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# Opting out of an EU identity? The effects of differentiated integration on European identity

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## ABSTRACT



The link between European institutions and European identities remains under-explored. Similarly, we know little about how countries opting out of European integration has helped shape their citizens' view of themselves as more or less European. Using general synthetic control models and data from 1983 to 2020, I find that people in countries with opt-outs tend to identify as more strongly European in the years after an opt-out is implemented, and most prominently so in the countries where opt-outs responded to a popular demand and were associated with great politicisation. This shows that providing individual countries with greater autonomy may strengthen their citizens' attachment to Europe, but that any such effect is likely to depend on domestic variations in for instance elite politicisation of European integration.


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## Introduction

A mainstay of the European Union after the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty is that it is permanently differentiated (Chiocchetti, 2023): While a core of EU member-states is integrated into all areas of the Union, a smaller subset of states has opted out of integration in particularly controversial policy areas. We know that these 'opt-outs' impact how people think about EU membership (Vergioglou & Hegewald, 2023). However, it is still uncertain whether they have a similar effect on people's tendencies to identify with the EU. There are good reasons for thinking that opt-outs may either strengthen exclusively national self-identification by making it less necessary

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for citizens to debate highly salient issues (Collignon, 2017) or weaken it by strengthening the support for the EU that is often a precursor to European identification (Schraff & Schimmelfennig, 2020; Vergioglou & Hegewald, 2023). This paper thus asks 'How does opting out of EU integration impact the tendency of people in the countries opting out to identify as exclusively national or both European and national'? Answering this question also deepens our understanding of whether the EU's institutional willingness to let countries opt-out of European integration may undermine the effectiveness of its work to establish something akin to an identity necessary for its cohesion as a political community (McNamara, 2019; Putnam, 1994).

To answer this question, I use general synthetic control models (Xu, 2017) and a time series of Eurobarometer data from 1983 to 2020. This lets me compare the levels of identification with Europe in the countries opting out to those found in a 'synthetic' control unit with close to identical levels of exclusively national identification in the years before the opt-outs became a reality. I find a greater decrease in exclusively national self-identification in opt-out countries after opt-outs were implemented than what is found in a highly comparable control group. However, this mainly applies where opt-outs stem from both popular demand and great politicisation.

My findings have implications both for theories of European integration and current debates facing the Union: They suggest that the institutional framework of the EU matters for people's identification with the EU, as assumed by a large literature studying how institutional contexts shape both the EU itself and popular support for it (Mariotto & Pellegata, 2023; Risse, 2013). However, the effects of any change in these frameworks are likely to be short-lived and appear mainly when the European Union is strongly politicised. In other words, for opt-outs to positively strengthen European identification the political elites that provide citizens with most of their cues about integration (van de Wardt *et al.*, 2014) must actively debate the issues leading to the opt-out, thus crystallizing the question of national and European identities in the minds of citizens, while the EU's accommodation of national preferences must be both visible and salient. For the immediate negative correlations between exclusively national identity and opting out to materialise as a long-term shift in national self-identification, they must arguably also permanently change the national elite discourse around the EU: If opt-outs do not consistently reduce the elite politicisation of European integration, as was arguably the case in Britain between the 1993 Maastricht Treaty opt-outs and Brexit (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020), they are also unlikely to lastingly change people's perceptions of themselves as either national or European.

Lastly, my results have obvious policy implications in a time where greater integration in highly salient policy areas like defense and migration may be more necessary than ever. What my results suggest is that granting opt-

outs to highly Eurosceptic populations might not be a panacea for reducing identity-based contestation. However, it may reduce such contestation if opt-outs are seen to accommodate national preferences in the wake of great elite politicisation of the EU.

This paper begins by outlining what we know about the public opinion effects of differentiated integration, the name that will be used in this paper to describe the above-mentioned process of opting out of EU integration. I then describe the methods and data used for the analysis. Lastly, I show how the different forms of opt-outs currently in place in the EU have different impacts on national identity before discussing the implications that these variations have for our understanding of how opt-outs may produce more or less identity-based contestation of the EU.

### ***Differentiated integration and EU public opinion***

EU law is typically applied unevenly across countries for two reasons (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2014): First, opt-outs, the focus of this paper, typically follow from a member state's desire to avoid integration that it deems too costly to its national sovereignty. Such opt-outs have typically been found in highly salient areas after the ratification of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty (Chiocchetti, 2023). Second, the EU's institutions may impose temporary exemptions from EU law upon new member-states as a precondition for membership. However, only the first kind of differentiated integration permanently alters the shape of the EU as a polity: Whereas a 'multi-speed' Europe temporarily alters which countries are subject to particular EU laws, opt-outs such as the British decision not to enter the Schengen Area creates an EU with multiple policy cores, where some citizens are not exposed to the benefits and obligations following, for instance, membership of the euro zone.

Recent studies have investigated how these variable levels of sovereignty impact attitudes towards the EU. Schraff and Schimmelfennig (2020), in their study of the impact of the Danish 2015 referendum on the country's continued opt-out from the justice and home affairs area, find that Eurosceptics became more satisfied with EU democracy after it became clear that the referendum would lead to a continued opt-out. Vergioglou and Hegewald (2023) corroborate the link between voluntary opt-outs and support for the EU by showing that the only form of differentiation that leads to more positive attitudes towards the EU is one that seeks to strengthen national autonomy while allowing the country to remain member of the EU. Voluntary differentiated integration is also associated with greater support for a permanently differentiated EU in the future (Moland, 2024; Winzen & Schimmelfennig, 2023). The reason may be that it allows 'those who want less to do less', thus creating a greater congruence between the ideal and actual level of

integration. In contrast, differentiated integration imposed by the EU on countries that seek closer integration tends to lead to less support for both the EU and the prospect of permanent EU differentiation (Moland, 2024; Vergioglou & Hegewald, 2023).

### *Opt-outs' overall effect on national identity*

While many have studied what differentiated integration means for the EU's institutions, the question of what it means for identification with either Europe or the nation-state is comparatively under-studied. The existing literature's focus on support for the EU may also be insufficient to answer this theoretically important question (Dalton, 2021): While there is a link between European identity and support for the EU (Foster & Frieden, 2021), the two are not the same. Importantly, social identities are more deeply rooted than general political attitudes (Huddy, 2001). Thus, even if opt-outs do impact short-term views of EU membership, they may have a smaller impact on identification with the nation-state. Studying opt-outs' effects on European identity, a connection untested in the public opinion literature on differentiated integration, is thus warranted because it lets me test whether variations in the level of a country's integration into the EU have a similar short-term impact on a deeply rooted social group identity like the feeling of belonging to a nation-state.

This paper leverages the fact that opt-outs from European integration render individuals citizens of countries with different levels of formal sovereignty, despite belonging to the same overarching polity. Reforms similar to the implementation of opt-outs, which essentially vary the extent of political autonomy across the different regions of a polity, are known to have impacted perceptions of both national identity and support for greater devolution of powers in the future outside of the EU (Ishiyama, 2022; Verhaegen *et al.*, 2021).

While social group identities like national identities are, as Huddy (2001) points out, slow to change, European identities have several peculiarities. First, because it rests on a thin public sphere (Bellamy, 2019), European identity formation may be more volatile than national identities built on shared cultures and deep social ties. Second, because the social ties connecting Europeans are weaker than those connecting co-nationals, transnational institutions may be needed to both build and sustain an understanding of European identity as a whole. As EU institutions are the ones most heavily associated with European identity-building (Laffan, 2004; McNamara, 2019), people's willingness to accept the shared European/national identification common among EU citizens (Risse, 2014) is likely to partially depend on how they think about the EU's institutions.

Opt-outs are thus likely to change national identity because they influence how strongly citizens need to relate to institutions and symbols that allow

them to see themselves as having shared concerns with other Europeans. Because political cooperation requires thinking about and debating issues that arise from it, as is the case for both the Schengen cooperation and the Eurozone, citizens of a country on the inside will inevitably have to spend more time engaging both with these shared concerns and the institutions set up to address them than those outside the cooperation (Collignon, 2017). Much as what happens at the individual level (Kuhn, 2011), this engagement with other European citizens could make it more likely for them to identify both as national and European rather than just national. This is most likely to happen not by weakening people's attachment to a nation-state, but rather by them becoming more open to identities that combine a national and European component (Risse, 2014).

In contrast to this sustained engagement, previous literature finds that parliamentarians from opt-out countries play a smaller role in European inter-parliamentary conferences (Winzen, 2023), and that Norwegian politicians have implemented informal 'gag rules' to disincentivise debates about highly controversial policies (Fossum & Graver, 2018). By making it less necessary for a country's citizens and elite to engage in debates about the most salient EU issues, differentiated integration may thus provide access to fewer venues that allow citizens to see themselves as members of a broader European citizenry. This may in turn produce a stronger national, rather than European, attachment among citizens of countries opting out. The way national media sources typically cover EU politics may also exacerbate these effects: Rather than discuss something as a shared European issue, journalists covering the EU are more likely to frame an issue in a way that privileges a national perspective (Michailidou & Trenz, 2023).

Additionally, opt-outs have typically both followed elite-driven politicisation of European integration (de Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Winzen, 2020) and have been framed as efforts to strengthen national sovereignty in the face of EU constraints (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Leruth, 2015). These elite cues can lead to a stronger attachment to the nation-state by making the distinction between national in- and out-groups more salient and to citizens becoming less attuned to European politics. An instructive example is how Danish debate on the country's various opt-outs from European integration focused on themes of sovereignty and the perception that it was under threat from European institutions (Adler-Nissen, 2014). This discourse has been publicly dominant even as Danish governments have selectively opted into policy areas subject to differentiated integration just as frequently as they have reaffirmed their right to opt-out (Migliorati, 2022). Similarly, in debates over the Maastricht Treaty in the UK House of Commons one Conservative MP employed similar frames, by painting attempts to supra-nationalise EU governance as a path towards a Napoleonic conquest of Europe (Todd, 2016, p. 62). Thus, even though the differences between opt-out and opt-

in countries will be the same as for the mechanism related to de-politicisation, this mechanism posits that the effect of the opt-out on national identity is mainly brought out because elite framing of European integration primes citizens to think of themselves as exclusively national.

It is possible that both socialisation and mechanisms relating to negative politicisation of the EU may lead to a correlation between opt-outs and increasingly national identification among citizens of countries opting out. I thus hypothesise:

H1: Exposure to opt-outs will lead to an increase in exclusively national identities in the relevant member-states.

The link between opt-outs and politicisation of Europe also indicates that they will predominantly impact exclusively national identities, rather than more common compound identities (Risse, 2014). Elite politicisation of opt-outs has, as I show above, posited European integration as both threat to sovereignty and national and European solutions as incompatible. This makes it likelier that people will shift towards a more exclusively national stance, rather than a shift in the direction of slightly less European identification.

However, there is typically a strong correlation between national identification and opposition to the EU as a political project (Hooghe & Marks, 2005; McLaren, 2002). Case studies have shown that opt-outs tend to make people more positively disposed towards the EU (Schraff & Schimmelfennig, 2020; Vergioglou & Hegewald, 2023). There may thus be a link between opt-outs and more inclusive national identification that goes through more positive attitudes towards the EU. This is evident also in how those who are most sceptical of the EU are also the ones most likely to be positively inclined towards these opt-outs, even if sovereignty concerns may be of limited importance for why the same people choose to support or oppose a proposal for differentiation (de Blok & de Vries, 2023; Heermann *et al.*, 2024).

Opt-outs may also lead to more European self-identification through how they potentially change people's perceptions of what the EU means for national sovereignty. States frequently decide to opt-out of integration because the exclusive nature of their citizens' self-identification leads to bottom-up demands for the protection of national sovereignty (Winzen, 2016). Such demands are either expressed through referenda rejecting EU policy or voting for Eurosceptic parties (Hobolt, 2009; van de Wardt *et al.*, 2014). Given that opt-outs, especially in countries with already Eurosceptic populations, are likely to bring the perceived speed of integration closer to the desired speed it (Malang & Schraff, 2024) it may show those who identify most strongly with their nation-state that EU integration is more compatible with national sovereignty than originally assumed. They could also become

more favourably inclined towards EU institutions than they were before the opt-out. As these institutions are the ones most seriously committed to building something akin to a European identity, exclusive nationals might as a result become more open to adopting some of the ideals, such as the idea of a European identity, that these institutions embody.

Because opt-outs are typically used for highly salient cases of integration (Chiocchetti, 2023), they may also reduce contestation of the EU by taking controversial policy integration 'off the table' (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). The reduced salience of EU politics could thus reduce politicisation, in turn making those who identify most strongly with their countries more likely to embrace a dual national and European identity. This causal chain leads to a competing hypothesis:

H2: Exposure to opt-outs will lead to a decrease in exclusively national identities in the relevant member states.

### *Not all opt-outs are equal*

Contexts are likely to matter for how opt-outs shape national identification. Studies have shown that a key division goes between externally imposed and voluntarily chosen differentiated integration, with the latter having the most positive effects on EU public opinion. Similarly, we may expect the effects of these opt-outs to differ by how they were brought about.

One important distinction goes between what Migliorati (2022) terms 'post-functional opt-outs', that are chosen by elites to address popular Euroscepticism, and all others. The paradigmatic case of postfunctional opt-outs are those that followed the negotiation and ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, which marked a shift from a 'permissive consensus' to a 'constraining dissensus' in how voters related to European integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Here the opt-out itself was debated by elites and citizens, and brought about after a highly politicized process. This separates them from opt-outs that did not arise from a *bottom-up* demand, such as the Irish opt-out from the Schengen cooperation (Sion-Tzidkiyahu, 2008). The greater public awareness and politicisation of postfunctional opt-outs could have two distinct effects on European identity: First, greater awareness could lead people to become more aware of the accommodation the opt-outs imply, and thus also to express greater faith in EU institutions than after other opt-outs. Second, because contestation of the EU leading up to these opt-outs heavily favoured Eurosceptic parties, (Beaudonnet & Gomez, 2024) and because they typically led to a more Eurosceptic party system after the fact (Malang & Schraff, 2024), the negative elite politicisation that they were associated with could conversely lead to greater increases in exclusively national identities than what is generally the case after an opt-out. This leads to the following hypothesis:



**Table 1.** Effect of opt-outs on exclusively national identity.

Hypothesis	Direction of opt-out effect
H1	+
H2	–
H3	Postfunctional opt-outs > Opt-outs in general

H3: The effect of postfunctional opt-outs will be greater than the effects of opt-outs overall.

My paper thus contributes to the emerging literature on the opinion effects of the European differentiated integration by probing how a range of different opt-outs, which vary in their institutional features as well as policy content, shape affective attachment to the European Union. My theoretical expectations are outlined in [Table 1](#).

## Data and methods

To investigate *H1–H3*, I combine data on opt-outs from EU treaties with Eurobarometer data measuring exclusively national self-identification. I complement the measures of exclusively national identity from the Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File, which covers the years 1970–2002 (Schmitt *et al.*, 2008), with a similar variable from 2003 – 2020 (Russo & Bräutigam, 2022).

I use general synthetic control models as developed by Bai (2009) and Xu (2017), with an EM algorithm proposed by Gobillon and Magnac (2016). The method uses all observations of untreated units (the countries without opt-outs) and the pre-treatment values of the treated units (opt-out countries) to construct a counterfactual trajectory for the treated units. The post-treatment trajectory of the treated units is then compared to the counterfactual to derive an average treatment effect on the treated (ATT). This offers a solution to the problem that it is frequently difficult to find a country that is sufficiently similar to the treated ones that I can credibly claim that any variation after the opt-out was implemented can be causally attributed to it (Abadie *et al.*, 2010).

## Dependent variables

The dependent variable is a time series composed of two different questions used between 1983 and 2020, with two highly related wordings. The first is ‘Do you ever think of yourself as not only (NATIONALITY), but also European? Does this happen often, sometimes or never?’ The second asks ‘Do you feel you are a citizen of the EU?’ The response categories are ‘yes, definitely’, ‘yes, to some extent’, ‘no, not really’ and ‘no’.

I harmonise the data from Russo and Bräutigam (2022) and Schmitt *et al.* (2008) to construct a time series where the country-year mean is the share of

respondents stating that they only identify with their nation-states or do not think of themselves as European citizens. This results in a time series that lets me study variations in exclusively national identification from 1983 to 2020.

While these questions use different wordings, the response categories found in both questions are likely to capture my theoretical concept: Someone who identifies as never feeling both European and national would be theoretically likely to also state that they do not feel themselves to be European citizens. This makes it likely that I capture the same theoretically interesting populations through both questions. Though the question wordings risk conflating the cultural and civic components of European identity (König, 2023), my operationalisation of exclusively national identity is well-known from the large literature inspired by Hooghe and Marks (2005).

As the questions about identity have not been consistently asked since they were first introduced, several country-years lack the responses needed to estimate a mean value. To address this, I use a method inspired by multiple imputation (Rubin, 2004), but which differs from this approach in that I average across the 25 runs of the imputation process to arrive at an average value for each country-year. My imputation uses both a measure of support for EU membership, individual-level variables such as education and occupation, known to correlate with different self-perceptions of national identity (Foster & Frieden, 2021; Kuhn *et al.*, 2021), as well as the country and year of each respondent, to predict a realistic imputed value for each missing value on the dependent variables. The algorithm does this by drawing on the self-reported identity of individuals similar to those with missing values. Imputing individual-level data before aggregating the resulting average to a country-year mean is likely to be a better solution than performing a univariate interpolation of the time series used as a dependent variable.

The reason is that it allows me to draw on individual-level information about each individual with a missing value, both in terms of socio-economic and political factors, to arrive at a realistic imputed value.

The wording and coding of the question changed consistently after the Eastern enlargement, with the only changes from 1983 to 2005 consisting of minor wording experiments in some survey waves. To avoid the variations in wording influencing the imputation quality, I impute the time series from 1983 – 2004 and 2005 – 2020 separately before merging them. As identical questions have not been asked after 2020, I cannot test how the termination of the Danish defense opt-out in 2022 shaped national identity.

Even as my method diverges from that used by Malang and Schraff (2024) to impute smaller gaps in their time series of satisfaction with national democracy and the desired and perceived speed of integration, the resulting time series (see figure S2, with standard deviations for all countries shown by figure S3) largely conforms to expectations (Leith *et al.*, 2019; Risse, 2014): In most countries a majority of citizens report some element of compound

identities. The percentage of exclusive identification also shows signs of decreasing over time, even if there are cyclical upticks in most countries. These cyclical upticks appear more pronounced in the UK than elsewhere. This is theoretically consistent with the finding that British elite Euroscepticism, and by extension also the cues transmitted to the public in times of great politicisation of the EU, have typically framed European integration as a threat to British sovereignty and political identity (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020).

A respondent may respond differently to questions about European-ness or European citizenship. This is an analytical challenge for any longitudinal study of national identity, and shows the need for more robust data. Nevertheless, figures S2 and S4 show only minor variations in the response patterns before and after the question wording changed. Other research (Schröder *et al.*, 2024) also suggests that people respond very similarly to questions about both phenomena.

### ***Treatment and independent variables***

I use three treatments, that together capture much of the variations in the institutionalisation and politicisation of differentiated integration, together with one treatment that captures the average effect of all of them. This lets me capture the effects of both postfunctional opt-outs with different degrees of salience and ‘functional’ opt-outs that were not driven by popular demand for greater sovereignty. A breakdown of treated and untreated country-years is shown in Figure S1.

I use the UK, Swedish and Danish opt-outs from the Maastricht Treaty from the eurozone as case studies of postfunctional opt-outs. While the Swedish opt-out from the eurozone is a *de facto* opt-out from the EU (Hofelich, 2022) without a legal basis in the EU treaties, it is similar to the Danish and UK opt-outs from the Maastricht Treaty in that it was implemented, despite elite support for the euro (Leruth, 2015), after a referendum that politicised issues of European identity. I construct a separate treatment variable consisting of the treated country-years for the three countries.

While several countries have *de facto* opt-outs from the eurozone, they were not put to popular votes. It is thus only in Sweden that a *de facto* opt-out was associated with a ‘politicizing moment’ (Kriesi, 2016) that made the question of European identity and integration salient. Because technical opt-outs tend to be little known among citizens (Telle *et al.*, 2022), I also do not test the effects of the British opt-outs from the European Stability Mechanism and the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance.

I treat the Irish Justice and Home Affairs and Polish Charter of Fundamental Rights opt-outs as cases of ‘functional’ opt-outs. While the Irish opt-out

**Table 2.** Summary of empirical tests

Tested hypotheses	Type of opt-out	Cases selected
H1–H2	All opt-outs	Denmark, UK, Ireland, Sweden, Poland, Malta and Hungary H3
H3	Salient postfunctional opt-outs	Denmark, Sweden and UK
H3	Non-salient postfunctional opt-outs	Malta and Hungary
H3	Functional opt-outs	Ireland and Poland

covered much of the same ground as the UK's opt-out from the Schengen area, it was not driven by popular contestation of the EU or concerns over sovereignty, but rather a functionally motivated desire to maintain relations with the UK (Sion-Tzidkiyahu, 2008, p. 497). Similarly, the Polish opt-out from the Charter of Fundamental Rights was initiated to address elite, rather than popular concerns, over what European integration meant for Polish rules on gay marriage (Puchalska, 2014).

I lastly treat the Maltese opt-out from the Permanent Structured Cooperation in 2017 and the Hungarian opt-out from the European Fiscal Compact in 2013 as a distinct set of postfunctional opt-outs. While both opt-outs stemmed from a national demand for autonomy in the relevant areas (Blockmans & Crosson, 2021; Vergioglou & Hegewald, 2023), these postfunctional opt-outs were less salient and politicised than the others. The Maltese defense opt-out illustrates this contradiction well: Even if support for EU defense cooperation is lower among Maltese citizens than elsewhere in Europe, the issue is generally not salient to voters (Mader *et al.*, 2021). Table 2 shows the empirical design.

The differences between the three sets of opt-outs becomes particularly clear when comparing the party-level EU polarisation surrounding them (see figure S5). We find the greatest party polarisation in the run-up to the salient and politicised postfunctional opt-outs, with much lower levels leading up to the others.

It is difficult to isolate the effect of opt-outs because they are not randomly occurring events, but rather policies that countries select into (Dunning, 2012; Morgan & Winship, 2014). Thus, countries that choose to opt-out are likely to systematically differ from those that do not (Winzen, 2016). To ensure that my analysis compares groups of countries that are as similar as possible in every respect save for the treatment, I introduce a range of auxiliary covariates. These include both economic variables, such as GDP growth and unemployment, as well as political variables like the vote shares of populist parties, the disproportionality of the party system (Gallagher, 1991), the average satisfaction with democracy and support for the EU in a given country-year. Here I follow Malang and Schraff (2024) and impute the time series using Stineman (1980) interpolation through the *imputeTS* package for R. This is reasonable because the gaps in the control variable time series are much smaller than

for the dependent variable. The well-known issues with linear extrapolation across very long periods (Honaker & King, 2010) are thus less likely to surface when imputing the control variables. For the protest vote shares, I assume that these do not vary between elections, and impute the same percentage for all years of an electoral period. Table S2 shows all descriptive statistics.

I control for popular Euroscepticism because it, together with changing economic conditions, predicts both opt-outs and variations in exclusively national identity (Foster & Frieden, 2021; Winzen, 2016). I also control for protest voting, democratic trust, economic openness, party system disproportionality, turnout and population to ensure that the control groups are as similar to the treated countries on as many socio-political dimensions as possible.

### **Model estimation**

I use general synthetic control models to test the relationship between opt-outs and exclusively national identity (Xu, 2017). The underlying logic of the method is that one can estimate a causal effect of a treatment by comparing the levels of the dependent variable before and after the treatment to that found in a control unit constructed by weighting cases from a donor pool. This logic is, following Vergioglou and Hegewald (2023), formalised in equation 1. Here the level of exclusively national identity  $Y_{it}$  is the level of exclusively national identity of unit  $i$  in year  $t$ ,  $T$  are the treated units and  $T_0$  are the pre-treatment periods. The average treatment effect on the treated  $\delta_{it}$  is thus derived by estimating the difference between the trend of the synthetic control unit and the observed trends of the treated units after the treatment was put into place. I use both country- and year fixed effects. Thus, while common shocks such as the fall of the Soviet Union could impact European identity, threatening causal inference, time-specific factors common to all countries will be absorbed by the year-fixed effects.

$$ATT_{t,t>T_0} = \frac{1}{N_{tr\ i \in T}} \sum [Y_{it}(1) - Y_{it}(0)] = \frac{1}{N_{tr\ i \in T}} \sum \delta_{it}. \quad (1)$$

The units of analysis are country-years ( $N = 511$ ). Following Vergioglou and Hegewald (2023) I use a minimum of five years (equivalent to ten Eurobarometer semesters) of pre-treatment data as a requirement for a country to be considered as a candidate for the synthetic controls in each case. I construct synthetic controls for (i) all country-years with opt-outs (ii) the Irish and Polish non-politicised opt-outs, (iii) the Danish, Swedish and UK politicised postfunctional opt-outs and (iv) the Maltese and Hungarian non-salient postfunctional opt-outs.

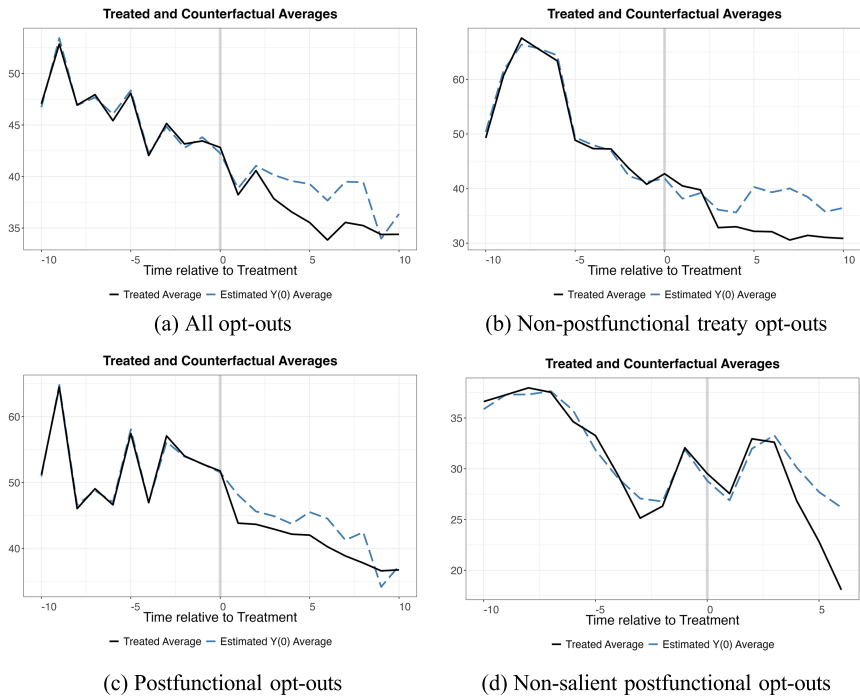
The Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption must also be met for my results to be interpretable as causal. The assumption states that the treatment value of one unit must be independent of the treatment value of all other units (Morgan & Winship, 2014). In other words, Britain's decision to opt-out of the Justice and Home Affairs provisions in the Maastricht Treaty must not depend on whether for instance the Dutch government decided to opt-out or not at the exact same time. Most evidence suggests that countries decide to use an opportunity for opt-outs to address national political concerns (Winzen, 2020). As a result, it is unlikely that the choices governments make about whether to opt in or out of EU integration are highly dependent on the choices other governments make.

To avoid treated units becoming a part of the donor pool I use only data from the so-called EU15 countries. I thus exclude untreated countries that entered the EU after the 2004 Eastern Enlargement. The synthetic control groups thus exclude countries with either discriminatory differentiation without a fixed end-point (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2017) or *de facto* opt-outs. For each sub-analysis I also remove countries treated with another form of opt-out. Thus, when analysing the effects of for instance functional opt-outs I remove Sweden, Denmark and the UK, which already had postfunctional opt-outs. While this makes it less likely that treated countries enter the donor pool, I may still be unable to establish causal links. Two reasons for this are (i) that citizens in both opt-out and non-treated countries became aware of the opt-outs at the same time, potentially reacting simultaneously to them and (ii) that reactions to the treaties themselves, not necessarily the opt-outs, could be mistaken for an 'opt-out effect'. This challenge is both important to acknowledge and difficult to fully mitigate.

## Results and discussion

Figure 1 shows that most treatment and synthetic controls have strongly overlapping pre-treatment trends. While there is some deviation between Hungary and Malta and their synthetic control, the overall picture suggests that the predicted levels of exclusively national identity were very similar between the treated countries and their synthetic controls. The factor loadings for most treatment and control units are also clustered fairly tightly together (see Figure S7). The treatment effects are thus likely shaped by moderate interpolation from very similar control units. However, figure S19 suggests that the UK counterfactuals in both the overall and postfunctional opt-out scenario are particularly susceptible to extrapolation. I address this in the section Limitations and robustness tests.

Table 3 shows that the negative correlation between entering an opt-out year and exclusively national identity is greater in the treated countries than



**Figure 1.** Pre- and post-treatment trends for treated units and their synthetic controls.

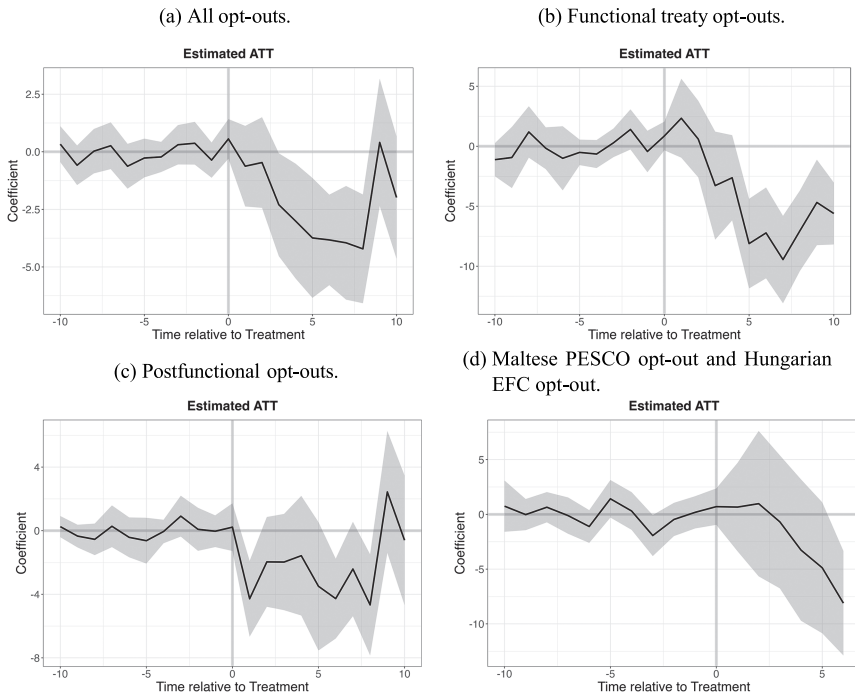
in their synthetic control groups. The coefficient suggests that, across the full post-treatment time window, the share of those identifying as exclusively national was on average 2.5 per cent lower in the treated group than in the synthetic control groups. I thus reject *H1*, while confirming *H2*.

However, this is a long-term effect. [Figure 2a](#) shows no immediate decline in exclusively national identity. That the first statistically significant differences between all opt-out countries and their controls appear several years after the opt-outs came into force suggests that one cannot draw clear causal links between opt-outs and exclusively national self-identification. Instead, a likelier reason is that the opt-outs progressively created different conditions in the opt-out countries and in the relevant control countries.

**Table 3.** Average ATT per condition.

ATT	Coefficient	SE	<i>p</i> -value
ATT : Overall	-2.467	0.631	<b>0.00</b>
ATT : Functional opt-outs	-2.230	1.052	<b>0.03</b>
ATT : Postfunctional opt-outs	-2.984	0.786	<b>0.00</b>
ATT : Postfunctional non-treaty reform opt-out	-2.090	2.257	0.37

Note: Bold *p*-values indicate statistical significance.



**Figure 2.** ATT for all opt-out scenarios. 95 per cent CIs shown. Country- and year fixed effects.

While existing literature points to the reduced salience of European integration as a possible driver of more positive evaluations of the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), more research is needed to understand the precise causal mechanism behind these results.

However, the overall *ATT* does not shed light on how different contexts can create effect heterogeneity. Figures 2b and 2c suggest that there is a stronger negative correlation between being a citizen of a country with opt-outs if these opt-outs respond to bottom-up demand rather than elite concerns. The negative correlations are both greater on average and in the first post-treatment year between the postfunctional and overall opt-out models ( $\beta = -4.28, p = 0.00$  vs.  $\beta = -0.63, p = 0.48$ ). This confirms *H3*. The magnitude of the average effect of these postfunctional opt-outs (corresponding to 30 per cent of the overall standard deviation of the identity variable), is particularly interesting because social group identities are often stable in the short-term (Huddy, 2001). The lack of variation across time also supports a key assertion of Negri *et al.* (2021): Greater integration does strengthen inclusive identities, but this effect is not cumulative.

An important reason for the greater negative correlation found in countries with opt-outs compared to the synthetic control group may be

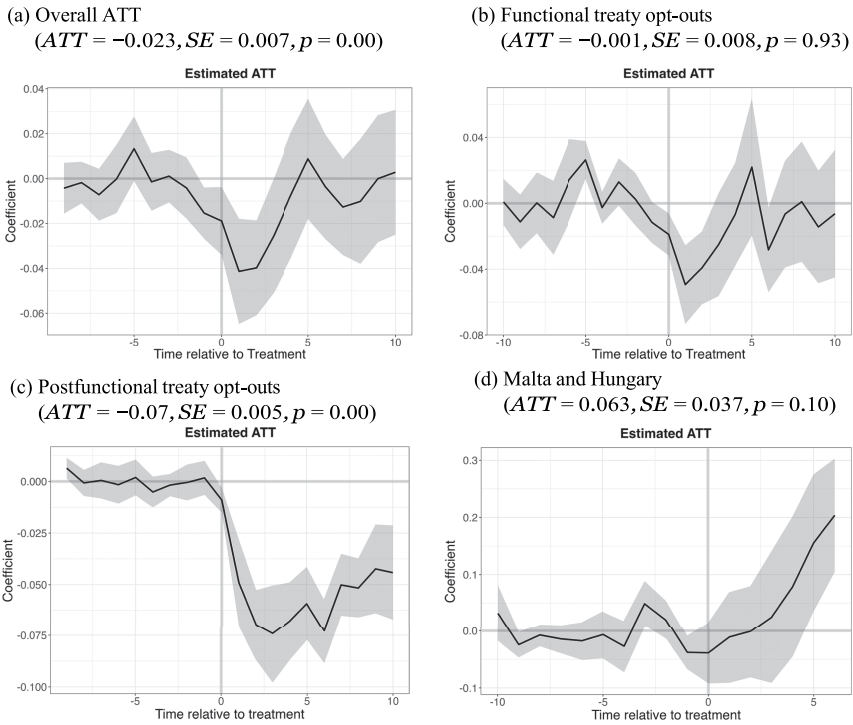


that those identifying exclusively with their nation-state may begin to see European integration as more compatible with national sovereignty than originally believed. That the correlations are different for the postfunctional opt-outs and the elite-driven ones seen in Poland and Ireland (see [Figure 2b](#)) suggests that whether opt-outs respond to a bottom-up demand for them or not is crucial for their impact on identity. The magnitude of the effects are similar when controlling for a smaller set of covariates only relating to citizen and elite views of European integration, even though the statistical significance for the overall and postfunctional opt-outs vary (see [Figure S24](#)).

However, popular Euroscepticism is not the only condition that must be met for opt-outs to weaken exclusively national self-identification: [Figure 2d](#) shows that Maltese and Hungarian citizens' national self-identification did not differ significantly from their counterparts in the synthetic control group either in the short or long run after their countries received opt-outs. These postfunctional opt-outs are distinct because they were not preceded by a politicizing moment that made the issue of European identity salient to citizens. Thus, whether opt-outs will be associated with more inclusive self-identification or not seems to depend not only on whether they are bottom-up, but also on how politicized they are. However, variations in these patterns could also be driven by variations in the timing of each set of opt-outs: Both the Maltese and Hungarian opt-outs coincided with the onset of a migration crisis. More inclusive identification as a result of opt-outs could thus have been subsumed by the more negative politicisation of Europe in the same years.

Lacking visibility can also explain why exclusively national identification does not decline after citizens reject EU treaties (see [Figure S18](#)). While the French, Dutch and Irish treaty rejections did lead to changes to the respective treaties (Hobolt, 2009), this effect was less immediate than the opt-outs that followed treaty negotiations. This can explain why negative referendum results, which also imply a rejection of deeper European integration, did not have a similar effect.

The significant correlation between postfunctional opt-outs and less exclusively national identities seen in the first year after opt-outs became a reality is not matched by a substantial decrease in popular Euroscepticism in the same period. As [figure S9](#) shows, the changes in responses to the commonly asked question 'Taking everything into consideration, would you say that (OUR COUNTRY) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the (EC & EU)?' are statistically insignificant in the first post-treatment years in the countries with postfunctional opt-outs. This suggests that the greater negative correlation between self-identifying as exclusively national and being a citizen of an opt-out country, rather than any of the countries in the control group, does not only reflect decreasing Euroscepticism in the same period.



**Figure 3.** Effects on alternative dependent variable measuring European identity. 95 per cent CIs shown.

I also run the same analyses using a version of the dependent variable scaled between 1-3, with higher values corresponding to more European identities. Figure 3 (parallel trends shown in figure S15) shows a negative correlation between European identity in all cases other than for the non-salient postfunctional opt-outs. These correlations, while substantively small and characterised also by pre-treatment significant drops in exclusively national identity in the treated countries, are nevertheless statistically significant immediately after opt-outs were implemented. Thus, while the shares of exclusively national identity may change little after opt-outs, compound identities seem to become slightly more national in the wake of most of them.

Thus, the choices EU member-states make about integration seem to impact their citizens' nationa

self-identification. However, this effect is also contextual: Whereas opt-outs may open previously closed national identities, this seems primarily to apply where opt-outs respond to clearly articulated demands for national autonomy after a salient 'politicizing moment' (Kriesi, 2016). In contrast, less salient and politicised opt-outs may either have no effect or strengthen exclusively national identities.

### **Limitations and robustness tests**

This study has several important limitations. First, the incomplete time series can only be filled by imputation. While my preferred imputation method has important advantages over traditional time-series imputation, actually observed values might have differed from those derived through imputation. Second, the Eurobarometer does not consistently include measures of both cultural and civic components of European identity (König, 2023). This makes it difficult to estimate whether opt-outs play a different role in shaping either aspect of a European identity. Lastly, as previously stated, it may be difficult to infer causality from the established correlations.

I run several robustness tests. I first estimate all models using traditional two-way fixed effects. Here only the functional opt-outs found in Ireland and Poland yield statistically significant effects. However, all of the treatment effects sizes are similar to my main results. They confirm, in other words, the viability of the original specification.

There is debate about whether to include control variables when creating synthetic control groups (Ben-Michael *et al.*, 2022; Shi *et al.*, 2022). As a robustness test, I therefore re-estimate all effects without control variables. As Figure S10 shows this increases the standard errors of all estimates. However, the estimates themselves are substantially similar to the original specification.

One challenge is the possibility that people from other countries adjusted their national self-identification after becoming aware of opt-outs in other countries (Schraff, 2022). To test this I rerun both the overall analysis and the analysis of the first set of postfunctional opt-outs, removing the treated countries and randomly substituting countries to stand in for the treated ones. Figures S16 and S17 show that spill-over between countries is a valid concern for this study. Both robustness tests show a statistically significant difference between a group of randomly chosen placebo countries and their synthetic controls. While the average effect is positive, the postfunctional placebo test shows a negative effect consistent with those from the original specification. That untreated countries also experienced significant variations in exclusively national identity in the same years as opt-outs were first implemented makes it difficult to speak of my results being causally attributable to opt-outs. This suggests that more research is needed to establish the precise causal mechanisms driving the greater negative correlations found in the opt-out countries.

Extrapolation may also influence the average treatment effect for each case. Figures S20 and S21 suggests that excluding the UK makes the overall effect and those of the postfunctional opt-outs statistically insignificant, and changes the sign of the latter. While this does mean that the postfunctional opt-out effect hinges on the inclusion of Britain as a case, the robustness test also illustrates that opt-outs may be most important for

changing national self-identification when they come on the heels of great politicisation of European integration.

Lastly, I specify the same models as in my original analysis while substituting the years of my original analysis with the Eurobarometer semesters favoured by Vergioglou and Hegewald (2023). Figures S11 to S14 suggests that this increases the standard errors of all models. As a result, the two statistically significant immediate effects become statistically insignificant. This suggests that my original specification estimates the effects with greater precision. However, save for the effects of the Maltese and Hungarian opt-outs, the results are all similar to the original estimates.

## Summary and concluding discussion

This article contributes to an emerging research agenda investigating how differentiated integration shapes attitudes towards the EU. In contrast to the existing focus on the connection between opt-outs and support for the EU found in the literature (Malang & Schraff, 2024; Vergioglou & Hegewald, 2023), I study how national autonomy may either facilitate or hinder the emergence of a shared European identity. By comparing the levels of exclusively national self-identification before and after an opt-out between a country with an opt-out and a suitable ‘synthetic control’ I show that opt-outs are correlated with a greater decrease in exclusively national citizens’ self-identification in countries that opted out compared to their synthetic control groups. However, this only applies where the relevant issues were politicised, with the opt-out responding to a clearly articulated demand for more national autonomy.

While it may be difficult to establish a clear causal link, my results may have implications for both policy-makers and scholars of differentiated integration: First, the increasing tendency to identify with both Europe and one’s country in the years after an opt-out suggests that, while differentiation has a centrifugal effect on the EU as a polity (Fossum, 2015), particularly salient opt-outs might have a centripetal effect on the affective attachment that people feel towards it. This effect, however, seems to be short-term. Making a short-term effect a lasting one likely requires a greater realignment of the political opportunity structures and shifting away from continual contestation of the EU and towards a more conciliatory debate about European integration that privileges the idea that European and national identities can co-exist.

My results raise interesting questions for future research: First, existing research indicates that those who identify strongly with their nation-states are more likely to oppose integration of so-called core state powers than so-called regulatory integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). This raises the question of whether opt-outs from such policies have a greater impact on European identities than a country’s opt-out from merely regulatory integration.

Because researchers typically lack of data on European identities before a country accedes to the European Union, it has also been difficult to test the impact of so-called 'capacity differentiation' on European identity. Such differentiation is temporary, imposed as a condition for EU membership, and associated with more critical attitudes towards EU integration (Vergio-glou & Hegewald, 2023). An important question for future research is how it shapes European identity.

Future research would also profit from connecting my findings to the emerging literature that studies the political effects of sub-national autonomy. This literature contends that sub-national autonomy will strengthen sub-group identities (Ishiyama, 2022) and ethnic conflict (Juon, 2024). While differentiated integration is particular to the European Union, which in turn differs in key ways from traditional federations, my results suggest that the link between sub-national autonomy and identities is heavily dependent on context. Understanding the role of these contexts, and when local groups can use such autonomy to strengthen identity-based contestation of a federal core, is crucial for policy-makers seeking to create sustainable multi-national or multi-ethnic federations.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Martin Moland* is a postdoctoral research fellow at the ARENA, Centre for European Studies.

## Conflict of interest statement

Replication data and code for the paper is available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/AEZLZJ>. The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Data availability statement

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