

# **Mass Euroscepticism revisited: The role of distributive justice**

(Draft paper, please do not circulate)

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*Abstract:* This article advances research into mass Euroscepticism by investigating the role of distributive justice. Drawing on cross-national survey data from 23 countries, the study shows that the way in which citizens evaluate the distribution of scarce resources in society affects the social legitimacy of the European Union. More specifically, the findings indicate that perceived injustice of individual opportunities (i.e., educational and job opportunities) and outcomes (i.e., earnings) nourish Eurosceptic sentiments, independent of objective inequalities. However, the public response to distributive injustice varies across EU member states, as high domestic corruption levels dampen the apparent link to EU accountability. Perceptions of injustice concerning earnings provide a stronger breeding ground for Euroscepticism in member states with low levels of corruption, while EU scapegoating regarding earnings injustice does not manifest itself in member states with the highest levels of corruption. These findings suggest that distributive justice interacts with procedural justice in its corollary to anti-EU sentiments. These results are strongly supportive of a justice-based approach in understanding varieties of Euroscepticism across Europe.

*Keywords:* Euroscepticism, distributive justice, corruption, public opinion, European integration

## 1. Introduction

The literature on mass Euroscepticism can be broadly divided into three dominant approaches: utilitarianism, identity and cue-taking theory (Abts, Heerwegh, & Swyngedouw, 2009; Anderson, 1998; Gabel, 1998; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2005; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2005; McLaren, 2004; Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000). These theoretical perspectives attribute Euroscepticism to economic, cultural and political factors, respectively. Yet the social roots of mass Euroscepticism have been paid only limited attention in scholarship to date (Lahusen, 2020; Sørensen, 2007). This is somewhat surprising, because the European Union (EU) has expressed an explicit social objective (Ferrera, 2017; Vandebroucke, Barnard, & De Baere, 2017), which was reinforced by the announcement of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017 (European Commission, 2017). The EPSR aims to provide new and more effective social rights for all Europeans, directly touching on the notion of social justice through its premise to promote fair wages and equal opportunities in a more digital and sustainable economy.

Against this background, an important question that arises is whether justice-based Euroscepticism constitutes a distinct threat to the European Union. As a consequence of the gradual shift of decision-making power from national to EU institutions in the multi-level governance architecture, Europeans may start to hold the EU accountable for diverse problems, and may increasingly blame the EU for perceived distributive injustice (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014a). In a similar vein, scapegoating of the EU may be sparked by structural flaws in its governance. The EU's predominant focus on economic integration through the internal market — that is, the embodiment of free trade liberalization — has mainly left issues of distributive justice to the markets. From this point of view, the EU can be seen as a cosmopolitan project that benefits elites and mobile citizens, whose rights and opportunities have increased (Kriesi et al., 2006; Vandebroucke, 2019), whereas for others, European integration results in fear of job losses and reduced social security (Grauel, Heine, & Lahusen, 2013).

Previous research has not directly investigated the link between distributive justice and Euroscepticism. Whereas the Eurosceptic vote of people who feel 'left behind' is often assumed and has become increasingly included in empirical research — particularly focusing on emotions such as anger and fear

(Garry, 2014; Magni, 2017; Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017; Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2017) — perceptions of distributive injustice often remain implicit and poorly conceptualized (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018; Capelos & Katsanidou, 2018; Fanoulis & Guerra, 2017). Other studies have investigated the role of inequality, at the individual (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2004; Sani & Magistro, 2016), regional (Lipps & Schraff, 2020) and country level (Burgoon, 2012; Kuhn, van Elsas, Hakhverdian, & van der Brug, 2016; Schraff, 2020) in explaining both Euroscepticism and trust in EU institutions. However, research into the psychology of social justice shows that inequality is not always perceived as unjust (Hegtvedt & Isom, 2014; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Stephenson, 2000).<sup>1</sup> Hence, the extent to which Eurosceptic sentiments are sparked by distributive injustice — capturing normative evaluations of the actual distribution of resources in society — rather than inequality per se, remains unclear. Furthermore, whether and how the national context can temper or fuel the rise of justice-based Euroscepticism is unknown.

The current study addresses these lacunae in previous literature by focussing on two research questions. First, *how do perceptions of distributive injustice affect Eurosceptic sentiments among citizens?* Here, I distinguish between injustice of opportunities and outcomes, which makes it possible to offer a fine-grained insight into the nexus between Euroscepticism and perceptions of distributive justice. Second, this article investigates whether the prevalence of justice-based Euroscepticism depends on national institutions. More specifically, the article examines the role of corruption as a macro determinant of procedural justice, which affects the distributive practices of institutions (Gupta, Davoodi, & Alonso-terme, 2002). Corruption also undermines the legitimacy of both the meritocratic and egalitarian dimensions of economic distribution within welfare states (Smith, 2010). Hence, the second research question is: *to what extent does corruption mediate the linkage between distributive justice perceptions and Euroscepticism?* It is hypothesized that in EU member states with low levels of corruption, distributive justice creates a stronger breeding ground for Euroscepticism because remaining perceptions of unfairness are more likely to be attributed to external governance actors when domestic institutions

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<sup>1</sup> This distinction between inequality and injustice is endorsed by system justification theory, which states that there is a general ideological motive to internally justify the existing social order and inequalities.

are performing properly. The hypotheses are tested by means of multilevel modelling, using data from the European Social Survey 2018 that includes 23 EU member states. The results show that when citizens perceive that they do not get what they deserve, they hold stronger Eurosceptic attitudes, regardless of their objective socio-economic position. This is particularly the case in countries with low levels of corruption. These findings indicate that the distinction between inequality and injustice is not merely a conceptual one, but is crucial in gaining a better understanding of the social roots of mass Euroscepticism. The implications for future challenges regarding the social legitimacy of the European integration project are discussed.

## **2. Distributive injustice: A road to Euroscepticism?**

Distributive justice refers to the just distribution of valuable resources across members of society (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015, p. 380; Jasso, 1980; Jasso, Törnblom, & Clara, 2016; Olsaretti, 2018; Rawls, 1971; Clara Sabbagh & Schmitt, 2016, p. 6). These resources are important for citizens' life chances, and concern economic goods (income and property), opportunities (educational and job opportunities) and recognition (status and honour). Scholars have identified distinct principles of distributive justice that regulate the distribution of such resources and that may guide citizens' judgements on whether the distribution of resources is fair or unfair. These principles include equality, equity, need and entitlement (Deutsch, 1975; Forsé & Parodi, 2009; Hülle, Liebig, & May, 2018; Van Hootegem, Abts, & Meuleman, 2020). Distributive justice theory postulates that inequality is perceived as fair or unfair to the extent that it meets or violates normative expectations about how valuable resources are distributed across society (Jasso et al., 2016). Hence, how citizens evaluate given allocations of resources depends on their preferences for different principles of distributive justice and on the divergence between the expected and actual outcomes (Hegtvedt & Isom, 2014).

A wide range of empirical studies have shown that experiences of distributive injustice influence political attitudes and behaviour, and thereby lead to social consequences that can affect the functioning of institutions and society as a whole. For instance, perceptions of distributive injustice in society erode trust in political institutions and actors (Zmerli & Castillo, 2015), and a greater sense of injustice regarding a person's own earnings is found to decrease their intention to participate in elections (Liebig

& Schupp, 2005). Furthermore, people's perceptions of not getting what they deserve are positively related to political cynicism (Van Hootegeem, Van Hootegeem, Selenko, & De Witte, 2021) and distrust in political leaders and institutions (Rasinski, 1988; Tyler, Rasinski, & McGraw, 1985; Zmerli & Castillo, 2015). Other studies also show that generalized feelings of being treated unfairly relate to higher levels of radicalization and political violence (Pauwels & Heylen, 2020; van den Bos, 2018).

Whereas questions of distributive justice have historically been asked only within the nation state (Blake, 2018, p. 620), the consequences of perceived distributive injustice may easily transcend the state level. I contend that reactions to distributive injustice (in terms of outcomes and opportunities) can include opposition to European integration for two main reasons, which I refer to as political and ideological blame attribution. *Political blame attribution* occurs when citizens project experiences of distributive injustice towards the EU because of the gradual development of more centralized EU decision-making. As a result of the EU's widening scope of competences, citizens may hold the EU accountable for a multitude of problems (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014a). In the realization that policies have become Europeanized, citizens — especially those who feel left behind by the integration process — may increasingly blame the European Union for undesired outcomes (Beaudonnet, 2015; Kumlin, 2009). In this regard, Hobolt and Tilley (2014a, p. 4) argue that since EU institutions increasingly hold the same policy levers as national governments, we should expect the EU to shoulder more of the blame when things go wrong. Moreover, in the context of the sovereign debt crisis, Europeans have witnessed the limited room for manoeuvre by national governments (Bellucci, 2014; Lobo & Pannico, 2020; Otjes & Katsanidou, 2017). Following this logic, distributive injustice could not only be seen as a national problem, but also as an EU problem for which the EU is then held accountable. In other words, distributive injustice may elicit Euroscepticism, because the locus of decision-making is gradually shifting from the national level towards the EU level. This reasoning is in line with empirical studies showing that citizens not only hold national governments accountable, but also attribute responsibility to the EU for various policy outcomes, including economic conditions, healthcare and social welfare in their country (Devine, 2021; Goldberg, Brosius, & de Vreese, 2021; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014b; León, Jurado, & Garmendia Madariaga, 2018; Wilson & Hobolt, 2015).

*Ideological blame attribution* occurs when citizens hold the EU accountable for distributive injustice because of the ideological choices reflected in its agenda. In this logic, distributive injustice is deemed to be due to EU policies and structural flaws in the EU governance. The European integration project predominantly focusses on economic integration through the internal market, and it was built on the premise that it would bring prosperity to its member states and inhabitants. However, literature dealing with the winners and losers from European integration — and globalization more generally — suggests that the growth has not been inclusive (Kriesi et al., 2006; Teney, Lacewell, & De Wilde, 2014). Elites and mobile citizens are considered privileged in taking advantage of the new opportunities that European integration offers (Haller, 2008). With regard to educational opportunities, inequalities are being produced and reproduced through education policies, including the EU's Erasmus programmes to support student mobility (Schnepf & Colagrossi, 2020). In terms of employment opportunities, the European internal market has led to job creation and labour mobility for some people, while increasing competition for others (Gabel, 1998; Kriesi et al., 2006). Intergroup comparisons may lead to some people's resentment or bitterness about others benefitting at their expense. This resonates with popular views of the EU as a cosmopolitan elitist project that has contributed to inequality (Beckfield, 2019; Kuhn et al., 2016; Simpson, 2019), leaving distributive justice to the markets (Luo, 2017). In light of this criticism, the recently introduced European Pillar of Social Rights can be seen as an EU response to market-generated inequality, touching on distributive justice in various ways. Principle 3 of the EPSR states that 'regardless of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, everyone has the right to equal treatment and opportunities regarding employment, social protection, education, and access to goods and services available to the public'. Furthermore, principle 6 states that 'workers have the right to fair wages that provide for a decent standard of living'. The EU's commitment to strengthen its social dimension may not prevent or may even fuel the rise of justice-based Euroscepticism. EU citizens could hold the EU accountable for not complying with this mission, and thus not being effective in eliminating or reducing existing inequalities and distributive injustice. The growing frustration and disillusionment of citizens who feel they have been disadvantaged for the benefit of others may spur engagement in justice restoring behaviour, which can include opposing European integration altogether.

Although there is a lack of empirical research into the link between Euroscepticism and perceptions of distributive injustice, two studies hint that normative evaluations of a person's opportunities might be an important, additional factor to take into consideration with regard to understanding Euroscepticism. A study by (Author) shows that voters who experience stronger relative deprivation — measured by feelings of being systematically disadvantaged in society — hold stronger Eurosceptic sentiments, which are partly channelled through political cynicism. In a similar vein, Burgoon and colleagues (2019) found that those who experience positional deprivation — where individuals' growth in income is outpaced by that of others in society — are more likely to support radical-right political parties. In this light, these authors argue that radical ideologies provide easy scapegoats for the (allegedly) unjust deprivation that voters face (Burgoon et al., 2019, p. 58). They also contend that outgroup scapegoating may be directed towards the EU, since supranational institutions constrain national-level autonomy while political identities are overwhelmingly national. Based on these findings and the reasons outlined above, one can expect that perceptions of distributive injustice related to outcomes and opportunities give rise to Euroscepticism, irrespective of objective inequalities. Hence, I hypothesize that:

H1: Individuals with stronger perceptions of earnings injustice are more Eurosceptic.

H2: Individuals with stronger perceptions of opportunity injustice are more Eurosceptic.

### **3. Corruption, distributive justice and Euroscepticism**

Does justice-based Euroscepticism thrive within all member states? There are good reasons to expect that the context in which the perceiver of distributive justice is embedded matters for the viability of this particular form of Euroscepticism. The effect of distributive injustice perceptions on Euroscepticism may depend on the procedures by which goods are distributed in society, commonly referred to as procedural justice. More specifically, one can expect that the likelihood of blame attribution for distributive justice will depend on the level of corruption within a country, because of the distributive consequences that corruption entails.

Corruption here refers to the abuse of public power for private gain (Tanzi, 1998, p. 8). Since acts of corruption contravene the 'rules of the game', corruption is closely tied to the stratification system and

to problems of poverty and social exclusion (Gupta et al., 2002). For instance, corruption and practices such as tax evasion undermine the redistributive functions of the national state by siphoning off public financial resources, reducing the state's capacity to fight economic inequality and provide basic services for its citizens (Smith, 2010, p. 450). Numerous studies have established an effect of corruption on inequality (Apergis, Dincer, & Payne, 2010; Gupta et al., 2002; Jain, 2001; Jong-Sung & Sanjeev, 2005). Corruption is likely to increase inequality, because it allows well-positioned individuals to take advantage of government activities at the expense of the rest of the population (Tanzi, 1998, p. 26). Since corrupt practices cheat the distributive system, stealing resources from the people who deserve them (Smith, 2010, p. 450), perceived injustice concerning the distribution of resources will be blamed on the self-serving elite for not responding to the will of the ordinary people.

In countries with high levels of corruption, distributive justice may primarily trigger feelings of resentment towards domestic rather than supranational actors and structures. Moreover, in member states where the level of corruption is high, further steps towards European integration could be considered as a strategy to curb corruption, compensate for deficient institutions and achieve more distributive justice in society. In the current multi-level governance system, citizens are likely to take their domestic institutions into account when strategizing how they can get what (they believe) they deserve. In this regard, it has been found that in contexts with higher levels of corruption, citizens have more trust in the EU (Arnold, Sapir, & Zapryanova, 2012; Muñoz, Torcal, & Bonet, 2011; Obydenkova & Arpino, 2018) and prefer faster European integration (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000), while having lower levels of trust in national institutions (Donovan & Karp, 2017; Pellegata & Memoli, 2016). These studies suggest that how citizens seek to resolve domestic problems is contingent on institutional quality. This resonates with empirical research showing that national institutions are used as a benchmark against which the added value of the EU is assessed (Beaudonnet, 2015; de Vries, 2018; Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000). Citizens living in countries where institutions are plagued by corruption, inefficiencies or lack of responsiveness will have more reasons to place greater trust in EU institutions (and may even tend to embrace the EU integration project) to increase distributive justice.



By contrast, in countries with little corruption, EU scapegoating for what is perceived unfair is more plausible. In these countries, where national institutions and procedures are believed to operate fairly, transparently and predictably, remaining perceptions of distributive injustice are more likely to be attributed to external forces that are believed to intrude on and disturb the distributive practices and existing rules for allocating opportunities and rewards. Hence, where the quality of government is high and public service delivery is efficient, people's feelings that they do not get what they deserve may be projected more easily towards supranational actors, such as the European Union. For the reasons outlined above, the EU may be seen as a more credible scapegoat for distributive injustice when domestic corruption levels are low. This logic can be expected to hold true for injustice of opportunities (relating to education and labour market inclusion) as well as for injustice of outcomes (relating to economic rewards). Hence, I hypothesize that:

H3: The positive effect of perceived distributive injustice of outcomes (H3a) and opportunities (H3b) on Euroscepticism is weaker in countries with higher levels of corruption.

## **4. Data and Methods**

### *4.1 Data*

To test the hypotheses, this article draws on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) 2018, which includes a 'Justice and Fairness in Europe' module.<sup>2</sup> All the 23 EU countries that participated in the survey were selected for analysis: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Bulgaria (BG), Croatia (HR), Cyprus (CY), Czech Republic (CZ), Estonia (EE), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), the Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Slovenia (SI), Slovakia (SK), Spain (ES), Sweden (SE) and the United Kingdom (UK). The survey data contains responses obtained via face-to-face interviews, conducted among probability samples of the population aged 15 and over and resident in private households.

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<sup>2</sup> ESS Round 9: European Social Survey Round 9 Data (2018). Data file edition 1.2. NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS9-2018.

## 4.2 Variables

The dependent variable, *Euroscepticism*, is measured by a widely-used item: ‘Now, thinking about the European Union, some say that European unification should go further. Others say that it has already gone too far. Using this card, what number on the scale best describes your position?’ Responses were given on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 (‘Unification has already gone too far’) to 10 (‘Unification should go further’). The responses were recoded, so that higher scores indicate stronger Eurosceptic attitudes. This item captures Euroscepticism among respondents, defined by Paul Taggart (1998, p. 366) as ‘the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration’. Appendix Figure A shows the mean scores for Euroscepticism by country.

Perceptions of *distributive justice*. Distributive justice perceptions of individual *outcomes* are captured by *individual earnings injustice*. This was measured by respondents’ evaluation of how fair they consider their net pay or net income from a pension or from social benefits. Responses were measured on a scale ranging from -4 to 4, where negative scores indicate perceptions of over-rewarding, zero indicates that actual earnings are perceived as just, and positive scores indicate perceptions of under-rewarding. This operationalization of earnings injustice is more inclusive than that used in previous research, as it has exclusively covered earnings injustice linked to employment, thereby excluding other social groups, notably the unemployed and pensioners (Jasso 2015; Liebig et al., 2010; Schunk et al., 2015).<sup>3</sup> Distributive justice perceptions of individual *opportunities* are measured using two components, educational opportunities (Clayton, 2018; Resh & Sabbagh, 2016) and employment opportunities (Gomberg, 2018), as these are important for citizens’ life chances in Europe. Distributive justice perceptions of *educational opportunity* are measured by the item ‘Compared with other people in [country], I have had a fair chance of achieving the level of education I was seeking’. *Employment opportunity* was measured by the item ‘Compared with other people in [country], I would have a fair chance of getting the job I was seeking’. Responses on both items range from 0 (‘Does not apply at all’)

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<sup>3</sup> Previous work has addressed injustice perceptions about the level of pensions (Sabbagh & Vanhuyse, 2014); however, not yet among pensioners themselves.

to 10 ('Applies completely'), and were recoded so that high values indicate strong perceptions of distributive injustice. The correlations between the three justice variables and their descriptive statistics by country are shown in Appendix Table C and Figures B and C.

*Individual-level controls* include conventional determinants of Euroscepticism in order to isolate the effects of distributive injustice perceptions. First, *satisfaction with the national government* is included, since citizens may hold the national government accountable for distributive injustice, and Euroscepticism has been shown to be channelled through people's assessments of the national government. To account for *identity*, a variable was constructed that captures exclusive national identity. This variable is based on two items measuring respondent's emotional attachment to Europe and their country, with responses ranging from 0 ('Not at all emotionally attached') to 10 ('Very emotionally attached'). *Left-right ideology* is included as self-placement on a 0 to 10 scale. Furthermore, various social-structural characteristics are included. *Income* is operationalized as equivalent household income, using the OECD-modified equivalence scale (OECD, 2005). To enable comparisons of income between countries, the variable is categorized into country-specific quartiles and a separate category for missing values is included. This operationalization captures the relative income position of households within countries. *Occupation* is included as a categorical variable, based on a slightly modified version of the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) scheme (Ganzeboom, De Graaf, & Treiman, 1992) and comprising (1) higher service class, (2) white collar, (3) blue collar, (4) self-employed, (5) unemployed and (6) a residual category including those who are retired and other non-employed people. *Education* is categorized as low (lower-secondary or less), medium (upper-secondary) or high (advanced vocational and tertiary), based on the ISCED classification for the highest educational qualification achieved. Lastly, I control for *age* and *gender* (0=male; 1=female).

*Macro variables.* The level of *corruption* is measured by the widely-used Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) from Transparency International. The CPI is a composite index, based on expert assessments and opinion surveys, and measures how corrupt the public sector is perceived to be.<sup>4</sup> The CPI ranges from

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<sup>4</sup> Detailed information on the methodology of the CPI is publicly available at <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nzl>

0 to 100, where the value 0 indicates the highest level of corruption and the value 100 indicates the lowest level. Robustness checks provided in Appendix Table D use the Control of Corruption Index (CC) from the World Bank Governance Indicators as an alternative indicator for corruption. This index is collected from elite and mass surveys (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010). The CPI and CC are highly correlated (Pearson's  $r=0.98$ ). At the macro-level, I control for *GDP per capita* in PPS (Eurostat code nama\_10\_pc) to take into account that national corruption levels in Europe are related to economic development (Christos et al., 2018). Lastly, the level of *income inequality* within countries is controlled for, using the Gini coefficient (Eurostat code ilc\_di12). Descriptive statistics of individual-level and country-level variables are reported in Appendix Table A-B.

#### 4.3 Statistical modelling

Multilevel analyses were performed to take into account the hierarchical data structure and to estimate individual-level and country-level effects simultaneously. The intra-class coefficient of the null model indicates that 5.6 per cent of the variance of Euroscepticism is attributable to country-level differences. The hypotheses were tested using a stepwise approach, starting from a baseline model with only controls (Model 1). Subsequently, the variables of theoretical interest at the individual level — i.e., perceived distributive injustice — were included (Model 2), and lastly the interaction effects between these individual variables and corruption levels were added (Models 3–5). All the reported models were estimated using robust standard errors and performed in STATA version 16.

## 5. Results

How do perceptions of distributive justice relate to Eurosceptic sentiments? Table 1 presents the results of the multilevel models. Starting from the baseline model with only controls (Model 1), the effects of the three distinct components of distributive injustice under investigation are presented in Model 2. With regard to the effect of injustice of outcomes, Model 2 shows that people who perceive greater earnings injustice are more Eurosceptic. Furthermore, Model 2 indicates that people with stronger perceptions of injustice in educational and employment opportunities similarly show higher levels of Eurosceptic attitudes. These findings indicate that the EU is blamed for perceived distributive injustice, confirming

H1 and H2. Interestingly, the perceptions of distributive justice seem to mediate the effects of social-structural variables. The positive effects of having a lower education, occupational status or income position (as shown in Model 1) weaken somewhat after adding the distributive injustice perceptions into the model. In other words, the reason that people with lower socio-economic status tend to be more Eurosceptic than higher socio-economic status groups can partly be explained by the former perceiving greater distributive injustice.

**Table 1.** Multilevel model: Determinants of Euroscepticism

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>Individual-level variables</i>					
Earnings injustice		0.054* (0.023)	-0.156 (0.099)	0.054* (0.023)	0.054* (0.023)
Educational injustice		0.035*** (0.009)	0.035*** (0.009)	-0.005 (0.043)	0.033*** (0.009)
Employment injustice		0.041** (0.012)	0.041** (0.012)	0.041*** (0.012)	-0.036 (0.057)
<i>Education</i>					
Low	0.490*** (0.102)	0.366*** (0.070)	0.371*** (0.096)	0.370*** (0.096)	0.372*** (0.096)
Medium	0.501*** (0.076)	0.448*** (0.070)	0.449*** (0.070)	0.447*** (0.070)	0.449*** (0.071)
<i>Income</i>					
First quartile	0.306*** (0.069)	0.194** (0.071)	0.189** (0.069)	0.192** (0.070)	0.190** (0.070)
Second quartile	0.211*** (0.055)	0.142* (0.060)	0.144* (0.057)	0.141* (0.059)	0.143 (0.058)
Third quartile	0.141* (0.059)	0.133* (0.053)	0.136* (0.053)	0.132* (0.053)	0.134* (0.053)
Missing	0.201** (0.065)	0.186* (0.081)	0.177* (0.079)	0.183* (0.079)	0.182* (0.079)
<i>Occupation</i>					
White collar	0.195** (0.072)	0.159* (0.080)	0.157* (0.079)	0.158* (0.079)	0.156* (0.079)
Blue collar	0.359** (0.104)	0.283* (0.101)	0.280* (0.110)	0.279* (0.110)	0.278* (0.109)
Self-employed	0.193 (0.099)	0.154 (0.106)	0.149 (0.105)	0.153 (0.106)	0.155 (0.105)
Unemployed	0.345** (0.110)	0.305* (0.136)	0.302* (0.135)	0.297* (0.136)	0.283* (0.137)
Retired and other	-0.059 (0.078)	-0.014 (0.093)	-0.011 (0.093)	-0.016 (0.092)	-0.015 (0.092)
Exclusive national identity	1.883*** (0.144)	1.863*** (0.148)	1.853*** (0.150)	1.864*** (0.149)	1.862*** (0.148)
Government support	-0.141*** (0.035)	-0.133*** (0.034)	-0.134*** (0.034)	-0.133*** (0.034)	-0.133*** (0.034)
Left-right placement	0.093** (0.035)	0.089* (0.033)	0.090** (0.033)	0.089** (0.033)	0.089** (0.033)
Gender	0.119 (0.051)	0.067 (0.052)	0.067 (0.053)	0.006** (0.002)	0.068 (0.053)
Age	0.011*** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)	0.006** (0.002)

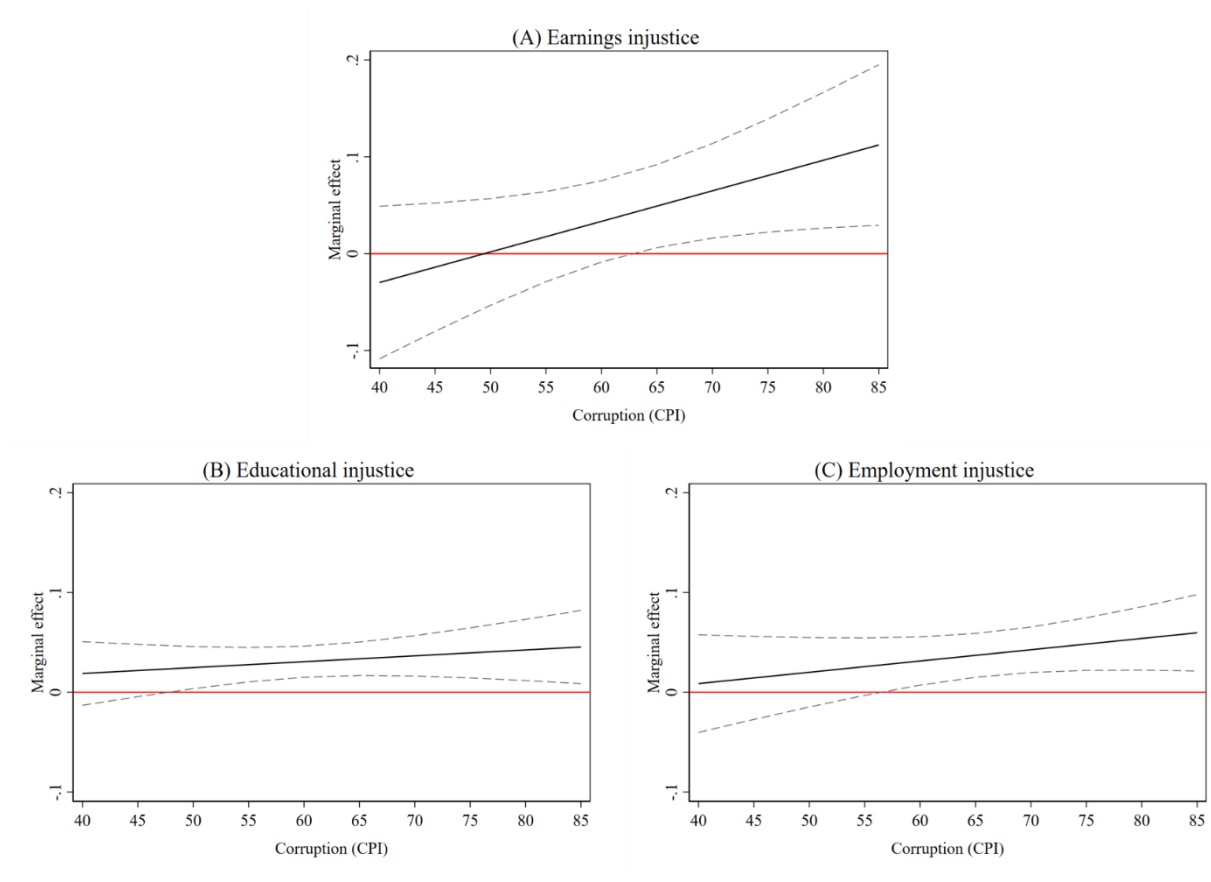
<i>Country-level variables</i>					
Corruption	-0.003 (0.012)	0.001 (0.012)	-0.004 (0.012)	0.000 (0.012)	-0.002 (0.012)
GDP per capita	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Income inequality (Gini)	-0.053 (0.033)	-0.055 (0.035)	-0.055 (0.032)	-0.054 (0.035)	-0.055 (0.031)
<i>Cross-level interactions</i>					
Corruption X Earnings injustice			0.003* (0.002)		
Corruption X Educational injustice				0.000 (0.000)	
Corruption X Employment injustice					0.001 (0.000)
Constant	4.878*** (1.393)	4.679** (1.450)	5.042*** (1.407)	4.779** (1.458)	5.052*** (1.329)
Log Pseudolikelihood	-75578.06	-63089.33	-63064.424	-63079.335	-63064.973
Observations level 1	32,310	27,011	27,011	27,011	27,011
Observations level 2	23	23	23	23	23

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001.

Notes: Reference categories: education: high; occupation: higher service class; income: fourth quartile; occupation: higher service class; identity: inclusive national identity; gender: male.

Altogether, the results from the pooled sample of 23 EU member states confirm that perceptions of distributive justice increase Euroscepticism. However, is the link between distributive justice and Euroscepticism mediated by corruption within the country? To empirically test this, Models 3–5 present the interaction effects between the extent of corruption at the national level and perceptions of distributive injustice. The results of Model 3 show a positive and significant interaction effect between earnings injustice and corruption on Euroscepticism. To facilitate the interpretation of this interaction effect, Figure 1 displays the marginal effects of perceived distributive injustice on Euroscepticism at various levels of corruption in the country. Panel A shows that when corruption levels are low (a high CPI score), perceptions of earnings injustice are positively related to Eurosceptic sentiments. By contrast, when corruption levels are high (a low CPI score), there is no significant relationship between earnings injustice and Euroscepticism, since the 95 per cent confidence intervals around the marginal effects contain the value zero. These findings lend support to H3a. Contrary to expectations, this picture does not hold true when it comes to distributive injustice of opportunities. The results of Models 4 and 5 show that the interaction effects are non-significant, meaning that the positive effect of perceived educational (Panel B) and employment injustice (Panel C) on Euroscepticism do not differ according to the corruption level in the country. However, Panel B and Panel C indicate that distributive injustice of opportunities is a slightly larger trigger for Euroscepticism in member states with lower corruption (a

higher CPI score), although the differences are too small to be statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). In countries with high levels of corruption (a lower CPI score), the 95 per cent confidence intervals around the marginal effects again contain the value zero, although the differences in effect size between countries with high and low corruption levels are non-significant. Therefore, H3b is not confirmed. Robustness checks using an alternative indicator for corruption, reported in Appendix Table D, yield similar findings.<sup>5</sup> To conclude, perceptions of distributive injustice mainly provide a source of Eurosceptic sentiments in national contexts where corruption is less prevalent.



**Figure 1.** Marginal effects of (A) earnings injustice, (B) educational injustice and (C) employment injustice on Euroscepticism by different levels of corruption.

Notes: Dashed lines represent 95 per cent confidence intervals. High CPI values indicate low levels of corruption.

<sup>5</sup> The interaction effect between earnings injustice and corruption is similar in size, yet only significant at the  $p=0.100$  level when using the ~~using the~~ CC Index as an indicator of corruption.

## 6. Discussion

This study contributes to the literature on mass Euroscepticism by investigating the role of distributive justice. More specifically, the analysis shows how perceptions of distributive justice are related to Euroscepticism and the extent to which corruption mediates this linkage. Drawing on data from the European Social Survey 2018, it is confirmed that Europeans who perceive higher levels of injustice of earnings and opportunity — concerning education and employment — hold stronger Eurosceptic views than their counterparts who perceive less distributive injustice. In other words, people project their personal experiences of distributive injustice towards the EU to a certain extent, making these people more likely to hold anti-EU sentiments, whereas they are more likely to endorse further European integration steps if their normative expectations about the distribution of resources in society are met. These findings complement previous studies on the roots of mass Euroscepticism that have predominantly focussed on economic, political and cultural determinants. Controlling for these conventional explanations of Euroscepticism, the current study evidences that distributive justice is a distinct, yet underexplored, source of Euroscepticism.

Nevertheless, the context in which the perceiver of distributive justice is embedded also matters, as the current study reveals that higher levels of corruption dampen this apparent link of accountability. In countries with high levels of corruption, perceptions of distributive justice are not significantly positively related to Eurosceptic sentiments among the population. This finding suggests that in such contexts, citizens perceive the EU as an actor that could address, or at least not aggravate, distributive injustice as a specific problem resulting from corruption. What citizens want from the EU varies from one member state to another. Thus, extending previous research, citizens consider not only the economic, political and cultural consequences of European integration, but also anticipate its impact on social issues such as injustice. Overall, these findings suggest that it is important to consider citizens' perceptions of distributive justice to gain a better understanding of the differentiated drivers of mass Euroscepticism across Europe.

The findings of this article have implications for EU policymaking, as they reveal that the responses to distributive justice (and injustice) go beyond national boundaries. When people feel that they are not



getting what they deserve, they are less inclined to embrace European integration. In other words, perceptions of injustice are damaging to the cohesion and legitimacy of the European project, and have the potential to destabilize it. Distributive injustice is therefore not merely a normative problem, but a multi-level problem that poses a threat to the European project in some of its member states. The finding that this adverse effect is dependent on the national context challenges the policy options for the EU. Mainly in the EU member states with high institutional quality and low corruption levels, addressing social injustice could be considered beneficial to secure support for further European integration steps. Yet the question remains as to what extent perceptions of distributive injustice are malleable. Moreover, in member states with high corruption levels, perceived distributive injustices appear not to undermine support for European integration. This cross-national variation in the roots of Euroscepticism refines our knowledge about the relationship between institutional quality and support for European integration.

This study leaves important paths open for future research. First, the reference frames of the perceptions of distributive justice relating to earnings and opportunities differ in scope. Whereas the perceived injustice of opportunities was measured in relation to the national community, the measurement of perceived earnings injustice did not specify the reference group. Hence, an important question remains with regard to whether citizens compare themselves with fellow nationals or with Europeans when assessing the fairness of their own economic rewards. The higher reported levels of earnings injustice among citizens in Eastern and Southern Europe could partly result from their awareness of higher wages in Western and Northern Europe. Therefore, an important task for future policy will be to analyse whether Europeans adopt European as well as national frames of reference and what consequences this has in terms of public support for European integration. Second, future research could apply transnational notions of justice (Blake, 2018; de Witte, 2012) to EU opinion studies, including inter-state (sociotropic) and inter-personal (egocentric) conceptions of distributive justice. In the context of European integration, distributive justice reaches beyond the distribution of resources across nationals, including the allocation of resources across EU member states and ultimately European citizens (Labareda, 2021). After many decades of European integration, it would be worthwhile to analyse the extent to which citizens have expanded their scope of justice beyond national boundaries. If inequality

is perceived as fair or unfair to the extent that it meets or violates normative expectations about how valuable resources are distributed, then what does this mean for justice in the EU as a whole? Future research should clarify what levels of inequality are considered as just or unjust, and how such normative evaluations shape citizens' attitudes towards the EU's role in social policymaking, starting out from the idea of the EU as its own site of justice. Third, the results of this study (which are based on cross-sectional data) leave important questions open concerning the dynamic relationship between distributive injustice and Euroscepticism. With the increasing visibility of the EU and its policies, accountability attributions at the EU-level may become more prevalent over time. Depending on the EU's response to the social consequences of the multiple crises Europe is facing, the injustice of outcomes and opportunities might be projected more strongly against the EU in the future. In this regard, citizens may increasingly evaluate the EU in terms of its social performance, paving the way for justice-based Euroscepticism.

## 7. References

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