

Wang, Hequn

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Support for an EU-wide social policy? A country-comparative analysis of unemployment perceptions

Hequn Wang 

Universität Hamburg, Hamburg,  
Germany

**Correspondence**

Hequn Wang, Universität Hamburg,  
Hamburg, Germany.  
Email: [hequn.wang@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:hequn.wang@uni-hamburg.de)

## Abstract

This article explored the influence of unemployment perceptions on attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy that guarantees a minimum standard of living for the poor across 18 European countries. The article relied on a theoretical framework that highlights the interaction among economic self-interest, ideology, and perceptions. Using data from Eurostat and the European Social Survey, the results show that Europeans with more negative perceptions of national unemployment or the living conditions of the unemployed were more likely to support an EU minimum income scheme. This association was particularly strong among individuals with non-egalitarian values or right-leaning ideology and remained relatively consistent across different national contexts. Additionally, support was stronger in countries with poor economic and welfare conditions. Overall, the findings reveal a high perceived legitimacy among Europeans for implementing a policy measure that aims to tackle poverty in the EU.

## KEYWORDS

EU social policy, minimum income, perceptions, public opinion, social Europe, unemployment

## INTRODUCTION

The European Union intervenes in the social policy domain to deal with inequality and to combat poverty and social exclusion within the EU, leaning towards a 'social Europe' (Martinsen & Vollaard, 2014). Still, one in five Europeans was at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 2022, that is, having an income below the national poverty threshold, being socially deprived or excluded

from the labour market as defined in the EU (Eurostat, 2023). In addition, the situation varied largely between countries, ranging from 12% in Czechia up to 34% in Romania. A related question is whether there is general support for the EU's intervention in social policy for the sake of the well-being of Europeans and perhaps stronger support in countries with a higher share of a poor population.

Although to date social policy remains mainly within the area of national authorities, political debates on fostering solidarity and redistribution beyond national borders are ongoing. These debates have gained increased

**Abbreviations:** ESS, European Social Survey; GDP, gross domestic product; ICC, intraclass correlation coefficient; SD, standard deviation.

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importance in recent years due to major global crises such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. This has reinforced the political relevance of studying public opinion on social policy at the EU-level.

Against this background, this article analysed EU citizens' attitudes towards the introduction of an EU-wide social benefit scheme that guarantees a minimum standard of living for all poor people in the EU. At the national level, minimum income benefits are already in place in all member states to reduce poverty and social exclusion. However, in most countries, the benefit levels fall far below national poverty thresholds and vary significantly across countries. Therefore, promoting a minimum income benefit scheme at the EU-level would address inequalities within and between member states. Potential alternative policies, such as a framework on adequate minimum wages that the EU has settled on by the end of 2022, aim to enhance minimum income protection for employed persons in the EU. Instead of addressing in-work poverty specifically like that, an EU-wide minimum income benefit would provide minimum income protection to all individuals in need, including the unemployed who live in poverty. In addition, such a policy measure would require rich member states to invest more financially, promoting redistribution at the EU-level. A thorough understanding of Europeans' support for the policy measure thus contributes to legitimizing further integration within the EU, and in particular, to achieving the EU priority to tackle poverty in general.

While there has been a long-standing tradition of studying attitudes towards EU integration in general (e.g., Anderson & Reichert, 1995; Gabel, 1998; Gabel & Whitten, 1997), attitudes towards social-policy making at the EU-level have seldom been discussed explicitly in previous literature until the last few years (e.g., Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Beaudonnet, 2013; Burgoon, 2009; Gerhards et al., 2016; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2021). The recent studies demonstrated that support for EU social-policy making is generally stronger in member states with worse economic and welfare performances (e.g., lower welfare generosity or efficiency). While revealing a contextual impact on Europeans' attitudes, most studies left out how Europeans may perceive their country's conditions differently. Less is known about the specific role that individual perceptions of the national context may play in shaping attitudes. Perceptions at the individual level should be considered in addition to objective contextual factors, as people often exhibit significant misperceptions regarding national indicators, such as the level of unemployment, poverty or inequality (e.g., Cardoso et al., 2016; Choi, 2019; Kuhn, 2019). As a result, scholars found that support for redistribution at the national level is more strongly associated with

individuals' perceptions of national inequality than with contextual factors (e.g., Bussolo et al., 2021; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018). This prompts the question of whether perceptions also play a crucial role in explaining attitudes at the EU-level.

The present study contributes to the existing literature by addressing the role of both objective contextual factors and individual perceptions of them in shaping Europeans' attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy in terms of a minimum income benefit scheme. This study centred on the perceptions of the unemployment rate and the living conditions of unemployed individuals within the country (also referred to as 'unemployment perceptions' or 'perceptions regarding unemployment' hereafter). In this study, I adapted a theoretical framework that highlights the interaction among economic self-interest, ideology, and the perceptions. Empirically, I combined macro data on country-level economic and welfare performances with individual-level data from the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2016, which includes 18 EU member states. This article aimed to address the following research questions: *First*, how are attitudes towards an EU-wide minimum income scheme associated with unemployment perceptions differently in comparison to objective contextual factors regarding the economic and welfare performances of the EU member states? *Second*, to what extent can individuals' ideological motivations, such as egalitarianism or political ideology, influence the role of the perceptions in shaping the attitudes? *Finally*, do contextual factors also influence how unemployment perceptions relate to attitudes towards the policy measure?

## COUNTRY PERFORMANCES AND SUPPORT FOR THE EU'S INTERVENTION IN SOCIAL POLICY

Since the Maastricht Treaty, the integration process within the EU has largely extended to the social dimension. The EU has begun to intervene even more in the social policy domain, since the economic crisis in 2007/2008 has increased economic disparities between European countries. For instance, different European Structural and Investment Funds have been carried out, such as the European Social Fund, supporting initiatives that aim to reduce unemployment and promote economic and social cohesion (European Parliament, 2022).

However, from the perspective of European citizens, the Europeanisation of social policy resulted in a sudden loss of support for the EU back in the 1990s. There was growing public concern about the EU's intervention in the social policy domain having a negative impact on

national social security systems (Ferrera, 2005), also described as the ‘Post-Maastricht blues’ (Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007). Scholars argued that this reflects an economic self-interest among Europeans, as their attitudes towards integration within the EU depend on how it could influence their country and themselves (see also Gabel, 1998; Gabel & Whitten, 1997). Accordingly, opposition to the intervention by the EU would be particularly strong in member states with favourable economic and welfare conditions. In contrast, support would be strong in member states with unfavourable conditions to start with because their citizens may expect the EU’s intervention in social policy to improve the level of social benefits in their country, from which they could possibly benefit (e.g., Burgoon, 2009).

In line with the economic self-interest explanation, recent comparative literature found that support for the EU’s intervention in social policy is overall negatively associated with national economic and welfare performances. Instead of referring to the EU’s intervention as a whole directly, empirical studies mostly narrowed it down to one specific aspect where the EU could possibly intervene. For instance, focusing on three European countries, that is, Germany, Spain and Poland, Gerhards et al. (2016) showed that support for a specialised European social policy was strongest in Poland and weakest in Germany. In Mau (2005), support for EU welfare responsibility was much stronger in Mediterranean than in Continental countries, and was weakest in Scandinavian countries. Moreover, studies revealed that a higher level of national social protection relates to lower support for the welfare responsibility of the EU (Beaudonnet, 2013; Burgoon, 2009) and for a specific EU-wide income benefit scheme (Baute & Meuleman, 2020). Similarly, the support is negatively associated with national economic conditions (Beaudonnet, 2013; Burgoon, 2009; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2021).

Another growing branch of literature linked support for redistribution to the perceived, not the objective situation of a country. The main reasoning is that individuals tend to largely misperceive the actual state of their society with respect to national indicators such as the extent of unemployment, poverty, and inequality (e.g., Arin et al., 2021; Cardoso et al., 2016; Choi, 2019; Kuhn, 2019; Kunovich, 2012). Given these misperceptions, previous studies found that individual perceptions of, for example, national inequality, rather than actual contextual factors of a country, strongly associate with the demand for national redistribution (e.g., Bussolo et al., 2021; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018). This raises the question of whether individuals’ perceptions also have stronger explanatory power than objective contextual factors in analysing attitudes towards redistribution at a supra-national level, that is, the EU-level.

To date, only two empirical studies (Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2021) drew attention to the impact of perceptions about national context on attitudes towards redistribution at the EU-level. Using the same individual-level survey data from the ESS in 2016, the results of both studies reveal that perceptions play a similarly important role as objective national economic and welfare conditions in explaining attitudes towards an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme. First, the more negative the standard of living for unemployed or retired individuals in the country is perceived, the stronger the support for the policy measure. Second, individuals from countries with worse welfare performances tend to exhibit stronger support. However, neither of the studies discussed the gap between the objective national context and the individual perceptions or explicitly explained why perceptions should matter in addition to national context.<sup>1</sup> This article aimed to address this research gap, with a focus on individual perceptions regarding unemployment.

In addition to the perceived standard of living for the unemployed addressed in the two previous studies, the present study included a second measure of unemployment perceptions, that is, the perceived national unemployment rate. Unemployed Europeans, who usually stand at the bottom of national income distribution (e.g., de Graaf-Zijl & Nolan, 2011; Gallie et al., 2003), should be among the primary target groups of an EU-wide social policy that aims to improve the well-being of those in poverty. Therefore, perceptions related to both the proportion of unemployed individuals in the country and their living conditions are particularly relevant for analysing attitudes towards such a policy measure. This article accounted for both these individual unemployment perceptions as well as objective national economic and welfare performances, and investigated different mechanisms of how they affect attitudes towards an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme.

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<sup>1</sup>Instead, both studies shifted their focus to additionally analyse how individuals’ expectations about the EU’s impact on national social benefits shaped their attitudes. Baute and Meuleman (2020) demonstrated that these expectations fully accounted for the contextual impact on the attitudes, leaving aside perceptions of the national context. Roosma and van Oorschot (2021) investigated whether the role of the perceptions could be attributed to a ‘hope-or-fear reasoning’ at the individual level: Individuals with negative (positive) perceptions of the living conditions of unemployed persons would expect an EU-wide social policy to improve (worsen) the level of social benefits in their country, and consequently, support the policy measure more (less) strongly. However, they found no empirical evidence to support this reasoning.

## EXPLAINING ATTITUDES TOWARDS AN EU-WIDE SOCIAL POLICY

The economic self-interest explanation is a common approach for analysing country variations in attitudes towards redistribution and social policy at the EU-level, as previously discussed. At the individual level, empirical evidence indicates that it is not individuals' socioeconomic status that primarily shape these attitudes, but their ideological motivations (e.g., Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Gerhards et al., 2016). For instance, politically left-leaning individuals and individuals with egalitarian values are more in favour of an EU-wide social policy.

Both economic self-interest and ideological motivations are traditionally considered as important theoretical explanations for the demand for national redistribution (see Alesina & Giuliano, 2011), before being applied to the supra-national level. A more recent study by Bussolo et al. (2021) proposed a concise framework that particularly addresses the interplay between the economic self-interest, ideological motivations, and perceptions of national context in explaining demand for redistribution at the national level. Focusing on perceptions of national inequality, the basic theoretical assumption of the authors is that a stronger demand for national redistribution is associated with higher perceived national inequality, lower socioeconomic status, and a left-leaning ideology or similar views on social justice. Moreover, both self-interest and ideology play a crucial role in shaping individuals' perceptions. In particular, the authors argued that citizens of one country are exposed to the same national socioeconomic conditions, such as the extent of unemployment, poverty, and inequality within the country. Individuals' socioeconomic characteristics and ideology, including political orientation, determine how they may interpret such national context differently.

Accordingly, better national economic and welfare performances lead to more positive perceptions among individuals regarding the national context, such as lower perceived national inequality. Conditional on the same national context, individuals with a lower socioeconomic status or a left-leaning ideology tend to exhibit more negative perceptions and regard a high level of unemployment, poverty or inequality as more problematic.

In this article, I adapted the theoretical approach of Bussolo et al. (2021) to explain attitudes towards redistribution at the EU-level. As opposed to their focus on inequality perceptions, this article explored the role of perceptions regarding unemployment in shaping attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy. Overall, I

assumed a similar mechanism with regard to how socioeconomic status, ideological motivations, and perceptions regarding unemployment within a country relate to attitudes at the EU-level. Individuals with a lower socioeconomic status are likely to support social assistance at the EU-level as an 'imperfect substitute' (Burgoon, 2009, p. 433) to assure their living conditions. In other words, driven by the self-interest motivation, individuals will support social policy at the EU-level if they believe their country and themselves could benefit from it. Following this logic, individuals who perceive a high unemployment rate or a low standard of living for the unemployed in their country should be more in favour of an EU-wide social policy. Therefore, I hypothesised that *the more negative the perceptions regarding unemployment in the country, the more likely the support for an EU-wide social policy* (H1).

Considering both the economic self-interest and ideological motivations, a few previous studies (e.g., Armingeon & Weisstanner, 2022; Margalit, 2013) addressed a conflict of interest by analysing the interplay between individuals' socioeconomic status, such as income, and political ideology for shaping demand for national redistribution. They found that demand for national redistribution is overall stronger among left-leaning individuals and poor individuals. In addition, poor right-leaning individuals and rich left-leaning individuals also exhibit relatively strong demand, both of which are stronger compared to rich right-leaning individuals, though less strong compared to poor left-leaning individuals. With regard to the role of economic self-interest and how it could be influenced by ideology, their findings reveal that left-leaning ideology mitigates the influence of socioeconomic status on the attitudes. Accordingly, individuals with a left-leaning ideology or egalitarian values may face a similar conflict of interest when they hold positive perceptions regarding unemployment, that is, perceptions of a low unemployment rate or a high standard of living for the unemployed in the country. Although not addressed in their theoretical framework directly, Bussolo et al. (2021) provided empirical evidence that the left-leaning ideology diminished the role of perceptions in shaping attitudes towards national redistribution. I expected ideology has a similar damping effect at the EU-level, leading to my second hypothesis, namely *the relationship between unemployment perceptions and support for an EU-wide social policy is stronger among individuals with a right-leaning ideology or non-egalitarian values* (H2).

As elaborated, national economic and welfare performances play a role in the formation of individuals' perceptions, determining their between-country variation. Accordingly, the influence of unemployment perceptions on support for an EU-wide social policy could be partly



explained by objective contextual factors. Moreover, previous studies empirically confirmed that attitudes towards social policy at the EU-level are negatively associated with objective country performances. However, these studies did not analyse the role of the perceptions or discuss them in comparison with the contextual factors, as discussed in the previous section. Instead, they pointed out that contextual factors' impact on attitudes at the EU-level results from public concern about the EU having a negative impact on national social security systems (e.g., Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2021). In general, rich countries and countries with generous welfare provision are more likely to be negatively affected by the intervention of the EU, as competences are to be shifted from the national to the EU level (Baute et al., 2018; Ray, 2004). Consequently, driven by their economic self-interest, opposition from the citizens to the EU's intervention in social policy could be strong. Against this background, I assumed that *individuals from countries with better economic and welfare performances are less likely to support an EU-wide social policy* (H3).

Considering both the literature that discussed the role of welfare state performances and the theoretical approach of Bussolo et al. (2021), objective contextual factors and subjective perceptions regarding unemployment have an impact on attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy that is partly independent from each other. Furthermore, there should be between-country variation in the role of the perceptions, depending on a country's actual economic and welfare performances. Given that the contextual factors could affect attitudes directly, support for an EU-wide social policy in a country may already reach a sufficiently high level due to the poor economic and welfare performances of the country. Consequently, perceptions regarding unemployment may no longer matter in that country. In contrast, attitudes

towards an EU-wide social policy may vary strongly in rich countries or countries with generous welfare provision, depending on how individuals perceive unemployment within their own country. Following this logic, I expected that *the relationship between unemployment perceptions and support for an EU-wide social policy is stronger in countries with better economic and welfare performances* (H4).

Figure 1 depicts a full picture of the mechanisms with regard to the formation of attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy that I applied for studying the role of perceptions regarding unemployment. Arrows with black straight lines in the figure respectively denote the discussed hypotheses (H1–H4). Arrows with black dashed lines illustrate a more general interplay among socioeconomic status, ideology, and unemployment perceptions that I did not explicitly address in terms of hypotheses.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

### Data

To examine the hypotheses empirically, the present study used individual-level data from the 8th round of the European Social Survey (ESS8) that was held in 2016 in 23 countries, including five non-EU countries (European Social Survey Round 8 Data, 2016). This study focused on EU member states to analyse attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy. The following 18 countries remained in the sample: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Czechia (CZ), Estonia (EE), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Lithuania (LT), the Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES), Sweden (SE), and the United Kingdom (GB). After data cleaning, the sample consisted of 29,286 individuals in

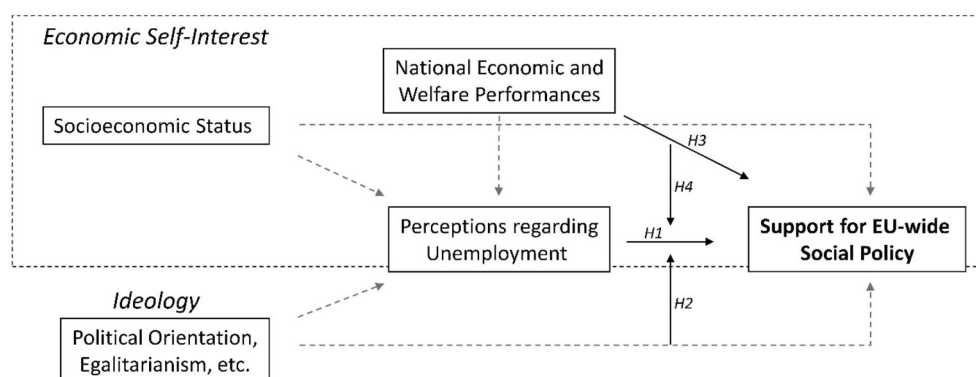


FIGURE 1 Formation of attitudes towards EU-wide social policy.

total, with sample sizes ranging from 1114 in Slovenia to 2623 in Germany.<sup>2</sup>

For the first time, ESS8 included a specific survey question about attitudes towards a potential EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme. The introduced proposal comprised the following three features: (1) ‘The purpose is to guarantee a minimum standard of living for all poor people in the European Union’; (2) ‘The level of social benefit people receive will be adjusted to reflect the cost of living in their country’; (3) ‘The scheme would require richer European Union countries to pay more into such a scheme than poorer European Union countries’. On a scale of 1 (‘strongly against’) to 4 (‘strongly in favour’), respondents were asked if they would be against or in favour of such a scheme. Notably, over 80% of the respondents fell into the middle two categories (‘against’ or ‘in favour’). In 12 out of the 18 countries, below 5% (30 respondents or less in several countries) selected ‘strongly against’ and ‘strongly in favour’, respectively. Therefore, I combined the first two and the last two of the original categories to generate a dichotomous dependent variable, denoting whether respondents would support an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme or not. Eventually, 67% of all respondents were supportive of the policy measure. This article presented the results using the dichotomous variable as the dependent variable, but the results remained robust when using the original variable with four categories.

I used two items in ESS8 on perceptions of the unemployment rate and the standard of living for the unemployed within the country as measures of unemployment perceptions. First, ESS8 asked respondents to estimate how many in every 100 working age people in their country are unemployed and looking for work. Respondents were provided with answering categories ranging from 1 (‘0–4’) to 11 (‘50 or more’) with an interval of 5 percentage points for their responses. They were then asked to assess the standard of living of people who are unemployed in their country on a scale of 0 (‘extremely bad’) to 10 (‘extremely good’).

Following the operationalisation in Baute and Meuleman (2020), egalitarianism was measured as a latent variable constructed from three items. Respondents were asked to report on a scale of 1 (‘agree strongly’) to 5 (‘disagree strongly’), how much they agreed or disagreed with each of the following three statements: (1) ‘Large differences in people’s incomes are acceptable to properly reward differences in talents and efforts’; (2) ‘For a society

to be fair, differences in people’s standard of living should be small’; (3) ‘The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels’. I recoded the responses for the construction of the latent variable so that the higher the score, the stronger the egalitarianism.

Political ideology was measured by the item in which respondents were asked to place themselves on the scale of political left–right, ranging from 0 (‘left’) to 10 (‘right’). I reversed the coding of the item for the analysis. Due to a high number of missing values (13% of all respondents), I included political ideology only for additional analysis.

According to the theoretical framework elaborated in the previous section, individuals’ socioeconomic characteristics also have an impact on their attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy, as depicted in Figure 1. Therefore, in the regression analysis, I included as controls gender, age, and socioeconomic status. The latter was measured by four different indicators: household income, welfare dependency, employment status, and education. Since this study focused on attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy, I additionally controlled for respondents’ emotional attachment to Europe. Summary statistics of all individual-level variables are provided in Table A1 in the Online Appendix.

At the country level, I used Eurostat data in 2016 for measuring objective national economic and welfare performances. I calculated welfare efficiency as the ratio between the percentage of the population at risk of poverty before and after social transfers.<sup>3</sup> The efficiency scores can vary between 0 and 100. The higher the scores, the higher the welfare efficiency. The indicator shows the extent to which national social transfers protect citizens from poverty, which better measures the welfare performance of one country than other measurements such as the social welfare generosity scores (see Scruggs, 2014). For robustness checks, I used net expenditure on social protection benefits (as the percentage of gross domestic product [GDP] per capita) and at-risk-of-poverty rate (after social transfers) as alternative contextual factors that reflect the national welfare situation more generally. In addition, I used unemployment rate for measuring national economic performance and included GDP only for robustness checks because it correlated statistically highly with welfare efficiency (Pearson’s correlation: 0.64).<sup>4</sup>

Descriptive statistics of all contextual factors used in the main analysis and the robustness checks are provided in Table A2 in the Online Appendix. Table A2 also shows

<sup>2</sup>For descriptive analysis, post-stratification weights and population size weights were used in combination to reduce sampling error and potential non-response bias and to adjust the sample size for each country in proportion to its population size.

<sup>3</sup>I used the Eurostat data in which pensions were excluded from social transfers. The at-risk-of-poverty threshold was set at 60% of the national median equivalised household income. The Eurostat codes are *ilc\_li10* (before social transfers) and *ilc\_li03* (after social transfers).

<sup>4</sup>Eurostat codes for net social expenditure, at-risk-of-poverty rate, unemployment rate, and GDP are *spr\_net\_ben*, *ilc\_li03*, *une\_rt\_a\_h* and *nama\_10\_pc*, respectively.

statistics on the perceptions of the unemployment rate and the living standard of the unemployed at aggregate level (i.e., mean values for each country), which I additionally calculated for the descriptive analysis.

## Methodology

I applied multilevel modelling to account for country-level variations in attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy according to national economic and welfare performances. Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, I estimated linear probability random intercept models to test the first three hypotheses.

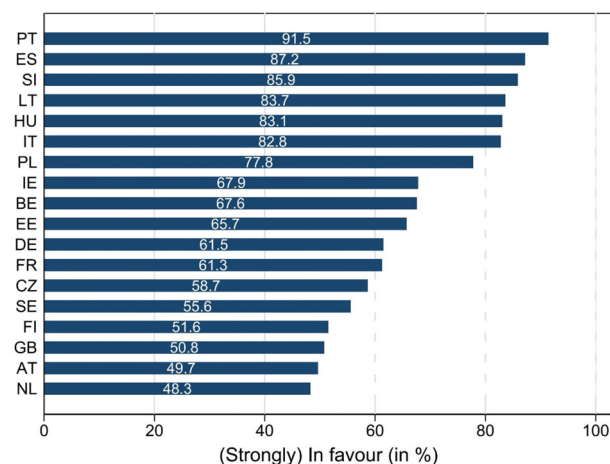
For cross-level interactions, random slope models are more adequate than random intercept models, since the former allows for variations at the cluster level with respect to the coefficients of lower-level covariates (Heisig & Schaeffer, 2019). However, my sample contained only 18 countries and a relatively large number of individuals per country. In the case of a small sample size at the cluster level, estimates of parameters referring to context effects are likely to be biased, and may cause additional reliability problems for including random slopes to test cross-level interactions (Bryan & Jenkins, 2016). To tackle this specific issue, one may consider two-step modelling (Achen, 2005; Heisig et al., 2017), which estimates cross-level interactions in a more straightforward manner: in a first step, regressions are estimated separately for each cluster, and in a second step, coefficient estimates of variables of interest obtained from the first-step regressions are regressed on the cluster-level indicators.

Given this context, I employed all three possible models, that is, random intercept models, random slope models, and two-step modelling, to test my last hypothesis regarding cross-level interactions. I aimed to draw robust conclusions by comparing the results of these different models. Country-level indicators were additionally standardised for better interpretation of the results.

## RESULTS

### Support for an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme: Descriptive statistics

As mentioned, a majority (67%) of all respondents were in favour of an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme. However, there were distinct country differences. Figure 2 displays that the share of the supporters ranged from 48% in the Netherlands to 92% in Portugal. Support was stronger in Southern and Eastern European countries compared to countries in the North and West.



**FIGURE 2** Support for EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme in 18 European countries. Using ESS8 data, 18 European countries,  $N = 29,286$ ; Weighted statistics.

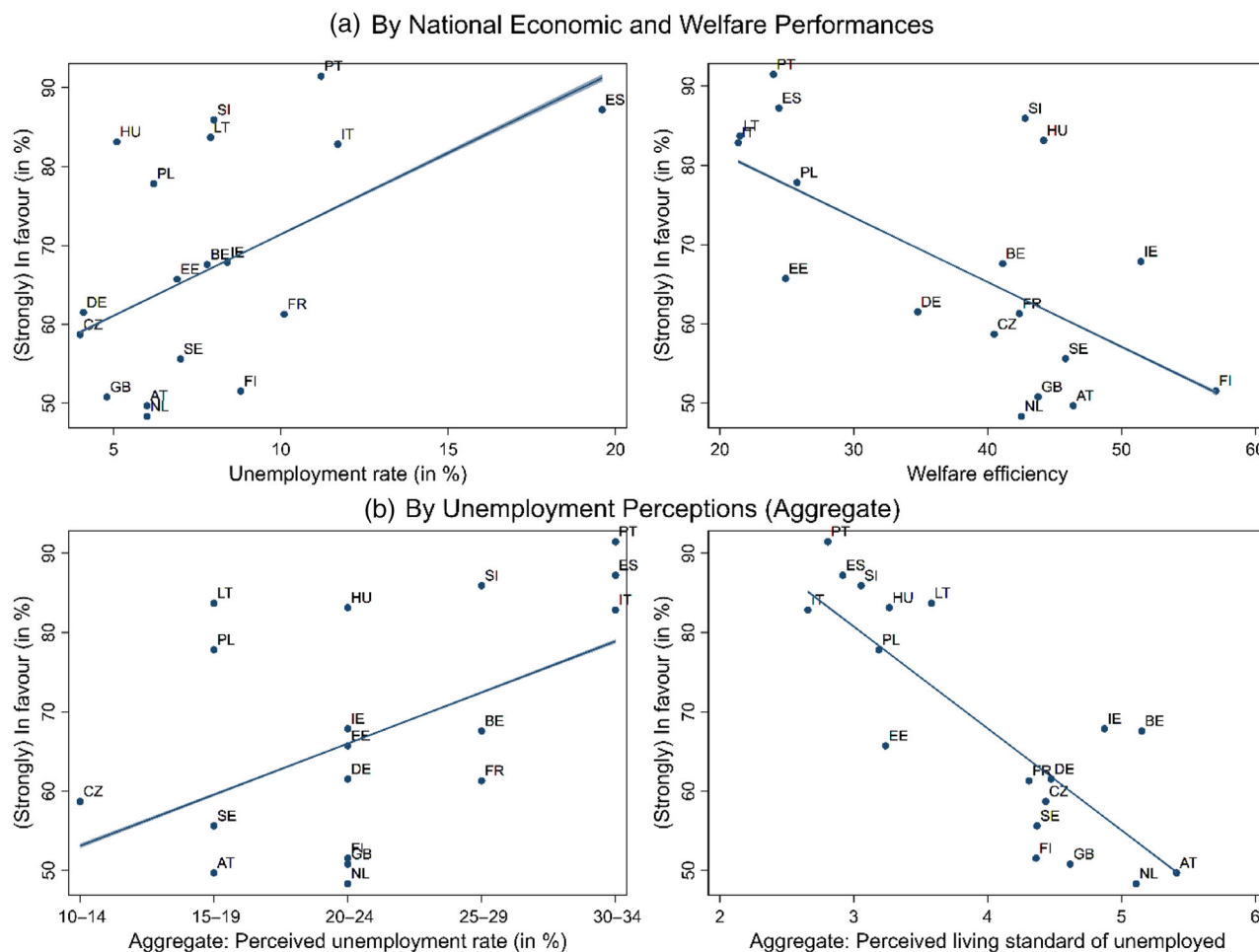
Figure 2 suggests that the richer the country, or the better the welfare performance of the country, the lower the possibility of supporting the policy measure.

This assumption was backed up when looking at the correlation between the support and country characteristics regarding the economic and welfare performances. Figure 3a shows that the higher the unemployment rate, or the lower the welfare efficiency of one country, the higher the share of respondents in that country that were (strongly) in favour of an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme. This suggests a negative relationship between national economic and welfare performances and support for an EU social policy.

Consistent with the results regarding the objective country characteristics, Figure 3b illustrates a positive correlation between unemployment perceptions and support for the policy measure: the higher the unemployment rate was perceived at aggregate level, the higher the share of respondents of one country in favour of an EU-wide minimum income scheme. The share of supporters was negatively correlated with aggregate-level perceptions on the standard of living of the unemployed in one country. In addition, Figure 3 shows a clearer and stronger linear correlation between the latter two (Pearson's correlation:  $-0.82$ ) compared to the correlations for the other three presented indicators. It seems that the average perception regarding the standard of living of the unemployed within one country could better explain country differences in the attitudes.

To sum up, descriptive statistics suggest that national economic and welfare performances as well as perceptions regarding unemployment matter for analysing attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy like a minimum income benefit scheme. Further analyses are needed to investigate their underlying mechanisms.





**FIGURE 3** Support for EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme. Pearson's correlation between the share of supporters in one country and national performances in (a) is 0.54 for unemployment rate (left) and  $-0.65$  for welfare efficiency (right). The correlation between the share of supporters and aggregate-level unemployment perceptions in (b) is 0.52 for the perceived unemployment rate (left) and  $-0.82$  for the perceived living standard of the unemployed (right). All correlations are highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Weights applied for ESS data ( $N = 29,286$ , 18 countries).

## Impact of unemployment perceptions and country performances

This section shifted the focus from aggregate-level perceptions to perceptions at the individual level. Following the theoretical model, I tested in this section the extent to which unemployment perceptions relate to attitudes towards an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme, and how the role of the perceptions differs alongside individual ideology. In addition, I investigated how the attitudes are associated with national economic and welfare performances.

The results are depicted in Table 1. Column (1) shows that, at the individual level, the probability of supporting an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme increased significantly by 0.5 percentage points as the perceived national unemployment rate increased by one unit, that is, by 5 percentage points. The probability of supporting

the policy measure decreased significantly by 1.6 percentage points as the perceived standard of living of the unemployed in one's country increased by one unit. Accordingly, the higher the unemployment rate or the worse the standard of living as unemployed was perceived by individuals, the more likely their support for an EU-wide minimum income scheme. This confirmed my first hypothesis that support for such a social policy is positively associated with more negative perceptions regarding unemployment (H1).

The results of Column (1) additionally indicate a positive association between support for the policy measure and egalitarianism. Column (2) then shows that for respondents with non-egalitarian values, the probability of supporting an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme increased significantly by 3 percentage points as the perceived national unemployment rate increased by one unit (5 percentage points). However, the more

**TABLE 1** Determinants of support for EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme.

	Support for EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Perceived unemployment rate	0.005*** (0.001)	0.030*** (0.004)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)
Perceived living standard of unemployed	−0.016*** (0.001)	−0.016*** (0.001)	−0.033*** (0.005)	−0.016*** (0.001)	−0.016*** (0.001)
Perceived unemployment rate × Egalitarianism		−0.007*** (0.001)			
Perceived living standard of unemployed × Egalitarianism			0.005** (0.002)		
Egalitarianism	0.092*** (0.004)	0.127*** (0.007)	0.071*** (0.007)	0.092*** (0.004)	0.092*** (0.004)
National unemployment rate				0.013 <sup>+</sup> (0.007)	0.006 (0.007)
National welfare efficiency					−0.006** (0.002)
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N—Individual	29,286	29,286	29,286	29,286	29,286
N—Country	18	18	18	18	18
Residual—Individual	0.195	0.194	0.195	0.195	0.195
Residual—Country	0.067	0.068	0.067	0.060	0.041

Note: Using multilevel linear probability random intercept models; Intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of null model: 0.100; Individual-level covariates (gender, age, age<sup>2</sup>, equivalent net household income, welfare dependency, employment status, education, European attachment, egalitarianism) included in all models; Standard errors in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup>Significance level:  $p < 0.1$ ;

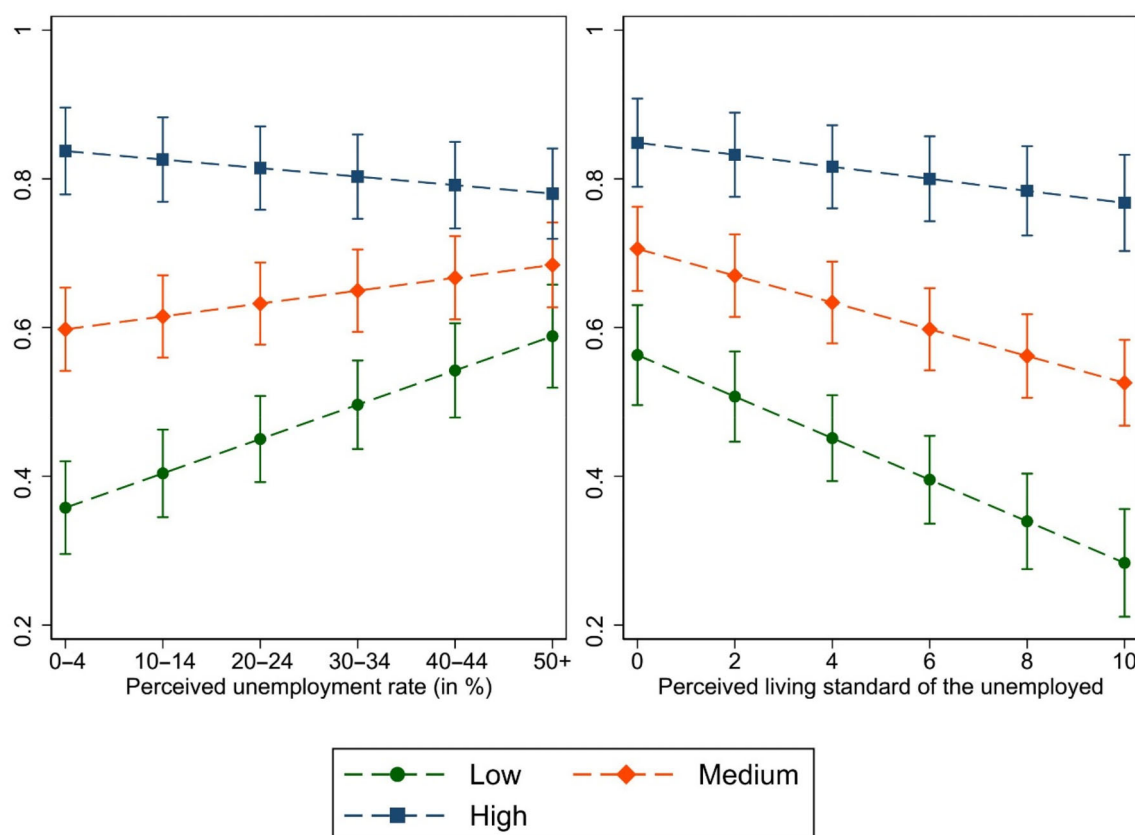
\*\*Significance level:  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*Significance level:  $p < 0.001$ .

egalitarian the values of an individual, the less influential the perceived unemployment rate was on the attitudes. The coefficient of the perceived unemployment rate decreased significantly by 0.7 percentage points as the degree of egalitarianism increased by one unit. Similarly, Column (3) shows that egalitarianism also reduced the negative association between the perceived living standard of the unemployed and the attitudes. For respondents without egalitarian values, they were 3.3 percentage points less likely to support an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme as the perception rose by one unit. The size of the coefficient decreased significantly by 0.5 percentage points as the degree of egalitarianism increased by one unit.

Figure 4 plots the predicted probabilities of supporting an EU-wide minimum income scheme alongside unemployment perceptions and egalitarian values, illustrating the damping effect of egalitarianism on the role of unemployment perceptions: the association between the perceptions and support for the policy measure was strongest among individuals with low-level egalitarian

values and weakest among those with high-level egalitarian values. In addition, individuals with high-level egalitarian values were most likely to exhibit support, regardless of their unemployment perceptions. Notably, among them, the probability of supporting the policy measure reached about 80% for those holding the most positive unemployment perceptions additionally. The probability of support for this group was over 20 percentage points higher compared to individuals with low-level egalitarian values but the most negative unemployment perceptions. The results suggest that egalitarian values play a more crucial role than unemployment perceptions in shaping support for an EU social policy.

Additional analysis shows similar results for political left–right leaning (for full results see Table A3 in the Online Appendix). To summarise, the results were in line with my expectation of a conflict of interest among individuals between their economic self-interest and ideological motivations when forming attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy. The findings also confirmed my hypothesis that the impact of unemployment



**FIGURE 4** Role of unemployment perceptions by egalitarianism. The figure plots the predicted probabilities of supporting an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme alongside the perceived unemployment rate (left) and the perceived living standard of the unemployed (right), conditional on the level of egalitarianism (low, medium, high); The perceived unemployment rate ranged from ‘0%–4%’ to ‘50% or more’ and the perceived living standard of the unemployed ranged from ‘extremely bad’ (0) to ‘extremely good’ (10); Using estimation specification for Columns (2) and (3) of Table 1, respectively, with 95% CI.

perceptions on support for such a policy is stronger for individuals with less egalitarian values or a right-leaning ideology (H2).

Support for an EU-wide social policy was also associated with other individual characteristics that I included as control variables: younger individuals, individuals with lower income or education levels, individuals who were in education, unemployed or welfare dependent, and individuals who felt emotionally attached to the EU were more likely to exhibit their support (for full results, see Table A4 in the Online Appendix).

Turning to the contextual impact, Columns (4) and (5) of Table 1 display the results of how national economic and welfare performances related to attitudes towards an EU-wide minimum income scheme, while accounting for individual-level covariates. Column (4) shows that respondents in countries with a higher unemployment rate were more likely to support the policy measure (coefficient: 0.013, significant at 10%-level). The coefficient reduced strongly and turned insignificant to including national welfare efficiency, as shown in

Column (5). In contrast, there was a significant negative relationship between welfare efficiency and the policy support (coefficient:  $-0.006$ ), suggesting a stronger explanatory power of welfare efficiency than the unemployment rate as country-level determinants. Robustness checks reveal high consistency in the contextual impact when using net social expenditure and the at-risk-of-poverty rate as alternative indicators for country performances (see Table A5 in the Online Appendix). Overall, the results confirmed my hypothesis that national economic and welfare performances relate to support for an EU-wide social policy negatively (H3).

Columns (4) and (5) additionally show that the coefficients of both indicators on unemployment perceptions remained unchanged after including contextual factors on national economic and welfare performances. It seems that the influence of unemployment perceptions on support for an EU-wide social policy cannot be explained by the contextual factors. As theoretically elaborated, contextual factors explain the country-specific differences in individuals' perceptions regarding unemployment.

**TABLE 2** Role of unemployment perceptions by country performances.

	Support for EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme					
	Random intercept		Random slope		Two-step	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Panel (a): Role of perceived unemployment rate by contextual factors</i>						
Perceived unemployment rate	0.005*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.006** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)
Perceived unemployment rate × National welfare efficiency (std.)	0.002* (0.001)		0.002 (0.002)		0.002 (0.002)	
× National unemployment rate (std.)		−0.002* (0.001)		−0.002 (0.002)		−0.002 (0.002)
<i>Panel (b): Role of perceived living standard of unemployed by contextual factors</i>						
Perceived living standard of unemployed	−0.016*** (0.001)	−0.015*** (0.001)	−0.015*** (0.002)	−0.015*** (0.002)	−0.014*** (0.002)	−0.014*** (0.002)
Perceived living standard of unemployed × National welfare efficiency (std.)	−0.002 <sup>+</sup> (0.001)		−0.002 (0.002)		−0.002 (0.002)	
× National unemployment rate (std.)		0.004** (0.001)		0.004* (0.002)		0.003 (0.002)
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N—Individual	29,286	29,286	29,286	29,286	29,286	29,286
N—Country	18	18	18	18	18	18

*Note:* Using multilevel linear probability models to test how contextual factors (in standardised values (std.)) influence coefficients of the perceived unemployment rate (Panel a) and the perceived living standard of the unemployed (Panel b). Columns (1) and (2) display the results of random intercept models, Columns (3) and (4) display the results of random slope models, and Columns (5) and (6) display the results of two-step modelling; Both contextual factors, both indicators of perceptions, and the individual-level covariates (gender, age, age<sup>2</sup>, equivalent net household income, welfare dependency, employment status, education, European attachment, egalitarianism) included in all models; Standard errors in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup>Significance level:  $p < 0.1$ ;

\*Significance level:  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*Significance level:  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*Significance level:  $p < 0.001$ .

Consistent with the theoretical assumption, additional results show a significant positive association between unemployment perceptions and the country performances (see Table A6 in the Online Appendix). The result concerning the unchanged coefficients of unemployment perceptions on policy support in turn reveals a much more pronounced variation in the perceptions at the individual level compared to the cross-country variation.

## Impact of unemployment perceptions by country performances

This section took a step further by analysing how the national context influences the role of unemployment perceptions in shaping attitudes. I tested whether the relationship between the perceptions and support for an

EU-wide social policy is stronger in countries with better economic and welfare performances (H4).

Table 2 displays the results of random intercept models (Columns 1 and 2), random slope models (Columns 3 and 4), and two-step modelling (Columns 5 and 6).<sup>5</sup> For better interpretation of the results, values of the contextual factors were standardised in all models. Panel (a) shows that, on average, the higher national unemployment rate was perceived by individuals, the more likely their support for an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme. The results were highly consistent across different models. Further, the positive coefficient of the perceived unemployment rate increased by

<sup>5</sup>In each of the random slope models, slopes were estimated only for the perception indicator used in the respective cross-level interaction. Results were quite robust to including slopes for further individual-level covariates.

0.2 percentage points as national welfare efficiency increased by one standard deviation (SD) or national unemployment rate decreased by one SD. However, the interaction terms were only significant in the random intercept models and no more significant when utilising random slope models or two-step modelling.

Accordingly, I found no substantial differences in the role of the perceived national unemployment rate alongside contextual factors, including the actual national unemployment rate. Notably, less than 3% of all respondents perceived a national unemployment rate that was lower than the actual rate, which varied between 4% and 20% across the 18 countries.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, a majority of respondents perceived their country's unemployment rate as overly high, that is, at least 10 percentage points higher than its actual value (for results on the distribution of misperceptions in each country, see Figure A1 in the Online Appendix). This should clarify my finding that the extent of the actual unemployment rate could not influence the role of the perceived unemployment rate in shaping attitudes. Additional analysis shows similar results when accounting for individual misperceptions of national unemployment rate (see Table A7 in the Online Appendix).

Panel (b) of Table 2 shows that individuals who perceived a lower standard of living for the unemployed in their country were on average more likely to support an EU-wide minimum income scheme, and this finding held for all different models. In the random intercept models, the size of the coefficient increased by 0.2 percentage points (significant at 10%-level) as national welfare efficiency increased by one SD, and increased significantly by 0.4 percentage points as national unemployment rate decreased by one SD. The interaction term for national welfare efficiency turned insignificant with random slope or two-step modelling. In contrast, the interaction term for national unemployment rate remained significant in the random slope model. Though being again insignificant with two-step modelling, the direction and size of the coefficient were consistent across all models.

In summary, the perceived living standard of the unemployed tend to influence support for an EU minimum income scheme differently alongside national unemployment rate as expected. The results of random intercept and random slope models indicate that the impact of the perception on the attitudes is stronger in countries with a lower unemployment rate. However, considering the results of all different models, I found no strong evidence of systematic changes in the role of

unemployment perceptions alongside objective contextual factors. Therefore, my last hypothesis that perceptions regarding unemployment have a stronger impact in countries with better economic and welfare performances was not empirically supported. For analysing attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy, the findings suggest that unemployment perceptions play a role that could be influenced to a rather limited extent by national economic and welfare indicators.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed to gain a better understanding of public opinion on an EU-wide social policy that would guarantee a minimum standard of living for the poor, which targets inequality between European countries for reaching a social Europe. Using data for 18 European countries from the ESS and Eurostat in 2016, this article contributed to the literature by investigating the different roles of individual perceptions regarding unemployment and objective national economic and welfare conditions.

Theoretically, this paper applied a theoretical framework that addresses the interplay of economic self-interest, ideology, and perceptions of the national context for explaining demand for redistribution. Specifically, I explored how perceptions of the national unemployment rate and the living conditions of the unemployed in the country influence attitudes towards an EU-wide social policy targeting unemployed Europeans together with other groups at risk of poverty. Further, I investigated the extent to which the role of these unemployment perceptions in shaping attitudes is influenced by individuals' ideological motivations and by national context on economic and welfare performances.

The empirical results confirmed my overall assumption regarding the conditions under which EU citizens would support an EU-wide social policy. First, individuals in countries with poor economic and welfare performances were more likely to support an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme. Second, the higher the unemployment rate or the worse the living standard of the unemployed in the country was perceived by individuals, the more likely their support. Additionally, the impact of the perceived living standard of the unemployed was stronger among individuals from countries with a lower unemployment rate. However, there was no strong evidence of a systematic influence of objective country performances on the relationship between unemployment perceptions and support for an EU minimum income scheme. The role of unemployment perceptions in shaping support for the policy measure remained relatively consistent across national contexts.

<sup>6</sup>Given that individuals' perceptions of national unemployment rate were originally collected in categories, as mentioned in the previous section, it was only possible to roughly calculate their misperceptions.



In contrast, the impact of unemployment perceptions on support for the policy measure was—in line with my expectation—particularly strong for individuals with non-egalitarian values or a right-leaning ideology. This indicates a damping effect of egalitarianism and equivalent ideologies on the role of the perceptions, confirming a conflict of interest between economic self-interest and ideology also at the EU-level for shaping the attitudes.

Methodologically, this paper added to cross-country literature that analysed contextual effects using multilevel modelling. In particular, random slope models are widely used instead of random intercept models for testing cross-level interactions. This yet causes reliability problems regarding statistical inferences given a small sample size at the country level. This paper addressed this issue by including two-step modelling in addition to random intercept and random slope models to obtain robust conclusions regarding cross-level interactions between individual perceptions and national contextual factors.

Similar to previous studies, this research utilised secondary data and concentrated on the introduction of an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme as a representative example of the EU's intervention in the social policy domain. Due to the limitations of existing data, it is difficult to study the role of unemployment perceptions and other determinants in explaining attitudes towards different dimensions regarding redistribution at the EU-level, or towards other possible policy measures that tackle poverty within the EU. This invites further research using primary data to gain a more thorough understanding of public opinion on the EU's intervention in social policy as a whole.

Despite the data limitations, the findings of this paper provide important policy implications. First, citizens who live in, or believe that they live in, countries with poor economic and welfare conditions exhibit stronger support for an EU-wide social policy. Consistent with previous literature (e.g., Baute & Meuleman, 2020), this finding reveals a strong economic self-interest motivation behind it. However, it is member states in good economic conditions that would be required to contribute more financially to the policy measure, from which their citizens possibly do not directly benefit. This dilemma may consequently hinder social integration within the EU in terms of promoting redistribution between member states. Nevertheless, and more importantly, my findings provide novel evidence that Europeans with egalitarian values tend to support the policy measure generally, and their perceptions regarding unemployment are thus much less relevant for their attitudes. This explains the result that in total two thirds of Europeans were in favour of an EU-wide minimum income benefit scheme, suggesting a high

level of EU solidarity. The finding is contradictory to previous research that found relatively low support across countries for the EU to join in the decision-making on providing social welfare (e.g., Beaudonnet, 2013). This indicates different public opinion on different dimensions of the EU's intervention in social policy, which should be taken into consideration in future debates on fostering integration within the EU. The overall support for an EU-wide minimum income scheme in turn reveals a high perceived legitimacy for introducing social policy that addresses poverty in the EU directly.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The individual-level data that support the findings of this study are openly available in ESS Data Portal at <https://doi.org/10.21338/NSD-ESS8-2016>. The country-level data stem from Eurostat at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>.

## ORCID

Hequn Wang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7894-2642>

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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