

Public support for differentiated integration: individual liberal values and concerns about member state discrimination

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ABSTRACT

Research on differentiated integration (DI) in the European Union has burgeoned in recent years. However, we still know little about citizens' attitudes towards the phenomenon. In this article, we argue that at the level of individual citizens, liberal economic values increase support for DI. Stronger preferences for equality, in contrast, make opposition to the concept more likely. Similarly, concerns about discriminatory differentiation at the member state level lead citizens to oppose DI. We test the theoretical claims by analysing survey data on citizens' attitudes towards a 'multi-speed Europe'. Supporters of DI, indeed, are marked by liberal economic attitudes. In contrast to general EU support, we do not find robust correlations with socio-demographic variables. Moreover, the data reveal striking differences amongst macro-regions: support for DI has become much lower in Southern European states. We attribute this opposition to negative repercussions of the Eurozone crisis.

KEYWORDS differentiated integration; European Union; public opinion; inequality; liberalism

Introduction

A political and legal reality at least since the 1990s, differentiated integration (DI) – defined as an incongruence between 'the territorial extension of European Union (EU) membership and EU rule validity' (Holzinger & Schimmelfennig, 2012, p. 292) – has moved centre stage in the current debate on the future of European integration. For instance, the European Commission's (2017) 'White Paper on the Future of Europe' depicts differentiated integration as one possible option of moving forward. Likewise, in its response to the Commission's White Paper, the European Parliament aims at 'operationaliz[ing] differentiated integration [...] within the EU's institutional framework in the *best interests of the Union and its citizens*' (EP resolution of

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January 17th, 2019; emphasis added). But what do EU's citizens think about DI? Who supports and who opposes the concept? There is growing research on its causes and, at least partially, on its consequences, both at the levels of primary and secondary law (Burk & Leuffen, 2019; Duttler et al., 2017; Holzinger & Schimmelfennig, 2012; Leruth et al., 2019; Leuffen et al., 2013). However, our knowledge of public opinion on DI remains limited. This shortcoming is troubling given the EU's democratic aspirations: if more differentiation is an instrumental option for the future development of the EU, public support is indispensable to ensure the legitimacy of such reforms. Against this backdrop, this article develops and empirically tests a theory of public preferences for DI.

We argue that citizens associate the idea of DI with more general conflicts over autonomy and solidarity, both at the individual and country levels. Citizens who value freedom of choice and the efficiency-enhancing merits of differentiation – in short, economic liberals – should support DI. In contrast, citizens with stronger preferences for equality should be more sceptical of DI, possibly conceiving of it as a threat to solidarity. In addition, going beyond individual ideological dispositions, we expect citizens to anticipate the possible consequences of DI for their own countries. At the country-level, we expect perceptions of 'discriminatory' versus 'exemptive' differentiation (Schimmelfennig, 2014) to have an effect: Citizens fearing that their country may be discriminated against through DI should oppose it. Moreover, in line with Hobolt and Wratil (2015), we expect deteriorating macroeconomic contexts to make such sociotropic utilitarian considerations more salient. In consequence, we expect citizens of Southern Europe, which were most strongly affected by the Eurozone crisis, to conceive of DI as a threat of possible discrimination and a weakening of European solidarity.¹ In short, our theory expects individual political dispositions, particularly with respect to economic liberalism, as well as to national sociotropic concerns, to affect support for DI. We thus argue that at both the individual and the national levels, an appreciation of freedom of choice and a tolerance for unequal outcomes impacts on DI support.

We test these arguments using cross-national survey data provided by the Eurobarometer, which taps into support for the idea of a 'two-speed Europe'. Our focus is on the 2011–2017 period, but we also include data from 2005 to 2007. The concept of a 'multi-speed' or 'two-speed Europe' is only one possible form of DI (cf. Holzinger & Schimmelfennig, 2012; Stubb, 2002). However, it probably guarantees the most intuitive grasp of this – from a citizen's perspective – rather technical matter. Therefore, it seems well suited for testing more general evaluations of DI.

The empirical analysis largely corroborates our theoretical expectations. We show that DI supporters display liberal-conservative dispositions; in

contrast, citizens with stronger support for equality are less likely to support DI. Perceived threats to one's national identity lead to less support for DI. Although the correlation is small, it indicates that mostly liberal-conservatives, but not national-conservatives, support DI. Other variables that capture differences on the GAL-TAN cleavage do not predict DI support at all. As for the socio-economic variables, we find that education has a positive impact, but not class or the occurrence of financial problems. This suggests that at the individual level, ideological dispositions seem to matter more than individual utility or identity considerations. This contrasts with existing findings on the correlates of general EU support, some of which we replicate for the purpose of comparison.

In addition, the analysis uncovers a large regional gap between Northern and Eastern European citizens, on the one hand, and Southern European citizens, on the other. In the latter, citizens are as much as 30 per cent less likely to support DI – a finding that holds even when we adjust for an extensive battery of individual-level covariates. Southern Europeans are also less likely than citizens in other regions to support both membership and DI or only DI. We take this as an indication that DI is perceived as potentially divisive in the countries that have been struck worst by the economic crisis. In fact, the regional gap had been much smaller or actually reversed before 2007.

In sum, we find that individual dispositions on an economic liberal versus equality-oriented axis as well as the national context are useful starting points for understanding citizens' support for DI. In terms of policy relevance, we argue that if future EU reforms are directed towards differentiated integration, it will be essential to consider the regionally disparate perceptions of such choices and to pay closer attention to the lacking support of citizens left of the centre.

Differentiated integration and differentiated attitudes

Largely a taboo up until the 1990s, differentiated integration has become an integral part of EU primary law. For instance, Leuffen et al. (2013) show that almost half of all integrated policy areas contain some form of differentiation in primary law; classic examples are the Schengen area or the Eurozone. Moreover, Duttler et al. (2017) underline that differentiated integration has been a part of secondary law since the beginnings of the European Communities, extending far beyond the few cases of the enhanced cooperation procedure initialized by the Amsterdam treaty (cf. Kroll & Leuffen, 2015). The academic focus, primarily driven by legal perspectives, was first on concepts of DI (Stubbs, 1996; Tuytschaever, 1999). Over time, with a growing interest in the topic, the analysis of DI turned stronger towards explanatory approaches. Today, our knowledge on states' positioning towards differentiated

integration is solid (Duttler, 2016; Leruth et al., 2019; Leuffen et al., 2013) and the reasons for supporting DI (e.g., Scharpf, 2006, p. 860) and for opposing it (e.g., Adler-Nissen, 2014, pp. 25–31; Martinsen & Wessel, 2014) are quite well known at the state level.

However, we hardly know anything about individual-level attitudes towards DI (an exception being recent, but still unpublished work by de Blok & de Vries, 2020). At most, public opinion plays a role in theoretical accounts when explaining the opt-out of single countries (e.g., UK and Denmark opting out of the European Monetary Union) (Holzinger & Tosun, 2019, p. 645). This gap is troubling, not least because the future of European integration hinges on citizens' support (cf. Boomgaarden et al., 2011, p. 242; Malang, 2017, p. 17).

Which citizens support or oppose DI? And what do they associate with DI in the first place? At the individual level, several socio-economic variables, education – interpreted either as a resource or as a signpost for a postmaterialist value-scheme –, identity or national or party cues are commonly used for explaining support for EU integration (cf. Anderson & Reichert, 1995; Citrin & Sides, 2004; Gabel, 1998; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Kuhn, 2019; Nicoli et al., 2020). However, can we simply equate support for integration with support for differentiated integration? The nexus is far from obvious. On the one hand, DI can be considered to pose a threat to the unity of the integration project, cementing differences between the member states. When viewed in this manner, EU supporters should be opposed to DI. On the other hand, DI can be considered a necessary measure to overcome gridlock in a heterogeneous EU (Holzinger & Schimmelfennig, 2012; Stubb, 2002); in such a perspective, it allows at least a subgroup of member states to act as forerunners, with the possibility of other states following over time. For pro-integration minded citizens, partial integration can be seen as a second-best option, to be preferred over a complete stagnation of the integration process. What further complicates the integration-differentiation nexus is that a citizen's evaluation of DI may also differ depending on whether the citizen lives in a country likely to participate in DI regimes. In sum, the link from EU support to DI support is far from straightforward.

In this article, we argue that instead of being guided by EU integration attitudes, citizens evaluate differentiated integration in correspondence with their more general attitudes on societal differentiation. We claim that their attitudes on DI are in line with their attitudes on individual autonomy, freedom of choice, equality, and solidarity. Economic liberals usually value freedom of choice and stress the efficiency-enhancing merits of differentiation. Accordingly, citizens with economic liberal worldviews should support differentiated integration. In contrast, other citizens hold stronger preferences for equality and solidarity – arguably, because they believe that inequality results from luck, rather than from individual control, work,

or achievement (Alesina & Angeletos, 2005). Such citizens are more likely to oppose DI, possibly conceiving of it as an undermining of solidarity. They may also fear that differentiation could lead to dominance (cf. Eriksen, 2018) or cause negative external effects (cf. Kölliker, 2001). In contrast, respondents supporting freedom of choice, free trade, and a market economy should support DI. Since liberal economic attitudes should also translate into persons' self-placements on a left-right scale, we expect citizens on the political right to be stronger in favour of DI.

Going beyond their individual economic ideologies, citizens may also anticipate the effects of DI for their member states. At the state-level, heterogeneity, both with respect to interdependence and the politicization of EU politics, explains patterns of differentiated integration (Schimmelfennig et al., 2015). However, one cannot directly infer citizens' support or disapproval of DI from their states' choices to participate or not in specific policy regimes. Most observers agree that differentiated integration offers a way for avoiding heterogeneity-induced gridlocks (cf. Holzinger & Schimmelfennig, 2012; Stubb, 1996, p. 283), but its evaluation is likely to depend on whether national populations expect to win or lose in actual differentiation decisions. We thus expect that while a more general freedom of choice versus equality cleavage is a starting point for their evaluations of DI, citizens also take possible consequences of DI for their state into account. Schimmelfennig's (2014, p. 682) distinction of exemptive versus discriminatory differentiation is useful here. Exemptive differentiation favours the state which desires an opt-out, be that to please a Eurosceptic public or because of economic or other policy-related concerns. In contrast, discriminatory differentiation prevents a state from profiting from the good established through the enactment of a (differentiated) policy. An example of such discriminatory differentiation is the so-far unsuccessful attempt of Romania and Bulgaria to join the Schengen zone.

Hobolt and Wratil (2015) and Gomez (2015) show that dire economic circumstances, and the Eurozone crisis, in particular, tend to make utilitarian considerations more relevant, at the expense of identity considerations or liberal dispositions. Accordingly, we expect Southern citizens to perceive DI as a divisive and discriminatory issue of economic governance that could negatively affect European solidarity.² We thus expect citizens in Southern member states to take a more critical stance towards DI compared to those in Northern member states – at least with respect to the period after the Eurozone crisis.

On the other hand, we expect citizens from Northern member states to largely support DI because it should have few detrimental effects for them. DI as an autonomy enhancing instrument gives their home states an option to participate or refrain from participating in (costly) policies. Our predictions are less clear-cut for the Eastern European member states. On the

one hand, their citizens may fear discrimination, on the other hand in the past they were avid at claiming and receiving exemptions (cf. Schimmelfennig, 2014). In sum, we expect the order of DI preferences to be as follows: citizens in Northern member states should be the strongest supporters; those in Southern member states should be the most critical; and Eastern Europeans should be located somewhere in-between.

In general, the interactions of individual dispositions with national contexts can be complex. First, in dire economic circumstances, utilitarian considerations can become more relevant, making identity considerations or liberal dispositions less relevant (Hobolt & Wrátil, 2015). Second, the relationship between general EU support and support for DI may depend on national factors. In the South, EU supporters may be critical of DI, possibly considering as it not only to undermine European solidarity but the European project, more generally. Fortunately, our data allow us to test these predictions related to liberal dispositions, general EU support, and DI support.

Our theory is broadly in line with the argument put forward by Hobolt (2014), who investigates attitudes towards deepening integration or enlarging the Union. Specifically, Hobolt suggests that relationships between independent variables and support depend on the national economic context. Our theory also relates to Hobolt and de Vries (2016) call to go beyond examining individual general support for European integration, and towards more specific opinions on EU reform. In this regard, it is crucial to assess whether our independent variables show similar relationships to general EU support as to DI support.

Methods and data

Our analyses use Eurobarometer data comprising surveys from the years 2005–2007, and 2011–2017. Our dependent variable is mostly based on the following item:

With regards to the idea of a ‘two speed Europe’, which of the following comes closest to your personal preference? Those ready to intensify the development of a common European policy in certain important areas ... should do so without having to wait for the others (coded as support for DI), or ‘they should wait until all Member States of the EU are ready’ (coded as opposition to DI).

This item is the only survey questions related to differentiated integration that has been asked over a longer time-span in multiple countries. By omitting the academic phrase ‘differentiated integration’ and adopting the more intuitive concept of a ‘two-speed Europe’, it should be relatively easy for respondents to understand. One potential ambiguity comes from using the phrase ‘being ready’, which could be interpreted either as a national

'willingness' or 'capacity'. We also note substantial missings (11 per cent over the 2011–2017 period), compared to 2 per cent for the standard item asking whether one's country's EU membership is 'a good thing'. We take this as an indication of respondents' weaker understanding of, or underdeveloped preferences on DI. At the same time, this observation highlights that respondents do not just equate DI with integration. We return to the issue of adequately measuring DI preferences in the concluding section. Our main analysis uses only complete cases; however, we also analysed the data after imputing missing values.

For our descriptive graphs and country-level regressions, we apply post-stratification weights for country averages and population weights for the EU average, provided by Eurobarometer. In our regression analyses, we mostly employ linear multi-level models. Our choice is motivated by the fact that most of our independent variables are discrete so that our model is close to being saturated and therefore linear in the coefficients (see Wooldridge (2010, p. 564) and Angrist and Pischke (2009, pp. 34–40, 48–51)). The selected estimator has the obvious advantage that the coefficients are straightforward to interpret as mean differences. Moreover, replications based on logit models corroborate our findings. For the individual-level regressions, we include random country intercepts to account for correlated errors.

In our analysis, we distinguish three batches of explanatory variables. Centrally, one batch captures liberal values. It contains respondents' self-placement along a generic left-right scale (categorized to left, centre, and right),³ preference for social equality, free trade, and a market economy. The latter classifications are based on the following survey question: 'From the following items, which two should our society emphasize in order to face major global challenges?', where we code mentions of 'Social Equality and Solidarity' as well as 'Free trade/market economy' as dummy variables.⁴

Furthermore, we include essential socio-demographic attributes. These comprise age, gender, education (measured as the age when finished one's education), and occupational categories (manual workers, lower white collar, higher white collar, self-employed, students, retired/out of labour force, and reference category unemployed). Finally, we include reports of financial problems (almost never/never, from time to time, most of the time) as a proxy for the individual economic situation.

Our final set of variables is directly related to the EU and perceived threats to national identities. It includes whether a respondent feels that her country's membership in the EU is a 'good thing' (as a measure of general regime support), whether she feels well-informed about the European Parliament's activities (as a measure of interest in EU affairs), whether she feels that her voice is acknowledged in the EU (as a measure of perceptions of input legitimacy), and whether she agrees that 'globalisation threatens our (our

country's) identity' (Hooghe & Marks, 2004). This last variable also allows us to tell apart economic liberals from national conservatives.⁵

Throughout, we first examine the unconditional association of the variable batches with DI support and then combine them to see whether correlations are stable across models.⁶ In our final model, we add the regional variables – South and East with North as a reference category – to show how regional factors impact individual-level effects. The descriptive statistics already reveal substantive variation across European macro-regions in the evaluation of DI.

Empirical analysis

We begin by visually examining fundamental trends in support for DI. The left graph in Figure 1 shows the average support for DI among all EU citizens (solid line) and the share of respondents that believe their country's EU membership is a 'good thing' (dashed line). While general EU-support shows a relatively steady upward trend, starting from just below 50 per cent (indicated by the dotted horizontal line) in 2011 and reaching almost 60 per cent in 2017, support for DI oscillates stronger around 50 per cent, with a significant dip in 2015. However, we almost always find a slight majority in favour of DI at the aggregated level. The graph on the right shows regional differences in DI support over time. As expected, we find a significant divide between North

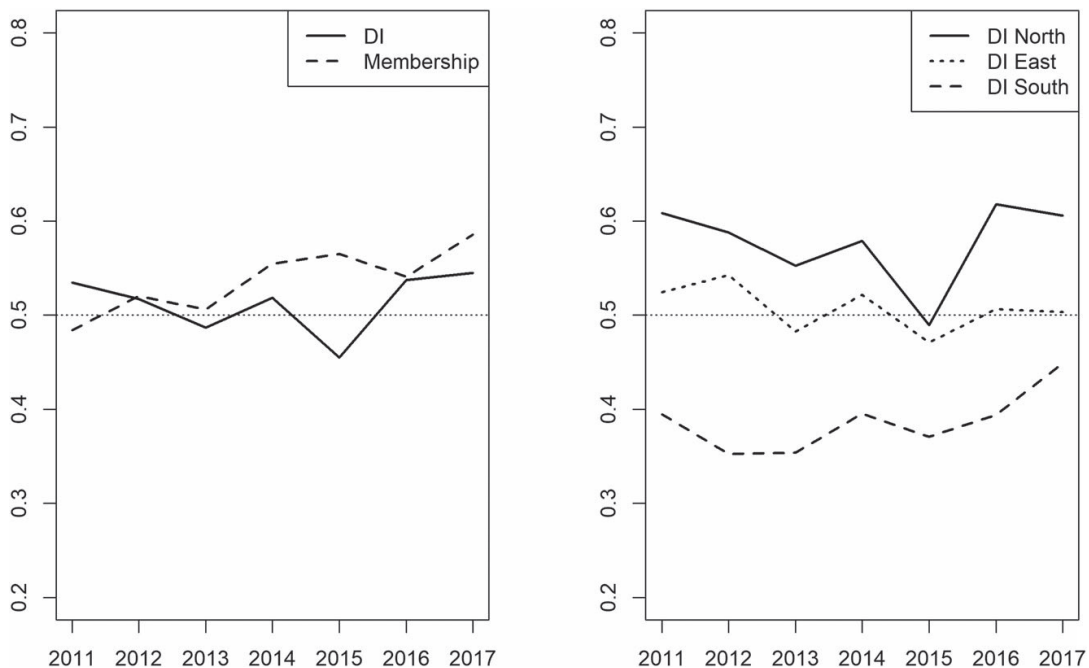


Figure 1. Percentage of supporters (a) of EU membership and DI from 2011 to 2017, across all member states (left) and (b) of DI, divided by regions (right) (based on Eurobarometer data).

and South, with Eastern Europe somewhere in between, but generally close to the North.

To further analyse the correlates of support for DI and to contrast them with correlates of general EU support, we now present results from a series of regression models. The primary analysis is based on Eurobarometer 86.1, fielded in September/October 2016. We selected this round of the Eurobarometer because it is the most recent data set, which contains not only an item on differentiated integration, but also items capturing liberal attitudes. However, we also tested our models on data from the other available years and got substantively similar results, with an exception for the years 2005–2007, an issue to which we will return below.

Table 1 examines the distribution of DI preferences across various country groups.⁷ In contrast to all other analysis, we work with weighted country averages of DI support, since all independent variables are at the country level too. The analysis confirms that citizens in Southern member states are particularly critical vis-à-vis DI (model 1). The sharpest divide at the macro-level is between Northern and Eastern Europe on the one hand, and Southern Europe on the other. Citizens in Southern Europe are about 21 percentage points less supportive of DI than Northern Europeans (18 percentage points compared to the East), a relative difference of more than 30 per cent. We find no similar gap when it comes to general EU support (where both East and South have much lower support than the North) (cf. Appendix Table A2, see supplementary data). Moreover, these regional differences in DI support are stable when controlling for a wide array of individual-level covariates, in contrast to general EU support.

Other macro divisions could additionally be relevant for understanding DI preferences. For example, the European Parliament has claimed that ‘old’ (EU12) member states exhibit higher support for DI than ‘younger’ member states (cf. EP resolution of January 17th, 2019). We find no significant evidence for this, and the point estimate is actually in the opposite direction (model 2). Moreover, we do not find significant differences between states that are part of the currency union and those that are not. We do find significant differences between EU-budget net-contributors and -receivers. The former are ten percentage points more likely to support DI. However, the net contributors are essentially Northern Europe, plus Italy and France, which both have relatively high DI support compared to the other Southern member states (see Figure A1 in the Appendix, see supplementary data). We think that using the regional divisions is more informative because it highlights the differences between both North and South and East and South. Finally, Hobolt and de Vries (2016) further divide the North into Eurozone (EZ) and non-EZ members. For their over-time comparisons of central attitudes such as membership support, this makes a significant difference, mostly because of the extremely low support in the UK. For DI, however,

Table 1. Support for DI across country groups and regions. Based on Eurobarometer 86.1 (2016).

	Dependent variable:			
	Support for DI			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
East	β -0.037	(se) (0.037)	β	(se) β (se)
South	-0.215***	(0.056)		
EU12			-0.048	(0.047)
EMU			0.001	(0.04)
Net Contributor			0.585***	(0.022)
Constant	0.619***	(0.022)	0.556***	(0.030)
Observations	28	28	28	28

Note: Coefficients from linear models. Heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

this does not make a difference (see Table A3). Average support for DI in Northern EZ countries is virtually the same as in Northern non-EZ countries.

In the Appendix (Figure A1, see supplementary data), we also graph the development of average DI for each member state over time. There is variation in levels and trends in every country, but the division into North, East, and South still appears to be a useful summary. Specifically, Greece, Spain, and Portugal are, by far, the most DI-sceptic countries.

We now look at individual-level correlates of DI support. In Table 2, we find relatively weak relationships with socio-demographic variables. For example, manual workers and lower white collars do not have significantly different opinions (with unemployed being the reference category), nor does the occurrence of financial problems correlate robustly with DI support. However, white-collar workers show higher support (close to four percentage points). Retired citizens, as well as students, show lower support. Education is strongly and positively associated with support for DI. Finally, we find no robust gender or age effects.

For attitudinal variables, we find much stronger relationships. Per our argument, DI supporters are proponents of free markets and trade, and they value social equality less. In both cases, the mean difference is about two percentage points; while this is a small effect size, the opposite direction of the effects for free markets and trade versus social equality is exactly in line with our expectations and remains robust when controlling for other variables. Similarly, the political right is much more supportive of DI than the left or the centre (about five percentage points).

Variables related to the EU are positively associated with support for DI, regardless of adjustment variables. This holds especially true for general membership support. We will later explore in more detail how this association varies across regions. The 'identity threat' variable is negatively related to DI support (mean difference of about two percentage points). This indicates that the profile of a DI supporter is right-wing in terms of economic liberalism, and not nationally conservative.

Finally, even when adjusting for multiple individual-level covariates, we find the large gap between Northern and Eastern Europe and Southern Europe, respectively, virtually unchanged. According to model 6, individuals in Southern Europe are about 15 percentage points less likely to support DI than Northern Europeans. We replicate these findings almost exactly using a multi-level logit model (Table A7 in the appendix, see supplementary data).

We argue that attitudes towards DI might be different from general attitudes towards the EU. Therefore, we compare our results to regressions with a different outcome variable, preferences for one's country's membership in the EU.⁸ Table A5 in the Appendix shows results where we code assessments of a country's EU membership as a 'good thing' as 1 (and 0 otherwise). We find robust correlations with socio-demographics, especially

Table 2. Support for DI. Based on Eurobarometer 86.1 (2016).

	Dependent variable:									
	Support for DI									
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)				
β	(se)	β	(se)	β	(se)	β	(se)	β	(se)	
Socio-Demographics										
Self-employed	0.010	(0.017)	0.010	(0.019)	0.010	(0.020)	0.010	(0.020)	0.010	(0.020)
Higher White Collar	0.039**	(0.016)	0.036**	(0.017)	0.030*	(0.018)	0.030*	(0.018)	0.030*	(0.018)
Lower White Collar	0.014	(0.015)	0.009	(0.017)	0.009	(0.018)	0.009	(0.018)	0.009	(0.018)
Manual workers	-0.021	(0.014)	-0.022	(0.016)	-0.020	(0.016)	-0.020	(0.016)	-0.020	(0.016)
Retired/Out of Labour Force	-0.041***	(0.015)	-0.041**	(0.017)	-0.038**	(0.017)	-0.038**	(0.017)	-0.038**	(0.017)
Students	-0.063***	(0.019)	-0.057***	(0.021)	-0.065***	(0.022)	-0.065***	(0.022)	-0.065***	(0.022)
Education	0.032***	(0.005)	0.033***	(0.005)	0.026***	(0.006)	0.025***	(0.006)	0.025***	(0.006)
Age	0.0005*	(0.0003)	0.0004	(0.0003)	0.0003	(0.0003)	0.0003	(0.0003)	0.0003	(0.0003)
Female	0.004	(0.006)	0.010	(0.007)	0.011	(0.007)	0.011	(0.007)	0.011	(0.007)
Financial Problems:	0.014	(0.012)	0.015	(0.014)	0.008	(0.014)	0.008	(0.014)	0.008	(0.014)
From time to time										
Financial Problems:	0.023*	(0.012)	0.022*	(0.013)	0.012	(0.014)	0.012	(0.014)	0.011	(0.014)
Almost never/never										
Politics and Society										
Support for Equality					-0.022***	(0.007)	-0.021***	(0.007)	-0.023***	(0.007)
Support for Free Trade					0.018**	(0.008)	0.019**	(0.008)	0.016**	(0.008)
Political Centre					-0.00002	(0.009)	0.001	(0.009)	0.002	(0.009)
Political Right					0.047***	(0.010)	0.046***	(0.010)	0.045**	(0.011)
EU										
Voice acknowledged in EU							0.020***	(0.007)	0.016*	(0.008)
EU Membership a good thing							0.057***	(0.007)	0.055***	(0.008)
EU Knowledge							0.022***	(0.007)	0.016**	(0.007)
Identity Threat							-0.019***	(0.007)	-0.024***	(0.007)
Regions										
East									-0.028	(0.042)
South									-0.156***	(0.048)
Constant	0.435***	(0.032)	0.561***	(0.024)	0.427***	(0.036)	0.526***	(0.022)	0.429***	(0.037)
Observations	23,967	20,749	20,266	22,319	18,752	18,752	18,752	18,752		

Note: Coefficients from linear multi-level models with country random effects. Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

individual financial problems, and that both supporters of social equality and of free markets support the EU. This finding indicates that general EU attitudes cannot sensibly be related to economic liberalism, in contrast to DI attitudes. Furthermore, the association with perceived threats of one's national identity is negative and extremely strong (about 15 percentage points). This is in line with previous results (Hooghe & Marks, 2004; Nicoli et al., 2020) and a stark contrast to the case of DI support. Finally, we do not find the regional gap we uncovered for DI preferences at all – the region dummies are both substantively and statistically insignificant.

In sum, this suggests that general support for the EU, as opposed to DI, more strongly aligns with standard socio-demographic variables and with identity factors, especially in terms of effect sizes. In contrast, differences in support for DI seem to stem more from differing preferences on the social-equality free-market conflict line.

Our analysis suggests that citizens relate DI to issues of economic liberalism. Previous research, however, indicates that the cleavage between 'green-alternative-libertarians' (GAL) and 'traditional-authoritarian-nationalists' (TAN) has become critical, especially concerning preferences on European integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Much of the individual-level evidence for the importance of this dimension is centred on education as an independent variable, with highly-educated citizens being more supportive of environmental protection, immigration, and globalization (cf. e.g., de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005). As we have shown, support for DI is similarly highly correlated with education. However, in contrast to the strong and consistent correlations of DI support and items measuring economic liberalism, we find no relationships with items measuring concern for the environment or immigration (see Table A5 in the Appendix, see supplementary data). The relationships with all other variables remain robust.⁹ This lends support to the notion that DI is about support for economic liberalism and more closely aligned with classic economic left-right cleavages.

We further explore the robustness of our findings across time (Figures A3 and A4 in the appendix, see supplementary data). There are no other Eurobarometer surveys that contain the full sets of variables that we have used in our main analysis. However, we can estimate models that include basic socio-demographics, region indicators, and our liberal value variables. Our main results regarding regional cleavages and liberal values are robust. Regarding socio-demographics, the estimated correlations vary significantly over the years (except for years of education), further underlining their limited explanatory power. Finally, our main result is also robust to multiple imputation of missing values (Honaker et al., 2011) on the dependent and independent variables.

Our next step is to investigate the regional divide we have uncovered. We hypothesized that to some citizens, DI might signify an attempt to dilute European solidarity and to divide poorer from more prosperous member

states. Possibly, this partly explains why Southern Europeans are much more sceptical towards DI. We use two indirect tests of this mechanism. First, this argument implies that attitudes in the South should have changed after the shock of the 2009 financial crisis.¹⁰ We can test this to some extent, as a similar item on ‘multi-speed Europe’ was also included in a number of Eurobarometer surveys in 2005–2007.¹¹ A comparison of the pre- to the post-crisis period reveals a sharp decline of DI support in the South (Figure A4). In fact, prior to 2008, Southern Europeans showed as much or even higher support for DI than Northern and Eastern Europeans. A regression analysis confirms this (Table A8). Although we lack data on the immediate crisis years, we take this before and after difference as further support for our argument.

A second test of this conjecture is to examine associations between general EU support (as measured by the ‘membership’ variable) and DI preferences across regions. One potential pattern is that in Southern Europe, general membership supporters are less likely to support DI, because they see it as an inappropriate pathway; while in Northern and Eastern Europe, the opposite is the case.

Figure A6 in the online appendix plots marginal effects based on the specification of model 6 from Table 2, with an additional interaction between indicating that one’s nation’s EU membership is ‘a good thing’ and the regional dummies. The point estimates are not fully consistent with our conjecture, although the relationship is indeed strongest in the North. However, differences in the estimates are not statistically significant from each other. Accordingly, this test is inconclusive. Figure A6 provides some additional descriptive evidence. We treat membership and DI support as a multinomial outcome so that there are four types of respondents (i) support for both membership and DI, (ii) only membership, (iii) only DI, or (iv) none. While Northern and Eastern Europe have comparable overall levels of DI support, there are many more Eastern Europeans that support only DI. This suggests that citizens in the North tend to see DI as a constructive step in European integration, while those in the East prefer it to fence off an ever-closer union. In the South, on the other hand, there are many more respondents that only support membership, while supporters of both membership and DI are the minority. This indicates that DI may be seen as a hindrance to successful integration of one’s country into the EU amongst Southern EU citizens.

We also hypothesized that utilitarian considerations and political attitudes might play differing roles, depending on contextual factors. Therefore, we estimate interactions between political orientations and regional dummies. Figure A7 in the Appendix shows that a left-right divide only occurs in Northern Europe, but again the estimates are not significantly different from each other. Furthermore, we show that the relationship between financial problems and DI support is zero in every region (Figure A8). This, together

with our earlier results, suggests that sociotropic (regional) factors play a huge role, but egotropic considerations do not.

Conclusion

DI in the EU is an empirical reality. However, prior research has not investigated public attitudes toward this phenomenon. In this article, we have started to fill this gap. We find, first, that support for DI correlates with liberal individual values. While supporters of free trade and the market economy are supportive of DI, citizens with stronger concerns about equality are more sceptical.

Second, citizens in the Southern European member states are markedly stronger opposed to DI when compared to their fellow citizens in the North and the East. We find some evidence that this macro-regional difference is a consequence of the still prevalent negative repercussions of the Eurozone crisis, which mostly affected Europe's South. In stark contrast to previous findings on general EU support, sociodemographic as well as identity-related variables prove to be less important for explaining DI support.

Our final interactive models show that the correlations of various micro-level variables with DI support do not vary much across regions. This qualifies the importance of contextual variables and suggest that such factors impact populations rather uniformly. Future research should therefore continue to investigate how exactly national contextual variables affect support for DI. The fact that there is a sizeable residual gap even when adjusting for a broad set of individual-level variables could imply that this works through macroeconomic circumstances and sociotropic mechanisms. Future research should also aim at more carefully disentangling the complex interactions between EU and DI support. Moreover, and linked to this, heterogeneous treatment effects of DI as a multidimensional concept merit further attention.

In our analysis, we rely on an item in the Eurobarometer that measures support for a 'two-speed Europe'. An advantage of this item is that it is quite easy to understand, as it avoids the rather technical term 'differentiated integration'. Nonetheless, future research should aim at deriving better measures of actual knowledge and possibly different notions of DI – ideally including policy-specific variation to capture differences between DI concerning regulatory policies or core state powers. Moreover, eliciting possibly multi-dimensional preferences on, for example, exemptive versus discriminatory DI (Schimmelfennig, 2014), seems to be a promising direction for future research. More nuanced measurement would certainly contribute to a better understanding of regional differences in terms of perceptions and evaluations of DI. Furthermore, future research should pay closer attention to the wording of items and the framing of DI, since frames are likely to

impact on respondents' assessments of integration scenarios, a finding that holds in particular for less informed citizens (cf. Schuck & de Vreese, 2006).

The consistent correlations of DI support with 'liberal' values and the significant regional differences revealed by our analysis have normative, but also practical implications. If a substantive amount of EU citizens considers DI a discriminatory instrument going against European solidarity, it will be a challenge to promote it as a legitimate and fair tool for future integration. Clearly, citizens in Europe's South as well as those left of the centre will need to hear more cogent arguments about how DI can be reconciled with their visions for the future of Europe.

Notes

1. Note that the divide between Southern, Northern and Eastern EU member states, widely diagnosed for the Eurozone crisis, has recently resurfaced in discussions of the Corona recovery fund, pitching solidary concerns against claims of autonomy.
2. Research has indeed highlighted that the Eurozone crisis has had a substantive impact on citizens' evaluations of the EU as well as of member state institutions (cf. e.g., Gomez (2015), Foster and Frieden (2017) and Morlino and Raniolo (2017)).
3. This allows for a non-linear relationship. We simplified the 1–10 scale so that approximately 50 percent of respondents are at the centre, and 25 percent belong to the left or right, respectively.
4. A possible shortcoming of this item is that the question asks about responses to 'global challenges', which may not directly elicit respondents' intrinsic attitudes towards equality or free markets. For future research, developments in behavioural and survey measures of economic preferences might be of relevance (Falk et al., 2018).
5. A summary of all variables and their operationalization can be found in the Appendix.
6. See Bechtel et al. (2014) for a similar approach.
7. Our regional coding follows Hobolt and de Vries (2016): North: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom. South: France, Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta. East: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia. Net EU budget contributors (in 2016): Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, UK.
8. Hobolt (2014) and Malang (2017) follow a similar approach by directly comparing the same regression model with different attitudinal outcomes.
9. We use the following items: 'Which of the following do you think are the main challenges for the EU?', with answers 'Environmental issues' and 'Migration issues' coded as dummies, as well as 'From the following items, which two should our society emphasise in order to face major global challenges?', with 'Protecting the environment' coded as a dummy.
10. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this.

11. The item in Eurobarometers 64.2 (2005), 65.2 and 66.1 (2006), and 68.1 (2007) reads, 'What is your opinion on each of the following statements? Please tell me for each statement, whether you are for it or against it.' ... 'The speed of building Europe being faster in one group of countries than in the other countries'. In Eurobarometer 67.2 (2007), the same item as in the 2011–2017 surveys analysed previously was asked.

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