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Understanding European Public Opinion: How Education Affects Attitudes Towards Social Spending in the EU

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Universiteit
Leiden

**UNDERSTANDING EUROPEAN PUBLIC
OPINION: HOW EDUCATION AFFECTS
ATTITUDES TOWARDS SOCIAL SPENDING
IN THE EU**

THESIS

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the MSc Public
Administration, International and European Governance

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ABSTRACT:

At the times, when welfare states across the European Union are facing unprecedented pressures, Social Europe has gained a momentum. In view of societal transformations, such as the aging of European societies, or the increasing trends towards automation and robotisation of jobs, that threat medium-term employment opportunities for national workers (European Union 2020), national welfare states are challenged by the increasing cost of maintaining welfare states at the national level. While education provides with milestones of personal and profesional development, the ongoing societal transformations might put in jeopardy the individual European citizens' goals and life ambitions. Even though there has been extensive literatura on how education shapes attitudes towards social provisions at a national level, no studies have yet addressed its impacto on the social policies of the European Union. This thesis aims to fill this gap. Through quantitative analysis, it concludes that having more education decreases support for social spending. It demonstrates that older people and females are more likely to support social spending. No other interaction effects have been discovered.

Keywords: budget preference, social affairs, education, Social Europe, public opinion, Eurobarometer

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I. Introduction

“The people of Europe are calling precisely for opportunity and protection.” – Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, at the Porto Social Summit

In May 2021, presidents and prime ministers from among the EU member states gathered in the Portuguese city of Porto together with social partners and civil society representatives to further confirm their commitment with the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the rulebook through which the European Commission plans to achieve fairer, more well-functioning labour markets and stronger welfare systems for the benefit of all Europeans. With the pledge not to leave a single European behind, European leaders discussed the implementation of a European social policy agenda in the upcoming decade. The summit addressed, mainly, three policy areas: work and employment, skills and innovation, and welfare state and social protection (Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2021).

The organisation of a high-level summit in Porto, as well as the remarks expressed by the President of the European Commission, that have been used to start this thesis, illustrate the existence of both political and civil compliance to further implement the Social Pillar of the European Union. The ongoing health crisis, unprecedented in the EU, has accentuated civil demands for social policy that serves as a fundamental element for any society to recover. However, the ideas behind the European Social Pillar bear a far stronger and far-reaching impact than that of recovery from the ongoing health crisis. Their implementation has a broader meaning: it will strengthen the Union's drive towards a digital, green and fair transition in the upcoming decades and it will be able to contribute to achieving upward social and economic convergence and addressing the demographic challenges. Civil calls for social protection are of utmost relevance to the European policymaking. The importance of public opinion in democracy is grounded on the fact that people are, in a way, the ultimate source of political legitimacy. At all times, government officials have to take public opinion into account during policymaking processes in the European Union, a democratic organisation where public opinion remains a paramount driver of European policy, particularly in the European parliament. One of the purposes of public opinion in a democratic society is to inform policymakers in order to make decisions that are close to the wishes of the people. In that sense, opinion polls are often identified as reliable mechanisms for presenting the views of civil society

to lawmakers. Hence why, public opinion -and polling- are paramount to ensuring democratic governance. Given the fact that the implementation of Social Europe might imply further EU integration, at the domestic level the politization of the issue is expected, as mass public minds integration as long as it affects issues related to national sovereignty, collective identities or redistribution (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2016). The enhancement of European Parliament's powers, in particular regarding the Union's budget, has placed a growing emphasis on mass politics. It is thus relevant to identify what are the drivers of public opinion in the European Union towards EU policymaking and integration. More specifically, the European Union budget is meant to provide support on things that matter for Europeans, thus placing significant relevance on EU citizens' preferences towards supranational policies.

Yet, there are yet no empirical studies exploring systematically the possibility that the level of education and spending preferences at the EU-level are linked. Most of the existing research on the topic focuses exclusively on the domestic level. There is an evident gap in literature addressing attitudes towards European social spending. The lack of knowledge and academic studies have consequently motivated this thesis. At an age when societal changes and the COVID-19 pandemic have brought forward the need for social provisions in the Union, understanding the drivers of budget preferences is of particular interest. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to identify the impact of education -more specifically the level of education achieved- in the formation of specific preferences towards social expenditure at a supranational level. Preferences towards social spending are used as an indicator of support towards further social policies at the EU-level, assuming that budget spending ensures the funding of EU policies and programs drawing from its political priorities and legal obligations. Therefore, in order to assess the aforementioned impact, this thesis is set out to respond to the following research question: *to what extent does the level of education determine favourable attitudes towards more social spending in the EU budget?*

Employing data from the Eurobarometer, this thesis investigates whether education and budget preferences for social expenditure are somehow related. Beyond this, the thesis aims to identify other demographic confounding variables that explain support for social provisions at the supranational level in Europe. Furthermore, this thesis wishes to test theoretical assumptions regarding the support for welfare provisions that have not been tested yet on the supranational level. Nonetheless, the results seem to fall in line with

traditional arguments based upon the self-interest of individuals. Therefore, models have indicated that longer periods of continuous education reduce the likelihood of having preference for social spending in the EU budget.

In the course of the analysis, surprising outcomes have been discovered: (1) more education does not equal more understanding of the EU, most likely given the variety of fields of study among the participants of the survey. This information has not been provided by the survey; (2) Nation-state performance regarding provision of public services explains support for supranational provision of social services; (3) the better an individual's job expectations are, the less likely it is he or she will support social provisions at the EU level. Nonetheless, education appears not to have any effect on this relationship. In general terms, more education tends to reinforce self-interest of individuals at the supranational level as well.

The thesis is structured in the way that is going to be outlined next. The first section outlines the existing literature on European social policy and the impact of education in the formation of public preferences, in particular towards social provision at both the domestic and the supranational level. Afterwards, the thesis lays out theoretical expectations on the relationship between more years spent studying and individual preferences on social spending in EU budget. Later on, we empirically test the aforementioned relationship and, finally, we summarise concluding remarks of this study in the conclusion.

II. Literature review

The process of building a Social Europe has received extensive attention since the establishment of the European Community through the Treaty of Rome, in 1957. The policy consequences of European integration have caught the attention of researchers and scholars ever since, who have extensively analysed the impacts and restrictions placed upon national welfare systems by European integration, and its consequences to social policymaking. Although welfare policies remain essentially national competences, the EU has, throughout the years and successive waves of integration, strengthened its role in the social field, by developing an array of instruments, ranging from financial support to benchmarking. Social justice and cohesion are amongst the objectives of the Union, as enshrined in its Treaty (European Union, 1992). A strong and effective Social Europe is paramount to the concomitant pursuit of economic growth and integration and, on the one hand, and social cohesion on the other.

The European economic and sovereign debt crisis raised inequality between and within member states and triggered concerns on the social dimension of the European project. The crisis encouraged a debate amongst scholars and policymakers on whether the EU should take balance out the negative consequences of deeper market integration and take responsibility for the living standards of European citizens. In that regard, Social Europe embodies an opportunity to assist member states and protect European citizens from the ongoing societal transformations, such as the ageing population, the immigration trends, globalisation, or digitalisation, and its potential negative impacts. The transnational nature of the aforementioned pressures demands a supranational multi-level approach. Additionally, bearing in mind the growing Euroscepticism, it has been suggested that amending the social fallout of the crisis sets up a window of opportunity for the European Union to enhance the support of its citizens through the promotion of social convergence across member states.

The greater role of Europe as a provider of social protection, however, will depend significantly on public legitimacy, which will shape its future provisions. Surprisingly, individual attitudes towards a Social Europe have received relatively little attention from academia. Given the fact that this study is set out to analyse the relationship between education and individual support towards a more Social Europe, paramount studies on this topic, as well as on attitudes towards European and national welfare policies, have been reviewed. Many theories have been suggested to describe and explain the

determinants of public attitudes. However, overall, these studies have highlighted the relevance of self-interest explanations to public attitudes towards welfare state schemes and social provisions, either European or nation-wise. Although the literature presents self-interest in a variety of contexts, this research study will primarily focus on its application in relation to education and Social Europe.

In order to better define the theoretical framework that embraces my research, I will first provide a literature review of the origins and main tools of the EU in the social policy field, as well as a review of the most relevant literature on individual attitudes towards welfare state at a national level and a supranational Social Europe.

2.1 The Social Europe: establishment and development

The establishment of the European Community in 1957 signalled the commencement of social policy debates at a supranational level. During the early stages of the process of European integration, the Social Europe consisted, exclusively, on the promotion of free movement of workers across member states (Falkner, 2009). The Treaty of Rome (1957) already recognised EU citizens access to the social security systems of other member states and included the “transferability of already-earned social security rights” between member states (Baute, et al., 2017, p. 5). Even nowadays, Daly (2017, p. 95) suggests that “the rights of migrant workers are the closest the EU comes to having a social policy”. Social protection underpins the essence of Social Europe, as it is the only field where the EU has been granted an enforceable set of social entitlements that allow migrant workers from other member states have the same rights and social prerogatives than national workers. Beyond the rights of workers, the European Union has expressed a more far-reaching array of policy goals that evolve around health and safety at work, the rights of workers broadly, gender equality, employment levels and conditions. The entry in force of the Lisbon strategy, in 2000, extended EU’s social policy priorities to poverty and social exclusion, pensions and health and social care have been included to EU’s policy concerns (Daly, 2017, p. 95). Previously to the Lisbon agreement, the EU did not have, for a long time, any direct or explicit competences to draft legislative proposals on social policy. Falkner (2009) posits that only through the subsidiarity principle, European intervention on social policymaking was allowed, whenever it was an issue related to market integration. In spite of the difficulties of creating a Social Europe, presently EU social action resumes in three paramount areas: a regulative dimension (directives), a distributive dimension, which enables the establishment of the

European Social Fund, and, finally, the so-called Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which promotes mutual learning through benchmarking strategies (Falkner, 2009; Fernandes & Rinaldi, 2016).

Throughout the years, as a result of the growing interdependence between the economic and social spheres of European integration, the EU has gradually increased its involvement in social policymaking, thus actively shaping social welfare provisions within member states and ensuring their sustainability and efficiency (Gerrits, 2015; Fernandes & Rinaldi, 2016). Some scholars argue that a more proactive role of the EU in the social policy field constitutes an opportunity to expand public legitimacy for European integration (Fernandes & Maslauskaitė 2013). Moreover, taking into account the current legitimacy shortcomings of European policymaking, and in light of the increasingly influential Euroscepticism and citizen indifference, the enhancement of European social provisions could arguably reduce accountability gaps in European policymaking and, by extension, increase the legitimacy of the European policy cycle (Baute et al., 2017). Other authors have questioned, however, the validity of such assumption, emphasising that the European project is elite-driven: “the European project is, by and large, a project of the political elites and less a project of the wider societies” (Mau, 2005, p. 78). Be as it may, the European Union constitutes a unique space where politics can tackle far-reaching societal and economic transformation through policies both at the national level and the EU-level (Burgoon, 2009).

EU social action is scattered across different policy domains and is, according to Daly (2017, p. 95), “shallow” wherever the competences and influence of member states are more solid. Taking national welfare state schemes as starting point, it is possible to suggest that social policy has traditionally entailed the following policies: “securing the rights of workers, guaranteeing income security, improving the well-being of families and children, and addressing poverty and material deprivation” (Daly, 2017, p. 95). When addressing European social policy, nonetheless, Martinsen and Vollaard (2014, p. 680) have identified two dimensions of Social Europe:

(1) the protection and extension of social rights by means of positive integration and market correcting/restricting policies, and (2) the intervention in national social policies to enforce the market and promote free movement, free competition and non-discrimination. Whereas the imperatives of market correction and non-discrimination may establish (European) social rights,

market enforcing and non-discrimination tend to weaken the spatial boundaries of the welfare state and challenge the traditional allocation principles for social sharing.

To date, besides the social structural funds and the Common Agricultural Policy, no other legislation has been adopted that “involves actual social transfers to the citizens of the EU, and such transfers after all constitute the core of social policy” (De Swaan, 1992, p. 568). Hence why, the European Union, and the Commission in particular, have had to embrace certain creativity to address its social policy concerns, mostly by means of ‘soft methods’ encompassing reflexive learning and creative adaptation. As a result, the European Union has been actively promoting emerging social policy concepts and notions, such as “activation”, “social exclusion”, “gender mainstreaming”, reconciliation of work and family life, civil dialogue, social investment, social innovation and “active inclusion” (Daly, 2017, p. 102). In addition, various studies have addressed the relationship between national welfare schemes and EU social provisions. Burgoon (2009) speculates on how domestic-level social policy impacts public support for supranational EU-level social assistance, and vice versa. From a multi-level governance standpoint, his research bears significant interest as it allows to determine the impact of certain activities in one level of policymaking on another. His conclusion sheds light on the future of a Social Europe and its public legitimacy and accountability. Again, Burgoon (2009, p. 429) suggests that national and EU levels of social provision are considered by citizens as “imperfect substitutes” and that, interestingly, the more generous national welfare schemes are, the lesser individual support for EU-level provisions.

Although some literature focuses on whether welfare issues should be subject to EU decision making, this study will focus on how individual characteristics, specifically different levels of education, shape support for EU-level social policies.

2.2 Literature on individual-level attitudes towards welfare and Social Europe

Several studies measure attitudes towards welfare state policies and, less commonly, on EU-level social policies through individual-level variables. Measuring public support to policymaking, in particular in the social field, is particularly relevant to the legitimacy of social provisions, such as redistribution schemes or unemployment subsidies. Moreover, in liberal democratic systems, policymaking should be ideally directed by public opinion, expressed through elections, other kind of votes or surveys,

among others. Yet if studies assessing individual-level attitudes towards social policy, namely welfare state, are traditional in different academic fields, measurement of individual preferences regarding EU-level social policymaking have remained, to a significant extent, untested to date. Hence why, this study aims at assessing what, if any, is the relationship between educational level and favourable attitudes towards a Social Europe.

Scholars and researchers have generally based their studies on two theoretical assumptions to explain attitudes towards a particular policy field or policy instrument. On the one hand, one finds the rational choice theory, that posits that attitudes are influenced by self-interest, while on the other hand, the explanatory variable is political ideology (Gabel, 1998). However, in most of the cases, individual attitudes towards social provisions result from the interplay between the different dimensions highlighted by Roosma, van Oorschot and Gelissen (2014, p. 200) in their study. These are “attitudes about what people believe the welfare state should do, and attitudes towards its actual performance”. The relationship between both dimensions is not linear, given the fact that individuals have combinations of attitudes, in which motivations of self-interest and ideological background are equally important. It has been suggested that, regarding social policy, the European Union has a tendency towards liberal and corporatist approaches (Daly, 2017).

From an individual-level standpoint, different studies have focused on explaining support to welfare policies from the perspective of political ideologies. It has been suggested that negative stereotypes of social benefits recipients, traditionally underpinned by Conservative or Liberal parties, diminish support for welfare provisions. For instance, Likki and Staerklé (2015) observed the impact of cultural beliefs on public support for welfare systems. They concluded that “dependency culture beliefs were associated with more negative attitudes toward welfare policies in favour of groups traditionally considered undeserving (the unemployed), but also toward policies in favour of deserving groups (the sick and the old)” (Likki & Staerklé, 2015, p. 147). Interestingly, Likki and Staerklé also point out that the influence of beliefs varied across states, thus highlighting the paramount importance of having into account shared social representations. Scharpf (2000) builds up on this assumption when arguing that welfare states rely on shared identities, which allow for the provision of common goods and services. In that regard, Scharpf (2000, p. 12) concludes that social policies demand “a collectivity in which the

identification of members with the group is sufficiently strong to override the decisive interests of subgroups in cases of conflict”. Therefore, a common European identity might be arguable a prerequisite to favourable attitudes towards EU-level social policy. Although it is implied that the EU lacks such common identity (Mau, 2005, p. 77), this study hypothesises that long-term education in the European Union might, through socialization, foster a feeling of “being European”. However, no relevant research on this topic has been identified and it is not possible to validate this hypothesis at the moment.

When considering attitudes of public support towards social spending in the European Union, one discovers that academia has not paid the attention one believes it deserves. Significantly, Baute et al. (2017, p. 2) consider the measurement of citizens’ attitudes towards Social Europe “the Achilles’ heel of existing research”. Taking into account that most of the existing research assesses these attitudes by paying attention to a single dimension, Baute et al. (2017) propose a multidimensional measurement of attitudes towards Social Europe and conclude that, out of the different dimensions of Social Europe, “member-state solidarity is clearly the primary aspect in public opinion” (Baute et al., 2017, p. 17). Hence why, for the purpose of comprehensively measuring attitudes towards Social Europe they suggest taking into account the following dimensions: member-state solidarity, European social citizenship and the European social security system (Baute et al., 2017, p. 17).

On a similar note, a study on public attitudes towards a European minimum income benefit focuses, once again, on the interplay between citizens expectations and welfare state performance to explain public support to this specific tool of social provision (Baute & Meuleman, 2020). The results of their study show that individual expectations, as well as welfare state generosity and subjective performance assessments are pivotal elements to take into account when describing the determinants of Europeans’ support to the establishment of an EMI (Baute & Meuleman, 2020, p. 416). Public attitudes are determined through subjective assessments of costs and benefits of a particular policy, in this case an EMI. Baute & Meuleman (2020, p. 416) summarize the notion as follows: “if citizens expect that ‘more Europe’ will increase social protection levels, the establishment of an EMI is considered more attractive”. Similarly, in alignment with the self-interest standpoint, Shivo and Uusitalo (1995) expect high-income groups to have non-favourable attitudes towards social provision policies and welfare state schemes, given the fact they are subject to a higher tax burden and unlikely beneficiaries of such policies. In line with

this assumption, one believes that national welfare institutional arrangements are determining in shaping individual attitudes towards a common European welfare policy. Individual support to shifting the responsibility on social policy to the European level will depend on to what extent national populations feel benefited or affected by this process. Therefore, support for the Europeanization of welfare systems is more likely to happen “if electorates expect – because of their relative position or the organisational features of their national welfare systems – an upward harmonisation” (Mau, 2005, p. 78). Consequently, this study argues that the more substantial and generous national welfare arrangements are, the less likely citizens will support a more Social Europe. With regards to education, one hypothesises that lower-educated citizens will have less capacity to understand the effects of such shift from national welfare schemes to a European welfare provision and, thus, will tend towards fewer support.

2.3 The relationship between education and support to social policy

With regards to the specific relationship between the level of education and public support towards EU social policymaking, there is not enough research on the topic, albeit its paramount importance in determining individual beliefs and shaping “popular expectations and attitudes towards policymaking” (Busemeyer, 2017, p. 1). Nonetheless, academia has paid extensive attention to the relationship between education and public attitudes towards social provision at a national level. Findings have found both negative and positive relationships. From a self-interest perspective, it has been suggested that educated people tend to have better job market positions and lower chances of being unemployed, and consequently, they have less need for social provision or welfare policies (Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989; Pfeifer, 2009). Svallfors (2003) suggests that the labour market position has a negative relationship to support towards WS. More specifically, the stronger one’s position in the labour market, the less likely he or she will support state social protection, and vice versa. Busemeyer (2017) argues that individuals who funded their education from their own pockets, and have thus incurred in significant student debt, are more likely to support a deregulated labour market (with less social provisions) to receive higher salaries and, consequently, reward their financial efforts.

On the other side, Andress and Heien (2001, p. 341) suggest that education might reinforce the perception that individuals’ success and achievement should be rewarded and, therefore, educated people might associate welfare provisions to the encouragement

of people to stay on benefits rather than seek work (Likki & Staerklé, 2015, p. 138). On the other hand, Pfeifer (2009, p. 119) argues that “due to their longer socialization according to egalitarian values”, might actually be more supportive of welfare state and, by extension, of social provisions. On an interesting note, Hasenfeld and Rafferty research seems to conclude that the relationship between education and support to welfare provisions is a rather negative one. Their research suggests that educated people tend to exhibit higher sophistication by displaying “greater support to abstract democratic values but are not more willing to apply those principles to specific situations” (Jackman & Muha, 1984, p. 753, as cited in Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989). Hence why, it is argued that “education results in greater ideological sophistication in justifying dominant groups’ position, and since education is also an intrinsic component of socioeconomic standing, it reinforces attitudes supporting social status interests” (Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989, p. 1031). Following the purposes of this research and building up from the assumption laid out by Hasenfeld and Rafferty, one suggests that educated citizens would tend to support European welfare benefits. Not only because they might have the ability to understand the impact of EU-level social policies on their status, or due to their higher opportunities to work abroad and, therefore, benefit from shared European welfare provisions across member states.

In conclusion, research studies regarding the relationship between education and welfare support seem to rely considerably on self-interest assumptions (Andress & Heien, 2001; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989; Jæger, 2006; Pfeifer, 2009; Shivo & Uusitalo, 1995; Svallfors, 2003; Likki & Staerklé, 2015; Busemeyer, 2017).

2.4. Social Policy at EU-Level: Politization of EU integration

Postfunctionalism suggests that the more issues were placed at an EU level, the larger attention mass publics would place on EU decision-making processes (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). National referenda are intrinsically related to politization (Kriesi, 2016), which is driven by the emphasis on cultural cleavages (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). As a result, mobilization of mass publics has constrained EU integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). The emergence and mobilization of identity politics limits and reduces any room for compromise at a European level and, thus, domestic politics pose a downward pressure on integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

European integration is defined as a system of differentiated integration, with either vertical or horizontal integration (Schimmelfennig, et al., 2015). Vertical integration is determined by the level of centralization of decision-making processes, whether they are exclusive of the EU or of member states. Instead, horizontal integration depends on the uniform implementation of policies in many member states (Schimmelfennig, et al., 2015). Integration and politization are inter-related and interdependent concepts. Politization actively shapes current trends of European differentiated integration (Schimmelfennig, et al., 2015), as well as further integration fosters politization of EU policymaking processes (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2016). Schimmelfennig, Leuffen and Rittberger (2015) suggest that politization triggers horizontal integration, whereas interdependence generates vertical integration. European integration is mainly developed through vertical means, although in recent decades horizontal integration has grown considerably (Schimmelfennig, et al., 2015). National ‘opt-outs’ in the Schengen Area or the Eurozone are representative examples of the latter (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2016).

III. Theoretical framework and hypothesis

Welfare states across the European Union are facing unprecedented pressures, both of exogenous and endogenous nature. In view of societal transformations, such as the aging of European societies, or the increasing trends towards automation and robotisation of jobs, that threaten medium-term employment opportunities for national workers (European Union 2020), national welfare states are challenged by the increasing cost of maintaining welfare states at the national level. Globalization processes have also further challenged welfare states and reduced the capacity of states to effectively tax companies' benefits. As businesses have globalised their services, they have shifted their incomes from high to low-taxed jurisdictions (Mintz, 1999). This has also raised questions on how to fund welfare states at a national level besides workers contributions. The potential deficit of contributors that European welfare states could face in the upcoming decades, together with the undermined capacity of states to tax globalised activities, challenges welfare state sustainability: without enough people capable of contributing to the system, European states will not be able to provide many of the social services that a welfare state entails, such as pensions.

Given the nature of the challenges that national welfare states face, it is arguable that the dysfunctions created by technological changes and globalization should be addressed from a European perspective. The increasing number of studies on European social policies highlight the growing relevance of social policymaking at a supranational level. In addition, the ongoing health crisis and the consequent economic crisis could reinforce the aforementioned pressures on welfare states, thus strengthening the relevance of a more social Europe. This phenomenon has increased the number of literatures exploring the challenges and obstacles of social policymaking at the European level, as well as its opportunities, implementation and legitimacy. Thus, academia and researchers have shown recent interest in the governance of European welfare and social. However, little attention has been paid amongst previous studies to the impact of education on individual attitudes towards a more social Europe, that is to say, whether there is a clear relationship between the years spent studying and favourable attitudes towards European social policymaking. Public opinion is of paramount importance in democratic governance systems such as the European Union, where the opinion of its citizens moulds its decision-making. Aiming to construct a more comprehensive understanding of the variables that determine a favourable attitude towards a more social Europe, more specifically, how

education patterns determine behaviours and attitudes towards EU-level social provision, this thesis will respond to the following research question:

To what extent does the level of education determine favourable attitudes towards more social spending in the EU budget?

In order to answer the research question, I have conducted quantitative research to assess the relationship between *higher levels of education* and *preference for social expenditure in the EU budget*, as measured by the Eurobarometer across the European Union. From an individual standpoint, education is the landmark of personal and societal development. Education is generally seen as the principal source of knowledge and skills to the population, thus being responsible to a significant extent for an individual's success and life quality. To begin with, this thesis aims at testing the effect of higher levels of education in social spending preferences at the EU level. Drawing from the existing literature, it could be expected that *higher levels of education* result in more support to European social provision policies, leading to the formulation of the next hypothesis:

H1: European citizens that have higher levels of education are more likely to choose social affairs expenditure as a priority at the EU-level.

The testing of this hypothesis will allow to determine whether the relationship between education and support towards the EU social provisions has a negative or a positive nature. If evidence supports this hypothesis, the arguments of those mentioned in the literature advocating for a positive relationship will be proven right, and thus it will be possible to suggest that the more years an individual spends studying, the higher their exposure to egalitarian values, underpinned by education, will be (Pfeifer, 2009). On the contrary, if the hypothesis is proven wrong, this would mean that the degree of education alone does not explain the existence of favourable attitudes towards social provision but, instead, it should be seen as a mere mediating variable for socio-economic status and previous socialisation experiences. In that regard, some studies have argued that education tends to reinforce attitudes supporting social status interests (Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989). Hence why, at this point, it is relevant to take into account potential variable bias, given that more or less educated individuals could differ in different unobservable ways, such as family background.

On the other hand, education encourages individuals to expand their horizons and knowledge in specific areas and, hence why, there is a strong evidence that educated

citizens are more likely to care about politics (Verba & Nie, 1972). Following this causal link between education and political awareness, the first hypothesis that this thesis will test is the following:

H2: Higher levels of education lead to a better understanding of how the European Union works, which in turn increases the likelihood of choosing social affairs as a priority for EU budget.

The hypothesis is based on the assumption that educated individuals not only have a better understanding of societal and political issues but are also more likely to be informed about and critically engaged with European politics and EU-level policy initiatives. According to the aforementioned hypothesis, a longer educational experience would increase the likelihood of knowing about Social Europe and its initiatives, therefore increasing the possibility of having positive or negative attitudes towards it. Even though the confirmation of this hypothesis might not be very revealing, it is of utmost relevance to this thesis to determine whether a higher degree of education equals a better understanding of EU social policies and, by extension, moulds attitudes towards EU social policy. On the one hand, it could be the case that, having a better understanding of Social Europe, the likelihood of having favourable attitudes towards its strengthening will be higher, whereas, on the other hand, it would confirm the assumption that the lack of understanding of a particular policy issue tends to result in no attitudes or in its rejection by public opinion.

On a different note, some academic literature suggests that education is perceived as a source of social progress, economic wealth and political awareness. In a sum up, education enhances the capacity of individuals to secure a better economic and social status. Acknowledging that more educated people are more likely to secure a better position in the labour market, and assuming that, as a result of their good labour prospects, they are more likely to work in a different EU member state. This assumption challenges the self-interested argument stated in the literature, which suggests that the stronger an individual's position is in the labour market, the less need for social provision, either at a national or supranational level (Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989; Svallfors, 2003; Pfeifer, 2009). In order to challenge the aforementioned standpoint, this thesis has posited the following hypothesis:

H3: A higher level of education leads to better job situation expectations, which in turn reduces the likelihood of choosing social affairs expenditure as a priority at the EU-level.

The confirmation of the aforementioned hypothesis would confirm that better labour prospects at a European level result in low support to supranational social policies, given the lack of need for social protection. On the contrary, this thesis suggests that, at a European level, a good labour position could trigger the opposite effects. Thus, if the hypothesis is proven wrong, it would confirm that better labour prospects do not necessarily hinder support for social provisions, and that given European workers' mobility options, public attitudes towards European social provision have a positive relation with the prospects of working abroad, that are reinforced by higher levels of education.

In an attempt to assess the different impact of education across EU member states, this thesis aims at testing whether the relationship between *degree of education* and *support for a more Social Europe* changes depending upon several moderator variables. In an attempt to determine whether national perceptions on the rest of EU citizens alter the relationship between both variables we hypothesise the following:

H4: The relationship between higher levels of education and preference for social affairs expenditure will be weaker among individuals that believe that people in the EU do not have a lot of things in common.

This hypothesis bears significant relevance. Its confirmation would mean that individuals alter their opinion towards supranational social policies in relation to how they perceive the other citizens of the EU -which would be, potentially, the beneficiaries of such policies. If the perception that EU citizens do not have a lot of things in common reduces the relationship between higher level of education and support for a more Social Europe, it would be possible to conclude that education reinforces the belief that social provisions should be restricted to specific social groups particularly limited to the natives of his or her country. This finding would match with the arguments posed by Hasenfeld and Rafferty (1989), who argue that education reinforces the position of dominant groups. The available data, however, remains ambiguous and would require further study to determine more clear relationships. On the contrary, if the hypothesis is proven wrong, the perception of other citizens of the EU will appear to be redundant to the relation between both variables, thus confirming the main hypothesis of the thesis. Arguably, a

higher level of education might result in the acknowledgment of social, historical, political, economic differences.

Additionally, drawing from the literature, this thesis assumes that support for EU social policy varies according to the performance of national public services. Thus, it suggests the following hypothesis:

H5: The relationship between high level of education and preference for social affairs expenditure will be stronger among individuals that assess the provision of public services in his or her country as bad.

The corroboration of the above-mentioned hypothesis would mean that education increases an individual's awareness of the benefits of a more Social Europe, in particular when the performance of the nation-state is assessed negatively. If the hypothesis is proven wrong, this would mean that a negative performance of national public services hinders the relationship between education and support for Social Europe policies. At this point, once again, it would be worth assessing potential variable bias, as well as analysing the impact of controlling variables, such as income, gender, age or other relevant socio-economic conditions.

IV. Methodology

The departure point for this research has been outlined in the literature review that has identified a gap in the existing knowledge products related to the preferences and attitudes towards further social spending. While there is an abundance of domestic research, there is no empirical study focused on the preferences and attitudes of the EU. Having provided theoretical argumentation and information that has been indispensable in constructing several hypotheses, the next part seeks to introduce the methodology applied in the process of this research. The presentation of the methodology will consist of two parts. The first part will describe data used for the purpose of this research and variables measured. The second part, in its turn, will focus on the method of analysis and measuring of the variables and data discussed previously.

Data used and operationalization

In order to respond to the research question and to test different hypothesis that this thesis has set out to reply, quantitative research design has been chosen as the most suitable method.

The data gathered corresponds to the independent variable (higher levels of education) and the various potential interaction effects that might have an influence on the dependant variable (preference for social spending). In order to provide the sufficient information on both the data collection process and the variables, this chapter will proceed to introduce the concepts that have been operationalised. An operational definition consists of the following components: (1) variable being measured, (2) measure that will be used, (3) how the results of that measure will be interpreted. I will begin by providing information on the dependent variable of the research. Next, I will do likewise with the independent variable. Finally, I will introduce different variables that make up the interaction effects introduced in the theoretical framework.

Dependent variable: preference for social spending in the EU budget

The most important concept of this research is preference for social spending in the European Union budget. The EU budget is the tool that ensures that the European Union remains a prosperous and a competitive force, given that by pulling resources at a European level, member states can achieve more than they could by acting alone. The EU budget provides means to make Europe a global leader facing today's and tomorrow's

challenges. Hence why, at times when we are facing an unprecedented global health crisis, and while our societies are undertaking deep transformations related to the ageing of the population, novelties in migration trends or digitalisation of labour, many are the voices that claim for supranational and multi-level approach to social policy. Favourable public opinion is paramount to its legitimacy given the fact that the EU budget is meant to help and support EU member states in delivering in those policy fields that are more relevant for European citizens. Thus, analysing individual preferences towards spending is of the utmost importance for the democratic decision-making processes in the Union. Given that there was no direct data assessing the support to Social Europe, preference for social spending has been used as a proxy variable. Taking all the above mentioned into account, the variable preference for social spending is an approximation to individual preferences for spending at a supra-national level that draws on a number of surveys elaborated by the Eurobarometer. Respondents were asked “on which of the following would you like you budget to be spent firstly?”. Respondents had a range of 15 different answers out of which this thesis has exclusively focused on answer number 14, which is “Employment social affairs and public health”. For that reason, the variable was transformed into a binary variable that assesses whether the respondent had a preference for spending in social policy or not. In this variable the value “0” means no preference while the value “1” implies preference for social spending. This would allow a clear understanding of the empirical analysis.

Independent variable: level of education

The second relevant concept related to the independent variable is the level of education. The variable measures the age at which respondents dropped their full-time education programmes. Once again, the data has been taken from a survey of the Eurobarometer. Respondents were asked “How old were you when you stopped full time education?”. In order to facilitate the interpretation of the results of the interaction models, the variable has been recorded. Its scores indicate the age at which respondents dropped full-time education. The value “0”, which meant “Still studying”, has been recorded to show the actual age of respondents.

Interaction effects

Additionally to the already introduced variables, there are some other variables, used in the second, third, fourth and fifth hypotheses, that will probe the mechanisms and

reveal possible interaction effects on the causal relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable.

The variable “Age” measures the length of time that the respondent has lived; therefore, the higher the score of the variable is the older the respondent is. The variable “Assessment of public services provision” measures the extent to which the respondents are satisfied with the amount and quality of public services provided by the government of their country, either directly through public sector agencies. The respondents assessed the provision of public services in their countries as “Very good”, “Rather good”, “Rather bad” or “Very bad”, which are marked by the values “1”, “2”, “3” and “4”, respectively. Thus, the higher the value, the worse the assessment of public services provision.

The variable “Understanding of the EU” is an approximation to the individual perception of respondents of their capacity to be knowledgeably aware of the inner workings of the European Union. Respondents were asked if they agreed with the following statement: “I understand how the EU works”. The scores of the variable indicate the extent to which the respondent agree or disagree with this statement. Total agreement is marked with 1, whereas total disagreement is represented by the score 4.

The variable “Job expectations” refers to the expected situation of each of the respondents in the labour market in the next 12 months, which has been marked as “Better”, “Worse” or “Same”. The variable “Belief that people in the EU share a lot of things” deals with the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with the statement “People in the EU have a lot of things in common”. Again, total agreement is marked with 1, whereas total disagreement is represented by the score 4. Finally, the variable “Gender” deals with the identification of the respondent with either of the two sexes: either male or female.

Method of analysis

In order to infer causal relationships between the independent and dependent variables, the main method of analysis used in this thesis will be regression analysis. In the hypothesis that were testing mediation effects, Baron and Kenny method and the Bootstrapping method have also been used.

V. Empirical analysis

Once the data from the Eurobarometer was collected and recoded, I have continued with the empirical analysis. To begin with it, I have tested the correlation between the independent variable “Education” and the dependent variable “Preference for social spending”. Afterwards, I have proceeded to the analysis of more complex models to probe the relationship between my dependent and independent variables and to discover possible interaction effects.

The results of the first hypothesis are the following:

Table 1. Regressions coefficients for the impact of the independent variable on Budget Preference

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Budget preference	
Education	-0.021	*** (0.002)
Age	0.004	*** (0.001)
Gender	0.270	*** (0.029)
Constant	-1.122	*** (0.085)
Observations	23,775	
Log Likelihood	-14,223.080	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	28,454.170	
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

The results of this model show a negative relationship between preference for social spending in the EU budget and education. The model indicates that more education decreases the preference for social spending. This appears to confirm previous research studies that rely on self-interest assumptions when analysing the relationship between education and support for social provisions. In doing so, this thesis contributes to current literature by identifying self-interest behaviour at a supranational level in the EU. Interestingly, the negative link between education and social preference is not altered after two likely confounding variables are introduced in the model.

When included, the model shows a positive relationship between both age and gender and preference for social spending, suggesting that older people and women are more likely to have the aforementioned budget preference, respectively. Evidence seems to confirm, once again, existing literature based on self-interested assumptions. Both demographic groups -in particular the elderly- are more likely to be beneficiaries of social provisions,

including pensions, which could explain the reasons why they are more likely to support social spending in the EU budget.

Moving on to the second hypothesis, the following results have been demonstrated through the Baron & Kenny method. The model is summarised as follows:

Table 2. Baron & Kenny method coefficients for the mediation effect of understanding of the EU

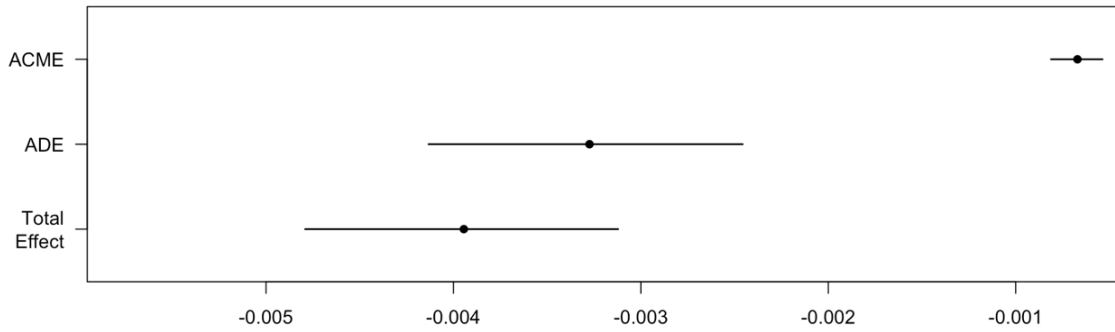
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Budget preference (1)	Understand (2)	Budget preference (3)
Understand			-0.039*** (0.004)
Education	-0.004*** (0.0004)	0.017*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.0004)
Constant	0.371*** (0.009)	2.398*** (0.017)	0.464*** (0.013)
Observations	23,775	23,170	23,170
R ²	0.003	0.020	0.008
Adjusted R ²	0.003	0.020	0.008
Residual Std. Error	0.453 (df = 23773)	0.800 (df = 23168)	0.452 (df = 23167)
F Statistic	81.968*** (df = 1; 23773)	479.644*** (df = 1; 23168)	95.730*** (df = 2; 23167)

Note:

* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

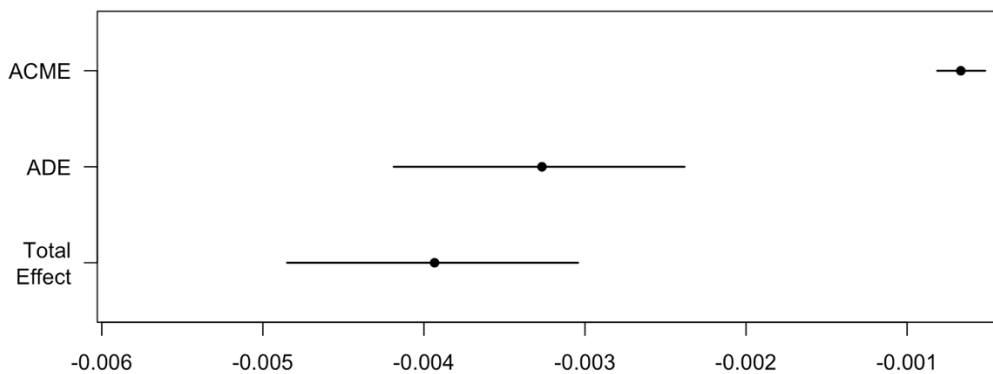
We find that the total effect model shows a negative relationship between education and preference for social spending. As expected, the conducted Path A model reveals that respondents with more education have a better understanding of how the EU works. The Path B model then demonstrates that understanding of how the EU works decreases preference for social spending in the EU budget when controlling for education. Consequently, the test indicates that people that understand how the EU works less are more likely to have this spending preference. Finally, preference for social spending at a EU-level appears to have a negative relationship with education when controlling for understanding of the EU, thus confirming the previous model, which suggested that education decreases preference for social spending. Consequently, it is possible to argue that the understanding of how the EU works does not mediate the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. However, this method alone does not allow for a formal test of the indirect effect, so it is not clear whether the change in this relationship is truly meaningful. Hence why, the Bootstrapping method has been used in addition to formally test the significance of the mediation effect.

Table 3. Mediation analysis of understanding of the EU using Bootstrapping



The Bootstrapping mediation analysis has provided this research with Average Causal Mediation Effects (ACME), as well as Average Direct Effects (ADE). The latter represents the combination of the direct and indirect effects. In this case the ACME measures the indirect effect of the mediation variable, that is to say, its total effects minus its direct effect. Consequently, this value shows whether the mediation effect is significant or not. The Causal Mediation Analysis model demonstrates that the understanding of the EU has no direct effect on the relationship between education and budget preferences. When running a nonparametric Bootstrapping analysis, the results confirm the nonexistence of a mediation effect of understanding on the relationship between education and preference, as the following plot illustrates:

Table 4. Mediation analysis of understanding of the EU using Nonparametric Bootstrapping



With regards to the third hypothesis, I have once again conducted analysis using the Baron & Kenny method in order to identify the mediation effect of the variable “Understanding of the EU.” The results of the different paths of mediation are summarized in the following table:

Table 5. Baron & Kenny method coefficients for the mediation effect of job expectations

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Budget preference (1)	Expectations (2)	Budget preference (3)
Expectations			-0.010* (0.006)
Education	-0.004*** (0.0004)	0.004*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.0005)
Constant	0.371*** (0.009)	-0.044*** (0.012)	0.355*** (0.010)
Observations	23,775	21,135	21,135
R ²	0.003	0.002	0.003
Adjusted R ²	0.003	0.002	0.003
Residual Std. Error	0.453 (df = 23773)	0.550 (df = 21133)	0.451 (df = 21132)
F Statistic	81.968*** (df = 1; 23773)	44.090*** (df = 1; 21133)	29.941*** (df = 2; 21132)

Note: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Once again, the total effect model indicates a negative relationship between education and preferences. In this case, the conducted Path A results show that more educated people are less likely to think their job expectations will get worse in the next 12 months. The coefficient illustrates that when increasing the value of education, the value of job expectations is also increased. On the other hand, the Path B model shows that people with more education and better job expectations are less likely to have preference for social expenditure in the EU budget. Focusing on the hypothesis, in light of the results, it is possible to conclude that job expectations do not mediate the relationship between the independent variable and dependent variables. Nonetheless, in order to confirm the results of the indirect test, I have also used the Bootstrapping method in this hypothesis to confirm the results of the regression. The results are the following:

Table 6. Mediation analysis of job expectations using Bootstrapping

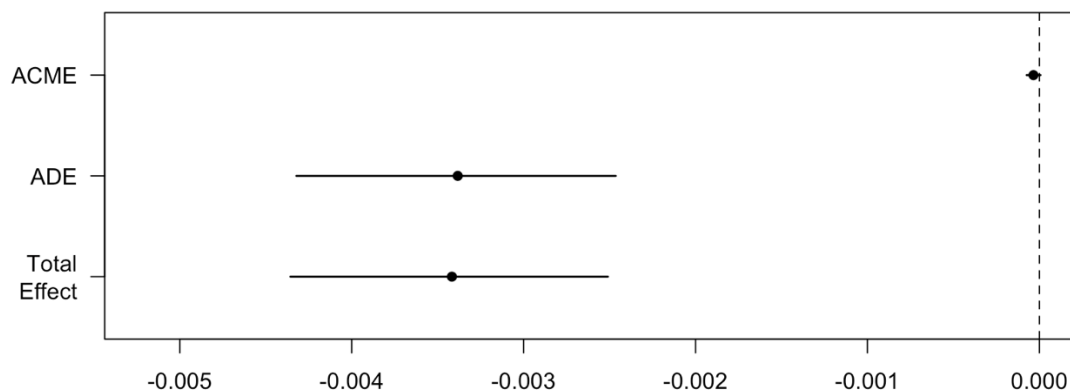
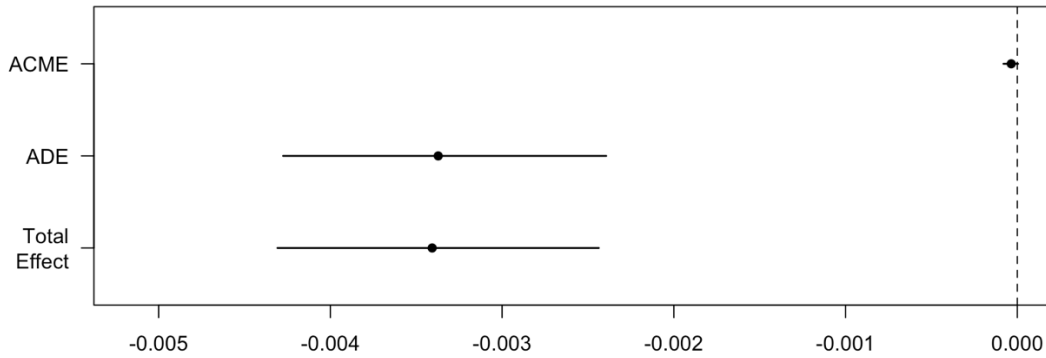


Table 7. Mediation analysis of job expectations using Nonparametric Bootstrapping



Both plots in tables 6 and 7 show that there is no evidence for the mediated effect, given that p-value is bigger than 0.05 and the confidence intervals overlaps with zero. In any case, there is certainly no evidence for a positive ACME. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that job expectations have no direct effect on the relationship between education and social spending preferences in the EU budget.

The next table represents the results of the model used to test the fourth hypothesis of the thesis. This model aims at measuring the interaction effects of the belief that people have a lot of things in common in the EU in the relationship between education and preferences. The results conducted in the regression analysis are the following:

Table 8. Regressions coefficients for the impact of the independent variable and belief of common things on Budget Preference

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Preference
Education	-0.005 ^{***} (0.002)
Common	-0.026 ^{**} (0.012)
Age	0.001 ^{***} (0.0002)
Gender	0.058 ^{***} (0.006)
Education:Common	0.001 (0.001)
Constant	0.295 ^{***} (0.036)
Observations	22,737
R ²	0.008
Adjusted R ²	0.008
Residual Std. Error	0.450 (df = 22731)
F Statistic	38.311 ^{***} (df = 5; 22731)
Note:	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

The results indicate that the belief of having common things in the EU does not influence the relationship between education and preference for social expenditure in the EU budget. Given that there is no interaction effect, the hypothesis is tested wrong. It is difficult to determine at this point whether the model is circumstantial or it results from causality, and further analysis should be conducted. Similarly to the negative relationship between education and preference for social spending, the results could account for self-interest arguments.

As stated previously, the results timidly point at the fact that less education does not necessarily reinforce the belief that social provisions should be restricted to specific social groups particularly limited to the natives of his or her country. Furthermore, it has been argued that identity politics limit political compromise at a European level, posing a downward pressure to more ambitious policies and integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). In that regard, these results conclude that the self-interested positions reinforced by longer periods of education are more likely to explain the lack of preference for social spending at a EU-level than identity beliefs. Once again, older people and females are more likely to have such preference for social expenditure. Both variables do not affect the direct relationship between education and preferences.

Finally, table 9 concludes the empirical analysis of this thesis. After conducting a regression analysis, the results have measured the interaction effect of the provision of public services at the national level:

Table 9. Regressions coefficients for the impact of the independent variable and provision of public services on Budget Preference

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Budget preference
Education	-0.003 ^{***} (0.0005)
Provision	-0.034 ^{***} (0.008)
Education:Provision	0.0002 (0.0004)
Constant	0.364 ^{***} (0.010)
Observations	23,021
R ²	0.010
Adjusted R ²	0.010
Residual Std. Error	0.451 (df = 23017)
F Statistic	75.549 ^{***} (df = 3; 23017)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Similarly to hypothesis 4, the results of this model indicate that the assessment of public services provision does not influence the relationship between higher levels of education and preference for social expenditure in the EU budget. Given that there is no interaction effect, the hypothesis is tested wrong. Nonetheless, the results of this model are particularly insightful. The model shows that people that assess the provision of social services in their country as “bad”, are more likely to have preference for social spending at a EU-level. This seems to confirm the argumentation posed by Mau (2005, p. 78), that suggests that individuals are expected to support social policy at a supranational level when they anticipate “an upward harmonisation” of social provisions.

VI. Conclusions

The drivers of public opinion towards social provision and welfare state have drawn much attention from academia and policy-making. At times when societal transformations and the ongoing health crisis have brought the shortcomings of our current welfare institutions forward, understanding public opinion and the formation of citizen preferences towards this policy field is a paramount act. Nonetheless, the majority of literature on this topic has mainly focused on the impact of education in the formation of public preferences towards social spending in the domestic arena. Most of the scholars have posited self-interest motivations as the main explanatory variables to account for individual attitudes towards social provisions. Other scholars, however, argue that higher levels of education can predict favourable attitudes towards welfare states. The lack of studies relating education to preferences for social spending in the European Union budget have motivated this thesis. Consequently, the majority of theoretical observation upon which this thesis is based is taken from studies on attitudes towards national welfare states. It is explanatory to discern how domestic dynamics towards social provision can be reproduced in the supranational level.

This thesis has modestly contributed to current studies on attitudes towards welfare states through the testing and the application of different theories, namely those based on self-interest arguments or those based upon socialisation ideas. To do so, the theoretical framework upon which this thesis has been based has been applied on a new data sample. This has allowed to draw clear conclusions on how education shapes attitudes and preferences towards social policies at the supranational level. In this regard, it is possible to conclude that preferences towards social provisions in the European Union seem to be determined by the same motivations as those in the domestic field.

This thesis provides an answer to the research question posed previously by analysing different models of interactions between higher levels of education and preferences for spending in the European Union Budget. In addition, it sought to prove five hypothesis, out of which of the main hypothesis focused on the relationship between education and budget preference. The analysis is conducted with the use of a quantitative research methodology. Based on data collected by the European Commission's Eurobarometer, between July 2020 and August 2020, this thesis concludes that people with higher levels of education are less likely to support social spending in the European Union budget. This conclusion directly verifies the premises of the rational choice theory, which identifies

motivations of self-interest nature as the main drivers of public opinion towards social provisions in the domestic field and, as this thesis has shown, also in the supranational theatre. Thus, the main hypothesis of the thesis has been proven wrong, given that higher levels of education do not predict preference for social affairs spending in the European Union. The remaining four hypothesis have been tested wrong, as well. In the case of hypothesis 2, the analysis has demonstrated that having a good understanding of how the European Union works has no effect on the relationship between education and budget preference. The same applies to hypothesis 3 that sought to identify possible interaction effect of individual job expectations on the aforementioned relationship. Regarding hypothesis 4, the belief that people in the EU have many things in common has neither direct nor indirect effect on the relationship. Finally, hypothesis 5 similarly suggests that the domestic provision of services does not influence the relationship.

The theoretical framework described previously can shed light on the research results. Overall, the analysis validates the theoretical assumptions based upon self-interest arguments (Andress & Heien, 2001; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989; Jæger, 2006; Pfeifer, 2009; Shivo & Uusitalo, 1995; Svallfors, 2003; Likki & Staerklé, 2015; Busemeyer, 2017). More specifically, these suggested that having a good labour market position would decrease support to welfare state policies (Svallfors, 2003). On a similar consideration, results can be interpreted in line with the assumptions formulated by Shivo and Uusitalo (1995), that indicated that well-paid individuals would have negative attitudes towards social policies given they unlikely beneficiaries and responsible for their funding to a larger extent than low-income groups. Considering that more education increases job expectations, it is logical to assume that more educated individuals are less supportive of social policies due to this reason.

On another note, given the negative correlation that this thesis has discovered between good job expectations and preference for a social spending at a supranational level, it is possible that public opinion in the European Union might react positively towards social spending in a situation of economic downturn or crisis in which, in theory, job expectations would worsen significantly. On a completely different note, this thesis has also illustrated how the belief that the people in the European Union share a lot of things has no effect on the relationship between education and social preference. Nonetheless, surprisingly, the analytical models have also shown that people that do not believe in the fact that the EU citizens share a lot of things are more likely to support social spending

in the European Union budget. Surprisingly, this results seems to contradict the theoretical assumption posited by Scharpf (2000), who argued that welfare states rely on shared identities. Future research should definitely attempt to straighten out this relationship and determine whether attitudes towards the welfare state in the European Union are not sustained on a European collective identity.

Furthermore, the analysis of the interaction models conducted previously has confirmed a theoretical assumption that when citizens see European social provisions as a means to improve their access to public services, they tend to support supranational policies in the field of welfare, thus validating the arguments of Baute & Meulemann (2020). In this case, the results have demonstrated that those people that assess the provision of services in their countries as bad are more likely to support social spending at a supranational level, given that more social spending at EU-level is assessed as an improvement of current policies.

The results recounted in this thesis have been accomplished through quantitative methods, which were deemed to be more befitting for the purposes and the logic of this study. The research was initially formulated too broadly and had to be narrowed throughout the process of research. Finally, at the beginning of the research and data clearing process, the author did not have any experience in quantitative data and in using R as a software to visualize data. Different stages of the empirical analysis have therefore been challenging and required significant preparation and self-learning. This, amidst the inability to attend face-to-face discussions, has been a rather pressing issue throughout the process. Hence why, the author acknowledges that, from a methodological point of view, there is a room for improvement of the argument and the methods used (as there is a possibility that there are alternative methods, other than regressions, that would have been more fit for the purpose of this research). Given the lack of experience and time constraints, those methods could not be explored and remain a possibility for a future research. Nonetheless, the experience has been highly rewarding as the author has been able not only to complete the thesis but also has learnt new useful techniques of quantitative research through the process.

Finally, to better understand the implications of these results, future studies could also address the socialisation effects of the Erasmus programme on the European citizens. This could help determine whether those people that have taken part in Erasmus exchange programmes have acquired the so-called “European identity” on the ground of

socialization. For a more comprehensive analysis of individual attitudes towards a Social Europe, future research should address the issue from the multidimensional point of view. Due to time restrictions and other limitations, and lack of available data, this thesis has addressed the issue from a unidimensional perspective. Nonetheless, further studies could benefit from analyzing how attitudes are shaped towards different, more specific initiatives of Social Europe, such the introduction of the European minimum wage. Future research could, ultimately, shed light on the relationship between a European common identity and support for social spending in the EU.

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