

# Is this crisis different? Attitudes towards EU fiscal transfers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

To mitigate the enormous and asymmetric economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU has adopted an unprecedented €750 billion fiscal transfer programme, financed by joint member state liabilities. The highly contested decision pitted ‘frugal’ northern member states against ‘profligate’ southern member states. However, do citizens from northern countries view EU transfers as unfavourably as their governmental positions suggest? This article focuses on the crucial case of the Netherlands, whose government has become the assertive leader of the ‘frugal’ coalition. We test COVID-19 specific explanations based on a large-scale survey conducted at the height of the pandemic. Our analysis suggests that citizens who experience the non-material health and social effects of the pandemic more directly are more supportive of fiscal transfers than those to whom the pandemic is more abstract, whereas those who experience negative financial effects and those who believe that COVID-19 is a conspiracy are less supportive.

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**Introduction**

Anticipating an economic crisis that would dwarf the 2008 Great Recession, the European Union (EU) scrambled to come up with a joint response to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19. Despite heavy contestation, the European Council decided on a recovery package of €750 billion financed through EU-issued bonds, *NextGenerationEU*, in July 2020. The step towards debt-financed EU fiscal policies might be temporary but could also evolve into a more permanent feature, a new major step in EU integration, shaking up the EU's 'constitutional equilibrium' (Moravcsik, 2005), and further penetrating core state powers (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2018). The recovery package implies a sizeable redistribution of financial resources across member states (ECB, 2020).

The decision for large-scale fiscal transfers to cope with COVID-19 and the unprecedented step to accrue significant debt met with a heavily politicized environment. The 'politicization' of European integration (De Wilde et al., 2016; van der Veer and Haverland, 2019) and the associated rise of Eurosceptic public opinion (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016) and Eurosceptic political parties (Braun et al., 2019; de Vries and Hobolt, 2020) have replaced the 'permissive consensus' (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970: 62) with a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks, 2009: 22). Public opinion matters significantly in the calculation of political actors and due to polarization has become significant for decision making.

The conflict over whether and under what conditions the economic burdens of the pandemic should be shared has divided the governments of the EU member states across trenches dug in 2008 (Iversen et al., 2016). The EU response to the European sovereign debt crisis (henceforth, Eurocrisis) has created narratives of 'northern saints' and 'southern sinners' (Matthijs and McNamara, 2015), which have been echoed by small northern countries, the so-called 'frugal four'. These 'frugal' countries initially opposed fiscal transfers and then favoured loans under strict conditions using the European Stability Mechanism, as opposed to providing grants and joint borrowing through so-called Coronabonds (Walker and Schaart, 2020). Given the increased politicization of the EU, one might assume that northern political leaders are constrained by Eurosceptic publics. Cross-national research prior to the pandemic has demonstrated that a member state's economic performance and (perceived) position as potential net-contributor or net-beneficiary do influence their citizens' opinion regarding whether and under what conditions international redistribution should occur. At the same time, that research has also documented significant differences within individual countries associated with identity, political values, cueing effects, and, to a lesser extent, material considerations.

This article adds to the literature by testing explanations specific to this crisis. It is based on the assumption that the causes of the COVID-19 pandemic differ from those of the 2008 Eurocrisis in an important aspect: the first economic downturn originated

from a non-systemic, external cause (a virus). The Eurocrisis was at least partly endogenous, due to asymmetries in the European Monetary Union (EMU) governance architecture and already existing structural problems in the countries that suffered most (Fabbrini, 2022; Iversen et al., 2016; Verdun, 2015). Especially among northern creditor states, the Eurocrisis is widely believed to be in part caused by the neglect of reforms in debtor states.

However, previous studies have shown that the nature of a crisis or policy challenge matters for public support. For instance, the support for EU assistance in cases of natural disaster is higher than in cases of high debt burdens, probably because the former is seen as a one-off, external misfortune. The idea that the COVID-19 crisis and its asymmetrically harsh effects on southern member states were just poor luck was much more prevalent in political discourse in creditor countries than during the Eurocrisis. This suggests that citizens in net-contributing states may believe that others ‘deserve’ support with fewer conditions when the cause is beyond their control. Moreover, citizens in net-contributing countries who experience the effects more directly (either themselves or in their direct environment) may feel empathy towards citizens in other member states who share their fate, which amplifies deservingness. At the same time, citizens’ willingness to extend solidarity to countries hit by COVID-19 might be constrained by utilitarian calculations involving economic losses. Citizens care about deservingness until they begin losing out materially, which then begins decreasing support for fiscal transfers. Moreover, citizens might also be more reluctant to support citizens in other member states if COVID-19 is seen as a conspiracy, hyped up by malign elites.

This study focuses on the Netherlands, the net-contributing country that has been the most vocal of the ‘frugal’ member states, which also include Austria, Denmark, and Sweden. The pandemic allows for a crucial case study. If an external crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic will not sway Dutch voters towards supporting redistribution, no endogenous crisis will. We find a positive and significant effect of personally experiencing the social consequences of the pandemic (measured by job loss) on support for fiscal transfers. However, we also find that when household income is affected, support turns into opposition. The data also show that those who believe that COVID-19 is a conspiracy are much less likely to support fiscal transfers.

## **Determinants of public support**

The determinants of public support for the EU and its policies can be roughly divided into two categories: on one hand, the utilitarian factors focusing on the material interests of individual citizens or of their societies; on the other hand, non-material, ideational and cultural factors such as political ideology, identity and political values and ‘cue taking’. Scholars have defined ‘cue taking’ as following the lead of the elite with which one sympathizes (De Vries, 2020; Hobolt and de Vries, 2016; Loveless and Rohrschneider, 2011). These competing explanations have been identified in research that has largely focused on support for the EU in general, for instance, investigating whether citizens believe that EU membership is a good idea. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which developed into a sovereign debt crisis and led to bailouts

of heavily indebted member states such as Greece and Portugal, research on the determinants of European economic and financial governance emerged. The underlying idea was that the EU's response to the crisis raised the stakes of integration by making its distributive consequences more visible and therefore salient in the eyes of the public (Hobolt and Wratil, 2015; Kuhn and Stoeckel, 2014).

Cross-national studies largely confirmed the view that citizens in economically well-performing member states, which are most likely to be net-contributors, are less supportive of European economic and financial integration than citizens in poorer performing countries, which are likely to be the net-beneficiaries of EU redistribution (Daniele and Geys, 2015; Kuhn and Stoeckel, 2014; Medrano et al., 2019). Furthermore, citizens in countries on the receiving end are less likely to support heavy conditions, such as austerity measures that might come along with fiscal transfers (Lengfeld and Kley, 2021).

When it comes to individual-level explanations, ideational and cultural variables trump individual utilitarian variables. Cosmopolitanism, altruism, left ideology and a European identity are consistently associated with support for EU economic and financial integration (Bechtel et al., 2014; Franchino and Segatti, 2019; Kleider and Stoeckel, 2019; Kuhn and Stoeckel, 2014; Medrano et al., 2019). Kuhn and Stoeckel (2014: 624) argue that the 'European economic governance constitutes an even greater perceived threat to national identity, especially in the member states that fare well economically', which explains the dominance of cultural factors (although this finding was contested in the panel studies by Foster and Frieden, 2017, 2021).

In terms of 'cue taking', one might argue that citizens are less likely to take cues from elites when faced with salient and redistributive issues such as those in economic and fiscal governance, rather than non-salient and complex regulatory issues that were the substance of the early stages of European integration. Yet, research found evidence that cuing is one of the determinants of EU support even in this area (Bauhr and Charron, 2018; Bechtel et al., 2014; Stoeckel and Kuhn, 2018).

In addition to material, non-material and cue taking explanations, recent studies have also evaluated whether the design of policies and their likely implications have an effect on support. It has been shown using survey experiments that support is highest when costs are lowest – either individual costs in terms of additional taxes (Franchino and Segatti, 2019; Koos and Leuffen, 2020) or country's contribution (Bechtel et al., 2017). Yet, there is relatively less support for the mutualization of debt (Bremer et al., 2021; Koos and Leuffen, 2020); as well as for strengthening the role of the European Commission (Bremer et al., 2021; Franchino and Segatti, 2019).

## **Crisis-specific explanations**

Research on economic and financial governance has added to the broader literature on the support for European integration. This article complements those studies by drawing attention to the probabilistic, exogenous nature of the cause of this crisis, as compared to deterministic, endogenous causes of the Eurocrisis. Previous research has already demonstrated that the level of support might vary depending on the reason for a policy response. Both Genschel and Hemerijck (2018) and Medrano et al. (2019) found that

the level of support for financial assistance to other EU member states in the case of a natural disaster is higher than helping other countries to pay their debt. This difference is striking. Citizens may see a natural disaster as a one-off event and the result of an external cause (Bremer et al., 2020; Genschel and Hemerijck, 2018).

We argue that while citizens in net-contributor countries may have related the Eurocrisis to the profligate behaviour of the heavily indebted countries, they could instead link the COVID-19 pandemic to a 'natural disaster'. The ailing countries might then not be perceived as 'sinners', thus increasing support for fiscal transfers. This argument draws on the literature on deservingness, which has developed in the context of comparative welfare state research. Hence, we add an additional non-material factor to explain EU support: a cause beyond citizens' control is a reason for others to support assistance, because those affected deserve it (Meuleman et al., 2020; van Oorschot, 2000, see also Koos and Leuffen, 2020).

The perception of deservingness is further strengthened when the 'giver' can identify with the 'receiver'. We perceive those closer to us as more deserving, reflecting the general notion of in-group preference (Meuleman et al., 2020; Van Oorschot, 2000). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals may feel close and identify with citizens in other member states when they experience the effects of the pandemic more directly, either themselves or in their direct environment. Having the common fate of the COVID-19 experience may nurture a feeling of empathy, closeness, and sympathy (Medrano et al., 2019), care about the well-being of the other (van Oorschot, 2006), and/or increase the perception of neediness of the support (Meuleman et al., 2020; van Oorschot, 2000). As a consequence, affected citizens may be prepared to engage in a solidaristic sharing of resources. As will be argued in the following, we expect this to occur only for the non-material effects of the pandemic.

*H1a:* Citizens who experience the non-material negative effects of the pandemic more directly, either themselves or in their direct environment, are more in favour of EU fiscal transfers than those citizens to whom the pandemic is more abstract.

When it comes to conditions under which transfers are supported, the northern 'saints' and southern 'sinners' narrative implies a lack of trust that public resources would be spent in the same targeted and efficient ways in the south of Europe than it is perceived to be the case in the fiscally conservative north. A difference in perceived 'moral' standards and attitudes, here towards public spending, could reduce the feeling of deservingness (van Oorschot, 2000). As a consequence, the 'givers' may demand that conditions be attached to the fiscal transfers. Receivers need to be 'grateful' and commit to the perceived 'northern' fiscal standards in exchange for the assistance, a feature known as 'reciprocity' in the deservingness literature (Meuleman et al., 2020; Van Oorschot, 2000). This idea ties into the wider literature on solidarity that also emphasizes the idea of reciprocity, and that reciprocity can evolve into conditionality, making the sharing of resources dependent upon compliance with certain requirements (Banting and Kymlicka, 2017; Ciornei and Ross, 2021). For instance, fiscal transfers might come with demands for structural reforms (see Lengfeld and Kley, 2021). Although the

perceived norm differences as well as the conditional character of solidarity could suggest that citizens from transferring countries would support the conditions added to fiscal transfers, we argue that this might be mitigated when it comes to citizens with a more direct experience of the pandemic, which nurtures identification and empathy.

*H1b:* Citizens who experience the non-material negative effects of the pandemic more directly, either themselves or in their direct environment, are less likely to support own government control over spending by recipient countries than those citizens to whom the pandemic is more abstract.

However, the feeling of deservingness by citizens who are more directly affected by the pandemic might be constrained by material considerations. In other words, citizens might care about deservingness until they begin losing out economically, which then begins decreasing support for fiscal transfers. Losing out economically might signal to respondents an overall scarcity of financial resources and might trigger a ‘utilitarian’ response. These citizens may oppose fiscal transfers because they believe that domestic financial assistance might be crowded out by fiscal transfers to the net-beneficiary countries (Bechtel et al., 2014: 838; Koos and Leuffen, 2020: 5).

*H1c:* The more citizens that are directly affected by the non-material effects of the pandemic also experience its negative material consequences, the less likely they are to support EU fiscal transfers.

In terms of their government’s control over how the transfers are spent, we expect that those who are directly affected and are also faced with negative material consequences prefer strong control by their own government. Being opposed to fiscal transfers would also translate into a demand for conditionality should fiscal transfers occur. A targeted and efficient spending enabled by their own government’s control is likely to be perceived as an important condition to keep the bill low and to keep as much of the resources as possible in their own country.

*H1d:* The more citizens that are directly affected by the non-material effects of the pandemic also experience its negative material consequences, the more likely they are to support their own government’s control over spending by recipient countries.

In addition to tapping into the effects of the pandemic on citizens, we also take into account an important cognitive aspect of the pandemic – the widespread belief that COVID-19 is actually a conspiracy. Conspiratorial thinking finds causes of events in ‘hidden, malevolent groups secretly perpetuating political plots and social calamities to further their own nefarious goals’ (Oliver and Wood, 2014: 952). In this sense, those who believe in conspiracy theories think that key information is purposefully hidden by elites from the public (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). In this way, individuals are predisposed to see the world as the one where ‘authoritative accounts [are] fabricated and powerful actors [are] conspirators’ (Edelson et al., 2017: 936). In line with recent

research, we argue that those who score high on conspiratorial thinking tend to attach conspiratorial explanations to political events, which in turn influences their political attitudes (see also Douglas et al., 2019; Onderco and Stoeckel, 2020).

Given that the information about COVID-19 was limited at best, that accepted scientific wisdom changed over time and that the origin of the virus was uncertain (Lentzos, 2020), it is not hard to imagine why citizens have clung to conspiracy thinking. From the beginning of the pandemic, many conspiracy theories have been linked to COVID-19: the pandemic was linked to 5G networks, Chinese military experiments gone awry, Bill Gates' philanthropical pursuits, or simply labelled as a hoax (Douglas, 2021). These conspiracy theories influenced numerous aspects of social life. Research has shown, for instance, that they are negatively related to support for COVID-19-related government policies (Pummerer et al., 2022). As fiscal transfers are explicitly framed as a response to the economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, we argue that the degree to which COVID-19 is regarded as a conspiracy is negatively related to support for EU fiscal transfers.

*H2a:* Citizens who hold conspiracy beliefs about the origin and the nature of COVID-19 are less likely to support EU fiscal transfers.

However, it is hard to theorize whether those believing that COVID-19 is a conspiracy are more or less in favour of their own government's control over spending, since conspiracy thinkers often see their own government being part of the conspiracy (Douglas et al., 2019). Therefore, we expect no relationship between conspiracy thinking and government control.

*H2b:* Whether citizens hold conspiracy beliefs about the origin and nature of COVID-19 is not linked to support of government control over spending.

## **Design, data and measurement**

Our analysis is based on a survey conducted by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, in cooperation with Kieskompas, the University of Amsterdam and Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, concerning the effects of COVID-19 on the life and welfare of Dutch citizens (Krouwel et al., 2020). The survey was fielded in December 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic ( $N=5745$ ). To obtain results that are representative for the Dutch population, data are weighed by Kieskompas with regards to age, gender, ethnicity, level of education (based on Statistics Netherlands' Gold Standard), and ideology (using 2017 national elections results).<sup>1</sup>

### **Dependent variable**

In general, citizens may perceive EU issues as particularly complex, which may affect the reliability of measuring public support (Iarossi, 2006). This should hold less for

redistribution however, as that involves relatively clear winners and losers. Also, discussions concerning EU redistribution were highly salient in the Netherlands at the time of the survey, so it is likely that citizens have formed an opinion about it. To decrease the remaining complexity, we added two cues to the question. First, we mention specific countries in order to solicit more honest responses. We chose Italy and Spain, as they were considered most likely to benefit from EU fiscal transfers and represent the paradigmatic ‘southern sinners’. Secondly, to emphasize the redistributive character of the policy, we make explicit the *possibility* that not all financial support would be paid back, that is, the possibility of grants over loans. This formulation of the instrument is in line with the public framing of the *NextGenerationEU* in Dutch discourse at the time of sampling, as exemplified by the infamous cover of the Dutch weekly *Elsevier Weekblad* in which a stereotypical hard-working Dutch man is contrasted with stereotypical southern-European man sunbathing (Elsevier Weekblad, 2020). Accordingly, support for EU fiscal transfers and the conditions attached to it are operationalized by the following survey questions, with answers being elicited on a five-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

In the EU, the Netherlands is currently asked to provide financial support for member states that are heavily affected by the COVID-19, such as Italy and Spain. To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

- The Netherlands must support these countries, even if not every Euro is paid back at the end.
- The Netherlands must be able to determine how other countries use the Dutch financial support.

### *Crisis-specific explanations*

To measure the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we tap into a number of factors relating to the non-material and material impact that the pandemic may have on individual citizens. To understand the non-material impacts, we ask respondents whether they have tested positive for COVID-19, or whether they know someone close to them who has tested positive, such as a friend, spouse, family member or colleague. While not every one of those tested positive might get seriously ill, being or knowing someone who has tested positive should indicate more direct experience with the disease, both in a medical as well as social perspective (obligation to quarantine).<sup>2</sup> To ameliorate the risk of common method bias,<sup>3</sup> we also used the respondent’s municipality of residence to include a measure of the average number of reported COVID-19 cases in the municipality in the two weeks prior to the date the survey was conducted. This measure serves to capture the likelihood that a respondent encounters the effects of COVID-19 in its wider environment. These data were taken from the Open Data portals of the Dutch Institute for the Environment and Public Health (RIVM), the authoritative Dutch public scientific agency for infection diseases (RIVM, n.d.) and Statistics Netherlands (CBS, n.d.).

We investigate material factors mainly by asking respondents whether they have experienced a loss in household income or employment due to the pandemic.



Importantly, we view the second measure as both a material (economic) as well as a non-material (social) effect: losing your job is arguably a severe and significant social consequence of the pandemic, as it comes along with disruption of social ties. Unemployment is also linked to diverse identity consequences as individuals also derive social status from their jobs (Wanberg, 2012). Experiencing such social disruption due to the pandemic might lead to identification with citizens in other member states who have been hit hard and lead to support for fiscal transfers. The fact that we do not necessarily equate job loss with income loss is a consequence of the widespread domestic relief programmes that were in effect in the Netherlands to cushion the financial effects of the crisis (Government of the Netherlands, 2020). Jointly, these variables allow us to tease out the difference between the material and non-material impact of the crisis: Job loss without income loss suggests a respondent experienced the non-material impact of losing her job without suffering the material impact.

Finally, we have presented the respondents with four statements for measuring conspiracy thinking and have asked them whether they disagree or agree with them on a 10-point scale. Respondents were asked whether they agree that COVID-19 is: (a) a biological weapon designed by scientists, (b) a conspiracy to remove our civil rights forever and to form an authoritarian government, (c) a hoax invented by interest groups for financial profit, and (d) a cover-up for the impending global economic crisis. Our final measure uses the mean score on these variables after a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) confirmed the presence of a single underlying dimension (see the Online appendix).<sup>4</sup>

### *Control variables*

In terms of material influences, we control for income levels. From a utilitarian perspective it has been argued that higher income earners are less supportive because they are more likely to pay the brunt of redistribution costs due to progressive taxation, whereas it has also been argued that higher income earners have a larger interest in overall financial stability and perceive transfers as insurance against instability risks (Bechtel et al., 2014; Franchino and Segatti, 2019). Income is measured as self-reported net household income per month using three categories: low (below €1600), medium (€1600 to €3500), and high (€3500 and above).

In terms of non-material or ideational factors, we control for the *left–right orientation* of citizens. Citizens who believe in equality and distributive justice in the domestic setting might also be in favour of more equitable outcomes in the international setting, while those citizens who are against intervention in the domestic market might also be opposed to such intervention in the international setting (Blekesaune and Quadagno, 2003; Daniele and Geys, 2015; Kleider and Stoeckel, 2019). Accordingly, we expect that ideologically left citizens are more supportive than ideologically right citizens. Ideology is measured through self-placement on a scale from left (0) to right (10). We also control for the degree of urbanization, which is measured by the population density of the municipality where the respondent resides, using data from the Statistical Bureau of the Netherlands (CBS, n.d.). Research by Huijsmans et al. (2021) in the Netherlands has shown that the degree of urbanization is strongly related to

cosmopolitan values, even if controlled for socio-economic factors, which in turn affects attitudes towards the EU. We have also checked for voting intentions for right-wing populist parties. As of December 2020, Forum for Democracy (FvD) and the Freedom Party (PVV; see Otjes, 2021) were the two right-wing populist parties in the Netherlands. We have asked Dutch citizens which party they would choose if there were to be parliamentary elections the next day, and we used a dummy distinguishing from the rest those who would vote for the FvD and the PVV. This variable has been used as a proxy for a citizen's national identity in the past, hence tapping into another cultural explanation for public support (Bremer et al., 2020). However, this variable might capture cueing effects, as argued by Bauhr and Charron (2018), and citizens following the lead of Eurosceptic parties use it to form their opinion concerning EU issues. Finally, we control for gender, age, and the level of education (measured in three categories: low/medium/high).

We subsequently analyse our data using multilevel ordinal logistic regression models, which is the preferred modelling strategy given the hierarchical character of the data and the ordinal distribution of our outcome variables. We use a random intercept for the 320 municipalities in our data. Following the recommendations in the statistics literature, we mean-centre our predictors and standardize them by two standard deviations (Gelman and Hill, 2007: 57). Consequently, effect estimates can be interpreted as the predicted change in the probability of a respondent choosing a specific score on Y over the scores below it (e.g. 4 over 1–3), given a 2 SD change in X. For continuous variables, this roughly corresponds to the difference between mean  $-1$  SD and mean  $+1$  SD. We use weighted means and standard deviations for the predictors taken from the survey.

In line with standard practice, we build our models sequentially and show that each addition of new predictors improves the overall fit of the model (see the Online appendix): models 0 are the baseline models; models 1 include only control variables; models 2 include the crisis-specific variables; models 3 also include our interaction effects. No modelling assumptions were violated by any of the models presented below (see the Online appendix for details).<sup>5</sup> Missing values were handled through list-wise deletion.

## Results

### *Support for fiscal transfers*

Our study reveals that Dutch citizens are not as opposed to fiscal transfers as its government stance would lead us to expect. In fact, citizens are quite divided. About 20% strongly disagree and 22% somewhat disagree with supporting other countries, while 33% somewhat agree and 11% strongly agree. Dutch citizens are, however, quite united concerning the desired role of their own government in controlling how the fiscal transfers are spent. Almost 75% somewhat or strongly agree that the government must be able to determine how other member states use the financial support.

Our model for the degree of public support, reported in Table 1, largely corroborates our hypotheses regarding the effect of the crisis-specific variables. In line with our

**Table 1.** Support for fiscal transfers.

	Model A0	Model A1	Model A2	Model A3
Female		0.401 *** (0.065)	0.443 *** (0.066)	0.200 ** (0.070)
Age		0.325 *** (0.070)	0.396 *** (0.072)	0.778 *** (0.077)
Education high		1.247 *** (0.122)	1.136 *** (0.125)	0.735 *** (0.132)
Education middle		0.782 *** (0.118)	0.688 *** (0.120)	0.531 *** (0.128)
Medium income		-0.038 (0.077)	-0.038 (0.077)	-0.001 (0.082)
High income		0.322 *** (0.087)	0.276 ** (0.087)	0.335 *** (0.091)
COVID19: Job loss			0.346 * (0.154)	2.866 *** (0.315)
COVID19: income worse			-0.358 *** (0.100)	0.249 * (0.112)
COVID19: tested positive			0.003 (0.153)	-0.207 (0.154)
COVID19: know someone tested positive			0.521 *** (0.071)	0.405 *** (0.075)
Infections per 100.000 inhabitants			-0.463 ** (0.147)	-0.272. (0.149)
Inhabitants per km <sup>2</sup>			-0.002 (0.259)	0.033 (0.262)
Ideology (left-right)				-1.527 *** (0.082)
Vote PVV/FvD				-2.601 *** (0.153)
Conspiracy				-1.474 *** (0.095)
COVID19: Job loss × Income worse				-3.241 *** (0.359)
COV 19: Income worse × Vote PVV/FvD				-1.513 ** (0.462)
1 2	-1.901 *** (0.096)	-0.804 *** (0.145)	-0.682 *** (0.167)	-1.806 *** (0.179)
2 3	-0.473 *** (0.092)	0.676 *** (0.145)	0.816 *** (0.167)	0.259 (0.175)
3 4	0.121 (0.092)	1.293 *** (0.145)	1.442 *** (0.168)	1.065 *** (0.175)
4 5	2.320 *** (0.098)	3.547 *** (0.154)	3.715 *** (0.176)	3.779 *** (0.185)
Log likelihood	-6741.784	-6640.198	-6601.280	-5655.979
AIC	13,493.569	13,302.396	13,236.561	11,355.958
BIC	13,525.884	13,373.489	13,346.432	11,498.145
Num. obs.	4736	4736	4736	4736
Groups (Municipality name)	320	320	320	320
Variance: Municipality name: (Intercept)	1.533	1.630	1.587	1.598

Note: \* $p = 0.05$ , \*\* $p = 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p = 0.001$ .

hypothesis concerning the link between experiencing the non-material effects of the pandemic and support for fiscal transfers (*H1a*), we find that those who lose their job without losing income and those who know someone close to them that has tested positive have indeed a significantly more positive view than those who are not affected by these conditions. Associated odds ratios suggest they are, respectively, 17.4 and 1.5 times more likely to report a support score over lower scores (e.g. 4 over 1–3). This is in line with our argument that the experience of non-material impact of the pandemic (i.e. the feeling of being in the ‘same boat’) might yield empathy with citizens in other member states. Whether a respondent has tested positive for COVID-19 has, however, no apparent effect on support, and there is no statistically significant effect of residing in a municipality with high infection rates on support. As expected, we find a significant negative effect of conspiracy thinking on support for EU fiscal transfers (*H2a*): a one unit increase on our conspiracy scale is associated with a 77.1% decrease in the odds of a respondent choosing a given support score over scores below it.

We indeed find that while the experience of job loss without income loss leads to support for redistribution, this support turns into opposition when it interacts with a loss of household income as well (see the Online appendix). As argued above, a worsening income situation might signal the scarcity of resources and a perceived need to compete with citizens of other member states for financial resources to cushion their own adverse economic effects. Hence, this supports our hypothesis on the material constraints on the deservingness mechanism (*H1c*). Looking at income levels as such, we stated that competing expectations from a utilitarian perspective can be deduced. High income earners might oppose fiscal transfers in the EU because they are more likely to pay the brunt of redistribution costs due to progressive taxation, while it has also been argued that higher income earners have a larger interest in overall financial stability and perceive transfers as insurance against instability risks. Our results are consistent with the latter argument, as high-income earners are significantly more supportive than other citizens: they are 1.4 times more likely to report higher support scores than respondents with lower income scores.

Non-material variables fare relatively well. In line with the literature, those who position themselves on the ideological right are 78.3% less likely to support EU fiscal transfers. For those with voting intentions for the right-wing populist parties PVV and FvD, the odds are 92.6% lower. Those who support PVV or FvD are also much more likely to resent fiscal transfers if they have lost income than voters of other parties (see the Online appendix). In contrast to recent research in the Netherlands on urbanization and cosmopolitanism by Huijismans et al. (2021), we do not find a significant positive effect of the degree of urbanization of the respondent’s municipality on support for EU fiscal transfers. In line with other research, women are more supportive of EU action than men, and age and the level of education are positively related to support.

### *Support for Dutch control over spending*

Our findings regarding citizens’ view of support for Dutch control over spending as a condition for fiscal transfers are also largely consistent with our hypotheses (see

**Table 2.** Explaining support for control by the own government.

	Model B0	Model B1	Model B2	Model B3
Female		-0.490 *** (0.067)	-0.522 *** (0.068)	-0.324 *** (0.071)
Age		-0.458 *** (0.071)	-0.636 *** (0.074)	-0.933 *** (0.077)
Education high		-1.302 *** (0.123)	-1.294 *** (0.128)	-1.002 *** (0.135)
Education middle		-0.835 *** (0.119)	-0.834 *** (0.124)	-0.661 *** (0.130)
Medium income		-0.180 * (0.079)	-0.220 ** (0.079)	-0.211 * (0.082)
High income		-0.361 *** (0.090)	-0.344 *** (0.091)	-0.402 *** (0.093)
COVID19: job loss			-0.579 *** (0.151)	-0.660 * (0.275)
COVID19: income worse			-0.235 * (0.099)	-0.440 *** (0.115)
COVID19: tested positive			-0.012 (0.157)	0.096 (0.159)
COVID19: know someone tested positive			-0.649 *** (0.074)	-0.615 *** (0.077)
COVID19: Infection per 100.000 inhabitants			0.246 (0.150)	0.072 (0.158)
Inhabitant per KM <sup>2</sup>			-0.273 (0.269)	-0.325 (0.284)
Ideology (left-right)				1.532 *** (0.083)
Vote PVV/FvD				1.250 *** (0.153)
Conspiracy				0.538 *** (0.093)
COVID19: Job loss × Income worse				0.176 (0.321)
COVID19: Income worse × vote PVV/FvD				-0.460 (0.291)
1 2	-3.881 *** (0.124)	-5.340 *** (0.174)	-5.797 *** (0.199)	-5.833 *** (0.211)
2 3	-2.421 *** (0.102)	-3.855 *** (0.158)	-4.306 *** (0.185)	-4.243 *** (0.196)
3 4	-1.171 *** (0.096)	-2.571 *** (0.151)	-3.009 *** (0.179)	-2.841 *** (0.189)
4 5	1.243 *** (0.096)	-0.058 (0.145)	-0.446 ** (0.172)	0.051 (0.184)
Log likelihood	-5824.702	-5698.204	-5636.840	-5241.027
AIC	11,659.404	11,418.407	11,307.680	10,526.054
BIC	11,691.719	11,489.500	11,417.551	10,668.241
Num. obs.	4736	4736	4736	4736
Groups (Municipality name)	320	320	320	320
Variance: Municipality name: (Intercept)	1.641	1.677	1.696	1.896

Note: \* $p = 0.05$ , \*\* $p = 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p = 0.001$ .

Table 2). Considering the affectedness by non-material consequences (*H1b*), we find that citizens that experience job loss during the pandemic and who know someone in their close environment who experienced COVID-19 are less likely to demand that their government controls the spending. They are, respectively, 48.3% and 45.9% less likely to report higher scores on this measure. However, as was the case with support for fiscal transfers, respondents testing positive themselves are not less likely to demand control by their own government than other citizens and the result for higher infection rates in the municipality of residence is again also insignificant. As to potential material constraints on deservingness (*H1d*), we find that even when losing the job is accompanied by a worsening income situation in the citizen's household, there is no significant increase in demand for government control over how resources are spent in other member states. Moreover, a worsening income situation as such is associated with a 35.6% decrease in the odds of demanding higher levels of government control. This is hard to square with a utilitarian perspective. Contrary to our expectations, the effect of conspiracy thinking does extend to the control issue. There is a significant positive effect of conspiracy thinking on support for Dutch control (*H2b*).

As stated above, we have found a positive effect of income levels on support for fiscal transfers: those with a high or a medium income are, respectively, 33.1% and 19.0% less likely to show higher demands for the Dutch government to control how the resources are spent over those reporting low income. The finding that respondents with high income view the control by their own government as less important resonates again with the idea that they are generally in favour of EU action because it is overall beneficial for them, even though it has some concrete costs like spending a disproportionate part for transfers. The fact that by implication those with a low income are in favour of more control is consistent with the benefit competition argument.

Turning to the non-material control variables, as expected, those on the ideological right strongly support Dutch control, as do those intent on voting for PVV or FvD. The former are 4.6 times more likely to report higher demand for control, the latter 3.5 times. Again, the degree of urbanization of a municipality does not matter. We find a consistent pattern for the social demographic control variables: Female, older and highly educated respondents are not only more supportive of EU fiscal transfers but also less supportive of Dutch control over spending.

## Conclusion

This article seeks to add to the emerging debate on support for EU fiscal policies by focusing on the recent debate concerning EU fiscal transfers to cope with the asymmetric economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is based on the assumption that this crisis of European economic governance is different from the 2008 Eurocrisis, as it can be perceived as a shock for which governments and citizens in the worst affected countries cannot be blamed. Focusing on the crucial case of the Netherlands as informal leader of the 'frugal' member states, the article asks whether crisis-specific considerations, of deservingness triggered by shared non-material

effects of the pandemic, and cognitive aspects of the pandemic as to the nature of the crisis, explain variation in support for EU fiscal transfers and the strictness of the conditionality attached to it.

In line with our hypotheses based on the deservingness literature, we found a positive and significant effect of personally experiencing the social consequences of the pandemic, in terms of job loss, on support for fiscal transfers. Becoming unemployed during the COVID-19 pandemic may increase citizens' awareness of the gravity of the crisis and the need for supporting others. Note that 'need' is another element that shapes beliefs of deservingness (Meuleman et al., 2020; Van Oorschot, 2000). Our results show that this empathy is limited by material considerations: When household income is affected as well, support turns into opposition. This finding suggests that generous domestic compensation schemes in 'frugal' countries may increase international solidarity.

Regarding the health effects of the crisis, interestingly, the direct personal experience of a COVID-19 infection does not lead to more support, but infections in the close environment do. In terms of measuring the health effects, we are aware that not everyone who got infected got seriously ill. However, at the time of the survey, those infected typically had symptoms which are also more severe than the flu. Still, we cannot completely address this limitation with the current data.

Further research could use qualitative research using open interviews to inductively reveal whether and why the experience of COVID-19 in the close environment trumps the personal experience. In any case, encountering COVID-19 in the wider environment, operationalized here as infection rate on municipality level, does not seem to trigger feelings of deservingness. Our findings suggest that we should think about the pandemic in terms of deservingness only with reference to the close social contacts, not the area of residence.

How other member states spend the transfers is less concerning for citizens who are confronted with the health effects of the crisis or the social and material consequences than for those who had a more abstract experience of the pandemic. Hence even citizens whose financial household situation decreased are not more likely to support the control by their own government on the adequate spending of transfers by receiving member states. This unexpected finding suggests that these citizens are aware of the seriousness of the crisis and therefore expect that governments of other countries will adequately target expenditure anyway. This would resonate with the finding by Daniele and Geys (2015) that poorer citizens are less likely to demand strict EU-wide fiscal governance regimes.

The strongest and clearest effects are exerted by beliefs concerning the nature of the crisis. Those who view COVID-19 as a conspiracy are much less likely to support EU fiscal transfers. To our knowledge this has been the first study that links conspiracy thinking to EU-related attitudes. While other research has already documented that conspiracy beliefs are related to politically relevant attitudes and preferences in other areas of (international) politics, our results suggest that it also has to be taken into account in future research on EU integration, as it is likely that future challenges to the EU might be viewed as conspiracies and hence affect citizens' attitudes. Given significant variation among the EU member

states in the degree to which citizens espouse conspiracy theories, future research should investigate how that variation translates into citizens' policy demands.

Overall, the article has drawn attention to new mechanisms that might drive or block public support in net-contributing countries for EU economic governance reforms that are triggered by externally caused challenges. In an interdependent world, member states and their citizens are easily affected by events beyond their control, while the causes and the nature of the events will be fiercely contested if citizens believe in conspiracies. The Russian invasion in Ukraine and its fiscal consequences, such as increasing defence budgets or energy subsidization, are a particularly stark example. With the *NextGenerationEU*, the EU has increased fiscal capacity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and has set a precedent for EU level fiscal solutions which might empower political actors in member states that will be particularly affected by future events. Further research into these new mechanisms of EU public support is therefore more than warranted.

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### Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. The survey is a part of the panel study organized since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The whole panel study was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences of VU University Amsterdam, and each individual survey is approved by the same committee again. Because the study does not include experimental items, the respondents are not debriefed at the end, but every respondent received a detailed informed consent at the



beginning of the survey. Panels stem from large-N nonprobability frameworks that are predominantly compiled from users of voting advice applications and complemented through targeted sampling approaches. For this study, a secondary complex sampling design was employed, which consisted of random stratified sampling as well as simple random sampling.

2. Note that in the second COVID-19 wave, which occurred when the survey was fielded, those infected typically had symptoms which were more severe than the flu. This is in contrast with later waves, when for instance the Omicron variant was dominant (RIVM, 2022).
3. When both dependent and independent variables are captured by the same survey, bias in the measurement method itself may create spurious correlations between different survey items. One way to ameliorate this risk is to include data from another data source.
4. The article aims to concentrate on conspiracy thinking rather than the related concept of populism. We also collected data on populist attitudes and ran a CFA to make sure that items load on to two different factors (see the Online appendix). The CFA confirms our expectations insofar as it confirms the presence of two latent factors ( $r = 0.561$ ) separating the conspiracy and populism items. That these two factors are correlated indicates the two concepts are indeed close. We calculate the variable *conspiracy* by taking the mean values of the responses on the items underlying the latent factor. To gauge populist attitudes the following four statements have been presented on 10-point scale: (a) 'The will of ordinary people should be the highest principle in politics', (b) 'the government is run by a few large interest groups that think exclusively about their own interest', (c) 'A large part of government leaders is dishonest', and (d) 'However you look at it, people like me never have a piece of good luck'. We use R's 'lavaan' package to run the CFA. The resulting model fits well (Brown and Moore, 2012): the comparative fit index and the Tucker-Lewis index are well above the recommended 0.95, the SRMR is well below 0.08 and the RMSEA is well below the recommended 0.06.
5. A relatively weak correlation ( $r = 0.32$ ) between the job loss and household income loss variables reflects the fact that many respondents may have lost income without losing their job altogether and that governmental income substitution for those losing their jobs was widely available in the Netherlands during the pandemic.

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