



The Differentiated Impact of Perceived EU Regional Policy on Citizens' Positions on European Integration

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Abstract The main goal of the regional development programme of the European Union (EU) is to decrease disparities in the economic situation between the regional units of the EU member states. An important side note effect of EU regional policy is that citizens should be able to directly identify the positive aspects of European integration when realising the impact of the EU for structural programmes in their city or region. We aim to evaluate this mechanism and ask whether the individually perceived benefit of EU regional funds in the home area of a respondent has a positive impact on their position towards European integration. Furthermore, we discuss how a relational perspective on EU regional funds—that is, whether a respondent considers other regions or other EU member states to benefit more from the EU regional funds than their own region—mediates the expected positive impact of EU regional funds on an individual's position on European integration. We answer these questions by analysing new survey data conducted in two German states, Baden-Wuerttemberg and Thuringia, which differ significantly in terms of the regional funding they receive. The analysis shows not only that there is a significant difference in the positions of respondents on European integration between the two regions but also that perceiving personal benefits of EU regional funding increases the support for European integration. Furthermore, individuals' thinking that their own region benefits more from EU regional funding than other regions tends to increase their support for European integration.

Keywords Cohesion policy · Perceived benefit · European funding · European integration · Regional politics

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Die differenzierten Auswirkungen der wahrgenommenen EU-Regionalpolitik auf die Haltung der Bürger zur europäischen Integration

Zusammenfassung Ein Hauptziel der EU-Regionalpolitik besteht darin, die Unterschiede in der wirtschaftlichen Situation zwischen den regionalen Einheiten der EU-Mitgliedsstaaten zu verringern. Ein wichtiger Nebeneffekt zielt auf die Perzeption der EU seitens der Bürger ab. In diesem Kontext soll die EU-Regionalpolitik die Bürger dazu bringen, die positiven Aspekte der europäischen Integration direkt zu erkennen, wenn sie die Auswirkungen der EU-Strukturprogramme in ihrer Stadt oder Region wahrnehmen. Wir wollen diesen Mechanismus evaluieren und fragen, ob die individuelle Wahrnehmung von EU-Regionalfonds in der Heimatregion eines Befragten einen positiven Einfluss auf seine Einstellung zu weiteren Schritten der europäischen Integration hat. Darüber hinaus diskutieren wir, inwieweit eine relationale Perspektive auf die EU-Regionalfonds, d.h. ob die Befragten der Ansicht sind, dass andere Regionen oder andere EU-Mitgliedstaaten mehr von den EU-Regionalfonds profitieren als ihre Region, intervenierend auf den erwarteten positiven Einfluss der EU-Regionalfonds auf die Position einer Person zur europäischen Integration einwirkt. Zur Beantwortung dieser Fragen analysieren wir neue Umfragedaten, die in zwei deutschen Bundesländern – Baden-Württemberg und Thüringen – erhoben wurden. Diese beiden Bundesländer unterscheiden sich hinsichtlich der erhaltenen Regionalförderung deutlich voneinander. Die Analyse zeigt, dass es nicht nur einen signifikanten Unterschied in den Einstellungen der Befragten zur EU zwischen beiden Bundesländern gibt, sondern auch, dass die positive Wahrnehmung der EU-Regionalförderung die Unterstützung für die europäische Integration erhöht. Außerdem führt die Überzeugung, dass die eigene Region mehr von der EU-Regionalförderung profitiert als andere Regionen, zu einer stärkeren Unterstützung der europäischen Integration.

Schlüsselwörter Kohäsionspolitik · Wahrgenommener Nutzen · Europäische Finanzierung · Europäische Integration · Regionalpolitik

1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) has faced multiple crises over the last decade. Against the background of this *polycrisis* (Zeitlin et al. 2019), several member states of the EU have seen an increased and persistent support for populist parties from the far left and far right that reject or are at least sceptical of the principles of European integration in general and the EU institutional structure in particular (Treib 2021). Examples are the left-wing populist Greek *Syriza* and the French *La France Insoumise*, as well as the radical right populist *Austrian Freedom Party* and the *Alternative for Germany* party. Besides the contestation of Europe through political actors, trust in and support for democratic political institutions in Europe have also decreased among citizens. This might be caused by the handling of the *polycrisis*, amongst others, the global financial crisis, the migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, or

the challenge of climate change (e.g., Armingeon and Guthmann 2014; Dotti Sani and Magistro 2016; Lynggaard et al. 2022). Therefore, mechanisms that increase the support for the European project and thus for further European integration are essential for the Union's future and for the stability of European democracies in general.

Key mechanisms that the EU and its predecessor in the form of the European Communities have developed are regional policies. These policies primarily aim at reducing regional disparities, supporting job creation, and enhancing the economic well-being of European regions (Bachtler et al. 2016, p. 12). However, an important side effect is that citizens can experience positive aspects of European integration firsthand when realising the impact of EU policies in their city or region. Thus, regional policy also aims indirectly at fostering positive views with respect to European integration among EU citizens (Begg 2008).

Indeed, Osterloh (2011) demonstrates that regional transfers can increase citizens' support for the EU if they directly benefit from EU funds (see also Dellmuth and Chalmers 2018), although citizens' awareness of benefitting from regional transfers is dependent on both their educational level and their information use. Dellmuth and Chalmers (2018) further show that citizens are more aware of cohesion policy if they live in regions receiving a large amount of EU regional transfers.

We aim at providing further evidence on the impact of EU funding on citizens' position towards further integration. Specifically, we investigate this impact from an egocentric and sociotropic perspective (see Hooghe and Marks 2005; Verhaegen et al. 2014). In addition, we discuss how a relational perspective on EU regional funds—that is, whether citizens consider other regions in their country or in the EU to benefit more from EU regional funds than their own region—mediates the expected positive impact on their position regarding European integration.

We answer these questions by analysing new survey data conducted in two German states—Baden-Wuerttemberg and Thuringia—which differ significantly in terms of the amount of regional funding they receive. The analysis shows that there is a significant difference in the positions towards European integration between the two regions: Respondents in Baden-Wuerttemberg are more in favour of European integration than Thuringians are. With respect to our hypotheses, we find that the perceived personal benefit from EU regional funding increases the support for further steps in European integration, which indicates that the indirect goals of EU regional policy—to increase support for the European project—are fulfilled if citizens perceive benefits from an egocentric perspective. Furthermore, belief that their own region benefits more from EU regional funding tends to increase support for European integration, which is in line with the sociotropic perspective. At the same time, the perception that other regions among the EU or Germany benefit more is associated with lower support for further European integration. These findings indicate that better promotion of the local and regional projects financed by European funds could indeed increase support for further European integration, thus stabilising the European project despite the multiple crises Europeans face and deal with.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: First, we provide a review of the literature on the impact of cohesion policy on citizens' attitudes. Based on

a utilitarian approach, we develop a set of expectations for the factors that should influence an individual's position on European integration considering the perceived impact of European regional funding for the respondent and their surroundings. Next, we provide a brief overview of the data we use, the COHESIFY Citizen Survey (Borz et al. 2017), and describe the data operationalisation. We proceed to present the results of our analysis in a descriptive and multivariate manner. The final section concludes by discussing the results and the limitations of this article. Moreover, we discuss incentives for future studies on the effects of cohesion policy on political attitudes in general and on European policy preferences of citizens in particular.

2 The Political Impact of European Regional Funding

European regional funding, in particular the Cohesion Fund, has attracted much scholarly attention since the 1990s. Previous research has investigated the effect of these funds on citizens' support for the EU (Anderson and Reichert 1995; Chalmers and Dellmuth 2015; Crescenzi et al. 2020; Dellmuth and Chalmers 2018; Duch and Taylor 1997; López-Bazo 2022; López-Bazo and Royuela 2019; Osterloh 2011), on preferences and voting for Eurosceptic parties (Borin et al. 2021; Rodríguez-Pose and Dijkstra 2021; Schraff 2019), and, more recently, on European identity (Borz et al. 2022; Capello and Perucca 2019).

Early research by Duch and Taylor (1997) does not provide evidence for a positive effect of regional transfers on citizens' support for the EU. In contrast, Osterloh (2011) finds a positive effect for both actual EU funding and awareness of EU funding in a citizen's country. Dellmuth and Chalmers (2018) show that support for the EU depends not only on regional funding itself but on whether the funding is aligned with regional needs. In addition, Chalmers and Dellmuth (2015) find that the effect of regional transfers depends on citizens' degree of communal identity and education. A positive effect on support for the EU is more likely for citizens with a more European and local identity compared to citizens with a national identity. Findings by López-Bazo (2022) also point in the direction that the effect depends on the respective local and regional context. While mere funding is enough for increasing support for the EU institutions and/or European integration, effective spending might contribute to even higher support for the EU and its ideas. Finally, López-Bazo and Royuela (2019) provide evidence that European funding has a positive effect on citizens' awareness of the EU but not on their support for the EU.

3 Individuals' Perceptions of European Funding: Taking a Cost–Benefit Perspective

Although a large number of individual and contextual factors influence the attitudes and positions of citizens regarding their support for the EU (see, e.g., Kentmen-Cin 2017; Stoeckel 2013; Van Ingelgom 2014), we focus on the question of whether citizens' perceptions of European funding for the region they live in increase support

for further European integration, particularly if their own region is perceived to benefit more than other regions. As already indicated, such a perspective is not new. Studies that concentrate on the party or government level indeed find that (subnational) political parties and governments in EU member states that financially benefit from the EU adopt a more positive position on European issues in the decision-making process between EU institutions (e.g., Carrubba 1997, 2001; Gross 2022; Gross and Debus 2018; Mattila 2004; Zimmer et al. 2005).

In line with these findings that exist on the micro and macro levels of decision-making, we expect that public opinion of the EU is also shaped by economic considerations and argue that citizens perceive EU funds as a benefit that their region—and thus, indirectly, the citizens who live in the respective region—can take advantage of. We follow standard assumptions from the literature of (spatial) models of decision-making. Common points of departure for this literature are spatial models of individual decision-making like the one by Downs (1957) who assumes that a citizen will prefer over others those alternatives that are likely to increase their (individually perceived) utility. In such a spatial context, individuals who can decide between two policy alternatives that would cost them, for instance, 100€ and 10€, respectively, should choose the option that costs only 10€ since this decision decreases their utility loss (see Hinich and Munger 1997, pp. 3–49). Applied to the context of EU regional funding, we would expect that individuals would show higher support for European integration in general and for further steps in the integration process if they perceive concrete support from the EU in the region where they live so that they are more likely to think that they are better off with an intensified integration process. Indeed, Reinl and Braun (2023) show that the perception of gaining greater benefit from the EU is associated with citizens displaying higher EU cohesion, which includes support for further European integration.

To be more precise, we focus on two different scopes of our economic indicator, the perceived EU regional funding: a sociotropic scope and an egocentric scope (Hillen et al. 2024; see Hooghe and Marks 2005; Verhaegen et al. 2014). The egocentric scope describes the individual level and therefore considers how much an individual benefits from EU funding (or thinks they benefit from EU regional funds), whereas the sociotropic perspective concentrates on the benefit or utility on an aggregate level, that is, the regional sphere of a political system where the regional funds are allocated. For example, in a recent study on perceived policy responsiveness, Hillen et al. (2024) differentiate between an egocentric and a sociotropic perspective and find that citizens consistently perceive governments as more responsive the closer the governments are to the citizens' policy positions. In line with Verhaegen et al. (2014), we focus on the subjective type of the evaluation and argue that such an evaluation should exert a stronger effect on support for the EU, “given the fact that the perception of benefits is not just based on cognitive information but also involves an attitudinal component” (Verhaegen et al. 2014, p. 298). In light of these theoretical considerations, our two first hypotheses are as follows:

H1 (sociotropic perspective): The individual perception that one's region has benefitted from European funding increases support for further steps in the European integration process.

H2 (egocentric perspective): The individual perception that one has personally benefitted from European funding increases support for further steps in the European integration process.

4 A Relational Perspective on European Funding

The expectations formulated in hypotheses 1 and 2 do not take findings from social comparison theories into account that argue that individuals often compare their records or achievements with those of others (see Adams 1965; Festinger 1954; Fox and Dayan 2004). The latter is, however, likely to be the case if individuals evaluate policies that are achieved in multilevel political systems. Think, for instance, of the German multilevel system in which the state governments do not only play an important role in legislative decision-making on the national level, so that “shared rule” is high, but also exert a relatively high amount of political authority and implement different policies, thus having a high degree of “self-rule” (see, e.g., Hooghe et al. 2016). This often results in rankings of the German states that provide information on which state is performing well in education policy or in fighting unemployment. Because of the principle of equalisation payments in Germany that redistribute financial resources both between the federation and states and between the richer and poorer states, citizens in a multilevel system like Germany are well aware of the economic performance of regional units since the political parties that govern the economically successful regions often complain about the amount of money they have to transfer to economically weaker federal states (e.g., Anan 2015).

Given that regional identity in Europe is increasing (Brigeovich 2018) and that citizens of states with a historically grown federal structure might be even more likely to compare the performance of policies on a subnational level, we argue that support for further steps in European integration is lower if the citizens perceive that their region benefits less from the European regional funds than other regions. The basic mechanism refers to fairness principles: If individuals consider it unfair that other regions receive more funds than they think their own region receives, then we should see less support for further European integration steps because their region is not only considered to be widely ignored by EU regional funding but is also perceived to receive less funds compared to other regions. This mechanism is affirmed by Reinl et al. (2023) who analysed the determinants of individuals’ support for European social policy. They found 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. [...] 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” (Reinl et al. 2023, p. 12). This finding reinforces the idea of a relational perspective when it comes to the impact of individually perceived effects of EU regional policy on the support for European integration: Citizens might be supportive of the EU (and its policies), but only as

long as they perceive that they benefit from it or do not benefit less than others. These considerations result in the following two hypotheses:

H3 Perceiving that other European regions receive more funding than one's own region decreases support for further European funding.

H4 Perceiving that other regions within the same country receive more funding than one's own region decreases support for further European funding.

5 Case Selection, Data, and Methods

Testing our expectations requires not only adequate survey data on the regional level but also a set of specific questions that concentrate on EU regional policy and its perception among citizens. The COHESIFY Citizen Survey (Borz et al. 2017; see also <https://www.cohesify.eu/data/>) provides such data and is thus an opportunity to evaluate our set of hypotheses. The survey was conducted in 2017 as part of the COHESIFY project which aims to investigate the impact of EU cohesion policy on attitudes towards the EU and European identity. As hypotheses 3 and 4 require an institutional configuration allowing individuals to know about the performance of other regions and to think about the political system as a multilevel structure in which regions can differ in terms of implemented policies, we follow the most likely case selection approach and concentrate on Germany in the empirical analysis. More precisely, we analyse the determinants of European integration preferences of individuals in two German states that share similarities, but also deviate in their characteristics.

In general, focussing on the regional level has significant advantages (see, e.g., Bowler et al. 2016; Jeffery and Wincott 2010; Snyder 2001). The institutional context is more or less the same across the German states (Länder) and has, moreover, remained relatively stable over time (see, e.g., Freitag and Vatter 2010). The institutional structure is therefore held constant, thereby minimising the potential confounding effects they may have. By focussing on the two states of Baden-Wuerttemberg and Thuringia, we adopted a similar system design in terms of concentrating on two economically strong federal states that do, however, vary in terms of their historical legacies and political culture. Baden-Wuerttemberg belongs to western Germany and, being located at the French border, should be more Europhile on average than Thuringia which is an eastern German state with a strong support for parties that are sceptical towards European integration (see Bräuninger et al. 2020; Debus et al. 2017). Moreover, and important for our research design, both states vary significantly in the amount of funding from European cohesion policy. Because Baden-Wuerttemberg is an economically strong state in western Germany, it receives less funding, whereas Thuringia, although it is the eastern German state that is economically in the best shape, receives significantly more funds. Actually, Thuringia received the second highest amount of funds of all German regions from the European Regional Development Fund in the programming period from 2014 until 2020 (about 1.023 billion euros), whereas Baden-Wuerttemberg received about 400

million euros.¹ Concentrating on the substate level has, therefore, a considerable advantage over comparative analysis where the institutional, economic, and societal context varies significantly across countries.

Concentrating on Germany has a further advantage since existing research on cohesion policy shows that it has an EU-wide positive impact on regional growth and employment, but a large part of the growth bonus is concentrated in Germany (Crescenzi and Giua 2020). We thus think of Germany from this outcome perspective as a most likely case for finding evidence for our expectations since Germans should in general be more likely to perceive regional funds from the EU and—because of their knowledge and experience with governing in a multilevel, federally structured system—should be more able to evaluate whether their own region receives more or less funds than other regions.

The dependent variable in the analysis is the amount of support for further steps in European integration. Respondents were asked how they would describe their general position on further European integration. The item was measured on a seven-point scale ranging from “strongly opposed” to “strongly in favour.” We transformed this variable to an ordinal one with three levels, namely having a negative, neutral, or positive stance on European integration. While we dispense a more fine-grained measure, we make our approach more comparable to other studies conceptualising support for the EU with the typical three-level Eurobarometer item on respondents’ perception of EU membership as bad, neither bad nor good, or a good thing (e.g., Dellmuth and Chalmers 2018). To evaluate the robustness of the results, we additionally estimate the models with a dependent variable that provides information on the respondents’ position on the EU membership of their country. In so doing, we refer to a variable that provides information on whether the respondents think that their country has benefitted from being a member of the EU. They can respond to the statement “My country has benefited from being a member of the European Union” on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”.

We are interested in how personal exposure to and experience with EU funds shape individuals’ support for further integration. Second, we want to study the role of relational perceptions. Specifically, how do respondents perceive the benefits of EU funding for their own region compared to the rest of the EU and the rest of their country? We evaluated our theoretical concepts by measuring personal exposure to EU funds with an item that informed the survey respondents that the EU provides funding for infrastructure, business development, and training to regions and cities and went on by asking them if they had heard about any such EU-funded projects to improve their own region or city. The item is coded dichotomously. In addition, respondents were asked if they benefitted in their daily life from European funding.² Again, this variable is a dichotomous one. Moreover, the survey includes items that allow us to examine the sociotropic perspective. Respondents who had heard of EU-

¹ This information is available for several programming periods and can be retrieved at <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/stories/s/47md-x4nq> (accessed 11 May 2024).

² The item reads: “Have you benefitted in your daily life from a project funded by any of these three funds?” Beforehand, respondents were asked if they had heard about the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund, or the European Social Fund (ESF).

funded projects in their region or city were asked about the impact of the funding, with possible answers ranging from “very positive” to “very negative” on a five-point scale.³ In addition, all respondents were asked about their region’s or city’s retrospective development without EU funding. The variable is also coded in an ordinal way, ranging from “much better” to “a lot worse” on a five-point scale.⁴

To measure the relational perspective on the European level, we relied on a categorical survey item with three levels that asks respondents if they think their regions benefit less (0), the same (1), or more (2) from EU funding than the rest of the EU. The same question is repeated but asks respondents how they weigh their region’s benefits compared to the rest of their country. This allows us to test the relational perspective on the national level.⁵ The reference category in our empirical analyses for both the European and national level is the perception that one’s region benefits in the same amount as other regions. Additionally, we control for several possible confounders. First, we control for the region that respondents are living in, either Baden-Wuerttemberg (0) or Thuringia (1). We expect that living in Baden-Wuerttemberg is associated with higher support for European integration due to the lower amount of populist attitudes, measurable in the vote share for parties from the far left and far right in elections, and structural factors such as the direct border with France, which should result in a higher amount of exchange and direct contact with individuals from other EU countries. Furthermore, we control for the respondents’ European identity, which should influence both the respondents’ attitudes towards further integration and their perception of EU funds. Third, we include the respondents’ position on an ideological left–right scale and their socioeconomic status variables as controls. Specifically, we include variables that provide information on the individually perceived living standard and the level of education of the respondents. Fourth, we control for the amount of trust an individual has in citizens from other European countries and EU institutions. Trust in European institutions is conceptualised by the question of whether the respective institutions work in one’s interest. Finally, we control for respondents’ age and sex.

Due to the ordinal structure of the dependent variable, we apply ordered logit regressions for fitting the empirical models. The general form of an ordered logit model is as follows (see Williams 2006):

$$P(Y_i > j) = \frac{\exp(\alpha_j + X_i\beta)}{1 + (\exp(\alpha_j + X_i\beta))}, j = 1, 2, \dots, M - 1,$$

where M equals the number of categories of the dependent variable and α the cutoff.

³ The item reads: “How positive or negative was the impact of the funding of the European Union on your region or city?”

⁴ The item reads: “How do you think your region or city would have developed without EU funding?”

⁵ The items read: “Do you think your region benefits more, less or the same from EU funding than the rest of the EU?” and “Do you think your region benefits more, less or the same from EU funding than the rest of your country?”

6 Results

Before evaluating our hypotheses by means of several multivariate regression models, we provide some descriptive information on the characteristics of the dependent variables. Table 1 offers a descriptive overview of our key variables by the region respondents live in. We can see differences between the regions across all variables of interest. As expected, respondents in Thuringia are more opposed to further European integration than respondents in Baden-Wuerttemberg are. At the same time, more respondents in Thuringia than in Baden-Wuerttemberg have heard about EU projects and perceive that they have personally benefitted from EU funds and that their region has benefitted from the EU regional funds. Also, a higher share of Thuringians than of respondents from Baden-Wuerttemberg think that they and their region benefit more than other regions from EU funds, regardless of whether we differentiate between other regions in the EU or in Germany. This is in line with the distributed European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funds: Thuringia was second highest of all German regions in received ERDF funds in the programming period from 2014 until 2020. However, a large share of respondents in both regions believe that they benefit less than other European regions. This is true only for the case of Baden-Wuerttemberg, whereas Thuringia is among the 20% of European regions that received the most ERDF funds between 2014 and 2020.⁶

We now proceed with testing our expectations. In so doing, we restrict the presentation of the findings to the key variables of interest; the full regression models with information on the effects of all independent variables are provided in the appendix.

Does the individual perception that one's region has benefitted from European funding increase support for further steps in the European integration process (H1)? The results of multivariate models provide evidence for the sociotropic hypothesis. Respondents who think their region's or city's development would have been a lot worse or somewhat worse compared to a situation in which their region would have received no EU funding are significantly more likely to be in favour of European integration. Figure 1 displays the average marginal effects of the related variables. Respondents stating that their region's development would have been a lot worse are 12.8 percentage points more likely to be in favour of European integration than respondents who think their region's development would have been the same (or worse). These results are robust to different operationalisations of the dependent and independent variables. Specifically, we show that there is a significant positive association between the respondents' attitude towards European integration and having heard of EU-funded projects to improve one's region or city and stating that these projects had a very positive or positive impact compared to no impact (see model 3 in Table 3 in the appendix).

We find a similar effect for our egocentric hypothesis (H2). The results indicate that the individual perception of personally benefitting from European funding is associated with a higher likelihood of being in favour of European integration. Respondents who perceive a personal benefit in their daily lives are 9.5 percentage points more likely to be in favour of European integration than those who do

⁶ The data are taken from <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/stories/s/47md-x4nq> (accessed 11 May 2024).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics by region

	Region				Total	
	Baden-Wuerttemberg		Thuringia			
Position on further European Union (EU) integration						
Oppose	44	8.8%	76	15.2%	120	12.0%
Neutral	92	18.4%	123	24.6%	215	21.5%
Support	364	72.8%	301	60.2%	665	66.5%
Country benefits from EU membership						
Strongly agree	236	48.0%	167	33.8%	403	40.9%
Agree	167	33.9%	203	41.1%	370	37.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	50	10.2%	52	10.5%	102	10.3%
Disagree	21	4.3%	45	9.1%	66	6.7%
Strongly disagree	18	3.7%	27	5.5%	45	4.6%
Heard about EU projects in regions						
Yes	154	31.2%	189	38.6%	343	34.9%
No	340	68.8%	301	61.4%	641	65.1%
Noticed acknowledgement of EU funding in region/town						
Yes	136	27.5%	224	45.0%	360	36.3%
No	358	72.5%	274	55.0%	632	63.7%
Benefitted from EU funds (egocentric perspective)						
Yes	50	10.5%	89	18.5%	139	14.5%
No	427	89.5%	392	81.5%	819	85.5%
Benefitted from EU funds (sociotropic perspective)						
Very positive	22	16.4%	42	23.5%	64	20.4%
Positive	80	59.7%	113	63.1%	193	61.7%
No impact	25	18.7%	21	11.7%	46	14.7%
Negative	4	3.0%	2	1.1%	6	1.9%
Very negative	3	2.2%	1	0.6%	4	1.3%
Retrospective development of region/city without EU funding (sociotropic perspective)						
Much better	15	3.6%	23	5.3%	38	4.4%
Somewhat better	52	12.4%	64	14.7%	116	13.6%
Same	195	46.3%	157	36.1%	352	41.1%
Somewhat worse	131	31.1%	147	33.8%	278	32.5%
A lot worse	28	6.7%	44	10.1%	72	8.4%
Perceived benefit vs. other EU regions						
Less	205	46.2%	142	33.5%	347	40.0%
Same	188	42.3%	216	50.9%	404	46.5%
More	51	11.5%	66	15.6%	117	13.5%
Perceived benefit vs. other regions in the same country						
Less	162	35.1%	125	27.8%	287	31.5%
Same	245	53.1%	240	53.5%	485	53.3%
More	54	11.7%	84	18.7%	139	15.2%

We show frequencies and proportions for both regions and for our overall sample. Source: COHESIFY citizen survey (Borz et al. 2017)

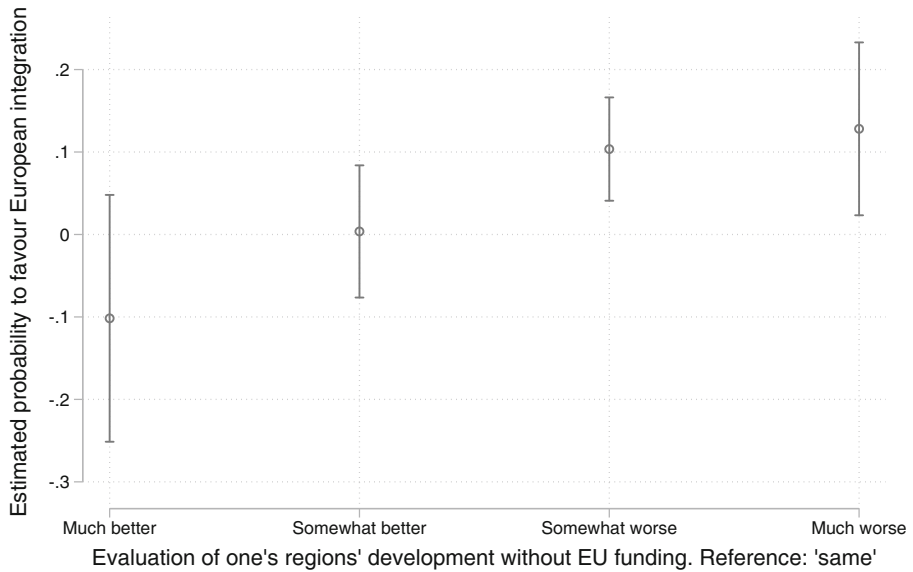


Fig. 1 Average marginal effects for respondents to favour European integration based on their evaluation of their regions' development without European Union funding. Estimates are based on model 1 in Tab. 3 in the appendix

not perceive such a personal benefit. At the same time, respondents perceiving this benefit are 4.7 percentage points less likely to oppose European integration than respondents not perceiving a benefit. Figure 2 displays these average marginal effects. Again, these results are robust to different operationalisations of the dependent variable (see Table 4 in the appendix).

Overall, we find support for the sociotropic and the egocentric hypotheses: The perception of benefitting individually from European funding as well as the perception that one's region benefits from these funds are associated with a higher likelihood of being in favour of European integration. Furthermore, the support for the hypotheses is stable across different operationalisations of the dependent and independent variables, as the additional results presented in the appendix demonstrate.

We further argued—by referring to social comparison theories—that a relational perspective on EU regional funds should matter for the support for European integration. If respondents think that other European regions or regions within their own country receive more funds than the region in which they live, then this should decrease their support for European integration. Our findings show that the relational perspective on EU regional funding is indeed relevant. We thus find support for hypotheses 3 and 4. Interestingly, the effect size for the perception that one's region benefits less from EU funds than other regions is larger in the case of the national comparison perspective. This might be related to the better-known principles of multilevel governance within Germany and the specifics of the eastern–western divide in Germany, since financial transfers to the former East German states have received a lot of attention in the period since reunification in 1990.

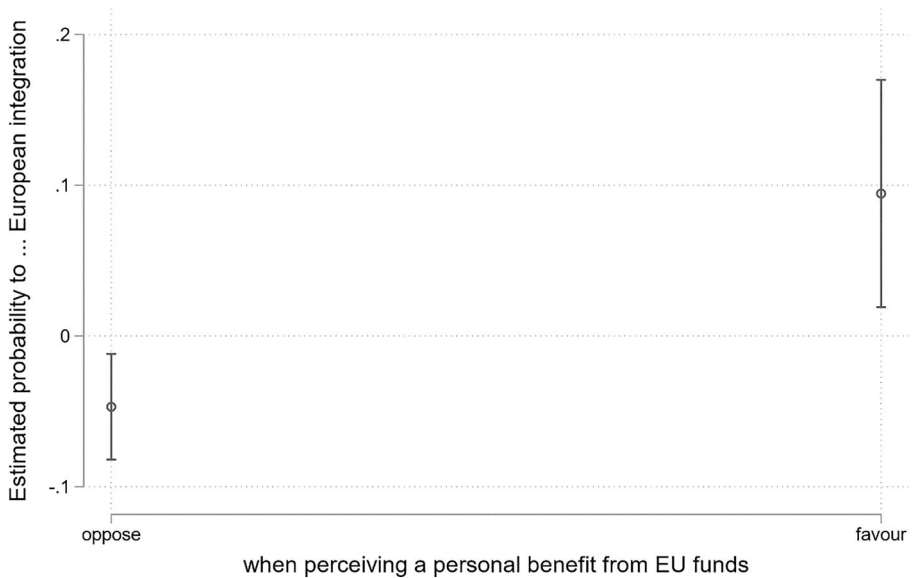


Fig. 2 Average marginal effects for respondents to favour or oppose European integration based on their perception of personally benefiting from European Union funding. Estimates are based on model 5 in Tab. 4 in the appendix

The marginal effect plots present the size of the estimated effects. Figure 3 shows average marginal effects for the positioning on European integration depending on the perception of how their region benefits from EU funds compared to other regions in the EU. Our results indicate that respondents perceiving that their region benefits less are more likely to oppose further European integration than are respondents who think their region benefits to the same degree. However, this effect is no longer statistically significant when controlling for the perceived individual level and regional benefits. On the other hand, we find a statistically significant effect for the variable that covers the perception of a respondent that their region benefits more than other European regions: Perceiving that one's region benefits more makes it more likely that respondents support further integration, even when controlling for individual and regional benefits.

We present average marginal effects in Fig. 4 in the same way for the relational perspective at the national level. We find the same pattern as for the relational perspective at the European level. Respondents who think their region benefits less or more than other regions in their country are more likely to oppose or to be in favour of European integration, respectively, compared to those who think their region benefits to a similar degree. As soon as we account for the egocentric and sociotropic perspectives, the perception that one's region benefits less loses its statistical significance, whereas respondents who think their region benefits more are 7.7 percentage points more likely to be in favour of European integration than those who believe their region benefits the same as other regions in the country (the effect is significant at the 90% level).



Fig. 3 Average marginal effects for respondents to favour European integration based on their relational perception that their region benefits more or less from European Union funding than other European regions. Estimates are based on model 8 in Tab. 5 in the appendix



Fig. 4 Average marginal effects for respondents to favour European integration based on their relational perception that their region benefits more or less from European Union funding than other regions in their country. Estimates are based on model 10 in Tab. 5 in the appendix

7 Conclusion

This paper aimed to evaluate the effects of EU regional funds on the support for European integration among citizens. We argued that the perception of EU funds that are allocated to the region where a respondent lives should matter and result in positive positions on further European integration steps. Moreover, we considered that a relational perspective could matter and that individuals compare the funds that their region receives with the amount of funds that other regions receive. We concentrated on two German states that are economically strong, but of which one state—the western state of Baden-Wuerttemberg—receives less funds, while the eastern state of Thuringia receives more regional funds because of the legacy of the planned economy of East Germany until 1990. We made use of the COHESIFY survey to evaluate our expectations and found that support for European integration indeed increases if respondents perceived that the funds increased their personal benefits. Moreover, thinking that one's own region benefits more from EU regional funding tends to increase the support for European integration, in particular when a respondent compares their “home region” with another German region.

While our findings contribute to the wide array of studies that find a positive effect of European regional policy on the support of European integration, we would ideally need panel data that allow for differentiating between the time period before EU regional funding was allocated to a region and after this occurred. If the support for European integration increases between the two points in time, then we would have more solid evidence that it is the regional funds that led to the increasing support for European integration in the respective region. Furthermore, we think that the relational perspective and its findings are worthwhile, so future research should take a closer look at the (regional-specific) effects of perceiving other regions as benefitting more from EU regional policies on the support for further European integration. In addition, a comparative perspective would allow for evaluating whether citizens living in more centralised and/or unitarian systems are less likely to adopt a relational perspective than citizens living in decentralised and/or federal systems, in particular when the degree of self-rule for the regions in these countries is high. If such a relational pattern also exists in other European regions, in particular those that feel disadvantaged and left behind, then this would be an incentive for political decision-makers and strategists at the EU level to provide more detailed information on EU regional funds and on which regions receive how much and, more importantly, for what reason. According to our findings, this could improve support for the European project, particularly in regions with inhabitants who are to a wide share disappointed with the political system and feel neglected by political decision-makers.

In the context of the current *polycrisis*, not only European regional policies but also better information on EU regional funds and their implementation seem to help in stabilising the European project. Increasing support for European integration and, thus, for EU institutions should help to increase resilience in Europe against the large antiliberal and antidemocratic movements, parties, and states within and outside Europe despite the number of international conflicts that structure global politics.

8 Appendix

Table 2 Summary statistics of variables used in the empirical analysis

Position on further European Union (EU) integration		
Oppose	12.0%	120
Neutral	21.5%	215
Support	66.5%	665
Country benefits from EU membership		
Strongly agree	40.9%	403
Agree	37.5%	370
Neither agree nor disagree	10.3%	102
Disagree	6.7%	66
Strongly disagree	4.6%	45
Benefitted from EU funds (egocentric)		
Yes	14.5%	139
No	85.5%	819
Benefitted from EU funds (sociotropic)		
Very positive	20.4%	64
Positive	61.7%	193
No impact	14.7%	46
Negative	1.9%	6
Very negative	1.3%	4
Retrospective development of region/city without EU funding (sociotropic)		
Much better	4.4%	38
Somewhat better	13.6%	116
Same	41.1%	352
Somewhat worse	32.5%	278
A lot worse	8.4%	72
Perceived benefit vs. other EU regions (relational)		
Less	40.0%	347
Same	46.5%	404
More	13.5%	117
Perceived benefit vs. other national regions (relational)		
Less	31.5%	287
Same	53.3%	485
More	15.2%	138
Degree of European identity		
Country only	26.7%	265
Country and European	52.6%	521
European and country	10.9%	108
European	9.8%	97

Table 2 (Continued)

Trust in EU to work in one's interest			
A lot		16.9%	164
Somewhat		46.2%	450
Very little		22.8%	222
Not at all		14.1%	137
Sex			
Male		64.8%	648
Female		35.2%	352
Left-right	4.7	(2.1)	973
Trust in European citizens	6.0	(2.3)	973
Living standard	4.5	(1.1)	988
Education	4.3	(1.3)	996
Age	54.0	(15.3)	998

Proportions and frequencies are displayed for categorical variables. For numerical variables, we show means, standard deviation in parentheses, and number of observations

Table 3 Determinants of a respondent's position on European integration—sociotropic perspective

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Sociotropic perspective (region's development without European Union (EU) funding; reference: same)				
Much better	-0.619 (0.446)	0.072 (0.401)	—	—
Somewhat better	0.024 (0.265)	0.044 (0.222)	—	—
Somewhat worse	0.731** (0.228)	-0.822** (0.181)	—	—
A lot worse	0.931* (0.427)	-0.923** (0.296)	—	—
Sociotropic perspective (impact of EU funding on region; reference: no impact)				
Very positive	—	—	1.248+ (0.669)	-1.780** (0.511)
Positive	—	—	1.376** (0.470)	-1.219** (0.387)
Negative	—	—	-1.498 (1.124)	1.510 (1.056)
Very negative	—	—	-1.912 (1.579)	0.095 (1.070)
European identity (reference category: "Country only")				
Country and European	1.492** (0.206)	-1.162** (0.192)	1.804** (0.456)	-1.370** (0.442)
European and country	2.751** (0.509)	-1.553** (0.314)	4.094** (1.262)	-1.873** (0.595)
European	1.668** (0.462)	-0.947** (0.333)	18.092 (1661.286)	-0.757 (0.686)

Table 3 (Continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Trust in the EU (reference category: “A lot”)				
Somewhat	−0.482 (0.327)	0.658** (0.232)	−0.256 (0.560)	0.729+ (0.374)
Very little	−1.108** (0.343)	1.240** (0.262)	−0.995 (0.616)	1.187* (0.462)
Not at all	−1.748** (0.372)	2.377** (0.306)	−1.914* (0.906)	2.454** (0.686)
Trust in European citizens	0.157** (0.044)	−0.158** (0.037)	0.044 (0.098)	−0.211** (0.073)
Position on the left–right scale	−0.167** (0.047)	0.051 (0.038)	−0.139 (0.109)	−0.005 (0.074)
Living standard (poor–rich)	0.208* (0.093)	−0.124+ (0.075)	−0.234 (0.193)	−0.045 (0.132)
Level of education	0.173* (0.073)	−0.184** (0.060)	0.208 (0.143)	−0.106 (0.109)
Age	0.004 (0.006)	−0.005 (0.005)	0.012 (0.016)	0.010 (0.010)
Female	0.129 (0.192)	0.357* (0.153)	−0.022 (0.412)	0.718* (0.285)
Thuringia	−0.335+ (0.189)	0.330* (0.154)	−0.978* (0.440)	0.516+ (0.292)
N	764	759	277	277
Pseudo R^2	0.260	0.184	0.278	0.208
AIC	970.914	1593.471	269.100	457.906

Ordered logit models. Coefficients are log odds. The dependent variable is the position of a respondent on further steps in EU integration (models 1 and 3) and the respondents evaluation whether the country has benefited from EU membership (models 2 and 4). For the latter, lower values indicate stronger agreement that the country has benefited from EU membership. The main independent variable for models 1 and 2 is based on respondents' opinion on their region's or city's retrospective development. Models 3 and 4 are based on respondents' evaluation of the impact of EU funding on their region that have heard about funding. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

Significance levels: + $p \leq 0.1$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$

Table 4 Determinants of a respondent's position on European integration—egocentric perspective

	Model 5	Model 6
Egocentric perspective		
Personal benefit from European Union (EU) funds	0.708* (0.309)	−0.709** (0.219)
European identity (reference category: “Country only”)		
Country and European	1.523** (0.193)	−1.230** (0.183)
European and country	2.761** (0.506)	−1.491** (0.300)
European	1.431** (0.393)	−0.976** (0.314)

Table 4 (Continued)

	Model 5	Model 6
Trust in the EU (reference category: "A lot")		
Somewhat	-0.675* (0.312)	0.813** (0.220)
Very little	-1.267** (0.325)	1.486** (0.247)
Not at all	-2.129** (0.349)	2.605** (0.285)
Trust in European citizens	0.185** (0.041)	-0.178** (0.035)
Position on the left–right scale	-0.180** (0.044)	0.073* (0.036)
Living standard (poor–rich)	0.176* (0.088)	-0.085 (0.073)
Level of education	0.219** (0.068)	-0.177** (0.056)
Age	0.003 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.005)
Female	0.149 (0.180)	0.301* (0.144)
Thuringia	-0.322+ (0.176)	0.387** (0.145)
N	847	838
Pseudo R^2	0.265	0.184
AIC	1096.115	1781.279

Ordered logit models. Coefficients are log odds. The dependent variable is the position of a respondent on further steps in EU integration (model 5) and on the question whether his/her country has benefitted from EU membership (model 6). For the latter, lower values indicate stronger agreement that the country has benefitted from EU membership. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

Significance levels: + $p \leq 0.1$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$

Table 5 Determinants of a respondent's position on European integration—relational perspective

	Model 7: EU	Model 8: EU	Model 9: Nat	Model 10: Nat
Relational perspective				
Benefit less than other EU regions	-0.470* (0.190)	-0.307 (0.209)	—	—
Benefit more than other EU regions	0.821* (0.362)	0.738* (0.373)	—	—
Benefit less than other national regions	—	—	-0.392* (0.190)	-0.298 (0.210)
Benefit more than other national regions	—	—	0.681* (0.318)	0.610+ (0.338)
Egocentric perspective				
Personally benefitting from funding	—	0.621+ (0.342)	—	0.583+ (0.337)

Table 5 (Continued)

	Model 7: EU	Model 8: EU	Model 9: Nat	Model 10: Nat
Sociotropic perspective (region's development without EU funding; reference: same)				
Much worse	–	–0.391 (0.501)	–	–0.479 (0.482)
Somewhat worse	–	–0.159 (0.291)	–	–0.153 (0.284)
Somewhat better	–	0.656** (0.247)	–	0.603* (0.240)
Much better	–	0.926+ (0.477)	–	0.875+ (0.473)
European identity (reference category: “Country only”)				
Country and European	1.543** (0.203)	1.603** (0.222)	1.469** (0.199)	1.516** (0.218)
European and country	2.804** (0.514)	2.667** (0.524)	2.757** (0.509)	2.555** (0.520)
European	1.609** (0.453)	1.551** (0.510)	1.676** (0.445)	1.611** (0.506)
Trust in the EU (reference category: “A lot”)				
Somewhat	–0.981** (0.359)	–0.845* (0.387)	–0.880** (0.336)	–0.727* (0.361)
Very little	–1.480** (0.373)	–1.283** (0.404)	–1.355** (0.350)	–1.138** (0.379)
Not at all	–2.337** (0.401)	–1.997** (0.431)	–2.217** (0.380)	–1.911** (0.408)
Trust in European citizens	0.204** (0.044)	0.183** (0.049)	0.215** (0.044)	0.194** (0.048)
Position on the left–right scale	–0.181** (0.048)	–0.179** (0.051)	–0.178** (0.047)	–0.171** (0.050)
Living standard (poor–rich)	0.211* (0.094)	0.193+ (0.102)	0.184* (0.091)	0.155 (0.099)
Level of education	0.214** (0.073)	0.170* (0.078)	0.204** (0.071)	0.141+ (0.077)
Age	0.003 (0.006)	0.007 (0.007)	0.005 (0.006)	0.008 (0.007)
Female	0.094 (0.193)	0.190 (0.211)	0.139 (0.188)	0.238 (0.206)
Thuringia	–0.383* (0.189)	–0.375+ (0.209)	–0.395* (0.183)	–0.414* (0.202)
N	780	669	813	696
Pseudo R^2	0.286	0.290	0.275	0.281
AIC	966.220	837.548	1015.130	874.345

Ordered logit models. Coefficients are log odds. The dependent variable is the position of a respondent on further steps in EU integration. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

Significance levels: + $p \leq 0.1$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$

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