

To differentiate or not to differentiate?

Public opinion on differentiated integration in the European Union

Summary

The European Union is an increasingly differentiated political system: not all member states participate in all EU policies (internal differentiation). Moreover, third countries formally participate in certain EU policies (external differentiation). A key question in the constitutional debate on the future of Europe is to what extent such 'differentiated integration' is desirable and legitimate.

This brief reports on original public opinion data and discusses which forms of differentiation citizens support and under what conditions they find differentiation problematic. Our data shows that European citizens distinguish between and formulate nuanced attitudes towards different forms of differentiated integration. While a majority of citizens are open to differentiation in the EU, attitudes vary across member states and between citizens with different political preferences. Despite these differences, citizens share important procedural and outcome concerns. Differentiation should be designed to be inclusive. In this respect, the enhanced cooperation procedure, enabling a subgroup of minimum nine EU member states to cooperate more closely within particular fields, resonates well with public sentiment. But there are clear red lines: differentiation should not make non-participating EU countries worse off. In sum, differentiated integration will not solve all disagreements in a diverse EU. To be legitimate in the eyes of the public, a differentiated EU must find the right balance between respect for member-state autonomy and respect for the EU's common interests and norms.

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A Differentiated EU

On 8 December 2022, European Union justice ministers rejected Romania and Bulgaria's application to join the border-free Schengen Area, even though it was officially recognised that the two countries fulfilled the technical criteria for membership. This political decision was criticised as “discriminatory” and “deeply unfair” (Ulceluse, 2022). From the perspective of its critics, the decision cemented a two-tier European society and, in this respect, constitutes a pathological form of differentiated integration. The concept of differentiated integration refers to the fact that parts of the EU rulebook do not apply to all members, either because a member state has been exempted from participation in a policy, or because it does not yet fulfil defined criteria for membership, for example of Economic and Monetary Union (internal differentiation). Differentiated integration also has an external dimension. Third countries may – under certain conditions – formally participate in select EU policies, as is the case in the European Economic Area, integrating Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein into the EU's single market.

The European Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe, published in 2017 in response to the shock of the Brexit referendum, relaunched the political debate about differentiated integration. One of the European Commission's “scenarios for the EU27 by 2025” explicitly suggested that “those who want more do more”. Political proposals for a more differentiated EU argue that differentiated integration would make decision-making and compromise-building easier in a diverse EU. However, Bulgaria's and Romania's Schengen experience illustrates that differentiated integration may also lead to unequal treatment of different member states. It is therefore

crucial that differentiation contributes to the EU's overall legitimacy. As the EU's legitimacy rests on public support, this policy brief discusses public attitudes towards different forms of differentiated integration.

Public opinions

The scenario depicted in the European Commission's White Paper relates to what has been called the ‘two-speed’ or ‘multi-speed’ model of differentiation. Rather than waiting until all member states are willing and able to take a new integration step, groups of willing countries proceed on their own, while the more reluctant are invited (or expected) to join at a later stage. The enhanced cooperation procedure fits into this model: It allows a subgroup of at least nine member states to cooperate more closely within the structures of the EU without the involvement of all other members.

“ *Differentiated integration may lead to unequal treatment of different member states.* ”

However, differentiation can also take many other forms. For example, a member state may negotiate an opt-out from a policy area such as Common Foreign and Security Policy. This may lead to a so-called ‘multi-tier’ EU with a deeply integrated ‘core’ of member states and a less integrated (second) ‘tier’. The most radical form of differentiation would be the idea of ‘Europe à la carte’ (also called ‘multi-menu’), in which each EU country can pick and choose freely the common policies in which it wants to participate. EU policymakers therefore need to take into account how citizens evaluate these different models when designing differentiated policies.

We here present insights from the ‘Comparative Opinions on Differentiated Integration’ survey, covering 12000 respondents from eight EU countries (1500 per country): Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, and Poland (Schuessler et al., 2023). The survey was carried out in February and March 2021.

Our data reveals that citizens are not in principle opposed to differentiated integration. There are relative majorities for the ‘multi-speed’, ‘multi-tier’ and – surprisingly – also for the ‘multi-menu’ model (Figure 1). However, it becomes clear that citizens have nuanced procedural preferences (Figure 2). In particular, citizens want consensual and inclusive differentiation. Citizens generally prefer larger integrating groups over smaller groups. Opt-outs should not be declared unilaterally; rather citizens want member states to agree collectively on opt-outs. When it comes to the involvement of the European Parliament, citizens display a certain ambivalence.

While they support giving the Parliament the right to propose differentiated integration, they oppose granting it a veto over differentiation choices. Thus, differentiation choices seem to be considered a prerogative of the member states.

“Citizens want consensual and inclusive differentiation.”

Citizens also have nuanced opinions on the question of when it is permissible to exclude member states from common policies. Citizens oppose arbitrary exclusion, for example, based on how wealthy EU countries are. However, citizens are open to the exclusion of member states from common policies when they think that there is a legitimate reason to do so. For instance, a relative majority of respondents supports the temporary exclusion of member states that violate basic EU norms, such as the rule-of-law.

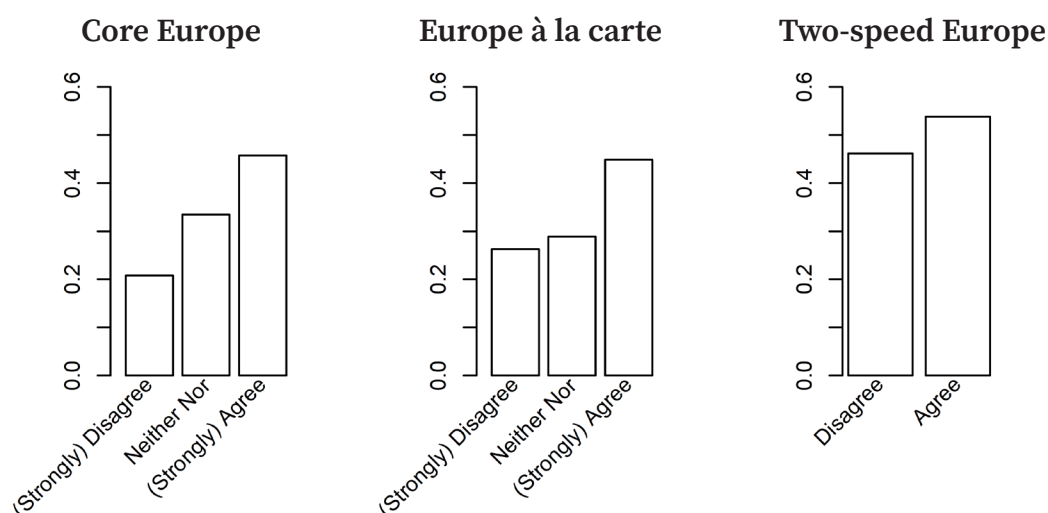


Figure 1: Public opinion on different models of differentiated integration

Core Europe: ‘The idea of building a core Europe, bundling the most integration-friendly states, is a good idea.’

Europe à la Carte: ‘Member states should generally be allowed to pick and choose from EU policies as they desire.’

Two-Speed Europe: ‘Countries which are ready to intensify the development of a common European policy in certain important areas (I) should do so without having to wait for the others, or (II) should wait until all Member States of the EU are ready for this.’

This corresponds to the finding that during the COVID-19 pandemic, German citizens were less supportive of providing economic support to EU countries accused of rule-of-law violations (Heermann et al., 2022).

“Citizens are open to the exclusion of member states from common policies when they think that there is a legitimate reason to do so.

So far, we have discussed EU citizens in the aggregate. However, the data also shows significant variations between individuals and between countries or regions. On the individual level, EU supporters prefer temporary differentiation, and want to limit permanent opt-outs. In contrast, citizens who are sceptical about the EU are more likely to support an unconstrained pick-and-choose model.

We also find notable regional variation. In contrast to Northern Europeans, citizens in Southern Europe are less supportive of a ‘multi-speed’ Europe. This regional variation appears to be a consequence of the euro-area crisis. Using time-series data from the Eurobarometer, we can demonstrate that before the crisis, Southern Europeans were strongly in favour of a ‘multi-speed’ Europe, while after the crisis they expressed pronounced opposition (Leuffen et al., 2022). Citizens in Southern Europe seem concerned about being excluded and left behind because of their home countries’ struggling economies. Related research finds the same logic in Bulgaria and Romania, where continued exclusion from the Schengen Area has soured citizens’ attitudes towards differentiated integration and the EU (Vergigioglou & Hegewald, 2023; Winzen & Schimmelfennig, 2023).

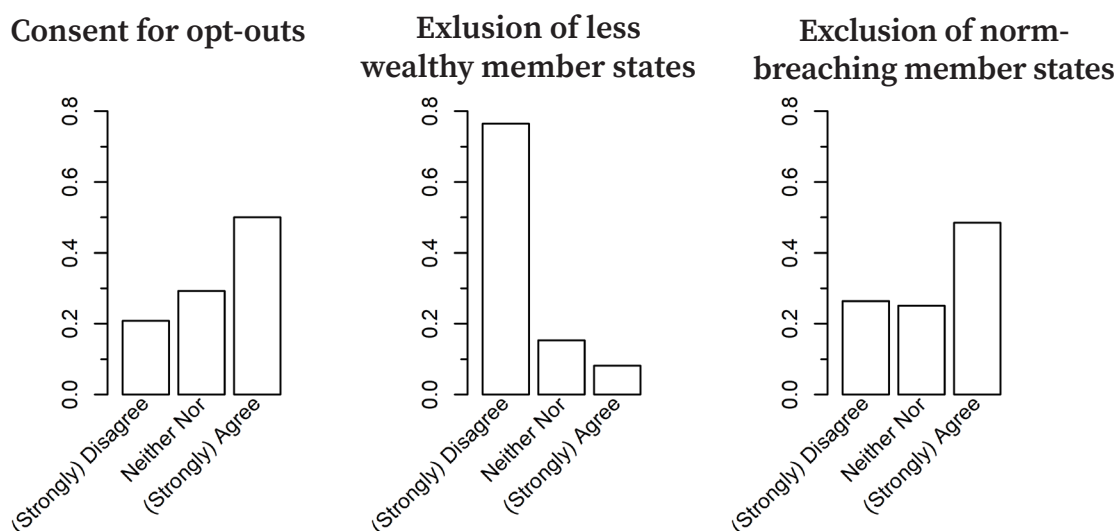


Figure 2: Public opinion on procedural aspects of differentiated integration

Consent for opt-outs: ‘Member states should be allowed to opt-out of specific policy areas only after receiving the consent of the other member states.’

Exclusion of less-wealthy member states: ‘It should be possible to exclude member states from common EU policies because they are less wealthy than most other EU member states (statement recoded for clarity).

Exclusion of norm-violating member states: ‘It should be possible to exclude member states, which breach core norms and values of the EU, from common EU policies’ (statement recoded for clarity).

These fears also explain why, in our survey, Greek and Italian respondents are less supportive of excluding norm-violating member states from EU benefits. They might have considered the Stability and Growth Pact as a part of the EU's core norms. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a majority of Polish respondents also object to the exclusion of norm-violating member states from EU policies, realising that their country might be a target of such a measure. More generally, the country differences make clear that citizens worry about how their home country might be affected by differentiated integration.

To test more systematically whether citizens evaluate differentiated integration primarily through the lens of how their home country will be affected, we asked survey respondents to evaluate hypothetical differentiation scenarios, in which we varied, among other things, the effects of differentiation on their home country and on the other EU countries. These survey experiments reveal a clear red line for citizens: Differentiated integration should not leave the non-participating member states worse-off. In other words, differentiation should not impose negative externalities on those member states, which are not part of the integrating subgroup.¹ This finding holds irrespective of whether the respondent's home country would be affected by these negative effects. This is good news for those who believe that European citizens can be trusted to contribute without a nationalist bias to the debate on the future of Europe.

Finally, our survey data also considers external differentiation (Figure 3). European citizens are in principle open to the participation of third countries in EU policies, provided that they contribute adequately to the EU's

Third countries can participate if they contribute

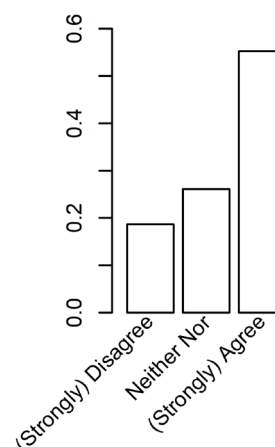


Figure 3: Public opinion on external differentiation

Conditional external differentiation: *Non-EU states should be allowed to participate in selected EU policies if they adequately contribute financially to the EU.'*

finances. Financial agreements with third countries, such as contributions to the EU's cohesion funds, are therefore considered appropriate by EU citizens. This finding is in line with the implications of our results for internal differentiation: Citizens are willing to support differentiated integration if it is fair in terms of procedures and outcomes.

Conclusions

The EU is an increasingly differentiated political system. In a diverse Union of 27 member states, differentiation can be an instrument to: (a) respect national sovereignty concerns of individual members, and to (b) account for differences in member-state capacities. Moreover, external differentiation allows the EU to forge close and mutually beneficial cooperation with third countries in its neighbourhood. Yet differentiation also entails the risk of being perceived as

¹ This result corresponds nicely to analyses of differentiated integration in normative political science (Lord, 2021).

discriminatory, creating the impression that some EU countries and their citizens are second-class Europeans, as in the case of Romania's and Bulgaria's failed attempts to join the Schengen Area.

Our research on public opinion on differentiated integration shows that European citizens are conscious of these risks and benefits. Citizens are able to distinguish between different forms and procedures of differentiated integration. In particular, our research shows that citizens evaluate differentiation based on two criteria: its perceived effects on (1) member-state autonomy and (2) the EU as a whole. While individual citizens may weigh these two criteria differently, our data shows that citizens care about the fairness of the procedures and outcomes of differentiation:

- Differentiation should be open and inclusive: Citizens prefer larger to smaller integrating groups, and all EU countries should be able to join in over time. Individual opt-outs should require the consent of the other member states. In particular, citizens who want 'more Europe' prefer temporary to permanent differentiation.
- There should be no arbitrary exclusion of member states from common policies. Citizens from less wealthy member states in particular worry about being left behind or discriminated against. Perceptions of discrimination can reduce public support for the EU in these countries. Temporary differentiation should therefore be designed and communicated in a way that will avoid perceptions of discrimination. Once member states fulfil agreed capacity criteria, they should not be prevented from joining in.

- Not all instances of exclusion are perceived as arbitrary. Citizens are open to temporarily excluding member states that violate core EU norms – such as the rule of law – from the benefits of common policies. However, support for such sanctions is much lower among citizens of potentially targeted countries.
- European citizens agree on a clear red line: differentiation should not make non-participating member states worse off.
- Citizens welcome the conditional participation of third countries in select EU policies, provided that they contribute financially to the EU. External differentiation is considered a legitimate instrument in the EU external affairs toolbox.

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EU Differentiation Dominance and Democracy (EU3D)

The EU has expanded in depth and breadth across a range of member states with greatly different makeups, making the European integration process more differentiated. EU3D is a research project that specifies the conditions under which differentiation is politically acceptable, institutionally sustainable, and democratically legitimate; and singles out those forms of differentiation that engender dominance. EU3D brings together around 50 researchers in 10 European countries and is coordinated by ARENA Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo.

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