

Cultivating trust? The role of European Union investments in bridging rural-urban divides[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decades, agricultural policies and structural investment funds for regional development have been central to European integration. However, the political effects of these funds, designed to enhance economic and social cohesion within the European Union and address regional disparities, remain contested. Existing research has established that rural residents tend to exhibit lower levels of political trust in the European Union compared to their urban counterparts. In this paper, we empirically examine whether institutional investments can mitigate the urban-rural divide in political trust toward the European Union. Specifically, we explore the potential of EU funds to enhance trust by fostering regional economic dynamics, and whether this is socially stratified. Analyzing 17 waves of Eurobarometer data (2003–2020) across 27 European countries, 99 regions, and around 370,000 individuals, we find that the rural-urban divide tends to be mitigated in regions receiving higher levels of investment. Moreover, we observe that EU investments disproportionately predict higher trust among individuals from middle to lower socioeconomic strata compared to those from upper strata, narrowing the gap at higher levels of investment (15–18 % of a standard deviation). Examining the intersection of rural-urban and socioeconomic divides, we observe that EU funds are more likely to predict higher trust amongst individuals from lower social strata, and the lowest trust among those from upper social strata. Our results imply that European institutional investment can reduce the gap between urban and rural residents due to the differences in the socio-demographic composition of these places.

1. Introduction

Urban and rural life cultivate distinct political perspectives, attracting different types of people and reinforcing these divergent views. The industrial era deepened existing divides between urban and rural regions, intensifying the polarization of voter behavior along these lines (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). In recent decades, this divide has grown even more pronounced, driven by social changes such as deindustrialization, globalization, immigration, and technological advancement. This has contributed to an unprecedented division between urban and rural social classes not seen since the 19th century (Piketty and Cagé 2023; Walter, 2021). These contrasting experiences have perpetuated the rural-urban cleavage, as voters distinguish themselves at the ballot box

(Huijsmans and Rodden, 2025; Valero, 2022).

Urbanites and ruralites also perceive political institutions differently (García del Horno et al., 2024; Kenny and Luca, 2021; Lago, 2022). Political trust varies by region, with rural residents typically exhibiting lower levels of trust in the national government compared to their urban counterparts (McKay et al., 2021; Mitsch et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2021). The urban-rural political trust gap arises from factors such as social composition (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), economic structure (Ejrnæs and Jensen, 2024), regional inequality (Lipps and Schraff, 2021), service provision (Cramer, 2016), and distance from the political center (Stein et al., 2021). In recent years, the urban-rural divide has emerged as an important dimension of the ‘geography of discontent’ and a contributing factor to the broader ‘crisis of trust’ in Europe (McCann, 2020).

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However, it remains unclear whether rural distrust in politics stems from cultural factors or negative assessments of institutional performance. Adjudicating between these two explanations is difficult due to the challenges of empirically disentangling these relationships in cross-national or sub-national observational studies. Recent research challenges the relevance of a strict distinction between economic and cultural factors, demonstrating that local economic conditions significantly shape cultural attitudes (Carreras et al., 2019). Building on this insight, we argue that examining EU regional investment policies provides a valuable lens for assessing how institutional performance may help mitigate the ‘crisis of trust’ between rural and urban areas in addressing economic inequality.

Since its inception, the European Union has prioritized local economic development, prominently through mechanisms such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the EU Cohesion Policy, respectively implemented in 1962 and 1986. Following the 2004 enlargement, the EU significantly increased investments in its new member states and disadvantaged regions, aiming to facilitate their convergence with the Union’s economic average. Despite the substantial financial allocations and the visible promotion of EU symbols on funded projects, rural areas have emerged as strongholds of Euroscepticism (Kenny and Luca, 2021; Luca and Kenny, 2024; Mitsch et al., 2021; Schraff, 2019; de Dominicis et al., 2022). This scenario is seemingly paradoxical, suggesting a puzzling disconnect between financial incentives and political trust in the institutions that provide them.

Our work is also motivated by an evolving scholarly debate about the political effects of EU structural funds. Some studies suggest that they are associated with increased support for the EU and a reduction in Eurosceptic sentiments among residents of net beneficiary regions (Albanese et al., 2022; Borin et al., 2021; Dellmuth and Chalmers, 2018; Vergioglou, 2023). However, another strand of research has expressed skepticism about the direct influence of European Funds on pro-EU political behavior suggesting that their effects are heterogeneous (Fidrmuc 2019). A recent study of the United Kingdom finds that EU funding does not bolster citizens’ support for the European Union and only reduces Euroscepticism when it is associated with tangible improvements in local labor market conditions (Crescenzi et al., 2024).

This paper builds on prior research to examine whether EU funds can address the urban-rural divide in supranational trust across regions. Specifically, it explores the potential of institutional investment, implemented in partnership with local and regional institutions, to influence trust in the European Union by enhancing regional economic dynamics. It also investigates how the social composition of rural areas shapes the impact of institutional investment. To empirically explore the relationship between EU funds and institutional trust, we integrate individual-level data from 17 waves of the Eurobarometer survey across 27 countries with data on EU investments at the regional level. Overall, the analysis covers more than 370,000 individuals over seventeen years (2003–2020), and our research design benefits from both cross-national and sub-national comparisons.

This article has several contributions. We first unify compositional explanations with structural aspects in a meso-micro framework to better understand trust in supranational institutions in rural areas. Since the Brexit vote and Trump’s election, the ‘backlash’ debates have brought a surge of research about political discontent in ‘left-behind places’ and politics of ‘rural resentment’ (Cramer, 2016; Munis, 2022) for living in places that ‘don’t matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Our research on the continuum of rural responses follows a more recent urge to go beyond this simple dichotomy (Scala and Johnson, 2017; Kenny and Luca, 2021). Instead, we emphasize the intersection of socio-economic position and rural-urban context. We also contribute to the literature on institutional trust by testing the explanatory power of the institutional performance hypothesis beyond traditional macroeconomic indicators by analyzing the role of institutional investment. This approach is particularly important because, unlike wealth or unemployment - which are influenced by global economic forces -

governments may have more direct control over institutional investment, making it a potential tool for policymakers to foster trust in political institutions.

2. Theoretical framework

Political trust refers to the belief that the government delivers outcomes aligned or consistent with an individual’s expectations (Hetherington, 1998). Derived from earlier work by Easton (1975), scholars see political trust as allowing citizens to believe that their interests will be addressed, even in the absence of close oversight or scrutiny of authorities. This trust is foundational for the legitimacy of democratic systems, as it fosters cooperation between citizens and the state, enhances compliance with laws, and promotes political stability. Political trust also provides citizens with a reservoir of support for the political system during periods of dissatisfaction with specific policies or political decisions (see Levi and Stoker, 2000).

While the concept of political trust can be applied to all levels of government, this paper focuses exclusively on trust at the supranational level, with an emphasis on trust in European institutions. It is widely agreed that trust in the European Union is conceptually distinct from trust in national governments, yet scholars remain divided on how trust in national and European institutions interrelate (Harteveld et al., 2013; Muñoz et al., 2011). In recent years, a growing body of research has examined trust in EU institutions (Kritzinger, 2003; Harteveld et al., 2013; Lipps and Schraff, 2021), highlighting their unique role in the global arena. Unlike national or international institutions such as the United Nations, EU institutions are shaped by their supranational character (Tallberg, 2000). They combine competencies on policy areas that are elsewhere held at the nation-state level, together with governance that involves both the citizens (the EU Parliament) and the governments of its member states (EU Commission and the Council of the European Union, Hagemann and Høyland, 2010).

The notion of political trust can be applied to the EU context (Harteveld et al., 2013) and is crucial for the EU’s legitimacy, especially after its decline following the 2007 Eurozone crisis (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014). Differentiating EU trust from other forms of political trust is challenging as European citizens are embedded in complex multi-level governance that includes supranational, national, and local institutions (Muñoz et al., 2011). The existing scholarship can be divided into three different ways of conceptualizing trust in the EU as it relates to trust in national institutions: 1) as stemming from a single, latent underlying notion of trust or distrust; 2) as mediated through national trust, where trust in the EU is shaped by perceptions of national institutions; or 3) as distinct and independent levels of trust.

In the first view, people are disposed to be trusting or not based on individual characteristics (Mondak et al., 2017; Ojeda, 2016), regardless of the object of trust. Thus, trust in the EU and trust in the national government are expected to be highly correlated to those who distrust suffer from a supposed underlying ‘trust syndrome’ (see Newton, 2001). Rather, in the second perspective, national trust is viewed as the most salient level of institutional trust with EU trust extrapolated from support for national institutions (Anderson, 2009; Harteveld et al., 2013; De Vries 2018). Whether it is positively or negatively related is still an open question. Muñoz et al. (2011) argue that national trust is an antecedent in a compensation logic (Muñoz et al., 2011). According to this reasoning, citizens with low confidence in their national institutions are more likely to trust the EU, seeing it as preferable to dysfunctional national systems. Conversely, individuals with high trust in their national governments may exhibit lower trust in the EU due to its perceived complexity and remoteness Lipps and Schraff (2021). Finally, the third strand of the literature argues that citizens can differentiate political trust at different levels of multi-level governance (Schneider, 2017). For instance, a recent study in the Netherlands finds that political trust is level specific: “Each government within the multilevel structure is judged on their own turf, with consideration to their own merits and

independently of attitudes developed for other governance levels" (Proszowska et al., 2022). Focusing on trust in local and national institutions, Hegewald (2024) elaborates on the 'crisis of trust' narrative by arguing that it reflects a crisis of trust in national institutions specifically, rather than in the political system as a whole.

While we do not directly engage with the debate about the distinction between EU trust and national institutional trust, our theoretical framework is informed by recent evidence suggesting that citizens can meaningfully differentiate between levels of governance when evaluating political trust (Hegewald 2023). Building on this, we propose an alternative perspective: that trust in the European Union can become localized through the implementation of EU policies in close collaboration with local and regional administrations. We expect that the localization of these EU policies and investments enhance their visibility to citizens. For example, these are often accompanied by public information campaigns and include European symbols. This reinforces the EU's presence and legitimacy at the local level in rural areas. We anticipate that the impact of EU trust will be more pronounced in rural areas, where close-knit social networks and the relative rarity of new initiatives make such projects more visible and symbolically resonant. This contrasts with urban environments, where the frequent rollout of infrastructure and cultural projects may reduce their perceived novelty and significance.

2.1. Investment as institutional performance

Scholars consider economic dynamics as central to citizens' evaluation of EU institutions (Anderson and Reichert, 1995). Beyond purposes of international security, economic motivations were central to the inception of European integration and have maintained an economic focus ever since, making it reasonable to assume that citizens will assess its performance with economic criteria (Gabel and Whitten, 1997). In the national context, economic prosperity is generally expected to build political trust. However, empirical findings on the influence of macro-economic factors remain inconclusive (van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2017; Keele, 2007). This ambiguity arises because citizens assess economic performance through a complex interplay of socio-economic dynamics, making it difficult to disentangle the specific effects of macroeconomic indicators (Levi and Stoker, 2000). In contrast, the relationship may be more straightforward for European institutions, given their emphasis on investment policies. Regional investment constitutes a pillar of European Union policy, with targeted funding mechanisms such as the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) aimed at rural areas, alongside broader initiatives like the Cohesion Fund (CF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to foster job creation and development. The strong emphasis of the EU on the visibility of its economic investments, with EU symbols becoming a relatively common sight across projects in its member states, should also enhance citizens' capacity to recognize and assess the economic actions undertaken by the Union. Moreover, the implementation of these funds in partnership with local authorities and political actors constrains the ability of local politicians to advance negative narratives about the EU, particularly when regional development is heavily dependent on European funding (Vergioglou, 2023).

Building on evidence that policy design can influence political trust (Hetherington and Husser, 2012; Jeannot et al., 2023), we hypothesize that individuals living in regions that receive more funding from the EU may perceive it as a more trustworthy institution and activate support for the EU's broader institutional framework. Accordingly, we expect that.

Hypothesis 1. Living in an area that receives more EU investment funds is associated with higher trust in the EU, relative to peers in areas receiving less EU investments.

2.2. EU investment, social stratification, and the urban-rural divide

EU investment may play a pivotal role in addressing the 'European Union trust paradox' in rural areas. While electoral support for Euro-skeptic parties is stronger in rural areas on average (de Dominicis et al., 2022), research has shown that EU funding can mitigate this pattern by positively impacting per capita GDP growth (Becker et al., 2010; Albanese et al., 2022; Schraff, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose and Dijkstra, 2021). However, subsequent research suggests that these funds may also exacerbate intra-regional inequalities by increasing the incomes of individuals in high-skilled occupations (Lang et al., 2022). A study by Crescenzi et al. (2020) finds that it is not the structural funds per se that influence voting behavior, but rather the capacity of these funds to generate tangible local economic outcomes. The local economic context in which individuals live, and work plays a crucial role in shaping cultural grievances and anti-UE sentiment. Carreras et al. (2019) argues that prolonged economic hardship can foster a sense of despair, making citizens more receptive to political narratives that attribute local economic challenges to the European Union. This raises the question of the ability of European funds to reduce anti-EU sentiment, even if they alleviate local economic distress. Building on this work, we extend this 'conditional investment' mechanism to explore its implications for trust in the European Union.

The influence of institutional investment is likely to depend on two simultaneous phenomena. First, people live in different areas, and socio-tropic considerations lead to variation in their levels of trust. Second, rural residents exhibit distinct socio-economic characteristics and ego-tropic orientations, which often result in lower trust in the European Union. We expect that rural citizens' trust in the European Union will vary based on the level of EU funding received by their communities. Indeed, public awareness, through the dissemination of EU symbols, and perceptions of EU investment subsidies at the local level can constrain political actors' ability to adopt anti-EU positions when competing for elected office. This dynamic is especially pronounced in rural areas, where dense social networks can inhibit the expression of strong anti-EU sentiment when individuals are aware that members of their community benefit from funds. Overall, public opinion toward European funds is positive. According to the Flash Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2019, 73 % of respondents in the most heavily funded regions are aware of EU-funded projects in their area, and 81 % consider that these funds have a positive impact on their local community (Vergioglou, 2023). Conversely, urban residents, who may exhibit higher levels of trust in the EU for reasons articulated in previous sections, are less likely to experience significant trust gains from such investments. If a trust gap exists between urban and rural citizens, we expect that EU investments could narrow this divide. There, we hypothesize that.

Hypothesis 2. Higher levels of EU investment increase trust in the EU amongst rural residents more strongly relative to urban residents, all else being equal.

In addition to the socio-tropic impact of EU funding, the relationship between place of residence and trust in the European Union may also be shaped by individual socio-economic characteristics which produce different ego-tropic considerations. As highlighted earlier, a central pillar in political trust research is the 'winners-losers' hypothesis (Zmerli and Newton, 2017). It suggests that individuals belonging to higher social classes or with a higher educational attainment are more likely to exhibit higher levels of trust in political institutions. This empirical regularity also extends to trust in the European Union (Harteveld et al., 2013; Foster and Frieden, 2017). Given the consensus in the literature, it is unnecessary to formulate a specific hypothesis. We can confidently expect that belonging to higher social strata, whether defined by class or education, will be associated with higher levels of trust in the European Union.

While the relationship between social stratification and trust in the European Union is well-documented, the extent to which EU funds affect

trust across social strata remains less clearly understood. Although individuals in lower social strata tend to exhibit lower levels of trust in the EU on average, what happens in regions with higher levels of EU funding merits closer examination, especially when such funding contributes to intra-regional inequalities by disproportionately benefiting more affluent individuals (Lang et al., 2022).

The impact of EU funding is 'conditional' on its ability to generate positive local economic outcomes (Crescenzi et al., 2020). Trust is often fostered by improved economic performance (Levi and Stoker, 2000). Therefore, it is plausible that higher EU funding may help bridge the trust gap between social strata. This may occur similarly to the dynamics seen in the rural-urban divide. The mechanism lies in the changing nature of the 'winners-losers' hypothesis (Zmerli and Newton, 2017). If EU funds result in tangible local benefits, such as job creation through infrastructure projects, individuals who may benefit the most are those who would otherwise suffer from a 'lack of decent job opportunities' (Rodríguez-Pose and Dijkstra, 2021) – typically, those in middle and lower social strata.

To illustrate, consider two individuals with similar characteristics but living in regions that received different levels of EU investment. While an individual in a lower social stratum may feel economically dissatisfied and, consequently, trust the EU less, this may not necessarily apply to someone living in a region receiving higher investments. If individuals can witness the direct benefits of these investments – such as improved roads or renovated schools (de Dominicis et al., 2022) – or experience social proximity to workers engaged in these projects, their perception of the EU's economic performance may be more positive. As a result, it is plausible that this latter individual may exhibit higher trust in the EU than the former, despite sharing a similar position in social stratification. Beyond economic performance, investment in cultural initiatives done in collaboration with regional and local administrations may influence public perceptions of the European Union by signaling that this supranational institution is attentive to the everyday lives of communities. Examples of these are such as support for local associations, cultural institutions, or projects like the renovation of local museums or development of hiking trails.

What about individuals at the top of the social hierarchy? It is plausible that their trust in the EU could increase in areas with higher levels of EU investment, or that their trust remains stable due to 'ceiling effects'. Given their already favorable socio-economic position, the potential for an increase in their trust in the EU may be limited. In any case, their response to higher levels of EU investment will likely be less steep compared to individuals in middle and lower social strata. Therefore, we hypothesize that.

Hypothesis 3. Higher levels of EU investment are associated with higher trust in the EU, especially among citizens in the middle and lower social strata.

To examine the interplay between EU investment, social stratification, and place of residence, we can integrate the second and third hypotheses. Specifically, we seek to determine whether EU investment has differential effects depending on both social class and place of residence. These two classic cleavages, described by Lipset and Rokkan, 1967, may interact in distinct ways with EU investment. We illustrate our proposed framework integrating the rural-urban and social divides in Fig. 1. The vertical axis represents EU trust, with higher trust levels indicated as you move up the axis. The horizontal axis distinguishes between urban and rural societies, effectively capturing the urban-rural divide. Within each category (urban or rural), social stratification is depicted as a vertical division within the circles, highlighting distinctions between different socio-economic groups. A horizontal dotted line separates mean EU trust for urban populations (higher level) and rural populations (lower level), showing that rural residents tend to have lower trust in the EU compared to their urban counterparts.

We first consider the extremes: the combinations of social and geographic groups that are associated with the highest and lowest levels

of EU trust. On one hand, those who trust the EU the most tend to be individuals in higher social strata living in urban areas. This group combines being 'winners' in socio-economic terms (Zmerli and Newton, 2017) with living in areas that are closer to socio-political centers (Stein et al., 2021). On the other hand, individuals who trust the EU the least tend to have lower socio-economic status, particularly in rural areas. Indeed, they may experience a double disadvantage, as they not only live in struggling areas but also face personal socio-economic hardship. We can hypothesize that EU trust levels among individuals in more 'mixed situations' – such as high-strata citizens living in rural areas or low-strata citizens living in urban areas – will fall somewhere between these extremes. The question then becomes: how does EU investment influence these patterns of trust?

If EU investment has the potential to reduce both the rural-urban and social stratification divides in EU trust separately, it is plausible that we observe the same effects when considered together. Those with the greatest potential to increase their trust in the EU, conditional on receiving EU investments, are likely to be individuals who stand to gain the most from such investments. To be more specific, we refer to those in the lower social strata within rural areas or those who are personally disadvantaged in areas that are economically 'left behind'. For these individuals, increased EU funding may foster socio-tropic economic satisfaction with the potentially by improving access to public services, reducing geographic isolation from economic centers, or creating new local economic dynamism (de Dominicis et al., 2022; Dijkstra et al., 2020; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). These improvements may generate greater economic satisfaction with the EU, especially for individuals who lack the personal means to alleviate this collective scarcity. Furthermore, even when individuals are not direct beneficiaries, European investment in a local area can enhance trust in the Union by signaling that it is attentive to and invested in the well-being of their community. Conversely, urban dwellers in higher social strata may benefit from EU investments in lower relative terms. Their trust in the EU tends to be higher, to begin with, and any improvements resulting from EU funds may be less noticeable or impactful. Therefore, we posit that this group is likely to be the least responsive to variations in EU investment.

In 'mixed cases', individuals in higher social strata living in rural areas may react more strongly to variations in EU investment than their urban counterparts. This could be explained by the fact that rural areas are typically comprised of closely-knit communities (Muñoz et al., 2011), where individuals in the upper social strata may be more likely to develop trust in the EU based on sociotropic considerations (Harteveld et al., 2013; Foster and Frieden, 2017; Lipps and Schraff, 2021). For example, a medical doctor in a rural area might develop greater trust in the EU if they observe improvements in the socio-economic conditions of their patients, even if they are personally unaffected by these changes. In contrast, individuals in lower social strata living in urban areas may experience more immediate personal benefits from EU investments but not witness improvements on the same scale as their counterparts living in service-deprived rural areas. Thus, we posit that.

Hypothesis 4. Higher levels of EU investment are associated with higher trust in the EU among citizens in the middle and lower social strata, especially in rural areas.



Fig. 1. Average Trust in the European Union (2003–2020)
Notes: Data source: Eurobarometer data. The year 2008 is missing because the Eurobarometer did not survey that year. In this figure, trust in the European Union is calculated as the mean of responses, where ‘Tend to trust’ is coded as 1 and ‘Tend not to trust’ as 0.

3. Data

Our analysis draws on individual-level data retrieved from the Eurobarometer (EB).¹ Using respondents' place of residence, we link individual data with socio-economic data at the regional level relying on the Annual Regional Database of the European Commission (ARDECO) and data on EU budget payments published by the Commission.² In this section, we describe the data and the methods used in this paper to construct our dataset.³

Trust in the European Union. We first gathered information on individuals' trust in European Institutions from the Eurobarometer (EB) using the GESIS Data Archive (2003–2020).⁴ The level of *Trust in the European Union* is gauged through a question that was for the first time posed in 2003.⁵ This question seeks to ascertain the extent of the respondent's trust in the European Union. Respondents were presented with three options for their answer: 'Tend to trust', 'Tend not to trust', or 'Don't Know'.⁶ We coded the answers as follows: 1 = 'Tend to trust' and 0 = 'Tend not to trust'. Since this question was first posed in 2003, we confined our analysis to the period from 2003 to 2020 to assess the effects of institutional investment on trust in the European Union using the same question.

We then harmonized respondents' region of residence at the NUTS 1 level to ensure a consistent analysis across time and place, while also linking our contextual data. The decision to use the NUTS 1 level was driven by the availability of information in the Eurobarometer survey. In certain countries, such as Germany and the United Kingdom, respondents' region of residence are reported exclusively at the NUTS 1 level. Additionally, efforts to harmonize administrative units over time were hindered by changes in administrative boundaries, despite the availability of crosswalks (particularly in Greece and Ireland). While we acknowledge that relying on NUTS 1 as the unit of analysis is not ideal, we contend that it is a suitable choice for our study for several reasons. First, it enables the inclusion of nearly all EU member states (excluding Malta) and facilitates regional analysis that extends beyond simple cross-country comparisons. Second, by incorporating respondents' self-reported residential locations ('Rural area or village', 'Small or middle-sized town', 'Large town'), we address challenges associated with multiple urban centers within the same administrative unit, thereby examining the rural-urban divide in trust towards the EU. Each NUTS 1 unit encompasses both significant rural areas and at least one major metropolitan center. Lastly, while regional policy is implemented most of the time at the NUTS 2 level, this is not universally the case across EU member states. For instance, since the 2016 administrative reform, France administers regional policy at the NUTS 1 level, while in Germany, regional policy is frequently coordinated across both NUTS 1 and NUTS 2 levels.

Finally, to address the potential concern that trust in the European Union may be driven by national trust or reflect broader patterns of institutional trust, we also collected data on individuals' trust in the National Government. Additionally, when available, we gathered information on trust in the European Commission, the European

Parliament, political parties, and the national parliament. A correlation matrix of these variables can be found in Online Appendix B, Figure A.4.

Overall, the total number of respondents is 449,434 before listwise deletion and our dataset covers the time frame 2003–2020 by including 99 regions from 27 countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and the United-Kingdom.⁷ Fig. 2 depicts the evolution of trust in the European Union (EU) by country, compared to the EU average. It shows a decline in trust in the EU following the 2008 financial crisis, with some countries eventually returning to pre-crisis levels, and some significant cross-country disparities (Fig. 2). For instance, individuals in the United Kingdom report, on average, much lower levels of trust in the EU. In contrast, Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004, such as Bulgaria, Estonia, Poland, and Romania, display substantially higher levels of trust in the EU compared to their Western counterparts.

Individual controls. From the Eurobarometer, we also retrieved several individual demographic controls such as age, gender, marital status, and the type of community where the respondent lives (Rural area or village', 'Small or middle-sized town', 'Large town'). We then converted these according to the EU typology for areas in 'Urban', 'Intermediate', and 'Rural'.⁸ Using information on respondents, we computed a series of socio-economic individual controls. To account for respondents' educational attainment, we use the following question: "How old were you when you finished your full-time education?". Following previous research (Baute and Tober, 2024; Hakhverdian and Mayne, 2012; Kuhn et al., 2016), we transformed the responses into a categorical variable with three categories, where 'high education' represents individuals who completed their education at the age of twenty or more, 'medium education' represents those who completed their education between the ages of 16 and 19, and 'low education' represents respondents who completed their education at the age of fifteen or below. These three categories correspond to the completion of lower secondary, upper secondary and tertiary education. We also added two categories: 'still studying' and 'missing education'. Finally, we converted respondent occupation using the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) to include social stratification in our analysis (Salaried', 'Intermediate class', 'Small employers/self-employed', 'Working class', and 'Missing social class').⁹

Socio-economic data. To gather data at the regional level (NUTS 1), we retrieved information from the Annual Regional Database of the European Commission on population, total employment, employment by NACE2 sector, GDP, and the number of persons unemployed.¹⁰ We computed the share of people employed in the agricultural, industrial, and service sectors using the NACE2 classification at the regional level.¹¹ We then added several regional controls such as GDP per capita, unemployment per capita, and population density using the NUTS 2021 shapefile.¹² Following previous research (Gutiérrez-Posada et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), we also control for the relative socio-economic trends of a region in two ways. We estimate the difference between employment change at the regional and national levels and the

¹ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/screen/home>.

² Annual Regional Database of the European Commission (ARDECO), maintained by the Joint Research center. <https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/territorial/ardecodatabase-en>; Historic EU budget payment available at: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/stories/s/Historic-EU-payments-by-region-1988-2018/47md-x4nq>.

³ The replication package and the R code used in this paper is available on.

⁴ GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, <https://www.gesis.org/en/home>.

⁵ For more information, see Online Appendix section B.

⁶ The full question is: "I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it: The European Union".

⁷ See Online Appendix A. Table A.1. and Table A.2.

⁸ For more information on respondents' place of residence see Online Appendix section C. For the EU typology, see: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Urban-rural_Europe_-_introduction.

⁹ For more information on respondents' education, see Online Appendix section D. The rationale for including 'Missing social class' is that individuals who are unemployed or often change jobs may be unable to identify their occupation, which is associated with socio-economic disadvantages.

¹⁰ <https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/territorial/ardecodatabase-en>.

¹¹ For more details on the NACE sector See Online Appendix Section E, table A.7.

¹² <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/gisco/geodata/reference-data/administrative-units-statistical-units/nuts>.

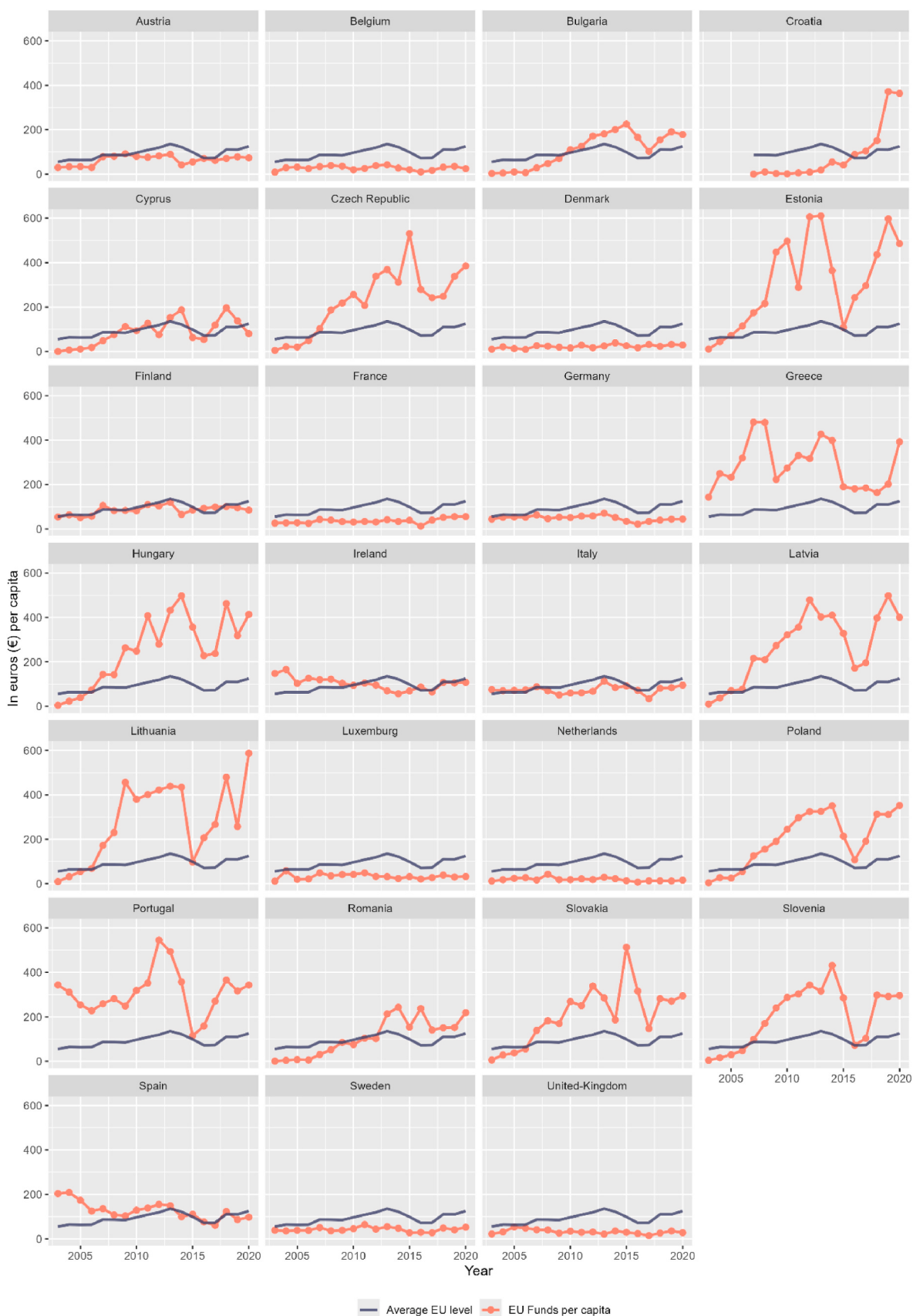


Fig. 2. Annual EU funds received by country (2003–2020)

Data source: Historic Budget payment database. EU funds received by country include the CF (Cohesion Fund), EMFF (European Maritime and Fisheries Fund), ESF (European Social Fund), YEI (Youth Employment Initiative), EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development), ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), FEAD (Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived).

difference between population change at the regional and national levels.

Historic EU budget payments data. To assess the impact of EU investment on individual trust in the EU, we used the European Commission's dataset on payments, which covers various programs, periods, and funds. We retrieved information on the annual amount received by a region from the EU and our data include the following programs: the Cohesion Fund (CF), the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Regional Development (ERDF), the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD). Fig. 3 displays the trends in EU funding received by country from 2003 to 2020.¹³ Over this period, two countries—Poland and Spain—received more than €100 billion in EU funds, while four others—Italy, Germany, Portugal, and Greece—received over €50 billion each. However, significant regional disparities exist both within individual countries and across European regions (see Fig. 3a). For example, between 2003 and 2020, Saxony in Germany received over €11 billion in EU funding, which is more than the entire country of Latvia, while the Hamburg region received only €0.5 billion.¹⁴ To account for these disparities and better understand the impact of EU funding on local populations, we adjusted the data to reflect regional differences by calculating the per capita value of EU funds received (see Fig. 3b).

In Online Appendix G. Table A.8., we provide a descriptive statistics table for all the variables used in this study.

4. Empirical strategy and results

4.1. Baseline framework

In this section, we present our empirical strategy to investigate the effects of EU funds on trust in the European Union. We first estimate the following baseline model by fitting linear probability models with country-year fixed effects for the period 2003–2020.

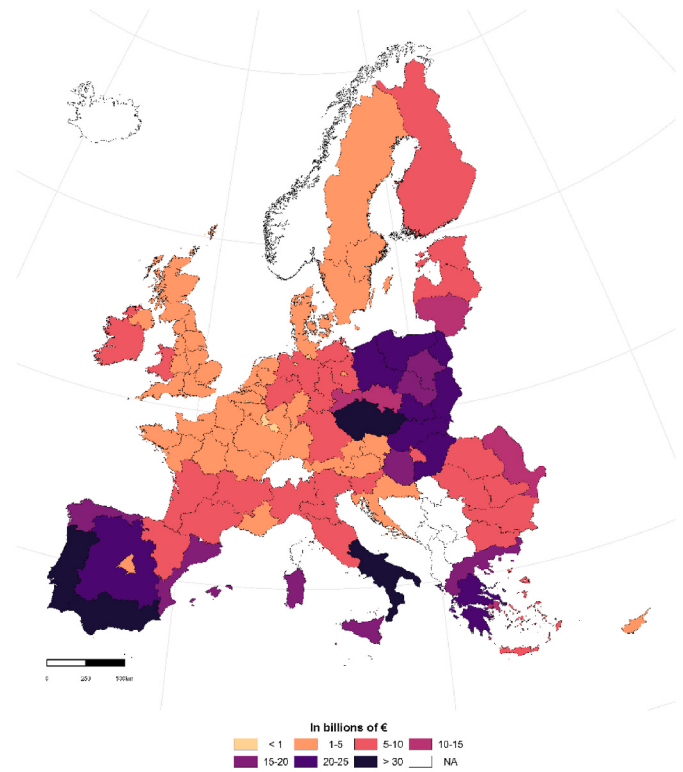
Model (1)

$$Trust_{ijkt} = \alpha + \beta_1 EUfund_{jkt} + \beta_2 Location_{ijkt} + \beta_3 Educ_{ijkt}$$

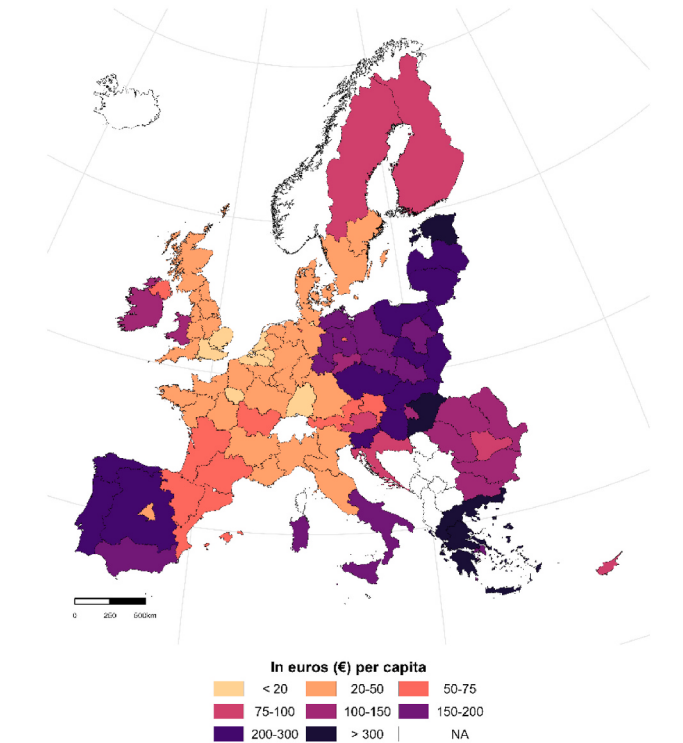
$$+ \beta_4 Social\ class_{ijkt} + X_{ijkt} + Z_{jt} + \gamma_{kt} + \epsilon_{kt}$$

Where $Trust_{ijkt}$ is a dummy variable indicating the trust in the European Union of an individual i living in a region j , in a country k in a year t ; $EUfund_{jkt}$ is average amount of EU investment per capita (in thousands of €) in a region j , in a country k in a year t ; $Location_{ijkt}$ is a categorical variable indicating the place of residence of an individual; $Educ_{ijkt}$ is a categorical variable capturing individual educational attainment; $Social\ class_{ijkt}$ is a categorical variable capturing individual social class based on ISCO classification; X_{ijkt} is a vector of individual controls including age, gender, the marital status and trust in national government; Z_{jt} is a vector of regional controls including the log population density, the log of GDP per capita, the log of unemployment per capita, share of agricultural employment, the share of industrial employment, the difference between regional and national employment change, and the difference between regional and national demographic change; and γ_{kt} is country-year fixed effects. Standard errors ϵ_{kt} are clustered at the country-year level.

Country-year fixed effects account for unobserved heterogeneity at the national level, both time-invariant and time-variant.¹⁵ This strategy



(a) Total amount of EU funds received by region (2003–2020)



(b) Average EU funds per capita received by region (2003–2020)

Fig. 3. EU funds received by region (2003–2020).

¹³ For more information on the EU payment data, see Online Appendix section F.

¹⁴ See Online Appendix F. Figure A.13.

¹⁵ In the Online Appendix, Section G. Table A.9., we provide our baseline model with various specifications (Country FE, Country + Year FE, Country + Year + Region FE, Country x Year FE, and Country x Year + Region FE).

fully controls for phenomena that could otherwise confound the focal relationship, from both the 'demand' (e.g., national socio-economic dynamics, Foster and Frieden, 2017; van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2017) and 'supply' sides of institutional trust (e.g., national political dynamics, rise and fall of specific political forces and leaders, electoral

systems, corruption scandals, Nannestad and Paldam, 1994; Levi and Stoker, 2000; Harteveld et al., 2013).¹⁶

The binary structure of our dependent variable could warrant both linear probability models (LPM) and logistic regressions. We chose to use Linear Probability Models for two reasons. First, they are appropriate to use if the smallest value of the binary dependent variable is at least 20 % (Hippel, 2015), while in our case the distribution is 49.94 % (0 – tend not to trust) and 50.06 % (1 – tend to trust). Second, there are concerns associated with logistic regressions when estimating different specifications, due to well-known rescaling issues associated with the fixed variance of the error term (Mood, 2010). These issues are exacerbated when interpreting interaction coefficients from a logistic regression model. For these reasons, we prefer to rely on linear probability models for our analysis. However, to address potential concerns about this choice, we replicate the main analysis using logistic regressions (Online Appendix H.2.). The results from the logistic regressions are consistent with those obtained using the LPM approach.

Table 1 reports the results of our baseline model (Model 1) regressing trust in the EU on a set of individual-level covariates, the amount of EU funds received by the respondent's macro-region, as well as other contextual control variables. To account for the possibility that trust in the EU may be influenced by or merely reflect broader levels of institutional trust, we include 'trust in the national government' as an additional control variable (Model 2).

Overall, there are three main patterns of interest. First, individuals living in rural and intermediate areas exhibit small but statistically significant decreases (from −2.5 % to −5 % standard deviation of a dependent variable in terms of effect size)¹⁷ in the probability of trusting the EU compared to those residing in urban areas (Table 1, Model 2).¹⁸ This finding confirms the rural-urban divide documented in prior studies (Kenny and Luca, 2021; Mitsch et al., 2021). Comparatively, this impact is relatively smaller than the influence of individual characteristics such as social stratification divides and age group. The differences in terms of education (High vs. Low), social class (Salariat vs. Working Class), and age (<29 vs. >60) range between 11 % and 15 % of a standard deviation in the dependent variable. These results are in line with previous studies showing that urban-rural gaps are often smaller than individual-level differences (Maxwell, 2019). Second, the observed gradients in EU trust based on social stratification and education levels are consistent with previous research (Baute and Tober, 2024).¹⁹ Finally, the amount of EU funding received by a macro-region is positively associated with trust in the EU, yielding a small but statistically significant effect²⁰ and supporting Hypothesis 1.²¹ However, these patterns may not influence all individuals uniformly. To investigate this variability, we employ an interaction model to examine the heterogeneous effects of these factors, using place of residence, education, and social class as moderators.

4.2. Heterogeneous results

In this section, we investigate the mechanisms through which European investments affect trust in the European Union by estimating the following model:

¹⁶ We considered relying on Multilevel Models for individuals nested within region-years nested within regions (again with country-year fixed effects), but the degrees of Intraclass Correlations are around 0.5 %, thus ten times lower relative to the 5 % that is considered as the least conservative threshold for multilevel models to be warranted (Garson 2019).

¹⁷ Coefficient/standard deviation of the dependent variable. For Rural: −0.024/0.5.

¹⁸ See Online Appendix G, Figure A.16, for the marginal effects.

¹⁹ See Online Appendix G, Figure A.17 and Figure A.18 for the marginal effects.

²⁰ A standard deviation (SD) increase in EU funds is associated with a 4 % increase in EU Trust.

²¹ See Online Appendix G, Figure A.15, for the marginal effects.

Table 1

The determinants of Trust in the EU (2003–2020) – Baseline model.

Model	1	2
EU Funds per capita (in thousands of €)	0.177** (0.060)	0.148** (0.053)
Place of residence (Baseline: Urban)		
Intermediate	−0.013*** (0.003)	−0.012*** (0.003)
Rural	−0.025*** (0.004)	−0.024*** (0.003)
Education (Baseline: High Education)		
Medium Education	−0.060*** (0.003)	−0.042*** (0.003)
Low Education	−0.095*** (0.004)	−0.073*** (0.004)
Still Studying	0.063*** (0.005)	0.046*** (0.005)
Missing Education	−0.094*** (0.008)	−0.070*** (0.004)
Age (Baseline: < 29 years old)		
30–39	−0.046*** (0.004)	−0.042*** (0.003)
40–49	−0.066*** (0.004)	−0.061*** (0.004)
50–59	−0.075*** (0.004)	−0.072*** (0.004)
>60	−0.051*** (0.005)	−0.071*** (0.004)
Social Class ESEC5 (Baseline: Salariat)		
Intermediate Occupations	−0.046*** (0.003)	−0.029*** (0.003)
Small Employers/Self-Employed	−0.042*** (0.005)	−0.032*** (0.004)
Working Class	−0.086*** (0.003)	−0.058*** (0.003)
Missing Social Class	−0.035*** (0.004)	−0.030*** (0.004)
Self-Reported Gender - Male	0.006** (0.002)	0.0002 (0.002)
Marital Status - Married/In Union	0.024*** (0.002)	0.012*** (0.002)
Log GDPper capita by region	0.078*** (0.015)	0.042*** (0.012)
Log population density by region	0.011* (0.004)	0.009* (0.004)
Log Unemploymentper capita	0.015 (0.014)	0.006 (0.011)
Share of industrial employment by region	0.003*** (0.0008)	0.002*** (0.0007)
Share of agricultural employment by region	0.004*** (0.0007)	0.002*** (0.0007)
Difference Population change	0.015* (0.007)	0.005 (0.007)
Difference Employment change	0.003 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)
Trust in National Government		0.433*** (0.006)
Country x Year FE	Yes	Yes
N	390,118	378,688
R2	0.10	0.25
Within R2	0.02	0.19

Notes: Standard errors are clustered by Country x Year. Linear Probability Models with Country-Year Fixed Effects. Data: Eurobarometer (2003–2020), Annual Regional Database of the European Commission (ARDECO), Eurostat, and EU budget payment data by the EU Commission. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Model (2)

$$Trust_{ijkt} = \alpha + \beta_1 EUfund_{ijk} * \beta_2 Moderator_{ijkt} +$$

$$+ X_{ijkt} + Z_{jt} + \gamma_{kt} + \epsilon_{kt}$$

In this model, the moderator variable is alternately location, education and social class. This approach allows us to investigate how these factors interact with European funding to affect individual's trust in the EU. The

other two remaining variables are included in vector X_{ijkt} .

Table 2 reports the results of our model (2), which examines the interaction between EU funds received by a macro-region and three moderators: respondent's location (1), education (2), and social class (3). First, the interaction between location and EU investment is not statistically significant, suggesting that the role of EU investments may not differ between rural and urban areas. Fig. 4 illustrates this pattern by depicting the marginal effects at the means with 95 % confidence intervals. While the variation of EU funding across macro-regions does not appear to affect trust in the EU for urban residents (the 95 % Confidence Intervals overlap between the 5th and 95th percentiles of EU funds per capita), some heterogeneity is evident among rural residents. Specifically, a small gap in trust emerges between urban and rural residents when EU investments are particularly low. However, this gap diminishes and becomes statistically insignificant as the level of EU investment increases. This finding provides support for Hypothesis 2, suggesting that the place of residence conditions the relationship between EU investments and trust in the European Union, although the effect size remains small.

On the other hand, as shown in Table 2 (Models 2 and 3), the interaction terms between EU investments and social stratification characteristics – education and social class – are both statistically significant. Fig. 5 and 6 further demonstrate similar patterns for these two dimensions of social stratification: the gradients in EU trust shaped by education or social class are most pronounced in regions where EU investment levels are particularly low (around 15 %–18 % SD in terms of effect size). However, at higher levels of EU investment, individuals with a tertiary education or belonging to the salariat class exhibit minimal differences compared to other groups. In contrast, those in the middle or lower strata have starker differences. Beyond the 75th percentile of EU investment distribution, the social stratification gaps in EU trust diminish progressively, becoming statistically insignificant at the 95th

Table 2

The determinants of Trust in the EU (2003–2020) – Heterogeneous effects.

Model	1	2	3
Specification	Int. Location	Int. Education	Int. Class
Interactions: EU Funds per capita x Location (Baseline: Urban)			
Intermediate area x EU Funds	0.033 (0.020)		
Rural area x EU Funds	0.042 (0.024)		
Interactions: EU funds per capita x Education (Baseline: High Education)			
Medium Education		0.063*** (0.017)	
Low Education		0.095*** (0.024)	
Still Studying		–0.014 (0.029)	
Missing Education		–0.056 (0.045)	
Interactions: EU funds per capita x Class (Baseline: Salarial)			
Intermediate Occupations			0.077*** (0.019)
Small Employers/Self-Employed			0.005 (0.031)
Working Class			0.076*** (0.021)
Missing Social Class			–0.018 (0.025)
Country x Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	378,688	378,688	378,688
R2	0.25	0.25	0.25
Within R2	0.19	0.19	0.19

Notes: Standard errors are clustered by Country x Year. Linear Probability Models with Country-Year Fixed Effects. Data: Eurobarometer (2003–2020), Annual Regional Database of the European Commission (ARDECO), Eurostat, and EU budget payment data by the EU Commission. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

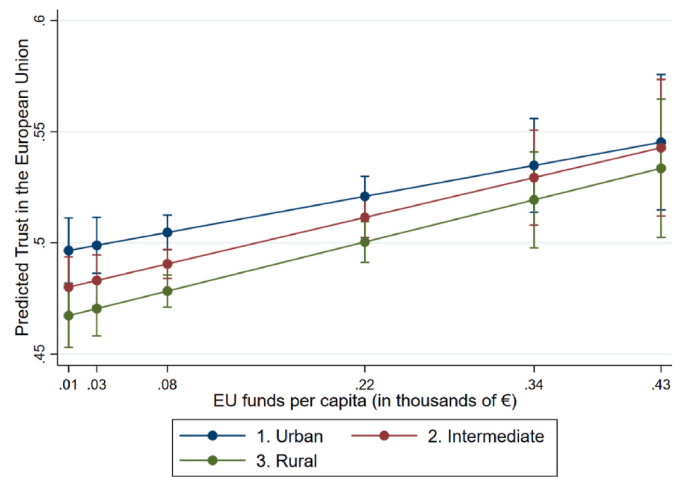


Fig. 4. Marginal Effects at the Means of Location and EU Funds

Notes: Marginal Effects at the Means with 95 % Confidence Intervals, computed after interactions in Table 2, Model 1, from Linear Probability Models with Country-Year Fixed Effects. Data: Eurobarometer (2003–2020) and Annual Regional Database of the European Commission. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

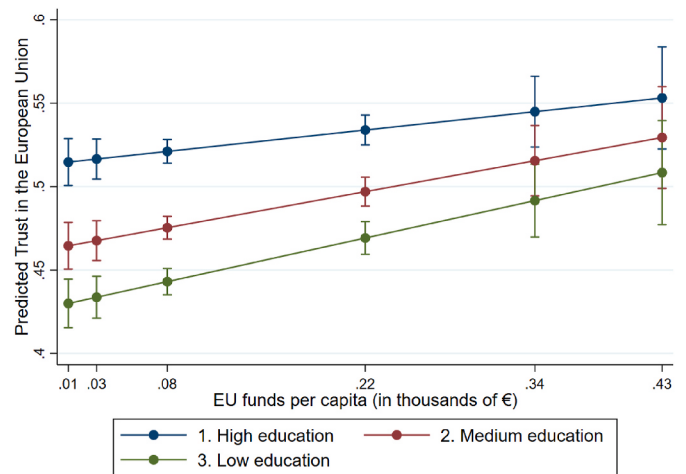


Fig. 5. Marginal Effects at the Means of Education and EU Funds

Notes: Marginal Effects at the Means with 95 % Confidence Intervals, computed after interactions in Table 2, Model 2, from Linear Probability Models with Country-Year Fixed Effects. Data: Eurobarometer (2003–2020) and Annual Regional Database of the European Commission. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

percentile. These results provide strong support for our Hypothesis 3 which posits that higher levels of EU investment at the regional level are associated with higher trust in the EU among citizens in the middle and lower social strata.

What happens if we combine the urban-rural divide and the social stratification gaps? Fig. 7 and 8 report again the marginal effects of the three-way interactions between EU funds, place of residence, and social stratification (see Online Appendix G. Table A.10 and A.11). In these models, the patterns for hypotheses 2 and 3 are combined. Although social stratification gradients are most pronounced at the lowest levels of EU investment (with similar effect sizes to the previous interactions), individuals with tertiary education or belonging to the salariat class in urban areas show the least reaction in terms of EU trust. While there appear to be some differences graphically between individuals in upper strata across urban and non-urban areas, the coefficients for the three-way interactions are not statistically significant. A similar pattern

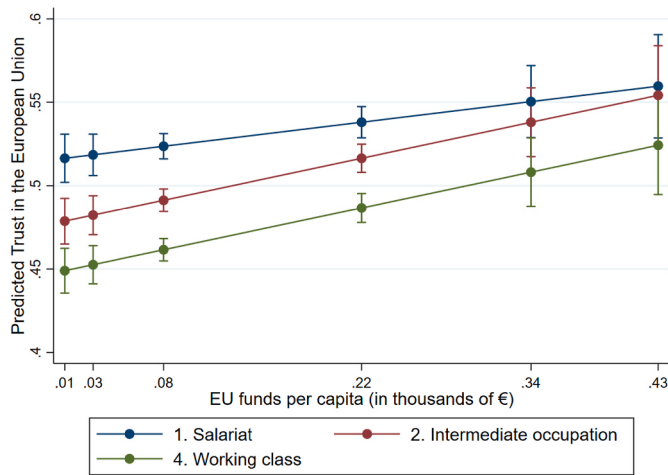


Fig. 6. Marginal Effects at the Means of EU Funds and Social class
Notes: Marginal Effects at the Means with 95 % Confidence Intervals, computed after interactions in Table 2, Model 3, from Linear Probability Models with Country-Year Fixed Effects. Data: Eurobarometer (2003–2020) and Annual Regional Database of the European Commission. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

applies if we rely on education instead of social class as the key social stratification parameter.

The interpretation of such a finding is that the differential impact of EU funds across social strata does *not* differ across urban and rural areas and is substantially homogeneous everywhere. In line with Hypothesis 3, citizens within the working class and with low education react the most to the variation in EU Funds. But *contrary* to Hypothesis 4, while

there is some heterogeneity in the joint EU funds and stratification pattern across urban and rural areas in the direction we posited, the differences are not statistically significant. We discuss further implications of these findings in the conclusive section.

4.3. Robustness checks

To strengthen our analysis and confirm our findings, we conducted several robustness checks. First, we replicated our models using trust in the national government as the dependent variable instead of trust in the EU (see Online Appendix H.1.). The results differ notably: EU funds show no direct effect on national trust (Online Appendix, H1. Table A.12 and Figure A.19.). Additionally, interactions with moderator variables are not statistically significant. As illustrated by the marginal effects, EU funding does not appear to reduce urban-rural or social stratification divides in national trust (Online Appendix H.1., Table A.13–14 and Figure A.20–24).

Second, we tested our model using an alternative dataset: the European Social Survey (ESS). As the ESS does not include a measure for ‘Trust in the European Union’, we employed a closely related dependent variable available in both datasets: *Trust in the European Parliament* (Online Appendix H.3., Table A. 20–21). While not identical, this variable offers several advantages: it enables comparison across the two datasets and allows for analysis at both the NUTS 1 and NUTS 2 levels (Online Appendix H.3., Table A. 22–23). The results reveal no direct effect of EU funds on trust in the European Parliament, and the interactions with moderator remain statistically insignificant. This applies to both the Eurobarometer and the ESS datasets. The lack of significance for the trust in the European Parliament, while the patterns for trust in the broader EU suggests that we should treat these two forms of trust as empirically related but distinct: considering the complex supranational

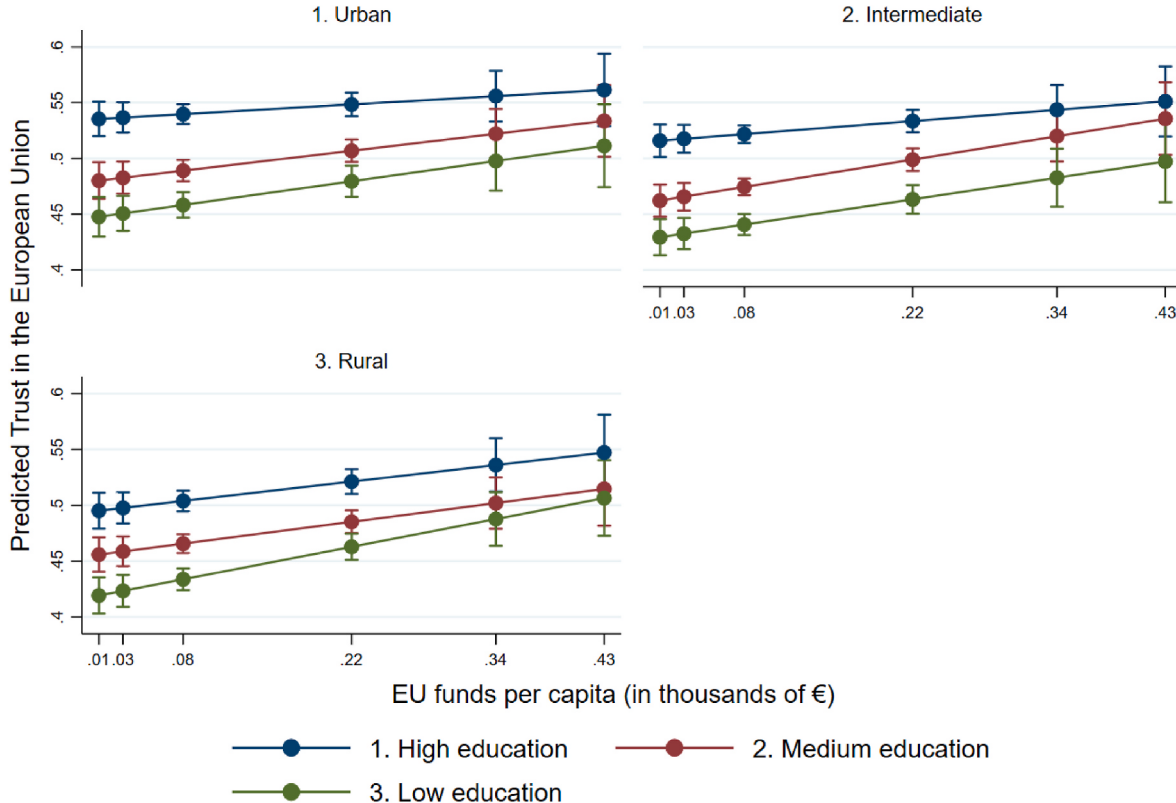


Fig.7. Marginal Effects at the Means of EU Funds and Education and Location
Notes: Marginal Effects at the Means with 95 % Confidence Intervals, computed after interactions in Online Appendix G. Table 10, from Linear Probability Models with Country-Year Fixed Effects. Data: Eurobarometer (2003–2020) and Annual Regional Database of the European Commission. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

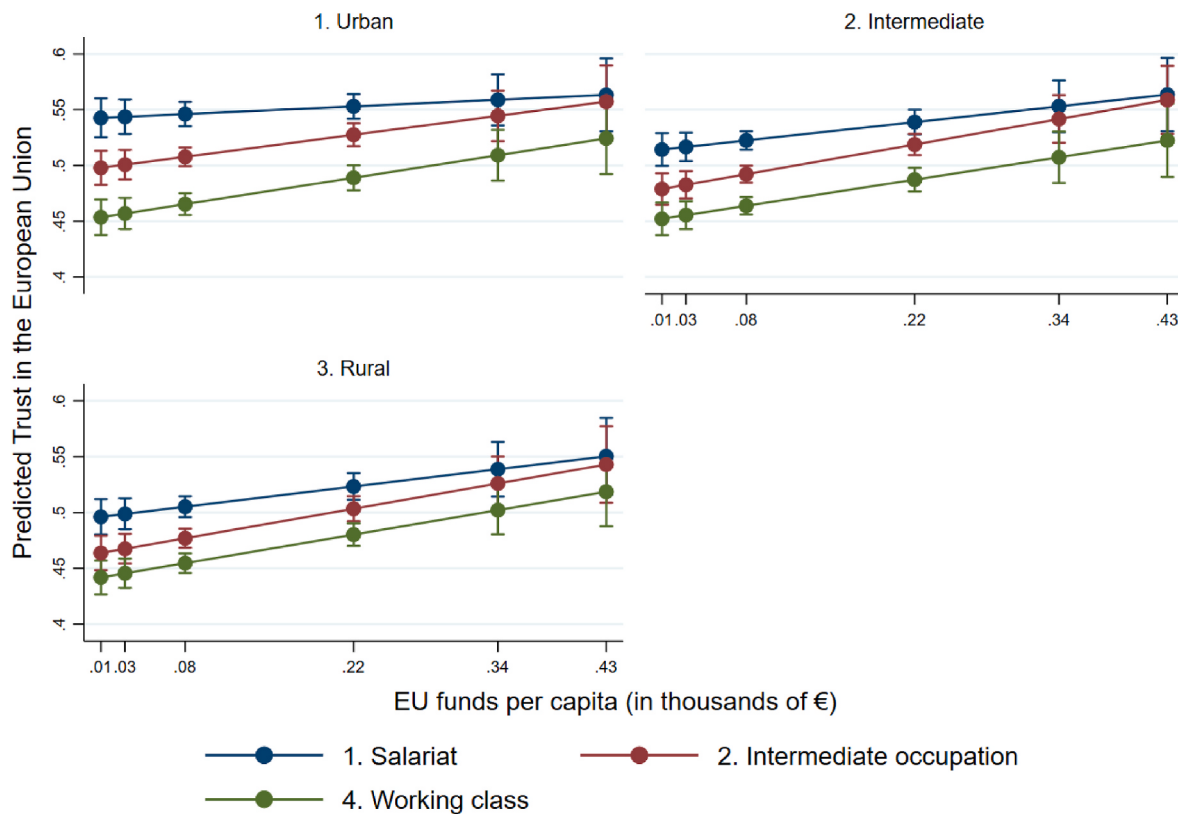


Fig. 8. Marginal Effects at the Means of EU Funds and Social class and Location

Notes: Marginal Effects at the Means with 95 % Confidence Intervals, computed after interactions in Online Appendix G. Table 11, from Linear Probability Models with Country-Year Fixed Effects. Data: Eurobarometer (2003–2020) and Annual Regional Database of the European Commission. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

architecture of the EU, it is possible that citizens differentiate between the European Union as a broader political entity and its institutional manifestations which encompass the Commission, the Council, and the European Court of Justice beyond the Parliament. This argument is substantiated empirically by the correlation coefficient between Trust in the European Union and Trust in the European Parliament: the correlation is only 0.59 (Online Appendix Figure A.4.) showcasing that these two forms of trust are clearly related in the same direction but far from being one and the same.

Finally, recognizing that EU funds function as investments with inherent time lags between disbursement and project implementation, we conducted three additional robustness checks. We examined the effect of EU funds received one, two and five years prior to the survey wave (Online Appendix H.5. Table A. 29–31 and Figure A. 31). We also focused on economic controls which may proxy for the greater economic opportunities as the main mechanism of EU funds. The interaction between EU funds and GDP per capita is significant and negative, indicating that the effect of EU funds decreases in wealthier regions (as GDP per capita increases), suggesting a diminishing return of EU funds in higher-income regions. The interaction between GDP per capita and location indicates that economic prosperity has a stronger impact on EU trust in urban regions. Yet, when we interact within the same specification EU funds with social stratification and GDP per capita with social stratification, we still have positive and statistically significant coefficients for the former with the lower social strata categories, corroborating our main analysis results. In all three cases, the results remain consistent with our main findings (Online Appendix, H.4., Table A. 24–28).

5. Discussion and conclusion

How do our statistical analyses fare in terms of the aims of this study? Broadly, our results show that, as expected, EU funds foster trust in the European Union. However, this impact is heterogeneous. It is slightly stronger (but not significant) for individuals living in rural rather than urban areas. On the contrary, EU funds can powerfully mitigate the gap in EU trust in terms of social stratification: the increases in EU funds lead to more pronounced improvements in EU trust among individuals in the middle and lower social strata compared to those in the upper social strata. Thus, our results show that institutional investment has the potential to mitigate social stratification divides in trust in the European Union, effectively closing the trust gap at high funding levels (beyond the 75th percentile). However, when examining the intersection of these divides, our analysis reveals that EU funds do *not* have a differential impact in terms of social stratification across urban and rural areas: while there are some slight differences in the direction posited by Hypothesis 4, these are not statistically significant. This finding demonstrates that the joint conditional relationship on EU trust driven by EU funds across different social strata applies homogeneously across the urban, intermediate, and rural areas.

Thus, if we look at the results for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 4, one may conclude that the EU funds have no power in bridging the rural-urban divide in EU trust. However, this is not strictly the case, due to the differential composition of rural and urban areas in terms of social stratification. As evidenced in Tables 3–4, individuals in the working class and with low education are more represented in rural rather than urban areas according to the Eurobarometer responses. More specifically, those in the working class are amongst the 24,1 % of those reporting living in an urban area, 29,2 % of those reporting living in an intermediate area, and 34,3 % of those reporting living in a rural area. In

Table 3

Distribution of education across location of residence.

Location	High education	Medium education	Low education	Still Studying	Missing education	Total
Urban	36.9	39.4	12.3	9.2	2.2	100
Intermediate	31.7	42.6	16.3	7.2	2.3	100
Rural	24.4	44.9	22.6	5.6	2.5	100

Table 4

Distribution of social classes across location of residence.

Location	Salariat	Intermediate occupation	Small Employer/self-employed	Working class	Missing occupation	Total
Urban	24	36.2	4	24.1	11.7	100
Intermediate	20.6	34.7	5.1	29.2	10.3	100
Rural	16.2	29.7	9.9	34.3	9.9	100

contrast, those within the salariat class are 24 % of the urban population, 20,6 % of the intermediate area population, and 16,2 % of the rural population. Similarly, the proportion of those with low education is higher in the rural (22,6 %) rather than urban (12,3 %) areas, while the proportion of those with higher education is symmetric and contrary (24,4 % in rural, 36,9 % in urban). This implies that the rural-urban divide in EU trust is important and may be bridged by EU funds through the social stratification effect, which is not different in terms of statistical significance across different areas. Rather than through a structural mechanism, the rural-urban divide can therefore be mitigated through a compositional mechanism: by increasing the EU trust of those in the middle and lower social strata, who are more likely to be found in rural rather than urban areas.

Overall, our results are particularly noteworthy given that our analysis considers both individual and confounding factors. These include regional economic dynamics – such as GDP per capita, unemployment per capita, employment trends, and the share of industrial and agricultural employment as well as demographic variables, such as population density and population change. These controls enable us to account for variations in economic development and population decline, factors identified in the geography of discontent literature (Díaz Lanchas et al., 2021; Vasilopoulou and Talving, 2024). Additionally, our analysis incorporates the important dimension of trust in national government (Lipps and Schraff, 2021). Finally, by conducting the same analysis with trust in national government (Online Appendix H.1.), we also showed that EU trust is not a function of national trust nor a reflection of an underlying trust in institutions more broadly. Our robustness checks find that EU funds mitigate the rural-urban and social stratification divides in trust only toward the European Union.

For illustrative purposes, our results are most pertinent for areas receiving minimal EU funding (below the 10th percentile) and exhibiting the most pronounced rural-urban and social stratification gradients in trust toward the EU. Examples of such areas are Île-de-France (Paris) region, Northwest Italy, Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, and Berlin region in Germany, as well as the northern region of the Netherlands. In contrast, in our model less affected regions are those with a particularly high amount of EU funding (above the 90th percentile), where differences in EU trust are negligible, including the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern region in Germany, Galicia and the central region of Spain, the Południowy and Południowo-Zachodni regions in Poland, continental Portugal, and the region of Transdanubia in Hungary.

Our findings provide encouraging implications for building political trust in rural areas. Such places constitute an important synthesis point for political trust research. According to our study, place-based political disenchantment is less entrenched than often believed. Scholars tend to focus on either the positive end of the spectrum and the determinants of individuals who trust (Bertou 2019), or on the negative end of the spectrum, by focusing on citizens who distrust political institutions in a deterministic manner, typically depicted as disparaging politics (Hart, 1978) or critical (Norris, 1999). Instead, our findings imply a more

optimistic interpretation: some citizens are more likely to strengthen their trust when more institutional investment is directed to their region, through either ego-tropic or socio-tropic motivations. These statistical findings contribute to theoretical debates about how political institutions can rebound from trust deficits (see Citrin and Stoker, 2018) and, in particular, continue to the role that institutional performance can play. While some dismiss macro-economic performance as being invisible to the common citizen, our research suggests that tangible forms of investment may be more perceptible. This study joins the call to bring ‘institutional performance back in’ to political trust research (see Kumlin and Haugsgjerd, 2017). There is still an open debate regarding which aspects of economic performance are pertinent (see Citrin and Stoker, 2018) and our study weighs in by demonstrating how local structural investment is a close-to-home avenue for increasing political trust amongst disadvantaged citizens.

Our study implies that citizens in rural areas are not inherently misanthropic, angry, or resentful. While there is some degree of lower trust in the EU associated with living in a rural area (see Table 1), an important component of the rural-urban gap comes from compositional effects, as citizens with lower educational attainment and within lower-skilled occupations are disproportionately concentrated in rural areas. While this is a considerable component of the rural-urban gap, citizens within lower social strata are however rationally responsive to European investment in their region through structural funds: where such investment is higher, socially stratified gaps in EU trust are mitigated if not fully bridged by those in lower social strata trusting more.

We speculate that this is caused by *both* egotropic and sociotropic concerns, as citizens within lower social strata may trust the EU more by on one hand benefitting directly from greater economic opportunities, or by witnessing investments in better infrastructure or cultural activities that benefit the community at large. Such findings are remarkably in line with the notion of a rational voter if we accept that it is rational to expect governments to steward a prosperous economy. Our results are also of interest to scholars of political behavior, particularly those who have been documenting the ongoing crisis of democratic legitimacy (Schmidt, 2013). If being ‘left behind’ socio-economically is associated with stronger support for Euroskeptical forces (de Dominicis et al., 2022; Schraff, 2019), it is noteworthy that EU institutional investment may mitigate it by building trust in this supranational institution. Thus, although the institutional investment mechanism does not operate through the type of place of residence directly it does through social stratification thus bridging the rural-urban divide in EU trust indirectly due to the greater proportion of low-strata citizens living in such areas.

Our article has several limitations which are worth noting. The first limitation concerns the issue of self-selection into urban or rural areas, which is likely influenced by unobservable individual characteristics that may also shape trust in European institutions. While our analysis controls for key observable factors such as age, occupation, or education, it cannot account for personality traits or other underlying factors that are beyond the scope of quantitative surveys. A second limitation

involves the potential for reserve causality. European structural funds may be strategically allocated to regions identified by policymakers as strongholds of anti-European politics. We cannot rule out this endogeneity given the nature of our dataset, which relies on repeated cross-sectional surveys. As a result, our findings reflect differences between individuals rather than changes in an individual's trust over time. Employing longitudinal data techniques in future research could address unobserved heterogeneity at the individual level (such as socialization), thereby approaching more closely the standards of causality. In the present paper, however, the changes we do observe are changes in regions over time, which we have aimed to observe over the longest possible period as the data allow.

It is also important to acknowledge that the period covered by our study encompasses both the 2007/8 financial crisis and its aftermath, the Sovereign Debt crisis, as well as the 2015 so-called 'Syrian refugee crisis', both of which cast doubt on the competence of the European Union. The Eurozone crisis is widely acknowledged as having eroded political trust (Kroknes et al., 2015; Foster and Frieden, 2017), while the empirical evidence about the impact of migration remains inconclusive. Some studies suggest that certain types of foreign migration undermine political trust, but findings related to the 2015 refugee crisis are mixed. For instance, Economou and Kollias (2024) found that it did not significantly affect trust in the EU. The effect of these crises likely varied across European regions, which may hold implications for our study. Regions characterized by high levels of migration and economic insecurity are more likely to vote for Eurosceptic parties (Nicoli and Reinl, 2020). While our analysis includes regional economic controls (especially change in the labor market or unemployment) to account for the financial crisis, assessing the impact of the refugee crisis poses greater challenges, given that asylum and refugee governance is predominantly centralized at the national level.

Finally, our data do not permit us to capture the diversity within rural areas of a given macro-region or their nuanced relationship with the European Union. The concentration of European investment, such as the protection and development of natural areas or the construction of infrastructure (roads, bridges, tunnels, cycle paths), may cultivate a localized sense of place that is not identifiable within our dataset. In Normandy, for example, substantial investments in the transformation of Mont Saint Michel might influence trust in the EU among residents of the surrounding rural areas but not among others in the region. It would therefore be interesting to conduct local surveys to investigate the intricate relationship between investment and citizens' trust in their institutions and to see whether their policies help to reduce the rural-urban divide.

Some of these limitations can be overcome in future research, by either generating new data targeted to specific areas or by exploiting single-country longitudinal datasets even if this would be at the expense of being able to generalize beyond the case of interest. We strongly encourage scholars to dig deeper by conducting single case studies of countries that deviate from the general pattern we have uncovered in our findings. While there have been numerous advantages to our double comparative design (countries x regions), it limits the level of inference to specific national contexts where other dynamics are at play. Another fruitful avenue might be to explore the diversity of rural areas (such as farmed flatlands, mountain areas, etc.) which foster different cultural and social institutions.

To conclude, European institutional investment has the potential to bridge the rural-urban divide in trust in the EU, but this may happen by bridging the *social stratification* divide, due to the tight geographical and social connection between these two cleavages. While living in a rural area predicts lower trust in the European Union, our study implies that a positive economic performance, in the form of institutional investment, shows considerable capacity to (re)build trust in supranational institutions among those that are socially struggling or not well off. Rural areas appear to be politically responsive to policy initiatives that encourage development and growth, through socio-economic

composition effects, suggesting that political discontent across the bottom strata of society, which are also more present in rural areas, can be alleviated.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Paul Maneuvrier-Hervieu: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Leo Azzollini:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Anne-Marie Jeannet:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.102987>.

Data availability

The replication package of this study is available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/YBKVCH>.

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