



An unknown known: Knowledge, preferences, and acceptance of the Common Agricultural Policy

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ABSTRACT

Despite its importance for the agricultural sector, little is known about the extent to which the general public understands and knows the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and how such (lack of) knowledge shapes their policy preferences. This paper investigates the role of factual knowledge of the CAP in influencing Italians' support for and acceptance of the policy. Relying on original survey data ($N = 1002$) representative of the Italian population, we first assess citizens' factual knowledge of the CAP's central function (providing subsidies to the agricultural sector, rather than imposing taxes on it or having no policy at all). We then examine how knowledge affects preferences over budget allocations across policy goals. In addition, we conduct an information provision experiment, randomizing information about the environmental conditionality of CAP subsidies, to test its effect on public acceptance of the policy. We use multinomial logistic regression to analyze budget allocation preferences and ordered logistic regression to examine the determinants of CAP acceptance. Our results show that Italians generally exhibit acceptance of the CAP, but respondents with correct knowledge display preferences that move away from income support toward other policy goals. Moreover, information about environmental conditionality of the CAP significantly increases its acceptance, particularly among individuals with environmentally conscious consumption habits. These findings highlight the importance of policy knowledge and communication in shaping public opinion on EU-level agricultural policies.

1. Introduction

Since its establishment, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has shaped the agricultural sector in Europe and beyond. Given its importance, an enormous literature has focused on a variety of its aspects, such as the effects of reforms at the micro (Moro and Sckokai, 2013) and macro levels (Beckman et al., 2022), or environmental (D'Alberto et al., 2018; Varacca et al., 2023) and productivity (Baráth et al., 2020) impacts. Farmers and experts are the primary stakeholders whose preferences regarding policy instruments have been studied (Hasler et al., 2022). In parallel, an extensive literature has analyzed how the public (not necessarily agricultural specialists) perceives food (Van Loo et al., 2014), agriculture (Jin et al., 2018; Johnston and Duke, 2007), agricultural landscapes (Sayadi et al., 2009), and their associated public goods (Westhoek et al., 2013).

Significantly less attention has been given to the perspective of the general public on agricultural policies (Caputo and Lusk, 2020; El Benni et al., 2024; Ellison et al., 2010a, 2010b) and the CAP itself (Mata and

Dos-Santos, 2024; Tienhaara et al., 2024; Tosun et al., 2024). These papers find a generally very high acceptability of the government support toward agriculture, even though policy contents matter (Caputo and Lusk, 2020; Finger et al., 2024; Moon and Pino, 2018). Even less is known about the public's factual knowledge of the CAP, beyond measurements of public awareness (EC - DG AGRI, 2024). However, a lack of policy knowledge is not merely an educational issue; it is a factor that actively shapes preferences and levels of policy acceptance (Nyhan, 2020). This has been proven true across a number of policy arenas, including redistribution (Alesina et al., 2020), estate (Sides, 2016) and income taxes (Stantcheva, 2021), education system (Blesse et al., 2023), and general political attitudes (Gilens, 2001), but not for agricultural policies. If this holds true for agricultural policies as well, gaining a clearer understanding of public knowledge of the CAP and its effects becomes essential—especially in light of public support for the farmers' protests (Biancalana and Mancosu, 2025; Finger et al., 2024) and ongoing debates on the future of the CAP (EC, 2025). This would underscore the need for improved communication around the policy.

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Our objective is to evaluate how knowledge of the CAP shapes preferences for, and acceptance of, the policy. Specifically, first, we elicit the factual and ex-ante knowledge of the general public on the CAP. We then evaluate its effect on the preferences regarding the budget allocation among different policy goals. Further, we test whether the knowledge of a specific aspect of the CAP, namely the environmental conditionality of the CAP subsidies, affects the public acceptance of the policy itself. To assess knowledge of the CAP and related policy preferences, we use original survey data ($N=1002$), collected in summer 2024 and representative of the Italian population. To test knowledge of the specificities of the CAP, we conduct an information provision experiment (Ellison et al., 2010a; Haaland et al., 2023) in which we randomized the information—regarding the environmental content of the CAP subsidies—provided to the respondents.

Our paper contributes to the relatively limited literature on the general public perceptions and opinions regarding agricultural policies, by interlinking policy knowledge and information to policy preferences and acceptance. First, our assessment of the role of policy knowledge in shaping public opinions on the CAP functions to extend the existing literature on the determinants of agricultural policy preferences. While studies by Ellison et al. (2010a, 2010b) and Moon and Pino (2018) are the closest to our work, they primarily explore the role of public knowledge regarding agriculture and its structure, rather than knowledge of existing agricultural policies themselves. Second, our information provision experiment contributes to the literature on the determinants of public acceptance of agricultural policies. We provide an empirical test for the suggestion that policy content matters for the overall acceptability of agricultural policies (Caputo and Lusk, 2020; Finger et al., 2024; Moon and Pino, 2018). Lastly, we complement the existing data on European citizens' self-declared awareness of the existence of the CAP, as provided by a series of Eurobarometer reports (EC - DG AGRI, 2024). Our questionnaire provides an estimate of Italians' factual knowledge of the CAP's central function. This allows us to critically assess the degree of "policy literacy" among the public, a phenomenon previously demonstrated in other policy arenas (Sawulski et al., 2024).

The article proceeds in Section 2 with background information and a theoretical framework. Section 3 describes our empirical approach, including the research design. Section 4 is dedicated to the presentation and discussion of our results and presents robustness checks. In Section 5, we draw the conclusions of our study and its policy implications.

2. Background information and theoretical framework

Traditionally, agriculture is a sector that has been dominated by public policies (Anderson et al., 2013). Since its inception, the CAP has emerged as the main policy affecting the agricultural sector in the EU, and as the largest recipient of the EU funds (Matthews et al., 2017). Over time, both the goals and instruments of the CAP have changed substantially. The main original objective of the CAP was food security and, in a period of rapid industrialization, the maintenance of an agricultural capacity (Matthews, 2015). This goal was successfully achieved through a complex system of instruments that included price support and import levies (Zobbe, 2001). With increasing pressure from the GATT and the WTO, these traditional and highly distortive tools were gradually replaced by first coupled and eventually decoupled subsidies (Ackrill et al., 2008).

With the Agenda 2000 reform, the CAP enlarged its goals (Dwyer et al., 2007). By establishing the so-called Pillar II, the CAP started targeting rural territories as a whole and embraced a variety of objectives including the improvement of environmental performance, the competitiveness of the sector, and the quality of life in rural areas (Uthes et al., 2017; Zasada et al., 2015). The second pillar of the CAP has been implemented through decentralized Rural Development Programs (now embedded in national Strategic Plans) (Pagliacci and Zavalloni, 2024). Alongside these changes, environmental goals gained momentum

(Matthews, 2013). To receive direct payments, farmers need to respect a number of environmental conditions, first through the cross compliance (Bartolini et al., 2012), then through the greening measures (Bureau et al., 2012) and through the so-called *conditionality*. Moreover, a new set of voluntary agri-environmental measures was introduced, albeit with large heterogeneity (Pagliacci and Zavalloni, 2023; Rac et al., 2024), in the Rural Development Programs (Matthews, 2013). These have the specific goal of addressing the environmental impact of European agriculture. The 2023–2027 CAP includes more stringent environmental constraints and goals (Petsakos et al., 2023). Among others, at least 3% of arable land must be allocated to biodiversity and non-productive uses, 25% of the direct payment budget must be allocated to eco-schemes, and 35% of the funds for rural development must be allocated to measures with environmental goals¹. However, agricultural lobbying is considered particularly strong (Faikowski, 2017), and farmers' protests managed to force the delay and relaxation of the rules.

Despite the importance of the CAP for the agricultural sector and for the EU budget, public knowledge of the policy is likely limited (Clark and Hellwig, 2012), partly due to the perceived distance and complexity of EU institutions (Pannico, 2017). More generally, a substantial literature has shown that the general public has limited in-depth knowledge of the mechanisms and functioning of public policies (Nyhan, 2020; Sawulski et al., 2024). In turn, weak knowledge translates into misconceptions and misperceptions that ultimately affect both the acceptance level and the preferences for existing policies (Alesina et al., 2020; Gilens, 2001; Stantcheva, 2021). To fix ideas, take the example analyzed by Stantcheva (2021) on how knowledge of the tax system shapes preferences over tax reforms. Consider two individuals, A and B, who both favor the same degree of tax progressivity. If one of the two has a distorted knowledge on the existing system (i.e. she believes it is more progressive than it is), she will be less inclined to support progressive tax reforms than the other, despite having the same preferences over the ultimate goal.

Inspired by this strand of literature, here we explore how the knowledge of the CAP affects preferences over budget allocation and acceptance of the policy. Our analysis starts from the assumption that Italians possess varying levels of factual knowledge of the CAP functions and mechanisms (Clark and Hellwig, 2012) notwithstanding a substantial support for the agricultural sector (EC - DG AGRI, 2024). Given these premises, our first hypothesis is that respondents with distorted knowledge of the CAP (i.e. those who do not know that the CAP is financially supporting the agricultural sector) are more likely to favor agricultural policies focused on direct income support to farmers, rather than e.g. supporting the transition to more sustainable production systems. Our second hypothesis is that, given the public interest in environmental quality in general (Franzen and Vogl, 2013) and in the agrifood system in particular (Ammann et al., 2025; Chakrabarti et al., 2026; De Marchi et al., 2024; Grammatikopoulou et al., 2020), the provision of information over the environmental conditionality of the CAP subsidies would increase the acceptance level of the policy itself.

Limited public knowledge of the CAP may lead citizens to hold preferences that do not reflect their underlying values. Understanding whether and how factual knowledge shapes preferences over budget allocation and policy acceptance is therefore important. To this end, we design a questionnaire that measures factual knowledge, elicits budget preferences, and implements an information treatment, as described in the next section.

3. Method

3.1. Questionnaire design

For the empirical analysis of this contribution, we use original survey

¹ See European Commission (n.d.a) for an overview of the CAP 2023–27.

data. An Italian polling institute carried out the data collection phase through the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method, between June 27th and July 1st, 2024.² The sample of 1,002 respondents was designed to mirror the Italian voting-age population's geographic distribution of residence and sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, level of education and professional status).³ Through the analysis, we apply weights to the summary statistics to reduce coverage and non-response errors by correcting for discrepancies and typical biases that are inherent in surveys despite the representativeness of the sample. Post-stratification weights were applied specifically to gender, age, and education.

The survey questionnaire contains sociodemographic questions (see Appendix A) and questions aimed at capturing respondents' political attitudes, alongside queries specifically related to environmental and agricultural issues. This last section of the questionnaire is primarily aimed at assessing the respondents' understanding and preferences toward current EU policies, as well as respondents' general policy preferences. The target audience (the general public, not agricultural experts) forced us to simplify the complexity of the CAP, albeit maintaining its core elements, in order to avoid excessive cognitive burden for the respondents (Lenzner et al., 2010).

To assess the general knowledge of Italians on the CAP (*CAP knowledge*), we ask respondents to complete the sentence "According to you, in the last thirty years, the European Union...", by choosing among three possible categories: "Has mostly distributed funds to the agricultural sector"; "Has mostly imposed taxes on the agricultural sector"; "Never had policies about the agricultural sector". In line with our goal of keeping the questionnaire accessible to a general public audience, we deliberately design this measure to capture only one core dimension of CAP knowledge — its general function as a subsidy mechanism — as we believe this is a fundamental and accessible distinction for non-expert respondents. We then recode *CAP knowledge* into two categories: 0 (*Do not know what CAP does*), in which we group non-respondents ($n = 22$) with those who answered either "...has mostly imposed taxes on the agricultural sector" or "...never had policies about the agricultural sector"; 1 (*Know what CAP does*) consisting of those who answered "...has mostly distributed funds to the agricultural sector".

Moreover, we include in the questionnaire a question on 'awareness' that is based on the one that is used in the Eurobarometer survey series over the years (*CAP awareness*). This question reads as follows: "Have you ever heard about the support that the European Union gives to farmers through the Common Agricultural Policy?" (EC- DG Agri, 2024). Respondents could choose among three different options: "No, I have never heard about it", in which we included non-respondents ($n = 14$); "Yes, but I do not know the details"; "Yes, and I know the details".

A third question elicits Italians' preferences regarding the CAP budget (CAP preferences). We design this question as if respondents had carte blanche on what to do with the EU agricultural policy budget. To simplify the question, we restrict the possible options to three (plus an *exit* option) of the main objectives of the CAP: to support farmers' income, to address the environmental issues associated with the agricultural sector (Foley et al., 2011; Pe'er et al., 2022), to foster R&D for the innovation of the sector. The question reads as follows: "According to you, the European Union should support the agricultural sector mainly with funding..." The possible categories to choose from were: "to

support farmers' income"; "to reduce the environmental impact of the agricultural sector"; "to support research on innovations that increase the profitability of the agricultural sector"; "it would be better to mainly support other sectors", which we grouped with non-responses ($n = 5$). This question is asked without informing respondents whether they had answered correctly about the CAP's main content. Moreover, we measure support for the farmers' protests with a 1-10 scale in response to the following question: "On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means totally opposed and 10 means totally in agreement, how much would you say you agree with the farmers' tractor protest blocking the roads against diesel prices and the agricultural policies of the European Union?"

We then aim to capture respondents' acceptance of the current CAP and how this depends on its environmental content. To this end, we run an information provision survey experiment (Haaland et al., 2023) by randomly providing information to the respondents, divided into two groups of almost identical sample size ($N=504$; $N=498$). We do so by using a scale from 0 to 10, in which 0 means completely against and 10 means completely in favor, measuring the respondents' agreement with the CAP in response to the following statement: "For the period 2023-2027, the European Union, through the Common Agricultural Policy, allocated a budget for the agricultural sector of 386.6 billion euro." A treated group receives the information that CAP subsidies are conditional on adopting a set of environmentally friendly practices. That is, the treated group also reads "Access to these funds by farms is conditional on the adoption of environmentally friendly practices." The control group is presented with no such information. In the survey question and before the randomly provided information, we disclose to both groups the figures on the available funds for the agricultural sector for the period 2023-2027. As before, we acknowledge the significant simplification of the CAP that we are presenting here. However, we believe that the question still captures the main environmental content of the CAP, as the environmental conditionality is mandatory for Pillar I subsidies—accounting for about 75% of the CAP budget⁴ and covering approximately 67% of Italian farmers in 2020⁵—and for some Pillar II measures⁶.

Finally, we measure, on a scale from 0 to 10, the importance respondents attribute to consuming food with a low environmental impact, where 0 means not important at all and 10 means extremely important. Specifically, the statement reads as follows: "That they [food products] come from production processes that minimize environmental impact." We report the details of the questionnaire in Appendix A.

3.2. Analysis

To investigate how ex-ante factual knowledge of the CAP affects the preferences over budget allocation, we rely on a multinomial logistic regression with the dichotomous variable *CAP knowledge* as the primary independent variable and the unordered four-category dependent variable *CAP preferences*. The dependent variable's reference category groups those who stated their preference for an income support scheme for farmers. In this one, as well as in the following regression models, we control for the respondents' main sociodemographics – gender; age class; level of education; socioprofessional category – as well as for whether they have a family member employed in agriculture or a related sector. This is because the relationship between the individual knowledge, support, and acceptance of issues related to the agricultural sector can likely be confounded by closeness to the mentioned issues and/or to self-interest reasons.

We use the survey experiment to analyze the causal effect of

² Participants were recruited from a large pre-existing online panel maintained by the polling institute and invited to participate via email. Participants received points as compensation, which could be accumulated and converted into shopping vouchers.

³ The reported sample ($N=1,002$) represents valid responses after the polling institute applied standard quality control procedures to exclude problematic response patterns. The final sample used in the empirical analysis corresponds exactly to the sample we received from the institute, as we did not apply further exclusion criteria.

⁴ See European Commission (n.d.b) for details on CAP funding mechanisms.

⁵ Data on farm income indicators are available from European Commission (n.d.c).

⁶ Article 12 in European Parliament and Council of the European Union, Regulation (EU) 2021/2115.

knowledge of the CAP environmental conditionality on policy acceptance. Namely, we test the effect of knowledge of the environmental conditionality to obtain the European Union's subsidies with a dichotomous variable, for which the positive term (=1) groups those who received the information and the other (=0) groups who did not receive such a piece of information. In parallel, we test the factual knowledge's effect and potential moderating effects between the treatment and CAP acceptance. To analyze the experiment data, we rely on nested ordered logistic regression models, chosen because of the ordered nature of the dependent variable, i.e., the CAP acceptance on a 0-10 scale. We study the effect of i) the treatment status, ii) *CAP knowledge*, iii) and the interaction of the two. Our expectation is that, contrary to the first one, the latter two effects are non-significant. We expect this given that the question in itself provides information about the CAP's content. Moreover, we test the moderating effects of the treated on CAP's acceptance for the following variables: iv) *CAP knowledge*, v) *CAP preferences*, and vi) the individual propensity toward food consumption that is attentive to the environmental impact of its production.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Italians' perspective on the CAP between awareness and factual knowledge

First, we analyze the Italians' perspective on the CAP through the lens of their 'awareness' and 'knowledge' of the subject. According to our results, most Italians are aware of the existence of the CAP (67%), and 7% of them claim to know the details of the policy. This finding aligns closely with the Eurobarometer survey taken in the same period, which indicates that 70% of Italians are aware of the existence of the CAP (EC - DG AGRI, 2024). However, our analysis goes further, indicating that Italians have little knowledge of what the CAP's main content actually is. Even given a limited number of options to choose from, fewer than one third of Italians indicate that the EU subsidizes the agricultural sector. Among those with wrong factual knowledge, 42% think that the EU is mostly taxing it, while 28% either believe that there are no agricultural policies in the EU or do not answer, which suggests a recognized lack of knowledge of the CAP.

In Table 1, we show the percentage cross-tabulation of the *CAP awareness* and *CAP knowledge* measures. We dichotomize the *CAP knowledge* measure into "Yes", when the respondent states that the EU is subsidizing the sector, or "No", when the respondent does not answer or indicates a wrong option. The results indicate that a large segment of those who claim to be aware of the CAP do not have actual knowledge of it, even when considering only its main content. About 45% and 63% of those aware of the CAP, respectively with and without details, responded incorrectly to the question aimed at assessing their proper knowledge. Alongside this result, about 11% of those admitting they are not aware of the CAP's function, responded correctly to the question aimed at verifying their factual knowledge. This suggests that this segment of respondents probably made an educated guess in this latter question, and that, consequently, the percentage of Italians holding factual knowledge of the CAP's content is probably even lower than the 30%

Table 1

Two-way table of percentages about CAP awareness and CAP knowledge. N = 1002.

	<i>CAP awareness:</i> No	<i>CAP awareness:</i> Yes, no details	<i>CAP awareness:</i> Yes, with details	Total
<i>CAP knowledge:</i>				
No	89.17	62.79	45.24	70.39
Yes	10.83	37.21	54.76	29.61
Total	100%	100%	100%	100

reported here.

Second, we explore the preferences that Italians have for agricultural policies and their percentage cross-tabulation with factual knowledge (Table 2). Notably, only 4% of Italians believe that the EU should rather subsidize other sectors, which highlights the importance of government support for agriculture in the public's eyes. This finding is further confirmed by the direct question on the acceptance of the CAP (see below in Fig. 1) and it is in line with policy preferences measured in other countries, such as the USA (Moon and Pino, 2018). Most respondents think that the EU should support agriculture with subsidies aimed at: supporting farmers' income (26%); reducing the environmental impact of the agricultural sector (35%); and supporting R&D activities for improving the productivity of the sector (35%). These descriptives are consistent with previous studies that also show that environmental and sustainability goals rank highest among public preferences across Europe (Beer and Heise, 2020; Tosun et al., 2024); however, our respondents also attribute great importance to R&D activities.

For these preferences, knowledge of the CAP is relevant. Among those who actually know the CAP, support for reducing the environmental impact of the agricultural sector is the most preferred option, while support for farmers' income is significantly less favored. In contrast, the preferences among those who do not know about the CAP are more evenly distributed. A striking result is that the preferences for directly supporting farmers' income are twice as high among those who do not know the CAP as among those who do know the CAP. Instead, the opposite holds for the pro-environmental option.

Third, we investigate the level of acceptance of the CAP. In Fig. 1, we show the distribution of the variable *CAP acceptance* among the respondents, differentiated by their information-treatment status. The figure is consistent with the previous descriptive results and with the findings from other studies (Grammatikopoulou et al., 2020; Moon and Pino, 2018), showing how agricultural policies are generally supported by the public. Overall, 90% of Italians indicate an acceptance score greater than or equal to 5 on the 0-10 scale. Similar figures characterize both the treated and the control group. However, this distribution also provides some indications – tested below in Section 4.3 – that the information-treatment may influence the CAP's acceptance. Indeed, among the control group, 35% indicate a score above 7, compared with 47% in the treated group.

4.2. CAP knowledge and preferences over budget allocation

Following the previous descriptive analysis (Table 2), we now estimate the effect of factual knowledge of the CAP on preferences regarding EU agricultural policies. In Table 3, we report the results in terms of Relative Risk Ratios of a multinomial logistic regression (the full model results and coefficient estimates are displayed in Appendix B, table B1). The nominal dependent variable is the individual preference for allocation of agricultural funds to different goals, with *farmers' income* as the base outcome category. The main independent variable of interest is *CAP knowledge*. In addition, we control for a set of socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, educational level, socio-professional status, family ties to the agricultural sector). From this analysis, *CAP knowledge* appears as a significant and positive predictor of each outcome category in comparison with the preference for directly subsidizing farmers' income. More specifically, respondents who know the CAP are significantly more likely to prioritize environmental impact reduction ($RRR=3.19$), innovation and R&D ($RRR=2.00$), and other sectors ($RRR=3.68$) over farmers' income support compared to those without CAP knowledge. In other words, respondents with a generally correct understanding of the CAP's main objective are more likely to prefer allocating the budget to purposes beyond mere income support for farmers.

These results are consistent with our hypothesis (and with the descriptive analysis presented in Table 2). Indeed, as expected and as in

Table 2

Two-way table of percentages about CAP knowledge and preferences over CAP budget. N = 1002.

	CAP preferences: <i>Farmers' income</i>	CAP preferences: <i>Environment</i>	CAP preferences: <i>R&D</i>	CAP preferences: <i>Other sectors</i>	Total
<i>CAP knowledge:</i>					
No	31.02	29.51	36.03	3.44	100
Yes	14.43	49.56	31.57	4.44	100
Total	26.11	35.45	34.71	3.73	100

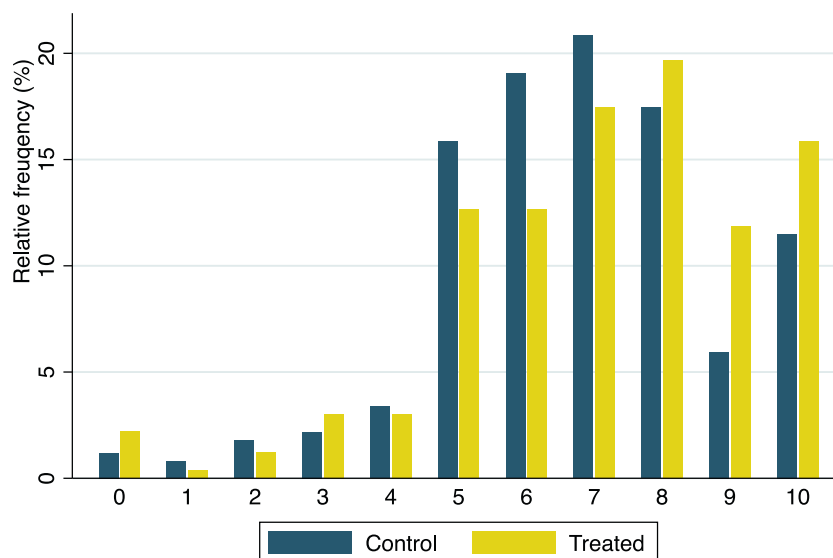


Fig. 1. Distribution of CAP acceptance.

Table 3

Results of multinomial logistic regression; dependent variable: CAP preferences; base outcome category: farmers' income.

Dependent variable:	CAP preferences: <i>Environment</i>		CAP preferences: <i>R&D</i>		CAP preferences: <i>Other sectors</i>	
<i>CAP knowledge (ref: NO)</i>	3.187	***	1.998	***	3.676	***
	[0.662]		[0.423]		[1.565]	
<i>Gender</i>	YES		YES		YES	
<i>Age class</i>	YES		YES		YES	
<i>Education level</i>	YES		YES		YES	
<i>Socio-professional status</i>	YES		YES		YES	
<i>Farm-in-family</i>	YES		YES		YES	

Note. Results reported as Relative Risk Ratios (RRR). N = 1002. P-values: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001. Standard errors in brackets. McFadden R² = 0.043. Full model with coefficient estimates in Appendix B, Table B1. Control variables included: Gender, Age Classes, Education level, Socio-professional status, Farm-in-family.

other policy arenas (Alesina et al., 2020; Blesse et al., 2023; Sides, 2016; Stantcheva, 2021), factual knowledge of the policy shapes the preferences over the policy itself. Those with misconceptions about the CAP details indicate preferences that focus on farmers' income. On the contrary, the respondents who correctly indicate that the CAP is subsidizing the sector tend to prefer an allocation that goes beyond the mere income support.

4.3. Knowledge, information and the acceptance of the CAP

Here we analyze how the provision of information on the CAP environmental conditionality affects the public acceptance of the CAP. The results in terms of Odd Ratios of such analyses are reported in Table 4 (with full model results displayed in Appendix B, table B2). In the estimation (1), the randomized treatment status of providing information on the environmental conditionality of the CAP is the main independent variable (*info-treatment*). The treatment is statistically significant and positive, indicating that informing the public about the environmental content of the CAP increases acceptance of the European

agricultural policy. People who received information had about 47% higher odds of reporting a higher level of CAP acceptance. This result is even more relevant when considering that the distribution of CAP acceptance in the pooled sample (treated and non-treated) indicates that Italians strongly support the existence of the CAP in general. The results complement the existing literature that suggests that knowledge of the agricultural sector does not affect much the acceptability of the policy (Ellison et al., 2010a). On a different note, our results further support the conclusions that the public supports the environmental conditionality as found in Germany (Beer and Heise, 2020).

Additionally, we run a regression where the informational treatment has been replaced with CAP knowledge. To interpret the results, consider that the survey experiment provides all respondents with information about the existence of the CAP and the size of its budget (while randomizing the information on the environmental conditionality of the CAP subsidies). Moreover, the experiment was administered to the respondents after they were asked about their awareness and knowledge of the CAP. By this point, all respondents had been informed about the existence of the CAP and its budget size, hence CAP knowledge (which

Table 4
Results of ordered logit regressions; dependent variable: CAP acceptance.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Info-treatment</i>	1.467 [0.166]	***	1.475 [0.168]	***	1.234 [0.170]	0.547 ***
<i>CAP knowledge</i> (ref: No)		1.062 [0.130]	1.092 [0.134]	0.849 [0.139]		-0.167 [0.233]
<i>Info treatment * CAP knowledge</i>			1.475	1.739 [0.418]	*	
<i>CAP preferences</i> (ref: income support)						
Environment					0.411 [0.089]	***
R&D					0.582 [0.121]	**
Other sectors					0.102 [0.050]	***
<i>Info treatment * Environment</i>					4.673 [1.429]	***
<i>Info treatment * R&D</i>					2.906 [0.877]	***
<i>Info treatment * Other sectors</i>					2.493 [1.700]	
<i>Food – environmental impact</i>						3.189 [0.604]
<i>Info treatment * Food – environmental impact</i>						2.122 [0.566]
<i>Gender</i>	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
<i>Age class</i>	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
<i>Education</i>	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
<i>Socio-professional status</i>	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
<i>Farm-in-family</i>	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
McFadden R ²	0.011	0.008	0.011	0.013	0.025	0.043

Note. Results reported as Odd Ratios. N = 1002. P-values: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001. Standard errors in brackets. Table B2 in appendix B reports the full models. Control variables included: Gender, Age Classes, Education level, Socio-professional status, Farm-in family.

measures ex-ante knowledge) should be irrelevant. The results of the regression confirm our expectation. Indeed, model 2 shows that the coefficient of *CAP knowledge* is not statistically significant. The same result is found when *CAP knowledge* is added to the informational treatment (model 3).

In model 4, we interact the variables *CAP knowledge* and *info-treatment* to verify whether factual knowledge has a moderating effect on *CAP acceptance*. The interaction term is statistically significant. Thus, while *CAP knowledge* alone has no significant effect on the CAP's acceptance at this stage, the effect of disclosing environmental information is stronger for those who already have ex-ante knowledge of the CAP's main content (and perhaps not of its environmental conditionality).

The results of Model 5 show that preferring EU agricultural subsidies to be directed toward goals other than directly supporting farmers' income, positively moderates the treatment's effect on CAP acceptance. Namely, if one is inclined not to directly subsidize farmers' income, when presented with the current CAP's allocated budget, they are more likely to agree with it if the subsidy is conditioned on the adoption of environmentally friendly practices. Finally, in Model 6, we test the moderating effect of pro-environmental consumption habits. As expected, being attentive to the environmental impact of food production positively moderates the treatment's effect. Altogether, these last two results indicate that, for those attentive to environmental issues and reluctant to support direct EU subsidies for farmers, it is crucial to link such subsidies to an environmental condition and to effectively communicate this conditionality, in order to gain their support for the CAP.

4.4. Robustness check

To support our conclusions, we run three robustness checks.

First, to further assess respondents' coherence in their responses and the role of the factual knowledge in shaping preferences, we examine the effect of *CAP knowledge* on the respondents' support for the 2024

farmers' protests. Indeed, in the first months of 2024, a wave of farmers' protests took place across Europe, mainly targeting the EU proposals for more stringent environmental regulations and ambitious sustainability goals (Matthews, 2024), which were expected to increase the costs of the policy compliance. At this point, we know that respondents with accurate factual knowledge of the CAP express budget preferences that shift away from the pure support for farmers' income (Section 4.2). Given this, if respondents are consistent in their responses, *CAP knowledge* should be negatively correlated to the support for farmers' protests. The result of an ordered logistic regression model (7), presented in Table 5 (the full model results are displayed in Appendix B, table B3), confirms our expectation. Indeed, the independent variable of interest is statistically significant and negative, indicating that knowledge of the CAP is a negative predictor for farmers' protest support.

Our second robustness check involves the measure of awareness of the CAP, which, as we showed in Section 4.1, does not imply factual knowledge of the CAP's main content. Here, we further test whether *CAP awareness* captures a perspective that is similar to, or significantly different from, factual knowledge. To this end, we run the previous

Table 5
Results of ordered logit regressions; dependent variable: Farmers' protests support.

Dependent variable:	<i>Farmers' protests support</i>
<i>CAP knowledge</i> (ref: No)	-1.310 [0.127]
<i>Gender</i>	YES
<i>Age</i>	YES
<i>Education</i>	YES
<i>Socio-professional status</i>	YES
<i>Farm-in-family</i>	YES

N = 1002. P-values: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001. Standard errors in brackets. McFadden R² = 0.043. Table B3 in appendix B reports the full models. Control variables included: Gender, Age Classes, Education level, Socio-professional status, Farm-in-family.

multinomial regression model (holding constant the preference for farmers' income as reference category) and the ordered logistic regression models (2, 4, 7), substituting *CAP knowledge* with *CAP awareness* as the main independent variable. The results presented in Table 6 confirm that the Eurobarometer measure of public awareness of the CAP does not capture factual knowledge and it is not a relevant factor to explain CAP preferences, acceptance, or support for farmers' protests. Indeed, *CAP awareness* is not statistically significant in any of the models, except one (predicting preferences over EU budget allocation for *other sectors* rather than the agricultural one).

Finally, we further test the causal impact of the treatment. To do so, we randomize the treatment status of the respondent according to a uniform distribution and rerun the regression model (1) in Table 3 (Table B5 in Appendix B reports the full models). The results of such a placebo-test are listed in Table 7, and show that all the coefficients of the randomized treatment status are non-significant. This further supports the results of section 4.3.

5. Main conclusions and policy implications

Agrowing literature has highlighted that the public generally lacks an in-depth knowledge of policies and that this, in turn, shapes preferences and levels of acceptance. Inspired by this literature, we analyse the effect of factual knowledge of the CAP on the preference over budget allocations and on the acceptance of the policy itself. Our analyses are based on an original survey held in 2024 that is representative of the Italian population.

Our results indicate that Italians believe they know the CAP, stating that they are *aware* of it, but they fail to answer correctly when questioned about its central function (i.e., financially supporting the agricultural sector). Despite this, Italians are rather supportive of farmers' claims and the agricultural sector. First, they exhibit a large acceptance of the existence of the CAP and its current budget. Second, if asked about their preferences over budget allocations, the option to allocate the funds to other sectors is the least chosen.

Moreover, our results suggest that knowledge of the CAP and its content is not merely educational, and it is not neutral in regard to the citizens' preferences about the agricultural sector. Instead, it shapes opinions and perspectives. First, our results show that preferences over budget goals depend on a correct understanding of the CAP purposes. Second, rather than merely supporting the subsidizing of the farmers' income, those who do know the CAP tend to favor budget allocations toward R&D in agriculture and toward the reduction of the environmental issues of the sector. Third, Italians are sensitive to the environmental dimension of agricultural policies. Indeed, the provision of information regarding the ecological conditionality of the CAP subsidies

strongly prompts an increase in the (already high) acceptance of the policy and its budget. This is especially true for those individuals having environmentally conscious consumption habits.

A number of limitations apply and could be explored in future research. A first limitation is that we greatly simplify the complexity of the CAP and of the EU policy realm to accommodate the non-expert target of the survey. Future research should further deepen the perspective of the general public on the multidimensional structure of the CAP. Promising avenues include, for example, public opinion on voluntary vs. mandatory environmental measures, the budget size of the CAP relative to alternative strategic sectors such as research, and the different objectives related to the agricultural sector. Furthermore, a possible limitation of our study is that, given the limited number of answer options in the survey question measuring factual knowledge, some respondents may have selected the correct answer by making an educated guess. However, we can reasonably expect that our results would have been even stronger without the noise introduced by those respondents, and with a consequently lower percentage of Italians lacking factual knowledge of the CAP's content. Moreover, although the sample is representative of the Italian population, its size remains limited, and future research should rely on a larger sample. Finally, our experiment provides information *exogenously*. An interesting avenue for future research would be to compare this setting with one in which the acquisition of information about the policy is endogenously chosen by the respondents.

The results carry policy implications. They show that, in general, self-assessed measures of awareness regarding policy functions should be cautiously interpreted by policymakers. In particular, we find that the EU survey measure to capture the public's knowledge of the CAP is insufficient and could be misleading if not complemented by questions that assess public's *factual* knowledge. In this regard, implementing new survey questions beyond the mere awareness will certainly be beneficial. Nevertheless, we find that the public welcomes EU policies supporting the agricultural sector. Yet, even at this stage, we can conclude that policymakers at the European level, when financing the agricultural sector, enjoy general support among the public, which stresses the importance of transparency in this regard. However, Italians are relatively less in favor of a mere income support scheme, preferring instead to allocate funding toward improving the sector profitability through R&D or reducing its environmental impact. Thus, the results suggest that conditionalities on CAP subsidies are a vehicle for higher CAP support among the public, bringing an alignment in the public opinion between agricultural and environmental priorities. Finally, the results suggest that greater efforts in communicating the CAP and its contents, particularly its environmental components, should be implemented.

Table 6
Comparisons of the results generated by substituting CAP awareness to CAP knowledge.

Dependent Variables:	CAP preferences: Environment		CAP preferences: R&D		CAP preferences: Other Sectors		CAP acceptance		CAP acceptance		Farmers' protests support	
<i>CAP awareness</i>	0.332		0.259		-0.950 *		0.239		0.092		-0.099	
	[0.191]		[0.190]		[0.409]		[0.124]		[0.177]		[0.123]	
<i>Info-treatment * CAP awareness</i>									0.347			
									[0.245]			
<i>CAP knowledge</i>	1.159	***	0.692	***	1.302	***	-0.164	***	-0.164	***	-1.310	***
	[0.208]		[0.212]		[0.426]		[0.164]		[0.164]		[0.122]	
<i>Inf- treatment * CAP Knowledge</i>									0.553	*		
									[0.240]			

Note. For comparison purposes, we include in the table the results of the regression with *CAP knowledge* as independent variable. $N = 1002$. *P-values*: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Standard errors in brackets. Table B4 in appendix B reports the full models. Control variables included: Gender, Age Classes, Education level, Socio-professional status, Farm-in-family.

Table 7
Results of placebo test.

	#01	#02	#03	#04	#05	#06	#07	#08	#09	#10
Placebo	−0.089 [0.112]	0.105 [0.112]	0.027 [0.112]	0.027 [0.113]	0.161 [0.113]	0.123 [0.112]	−0.069 [0.112]	−0.007 [0.112]	0.105 [0.112]	0.011 [0.112]
Gender	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Age classes	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Education level	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Socio-professional status	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Farm-in-family	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
McFadden R ²	0.008	0.009	0.008	0.008	0.009	0.009	0.008	0.008	0.009	0.008

N = 1002. P-values: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001. Standard errors in brackets. Control variables included: Gender, Age Classes, Education level, Socio-professional status, Farm-in-family.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Matteo Zavalloni: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Giacomo Salvarani:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Elena Viganò:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, 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.foodpol.2026.103082>.

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