

Past Political Asymmetry and Present Public Opinion: How Has the Asymmetrical Federation of the EU Shaped Popular Opinion of Its Optimal Shape?

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Asymmetries in the formal obligations and rights afforded to sub-units are mainstays of many federations that have been extensively studied from many angles. However, we know relatively little about how these asymmetries shape views on federalism in the future. By leveraging data on differentiated integration in the European Union (EU), conceptually very similar to asymmetrical federalism, and survey data on attitudes toward the optimal future of it, I show that historical exposure to differentiated integration resulting from a bottom-up process of demands for sub-unit autonomy correlates to increased support for permanent differentiation in the future, especially among those critical of the EU. However, the opposite applies to differentiation imposed by the EU. A legacy of asymmetric federalism may thus breed opposition or support for unitary European federalism, depending on both the mode of past asymmetry that citizens have been exposed to and their views of the EU.

Asymmetric federalism, in which different sub-units of a broader federation are subject to different rights and obligations, has long been used to address the potential for secessionism inherent to heterogeneity across the sub-units of a federation (Zuber 2011). A large literature conceptualizes asymmetric federalism and investigates its impact (Anderson 2014; Bhattacharyya 2023; Ishiyama 2023). However, there are still relatively few contributions (Brock 2008; Seidle and Bishop 2005) investigating what asymmetric federalism has meant for popular preferences toward either unitary or asymmetric federalism.

My article seeks to answer the question “How does past asymmetric federalism impact preferences for unitary or asymmetric federalism as a future normative ideal?” To do so, it exploits the conceptual similarity between differentiated European Union (EU) integration and asymmetric federalism within federal states. While the EU can only partially be described as a federation (Kelemen 2003), differentiated integration has rendered the EU a tripartite polity almost identical to

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the asymmetrically federated polities described by Zuber (2011): At the top, we find a federal level, consisting of EU institutions. Second, one group of Member States make up a core fully integrated into the EU's political order. Lastly, one group of members have either permanent or temporary exemptions from EU laws. The many similarities between the differentiated EU and the ultimate end-state of an asymmetrically federated traditional federal polity makes it a useful proxy for testing to what extent exposure to past asymmetrical federalism shapes people's views of the optimal structure of future federalism.

To answer this question, I combine survey data asking about support for the idea that the EU should allow Member States to either permanently or temporarily adopt different levels of integration with data on both voluntary and externally imposed exemptions from EU law in the highly salient policy areas known as core state powers (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2016). I find that exposure to voluntary differentiated integration increases support for permanent asymmetry. By contrast, differential integration that is externally imposed tends to generate opposition to permanent asymmetry. These effects are more pronounced among those opposing their country's membership of the EU. However, there is no similar effect on the views of temporary asymmetries.

This article contributes to two distinct literatures: First, it hints that a history of voluntary asymmetric federalism may beget popular demands for more of the same in the future, especially among those most critical of the central government. While the EU is not a traditional federation, the findings raise interesting questions about how past asymmetry can help shape current views on the optimal configuration of federalism. These questions should be further explored in the context of federal nation-states. Second, it contributes to an emerging literature on the determinants of differentiated integration in the EU (de Blok and De Vries 2023; Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz 2022; Moland 2024; Schuessler et al. 2023; Winzen and Schimmelfennig 2023) by showing that the effect of exposure to differentiation is mediated by pre-existing attitudes toward the EU and the mode of differentiation employed.

This article first paints a picture of differentiated integration in the EU and its kinship with more traditional forms of asymmetric federalism. It then lays out what expectations can be derived about how exposure to an asymmetrically integrated union will translate into preferences for future asymmetry, and how this process may differ depending on a citizen's pre-existing views of the EU. I then discuss the data and methods used to investigate the question. Lastly, I discuss how the results further our understanding of the relationship between historical exposure to asymmetric integration in the EU, and by extension the relationship between historical asymmetric federalism and future preferences for the same.

The Impact of Asymmetric Federalism in the EU: The Literature and Its Gaps

Differentiated integration is a core feature of European integration (Chiocchetti 2023). Differentiated integration typically takes two forms (Winzen 2016): “Sovereignty differentiation” is the name given to a process where countries are permanently exempted from EU law in order to strengthen national sovereignty. This “asymmetry from below” has much in common with both the fiscal asymmetrical federalism found in Spain and the ethnofederal governance structures in several countries (Anderson 2014; León 2012), where asymmetry stems from demands for autonomy on the part of the relevant sub-units. In contrast, “capacity differentiation” can be seen as “asymmetry from above”. Here the EU’s supranational level imposes exemptions from EU law on specific Member States, often as a precondition for accession to the Union. This has led countries to be exempted from integration that they would otherwise prefer, and for political elites in these countries to frame differentiation as a source of potential powerlessness (Cianciara 2014; Gagatek, Platek, and Plucienniczak 2022).

There are typically large variations in the contexts surrounding the implementation of the two forms of differentiated integration: Sovereignty differentiation became prevalent in the aftermath of the ratification of the EU’s Maastricht Treaty, which saw the EU expand its policy remit into more controversial policy integration than it had historically done. As a result, Member State governments increasingly voluntarily sought to “opt out” of integration into the ever-more salient integration that the treaty brought (Leuffen, Rittberger, and Schimmelfennig 2013). While the use of capacity differentiation has been more constant over time, it took a “discriminatory” turn during the Eastern Enlargement of 2004 and 2007 (Schimmelfennig 2014, 691). Thus, more of the exemptions that the post-Soviet countries were exposed to after accession were contradictory to their own preferences compared to what was the case for countries that acceded earlier.

The increasing differentiation of the EU has been investigated conceptually (Bátora and Fossum 2020; Leuffen, Rittberger, and Schimmelfennig 2013; Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2014), empirically (Gänzle, Leruth, and Trondal 2019; Malang and Holzinger 2020; Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2017; Winzen 2020) and normatively (Bellamy 2019; Eriksen 2019; Lord 2021; Nicolaïdis 2004). This has increasingly also meant studying support for differentiated integration (Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz 2022; de Blok and De Vries 2023; Schuessler et al. 2023; Telle et al. 2022; Moland 2024). Recently, several articles (Vergioglou and Hegewald 2023; Malang and Schraff 2023) have trained their lens on the public opinion effects of differentiated integration. Both Vergioglou and Hegewald (2023) and Schraff and Schimmelfennig (2020) show that so-called “sovereignty

differentiation” has a positive effect on attitudes toward the EU, both generally and among those critical of the EU. However, [Vergioglou and Hegewald \(2023\)](#) show that the opposite may be the case where differentiated integration is imposed in a fashion contrary to the preferences of a Member State. [Malang and Schraff \(2023\)](#) further show that differentiation, whether it is voluntarily chosen or not, leads to a short-term decrease in the desire for further integration among citizens exposed to it.

Despite the increased focus on the consequences of differentiated integration for public opinion, only one article ([Winzen and Schimmelfennig 2023](#)) surveys how past exposure to differentiated integration impacts current attitudes toward it. The authors find that the effect of historical exposure varies according to the mode of differentiation employed. Without delving into the specifics of particular policy areas, they show that those exposed to both capacity and sovereignty differentiation tend to translate this into a greater preference for sovereignty differentiation, but not capacity differentiation.

My article focuses on attitudes toward both sovereignty and capacity differentiation and differs from the existing literature in several ways. It first focuses solely on differentiation in the realm of highly salient “core state powers” ([Kuhn and Nicoli 2020](#)), where we might expect the relative benefits of voluntary opt-outs from integration or exclusion through capacity differentiation to be particularly pronounced for citizens. Second, I focus not only on the average effects of such exposure but also on how they might be moderated by pre-existing attitudes toward the EU. Unlike existing literature, I thus show how the effect of differentiated integration may differ strongly due to a complex interplay between contextual factors and individual predispositions toward EU integration.

The article also contributes to the literature on asymmetric federalism. A first strand of this literature has found that variations in fiscal autonomy lead to variations in how well citizens are able to hold national incumbents to account for economic conditions. It has also been found that granting one level of government clear competences over a policy area improves voters’ confidence in their own knowledge of who they should “take to task” for unfavorable conditions ([Leon and Orriols 2016](#); [León 2012](#)). A second strand shows that granting autonomy to particular sub-units of a federation may weaken an individual’s identification with the federal core ([Ishiyama 2023](#)). I investigate an under-studied question in this literature by investigating how a phenomenon conceptually similar to such instances of asymmetric federalism, EU differentiated integration, may also shape attitudes toward also the optimal shape of the federation itself.

Euroskepticism and Differentiated Integration

Differentiated integration is known to have low salience for both voters and parties ([Telle et al. 2022](#)). However, past research into the current effects of past policies

suggests that past exposure to a policy may shape how it is perceived today (Larsen 2019; Homola, Pereira, and Tavits 2020). Regardless of how people relate to the question of EU membership and EU institutions, they are likely to be aware of their countries' exemptions from EU law, either through public debate or through personal experience of for instance not being able to enjoy rights such as the freedom of movement to seek work elsewhere. While past literature (Winzen and Schimmelfennig 2023) shows that past differentiation impacts future support for it, we do not know whether different citizens translate this past experience into different levels of support for differentiated integration.

This article focuses on the moderating impact of Euroskepticism, expressed as a desire for one's country to leave the European Union. Such Euroskepticism can, in the typology of De Vries (2018), be termed "exit scepticism". It thus contrasts with the more limited "polity scepticism", a dissatisfaction with the EU's institutions, or "policy scepticism", which describes opposition to particular EU policies. Existing literature points to such Euroskepticism as a key driver of support for a more differentiated European Union, particularly where it allows for permanent exemptions from EU integration (Schuessler et al. 2023; de Blok and De Vries 2023).

Citizens of countries with much exposure to sovereignty differentiation are generally more likely to future favor sovereignty differentiation than those with less exposure (Winzen and Schimmelfennig 2023). This is particularly likely to apply to opt-outs from highly salient "core state power" integration (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2016), which have typically been framed as a source of greater national autonomy (Adler-Nissen 2014; Todd 2016). Sovereignty differentiation likely triggers a policy feedback similar to that posited by Lerman and McCabe (2017): Citizens may respond to the positive effects of being outside policy integration shown to have potentially negative consequences for a country, as was the case for the Eurozone during the sovereign debt crisis, and may become more favorable toward differentiated integration as a result. They may also respond positively to sovereignty differentiation as a tool that more generally shifts the relative burdens and benefits of EU integration. Such effects are likely to be more pronounced among those exposed to greater amounts of differentiated integration, making levels of exposure a source of variations in support between countries. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1a: Exposure to sovereignty DI will lead to greater support for future sovereignty DI.

H1b: Exposure to sovereignty DI will lead to greater support for future capacity DI.

These benefits are likely to hold special relevance for Euroskeptics: As those who oppose EU membership find the idea of membership problematic in the first

instance, an opposition that is increasingly motivated by concerns over sovereignty (Hobolt and Vries 2016), they are arguably likelier than supporters of the same membership to perceive a credible alternative to uniform EU integration as a salient issue. If exposed to a framework that allows their countries to selectively apply controversial EU law on a voluntary basis, the two core features of sovereignty differentiation, they are thus more likely than supporters of EU membership to translate this exposure to sovereignty differentiation into greater support for a differentiated EU. This translation mechanism is likely to be aided by elite framing of opt-outs as a tool for protecting national sovereignty. It is also likely that this logic, due to the low salience of differentiated integration, will apply to both sovereignty and capacity differentiation. I thus hypothesize:

H1c: Euroskeptics in countries with higher levels of exposure to “sovereignty” core state power integration will experience a greater positive effect of such exposure on support for future sovereignty differentiation than supporters of EU membership.

H1d: Euroskeptics in countries with higher levels of exposure to “sovereignty” core state power integration will experience a greater positive effect of such exposure on support for future capacity differentiation than supporters of EU membership.

“Capacity differentiation”, the name given to temporary differentiation that frequently has a detrimental effect on the ability of new states to enjoy the fruits of European integration, is generally likely to have the opposite effect among citizens of countries exposed to much of it. Such asymmetry has typically excluded new Member States from beneficial schemes of integration that they would prefer belonging to (Winzen and Schimmelfennig 2023, 4). Exposure to such exclusionary differentiation may in turn translate to a greater skepticism of differentiated integration as a concept, as it may be seen as a way for some countries to avoid sharing the obligations and benefits of membership. This may also be compounded by how national elites, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, have often framed differentiation as negatively impacting a country’s position within the EU (Cianciara 2014; Gagatke, Platek, and Plucienniczak 2022). It is, as before, likely that these attitudes will be directed toward differentiated integration as a concept, rather than citizens making very fine-grained distinctions between the various modes of differentiated integration. I thus hypothesize:

H2a: Exposure to capacity DI will lead to less support for future sovereignty DI.

H2b: Exposure to capacity DI will lead to less support for future capacity DI.

Both the perception that differentiation cartelizes benefits and reduces the power of their national states is likely to be particularly salient concerns for Euroskeptics. Euroskeptics, because they are likelier than supporters of EU membership to be

attentive to elite discourses critical of the EU's approaches in these areas (Steenbergen, Edwards, and Vries 2007), are also more likely to use elite cues to translate past capacity differentiation to a general skepticism of the concept of a differentiated European Union, and not only toward future capacity differentiation. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H2c: Euroskeptics in countries with higher levels of exposure to "capacity" core state power differentiation will experience a greater negative effect of such exposure on support for future sovereignty differentiation than supporters of EU membership.

H2d: Euroskeptics in countries with higher levels of exposure to "capacity" core state power differentiation will experience a greater negative effect of such exposure on support for future capacity differentiation than supporters of EU membership.

At the analytical core of both *H1a* and *b* is the concept of motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006). Euroskeptics are more likely to have pre-conceived notions of the EU as a problem and a challenge to their nation-states. When this interacts with having lived in a country in which elite discourses over several years have painted differentiation as a net positive it is likely to translate into greater support for a more asymmetric EU. Similarly, having lived in a country with greater amounts of capacity differentiation is likely to have exposed one to discourses painting differentiated integration as a challenge to sovereignty. When this is compounded by already critical views of EU membership, the end result is likely to be stronger opposition to an asymmetrically integrated future EU compared to those more favorably inclined toward EU membership.

However, we might also see the opposite effect. Since Euroskeptics are already likely to be more strongly favorable to differentiated integration, there might be less room for a "learning effect" among this group than among those more positively disposed toward EU membership. Because supporters of EU membership are more likely to have malleable views of differentiation, they may experience a stronger effect of exposure to it. An important reason is that they are less likely to hold strong prior beliefs about the desirability of uniform membership or its implications for national autonomy. They may thus be more likely to update their beliefs about differentiation in response to exposure to it than those more critical of the EU. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3a: Supporters of EU membership in countries with higher levels of exposure to sovereignty differentiation will experience a greater positive effect of exposure on support for sovereignty differentiation than those who oppose EU membership.

H3b: Supporters of EU membership in countries with higher levels of exposure to sovereignty differentiation will experience a greater positive effect of exposure on support for capacity differentiation than those who oppose EU membership.

H3c: Supporters of EU membership in countries with higher levels of exposure to capacity differentiation will experience a greater negative effect of exposure on support for sovereignty differentiation than those who oppose EU membership.

H3d: Supporters of EU membership in countries with higher levels of exposure to capacity differentiation will experience a greater negative effect of exposure on support for capacity differentiation than those who oppose EU membership.

I thus expect that differentiation initiated by the Member States will produce increased support for both sovereignty and capacity differentiation among all citizens. Euroskepticism is likely to amplify this effect. In contrast, the overall effect of externally imposed capacity differentiation is expected to lead to less support for both forms of differentiation. As such differentiation is more likely than sovereignty differentiation to be seen as a constraint on national autonomy, Euroskeptics are more likely to translate capacity differentiation into a broad distrust of differentiated integration than citizens more supportive of EU integration. By studying the effects of both “asymmetry from below” and “asymmetry from above”, and how their reception is shaped by pre-existing attitudes toward the EU, I help deepen our understanding of how the inherently asymmetric nature of modern federations may in turn shape popular preferences toward federalism among those living in asymmetrically federated polities.

Data and Methods

I investigate these questions using Bayesian multilevel models with random country effects and data from surveys fielded in 2020–2021 ([Hemerijck et al. 2021](#)). The sample includes respondents from Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Sweden, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, and Spain and has a total N of 43,372. While the sample covers all EU regions, a potential limitation is that the data skews heavily toward Eastern and Western Europe, with fewer Southern European respondents. This limitation is important because Southern European citizens have been shown to be particularly critical of differentiated integration, and necessitates further research in samples more representative of the entire EU ([Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz 2022](#); [Schuessler et al. 2023](#)). The survey has quotas for age, region and gender, and asks a range of questions about solidarity in the EU in addition to two questions about differentiated integration. By studying attitudes toward both temporary and permanent exemptions from EU treaty law, I am able to say something about the effect of past exposure to differentiation on support for differentiated integration as a multifaceted concept.

I combine the survey with a data set that measures the level of permanent and temporary asymmetric integration in the EU between 1952 and 2019

(Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2022). The dataset contains, for each year, all treaty articles in force in a given year that legally allow for some form of differentiation. I restrict my analysis to those articles with either temporary or permanent instances of differentiation. I also restrict my analysis to differentiation from treaty articles relating to the so-called “core state powers” (see “Variables of theoretical interest” for a discussion of operationalization). Exemptions from EU law in these areas, whether chosen by Member States or externally imposed by EU institutions, are more likely to be well-known by citizens than exemptions from less politicized areas like fisheries or agriculture. This, in turn, makes them likely to be a part of the mental map citizens use when making up their minds about the desirability of an asymmetric EU.

Dependent Variables

My first dependent variable is a Likert-scaled variable that asks respondents whether they support an EU that allows for sovereignty differentiation. The question is phrased: “Please tell us how far you agree or disagree with the following statement: ‘Member states should be allowed to opt out of specific areas of European integration’. This means that a Member State can negotiate exceptions (‘opt-out’) for areas in which it does not wish to cooperate. For example, Denmark has opted out of the common currency, and Poland has opted out of the EU’s Charter of Fundamental Rights.” I code the response categories so that 1 becomes Strongly disagrees and 5 Strongly agrees. The question frames differentiation as a source of national autonomy and clarifies that it allows countries to permanently opt out of integration. The reference to Denmark and Poland could make Scandinavians and citizens of Central and Eastern Europe positively inclined toward differentiated integration. However, Winzen and Schimmelfennig (2023) do not find any evidence of such bias in a study based on the same data.

There are, however, several important issues with this operationalization: Although a previous study using the same data found that both Eurosceptics and exclusive nationals expressed greater support for opt-outs when exposed to the same question (Moland 2024), the question does not make clear that opt-outs mainly apply to new integration, nor that such opt-outs facilitate further integration among those willing to deepen EU cooperation. It also fails to clarify that countries cannot use this mechanism to leave cooperation that they have already agreed to (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2014). Because differentiated integration is typically a low-salience issue, making question wording more salient, putting these facts front and center could have led to different results.

My second dependent variable measures support for future capacity differentiation. This question is formulated as follows: “Please tell us how far you agree or disagree with the following statement: The EU should allow countries to integrate at multiple speeds. This means that all Member States aspire to the same

levels of integration in the future, but they are allowed to arrive there at different times, creating more flexibility but also more fragmentation.” I once more reverse the coding of the response categories, so that 1 becomes “Strongly disagree” and 5 becomes “Strongly agree”. While the question is relatively even-handed in pointing to both the benefits and drawbacks of capacity differentiation, the reference to fragmentation might potentially make citizens more negatively inclined toward such differentiation than if the question had not made such a reference.

Variables of Theoretical Interest

To operationalize each country’s exposure to EU differentiation in the field of core state powers I sum and log-transform the total number of “article-years” from which a country has historically been exempted. I thus reduce the article–year format of the data, where the differentiations from each article are listed by year and country, to one value per country. This value represents a country’s total exposure to differentiated integration. I log-transform the data to reduce the impact of outliers on the coefficients, ensuring that the average effects of exposure are not unduly influenced by effects found in countries heavily employing such differentiation.

The benefit of operationalizing exposure to differentiation as a sum of “article-years” rather than treaty provisions is that it better accounts for how different exemptions from treaty provisions may be perceived differently by citizens depending on their functional and temporal scope. While citizens may assign similar importance to various exemptions, their experience may vary depending on their scope. This is particularly likely to be relevant for capacity differentiation, as the exclusion from a functionally extensive treaty provision may lead citizens to view the prospect of differentiated integration in a more critical light than if they had been excluded from less extensive treaty provisions.

Like [Winzen and Schimmelfennig \(2023\)](#) I count foreign and security policies, justice and home affairs and economic and monetary policies as belonging to the field of core state powers. These areas capture a range of powers that are “core to state functioning” ([Kuhn and Nicoli 2020](#)). Examples of this include opt-outs from the Schengen framework, which relates to the core question of a state’s ability to control access to its own territories, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Using all variations in exposure to sovereignty differentiation lets me show how even minute variations in the exposure to differentiation can potentially impact support for it in the future.

I define everything not counted as a voluntary opt-out with a legal basis in the EU treaties as instances of externally imposed capacity differentiation (Supplementary table A3 shows all opt-outs). There are two exceptions to this rule: First, while the Swedish opt-out from the euro after 2003 is not legally an opt-out, as it lacks a basis in the relevant treaties, the tolerance for it among EU

officials makes it a *de facto* opt-out (Hofelich 2022). Second, because the Fiscal Compact of the Treaty of Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG) was open also to countries outside the eurozone, the Hungarian and Polish decision not to adopt it should be treated as an opt-out even if the same countries' original exclusion from the eurozone was not (Vergioglou and Hegewald 2023). As before, I use a continuous log-transformed measure as my operationalization of exposure to capacity differentiation.

I believe the focus on core state powers is warranted because their integration has been contested to a much greater degree than what is found for less salient areas (Hooghe and Marks 2009). This makes such differentiation a "most likely case" for finding effects (Gerring 2007) and mitigates the bias that may stem from the generally low salience of differentiation (Telle et al. 2022). Because the two types of differentiation have also been used for very different types of policies (Chiocchetti 2023), focusing on only one policy domain also makes it more likely that I will isolate the effect of the differentiation being either temporary or voluntary, rather than the effect of it being in a particular policy area.

I lastly create a dummy for Euroskepticism. Here those who state that they would vote yes to leaving the European Union in a hypothetical referendum are coded as 1 and those answering no with a 0. This measures what De Vries (2018) terms "exit scepticism". In "Limitations and robustness checks" I also run a robustness test using skepticism of EU institutional quality rather than a wholesale rejection of EU membership as a proxy for Euro skepticism (De Vries 2018).

Control Variables

I operationalize support for liberal economic policies, an important predictor of support for differentiated integration (Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz 2022), through a question that asks whether respondents want to live in a Europe that "stresses economic integration, market competition and fiscal discipline". Those who respond in the affirmative to this are coded as 1 and others as 0. While the question asks about both fiscal discipline that may be described as austerity policies and more general market integration, it still appears to measure a general affinity for liberal economic policies. However, the question's reference to a Europe based on "fiscal discipline" may lead some respondents to think of the EU's austerity policies. If the question evokes feelings of sympathy or antipathy toward the EU, rather than views on fiscal policy, it may partly measure also positioning on the green/alternative/libertarian/-traditional/authoritarian/nationalist (GAL-TAN) cleavage important for understanding popular attitudes toward the EU (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

I include an equally weighted index of questions measuring respondents' evaluation of the national economy and their local areas' employment opportunities. These questions load strongly on an underlying dimensions that may be termed

“sociotropic economic evaluations” (see Supplementary table A2). Such evaluations, in contrast to egotropic ones, correlate with support for differentiated integration (Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz 2022). I also control for satisfaction with national democracy (Armington and Ceka 2014; de Blok and De Vries 2023; Hartevelt, Meer, and Vries 2013) and a self-reported measure asking respondents to evaluate their own income relative to their relevant age groups.

To operationalize exclusive identification to the sub-unit, in this case, the national Member State, I use the question “Do you see yourself as...?”, with the potential responses being “(NATIONALITY) only”, “(NATIONALITY) and European”, “European and (NATIONALITY)” and “European only”. I code those responding that they identify solely as nationals with a 1, and everyone else with a 0. This operationalization is widely used in the EU public opinion literature (Hooghe and Marks 2005). While this measure does not capture both the civic and cultural components of European identities (König 2023), the importance of self-perceived exclusive identities makes it an important control variable.

I also control for ideology, age and, gender. These are predictors of support for integration (see for example Carrubba and Singh (2004); Hobolt and Wratil (2015); Hooghe and Marks (2005); and Schoen (2008)). I operationalize ideology through a scale where 0 represents far-left and 7 far-right positions. As previous literature finds evidence of a curvilinear correlation between ideology and support for the EU (Elsas and Brug 2015; Toshkov and Krouwel 2022), I also add a squared term of ideology. Lastly, I add a control for the average mean GDP growth in 2020–2021. This reduces the potential for any variation in support between either high- and low-exposure groups to be directly attributable to differences in wealth known to impact attitudes toward EU differentiation (Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz 2022). Descriptive statistics are shown in Supplementary table A1.

Model Estimation

To address bias due to the small number of countries in my sample, I use Bayesian multilevel methods (Stegmueller 2013). Such models derive a *posterior distribution* of probable estimates from a combination of a researcher’s mathematical prior about the size and direction of the estimate and what the observed data shows about the same (Gelman et al. 2021; Gill 2012). This provides a *credible interval* that can be interpreted probabilistically. Thus, if 80 percent of an estimate’s credible interval is larger than zero, there is an 80 percent probability that the effect is the same. This lets me both address bias due to a small number of level 2 units and shows a more easily interpretable estimate than a frequentist model would.

Support for differentiated integration Y for individual i in country j is thus a function of a country-specific constant β_0 , the theoretically interesting interaction β_{1ij} , a vector of control variables β_{2ij} that also contains the main effects of the

interactions, and country- and individual-level variances ν and ϵ . The model is formalized in [equation 1](#).

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1ij} + \beta_{2ij} + \nu_i + \epsilon_{ij}$$

(1)

I assume that the dependent variable is normally distributed, which is largely supported by Supplementary figure A2, and fits the models using weakly informed priors for all variables and intercepts ($M = 0$, $SD = 2.5$). These somewhat regularize the computation of the model while still allowing the observed data to play a greater role in the effect estimation than the priors ([Goodrich et al. 2020](#); [Röver et al. 2021](#)). The reasonableness of the priors is supported by previous research into support for differentiated integration using the same data ([Moland 2024](#); [Winzen and Schimmelfennig 2023](#)), which finds that even important variables like national identity and Euroscepticism have coefficients close to 0. I report the median and 95 percent credible intervals, the intervals within which the true estimate will fall with a 95 percent probability, for all estimates.

Results and Discussion

I now discuss the empirical results. I first show how exposure to past sovereignty differentiation, both alone and together with Euroskepticism, impacts support for sovereignty and capacity differentiation. I then do the same for past capacity differentiation.

[Table 1](#) (control variables in Supplementary table A4) shows that the main effects of exposure to sovereignty differentiation are uncertain, with the credible intervals featuring both positive and negative effects

Table 1 Support for differentiated integration as a function of the interaction between exposure to sovereignty DI and Euroskepticism.

	Support for sovereignty DI	Support for capacity DI
Sovereignty DI X Euroskepticism	0.02 ^a [0.01–0.04]	0.00 [– 0.01– 0.02]
Sovereignty DI	0.00 [– 0.03, 0.03]	– 0.01 [– 0.04–0.02]
Euroskeptic	0.26 ^a	– 0.04
Constant	[0.20–0.33] 2.82 ^a [2.65–2.99]	[– 0.10–0.01] 3.35 ^a [3.20–3.51]

^aNull hypothesis value outside 95% credible interval.

I thus reject *H1a–b*. One reason for the null effects could be that opt-outs from salient policy areas are likely to be well-known also outside of the opt-out countries. Citizens of countries other than those affected by the opt-out may thus be equally likely to use them to make up their minds about the desirability of permanent differentiation (Schraff 2022), thus decreasing the effect size.

However, I confirm *H1c*: Exposure to sovereignty differentiation is correlated with greater support for it among Euroskeptics than supporters of EU membership. In contrast, I reject *H1d*, as the credible interval of the greater support for capacity differentiation among Euroskeptics indicates a null effect. The predicted values (see figure 1) tell the same story: Panel A suggests that supporters of EU membership exposed to increasing amounts of sovereignty differentiation do not vary greatly in their support for it, but that there is a marked increase in support among Euroskeptics. These effects appear to be independent of ideology (see Supplementary figure A3). In contrast, panel B shows that the relationship between exposure to sovereignty differentiation and support for capacity

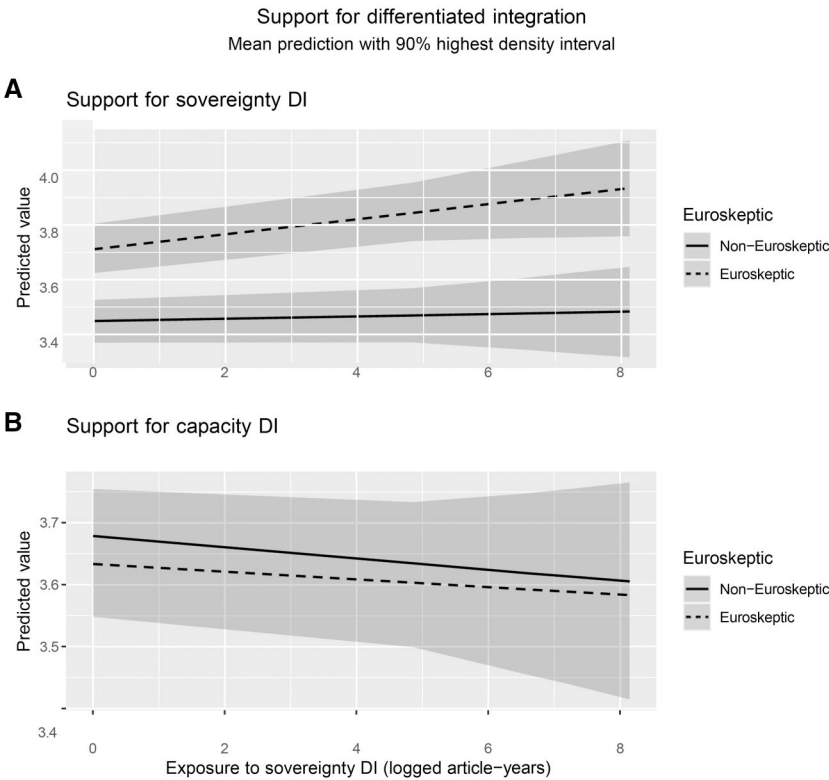


Figure 1. Support for (A) sovereignty and (B) capacity DI as a function of Euroskepticism and exposure to sovereignty DI. 90% highest density interval.

differentiation follows largely parallel paths in the two groups. It is thus only in the case of support for sovereignty differentiation that Euroskepticism amplifies existing trends in the broader population.

However, a greater preference for permanent differentiation need not imply a rejection of the EU. Table A10 suggests that the effect of an additional logged article-year of sovereignty has very little effect on Euroskepticism, and that it decreases Euroskepticism among people with exclusively national identities (see Supplementary table A10). It similarly weakens nationalist sentiments among Euroskeptics (see Supplementary table A14). An important reason may, as [Schraff and Schimmelfennig \(2020\)](#) argue, be that voluntary opt-outs from EU treaty law make it likelier for Euroskeptics to see the EU as open to national preference heterogeneity. This may lead them to see their country’s membership of the EU as more beneficial, and themselves as more closely connected to a broader European citizenry. My results thus suggest, in line with past research ([Vergoglou and Hegewald 2023](#)), that sovereignty differentiation may strengthen support for EU membership. However, somewhat contradicting this pattern, exposure to it also seems to reduce satisfaction with EU democracy (see Supplementary table A12).

Table 2 suggests that exposure to capacity differentiation negatively impacts support for sovereignty differentiation, but positively impacts support for capacity differentiation. However, both main effects are in reality null effects. I thus reject *H2a* and *H2b*. These null effects may be caused by how capacity differentiation typically arises from accession processes. This makes it less likely to be well-known than voluntary opt-outs. Those without strong objections to EU membership may thus be less aware of such differentiation than Euroskeptics, and therefore less likely to use it as a heuristic when evaluating the desirability of future differentiation.

Table 2. Support for differentiated integration as a function of exposure to capacity DI

	Support for sovereignty DI	Support for capacity DI
Capacity DI X Euroskepticism	− 0.50 ^a [− 0.82, − 0.17]	− 0.09 [− 0.41, 0.20]
Capacity DI	− 0.25 [− 0.96, 0.45]	0.43 [− 0.22, 1.11]
Euroskeptic	4.90 ^a [1.90, 7.81]	0.82 [− 1.85, 3.69]
	5.17	− 0.62
Constant	[− 1.34, 11.61]	[− 6.85, 5.39]

β = median of posterior distribution with 95% credible interval. *N* = 18,901

^aNull hypothesis value outside 95% credible interval.

However, confirming *H2c*, the interaction between Euroskepticism and capacity differentiation doubles the size of the negative main effect that such differentiation has on support for sovereignty differentiation. In contrast, I reject *H2d*, as Euroskepticism alters, rather than amplifies, the correlation between past exposure to capacity differentiation and future support for it. Thus, Euroskepticism seems to only amplify the effect of exposure to differentiation on support for sovereignty differentiation. Figure 2 confirms this: Whereas the decline in support for sovereignty differentiation stemming from large amounts of exposure capacity differentiation is much greater for Euroskeptics than supporters of EU membership, the effect it has on support for capacity differentiation largely overlaps between the two groups. However, even if I reject the hypothesis, the predicted values offer some support for the underlying theoretical assumption: Exposure to capacity differentiation makes Euroskeptics less likely to support it in the future compared to supporters of the EU, even if the effects in the two groups are very similar.

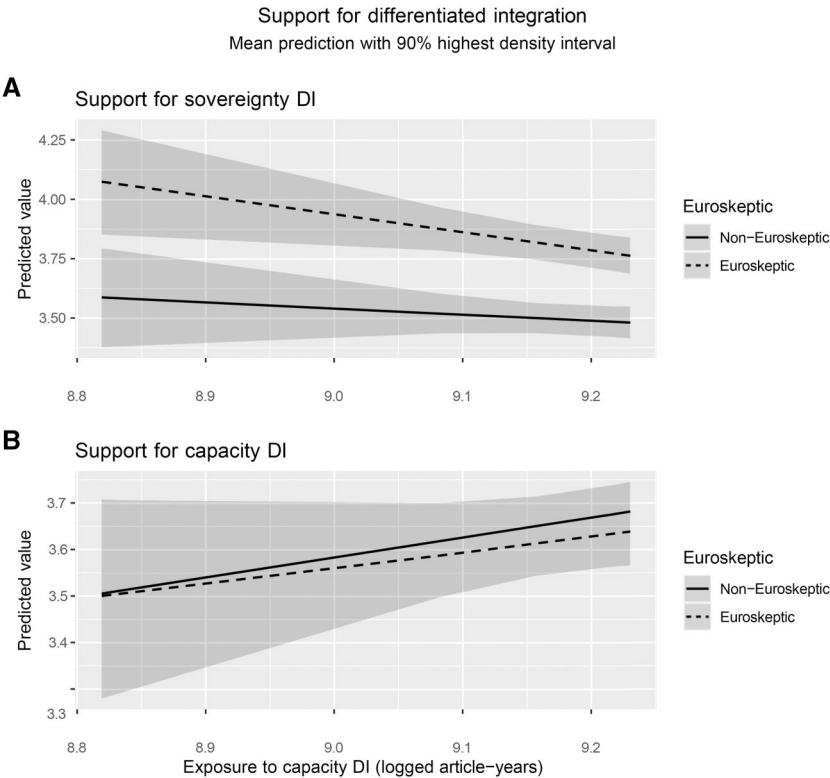


Figure 2. Support for (A) sovereignty and (B) capacity DI as a function of the interaction between Euroskepticism and exposure to capacity DI. 90% highest density interval.

I reject *H3a–d*. The theoretical assumption behind *H3* is that the effects of each mode of differentiation in the two groups are unidirectional but greater among supporters of the EU. However, my empirical analysis shows that the results are not compatible with this trend.

My results thus paint a nuanced picture of how exposure to differentiated integration shapes attitudes toward legal uniformity, both among supporters and opponents of EU membership. I find that where the sub-unit has actively sought and been granted strengthened permanent autonomy as a part of the institutional bargain between the EU core and its Member States opponents of EU membership become more likely than supporters to see such arrangements as preferable to a uniformly integrated EU. I also find that Euroskeptics exposed to greater amounts of capacity differentiation are more likely to respond negatively to permanent differentiation than supporters of the EU. However, exposure to either form of differentiation does not similarly produce strongly varied attitudes toward capacity differentiation between the two groups.

This suggests that the connection between past exposure to differentiation and support for it in the future varies both by the mode of differentiation and attitudes toward the EU. One reason that the link between past exposure to differentiation and support for it in the future among Euroskeptics differs so strongly by mode of differentiation may have to do with the temporary nature of capacity differentiation: While sovereignty differentiation lets some countries permanently strengthen their national autonomy or reduce their obligations as EU members, capacity differentiation is temporary. Because of this people may be most likely to use exposure to past differentiation as a heuristic for thinking about the desirability of differentiation that permanently reconfigures the EU.

However, as shown, the greater positive effect of past sovereignty differentiation on support for it among Euroskeptics does not necessarily threaten EU cohesion: Just as sovereignty differentiation correlates with less exclusively national identification among those most critical of the EU, it also correlates with less Euroskepticism among exclusively national citizens. Thus, in contrast to the “ethno-federalist” (Anderson 2014; Cornell 2002; Ishiyama 2023) assumption that increased sub-national autonomy will strengthen sub-national identities, I show that it may do the opposite among those critical of the EU. In contrast, temporary differentiation may, under certain conditions, produce greater opposition to the differentiation that is core to today’s EU, for instance, by solidifying the national identities of Euroskeptics (see Supplementary table A15) and creating public spheres conducive to identity-based contestation of the EU. This conflict is likely to emerge between a periphery where differentiation has been imposed and a core where it has been used to strengthen national autonomy (Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz 2022).

Limitations and Robustness Checks

The first limitation of this study has to do with the independent variables available for the analysis. The fact that several important variables are not available in the data introduces possible omitted variable bias. For instance, knowledge of the EU and education may both be important correlates of support for EU differentiation (Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz 2022). This limitation is difficult to overcome, as the relevant variables are not included in the data. The omission of such variables raises important questions that should be addressed by future research. The particular period in which the surveys were fielded, during a COVID-19 pandemic, may also be one in which citizens' perceptions of the optimal balance between national and European solidarity diverged from the norm. However, because there is much to suggest that solidarity resided predominantly at the national level even in the earliest phase of the pandemic, the results may very well generalize to periods also beyond the pandemic (Cicchi et al. 2020).

Reverse causality is another issue, particularly in the case of sovereignty differentiation: As voluntary exemptions from EU law are typically sought by Member States due to concerns about the implications of integration (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2014), a preference for such differentiation might be a *cause*, not a *consequence*, of exposure to it. The true chain of causality between the two is not easily testable, as it requires longitudinal data on preferences for differentiation that are only available for capacity differentiation (Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz 2022).

The large number of missing values on both the dependent variable and several theoretically interesting independent variables poses a second challenge (see Supplementary figure A4). As an example, 25 percent have not responded to a question about whether they want their country to exit the European Union or not. To test the possible bias caused by missing values I multiply impute the data (Rubin 2004), using the *mice* R package (van Buuren and Groothuis-Oudshoorn 2011), with five datasets being iterated over twenty-five times each. I also impute the dependent variables, with the minimal increases in bias stemming from this procedure likely outweighed by the corresponding increase in statistical power (Kontopantelis et al. 2017). For reasons of computational efficiency, I re-run the analyses from tables 1–2 using the randomly chosen seventeenth iteration of the imputation procedure. Supplementary Table A7 shows that the medians of the posterior distributions from the interaction effects go in the same direction as the original models, even if they are smaller.

A potentially problematic source of multicollinearity is the one between Euroskepticism and satisfaction with national democracy. However, testing the moderating effect of Euroskepticism alone necessitates the inclusion of both variables. To test bias due to multicollinearity, I nevertheless compare the results

from tables 1 and 2 to models without the variable measuring satisfaction with national democracy. Supplementary Table A9 shows that the interaction effects and the associated credible intervals are substantially similar to the original models.

The results may also depend on the type of Euroskepticism surveyed. Those who criticize the EU's democracy but not the idea of membership (De Vries 2018), may thus think differently about differentiation than those entirely rejecting the idea of EU membership. I operationalize the former with a question asking whether citizens are satisfied with the way democracy in the EU works. Supplementary Table A6 and Supplementary figure A1 show that increasing satisfaction with EU democracy correlates with decreased support for a more differentiated EU in the future. However, this relationship is much more prevalent for exposure to sovereignty differentiation.

The prior plays a key role in Bayesian analysis (Kaplan 2014), given that any posterior distribution of probable estimates is a mathematical compromise between a researcher's theoretically derived prior and the inferences drawn from the observed data. Because of how the prior may impact the posterior distribution of the results it is theoretically possible that probable estimates falling outside the parameters of my prior will not be covered by the credible interval, even if this problem becomes less relevant as sample sizes increase (Gelman et al. 2021). To test whether my choice of priors biases the estimates, I re-run the models from table 1 with priors that do not constrain the model estimation. Supplementary Table A8 shows that the results are substantially similar to those of the original models.

Summary and Concluding Discussion

This article shows that there is a complex relationship between pre-existing attitudes toward the EU, what kind of differentiated EU people have predominantly been exposed to and subsequent support for differentiated integration. I find that those opposing their countries' membership in the EU are more likely than their compatriots to support a permanently differentiated EU if they have been exposed to asymmetry framed as a voluntary choice. In contrast, the external imposition of differentiated integration makes it more likely that the same people will oppose permanent differentiation of the EU. However, possibly due to its temporary nature, Euroskepticism does not seem to amplify the effect of past differentiation on support for capacity differentiation.

My results have theoretical implications for both our understanding of differentiated European integration and the broader study of how historical exposure to asymmetric federalism is translated to preferences for future federalism. What my results show is that it is impossible to talk of one effect of exposure to asymmetries. Rather, the effects are brought about by a combination of pre-existing attitudes toward the core of the polity, levels of exposure to asymmetry

and its formal characteristics. However, due to the contested and composite nature of the EU as a polity (Bátora and Fossum 2020), these results may be brought about by the particular relationships that these groups have with the EU. Future research studying asymmetric federalism must thus investigate to what extent my results also extend to more traditional federations.

The clearest policy implications of these results extend to an EU that has set out to envision a future without the UK (European Commission 2017). On the one hand, the fact that differentiated integration does seem to have a particular appeal among Euroskeptic citizens suggests that it may be a valuable solution for strengthening the popular support for European integration even among those most critical of it. This is also evident in how sovereignty differentiation seems to increase support for EU membership among those identifying exclusively with their nation-states and the number of Euroskeptics identifying both with Europe and their nation-states. This aligns with normative literature debating the benefits and drawbacks of differentiated EU integration, which sees sovereignty differentiation as one tool for mitigating popular Euroskepticism (Bellamy 2019; Cheneval and Schimmelfennig 2013). Thus, exposure to such differentiation may produce greater support for more *differentiated* European integration, without this also implying support for European *disintegration*.

My study, while focusing on a highly particular case of asymmetric federalism, finds a correlation between exposure to such asymmetries and one's preferences for the structure of federalism. The link between past exposure to asymmetry and popular views on federalism is under-studied in the broader literature on asymmetric federalism. The fact that the effect of past exposure to asymmetric integration of the EU varies by both the mode of asymmetry and individual predispositions toward the core rather than the periphery suggests the importance of a future research agenda that assesses how asymmetric federalism impacts views on the optimal configuration of federal polities. Future studies should also critically evaluate the findings of the emerging literature on attitudes toward asymmetric integration of the EU travel to more traditional federations.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data can be found at www.publius.oxfordjournals.org.

Notes

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