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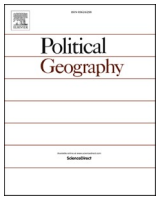

Full Length Article

Regional inequalities and transnational solidarity in the European Union

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A B S T R A C T

Amid the eurocrisis, scholars and policy makers sought to establish an EU-wide layer of social policy, aiming to ensure common standards through the EU and to provide a degree of common social protection. While public support for European social policy has been extensively studied, we don't know how regional (i.e., subnational) inequalities relate to preferences for European social policy. We analyse the effect of regional differences in socio-economic and institutional contexts on public preferences for European social policy in general and support for European unemployment insurance in particular. Combining original survey data collected in 2018 in 12 European countries with regional-level economic and political indicators, we find that regional-level self-interest impacts individual preferences but that the effect is not always clear-cut. Contrary to expectations, people in richer regions are more supportive of EU social policy than people in poorer regions, while citizens of politically more autonomous regions tend to have a generally more positive view of EU social policy. A conjoint experiment on support for different policy variants of European unemployment insurance sheds light on these counterintuitive findings: Citizens in richer regions are indeed more supportive of EU-level social policy, but only when it has limited redistributive implications and instead affects standards; conversely citizens in poorer regions are willing to forego their opposition to EU social policy for redistributive programs.

1. Introduction

In the multi-level political system of the European Union (EU), social policies are mainly regulated by and within the EU's individual member states. In the area of social protection, the EU has (limited) shared competences. The two main pillars of EU-wide social policies are the so-called open method of coordination (OMC) as well as the Europe 2020 strategy. However, since the outbreak of the eurocrisis[1] in 2009, European policy makers have sought to introduce a European layer of social policy to strengthen the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) in severe economic shocks. An important step in this direction is an EU-wide unemployment insurance scheme to buffer the negative impact of unemployment shocks in EU member states (Beblavý & Lenaerts, 2017). The importance of such a scheme has become even more urgent in the COVID-19 crisis which has had ripple effects on unemployment across the EU. However, policy makers hesitate to introduce EU-wide unemployment insurance because they fear a political backlash from eurosceptic publics.

As policy makers need public support to implement European-wide social policies, and this does not necessarily equate with general EU support (Eigmüller, 2013; Beramendi & Stegmueller, 2020), a growing body of research has assessed citizens' preferences for European social policy (for instance Gerhards et al., 2019; Dolls & Wehrhöfer, 2021), importantly, some of these contributions have emphasized the role of economic affluence and other contextual socioeconomic factors (Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2019 among others). While this research has considerably advanced scholarly knowledge on the individual and national determinants of support for European social policy, scholars have not paid enough attention to the regional (i.e. subnational) dimension of European solidarity. This omission is surprising for at least two reasons. First, the focus on national and individual explanations conceals the strong regional socio-economic heterogeneity across and within European member states. As of 2018, for instance, the per-capita purchasing-power adjusted income of cities like Prague or Bratislava is equivalent to those of Paris or the German region of Oberbayern (Eurostat, 2021), but the peripheral areas of Czech Republic or Slovakia lag much further behind in income convergence than the peripheral areas of France or Germany. EU redistributive policies, while generally modest (Burgoon, 2009; Citi & Justesen, 2021), have sought to address these regional disparities. A large share of EU funds has been channelled

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[1] By this term, we refer to the situation in the European Union (EU) from 2009 onwards where some EU member states (Cyprus Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain) were not able to repay their governments' debt anymore and needed financial bailout from third parties (European Central Bank, fellow EU countries or International Monetary Fund).

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at the regional, rather than the national or individual level, for example through European structural funds (Dellmuth, 2011). Hence, while some regions[2] have received a large amount of funding from the EU, others have hardly done so. European integration has therefore reshaped regional economic inequalities within and across member states. Existing research has shown that regional differences in socio-economic conditions (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Mayne & Katsanidou, 2023; Nicoli & Reinl, 2019); Nicoli et al., 2022) and EU funding (Chalmers & Dellmuth, 2015; López-Bazo, 2022) are reflected in public support for European integration. Second, European integration has transformed the power relations between member states and their regions, in some cases empowering regions while weakening them in others (Bourne, 2003). Consequently, some citizens want to centralise the EU because they expect this to improve the political fate of their region.

Hence, there are good reasons to expect that the regional context plays an important role in structuring public support for European social policy. Therefore, this paper addresses the following question: To what extent does the regional context influence public support for European social policy? We ask, in particular, whether socio-economic and institutional factors (such as the degree of autonomy of regions within member-states or their economic positioning vis-à-vis the national and EU average) moderate (1) EU-level social policy preferences in general, and (2) are associated with preferences for the specific design of European unemployment insurance. This subsequent dive into the relationship between specific policy details and regional characteristics helps clarifying some patterns left unexplained in the first stage of our analysis.

We rely on an original public opinion survey[3] which was fielded in 12 European countries[4] in autumn 2018. The countries under consideration are heterogeneous in their organisation of state power, so that both federal and unitary states are included in the analyses.

The results of our analyses of general support for European social policy are highly insightful but inconclusive. Our initial evidence is in contrast with our stated expectations. When respondents are asked their opinion about social and economic policy at EU level in general and policy details are left opaque, we find that respondents in poorer regions have less favourable views of EU social policy than respondents in richer regions. This finding is contrary to our expectation and could have different explanations: on the one hand, it could be that people in richer regions are more willing to share resources with other regions than poorer regions simply because they feel they can afford it. On the other hand, it could be that poorer regions feel 'left behind' by current institutions and are therefore unwilling to support them (Furlong, 2019; Mayne & Katsanidou, 2023).

To determine which of the two effects drives our general results, we analyse a conjoint experiment on a specific EU social policy, namely a European Unemployment benefit scheme, in which we vary and randomly assign information on the concrete design of such a policy. Importantly, one of the dimensions of the experiment pertains to cross-country redistribution, which allows us to support or reject the conjecture of whether richer regions are (generally) more supportive of EU-level social policy because they feel they can contribute more.

Our results in this second step help clarifying our earlier findings. They suggest that even though richer regions are generally more favourable to EU-level social policy, they tend to be less positive of social policy design schemes which include more redistributive options and demand access to be conditional upon the fulfilment of individual requirements. Instead, poorer regions tend to evaluate more redistributive schemes positively. This suggest that our earlier results are better explained by the conjecture that poorer regions feel left behind, and that their generalized uneasiness with EU-level initiatives might be counterbalanced by a clearly communicated commitment to redistributive actions.

Our article makes several contributions to the literature. First, the paper contributes to research on regional differences in public opinion on EU integration (Chalmers & Dellmuth, 2015; Dijkstra et al., 2019; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2010; Mayne & Katsanidou, 2023; Schraff, 2019) by showing that economic and institutional context shapes support for European social policy. Second, it advances benchmarking theory put forward by De Vries (2018) by highlighting the important role of regional rather than purely national context as a benchmark for evaluating European integration. Third, by emphasising the role of (erroneous) expectations about whether one's region will lose or benefit from European social policy, this paper contributes to a better understanding of euroscepticism in the 'left behind' regions of Europe (Carreras et al., 2019; Dijkstra et al., 2019; Furlong, 2019, Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Fourth, the paper provides important policy making insights into the conditions under which European social policy can find majority support by underlining the crucial role of cross-country redistribution in preference formation. While our paper focuses on public support for European social policy, it also has important implications for scholarly research on support for national social policy (Balcells et al., 2015; Franko, 2016) as well as fiscal federalism in general (Alesina et al., 1995; Beramendi, 2012; Beramendi & Stegmueller, 2020; Citi & Justesen, 2021).

2. Regional context and support for European social policy

Social policies intend to address citizens' social needs and to cover diverse types of care policies (like elderly care or childcare) as well as pensions and unemployment benefits (Yerkes, 2015). Within the EU, responsibility in this area lies largely with the member states. However, the eurocrisis laid bare the weaknesses of an economic Union without a centralized social buffer, and the covid-19 crisis further fuelled the discussion about an EU-wide unemployment insurance scheme. Indeed, to counter the economic fallout of the pandemic, the EU has moved in the direction of constructing a supranational unemployment absorption capacity with the introduction of 'SURE', an instrument of Support *to mitigate Unemployment Risk in Emergencies*. However, SURE remains a temporary instrument which works through loans at a favourable rate to member states, and only provides re-financing of short-term work schemes–a narrow type of unemployment policies which are only relevant in the context of major crises. Given the temporary nature of such policy, a vibrant debate has emerged on how to reform the instrument. Andor et al. (2020) suggest that any extension of the programme should go beyond short-term work schemes and make explicit choices over the generosity of shared benefits. Moreover, it should allow building fiscal buffers in good times and providing emergency support to certain countries or regions from common resources in bad times. Conversely, Feàs et al. (2021:10) further argue that a permanent version of SURE should include both individual-level conditions on job market participation for unemployed, and country-level conditions on social investment and improvement of human capital. In sum, the debate over the reform of the 2020 pandemic-related SURE instrument revolves around different levels of generosity, social investment, taxation, cross-country redistribution, governance, and activation policies.

How do Europeans perceive this debate? While others have already studied support for individual policy dimensions (Burgoon et al., 2020), we contribute to this vivid scholarly and policy debate by arguing that regional differences in socio-economic and institutional conditions are a vital but so far understudied aspect explaining citizen preferences for an

[2] For the purpose of this article, regions refer to the most important subnational units in a member state.

[3] The survey was approved by the ethical review board of [Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research.]. Hypotheses on experimental effects have been preregistered. The pre-registration is available at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/2USGRG

[4] Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain. Data was also collected in Ireland but excluded from this study for lack of regionally disaggregated data.

EU social layer.

We depart from a model of political preference formation in which citizens are interest-seekers but have incomplete and biased information on what is in their interest. Importantly, as discussed below, preferences for EU social policy are substantively different from, and generally less clear-cut, than general preferences for EU support. From this perspective, whether citizens support European social policy depends on whether they expect to benefit from it. People on the receiving end are hence expected to support it more than people who would have to pay into it. In line with this argument, research has shown that individual self-interest is strongly related to public support for social policy, with people of lower socio-economic status being more in favour of social policy (Blekesaune, 2013; Dallinger, 2010; Guillaud, 2011; Jæger, 2006; Naumann et al., 2016).

However, individuals often do not have objective knowledge on what is in their best interest and hence tend to rely on heuristics to interpret their interest. In her seminal benchmarking theory, De Vries (2018) argues that citizens use their own country context as a heuristic and benchmark the performance of their own country against the performance of the EU to form their opinion on European integration. We apply this theory to the regional level and expect that citizens 'benchmark' their region against the EU (Kuhn & Pardos-Prado, 2021). Citizens are likely to be most aware of the economic conditions in their own region due to their everyday experiences at work and in their local communities. The economic performance of regional entities can deviate significantly from the national average, confronting respondents in different parts of a country with dissimilar contexts. Hence, people use the performance of their own region as a heuristic. In line with this argument, research comparing the effects of national and regional economic conditions on citizens' vote shares for right-wing or Eurosceptic parties shows that citizens are more sensitive to changes in their direct environment rather than to changes on the national level (Nicoli & Reinl, 2019; Stockemer, 2016). This argument dovetails nicely with research on the 'left behind places' which suggests that euroscepticism and populism are predominant in regions that have experienced long-term economic and social decline (Cramer, 2016, Carreras et al., 2019; Dijkstra et al., 2019, Furlong, 2019, Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

While the impact of regional sociotropic interest on support for European social policy has not yet been studied, research on cross-national variation in public support for EU-level risk-sharing mechanisms also finds evidence in line with sociotropic considerations. Using survey data from 13 EU member states, Gerhards et al. (2019) find that citizens of economically struggling states are more in favour of a European welfare state than citizens of economically better-off countries. Similarly, Reinl and Giebler (2021) find that politicians in countries with weaker economic performance are more in favour of the EU providing economic assistance towards member states in crisis. Kleider and Stoeckel (2019), Vasilopoulou and Talving (2019), and Verhaegen (2018), all using the same survey wave from the European Elections Study, find that the stronger the economic performance of a country, the more supportive are its inhabitants that *their own* country provides financial bailout *to weaker countries*. While this conclusion might seem contradictory, also this pattern is in line with sociotropic self-interest: the survey question does not refer to European social policy in general, but to one's own country bailing out another one. From a collective self-interest perspective, it makes sense that citizens of economically struggling countries are more sceptical of bailing out other countries.

Hence, existing research suggests that citizens in weaker regions are more in favour of future financial support provided by the EU, and less in favour of contributing to cover other countries' inherited financial issues, than citizens in richer regions. We therefore expect individuals to be sensitive to their socio-economic context, acquiring a form of sociotropic self-interest akin to a 'collective' rationality, and therefore adapt their preferences to what would be reasonable for the welfare of the region they live in.

One important question is whether people use the EU or their member state as a reference category when evaluating the relative economic position of the region they live in. Naturally, the relative economic position of a region depends on the term of reference: respondents living in richer regions within a certain country might still perceive their region as poor when compared to regions in other European countries. In fact, empirical research suggests that citizens still primarily use the national community as a reference frame to evaluate their own economic situation, but that comparisons with other European countries have gained in importance (Delhey & Kohler, 2006). We therefore formulate two separate hypotheses on relative regional inequality, in the attempt of capturing these two separate mechanisms:

H1a. Citizens living in richer regions compared to the *EU average* are less supportive of EU-level social policy than citizens in poorer regions.

H1b. Citizens living in richer regions compared to the *national average* are less supportive of EU-level social policy than citizens in poorer regions.

Furthermore, institutional factors may also determine preferences towards EU-level social policy. The territorial organisation of the state and the autonomy of subnational political units varies considerably across the EU. Some EU member states, such as Germany, are federal states while others, such as the Netherlands, have more centralized administrations; some regions enjoy century-long autonomies while others are little more than administrative constituencies; some have a history of independentism while others have fully aligned with their nation state. Previous research demonstrates that political parties in regions with a stronger degree of regional autonomy are more likely to be in favour of European integration. There are several explanations underpinning this finding. First, the EU could be seen as an ally against the nation state and as a chance for further regional independence from country-level redistribution programmes (Jolly, 2007; Keating, 2000). Second, it could be argued that citizens of regions with high autonomy, and of federal states more in general, might be more used to the idea of multilevel governance and divided sovereignty across various layers of government. In this perspective, the EU represents just another layer in a well-known system, rather than an external entity interfering with national sovereignty. Finally, federations often explicitly accommodate cultural and at times national diversity, and therefore citizens of federations might be more accustomed to organized inter-community relationships. They assign less weight to the 'otherness' of citizens living in other parts of the state when it comes to the accession of benefits; even more so, when regions have explicit competences in social policy, like in Belgium, Spain, and, to a lesser extent, Germany, and Italy. In sum, we expect these institutional differences to influence whether citizens in a region will support or oppose EU-level policy in general, and social policy in particular. Accordingly, we articulate the following hypothesis:

H1c. Citizens living in more autonomous regions are more supportive of EU-level social policy than citizens in less autonomous regions.

An intriguing question is how economic and institutional context play out together. Existing research has shown that economic inequality is a key driver of support for decentralisation in federal states (Balcells et al., 2015; Beramendi, 2012). Citizens of wealthy regions are in favour of decentralisation while citizens of poorer regions are less favourable towards decentralisation as they depend on interregional fiscal transfers. We expect a similar, but somewhat more complex relationship in the multi-level system of the EU: Citizens of poorer regions with low autonomy feel abandoned by their national government and turn to the EU as an additional source of welfare, while citizens in poor and highly autonomous regions do not see the necessity of widening competences towards the EU. This contradictory relationship for regions with high/low autonomy should exist for most EU-level policies but especially so for social policy as it directly affects people's livelihoods and daily lives – be it either through health care, childcare or unemployment benefits. Hence, if people are dissatisfied with their national social

policies and their region has low autonomy to regulate them, they more likely feel an urgent need for bringing in another level of governance: the EU. However, if a region is independent in social policy, the EU is less likely to be seen as a saviour.

H1d. Citizens in poor regions with low level of political autonomy are more supportive of EU-level social policy than citizens living in poor regions with high level of political autonomy.

3. Regional context and support for specific policy designs

When the details of a policy are left unspecified and it is discussed in abstract and general terms, people may often think in equally generalising terms. In doing so, they are likely to be affected profoundly by ideology and implicit expectations about the effect of such a policy when formulating their preferences. In fact, existing research has shown that many citizens do not fully reject or approve EU-wide social policy but that their support is highly dependent on the concrete policy design of such a scheme (Bechtel et al., 2014: Beetsma et al., 2020; Kuhn et al., 2020).

Thus, while the first part of our analysis asks about general support for EU-wide social policy this could in large part reflect their implicit expectations about how such a policy would look like and its purported impact. However, this might be no longer the case if the details of a policy proposal are unveiled. When the general idea of a policy is replaced with specific options, and the inherent multidimensionality of policy design is made explicit, individuals might pay much more attention to the specific features they like or dislike within certain policy packages.

Hence, after analysing the relationship between regional differences and general attitudes towards European social policy, we assess whether support for specific policy design is similarly affected as general attitudes, or whether –once specific details of a policy proposals are discussed and displayed - the cues received by contextual factors are no longer relevant. Importantly, this second analytical step allows us to clarify some of the effects left unexplained in the first stage of the analysis. Therefore, we zoom in on European unemployment insurance, a policy high on the political agenda since the eurocrisis, and we examine how regional differences impact support for different designs of such a policy. Doing so enables us to better understand which aspects of European social policy citizens are most sensitive to. The dimensions (or attributes) of the conjoint experiment used in this study are derived from the actual discussions that took place among policymakers over the design of a European Unemployment Risk-Sharing (EURS) in the wake of the eurocrisis. EU-level discussion on EURS emerged after the then-President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, called for such an instrument in his roadmap for a genuine monetary union (Van Rompuy, 2012). Reports by the European Commission and other policy experts identified design features across which alternative EURS could vary: the degree of coverage of benefits, the level of governance, the presence or absence of redistribution between countries and the related 'clawback' mechanisms, the impact on domestic taxation, a range of conditionalities, and the size of the economic downturns activating the common policy (Beblavý & Lenaerts, 2017). In our experiment, we simplified the EU-level debate deriving six of the aforementioned policy characteristics. First-off, the income replacement rate of the scheme, which varies from 40% to 70% of the last income, captures the generosity of the scheme. Second, country-level conditions on training and education, that can be present or absent and identify public preferences for social investment. Third, individual-level conditions on job applications, that can be absent, compulsory, and accompanied by an obligation to accept suitable offers; this models public preferences for activation schemes. Fourth, the level of governance (national or European), modelling preferences for subsidiarity. Fifth, the long-term impact on domestic taxation, which can be neutral, or can lead to flat increases in taxation, or to progressive increases, modelling intra-national redistributive preferences. And finally, the effect on cross-country redistribution, which can be neutral, or allow any country to potentially receive resources from the system, or allow only poor countries to be net-recipients in the long term, modelling inter-national redistributive preferences.

In this article, we are interested in how these policy dimensions interplay with regional-level contextual factors. We expect that preferences for the design of European social policy can be explained by sociotropic self-interest, i.e. by citizens' considerations of what is most in the interest of the region where one lives. In particular, we expect that there are regional differences in preferences for those EU-level social policy dimensions that directly affect the amount and access to benefits, and that these regional differences reflect sociotropic self-interest: People in poorer regions should be more in favour of more generous and more redistributive policies with weak conditions for coverage because this would increase the chances that their region would benefit from such a policy. We therefore formulate the following hypotheses:

H2a. (Sociotropic self-interest, national comparison): Citizens living in richer regions *relative to their own country* are less supportive of European unemployment insurance that is a) more redistributive, (b) more generous, and (c) imposes weaker conditions on beneficiaries than citizens living in poorer regions.

H2b. (Sociotropic self-interest, European comparison): Citizens living in richer regions *relative to the EU average* are more supportive of European unemployment insurance that is a) more redistributive, (b) more generous, and (c) imposes weaker conditions on beneficiaries than citizens living in poorer regions.

In addition, the territorial organisation of the state likely impacts what kind of European social policy citizens prefer. We expect that citizens in more autonomous regions will prefer stricter conditions for the disbursal of benefits, since they might favour federal-like arrangements they are already familiar with, where the use of money is often kept in check. Similarly, citizens in more autonomous regions are less reliant on national-level coordination and policy making, and these regions often attempt to legitimise themselves as direct interlocutors with the EU. They are likely to feel less dependent on their country and aim to acquire a direct link with supranational institutions. Hence, we expect citizens living in more autonomous regions to display a relatively weaker preference for national-level governance (in respect to EU-level governance) than citizens living in regions with little autonomy.

H2c. (Autonomy logic): Citizens living in more autonomous regions are more supportive of European unemployment insurance that is (a) more conditional and (b) with weaker national governance, than citizens living in less autonomous regions.

4. Research design

4.1. Data

We merged an original survey conducted in 12 EU member states in 2018 with regional-level data on economic performance and political autonomy. The survey includes 108,786 respondents and has been fielded online in autumn 2018 in 13 countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain. Due to data constraints on the regional level, we exclude Ireland from the analysis. The survey was executed by the international survey company IPSOS[5] among its online access panel, which respondents can opt into. We imposed quota for age, education, gender and region at the NUTS-1 level. This resulted in a sample with a discrepancy of up to two percent for each demographic category in most countries, and no country with any demographic

[5] https://www.ipsos.com/en.

distribution deviating from the population distribution more than four percent. All regional-level macroeconomic and institutional indicators are measured on the (more fine-grained) NUTS-2 level with the only exception of Germany, where we opt for the NUTS-1 level (the German *Bundesländer*) instead.[6] Our dataset counts 145 regions. To match the period of fieldwork of the survey experiment, we drew on values from 2017 to calculate our regional indicators.

We proceed in two steps. We first test hypotheses 1a-1d by analysing how our key variables of interest at the regional level affect *overall preferences regarding the allocation of social policy at the European vs national level*. We then move to hypotheses 2a-2c and analyse the moderating role of our regional-level variables of interest on the effect of the *randomised policy features*.

4.2. Regional differences in general support for European social policy

To test hypotheses 1a-d on general support for European social policy, we use the following question as dependent variable: "Regarding economic and social policies, should decisions be made mainly by the [country] government, mainly by the European Union, or jointly[7]?" We build a binary indicator, which takes the value of 0 when a respondent prefers social policy to be national only, and 1 if a respondent would at least partially assign competences to the EU. Overall, 49.01 per cent of the respondents in our survey prefer that competences in social policy be (at least partly) conferred to the EU-level. Fig. 1 shows variation in public support for EU-level social policy across NUTS-2 regions. Regions such as Galicia (Spain), Umbria (Italy), Central Transdanubia (Hungary) or West Pomeranian Voivodeship (Poland) prefer that decisions are mainly taken by the EU, while regions such as Bourgogne (France) or Thuringia (Germany) prefer that these decisions are taken by their own country. Importantly, respondents in our sample see allocation of social policy as a substantively distinct preference from general support for the EU, with a correlation of only about 0.29.

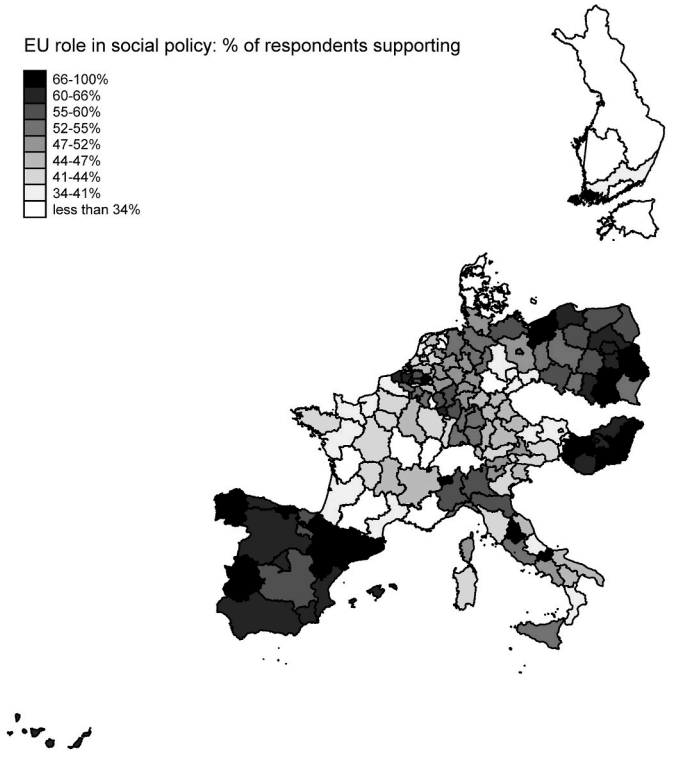

Fig. 1. Public preferences for the EU's role in social policy, NUTS-2 level.

To adequately operationalise regional-level economic performance, we use Eurostat (2021) data from 2017 on per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) and compare the regional per-capita GDP to the average score of the respective country. For this purpose, we calculate the regional value minus the national one. In the case of GDP per capita, this means that when the difference is positive, the region itself shows a stronger economic development compared to the country. Fig. 2 graphically presents within-country regional-level variance in economic performance. We see strong within-country variations especially in states such as Germany, Spain and Italy. This supports our assumption that simply taking national contexts into account misses out on existing intra-country variation and thus foregoes explanatory power for citizens' social policy preferences.

When considering the descriptive relationship between GDP per capita as compared to the EU average (see Fig. 3) and our first dependent variable, an overall negative correlation of −0.15 appears. However, regions are nested in countries. When looking at within-country correlations (figure A1 in appendix) a different picture emerges: within nearly all countries, the relationship is positive or flat.

We measure regional autonomy using the Regional Authority Index (RAI, Hooghe et al., 2016) for the year 2010. The RAI index has two subcomponents: a self-rule component – "the authority exercised by a regional government over those who live in the region" – and a shared rule component – "the authority exercised by a region or its representatives in the country as a whole" (Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021). The resulting RAI scores constitute a composite index merging these two dimensions. The higher the value of the composite index the more

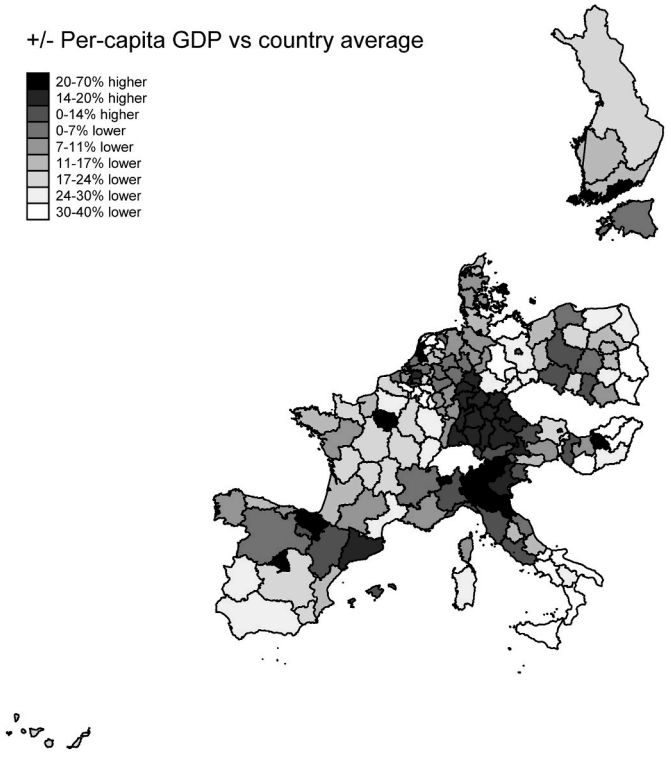

Fig. 2. Regional GDP vs. Country average.

[6] In the case of Germany, NUTS-2 levels have a primarily statistical value, while the politically meaningful subnational unit, the Land, is at NUTS-1 level, which is more aggregate.

[7] This question has two stimuli, namely economic and social policy decisions. It is therefore not possible for us to consider these two aspects separately. However, we think that this does not detract from analyzing and interpreting the variable, since many economic policies already reside at the EU-level and the social component embodies the new part of this package.

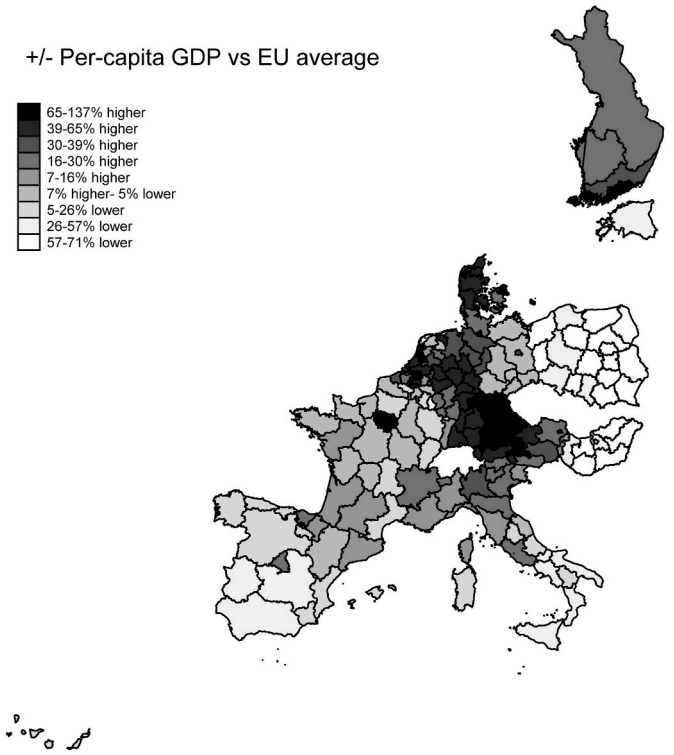

Fig. 3. Regional GDP vs. EU average.

autonomous the region. Calculated RAI values are generally in line with other known decentralisation measures (Schakel, 2008) and are a widely used indicator in scientific research (see for instance Chalmers, 2013; Neudorfer & Neudorfer, 2015). Fig. 4 again breaks down the degree of autonomy by country-regions. In comparison to regional-level economic performance, we find less intra-country variance with regard to the RAI index. For most countries, the value remains stable across regions. However, we find regional variation for Belgium, Finland, France, Italy, and Spain. This reflects the fact that most countries give an equal amount of autonomy to all their regions, while some countries confer more power to particular regions, such as the Basque Country in Spain or Trentino/Alto-Adige in Italy. The most autonomous regions in our dataset are in Germany, Spain, and Austria, while regions in Hungary, Denmark and Finland are least autonomous.

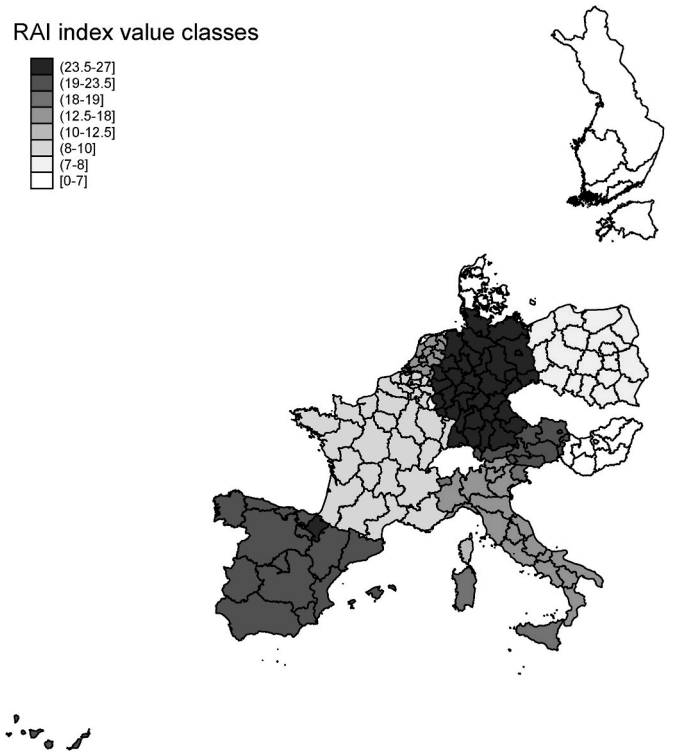

Fig. 4. Regional autonomy measurement.

We complement regional-level information with individual-level covariates controlling for the demographic and socioeconomic profile of respondents. In particular, 'age' measures the age of respondents; 'female' is a binary variable taking value of 1 for female individuals, and 0 otherwise; 'low education' is a binary variable for individuals in low education categories (ISCED 1–3), and 0 otherwise; and finally, 'unemployed' is a binary variable taking the value of 1 if the respondent is currently without employment, or 0 otherwise. Table A1 in the appendix provides an overview on all the variables used. Since the empirical focus of this paper is on regional differences, and individual heterogeneity has already been studied by others (Kuhn et al., 2020; Nicoli et al., 2020), the main analyses do not include attitudinal variables such as left-right placement, support for EU membership or collective identities, and use exogenous controls only. In the first purely observational part of our study, including such attitudinal variables would raise issues of endogeneity. The appendix shows additional analyses including attitudinal control variables, which show that the effect of regional affluence remains significant but weakens. In the conjoint experiment, dimensions are fully exogenous and individual-level heterogeneity is accounted for by individual-level standard errors. This allows us to focus on different moderators without committing omitted variable bias.

4.3. Modelling strategy

To test hypotheses 1a-d on the effect of regional sociotropic considerations, we perform a set of regression analyses on individual-level preferences for European social policy, whose results are shown in Table 1.[8]

Model 1.1 shows the results of an 'empty'-multilevel regression model with individuals nested in regions. Since we are mainly interested in regional differences rather than differences between countries, we use OLS estimates with country-fixed effects whenever suitable (i.e., when the RAI index is not included) as well as standard errors clustered at the regional level from model 1.2 onwards.[9]

In model 1.2, we include individual-level predictors. From model 1.3 on, we also add regional-level predictors. In model 1.3, we add the regional GDP differential vis-à-vis the EU, while we opt for the regional GDP differential vis-à-vis the country in model 1.4. In model 1.5, we include the Regional Autonomy Index (RAI). Since regional RAI variables tend to be similar in the same country (see Fig. 4), we do not use country dummies when including the RAI to avoid multicollinearity.

[8] Before starting, we regress support for EU membership on individual-level factors such as age, gender, education, employment status and identity, and contextual factors such as regional GDP (model 2.8 in Table A2 in the appendix). This model has a R2 of 0.28. When compared to the same model predicting EU social policy allocation (model A2.4) not only the R2 halves, but also different variables change their effects and significance, strongly indicating that generalized EU support and preferences for EU social policy allocation are distinct concepts. Indeed, the correlation between these variables is below 0.3, suggesting that, despite being related, support for EU and support for EU-level social policy are quite distant from each other.

[9] To address the issue of within-country intercepts discussed earlier, in table A3 in appendix, we show estimates for models including regional-level GDP variables in a random intercept model, allowing the intercept to vary by country; results are aligned with the country fixed effect model, which we prefer as a baseline method of estimation since it is more parsimonious and easier to interpret.

Table 1
Support for EU-level social policy.

	1.1: empty regional multilevel model	1.2: individual variables only	1.3: region GDP vs EU	1.4: region GDP vs country	1.5: RAI	1.6: split sample: Low autonomy by RAI index	1.7: split sample: high autonomy by RAI index
female		0.008	0.008	0.008	0.010	0.010	0.005
		(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.010)	(0.010)
age		−0.028***	−0.028***	−0.028***	−0.031**	−0.0314***	−0.025***
		(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.007)
unemployed		−0.009	−0.008	−0.008	0.005	−0.007	0.010
		(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.022)	(0.020)
low education		−0.050***	−0.050***	−0.050***	−0.053***	−0.078***	−0.036**
		(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.001)	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.011)
GDP position vs EU			0.036***				
			(0.013)				
GDP position vs country				0.040**		−0.044**	0.054**
				(0.016)		(0.022)	(0.021)
RAI index					0.002		
					(0.001)		
constant	0.501***	0.484***	0.465***	0.484***	0.541***	0.553***	0.560***
	(0.0106)	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.016)	(0.0514)	(0.016)	(0.017)
standard deviation (region)	0.111(***)						
	(0.008)						
Observations	17,133	16,957	16,957	16,957	16,957	9723	9838
R-squared		0.062	0.062	0.062	0.005	0.007	0.003

Notes: Models 1.2 to 1.4 include country dummies (not shown in the table) as well as regional-level clustered standard errors.
Standard errors in parentheses. Levels of significance: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Finally, in models 1.6 and 1.7 we test the moderating effect of autonomy on GDP. These two models allow to compare the effect of GDP differentials in regions with high/low autonomy. Given that in these models we already partition the sample following the type of region, models 1.6 and 1.7 do not use regionally clustered standard errors.

5. Results

5.1. Regional contextual differences and general attitudes towards European social policy

What is the relationship between regional affluence as measured by per-capita GDP differentials, and preferences for EU-level social policies? When included in the regression without accounting for regional autonomy differences (which correlate substantially with the country, and are therefore close, although not equivalent to, fixed effects), both measures of GDP differentials are statistically significant and of similar magnitude: the richer the region compared to the country (or the EU), the more support for social policy. Therefore, we do not find evidence in favour of H1a and H1b; the results are clearly not aligned with our original expectations, since people living in richer regions are more in favour of European-level social policy than poorer ones. It is plausible that respondents simply referred to a Europeanisation of decision making on social policy without taking into consideration its implications for cross-border redistribution. To check the robustness of our results, we also run logistic regression analyses instead of OLS. Results are shown in Table A4 in the appendix. Moreover, we test whether our results differ when we do not control for country dummies and region clustered standard errors (Table A5) and check for an alternative measurement of our dependent variable (Table A6). The findings from these alternative models do not differ in their interpretations. The results of the conjoint experiment will provide more insights into this question. In appendix table A2, we estimate additional versions of models 1.3–1.7 by controlling for European attachment. This reduces the statistical significance of regional GDP in all models. GDP differentials vis à vis the country or Europe remain significant at 10% or 5% threshold in all models, but a significant proportion of their effect is picked up by identity.

Next, we turn to the question of institutional structures. In model 1.5, we test H1c, exploring whether more autonomous regions tend to be more supportive of European social policy. The effect is not significant: we do not have sufficient evidence supporting the hypothesis that people living in more autonomous regions tend to be more supportive of EU-level social policy. We therefore reject H1c, although we maintain, for the moment, the conjecture that regional-level differentials in autonomy might modulate the effect of other variables, even though they may not – on their own – produce direct effects. We test this conjecture, formulated in H1d, in models 1.6 and 1.7 where we explore whether GDP effects *differ* depending on whether a region is autonomous or not. In other words, we look at whether regional autonomy, even if it does not have a direct effect on its own, moderates the effect of other factors. To do so, we run separate models depending on the level of autonomy of the regions, to formally test the existence of statistically significant differences between levels[10]. Regions are split as for whether they have higher (>10) or lower (<10) than median regional autonomy (10 being the median value of the RAI index). The effect is quite strong: the impact of within-country socio-economic performance (vis-à-vis the country) strongly depends on whether regions have higher or lower autonomy. Respondents in richer regions tend to support EU-level social policy if the region is also relatively more autonomous with respect to the EU-average, while they tend to oppose it when the region is rich, but not autonomous. This leads us to support for H1d: citizens in wealthier regions of a country support more EU-level social policy than citizens in poorer regions of the same country, but only when the region is relatively more autonomous, while the opposite is true for regions with lower autonomy.

Fig. 5 graphically presents the average marginal effects for these two groups. Autonomy appears to be a strong moderator of the ways in which wealth affects support for European social policy: respondents in comparatively richer and autonomous regions support a strong EU role in social policy, while respondents in comparatively richer but less autonomous regions are less likely to support it than their peers in poor and non-autonomous regions. The RAI index variation often coincides with country boundaries. This means that partitioning across the RAI index in some cases is equal to dividing the countries in two groups: countries with more and less autonomous tendencies. To control for

[10] We use split samples instead of a triple interaction due to their much simpler interpretation

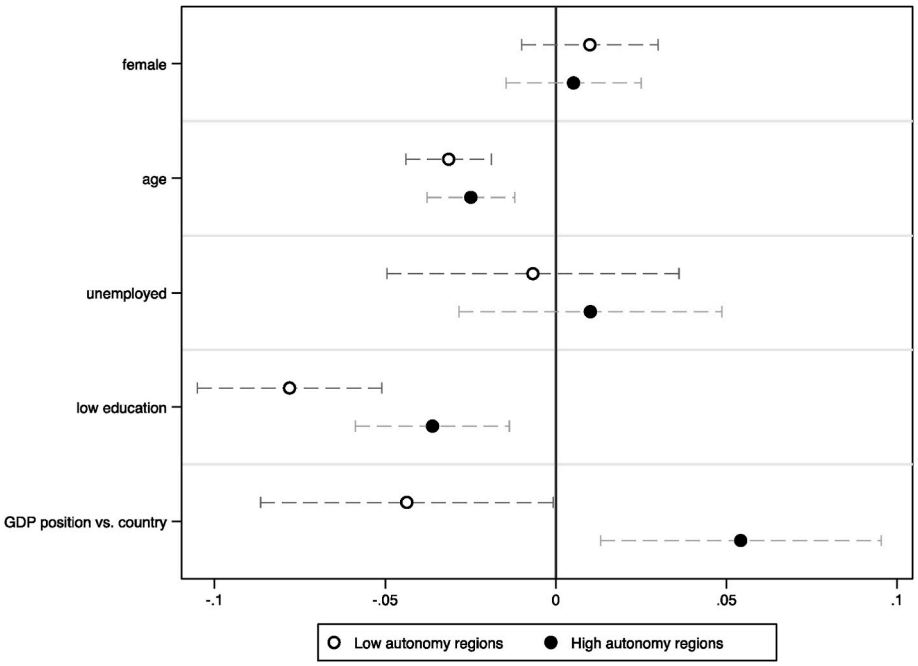

Fig. 5a. determinants of support for EU-level social policy, by regions with low and high autonomy.

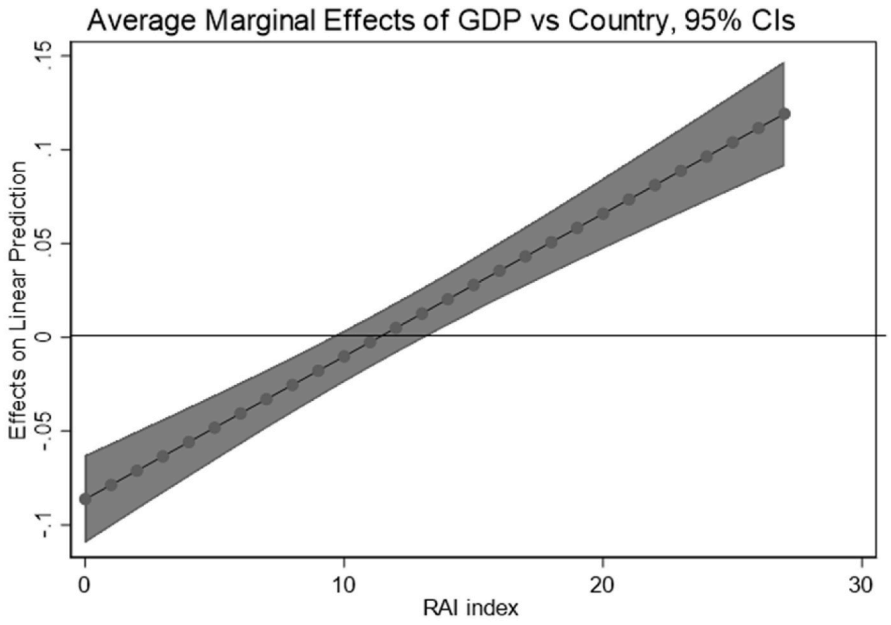

Fig. 5b. marginal effect on preferences for European social policy of GDP position vs country, at levels of regional autonomy.
Note: Regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals.

alternative explanations the RAI partition might pick up, we run additional robustness checks differentiating between a) rich vs poor countries, b) eurocrisis debtor vs creditor states, c) presidential vs parliamentary states, and d) monarchy vs no monarchy (see Figure A2 in the appendix). The distinction between levels of regional autonomy indeed reveals a discrepancy that is not capped by any other grouping (see Figure A3, also in the appendix).

To conclude, the results of these first empirical analyses advise us to consistently reject our expectations formulated in H1a and H1b. Inhabitants of richer regions are more supportive of EU-level social policy, especially when they are highly autonomous, while they tend to be less supportive of EU-level social policy than their poorer counterparts in very centralized countries.

Two reasonable explanations are possible for such result. First, it could be the case that richer regions just have more resources to share, so –all else equal-they might support higher EU-level benefits. Second, it might be that richer regions -the 'winners' of European integration-feel as protagonist in such process and attract more progressive and educated citizenry; some of these effects may be indirect and therefore remain even when controlling for individual level education or income. Conversely, poorer regions could feel 'left behind', experiencing not only relative income deprivation, but also experiencing outflows of

human capital and loss of perceived status. This experience of abandonment would lead to general lower support for the institutions that most represent the liberal international order-such as the European Union (Börzel & Zürn, 2021).

The generic nature of the question used in this first stage of the analysis does not allow us to discriminate between these two explanations. Without explicit policy alternatives, we cannot identify, for instance, whether support for EU social policy remains high in rich regions regardless of how much redistribution it involves.

To solve this puzzle, we now take a second step, where – through the use of a conjoint experiment - we can randomly assign policy features and therefore causally determine their relationship with preferences among different groups of people and of regions.

5.2. Regional contextual differences and specific attitudes towards alternative designs of European unemployment benefits

Having assessed how regional dynamics affect the overall preferences for the allocation of social policy *in general,* we now move to the specific issue of *European-level unemployment insurance.* By studying how design features of any such hypothetical EU social policy gain or lose traction with the public depending on the regional context respondents are immersed in, we test our hypotheses 2a-2c. Following our theoretical argumentation, the interaction of regional contextual factors with general versus specific social policies could turn out very differently.

To test our hypotheses on support for different designs of social policy, we draw on a conjoint experiment on public support for European unemployment insurance that was embedded in our survey. Conjoint experiments are an established method across the social sciences to elicit preferences on complex and multidimensional issues (Hainmueller et al., 2014; Kuhn et al., 2020; Munis, 2021). In the experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to descriptions of different policy packages that vary on crucial policy dimensions and were then asked to rate and rank these alternatives. While a great variety of fundamental policy dimensions have been identified in the literature (Beblavý & Lenaerts, 2017), the survey experiment focuses on six crucial policy dimensions of European unemployment risk-sharing: generosity, social investment conditions, redistribution, taxation, governance, and activation conditions. Each of these dimensions include several alternatives, which are then randomly combined to form six policy packages, which are then pitched against each other in pairs. Every individual is confronted with 6 packages, and s/he is asked to choose one for each pair and rank every package. Only a small fraction of individuals (6%) rejects 5 or 6 packages (signalling fundamental opposition to the idea) while everyone else identifies at least two packages they can live with.

Since every individual is presented with six different packages, the unit of observation in a conjoint experiment is not the individual, but the package. For each package, the experiment generates two dependent variables: a 'choice' variable, and a 'rate' variable. In other words, we know whether a specific package has been preferred over another one or not, and we know how much respondents like or dislike each package. The first variable is expressed in binary terms, while the second is expressed as a 5-points scale. However, to compute overall levels of support, it is important to know what share of the population likes or dislikes a specific package. For this reason, we construct a transformed version of the rating variable, whereby very negative, negative, and neutral evaluations of a package are recoded as 0, and positive and very positive evaluations are recoded as one. This gives us a conservative snapshot of the overall level of support for each package, which is more reliable than the choice variable, for it is independent from the contents of the opposite package. By considering neutrals as against, we also make sure that such estimates capture baseline support levels, or 'worst-case scenarios'. The treatments of the experiment are provided by the randomly assigned dimensions of the policy packages: each observation (a specific policy package) is provided with a randomly assigned set of values for each dimension. So, for each observation, we have a set of six independent experimental treatments, each of which indicates, respectively, the type of generosity, social investment conditions, cross-country redistribution, taxation, governance, and individual level conditions that had been randomly associated so to form that particular policy package. Such random assignment ensures that the estimated differences in the effects of the treatments can be interpreted causally, much alike in a randomised control trial.

Table 2 portrays the results of our main estimates. Before we turn to the moderating roles of our regional indicators, we first look at their direct effects on support for *any* European unemployment insurance policy. Neither measure of GDP disparity (models 2.1 and 2.2) displays a direct effect of these variables on support for EU unemployment benefits. This means that citizens living in richer regions do not significantly differ in their overall support for all European unemployment policies shown in the experiment. The RAI index (model 2.3) has a significant independent effect, with a slightly negative coefficient. Hence, on average across all packages, respondents in highly autonomous regions are slightly less likely to prefer EU-level unemployment benefits than their peers in less autonomous regions.[11] Moreover, it is worth mentioning the direct effects of policy design attributes, even if they are not in the focus of this paper. When no interaction is included (model 2.0), the degree of policy generosity has a significant and positive effect on support for European unemployment risk-sharing, i.e., on average, citizens prefer a more generous policy. Moreover, social investment conditions, as well as active labour market policies, are associated with higher support, meaning that citizens prefer schemes that impose individual and country-level conditions for benefiting from the policy. Respondents prefer no extra taxation, and if extra taxation must be raised, they prefer it to be progressive rather than flat; finally, citizens support a redistributive but de-centralized system under national control.

5.3. Interaction effects: sociotropic self interest

To examine whether the causal effect of policy dimensions on support for European unemployment risk-sharing is moderated by regional-level factors, we examine the interaction effects between our main regional-level variables and the policy dimensions in Table 2. We start with testing hypothesis 2a that citizens living in poorer regions relative to their own country are more supportive of European unemployment insurance that is a) more redistributive, (b) more generous, and (c) imposes weaker conditions on beneficiaries than citizens living in richer regions.

The national economic deviation measurement (model 2.1) shows a negative and significant interaction with one feature of international redistribution (*from rich to poor*). This means that packages including *redistribution policies from the rich to the poor* countries find less support among respondents in regions which are economically better off than the national average. Put another way, people living in regions with an above-average economic development measured by GDP, are comparatively more opposed to policy packages forcing redistribution from economically stronger to weaker countries. Fig. 6 graphically displays this relationship. However, there is no significant interaction effect with generosity and individual-level conditions. Consequently, our results are partially consistent with hypothesis 2a but we find no support for the aspects of *generosity* and *individual-level conditions*.

Model 2.2. in Table 2 shows a similar pattern with respect to hypothesis 2b, which expected that citizens living in poorer regions relative to the EU are more supportive of European unemployment insurance that is a) more redistributive, (b) more generous, and (c) imposes weaker conditions on beneficiaries than citizens living in richer regions. Both features of international redistribution (*from rich to poor &*

[11] Note however that the constant of the model-i.e., the 'floor' representing the minimal level of support for packages across all packages-is substantially higher in models including the RAI index than in models which do not.

Table 2
OLS regressions explaining support for European unemployment risk-sharing.

	2.0. Base model	2.1. regional vs. national GDP	2.2. regional vs. EU GDP	2.3. RAI
Contextual factor		0.013 (0.032)	0.032 (0.016)	−0.004*** (0.001)
Generosity (base level: 40%):				
70%	0.117*** (0.005)	0.117*** (0.005)	0.116*** (0.006)	0.117*** (0.005)
60%	0.087*** (0.004)	0.087*** (0.004)	0.086*** (0.005)	0.087*** (0.004)
Individual conditions (base: no conditions):				
Apply for and accept job	0.063*** (0.010)	0.064*** (0.010)	0.064*** (0.009)	0.031 (0.020)
Accept job	0.073*** (0.009)	0.075*** (0.009)	0.074*** (0.008)	0.039*** (0.017)
International redistribution (base: no redistribution):				
From rich to poor	0.005 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)	0.015*** (0.004)	0.006 (0.006)
Between any country	0.003 (0.005)	0.003 (0.005)	0.011*** (0.004)	0.004 (0.005)
Social investment conditions (base: no conditions):				
Training and education	0.070*** (0.003)	0.070*** (0.003)	0.070*** (0.003)	0.070*** (0.003)
Increase in taxes (base: no long-run increases):				
0.5% taxes for everyone	−0.058*** (0.004)	−0.058*** (0.004)	−0.058*** (0.004)	−0.058*** (0.004)
1% taxes for the rich	−0.028*** (0.004)	−0.027*** (0.004)	−0.027*** (0.004)	−0.027*** (0.004)
Governance (base: European governance):				
National	0.021*** (0.005)	0.021*** (0.005)	0.021*** (0.005)	0.030*** (0.008)
60% Generosity x regional indicator		−0.012 (0.017)	0.004 (0.008)	
70% Generosity x regional indicator		−0.001 (0.020)	0.008 (0.009)	
Accept job x regional indicator		−0.002 (0.034)	0.007 (0.015)	0.003*** (0.001)
Apply and accept job x regional indicator		0.013 (0.039)	−0.000 (0.017)	0.003** (0.001)
Between any country x regional indicator		−0.025 (0.018)	−0.046*** (0.008)	
From rich to poor x regional indicator		−0.053** (0.026)	−0.062*** (0.010)	
National governance x regional indicator				−0.001 (0.000)
Constant	0.340*** (0.010)	0.326*** (0.013)	0.324*** (0.012)	0.380*** (0.021)
Observations	89,2440.034	88,2240.035	88,2240.036	88,2240.025
R-squared				

Notes: OLS regression analyses. Models control for gender, age, education and unemployment status. Model 2.0, 2.1 and 2.2 additionally include country dummies. All models control for regional level clustered standard errors. Standard errors in parentheses. *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

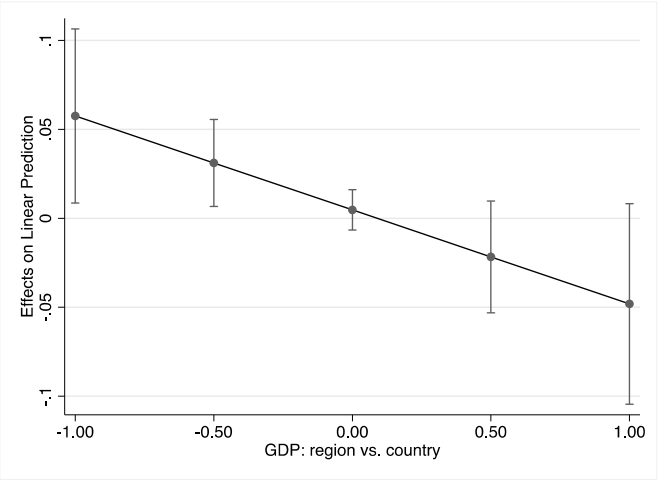

Fig. 6. Interaction effect: Redistribution from rich to poor x regional vs. national GDP.

between any country) form a negative interaction with the regional-level economy (vis-à-vis the EU) on support for a EU wide unemployment insurance. This means that citizens living in regions that are economically worse off than the EU average are more supportive of between-country redistribution than citizens of richer regions. Figs. 7 and 8 graphically display this relationship. In contrast, we find no significant interaction effects between the regional vs. EU GDP and the policy features *generosity* and *individual-level conditions* on support for a EU-wide unemployment insurance. Hence, we find only partial evidence in support of hypothesis 2b.

Finally, we assess how the territorial organisation of the state structures preferences for European unemployment risk sharing. We test hypothesis 2c that citizens living in more autonomous regions are more supportive of European unemployment insurance that is (a) more conditional and (b) with weaker national governance, than citizens living in less autonomous regions. Model 2.3 in Table 2 shows that policy features of individual-level conditionally (*accept job & accept & apply for job*) combined with the level of regional autonomy affect respondents backing for European unemployment risk-sharing. As further shown in Figs. 9 and 10, people in regions with more regional independence are indeed in favour of EURS packages that attach a high degree of conditionality at the individual level. In contrast, the level of governance displays no significant interaction with regional autonomy.

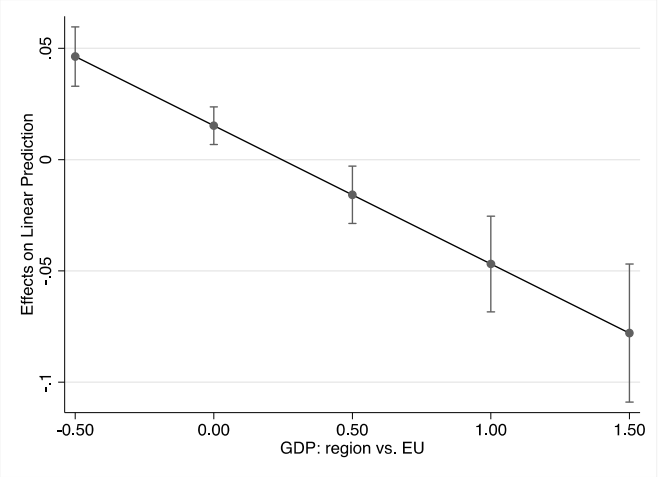

Fig. 7. Interaction effect: Redistribution from rich to poor x regional vs. EU GDP.

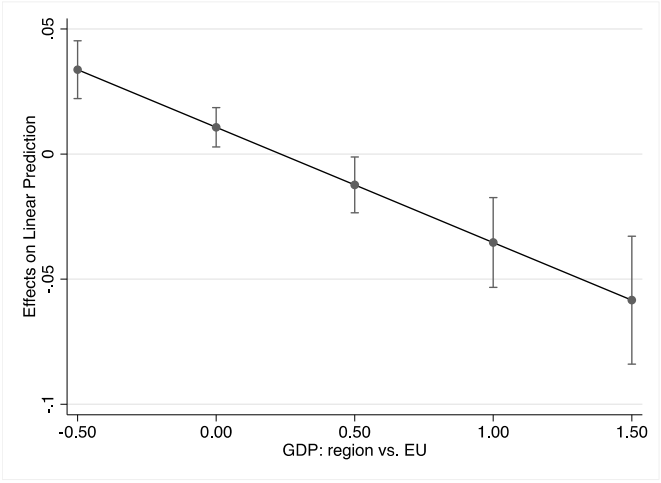

Fig. 8. Interaction effect: Redistribution between any country x regional vs. EU GDP.

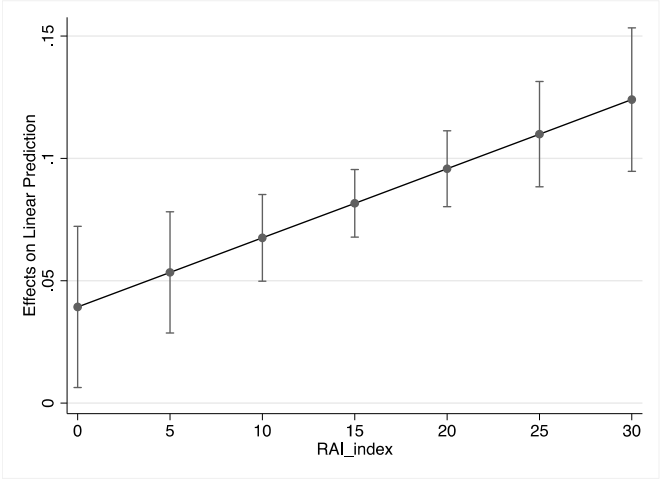

Fig. 9. Interaction effect: Accept any job x RAI index.

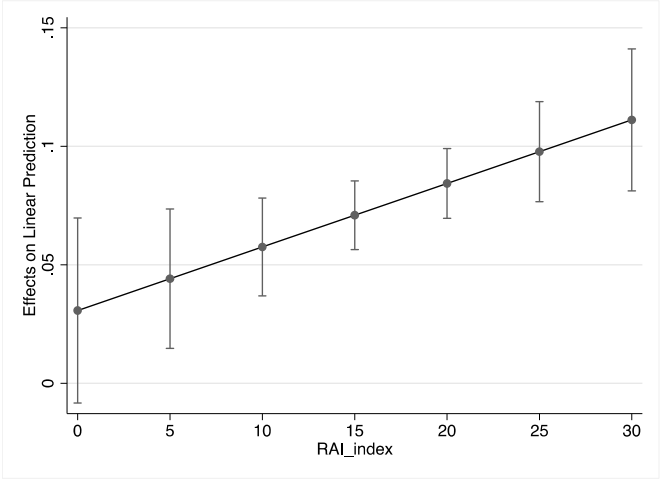

Fig. 10. Interaction effect: Accept and apply for a job x RAI index.

In sum, our findings are partly in line with our hypotheses 2a-c on regional differences in support for European unemployment risk sharing. Sociotropic economic self-interest plays a moderating role for the effect of policy features on support for EURS, both in comparison with the EU as well as the national economic performance. When compared to the average national and EU economic situation, a moderating effect is shown for the planned type of intra-EU redistribution. People in comparatively more prosperous regions are more critical of redistribution from rich to poor regions as well as redistribution between any countries compared to fellow citizens in economically weaker regions.

All in all, richer, median, and poorer regions generally agree on all aspects of a European Unemployment Benefit Scheme, except for its governance and of cross-country redistribution . The packages shown in Fig. 11 include high generosity, individual-level conditions, social investment, European governance, progressive taxation; they only differ about cross-country redistribution. Removing cross-country redistribution causes a fall in support in the poorest regions from about 0.59 to 0.53, while causing an increase in support among the richest regions from about 0.56 to about 0.64. In other words, cross-country redistribution is a critical element of the design, but – while important – it is not, on its own, able to prompt a region to switch from support to opposition. Left-behind regions, in other words, seem supportive of common instruments for unemployment support even if, in the long run, they do not necessarily receive net income transfers for it; richer regions, similarly, are ready to support EURS schemes even in case of redistributive packages. All in all, these results suggest that a compromise on some form of joint unemployment risk-sharing should indeed be possible and widely supported.

The second aspect of European regions considered in this study, that of regional autonomy, is also (partly) in line with the previously established hypothesis. Indeed, people in more autonomous regions prefer EURS packages that demand stricter conditionality at the individual level.

These results clarify the findings of our tests for hypotheses 1a-1d on general support for European social policy, where we found that poorer regions were generally less supportive of EU social policy. Two possible explanations were raised: material resources making rich regions more willing – and able - to share, and feelings of being left behind, making poorer regions less willing to support liberal international institutions (Furlong, 2019; Mayne & Katsanidou, 2023). The results of the second step point towards the latter explanation. Once redistribution effects are made explicit in the experiment, we see that support in richer regions tends to fall (Figs. 7 and 8). Conversely, we find that left-behind regions are willing to support EU-level social policy if it is clear that they will benefit from it. This suggests that citizens in left-behind regions hold views akin a 'qualified' rejection of EU-level social policy, and they are willing to consider variations of specific designs that explicitly support them.

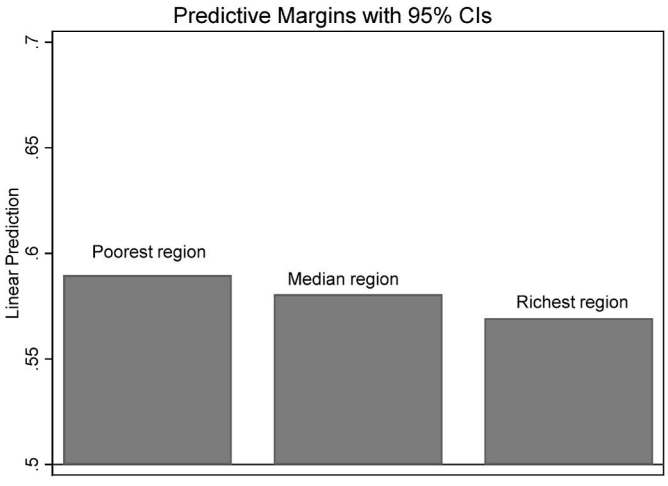

Fig. 11a. Support with cross-country redistribution, by regional affluence.

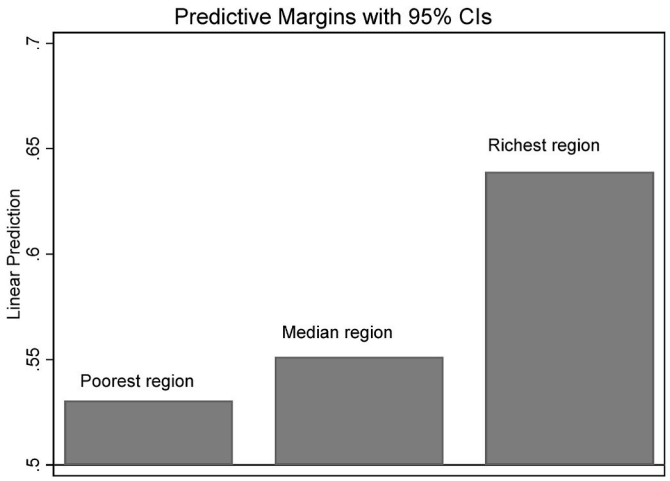

Fig. 11b. Support without cross-country redistribution, by regional affluence.

6. Conclusion

While the individual and country-level predictors of support for European social policy have been thoroughly studied, the regional dimension of the political geography of preferences for European social policy is poorly understood. This is surprising because European integration, and in particular its regional funds, had an important impact on the regional inequalities across Europe.

This article seeks to fill this gap by exploring to what extent the regional socio-economic context and regional autonomy shape public support for European social policy. We find that socio-economic and institutional differences between different European regions contribute to shaping attitudes towards European social policy, but in less straightforward ways than expected. All else equal, respondents in relatively richer regions (both compared to their own country and compared to the EU) are slightly more supportive of EU-level social policy in general. This initial rejection of our expectation raises the question of possible underlying mechanisms behind such relationship. One reason could be that richer regions might be more willing to redistribute at the EU level than poor regions because they are economically able to do so, and another reason could be that economically weak regions are generally more suspicious towards the EU level. To clarify these issues, in the second step of our paper we move away from the more general question on the allocation of social policy to explore alternative designs of a particular type of social policy, a EU-wide unemployment insurance scheme, whose characteristics may help to address the puzzle identified in our earlier results.

We argue and empirically show that a region's relative wealth does not only influence people's general preferences for European social policy but that people living in richer vs poorer regions have differing views on exactly how European unemployment policy should look like. Regional economic self-interest interacts with the redistributive nature of EU unemployment insurance whereas individual-level conditions of such a scheme find greater support in more autonomous regions. We find that people living in richer regions are generally more supportive of delegating decision-making power in social policy to the European Union, but at the same time are more critical towards cross-country redistribution in unemployment risk-sharing. Residents in these regions are supportive of an expansion of EU competences, but on their terms and with a clear mitigation of the risk that other people and regions may exploit the system. Regarding poorer regions, their approval is equally nuanced. EU social policy is only favoured insofar as these regions themselves are expected to benefit from it. These results qualify our findings in the first stage of our analysis: both the apparent support for EU-level social policy of residents of rich regions, and the apparent rejection of residents of poor regions, are in fact dependent on the details of such policies.

Moreover, the degree of regional autonomy within the country also plays a role: respondents in rich and non-autonomous regions tend to have a negative view of EU-level social policy, while respondents in rich but autonomous regions tend to have more positive view. People in regions with higher political autonomy are also more supportive of stricter conditions for benefiting from European unemployment risk-sharing. This finding suggests that people living in regions that enjoy higher independence are more sensitive towards the risk of 'moral hazard', i.e. that recipients take advantage of benefits.

The results of this study should be seen in the light of some limitations. First, our results are correlational in nature: while the effect of the policy dimensions can be interpreted as causal, the moderating effect of context cannot. However, the differences *in the effects* are sufficiently marked across different territories to suggest that these socio-economic factors do play a role. Second, as already discussed, we must use caution when interpreting the results with respect to our dependent variable of the first part of the analysis. As the question refers to both social and economic policy, we cannot say with certainty whether respondents really have an expansion of EU social policy in mind when answering the question or whether we are rather measuring their general support for EU integration. Third, and closely related to the latter, support for EU social and economic policy integration might be endogenous to a person's emotional attachment to Europe. Although we have conducted robustness tests in this regard, we cannot guarantee that there is no overlap between the two variables using observational data only. Fourth, the degree of regional autonomy rather seems to capture country instead of regional level differences as for some countries the index remains stable over all country regions. And lastly, this study might suffer from the fact that in considering regional contexts, on the one hand, one loses the national level as an important frame of reference in analyses, and, on the other hand, this regional division is in turn not fine-grained enough to really capture the narrowest contextual drivers of the respondents.

In view of future follow-up studies, further aspects should be taken into account in the analyses that go beyond the current scope of our paper but could nevertheless have an effect. Firstly, the level and extent of the national welfare state could play a role in the decision for or against more EU influence in this area. Secondly, the quality of government (at the national level) might reflect whether or not one would prefer to see the competences for welfare state provision being transferred to another level.

While this study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, it has important implications for scholarly research on public support for EU funds to buffer the economic consequences of this pandemic. The COVID-induced economic collapse has prompted an unprecedented expansion of EU social policy, including SURE (a proto-system of unemployment re-insurance), the introduction of Eurobonds, and the first expansion of the EU competences in the field of healthcare policy. Hence, it is more relevant than ever to understand what drives public support for European social policy.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix

Table A1
Descriptive statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
female (dummy)	18,096	0.512157	0.499866	0	1
age (3 categories)	18,131	2.137499	0.794362	1	3
education (9 categories)	18,131	3.82632	1.825753	0	8
low education (dummy)	18,131	0.224422	0.417213	0	1
attachment to Europe (10 levels)	18,131	5.801611	2.806102	0	10
unemployed (dummy)	17872	0.068767	0.253058	0	1

Education	**Freq.**	**Percent**
0 Not finished primary	99	0.55
1 Primary	594	3.28
2 Lower secondary	3376	18.62
3 Upper secondary	7105	39.19
4 Post-secondary non tertiary	1474	8.13
5 Short-cycle tertiary	754	4.16
6 Bachelor or equivalent	2256	12.44
7 Master or equivalent	2272	12.53
8 Doctoral or equivalent	201	1.11
Total	18131	100

Age	**Freq.**	**Percent**
1 18-34	4645	25.62
2 35-54	6348	35.01
3 55+	7138	39.37
Total	18131	100

unemployed status	**Freq.**	**Percent**
not unemployed	16643	91.79
unemployed	1229	6.78
Total	17872	98.57

gender	**Freq.**	**Percent**
male	8828	48.69
female	9268	51.12
Total	18096	99.81

Attachment to Europe	**Freq.**	**Percent**
0	1271	7.01
1	609	3.36
2	841	4.64
3	873	4.81
4	944	5.21
5	3574	19.71
6	2065	11.39
7	2419	13.34
8	2565	14.15
9	910	5.02
10	2060	11.36
Total	18131	100

Table A2
Models with EU attachment as control

VARIABLES	A2.2: individual variables only	A2.3: GDP vs EU, no RAI	A2.4: GDP vs country, no RAI	A2.5: RAI only,	A2.6: splitsamples by RAI index (low)	A2.7: splitsamples by RAI index (high)	A2.8: GDP vs country, no RAI, country dummies, EU support as DV
female	−0.000744	−0.000907	−0.000898	−0.000250	−0.00145	0.000770	−0.01***
	(0.00730)	(0.00706)	(0.00707)	(0.00712)	(0.00989)	(0.0114)	(0.000)

(*continued on next page*)

Table A2 (*continued*)

VARIABLES	A2.2: individual variables only	A2.3: GDP vs EU, no RAI	A2.4: GDP vs country, no RAI	A2.5: RAI only,	A2.6: splitsamples by RAI index (low)	A2.7: splitsamples by RAI index (high)	A2.8: GDP vs country, no RAI, country dummies, EU support as DV
age	−0.0421***	−0.0421***	−0.0421***	−0.0448***	−0.0470***	−0.0424***	−0.02***
	(0.00468)	(0.00651)	(0.00651)	(0.00635)	(0.00624)	(0.00741)	(0.005)
unemployed	0.0116	0.0125	0.0127	0.0250	0.0253	0.0240	−0.05***
	(0.0148)	(0.0182)	(0.0182)	(0.0172)	(0.0212)	(0.0214)	(0.01)
low educated	−0.0289***	−0.0289***	−0.0290***	−0.0251**	−0.0417***	−0.0101	−0.10***
	(0.00920)	(0.00994)	(0.00994)	(0.0101)	(0.0134)	(0.0128)	(0.09)
GDP position vs EU		0.0274*					
		(0.0154)					
attachment to EU	0.0393***	0.0392***	0.0393***	0.0438***	0.0438***	0.0436***	0.07***
	(0.00134)	(0.00146)	(0.00146)	(0.00139)	(0.00177)	(0.00210)	(0.002)
GDP position vs Country			0.0301*		−0.0371*	0.0583**	0.05***
			(0.0174)		(0.0212)	(0.0257)	(0.002)
RAI_index				0.00147			
				(0.00132)			
constant	0.276***	0.262***	0.276***	0.315***	0.328***	0.340***	0.313***
	(0.0179)	(0.0203)	(0.0180)	(0.0213)	(0.0183)	(0.0217)	(0.01)
country fixed effects	yes	yes	yes				yes
observations	16,957	16,957	16,957	16,957	9723	7234	12.310
R-squared	0.107	0.107	0.107	0.063	0.066	0.060	0.28

Standard errors in parentheses.
***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

Table A3
Random-intercept versions of models 1.3 and 1.4

VARIABLES	model 3.3, multilevel	model 3.4, multilevel
female	0.00785	0.00782
	(0.00748)	(0.00748)
age	−0.0284***	−0.0284***
	(0.00477)	(0.00477)
unemployed	−0.00818	−0.00775
	(0.0152)	(0.0152)
low education	−0.0503***	−0.0505***
	(0.00939)	(0.00939)
GDP position vs EU	0.0299**	
	(0.0134)	
GDP position vs Country		0.0394**
		(0.0164)
constant	0.554***	0.559***
	(0.0395)	(0.0367)
country level: sd (constant)	0.129***	0.120***
	(0.0272)	(0.0248)
sd (residual)	0.484	0.484
Nr of groups	12	12
observations	16957	16957

Table A4
Preferences for European Social Policy, logistic regression.

VARIABLES	A4.2 individual variables only	A4.3 GDP vs EU, no RAI	A4.4 GDP vs country, no RAI	A4.5 RAI only	A4.6 RAI +GDP vs EU	A4.7 RAI + GDP vs country
female	0.0346	0.0337	0.0337	0.0395	0.0403	0.0346
	(0.0302)	(0.0303)	(0.0303)	(0.0301)	(0.0411)	(0.0473)
age	−0.120***	−0.120***	−0.120***	−0.123***	−0.126***	−0.122***
	(0.0294)	(0.0294)	(0.0294)	(0.0267)	(0.0258)	(0.0306)
unemployed	−0.0401	−0.0344	−0.0335	0.0184	−0.0269	0.0604
	(0.0742)	(0.0743)	(0.0742)	(0.0688)	(0.0881)	(0.0885)
low education	−0.214***	−0.214***	−0.215***	−0.212***	−0.317***	−0.119**
	(0.0434)	(0.0435)	(0.0435)	(0.0435)	(0.0561)	(0.0528)
GDP position vs. EU		0.156***				
		(0.0594)				
GDP position vs cntry			0.171**		−0.177**	0.284***
			(0.0691)		(0.0884)	(0.106)
RAI index				0.00676		

(*continued on next page*)

Table A4 (*continued*)

VARIABLES	A4.2	A4.3	A4.4	A4.5	A4.6	A4.7
	individual variables only	GDP vs EU, no RAI	GDP vs country, no RAI	RAI only	RAI +GDP vs EU	RAI + GDP vs country
				(0.00594)		
constant	−0.0538	−0.134*	−0.0537	0.165*	0.213***	0.287***
	(0.0724)	(0.0766)	(0.0698)	(0.0943)	(0.0659)	(0.0769)
observations	16,957	16,957	16,957	16,957	9723	7234
Pseudo R-squared	0.046	0.046	0.046	0.037	0.005	0.031

Notes: For models A4.2 to A4.4 we control for country dummies (not shown in the table) as well as regional level clustered standard errors. Standard errors in parentheses.
Levels of significance: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Table A5
Preferences for European Social Policy, linear regression. No country dummies; not clustered standard errors

VARIABLES	A5.2	A5.3	A5.4	A5.5
	individual variables only	GDP vs EU, no RAI	GDP vs country, no RAI	RAI only
female	0.00953	0.00867	0.00947	0.00983
	(0.00770)	(0.00762)	(0.00770)	(0.00770)
age	−0.0303***	−0.0280***	−0.0304***	−0.0306***
	(0.00490)	(0.00485)	(0.00490)	(0.00490)
unemployed	0.00551	−0.00305	0.00587	0.00455
	(0.0155)	(0.0153)	(0.0155)	(0.0155)
low education	−0.0472***	−0.0362***	−0.0474***	−0.0527***
	(0.00941)	(0.00933)	(0.00941)	(0.00951)
GDP position vs. EU		−0.139***		
		(0.00729)		
GDP position vs cntry			0.0107	
			(0.0167)	
RAI index				0.00168***
				(0.000426)
constant	0.560***	0.573***	0.560***	0.541***
	(0.0124)	(0.0123)	(0.0124)	(0.0133)
observations	16,957	16,957	16,957	16,957
Pseudo R-squared	0.004	0.025	0.004	0.005

Standard errors in parentheses.
***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

Table A6
Preferences for European Social Policy, linear regression. Alternative AV; EU decision level only

	A6.1: empty regional multilevel model	A6.2: individual variables only	A6.3: GDP vs EU, no RAI	A6.4: GDP vs country, no RAI	A6.5: RAI only,	A6.6: split samples by RAI index	A6.7: split samples by RAI index
female				−0.0306***	−0.0307***	−0.0307***	−0.0307***
				(0.00500)	(0.00500)	(0.00500)	(0.00515)
age				−0.0391***	−0.0391***	−0.0391***	−0.0390***
				(0.00283)	(0.00283)	(0.00283)	(0.00284)
unemployed				0.00653	0.00706	0.00704	0.0131
				(0.00984)	(0.00985)	(0.00984)	(0.00955)
low education				0.00870*	0.00876*	0.00866*	0.0121**
				(0.00484)	(0.00486)	(0.00485)	(0.00511)
GDP position vs. EU					0.0152***		
					(0.00554)		
GDP position vs cntry						0.0138	
						(0.00844)	
RAI index							0.00130***
							(0.000418)
constant	0.0993***	−3.461***	−1.235***	0.186***	0.179***	0.186***	0.175***
	(0.00375)	(0.106)	(0.00542)	(0.00803)	(0.00804)	(0.00772)	(0.00995)
observations	17,133	17,133	17,133	16,957	16,957	16,957	16,957
R-squared				0.026	0.027	0.027	0.015
number of groups	146	146	146				

Notes: For models A6.2 to A6.4 we control for country dummies (not shown in the table) as well as regional level clustered standard errors.
Standard errors in parentheses. Levels of significance: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

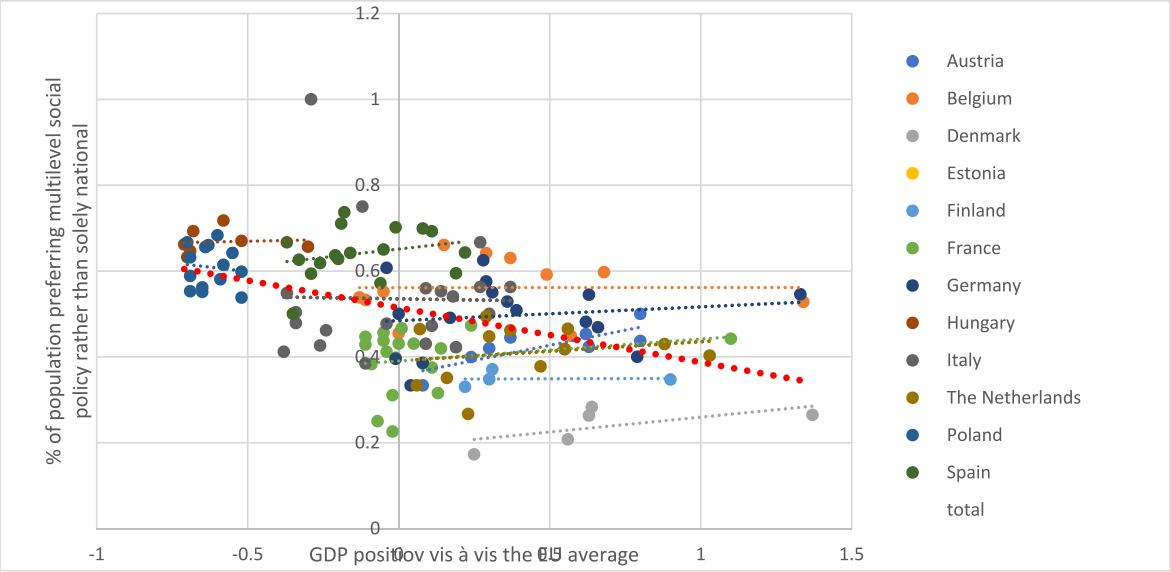

Fig. A1. Subgroup intercepts
Note: the wider, dashed red line indicates the overall relationship between GDP position and preferences for multilevel social policy, across all regions, while thinnier lines identify within-country correlations.

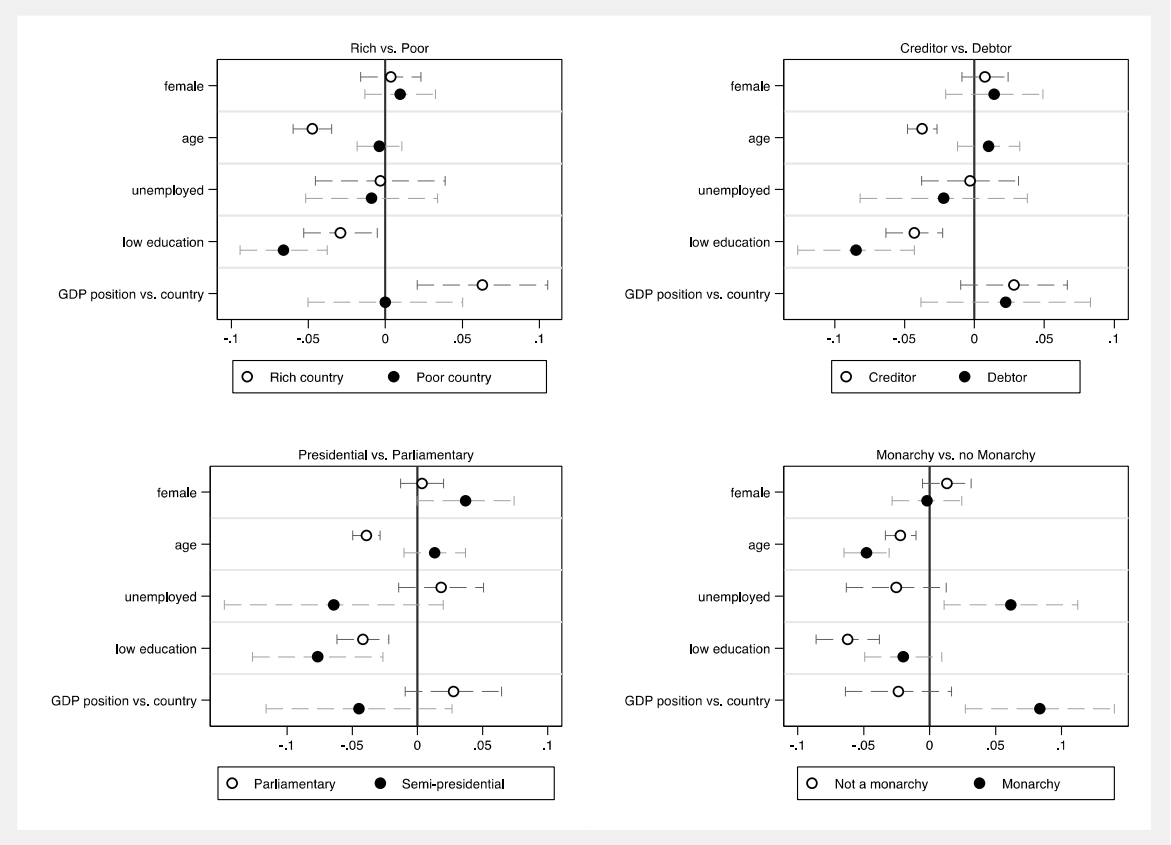

Fig. A2. Alternative subsamples.

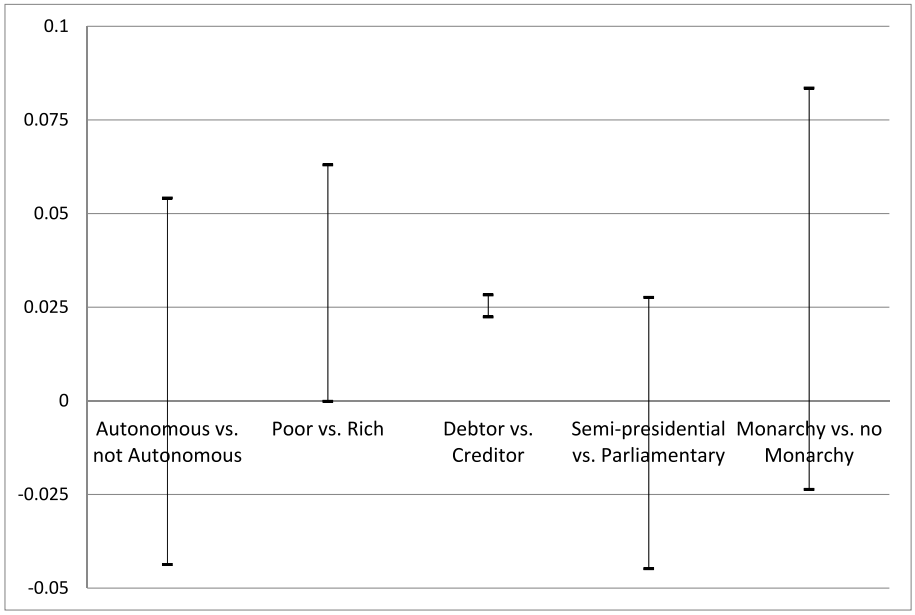

Fig. A3. Differences in regression coefficients (regional vs. national GDP) between subsamples.

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