frequently point out that most NREGS projects are not completed. The quality of those that are finished is often poor due to inadequate technical support and planning (Reddy et al., 2010). Additionally, workplace sanitation is frequently substandard, and workers frequently raise health and safety concerns at work sites. A lack of access to childcare has also become an obstacle preventing women from participating in the program. Pay is also low, and many commentators and policymakers in India argue current wages are insufficient to sustain the workers and their families (Jacob, 2021). While wages should be paid promptly, payments are frequently delayed, in some cases up to 200 days, due to limited state capacity at the local and regional level, a lack of transparency, and infrastructural bottlenecks (Narayanan et al., 2019).

**Argentina (Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados)**

**Context**

Argentina’s “Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados” was a large-scale job program that operated from 2002 to 2006. Jefes was introduced as a means of controlling social unrest that originated in response to a major recession that began in 1998 and left 21.5% of the labor force unemployed. The program only took 5 months to operationalize after it was initially authorized by the National Congress (Tcherneva and Wray, 2005).
Structure

Jefes’ pay was low and its eligibility was restricted. The program paid 150 pesos per month, roughly $50 at the time, to the head of a jobless household. Program enrollees earned less than the country’s minimum monthly wage of 300-350 pesos for full-time work. Household heads were defined as an adult with dependent children or disabled members. The payment was provided in exchange for a maximum of 20 hours of work per week providing community services or engaging in small-scale construction (Iturriza et al., 2011). Participation was restricted to heads of households with children 18 or younger. Some exceptions were made for individuals with no children but instead lived with a cohabiting partner who was disabled or pregnant. The Argentinian government further restricted eligibility by preventing anyone receiving unemployment insurance or other transfer benefits from enrolling, and by requiring that eligible workers sign up by May 17, 2002. This date cutoff prevented any new workers from joining the program after its initial launch, effectively capping the program’s size (Harvey, 2018). Finally, participants were required to vaccinate their children and enroll them in school.

During its four years, the program employed an annual average of 2 million workers, consisting of 5% of the population and 13% of the labor force. Expenses totaled 1% of GDP (Tcherneva & Wray, 2005).

The federal government set eligibility requirements and provided basic administrative services. Unemployed heads of households who met the eligibility for employment were issued social security cards and registered in a national database managed by the Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Security in Buenos Aires, which managed the entire program. The Argentinean federal government provided the majority of the funding, general guidelines for the execution of work projects, and some services for managing individual programs and addressing
complaints. These services included maintaining a national registry of program beneficiaries, as well as other databases that tracked proposed, approved, denied, and completed projects. Federal contributions were capped at 80% of the cost of projects but investments averaged 60% over the duration of Jefes (Harvey, 2018).

While the federal government set basic standards and provided resources, Jefes’ decision-making was highly decentralized. Local governments, assisted by regional Municipal Consultative Councils (MCCs) comprised of representatives of the public, private and non-profit sectors, oversaw most operations (Harvey, 2018). Communities were responsible for assessing their pressing needs and available resources. City governments and citizen councils evaluated proposals by local non-profits, NGOs, or individual citizens. Once the community approved a project, they notified the central government and contacted program beneficiaries informing them of the availability, time, and place of work. Jefes enrollees performed community services such as childcare, staffing soup kitchens in low-income areas, maintaining buildings, and cleaning public spaces. Many workers also formed microenterprises, mostly in agriculture, and participated in small infrastructure construction projects (World Bank, 2004).

Individuals registered for the program by submitting required documentation to a designated municipal office, including proof of identity, vaccination, and school enrollment. Before making payments, the Ministry cross-referenced participants’ national identity numbers with other government databases to verify that they were neither formally employed nor receiving other state benefits (Galasso & Ravallion, 2003). Once approved, program enrollees began to receive their monthly benefit checks regardless of whether they had been assigned to a work project. While most enrollees quickly found work in their local communities, the program was technically structured more as a benefit program that relied on local enforcement of work
requirements than as a jobs program that hired workers and paid them wages proportional to their skill level or amount of work completed.

Some political commentators interpreted Jefes as having hinted at a broader transformation of the nature of work from a process whose value was solely determined by market forces to one significantly shaped by participatory democracy (Tcherneva, 2018). Prior to the economic crisis from which Jefes was conceived, low-income communities in Argentina had existing markets for many, but not all, of the services provided by Jefes enrollees, like building maintenance and construction and artisanal manufacturing. During the country’s recession, however, these markets collapsed as increasing poverty and unemployment deteriorated local consumer bases (Kostzer, 2008, 24). Some services, however, like working in soup kitchens, participating in environmental cleanup crews, volunteering at domestic violence family centers, and reading newspapers to the elderly, operated independently of market mechanisms.

Approximately 87% of Jefes participants were employed in community projects, 7% were enrolled in formal training programs, 2% attended school, 1% were employed by firms using program stipends to subsidize their wages, and 3% were employed in other activities (Tcherneva & Wray, 2005). Of the portion engaged in community projects, 60% of enrollees were involved in construction, maintenance, and microenterprises (Kostzer, 2008). Agricultural microenterprises comprised the largest category of Jefes projects. Many small construction projects were directed toward building or renovating community centers wherein future communal projects would be housed. Larger infrastructure projects were overseen by the Ministry of Infrastructure.
Impact

Upon its completion, Jefes was generally viewed as a success and the quality of the public works was lauded by the World Bank team overseeing the program (World Bank, 2004; Kostzer, 2008). Jefes increased the average income of poor households, though not enough to pull most above the poverty line. The program’s minimal impact on poverty rates was not surprising due to the low monthly income provided by the program. A survey of participants conducted in August 2002, four months after the program was implemented, found that 98% of participants lived below the poverty line and the program’s wages reduced that poverty rate by only 2.9 percentage points to 95.4%. The same survey found that 86.4% of participants came from families earning below the still lower extreme poverty or “indigence” line and that Jefes reduced this rate by a more significant 24.6 percentage points to 61.8%. Unemployment also fell but reductions were limited due to the program’s small size (Tcherneva and Wray, 2005).

A remarkable 64% of Jefes beneficiaries were women (Tcherneva and Wray, 2005). This overrepresentation is likely because men found the program undesirable and volunteered their wives as household representatives while they looked for employment in the private sector or underground economy. If true, this would further explain Jefes’ reduced impact on unemployment. Most women signing up for the program entered from outside the labor force (Tcherneva and Wray, 2005), and thus did not count against previous unemployment statistics. As a result, the program would likely have needed to expand to considerably decrease measured unemployment and underemployment.

Limitations

Most criticism of Jefes has revolved around the program’s funding limitations and eligibility restrictions that reduced the scope of its impact. Legislation enacted during the
economic crisis limited the size of the program to 350,000 workers to comply with strict spending caps (Tcherneva and Wray, 2005). While there were some reported inefficiencies with the program’s implementation and oversight, there is minimal evidence of serious mismanagement or corruption. Instead, most critiques of Jefes focus on the Argentinian government’s reluctance to expand the program. Jefes was conceived as a temporary response to the country’s financial crisis and, despite being perceived as a success by both the political establishment and the public, was not renewed or otherwise freed from the constraints that reduced its scope once the recession ended (Tcherneva and Wray, 2005; World Bank, 2004).

In addition to the low level of payments and inability to offer full-time employment opportunities, Jefes’ decentralized model may also have prevented the program from scaling by replicating successful projects to employ more workers. There was no administrative infrastructure that prioritized sharing successful business models and effective construction techniques, for example, between communities. While each community had full control over what jobs the guarantee funded, they lacked access to the knowledge gained from other communities that funded similar projects. Under Jefes’ structure, project sponsors in one community that developed efficiency-saving innovations could not easily share their experiences with other stakeholders (Tcherneva and Wray, 2005).

**Paul et al.**

Mark Paul, Assistant Professor of Economics at Rutgers University; William Darity Jr., Professor of Public Policy, Economics, and African and African-American Studies at Duke University; and Darrick Hamilton, Professor of Economics at the New School for Social Research, envision a highly centralized program similar in structure to the WPA. Federal and
state officials would work together to select community organizations and then coordinate to design projects best suited for the community’s needs. The secretary of labor would administer "employment grants" enabling the chosen entities to engage in direct employment projects. These projects would be designed to provide socially beneficial goods and services to the local community and society at large. Jobs would start at $11.83 an hour, plus benefits, and be indexed to inflation. The authors do not provide an explanation as to why they selected $11.83, but they do write that wages would also vary slightly by region, experience, and prospect of promotion. While not stated directly, the authors imply that the federal government would finance the entirety of the program (Paul et al., 2018).

The program would have an oversight board at the national level to ensure that local capacity, defined as available workers, knowledge, staff, and funding for materials, could successfully implement the proposed project. In service of this, states, counties, and municipalities would conduct an inventory of their needs and develop a jobs bank to expedite the selection process. All jobs would be transparently stored online on a central server (Paul et al., 2018).

In addition, Paul et al. recommend that the Secretary of Labor work with federal agencies to identify under-invested areas in the U.S. economy where additional funds would not displace work planned by existing government agencies. If the existing provision of projects at the local level is insufficient to eliminate unemployment in the region, the secretary of labor would be empowered to intervene in the locality and provide adequate employment opportunities. The researchers predict the program would take two years to scale to the national level. They do not include specific examples of potential projects (Paul et al., 2018).
Pavlina Tcherneva, director of the economics program at Bard College and a research associate at Bard College’s Levy Economics Institute, proposes a job guarantee that resembles the participatory nature of Jefes and, in comparison to Paul et al.’s plan, is highly decentralized. Her job guarantee is modeled as a preparedness response program after the Center for Disease Control’s Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) of medicines, equipment, and medical devices.

When a virus sweeps across the nation, the supplies can be deployed from the SNS using a pre-established infrastructure to respond to multiple large-scale emergencies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) used the SNS to deploy personal protective equipment, respirators, face masks, gloves, and ventilators in all 50 states (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Similarly, Tcherneva’s job guarantee would be designed as a rapid local response to joblessness, using the existing unemployment insurance infrastructure to assign jobs to the unemployed. Jobs would pay $15 an hour, plus benefits, and be indexed to inflation.

Specifically, municipalities, in cooperation with community groups and citizens, would conduct assessment surveys that catalog community needs and resources. To store this data, municipalities would create Community Jobs Banks alongside existing unemployment insurance infrastructure, such as One-Stop Career Centers, to serve as repositories of jobs and locations that can offer on-demand employment opportunities to jobless workers. Community Jobs Banks would combine the existing services performed at One-Stop Career Centers such as referrals, training, GED completion, resume building, English lessons, instruction in math and reading, and financial planning, with a jobs bank (Tcherneva, 2018).
The Department of Labor would provide the general guidelines for the kinds of projects it would authorize under the program; however, it would generally leave flexibility and ultimate authority to propose projects in the hands of local communities. In addition to providing funding and approving projects, however, the Department of Labor would be empowered to make “requests for proposals,” (Tcherneva, 14) indicating that it will fund specific employment initiatives that serve the public purpose. Public institutions, NGOs, and social enterprises would be the organizations that carry out the projects (Tcherneva, 2018).

Tcherneva proposes the DOL provide grants for project proposals by evaluating the proposals’ social impact, creation of employment opportunities for the unemployed, and guarantees that the work would not displace existing public or private sector workers (Tcherneva, 14-15). She also suggests that the federal government only provides 85% of the funding required for projects to create buy-in from local stakeholders (Tcherneva, 2018).

Tcherneva envisions the guarantee as a “National Care Act” and distributes the type of work the job guarantee would provide into three categories: care for the environment, care for the community, and care for the people (Tcherneva, 2018). Environmental protection jobs could include establishing and fortifying the country’s infrastructure to protect against the impact of intensifying hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, and floods. It could also include planting trees, tackling soil erosion, providing flood control, conducting environmental surveys, monitoring species, maintaining and renewing parks, removing invasive species, developing sustainable agriculture practices, supporting local fisheries, promoting community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms, weatherizing homes, and composting (Tcherneva, 2018).

According to Tcherneva’s plan, caring for the community could involve cleaning up vacant properties, restoring public spaces, establishing school gardens, growing urban farms,
building co-working spaces, and deploying solar arrays. The program would also fund projects that build playgrounds, organize carpooling programs, construct community theaters, restore historical sites, and design recycling initiatives, food waste programs, and oral history projects (Tcherneva, 18-19).

Finally, Tcherneva’s projects that care for people include many types of social work such as elderly care and special programs for new mothers, at-risk youth, and people with disabilities. Other examples range from jobs where enrollees organize afterschool programs and shadow teachers and hospice workers (Tcherneva, 19).

Tcherneva argues that her list of jobs would be neither so valuable that investment in them displaces public sector jobs nor too unimpactful to lose public support. Her proposal acknowledges but does address in detail broader questions about substance abuse treatment or mental health rehabilitation, something that would be required to move at least some workers from a job guarantee to private employment (Tcherneva, 2018).

**Summary of Case Studies**

The three implemented case studies are alike in some ways and different in others. The WPA and Jefes were created and designed rapidly amid major economic crises. NREGS was proposed in legislation and debated in congress decades before it was implemented. NREGS and Jefes existed in developing states with limited state capacity whereas the WPA made considerable use of the United States’ recent expansion of the size of the federal government. WPA and NREGS incorporated, or at least promised in the case of NREGS, substantial oversight and guidance from the central government. All, it can reasonably be claimed, achieved varying degrees of success.
Combined, both NREGS and Jefes provide evidence that a job guarantee would reduce poverty and increase employment in a modern developing economy (Tcherneva and Wray, 2005; Shome, 2011; Haque, 2011). Neither program had negative impacts on private-sector employment and Jefes may have slightly raised private-sector wages and the future employability of program enrollees (Iturriza et al., 2011). Both observations are consistent with the scholarship on the WPA which has broadly found the agency minimally affected private sector wages or employment (Tymoigne, 2013). Jefes, which employed the most unique administrative model, may have worked as well as it did because the workforce employed on each project was so small. Larger scale projects require larger workforces and a level of hierarchy and complexity that the Jefes model was not designed for.

Both Paul et al. and Tcherneva’s proposals offer a helpful blueprint for a job guarantee and differ in clear ways but neither uses a consistent methodology to evaluate the effectiveness of their proposed program nor evaluate potential tradeoffs that arise. As the authors of both plans state, their purpose is less to serve as a detailed policy design and more as an outline to revive the political discourses surrounding a job guarantee (Paul et al., 2018; Tcherneva, 2018). To that end, both proposals have been successful. Since the authors released their proposals, the job guarantee has been featured in dozens of newspaper articles, demands from activists, and presidential campaign platforms.
IV. DATA AND RESULTS

This section describes how the proposals scored on each of the five variables. See Table 1 in the Appendix for a summary of the results.

WPA

The WPA’s purpose merited a “3”. The WPA never attempted to achieve full employment and instituted strict eligibility requirements that significantly reduced the number of potential enrollees. Nonetheless, the program was well-funded and provided extensive coverage that, over the course of its existence, employed most jobless Americans. In addition to reaching large portions of the population, the WPA built high-quality medium and large-scale infrastructure projects such as critical infrastructure and public buildings. This commitment to high-quality work was demonstrated through the WPA’s frequent use of the camp model of bringing large numbers of workers together to work on one project or a series of similar projects. This model helped achieve returns to scale that reduced timelines and kept enforcement and supervision costs low but also divorced the benefits of its projects from the communities its workers came from.

The WPA earned a “4” for its distribution of power and responsibilities. As detailed above, the program was highly centralized, and the agency administered the program internally, occasionally coordinating with other government bodies to procure equipment and move workers across the country. Local administrators were directed by state and regional administrators who received instructions from relevant agency divisions in Washington. Individuals and local organizations were able to suggest projects, but all decision-making power rested in Washington.

The program’s type of work provided received a “3”. The WPA employed both skilled and unskilled workers in many types of projects. Most workers had minimal professional
experience and were labeled as unskilled or semiskilled by the agency; however, a sizeable minority of workers had extensive work experience before the Depression. The large number of skilled workers who enrolled in the program allowed project sponsors to easily hire a handful of experienced workers to oversee larger numbers of unskilled workers. This distributed burden allowed WPA projects to accomplish complex assignments, usually construction projects. Most historical and cultural projects, by comparison, were staffed either by former writers and artists or previously untrained workers with longstanding ties to their local communities.

The WPA’s wage structure scored a “5”. The WPA had an extensive wage hierarchy. Workers’ earnings varied depending on three factors: the region of the country, the degree of urbanization, and the individual’s skill. Wages ranged from $19 per month to $94 per month in 2022 dollars.

Finally, the program’s training and rehabilitation earned a “2”. The agency initially funded no training programs and never provided rehabilitative services for workers. After 1941, the program contracted with defense corporations to provide job training services to enrollees as part of a broader mobilization effort during the buildup to World War II.

**NREGS**

NREGS earned a “2” for purpose. NREGS optimizes for maximizing the number of workers enrolled in the program instead of ensuring that each project provides high-quality, socially useful work. As a result, many researchers have criticized the program for lax oversight which has incentivized make-work projects. To an extent, India’s limited state capacity, along with successive defunding under the current BJP government, constrains NREGS’ oversight capabilities.
The scheme scored a “2” for the distribution of power and responsibilities. NREGS is fully funded by the central government however its administration is relatively decentralized. Projects are designed by regional administrators and approved by Gram Panchayats, democratically elected village counsels. State and central authorities are tasked with providing significant oversight, however, they often lack the will or means to do so.

NREGS merited a “1” for the type of work provided by the guarantee. Jobs created by NREGS are primarily small-scale agriculture projects that require no qualifications. Project teams are small and are overseen by a trained foreman who is paid by the guarantee and is often a former NREGS worker themselves.

NREGS also earned a “1” for its wage structure. NREGS workers are paid a flat piece rate or time rate that has been raised several times since the program’s inception.

Finally, NREGS scored “N/A” for training and rehabilitation. NREGS does not cover training or rehabilitation costs for its workers.

**Jefes**

Jefes received a “4” for purpose. Like in the WPA, participation in Jefes was restricted to one person per applicable household. Unlike the WPA, the program’s funding constraints prevented it from scaling to even approach reaching most unemployed workers in Argentina. Jefes also allowed communities to propose jobs that suited their needs, ensuring that funded projects were, almost by definition, socially useful.

Jefes’ distribution of power and responsibilities scored a “1”. The Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Security set basic requirements and distributed funds, but all projects were designed and selected at the local level.
Jefes’ type of work provided earned a “2”. Most jobs, such as small-scale agriculture and construction, required few qualifications or social embeddedness while others, such as managing counseling sessions and reading newspapers to the elderly required preexisting community relationships.

Jefes received a “1” for wage structure. Workers were paid a flat wage that varied over time between 300-350 pesos per month for full-time employment.

Finally, Jefes’ training and rehabilitation score was “N/A”. Jefes did not subsidize or integrate job training or rehabilitation programs into its operations. It did fund counseling jobs that provided mental health services like therapists for domestic violence survivors, for example, but these services were not primarily intended for Jefes workers.

**Paul et al.**

The Paul et al. proposal scored a “2” for purpose. Paul et al.’s plan aims to provide both full employment and environmentally and socially valuable work. The plan states that projects would be designed primarily to achieve full employment in all communities, suggesting a prioritization of full employment in the event of a tradeoff between the two.

The plan earned a “5” for its distribution of power and responsibilities. The federal government would fully fund the guarantee and the program would be administered by the Department of Labor (DOL) and overseen by the Secretary of Labor. The Secretary’s office would design projects and identify specific “areas of needed investment” in the economy. Individuals, community organizations, or nonprofits could not design projects and the plan does not clearly describe the role state and local administrators play in communicating between the DOL and project coordinators.
Paul et al.’s proposal scored a “4” for the type of work provided. The authors provide 19 broad examples of potential projects the guarantee could fund including expanding the nation’s housing stock, providing afterschool services, and supporting the arts. Most jobs, such as installing energy efficiency upgrades to public buildings and providing high-quality eldercare, appear to require specific skills or experience. Others, like ecological restoration, require few prerequisites. On balance, the proposal scores a “4” because its list of jobs provided weights towards those that require expertise, permanency, or social embeddedness.

Paul et al.’s plan merited a “4” for wage structure. The proposal would pay workers $24,600 annually for full-time work, or $12.30 per hour assuming 40 hours of work per week for 50 weeks per year. The guarantee would also provide retirement plans, paid family and sick leave, and one week of paid vacation per three months worked. The proposal states that the program would have “wage variation” which accounts for workers’ previous experience, education, and region of residence. The program would also have the “prospect of promotion”, although it does not state whether the possibility of advancement is guaranteed and, if not, how flat projects would be distinguished from hierarchical ones (Paul et al., 2018).

The proposal received a score of “N/A” for training and rehabilitation. The proposal does not discuss either training or rehabilitation for enrolled workers.

**Tcherneva**

Tcherneva’s proposal scored a “3” for purpose. Her plan aims to provide both full employment as well as environmentally and socially valuable work. The proposal contains several examples of projects that would provide socially valuable services like park maintenance, afterschool programs, and theater productions for communities. The author claims that there are
enough socially useful jobs not provided by the market and that do not require professional experience for every unemployed worker.

The plan earned a “3” for its distribution of power and responsibilities. The Department of Labor (DOL) would fully fund and oversee the program. States that decide to opt-in to the program would disburse the funds through job banks filled with projects provided by municipal governments and other community groups. Unlike in the WPA, local organizations could apply for funding directly to the DOL in Washington. The DOL would also have the authority to create and fund specific projects if it identifies gaps between supply and demand within communities.

Tcherneva’s proposal scored a “3” for the type of work provided. The proposal lists a large selection of potential jobs, divided into three sections: Care for the environment, Care for the community, and Care for the people. Nearly all environmental jobs would require no professional experience or community ties. Similarly, many community infrastructure jobs, such as vacant property cleanup, reclamation, and public space restoration would be broadly accessible. Social care projects, such as elderly care, afterschool programs, and services for children, new mothers, and at-risk youth, however, would require workers possess familiarity with specific communities. To address this, Tcherneva writes that the guarantee could provide jobs to the very people that benefit from the service. For example, “the at-risk youth themselves participate in the execution of the afterschool activities that aim to benefit them. The veterans themselves can work for and benefit from different veterans’ outreach programs” (Tcherneva, 19).

Tcherneva’s wage structure merited a “1”. The proposal calls for a flat wage of $15 an hour plus benefits, which would include health insurance, childcare, paid leave, and retirement.
Tcherneva calculates that a full-time JG worker would earn $31,200 per year and labor costs including benefits would total $37,440 per year.

Finally, the plan scored a “4” for training and rehabilitation. The proposal promises to provide workers with additional training and education resources, apprenticeship opportunities, and private-sector job placement programs. While the plan provides few details, it says it will administer training through expanded “one-stop job centers” where workers can search for available jobs and receive unemployment insurance.
V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Incorporating the lessons learned from the five case studies, this thesis outlines a job guarantee modeled to meet the needs and adapt to the unique features of the contemporary United States. This proposal, henceforth called the “Hoffman Proposal”, is described and evaluated using the same variables as the five case studies. The policy recommendation incorporates the insights from the case study analyses by explaining how the valuation of each variable best addresses that variable’s associated tradeoffs as described in Section II. Table 2 summarizes the numerical evaluation of the Hoffman Proposal and compares the program with the results of the other five case studies.

Program Evaluation of Hoffman Proposal

Purpose

Achieving full employment and providing necessary public works and services are not mutually exclusive. An American guarantee should strive to match every applicant to a local project that meets the needs of the community. As described in more detail below, areas with high unemployment face serious challenges whose solutions only require minimal professional or educational experience. Designing make-work projects to eliminate unemployment in these communities reflects more a lack of communication with local stakeholders or insufficient administrative capacity than an absence of socially useful projects available.

That said, a job guarantee must guarantee jobs. Any programs that do not prioritize universal coverage run the risk of providing too few jobs for the structurally unemployed in favor of projects that serve workers capable of working in the private sector. For example, if most jobs provided by the guarantee in a county require technical or educational expertise, such as construction workers or librarians, then enrollees lacking the necessary background or who are
otherwise unable to work in a library or engage in manual labor will be excluded from the program.

There are many jobs in the United States that are critically important and in short supply. Nursing and teaching assistants are two examples of jobs regularly cited by proponents of job guarantees that a program could provide. The United States faces a large shortage of nursing and teaching assistants. These shortages strain the country’s medical and educational systems, decreasing health outcomes for millions of Americans and preventing many public schools from fully meeting the educational needs of students (National Association of Health Care Assistants, 2022; Cooper and Martinez Hickey, 2022). Not every worker may be able to work as a teaching or nursing assistant, however. If the guarantee does not provide workers with an adequate supply of accessible projects, it will fail at its central mandate to eliminate unemployment. The program should optimize for employing all unemployed workers first before completing complex projects that might require specific backgrounds, qualifications, or training regiments that exclude some workers.

For this reason, the WPA cannot serve as a comprehensive model for a 21st-century American job guarantee. During the Great Depression, millions of educated and highly skilled workers were unemployed and willing to migrate away from their communities to camps across the countries where they participated in large-scale public works projects. This is far removed from the contemporary American labor market where most workers expect flexibility in their work environments (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Jefes and NREGS both exemplified the tradeoff between universality and complex work. Few of the construction projects funded by Jefes, for example, involved work beyond painting, and basic building refurbishment (Tcherneva and Wray, 2005). Similarly, most NREGS projects
do not remain functional after a few years (Muralidharan et al., 2021). However, as both examples demonstrate, this tradeoff is more a function of state capacity than any inherent tension between the size of a program and the utility of its projects. A guarantee can prioritize maximizing the number of enrollees and the quality of its projects by providing non-capital-intensive environmental jobs held to high standards. This can most noticeably be seen in India, where states with high investments in administrative provisioning, training, and oversight had both more enrollees and more durable assets (Muralidharan et al., 2021).

A job guarantee will not be a panacea for many of the country’s most important problems. Existing state agencies with decades of technical capacity are better suited to address specific issues like greening the nation’s electrical grid, rebuilding large-scale infrastructure, and improving public health networks, for example. The primary purpose of the job guarantee should be to combat the physical, psychological, and social harms of unemployment while providing a wage floor that lifts Americans out of poverty.

I scored the purpose of the Hoffman Proposal a “2”. While the Hoffman Proposal aims to provide both full employment and socially meaningful work, it prioritizes full employment in the event of any tradeoffs between the two. This slight prioritization of full employment, discussed in greater detail for the following variables, results in a value of “2” instead of “3”, which would imply perfect balancing between both objectives. Optimizing slightly for full employment addresses both the first tradeoff between flexibility and job quality and the second tradeoff between program size and social impact. Prioritizing full employment requires allowing workers full flexibility to enter and leave the guarantee because that freedom would make the program more attractive to both short and long-term unemployed workers. This in turn might increase turnover and decrease the quality of the work funded by the guarantee. For the second tradeoff
between universality and social benefit, prioritizing full employment may create make-work that decreases the potential utility of the program.

**Distribution of Power and Responsibilities**

An American guarantee should adopt a hybrid model informed by the successes and failures of both Jefes’ decentralized structure and the WPA’s centralized design. The mechanics of both Jefes and the WPA provided specific benefits and drawbacks. Jefes’ participatory project design process ensured that communities secured funding for the type of work they deemed best met their needs. This helped ensure local buy-in and kept Jefes uniformly popular. Additionally, Jefes’ democratic decision-making allowed communities to radically redefine the nature of work, as demonstrated through examples such as paying jobless children to read to senior living communities. Jefes’ structure also promoted broader democratization of the economy. While reliable online data is scarce, Tcherneva and Wray (2005) document numerous examples of communities using the guarantee’s funds to start small agricultural or artisanal cooperatives.

Despite these benefits unique to Jefes’ decentralization, Jefes would have had difficulty providing universal coverage. Compared to India, Argentina’s federal and state governments devoted comparably few resources to administering and learning from local projects. Most projects were designed for only a handful of workers and, lacking systems to provide training and managerial expertise, could not be scaled in size or complexity. Additionally, there was minimal communication between different local and regional administrators, meaning that successful small-scale projects were not effectively replicated in other communities (Tcherneva & Wray, 2005).

By contrast, the WPA’s centralized apparatus provided it with strong oversight capabilities, the ability to complete high-quality and large-scale projects, and impressive coordination.
between federal, state, and municipal stakeholders. The Department of Investigations, well-staffed and well-funded, proved highly effective at minimizing corruption. Many WPA projects have lasting relevance, including Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles, “Male and Female” by Jackson Pollock, and the transmission centers of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the nation’s largest public energy provider. Recognizing the electoral significance of the program’s success, the Roosevelt administration significantly expanded the executive branch’s capacity by marshaling all levels of government from the Army to city councils to quickly transport millions of workers across the country and coordinate their labor (U.S. Government Print Office, 1947).

While the WPA’s top-down design theoretically could have guarded against local discrimination, the program’s centralized decision making often meant its projects were not democratically designed. Entire regions like the South were neglected in favor of western swing states. Women, Black Americans, and workers with disabilities were often excluded from the program. Additionally, the country’s state capacity has deteriorated significantly since the middle of the 20th century. The dominance of anti-statist factions within the Republican Party (Kabaserice, 2012; Fried & Harris, 2021), a bipartisan favor for tax preferences over spending programs (Teles, 2013), and liberal attempts to preserve government capabilities by surreptitiously fitting new programs and initiatives into existing agencies unequipped to implement them (Mettler, 2011) have all contributed to the decline. The portion of public employees out of the total workforce, a crude but effective metric for state capacity, has declined from 14.6% in 2000 to 13.8% in 2022 (Bureau of Labor Force Statistics, 2022; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; author’s calculations).

A modern American job guarantee should combine the democratic nature of Jefes with the centralized administrative support of the WPA. Local NGOs, municipal government
agencies, and social entrepreneurs would design most projects and request program funds. City councils would be tasked with approving projects and would receive technical support from local program administrators and financial compensation from the program for increased workloads. If local governments lack the capacity to approve projects, even with additional support, state and local program administrators would be empowered to create local councils staffed by elected community representatives in a manner similar to Jefes’ Municipal Consultative Councils. The job guarantee would operate identically in Puerto Rico and in all U.S. territories.

Every county would have at least one program administrator tasked with adding approved projects to a publicly available job bank. The job bank would contain contact information about the project’s objectives and requirements, as well as its approval process. The job bank would be available online, allowing workers to digitally enroll in projects. Physically, the jobs bank would be accessible at local Unemployment Offices and would complement the existing network of American Job Centers established under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (U.S. Department of Labor). Unlike unemployment benefits, workers would be allowed to search for other employment without losing access to the guarantee. These workers would not be counted in official unemployment statistics.

State-level administrators would coordinate with local officials to identify gaps in the program’s supply of jobs and the needs of local communities. They would help state and local agencies design new projects and scale up existing ones when necessary. As demonstrated by NREGS, regional administrative capacity is critical for mediating behind federal standards and local participation. The guarantee would give state administrators the authority and mandate to combat discrimination and disparities at the local level when necessary. Program officials could direct funds to state or municipal agencies that create projects in communities without existing
civic infrastructure and coordinate with local officials and program administrators to identify successful projects to scale or replicate.

Finally, the federal government would fully fund the program and administer it through the Department of Labor (DOL). Incorporating the guarantee under a current agency instead of creating an entirely new unit of the executive branch would save time and funds by utilizing existing expertise and administrative capacity. The DOL would approve project designs from local stakeholders based on relatively flexible guidelines to ensure applications get processes quickly. The DOL would fund projects in one-year increments and allow sponsors to fast-track renewal processes so long as project reviews were satisfactory. The DOL would operate a network of oversight offices akin to the WPA’s Department of Investigations across the country. Administrators in Washington would have the authority to design complex or large-scale projects in specific communities.

Splitting funding for the program between the federal government, states, and municipalities has historical precedent but would make uniform and equal coverage functionally impossible in a modern environment. During the Depression, the federal government funded between 70% and 90% of the WPA’s expenses, with state and local governments supplying the rest (U.S. Government Print Office, 1947). The stated logic behind the WPA’s distribution of funds was to incentivize local stakeholders to ensure high project quality. A similar distribution today would require individual states to opt-in to the program. Optional state enrollment raises the possibility that some states participate and others do not, creating unjust disparities further explored below. Mandating otherwise risks violating *NFIB vs Sebelius* which found that similar obligatory payment schemes designed by Congress “violated the basic principle that the ‘Federal
Government may not compel the States to enact or administer a federal regulatory program””  
(National Federation of Independent Businesses vs Sebelius, 2012).

All program enrollees, regardless of project type or community partner, would be federal employees working in partnerships with their host organization in their communities. In addition to legally guaranteeing both program workers and administrators access to federal benefits, federal employee designation would insulate administrators and workers from state efforts to limit the size or effectiveness of the guarantee. This separation would prove necessary if Republican-led states attempt to opt out of the guarantee similar to previous resistance towards Medicare expansion during the Obama administration. Comparably unequal access to the guarantee would heighten existing racial, gender, and class disparities by creating an ecosystem where one’s right to work is dependent on where one lives.

I evaluated the Hoffman Proposal’s distribution of power as a “3” because it strikes a balance between the highly centralized “5” of Paul et al.’s plan and the decentralized “1” of Jefes. The proposed program adopts the same oversight structure as the WPA and Paul et al.’s proposal, but it gives local communities full authority, and not simply input, over deciding projects. This moderately decentralized structure allows for the possibility of payroll substitution presented by the third tradeoff. The legislation or executive order creating the job guarantee could address this tradeoff by requiring all applying organizations, not just public agencies, to demonstrate that new enrollees would add to, and not replace, the organization’s previous year’s labor capacity, or that previous downsizing was economically unavoidable.

**Type of Work Provided**

The guarantee would provide two types of jobs: jobs that do not require expertise, permanency, or social embeddedness, and jobs that do. In the service of optimizing for universal
coverage, and maximizing its counter-cyclical potential, the guarantee should prioritize providing flexible jobs that easily accommodate workers entering and leaving the program. Additionally, some workers beyond those unemployed for more than six months and classified as “long-term unemployed” struggle with physical or psychological issues so severe that they are unable to effectively operate professionally in social environments (Paul & Moser, 2009; Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2012). As of November 2022, 20.6% of unemployed workers have been unemployed for over 27 weeks (U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). While there are many reasons workers may fail to reenter the job market, a significant portion of potential enrollees may require jobs that provide special accommodations or impose few burdens on administrators. To ensure full employment, the guarantee should ensure an adequate supply of largely but not exclusively small-scale and environmental jobs for these workers.

Some jobs cannot simply have workers slot in without issue. Because a job guarantee that acts as a fiscal stabilizer could not prevent enrollees from leaving the program, this flexibility may necessitate a tradeoff of accepting decreases in work quality if workers leave in the middle of longer-term assignments that require training or on-the-job experience. For example, personnel turnover may significantly impact environmental surveyors or after-school program assistants whose quality of work depends on developed skills and social relationships. This issue could be at least partially mitigated by offering workers paths for advancement within the program to more complex assignments or access to specialized education and training. As explored in more detail below, this would necessitate a hierarchical wage structure and promotion system.
Finally, during a deep recession that affects workers across a wide range of income groups, millions of previously employed workers with extensive professional and educational backgrounds may be unemployed. To be truly elastic, the guarantee must identify a reserve list of projects that would exceed the qualifications of many unemployed workers in strong business cycles but will be filled when the size of the program expands dramatically during downturns.

Jobs would be provided organically and decided democratically at the local level, but the agency administering the guarantee could still shape the type of jobs funded by the program. The Department of Labor could provide guidelines and recommendations to all city councils on an optimal balance of projects to ensure all projects are accessible to as many people as possible. Additionally, job guarantee administrators could help communities develop reserve lists of jobs by encouraging local governments to identify organizations whose employment qualifications might exceed those of the unemployed population, but who during a recession could employ more experienced workers facing sudden unemployment.

The Hoffman proposal includes a non-exclusive list of potential jobs pulled from across the five case studies located in the Appendix. The jobs are divided into two categories: jobs that do not require expertise, permanency, or social embeddedness and jobs that do. Examples of more accessible jobs include park renewal, planting community gardens, and restoring historic sites. Jobs that require more expertise, permanency, or social embeddedness include staffing polling sites during elections, building flood control structures like levees and dams, and conducting environmental surveys.

I give a “2” for the types of jobs provided by the Hoffman Proposal. While the proposal suggests a wide variety of jobs designed to accommodate the demand of all types of workers who might enroll in the guarantee during a recession, the primary purpose of the guarantee is to
provide employment for workers who can only work at less-demanding jobs. As such, the proposed program would encourage local stakeholders to design projects from the first list of jobs, and not the second. Prioritizing jobs accessible to all workers results in a score of “2”. This accessibility addresses both the first and third tradeoffs. Prioritizing jobs with fewer prerequisites will allow the guarantee to employ workers at the expense of potentially creating useless projects. Additionally, prioritizing lower-skill jobs ensures the guarantee will overlap less with public sector agencies, disincentivizing them from having the guarantee fund their employees’ wages.

**Wage Structure**

The guarantee would pay a baseline flat rate of $15 per hour and partially fund higher wages for some projects that require tiered payment structures. The program would also provide benefits that include healthcare plans, paid family and sick leave, and paid time off. The guarantee would pay an initial flat wage similar to Jefes and NREGS while allowing individual states and communities to subsidize higher baseline wages. Organizations that propose tiered projects would have to supply half of all wages above $15 an hour. This would provide some workers the opportunity for advancement within the program while diminishing the financial burden on the federal government. An opt-in approach would also reduce the administrative burden of the program by incentivizing individual project designers, instead of program administrators, to discern whether their projects require higher or differentiated wages.

As of the beginning of 2022 31.9% of the US labor force, or 51.9 million workers, earned less than $15 an hour (Henderson, 2022). Workers earning less than $15 per hour, or even more than $15 per hour once benefits are included, will be incentivized to leave their current jobs and enroll in the guarantee. The guarantee would thus set an effective minimum wage across the
entire country by placing pressure on private firms to raise wages to match the guarantee. Wages would be indexed to inflation, creating similar pressure for states or the federal government to do the same.

Mainstream economic theory suggests that firms in competitive markets will often reduce staff or operational capacity in response to rising wages. However, there is a growing body of research that suggests the effects of rising wages on employment may be minimal because U.S. labor markets are far from perfectly competitive. The minimum wage literature suggests that perfect labor market competition is an assumption and not a fact (Card et al., 1995; Neumark & William, 2008; Ashenfelter et al., 1982; Dustman et al., 2022; Cengiz et al., 2019; Derenencourt et al., 2021).

Recent research follows up on this realization by identifying two variables that primarily drive this lack of competition: widespread monopsony power and barriers to worker mobility. Recent studies suggest that employer power is pervasive in local labor markets, allowing monopsonies and oligopsonies to regularly suppress wages (Naidu & Carr, 2022; Berger et al., 2022; Mishel, 2022; Mishel & Bivens, 2021). Second, labor markets are rife with frictions preventing workers from exiting one job and entering a higher paying one. Workers’ ability to move is greatly restricted by the number of available jobs, the time and costs associated with searching for jobs, the quality of available jobs, hours and working conditions, transit infrastructure, and racial and gender discrimination (Edwards, 2022). Combined, these analyses suggest the guarantee would raise wages and employment by combatting employer power, not displace private firms by deviating from equilibrium. These observations validate the experiences of both Jefes and NREGS. Neither guarantee reduced private sector unemployment.
and, in the case of NREGS, researchers found considerable evidence for widespread employer power in local labor markets (Iturriza et al., 2011; Muralidharan et al., 2022).

A $15 wage would also help reduce racial and gender wage inequalities. While 26% of white workers earned under $15 per hour in 2021, 47% of Black workers made less than $15 an hour. And while 40% of female workers made less than $15 an hour, 25% of male workers did (Henderson, 2022). More dramatically, 50% of women of color in the workforce made less than $15 an hour, and in 25 states, at least 60% of working women of color earned less. Previous research suggests that expanding the minimum wage would eliminate these disparities. The 1966 expansion of the minimum wage under the Fair Labor Standards Act explained more than 20% of the reduction in the racial income gap that occurred during the civil rights era (Derenoncourt & Montialoux, 2020).

I score the Hoffman Proposal’s wage structure as a “2” because while the program would feature jobs with wage differentiation and provide opportunities for promotion, they would be the exception, not the rule. Most jobs would pay a flat rate due to the requirements that sponsors cover half of wages higher than $15 an hour. A largely flat rate addresses the third tradeoff by restricting the number of jobs that overlap with public agencies primarily to positions that pay $15 an hour or less. However, as discussed in the administrative structure section of the Hoffman Proposal, the best solution to preventing public agencies from firing and rehiring workers through the guarantee would involve a legal clause written into the program.

**Training and Rehabilitation**

The guarantee would partially subsidize training and rehabilitation for workers to equip them to participate more fully in their projects and prepare them for possible employment outside the program. The guarantee would not provide training or rehabilitation services in-house but
instead pay specialized community organizations to provide up to six months of training or counseling. Project proposals that require training would submit information, including an agreement with a training contractor, in their application. Project sponsors would be required to cover a portion of the training cost previously determined by either state or local administrators.

No implemented guarantee has covered rehabilitation or training, primarily because the programs were limited to one individual per household, disincentivizing less qualified or psychologically healthy individuals from enrolling over others in their families. A universal guarantee would not just provide work solely for able family members but to anyone who is legally allowed to work. Providing universal access, however, requires investing in workers who suffer from significant physical or psychological ailments, or who lack the skills necessary to perform available jobs.

While previous public job training programs have proved largely ineffective (Fadulu, 2019), recent community training programs that prepare workers for employment in specific industries believed to possess sustained local labor demand have proven successful. This new generation of organizations prioritizes training workers in skills that are transferable and certifiable to promote sustained wage growth and flexibility (Katz et al., 2022; Holzer, 2022).

One program, Year Up, provides six months of technical and soft skills training to unemployed 18–24-year-olds and then matches them with internships. The program provides weekly transportation stipends and covers mentoring, living costs, and post-program job search services. Year Up also partners with local colleges to award participants college credit for successfully completing training courses (Holzer, 2022). After five years, the enrollee’s earnings had increased by 37% on average. In total, Year Up pays $11,590 to train each participant for six months. The program calculated that net social benefits, measured through participant earning
gains and decreases in recidivism and benefits use, outweigh costs by a 1.66-to-1 ratio (Holzer, 2022). Importantly, Year Up intensively screens applicants and only accepts those it deems sufficiently motivated and interested in career advancement. The guarantee would not have that luxury, and nonselective programs would likely be less effective.

I scored the Hoffman Proposal’s training and rehabilitation a “3”. Unlike any of the implemented guarantees, the Hoffman Proposal would invest in providing workers with skills and help them recover from ailments from the program’s inception. Unlike Tcherneva’s proposal, which scored a “4” on training and rehabilitation, the proposed guarantee would only cover part of the cost. A score of “3” reflects that while the proposal does invest in training and rehabilitation, it could invest more. Investing some, but not maximally in training and rehabilitation would influence the first and second tradeoffs by helping improve both the quality of jobs funded by the program and the number of workers the guarantee can hire, but not to the highest extent possible.

Cost

It is not the intention of this thesis to produce a rigorous estimate of the cost of the Hoffman Proposal nor to develop a means of financing it. However, the values of the five variables as previously defined can provide a rough outline of the cost of the program (see Table 3) which can then be compared to the estimates supplied in both Paul et al. (Table 4) and Tcherneva’s (Table 5) proposals.

An estimated 8.7 to 13.7 million workers would enroll in the guarantee. The U-6 rate as of October 2022, was 6.8% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). This represents 11,197,560 workers. The estimation utilizes Paul et al.’s assumption that even with a job guarantee, the U-6 unemployment rate will be 1.5%, representing the frictional unemployment of workers who are
between jobs but do not feel the need to enroll in the guarantee. As of October 2022, this group would be 2,470,050 people (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). That leaves, at a minimum, 8,727,510 potential workers for the job guarantee. In 2021, 52 million workers earned less than $15 an hour (Henderson, 2022). Some percentage of these will see their employer refuse to raise wages or do so and reduce staff as a result. An additional percent of that group would enter the job guarantee. This additional number of workers is benchmarked between 0 and 5 million, leaving a total of 8.7-13.7 million workers enrolled in the job guarantee.

The average cost per worker would be $53,24. Workers would earn an annual full-time wage of $30,600, assuming a wage of $15 an hour for 51 weeks of work per year including one week of paid vacation for every 3 months worked. This figure is an underestimate because some projects will have wage gradation that is half covered by the government. The guarantee will also provide $10,000 worth of benefits. This figure comes from Paul et al.’s rough average of the benefits, including health care, provided to civil servants and elected officials. The guarantee will also spend $10,300 on materials for every worker. This amount assumes that supplies cost 25% of labor, as suggested by Tcherneva, instead of Paul et al.’s 33% because supplies could be purchased per project instead of per worker as Paul et al. assume and thus receive group discounts. Finally, the employer’s half of FICA taxes, which are set at 7.65% of annual wages, is $2,341.

Administering the program will cost $510 million. The proposed job guarantee would require roughly 8,500 full-time administrators. These include 3,143 local administrators (one for every county and the five territories with permanent residents), 5,100 statewide administrators (100 administrators for every state and Puerto Rico), and 200 federal administrators in Washington, DC. This totals 8,448 administrators, which is rounded up to 8,500 to account for
large counties that require more than one local administrator to update the job bank. The average salary for administrators would be set at $60,000, creating a total annual administration cost of $510 million.

Next, the guarantee would spend $1.68 billion compensating local elected officials for their additional hours approving projects. The guarantee would pay city council members $15 an hour for an estimated 5 hours of work per week. Assuming a 51-week work year, this totals $3,825 per city council member. In 2012, the year with the most recent data, there were roughly 73,089 municipal, township, and special district governments in the United States. On average, each city council had 6 members (U.S. Census Bureau Public Information Office, 2012; National League of Cities). This equals 438,534 city council members. The total compensation would amount to $1.68 billion annually.

The guarantee’s $465 to $732 billion price tag represents between 6.8% and 10.8% of the total 2021 federal budget and between 29.1% and 45.8% of the discretionary budget (Congressional Budget Office, 2022). This is an extraordinary sum. It is also an underestimate of the program’s true costs because it does not include spending on training and rehabilitation programs. However, the guarantee could lead to several savings that offset its price tag. First, mass enrollment in the program would decrease federal expenditures on other social programs. Demand for Unemployment Insurance, which totaled $61.3 billion in 2021, and Targeted Assistance for Needy Families ($31.6 billion in 2020) would be nearly eliminated (U.S. Department of Labor Office of Unemployment Insurance, 2022; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Family Assistance, 2021). Families with one member enrolled in the job guarantee would likely exceed the cutoff for qualifying for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNA) which cost $111 billion in 2021 (U.S. Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service, 2021). Similarly, workers receiving healthcare benefits through the guarantee would not enroll in Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Second, increases in earnings and consumption from higher wages may increase tax revenues and drive growth, respectively (Paul et al., 2018). Finally, investment in personal and communal productive capacity in the form of job training and infrastructure improvements could increase private sector productivity and further increase growth (Paul et al., 2018). Decreasing unemployment may provide additional second-order effects that save money, including reducing incarceration and hospital visits (Carson et al., 2021; Maeda et al., 2014).
VI. CONCLUSION

A federal jobs guarantee in the United States would be an enormous undertaking and have to adapt the lessons from previous programs to suit the country’s current institutions. Large and complex job guarantees have been implemented before but to varying degrees of success. The guarantees that optimized for the strengths and weaknesses of their national political-economic environments were most effective in creating and provisioning useful jobs, eliminating corruption, and ultimately decreasing unemployment and poverty. Specifically, the WPA leveraged the United States’ significant state capacity to create a highly centralized and bureaucratic administrative infrastructure that effectively created projects and mitigated mismanagement. Jefes recognized the Argentinian government would be incapable of directly managing a federal guarantee and successfully delegated most authority to local communities. NREGS, meanwhile, attempted to balance participatory engagement with centralized control by giving local program officials most decision-making responsibilities. This decision led to significant corruption, disparities, and inefficiencies within the program by not acknowledging India’s weak state capacity which prevented policymakers in Delhi from supporting or regulating local administrators.

The WPA was designed out of existing social welfare agencies created during the Great Depression and utilized the comprehensive bureaucracy developed by the Roosevelt administration. The administration’s experience building large agencies in short order to provide cash transfers and targeted employment gave the government the experience and administrative capacity to rapidly and effectively roll out a highly centralized program. Other elements of the WPA’s design, like prioritizing complex, high-quality projects and allowing for a variety of wages set by statewide administrators, were made possible because of the agency’s confidence in
its own institutional capacity that stemmed from effectively utilizing the strengths of Depression-era America’s federal bureaucracy. Additionally, the political urgency in creating the WPA was made possible by the protracted and deep recession at the time—conditions not likely to be present for a future U.S. guarantee.

The policymakers who designed Jefes understood that Argentina lacked the state capacity to adopt a centralized model like the WPA. Instead, the Argentinian government utilized the country’s strong culture of participatory democracy and local institutional trust to design a decentralized model that worked well during an extreme economic crisis. This adaptation informs the Hoffman Proposal’s decision to leverage the United States’ sophisticated ecosystem of charities, nonprofits, and volunteer organizations in designing projects for the job guarantee. The primary takeaway of Jefes is that local communities understand their needs well and, given the necessary resources, can create socially beneficial work. The United States currently has more state capacity than Argentina did at the turn of the millennia and can coordinate and regulate the program in ways Jefes could not. Despite this comparable luxury, the success of Jefes’ democratic design should encourage any future American job guarantee to allow local communities to design and approve their own projects.

NREGS tried to institute a top-down model similar to the WPA but with more authority weighted closer to communities in local and regional administrators’ offices. This decision was less effective, however, because India lacked the state capacity to uniformly administer the program. Massive disparities in the efficacy of the program exist today between states and the overall quality of NREGS projects is worse than those funded by the WPA or Jefes. Nonetheless, NREGS has successfully decreased unemployment and poverty, similar to the other implemented guarantees. NREGS’s overreliance on local individuals to both create and distribute projects,
however, informed the Hoffman Proposal’s decision to largely take project design responsibilities away from program administrators.

This analysis suggests that a universal federal job guarantee, if properly tailored to the strengths of a domestic political-economic environment, would not be administratively impossible as some critics suggest. An optimal American program would combine the locally democratic design of Jefes with the strong authority given to WPA administrators to root out corruption. This hybrid model would allow local communities to design and approve the projects that would serve and employ their neighbors. Meanwhile, local and state administrators would be empowered to investigate corruption and combat disparities by directly designing projects for marginalized communities.

A lack of access to data surrounding key questions about American workers and U.S. state capacity limited the depth of this thesis’ policy recommendations for the Hoffman Proposal. Additional data on cultural differences, such as perceptions of authority and willingness to collaborate, between American, Argentinian, and Indian workers would have provided insight into the applicability of many of the lessons adapted from Jefes and NREGS. Additional information could have addressed the extent to which American workers require different levels of oversight as compared to their Argentinean and Indian peers. Additionally, this thesis could not describe in detail how U.S. state capacity is distributed throughout the country by determining what government agencies provide what services where. Similarly, Tcherneva claims that all of her proposed jobs “are already being done in one form or another. And all of them are in short supply” (Tcherneva, 2018, 19). While this claim may be true, there is no data to support it. Finally, detailed information on the socioeconomic needs of different communities would further refine the proposed program.
Future research could examine the politics and economics of the guarantee in more depth. Additional scholarship could compare the job guarantee’s potential impacts on poverty to transfer programs like the EITC and investments in social programs like Medicare. Proponents of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) contend cash transfers more effectively reduce poverty than direct job creation (Haagh, 2019). Further analysis could compare the impact and feasibility of UBI to different job guarantee programs. Additionally, this thesis does not discuss in detail the politics of a job guarantee. Public opinion of a guarantee would influence the feasibility of the program and may vary depending on its perceived effectiveness of supporting local communities or decreasing unemployment and poverty. Future studies could analyze the political responses to public employment programs at the local and national level. Finally, the scholarship surrounding the relationship between smaller, more targeted public employment programs and private sector wages and employment in developed nations can only imperfectly be applied to evaluating the efficacy of a job guarantee.

The most significant obstacle to conducting future research on the impact and efficacy of job guarantees is the absence of contemporary programs to study. Recently, however, this has begun to change. In October 2020, the Public Employment Service of Lower Austria began a pilot program to eliminate long-term unemployment and improve social, health, and wellbeing outcomes by providing a guaranteed job alongside targeted counseling to anyone in the region. A preliminary analysis released in November 2022 by economists at the University of Oxford working in conjunction with the Government of Lower Austria suggests the program has significantly reduced long-term unemployment among workers excluded from the labor market and slightly decreased total unemployment (Kasy & Lehner, 2022). As these results demonstrate, a universal federal job guarantee merits serious study. Policymakers, analysts, and pundits can
advance the discourse surrounding the job guarantee by internalizing this thesis’ key findings on the importance of tailoring to political-economic context, devolving authority to local communities, and optimizing for universal coverage.
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### Appendix

#### Table 1: Program Evaluation of Case Studies

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#### Table 2: Program Evaluation of Case Studies and Hoffman Proposal

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#### Table 3: Hoffman Cost Estimate

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<td>Average cost per worker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of administrators</td>
<td>8,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average administrator salary and benefits</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total cost of administration</strong></td>
<td><strong>$510,000,000</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual compensation for city councilmembers</td>
<td>$3,825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of city councilmembers</td>
<td>445,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total cost of compensation for city councilmembers</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,677,392,550</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total cost</strong></td>
<td><strong>$465,384,092,550 - $731,589,092,550</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4: Paul et al. cost estimate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment and underemployment (U-6), January 2018</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of unemployed and underemployed workers (U-6)</td>
<td>13.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of unemployed and underemployed workers if U-6 were at the full employment rate of 1.5%</td>
<td>10.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Demanded</td>
<td>9.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual wage</td>
<td>$32,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average spending on supplies and capital goods per FTE</td>
<td>$11,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer's share of FICA Taxes per FTE</td>
<td>$2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average spending on benefits</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average cost per job</td>
<td>$56,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cost</td>
<td>$543 billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5: Tcherneva cost estimate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of workers</td>
<td>11-16 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual wage</td>
<td>$31,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual benefits</td>
<td>$6,240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual material costs</td>
<td>$9,360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average cost per job</td>
<td>$46,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cost</td>
<td>$514 billion – $748.8 billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tcherneva estimates her program would cost between 1.3% and 2.4% of GDP. In 2018, that would have totaled between $314 billion and $493 billion. However, according to her own cost inputs as summarized in Table 5, her program would have cost between $514 billion and $748.8 billion.
The following list, while far from exhaustive, combines documented jobs created for the WPA, Jefes, and NREGS, as well as jobs suggested for both American proposals.

1. Jobs that do not require expertise, permanency, or social embeddedness
   1. Combatting soil erosion
      1. Mulching, planting cover crops, placing crushed stones
   2. Flood control
      1. Planting vegetation, installation of rock berms, rock ripraps, sandbags, maintaining normal slopes with vegetation or application of soil cements on steeper slopes and construction or expansion of drainage channels.
   3. Park maintenance and renewal
   4. Removing invasive species
      1. Hand pulling, weed wrench, cutting (high and low, in the case of vines), mowing, digging, bush hogging, prescribed burning, brush cutting and weed whipping, and pulling with a tractor and chain or Brush Brute.
   5. Weatherizing/insulating homes
      1. Applying house wrap/vapor barrier to exterior walls
      2. Applying foam internally
   6. Supporting local fisheries
   7. Planting community farms
   8. Community and rooftop gardens
   9. Tree planting
   10. Fire and other disaster prevention measures
      1. Installing smoke detectors, conducting inspections
   11. Composting
   12. Cleaning up vacant properties
   13. Reclamation of materials
      1. Sorting through landfill to find useable goods
   14. Restoring public spaces
      1. Painting, replacing building parts, adding signage, picking up trash, planting grass/vegetation, installing benches…
   15. Planting school gardens
   16. Restoring historical sites
      1. Cleaning, repairing, replacing with historically sensitive materials

2. Jobs that require expertise, permanency, or social embeddedness
   1. Teachers’ assistants
   2. Organizing afterschool activities or adult skill classes in schools or local libraries
   3. Staffing public health agencies
      1. Nurses’, physicians’, epidemiologists’, counseling, and social workers’ assistants; health clinic administrators, contact tracing workers
   4. Expanding electoral capacity
1. Hiring non-volunteer poll workers, increasing voting registration among minority populations, increasing voter accessibility for elderly and young populations, providing official, nonpartisan information to better inform citizens.

5. Expanding administrative capacity
   1. Hiring remote or in-person workers through the Government Accountability Office, Congressional Research Service, Congressional Budget Office
   2. Hire researchers for state legislatures and agencies to analyze policy and reduce policy influence of lobbyists.

6. Flood control
   1. Building levees, dikes, dams, water retention, or detention basins.

7. Conducting environmental surveys

8. Conducting species monitoring

9. Creating tool lending libraries classes and programs

10. Organizing recycling, reuse, and water-collection initiatives, food waste programs, and oral histories projects.

11. Facilitating extended-day programs for school children

12. Shadowing teachers, coaches, hospice workers and librarians to learn new skills and assist them in their duties

13. Organizing nutrition surveys in schools

14. Coordinating health awareness programs for young mothers.

15. Organizing campuses, co-ops, classes and training, and apprenticeships in sustainable agriculture