23

Blue signs on the road

European Union funding and citizens' feelings towards membership[1]

Alice Cunha

The European Union (EU) is a world in itself, with a wide variety of areas of intervention, policies and programmes. Among these, not only do EU structural funds – European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds), in their current designation – play an important part, they constitute moreover EU's main investment policy as well.

European funds have their origin at the very beginning of the European integration process. The Preamble of the Treaty of Rome (1957) highlights that the signatories were "anxious to strengthen the unity of their economies and to ensure their harmonious development by reducing the differences existing between the various regions and the backwardness of the less favoured regions". Also to that end, and specifically in order to improve employment opportunities for workers in the Common Market, the Treaty established the very first European fund, the European Social Fund (article 123). From that date onward, the history of European funding was in the making. That history is embodied in the creation of several funds (as shown in Table 23.1), all five of which are now included in the ESI Funds. Each decade has witnessed developments and reforms in EU funding, but the core, structure and purposes of the funds remain the same to today.

European funds interact with all areas of European integration, including some addressed in this book, such as agriculture (Gravey et al., 2021), transport and infrastructure (Dyrhauge, 2021), science and research (Ulnicane, 2021; Lieberman, 2021), culture (Bohas, 2021) and student mobility (Reilly and Sweeney, 2021). In fact, to different extents, all policy areas interact with, contribute to and/or benefit from European funding. Almost everything is related to EU funding.

European Union studies combine a mix of disciplines, from political science, history and geography, to law and economics and even literature. This interdisciplinary richness of contributions to the field has nevertheless neglected, or at least hindered, the development of a number of research topics. European funding is one of these.

The topics of structural and investment funds, regional disparities and economic and social cohesion have progressively entered Community jargon, which, however, is only mastered by a group of specialists, and remains to this date largely separate from the vocabulary of European integration scholars and Europeans in general. So far, economists and geographers (and, to a lesser extent, political scientists) have been at the forefront of regional studies and EU funding's

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Table 23.1 European funds

European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (1962), replaced by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) on 1 January 2007
European Regional Development Fund (1975)
Cohesion Fund (1994)
European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF, 2014)

Source: Author's own compilation

rationale, distribution, implementation, assessment and current and future prospects. They focus on concrete structural and investment funds, particularly mapping territorial inequalities and measuring the impact of structural funds on the regional and national growth process.

At the opposite end, European integration historians have not acquired a significant interest (if any) in this topic of research. Despite being a niche research area, paradoxically this field has a huge research interest and potential, with an enormous variety of topics to study and a multitude of single case studies, cross-programmes and cross-countries to analyse, as well as a vast amount of documentation and a huge number of archives to explore. And it may well be the next research challenge in the field of EU studies.

The state of the art shows that, in comparison with other topics, there has been very little analysis undertaken in this field of research, despite some important contributions (Polverari, Bachtler and Van Der Zwet, 2018; Cunha, 2017; Bachtler, Mendez and Wishlade, 2016; Piattoni and Polverari, 2016; Bachtler *et al.*, 2016; Mendez and Bachtler, 2016; Bachtler and Michie, 1994). Some literature focuses on EU funding prior to the accession, in the context of pre-accession assistance (Cunha, 2019; Antonopoulos, Eleftherios and Bachtler, 2014; Bailey and Propis, 2004), others on the relationship between EU funding and support given to European integration (Chalmers and Dellmuth, 2015), mostly focusing on partisan politics and voting on the recipient side (Schraff, 2019; Dellmuth, Schraff and Stoffel, 2017; Schraff, 2014; Dellmuth and Stoffel, 2012; Bouvet and Dall'Erba, 2010; Kemmerling and Bodenstein, 2006).

This chapter makes two contributions to existing literature. First – and since the *Handbook of European Integrations*' rationale is on neglected topics in the field – it uncovers a potentially niche area (the history of EU funding) and contributes to existing research on EU funding and its relation to European citizens' feelings towards EU membership. Second, it outlines the connection between EU funding and support for EU membership by analysing the amount of funding received in connection with the turnout in European Parliament (EP) elections. It combines descriptive and empirical evidence. The first section sums up the history of EU funding, while the second focuses on the empirical analysis. For this purpose, I have chosen a sample of four Member States (Italy, Ireland, Portugal and Poland) and compiled a dataset that covers the four from their respective date of accession until 2019, using Eurobarometer data (= 460 entries) and the official results of the EP elections. I calculated country-level averages of support towards EU membership and what effect EU funding has had towards support for EU membership.

Each European-funded project is obliged, in its communication strategy, to explicitly refer to the funding received from the EU and to mention the respective fund. The *blue EU signs on the road* (or in any other construction or website) are thus the most noticeable and emblematic element of any EU-funded project but are also a metaphor for the advertisement of EU funds among citizens. Is this visibility matched by a growing awareness and, moreover, further engagement in European integration?

My claim is that there seems to be no significant relationship between EU funding and a positive perception of European integration and that regardless of the amount of EU funds received, it has contributed neither to positive perception of European integration in general nor to turnout in EP elections.

The beginning of the history of European funds

Broadly speaking, European Union funds were designed either to implement a policy (EAGF, EMFF) and/or to correct unequal development among Member States, as well as to reduce social inequalities (ESF, EDRF, Cohesion). Hence, EU funding is simultaneously tangible evidence of solidarity between Member States and something that offers concrete benefits (e.g. a road, training, Wi-Fi). Despite their longevity and achievements, the history of each fund is yet to be written, and I am precisely starting this research with that focus and that particular aim in mind in order to unveil a novel and interesting topic of "European integrations", as the editors of this volume call it.

In a nutshell, the European Social Fund started operating in 1960 and initially aimed to improve labour market adaptability and workers' mobility. It took only a decade for the fund to be reformed for the first time in 1971, when national criteria were replaced by Community criteria for the selection of projects, and again in 1983, with a policy shift oriented towards young workers, including the improvement of the educational system and vocational training. The ESF remains the EU's main instrument for human capital and for the support of national public policies focused on employment, productivity and social exclusion.

Following the common agricultural policy reform, the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund, set up in 1962 (EEC Council: Regulation No 25 on the financing of the common agricultural policy, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, L 030, 20/04/1962), was designed under the overarching reform of rural development and the improvement of agricultural structures specifically to promote agricultural productivity, to stabilise the agricultural market and to increase the salaries of the sector but also, since 1968 and when needed, to decrease the agricultural population by means of re-training and retiring. Further reforms were introduced in 1985 in order to increase agricultural productivity, and nowadays the fund remains closely connected to agriculture and rural development.

The original Member States were rather similar in their economic development. In the first two decades of European integration, disparities between regions within Member States were not addressed by a proper European fund. The EDRF was created to decrease disparities between regions through developing infrastructure and competitiveness in various economic sectors. The plan for establishing the European Territorial Development Fund (later named EDRF) was originally put forth at the Paris Summit in 1972, at a time when the first enlargement round was about to take place, and addressed some regional problems, for example, the United Kingdom's prosperous Southeast and its industrial Northwest. In light of that, Member States decided to coordinate their regional policies and to create a Regional Development Fund, set up three years later in 1975 ["Statement from the Paris Summit (19 to 21 October 1972)", pp. 4–5; Council Regulation (EEC) No 724/75 of 18 March 1975 establishing a European Regional Development Fund, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, C 36/12, 09/02/79]. At that point and in the following years, the EEC did not have its own regional policy objectives and priorities, but from 1984 onwards, it became more independent, and from 1999 onwards, the funds' fundamental goals were determined by and included the promotion of economic and social cohesion and the elimination of regional disparities in the areas of infrastructures, technology and environment. Currently, regional policy is financed by four funds, and their operations were coordinated for the first time during the 1988 reform, facilitating the effective use of overall funding.

Similar concerns appeared with the uneven development of Member States – at a time when the EEC had not only doubled its members but some among them had dropped below the Community average economic development, for example, Ireland, Greece and Portugal – thus, the Single European Act (1987) established a policy of economic and social cohesion designed to help the least well-off countries rise to the challenge of the Single Market (this was the big late 1980s–early 1990s project), which then led to a major reform of the EEC's structural funds (1989). Later, under the Maastricht Treaty (1992), cohesion became a priority objective of the European Union, initiating a brand-new history of EU funding.

This entailed the creation of the Cohesion Fund in 1994 [Council Regulation (EC) No 1164/94 of 16 May 1994 establishing a Cohesion Fund, *Official Journal*, L 130, 25/05/1994]. With a view to promoting growth, employment and sustainable development in the fields of transport, energy and the environment, it applied to Member States with a GDP per capita income below 90% of the EU average at that time, which included the previously mentioned Member States and Spain. All states from the Central and Eastern enlargement rounds have also been beneficiaries of this fund, which was planned to be a catching-up tool for new Member States. Together (excluding Ireland and Spain and including Italy), they have formed the "Friends of Cohesion" informal group for lobbying in favour of a high percentage of funding for cohesion.

Finally, the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund [Regulation (EU) no 508/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulations (EC) No 2328/2003, (EC) No 861/2006, (EC) No 1198/2006 and (EC) No 791/2007 and Regulation (EU) No 1255/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council, *Official Journal*, L 149/1, 20/05/2014] is in close connection with and is the main financial instrument of the common fisheries policy, whose core goal is to achieve a sustainable exploitation of fishery resources while ensuring both economic and social sustainability of fishery-dependent areas and innovation in the sector.

The Delors I Package (1988), on the reform of financing of the Community budget, also introduced four principles which underpinned the structural funds and are still in force under the EU's cohesion policy. They are:

Table 23.2 Structural funds' principles

Additionality	*EU funds do not* substitute for Member State's funding but provide additional funding
Concentration	*of resources for the poorest regions and countries, of efforts in targeting* investments on key growth priorities and of spending
Partnership	between European, regional and local, public and private actors
Programming	of multi-annual national programmes

Source: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/how/principles/

The first reform of the structural funds, undertaken in 1989, combined these principles with five priority development objectives. These included the promotion of the development of the regions whose per capita GDP was less than or close to 75% of the Community average; the converting of the regions, frontier regions or parts of regions seriously affected by industrial decline; the combating of long-term unemployment; the facilitation of the occupational integration of young people; and the reform of the common agricultural policy. They were reduced to three in the 1999 reform: the development and structural adjustment of regions whose development was lagging behind, economic and social conversion of areas facing structural difficulties and development of human resources, and later complemented in the 2014–2020 programming period with 11 thematic objectives, which included improving the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises, promoting climate change adaptation and enhancing efficient public administration (https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/what/glossary/t/thematic-objectives).

EU membership and access to funds

Parallel to the history of European funding, each Member State has its own history regarding the process of joining the EU and how it has managed its membership. Despite separate paths and times in the history of European integration, they have shared common concerns and goals, one of which has been to make the most out of membership.

Italy is a founding Member State, one of the biggest in surface (302,073 sq. km) and in population (more than 60 million). As a founding Member State, it has participated in all decision-making processes, including those related to the creation of European funds, fund reforms and distribution. It has been one of the net contributors to the EU budget, but it is also one of those Member States that have benefited the most from EU funding.

Ireland is a small Member State (69,797 sq. km, with less than 5 million inhabitants) that joined the former European Economic Community in the first enlargement round, in 1973, alongside the United Kingdom and Denmark. Despite being one of the smallest Member States, it has the second-highest GDP per capita in purchasing power standards (PPS, 129%). From the Irish point of view, the country started its engagement with the EU on the right foot, since the result of the 1972 referendum on EU accession was an overwhelming 'Yes' vote (83.1%, against 16.9% 'No' vote). The country has received over €42 billion (net) of European funds since it joined the EU (Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Available from: www.dfa.ie/brexit/getting-ireland-brexit-ready/brexit-and-you/benefits-of-irelands-eu-membership/) and remains one of the EU Member States most efficient at applying for, absorbing and using EU funds [Court of Auditors, Annual Report on the Implementation of the Budget (2019/C 340/01), *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 340/3, 08/10/2019].

With 18 years in between, both Portugal in 1986 and Poland in 2004 had their respective 'return to Europe' after decades under the rule of authoritarian regimes. The Iberian and the Central and Eastern enlargement rounds are often compared regarding their transition to democracy and their need to foster economic development. After accession, both countries have proved to be well-integrated Member States that have complied with the obligations of European integration.

Portugal is not a newcomer to European integration and has been a Member State for 35 years now, but it is a peripheral and small country of 92,226 sq. km and just over 10 million inhabitants, with one of the lowest GDPs per capita in PPS (76%). Poland, on the other hand, is the sixth-largest Member State considering both its surface at 312,679 sq. km and its population of almost 38 million, but its GDP per capita in PPS is only of 71% of the EU average (https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/figures/living_en). Still, if Poland had not joined the EU, some estimate that its GDP would be at the same level as Ukraine's (Kolodziejczyk, 2016: 24). Fifteen years in, the economic and social benefits resulting from Poland's EU membership are clear. Conversely, the country is also facing a democratic backsliding, which does not play to its advantage among its European partners and which even led to the procedures initiated in

2017 by the European Commission against the country on basis of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, for its handling of the judicial system.

Access to and distribution of EU funding has been in close connection with the negotiations and agreement on each Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) – the EU "budget" – since 1988. For the 2021–2027 MFF, the European Council reached an agreement in July 2020 for €1074.3 trillion, plus the approval of the new recovery instrument Next Generation EU, with an allocation of €750 billion. This overall budget of €1824.3 trillion aims to help the EU to rebuild after the COVID-19 pandemic and to support investment in the green and digital transitions, three current top priorities of the EU. Despite being a post-coronavirus EU budget, it represents little over 1 percentage point of EU gross domestic product. Still, the amount allocated for EU funding is quite important for most recipients (in a pre- and post-coronavirus scenario), including our sample states Ireland, Italy, Poland and Portugal. The system of redistribution of the EU budget has been based not only on pure economic needs but also "partially on 'power politics', in which smaller Member States are able to use the disproportional allocation of Council votes to their advantage" (Mattila, 2006: 48). The EU budget can be analysed in a variety of ways: net contributions vs. receipts per Member State simply, as percentage of GDP, per capita. Either way, richer countries are always on the contributor side and poorer countries (such as Portugal and Poland) on the recipient side.

Even though national contributions to the EU budget are not the only index to measure the costs and benefits of EU membership, a simple analysis of these parameters shows that with the exception of an eight-year period (1976, 1978–1984), between 1976 and 2016, Italy's net balance with the EU has been negative, ranging from a small difference (–4 to over –180€ per capita). That means that the Italians almost invariably have paid more than they have received from the EU. Ireland illustrates quite the opposite, as it has always had a positive net balance with the EU, except for a period of four years (2009, 2013–2014, 2016), with high net income, especially in the 1990s. Portugal even exceeds this by always having been a net receiver, with a minimum of 150€ of net income per capita most of the time. The same applies to Poland since 2004, whose positive net balance increased until 2014 and decreased after under the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2014–2020 (source: www.money-go-round.eu/).

There have been five MFFs to date, and the sixth will start in 2021. Whereas the first MFF (also called Delors Package I, 1989–1993) gave priority to the establishment of the Internal Market, and the second MFF (Delors Package II, 1994–1999) focused on social and cohesion policy and the introduction of the single currency, the third MFF (or "Agenda 2000", 2000–2006) concentrated on EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe. More recently, the fourth MFF (2007–2013) gave priority to sustainable growth and competitiveness, and the latest (2014–2020) aimed for investment and sustainable and inclusive growth. All four Member States took part in and benefited from both, as shown in Table 23.3.

Table 23.3 Fund allocations per MFF and MS (in EUR) from 2007 to 2020

	Italy	*Ireland*	*Portugal*	*Poland*
MFF 2007–2013	€27.96 b.	€750 m.	€21.41 b.	€67 b.
MFF 2014–2020	€42.77 b.	€3.36 b.	€25.79 b.	€86 b.

Sources: Total EU Allocations per MS For 2007–2013 available at: https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2007-2013/Total-EU-Allocations-Per-MS-For-2007–2013/4taz-54g9; for MFF 2014–2020, ESI Funds Country Factsheet, available at https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/FR/policy/what/investment-policy/esif-contribution/

Under the current MFF, Italy has been allocated €42.77 billion from ESI funds, which represents almost 10% of the total fund allocations for the same period. Only Poland has received more than double. Under the previous MFF (2007–2013), Italy had the third-biggest ESI income after Poland and Spain.[2]

EU funds to Poland have regularly increased, from €2.47 billion in 2004 to €17.12 billion in 2014, which is partially explained by the high degree of fund absorption (almost 70%). In the financial framework for 2014–2020, the funds allocated to Poland are of approximately €119.5 billion, and the country has become a major net beneficiary of EU funds among the 2004-accession Member States, and even among the totality of Member States, since 2011, which makes Poland the "champion" of EU funding beneficiaries. Since accession and as of the end of February 2019, the financial flows from the EU to Poland have been substantial: Poland has received a total amount of €162.9 billion from the EU budget and has contributed only a total of €53.4 billion to the EU budget, which brings the balance to over 109.5 billion in Poland's favour.[3]

This EU funding track record has enabled the country to take full advantage of its membership, which translated, for example, into hundreds of projects related to the development of road and energy infrastructures; environmental protection; and financial and technical support to business, administration and R&D. Given its importance for the Polish economic growth and development, a separate ministry responsible for the use of EU funds was even created in 2005 (former Ministry of Regional Development, current Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy). This example is also in line with literature that argues that new Member States have been more effective at spending some EU funds (the case of ERDF) than old Member States, namely due to their investment in administrative and government capacity and also because of their experience of pre-accession conditionality (Tosun, 2014).

(Funding) awareness and engagement with European integration

The European integration process has largely been an elite-driven project, but over the years (particularly after Maastricht), public attitudes towards the EU have become increasingly important and decisive for the future of the EU, as put forward by the post-functionalist theory (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Public support for European integration is a multi-dimensional concept (Boomgaarden et al., 2011), which includes both the "emotional" and the utility. Whether citizens benefit from integration or not, they have an opinion on the EU (Hobolt, 2014), and the ones that benefit the most should be, in theory, the ones most supportive of the EU.

Recent data show that continued support for EU membership goes with a strong belief (68%, EU27 average) that Member States have benefited from being part of the EU, equalling the highest level recorded since 1983 (Spring Eurobarometer 2019), whereas a lower number (61%) consider that EU membership has been a good thing, while 27% consider it neither good nor bad.

Specifically focusing on our sample, I find variations and mixed results (Figure 23.1).

The most puzzling result is that of Italy, which is the Member State with the second-lowest level regarding the country's EU membership as a good thing, while 41% of Italians consider it neither good nor bad. Portugal and Poland are on the other side of the spectrum (69 and 68%, respectively), but still quite far from Ireland (83%), one of the "top 3" Member States on this matter, after only Luxembourg and the Netherlands. In this survey, Ireland is presented as the "optimism champion in the EU".[4]

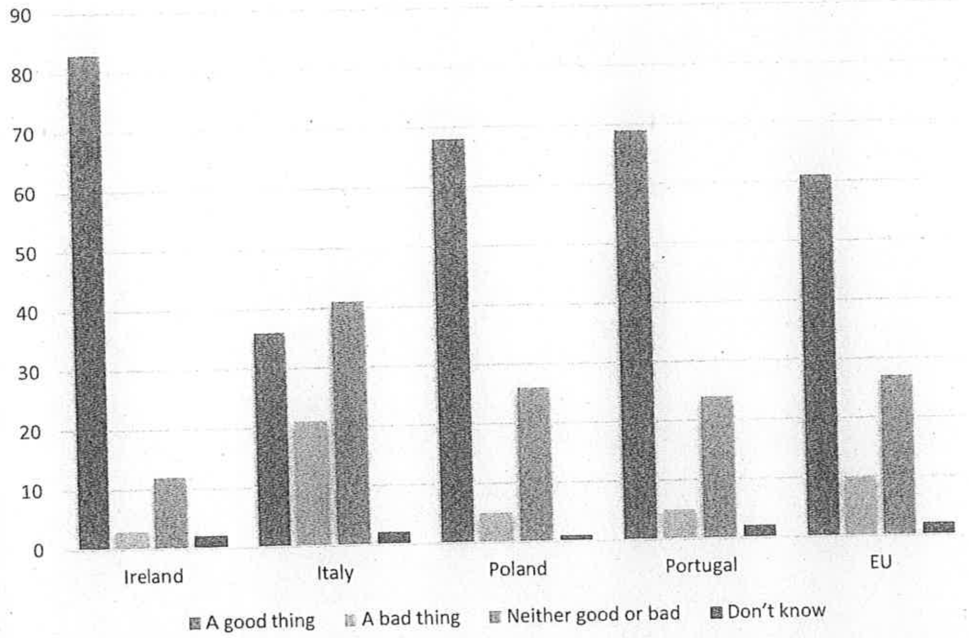

Figure 23.1 Membership

Each Member State has its particular goals within the EU, and ultimately the EU is a forum of permanent discussion and negotiation where members try to maximise utility in terms of economic and financial benefits, improved geopolitical security and/or increased political power within the EU. The recent MFF negotiations once again highlighted a well-known clash between the richer northern Member States – the so-called "frugal countries" (Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden), which are net payers into the EU budget – and the southern and eastern Member States, which are net beneficiaries and which are also due to be among the biggest beneficiaries of the recovery package. In the end, the price that each country pays and the benefits that it gets from EU membership are accounted for, and public opinion is not immune to their respective government's narrative on their participation in the EU, thus also influencing the results of the Europeans' feelings towards EU membership.

Questioned whether their respective countries have benefited from EU membership (Figure 23.2), Ireland, Poland and Portugal have similar results (ranging from 88% to 82%) in favour of a positive result, whereas Italy presents a quite divided result between those who consider that the country has not benefited (49%) against those who think that it has (41%). Therefore, being an old Member State is not the point, since countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark also show a different result. What, then, makes Italy a special case study? The economic crisis, pressure from illegal migration and then the refugees may have contributed.

A long-term analysis[5] (1989–2011), on the other hand, shows several variations.

By 1989, Italy had already been a Member State for 31 years and, at the time, membership was seen as a "good thing" by a very high percentage of Italians (79%). This has, nevertheless, significantly dropped over time (from 79 to 41%), reaching its lowest point in 2008, by the time of the financial crisis. Those who considered it as a "bad thing" ranged from 2 to 17%. Also

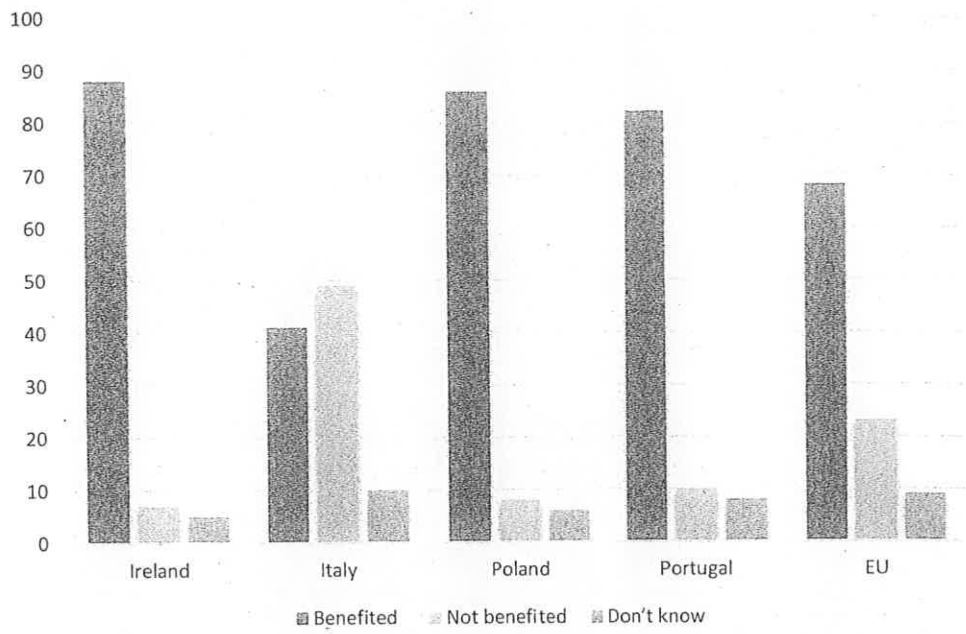

Figure 23.2 Benefits

Figure 23.3 Italy

interesting to note is that the respondents who considered that membership has been "neither good nor bad" have also grown over time. They have more than doubled and were, in 2011, very close in percentage (36%) to the ones who considered it beneficial. The same decline happens regarding the percentage of those who consider that Italy has benefited from EU membership over time: those who consider that Italy "benefited" start at a high percentage, dropping almost by half in the end; those who consider that Italy did "not benefit" start at a low percentage (12%) and increase until reaching 41% in 2019.

Ireland is a different case.

Membership has always been seen as a "good thing", never dropping below 63%, even during the financial crisis, while the number of Irish citizens who consider it "bad" never rose to higher than 12%. The same applies regarding whether the country has benefited from EU membership (77–88%) or not (3–13%).

Portugal, on the other hand, has mixed values.

In the first years after accession, membership was considered a "good thing" (70–72%), but after the Maastricht Treaty and the country's transitional period, figures drop tremendously, reaching a low point in 1995 and going even lower in 2011. The same applies regarding whether the country has benefited. It is also important to note that the percentage of those who considered EU membership a "bad thing" has also increased substantially over time, reaching 30% in 2011, only 9 points from those who considered it a "good thing". The percentage of undecided voters is noteworthy. Comprehensibly, the crisis years have shown the most negative results, easily justifiable by the strict measures the country was under, such as cuts in salaries and pensions and also those imposed by the EU.

Finally, Poland also shows mixed opinions.

EU membership has been seen as mostly good, with several variations, while less than 10% consider it bad, but around 30% are undecided. The trend is the same regarding the question

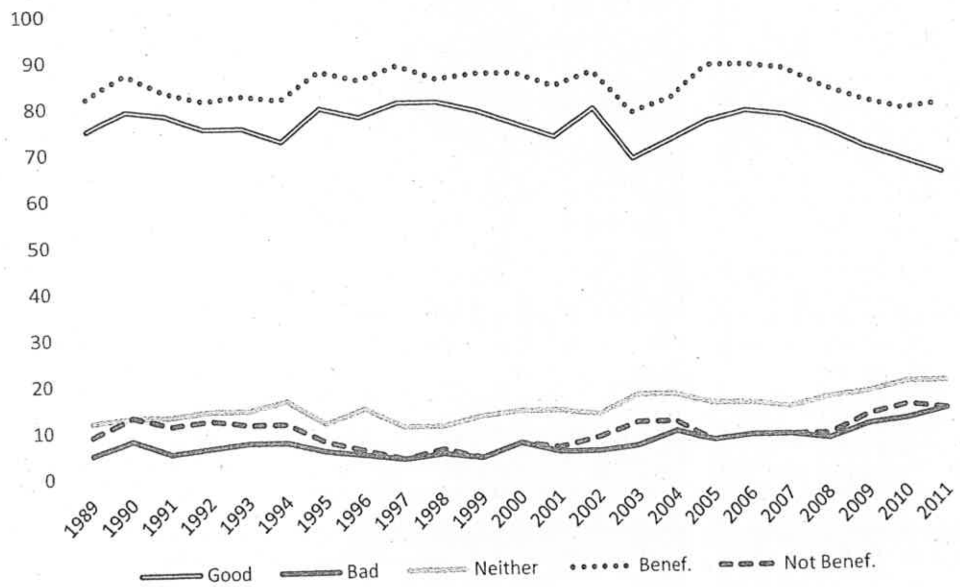

Figure 23.4 Ireland

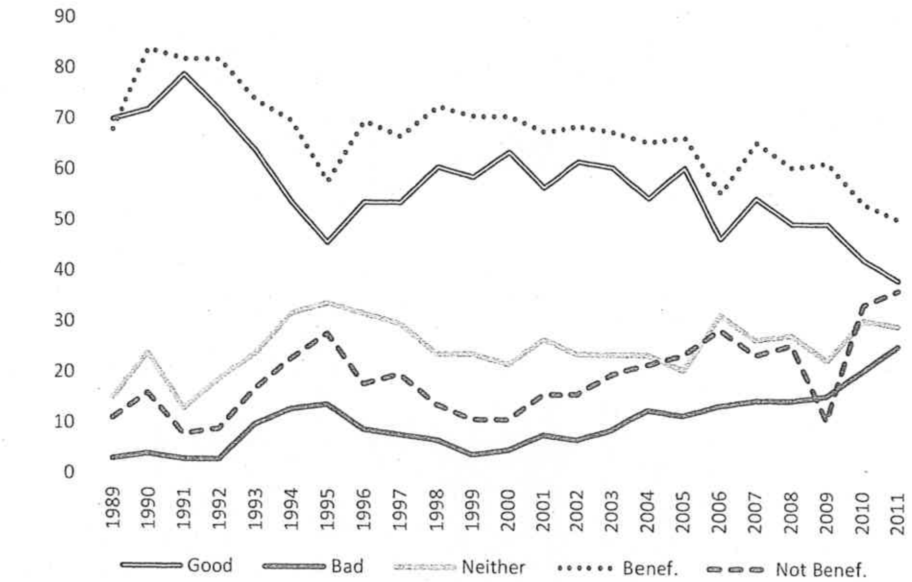

Figure 23.5 Portugal

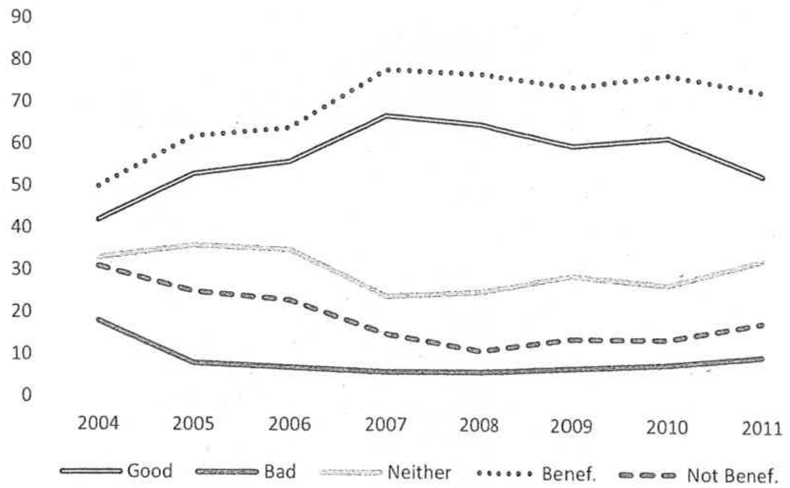

Figure 23.6 Poland

of whether EU membership has been beneficial. It is probably still too soon to assess the Polish case, since Poland has only been a Member State for 15 years, and the data only include 8 of those years.

All of the Member States selected for this study have benefited from membership to various extents, including investments in agriculture, industry and services, training and creating jobs, building infrastructure, the free movement of people and goods and consumer benefits, to mention some. From the perspective of policy makers, who aim at fostering European awareness and the importance of the EU and EU membership, ESI funds may also act as a policy tool to achieve that purpose by directly impacting at the local, regional and national community level with concrete projects aiming to improve citizens' working and living conditions (e.g. water supply, a new school building, better transport, work conditions). The way people perceive ESI funds, the way national governments promote public awareness (or not, or to what extent, or capitalise on it for their own political benefit) and the way European institutions manage to demonstrate their contribution to the economic and social development of all Member States may not be in line with the impact that EU membership may have had throughout time, countries and sectors of activity.

A blue EU sign on the road is important, but it does not settle whether citizens feel more closely engaged with the EU or explicitly measure its value. Recent data showed that awareness of EU-funded projects is above 60% in nine Member States, all newcomers/from the Central and Eastern enlargement round, including Poland with the highest percentage (82%) – as shown in Figure 23.7 – not only amongst new Member States but among all of them. This may suggest that EU funding is very present in the daily lives of Poles. On the other extreme are long-term and more developed countries such as Denmark, Belgium, Sweden and Germany, whose populations are less aware of such projects (Flash Eurobarometer No. 480, 2019).

The same does not apply to Portugal and Ireland, whose populations are less aware of EU-funded projects, ranging from 25% (Ireland) to 38% (Portugal). At the Community level, there is a higher number of citizens unaware of any EU-funded project in their regions and/or cities than of citizens who are aware. In Italy, on the other hand, the result is more balanced between people who are informed and those who are not.

As for the perceived impact of those projects, one must take into consideration that only those who responded "yes" on the previous question were asked to answer this separate question. That made it possible for Ireland to stand out with a 95% positive rate, the same for Portugal at a still very high 78% and for the EU average of 81%. As for Poland, awareness and positive

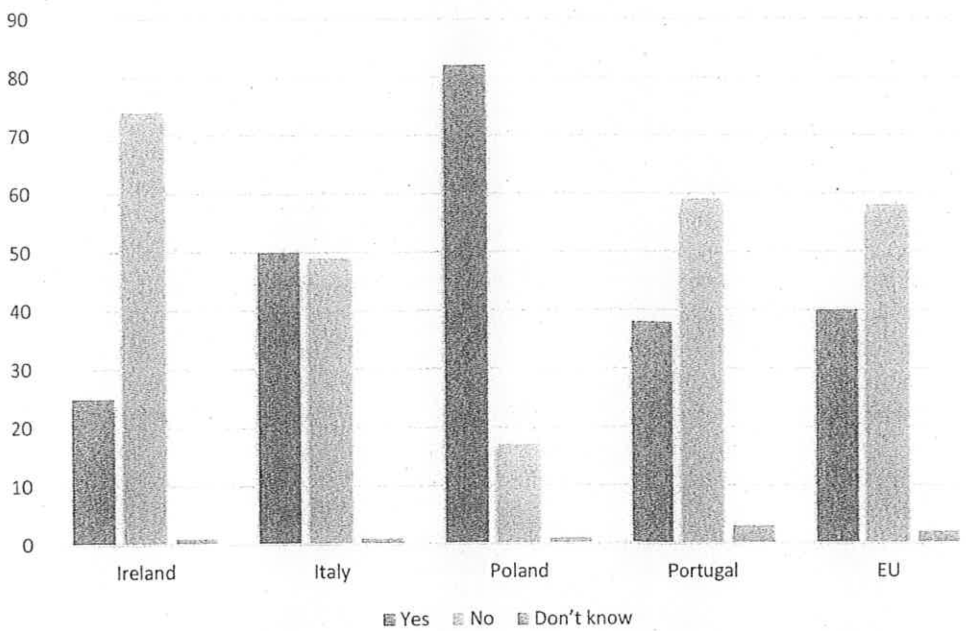

Figure 23.7 Awareness of EU-financed projects

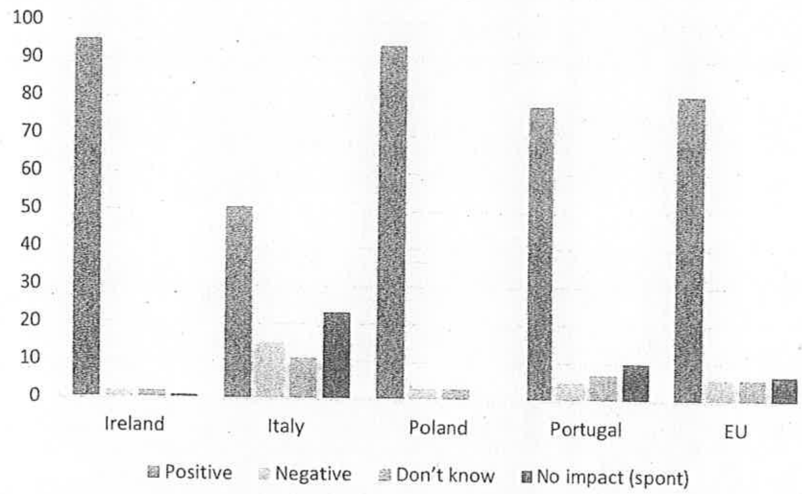

Figure 23.8 Impact of EU-funded projects

impact figures are close and very high (around 80%). Negative answers are residual among all, except in Italy, with a rate of 15%.

Figure 23.8 shows that in all cases, except for Italy, the great majority of citizens who know of the existence of EU-funded projects (and who are aware) tend to find their impact positive. But does this awareness translate into engagement with European integration?

One way to measure that engagement with the European Union is the turnout in the European elections. Despite the increased powers of the European Parliament and the fact that it is the only directly elected EU institution, EP elections remain second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), namely because they are considered less important than national elections. Usually the campaigns for the EP focus on domestic issues and discuss European affairs to a lesser extent. Voters use them to express their dissatisfaction with national parties and/or the ruling party in government and expect some kind of effect/punishment at national level. As a direct effect, EP elections have a lower turnout.

In the May 2019 EP elections, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and the centre-left Socialists & Democrats (S&D) lost seats across the Member States, while liberals, Greens and Eurosceptic populists all made gains, and the 50.66% turnout was actually the highest in 20 years. This increase was a combination of more young people voting, the state of the economy and the environment and even Brexit.

Despite the possibility for national parties and politicians to use European funds to buy votes (Dellmuth, Schraff and Stoffel, 2017), that correlation is not linear. Schraff (2019) argues that effects of EU funding on electoral behaviour vary across regions, that Eurosceptic voting is related to an insufficient compensation of the losers of EU integration and demonstrates that the probability of a Eurosceptic vote is highest under insufficient compensation among middle-income regions.

In none of the selected sample of Member States is voting in the European elections compulsory, and they elected (in the 2019 elections) a quite different number of Members of the European Parliament (MEP): 76 for Italy, 52 for Poland, 21 for Portugal and 13 for Ireland.

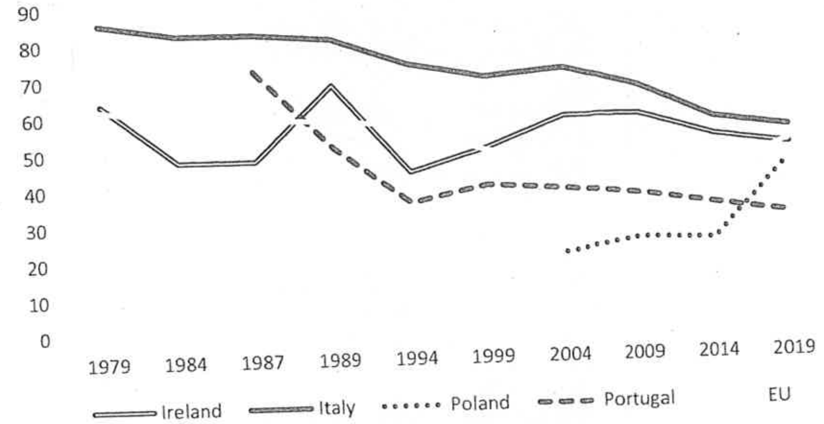

Figure 23.9 Turnout in European Parliament elections, by country, by election, in %

If we pay attention to the turnout by country, some conclusions can be drawn. In three out of four Member States, turnout has decreased over time; in the case of Italy, very significantly (85.65% in 1979 to 54.5% in 2019); in the case of Portugal, strongly between 1987 and 1994, due to recent membership enthusiasm, and thereafter with slight variations (39.93% maximum to 30.75% minimum); Ireland is the case in which greater variations have occurred, with several ups and downs, as shown in Figure 23.9, varying from 68.78% (its highest peak in the 1989 elections) to 43.98% in the following elections.

Poland is the exception, since it has more than doubled its turnout but only recently in the 2019 EP elections. Still, it presents the lowest result of the four Member States. In the first three EP elections where Poland has participated, the turnout was between 20.87 and 23.83%. This is in clear contrast with newcomers in previous enlargement rounds (e.g. Ireland, Greece, Portugal and Spain, Austria and Finland), who had a high turnout in their respective EP elections. Interestingly, that was not the case with the newcomers from the 2004 enlargement round, with two sets of major exceptions (Malta and Cyprus; the former has compulsory voting) and Lithuania and Latvia (turnout around 40–50%), whose turnout rates were generally low, below 30%. Also puzzling is that in the latest EP elections, turnout has considerably increased in most of those Member States, especially in Poland, with an increase of more than 21%, which can in part be explained by the fear of a populist and far-right rise.

While Italy has always been above the EU average, Ireland has fluctuated above and below, and both Portugal and Poland have been persistently below the EU average. The first EP elections in Portugal in 1987 were the only ones that stood above the EU average, quite significantly, in fact, which can be explained not only by the fact that these were the first EP elections in the country but also and mostly because they were held simultaneously with the legislative elections.

Key findings and avenues for future research

A comparison with the last two MFFs – to include the four Member States on an equal basis, since all were part of it – shows that all of them received more ESI funding, with high increases in the amount allocated, which, however, neither had a significant impact on people's feelings towards the EU nor resulted in any significant increase in EP election turnout, except for Poland. Under the next MFF 2021–2027, from only cohesion policy allocations, the four Member States combined will receive a total of almost €142 billion, plus other grants and access to loans under the framework of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (2021–2024).

If connected – awareness of the importance of EU membership and participation at the EP elections (engagement) – the results do not line up. In Ireland, an average of almost 75% consider membership a good thing, and even more (83%) find it beneficial, but only 49.7% voted in the 2019 elections. A similar trend occurs in both Portugal and Poland: in Portugal, around 58% have a positive impression of EU membership and think that the country has benefited from it (68%), while only 31% voted for the EP; in Poland, 57% regard membership as a good thing and think that the country has collected benefits from it (69%), but still fewer citizens voted in the last poll (46%). Italy's turnout, on the contrary, has only recently (as from the 2014 elections) been below its support rate for EU membership (60%), which suggests that in the Italian case, awareness and engagement may have a closer connection, and the first may influence the latter.

Even though some literature has provided a degree of evidence that EU funding has a positive effect on EU support (Chalmers and Dellmuth, 2015), the link between a positive effect of funding and low (or decreasing) turnout is yet to be thoroughly determined. Why the increase of EU funding has not led to the rise of turnout remains a question for future research in this niche field of research on European funding. Access to EU data on funding payments before 2000 will be pivotal to clearly illustrate this trend. In addition, the same data will also be used for comparisons not only at the EU and national level but also at the regional and even local level.

And although much empirical work needs to be conducted on this topic, my original argument that there is no significant association between EU funding, a positive perception of European integration and turnout in EP elections still holds. There seems to be a roller coaster pattern between the positive perception of membership, its benefits and turnout in EP elections: as the figures of considering EU membership a good thing are relatively high (more than 50% in all four Member States), the numbers on whether membership has been beneficial are even higher (on average, except for Italy, almost 10% more), but the figures on EP election turnout are substantially lower (almost half in the case of Portugal). Overall, this chapter shows the links that can be established between the previously mentioned variables and how they may be connected, one way or the other, with a "blue EU sign on the road".

Notes

1 This work was sponsored by Instituto Português de Relações Internacionais – Universidade NOVA de Lisboa (UIDB/04627/2020), and submitted for publication in 31 January 2020.

2 Source: "Italy, net contributor and great beneficiary of the EU". Available from: https://euelectionsitaly.blog/italy-net-contributor-and-great-beneficiary-of-the-eu/ and from https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2007-2013/Total-EU-Allocations-Per-MS-For-2007-2013/4taz-54g9

3 Available from: www.funduszeeuropejskie.gov.pl/en/site/15-years-in-the-eu/effects/

4 Spring 2019 Eurobarometer – Eurobarometer Survey 91.1 of the European Parliament, Brussels: European Union, 2019, p. 27.

5 Data collected from Standard Eurobarometer No. 31 June 1989 to Standard Eurobarometer No. 75 August 2011, Spring wave for each year (odd numbers). From Standard Eurobarometer No. 79 July 2012 onwards, data are missing for Member States, since the same two questions started to be addressed for candidate countries (Turkey, Macedonia, Serbia, etc.). Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb_arch_en.htm. Last accessed: 17/01/2020

The answers to the two previously mentioned questions were analysed.