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Studying differentiated integration

Methods and data

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Introduction[1]

Since their beginnings, the European Communities have struggled with the question of how to deal with internal heterogeneity. The empty chair crisis is just one, albeit very prominent example, highlighting the potential of individual member states to hold back the entire integration project. In response to the dilemma of wanting to be fair to both sides, i.e. those states that are ready to proceed with further integration and those that are more reluctant, the issue of differentiated or flexible integration has been on the political agenda at least since the 1970s. For instance, the Tindemans report (1976) promotes 'a new approach' to prevent Europe 'to continue to crumble away', promoting a 'multi-speed' concept of differentiated integration (DI) (Stubb, 1996). Another loud, and more radical, voice against the uniformity dogma of the time was Ralph Dahrendorf, who in his Jean Monnet Lecture at the European University Institute, discussed the 'Europe à la carte' model and deplored the 'strange puritanism not to say masochism which underlies much of Community action' (Dahrendorf 1979), which was traditionally geared towards uniformity. In the early days of the Community, empirical realizations of DI were mostly limited to temporary restrictions or exceptions, oftentimes used in the context of the accession of new member states, primarily affecting the area of secondary law (Duttle et al. 2017). The Schengen treaty, initially negotiated outside the treaty framework, started a period of more permanent differentiations in the area of primary law. Since then DI has become a core characteristic of the European Union's setup, leading observers to even describe it as a 'system of differentiated integration' (Leuffen et al. 2013).

The development of DI has led to an increase in academic interest in the topic. Initially, it was mostly legal scholars addressing the topic, oftentimes with clear practical orientations (cf., e.g., Ehlermann 1984, 1995, 1998; Tuytschaever 1999; Thym 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Piris 2011, 2012). In a review article published with the *Journal of European Public Policy* in 2012, Holzinger and Schimmelfennig (2012) diagnose 'many concepts, sparse theory, few data'. In the meanwhile, the field has significantly matured and become a vibrant area of EU studies. Moreover, as there are currently three EU-financed Horizon 2020 consortia, which study differentiation, the output on the topic is likely to increase significantly in the coming years.[2] Against this backdrop,

this chapter critically takes stock of methodological developments and data sources used in DI research.

The chapter starts out by sketching a catalogue of methods used in the study of DI. We then present a quantitative review of the methods used in the study of DI. The descriptive quantitative analysis supports the intuition that the study of DI traditionally was a field of qualitative research. However, more recently, we witness increasing methodological pluralism. We consider this a positive development, underlining the maturity of the field. Moreover, the methodological pluralism signals that the field is methodologically ripe to provide answers to some pressing problems in the academic and political debate. For example, DI research can now contribute to substantiating debates on the future of Europe and the role of DI, therein. In particular, scholars are now able to provide evidence-based assessments on the consequences of DI at different levels, partly but not exclusively by applying the potential outcomes framework of causal inference. Before concluding the chapter, we introduce a number of datasets suitable for usage in DI research. We thereby hope to inspire readers to consider new approaches to the study of DI.

Cataloguing the methods used in DI research

Conceptually, we can broadly distinguish theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of DI. We briefly discuss the theoretical strand before moving to its empirical counterpart. Theoretical research on DI covers conceptual, explanatory and normative approaches. From a methodological perspective, the theoretical work can be classified into formal and non-formal approaches. Formal modelling approaches are (still) the exception in the study of DI; in fact, just very few examples of formal work on DI stand out (cf., e.g., Jensen and Slapin 2012, Holzinger and Tosun 2019). At the same time, a part of the theoretical literature indirectly links up to formal, rationalist models of politics. For instance, Kölliker (2001) in his theoretical treatment on the emergence (or not) of DI builds on the public or collective goods literature, stressing the importance of the externality structure of goods. As already highlighted above, the early contributions were often motivated by studying the legal but also political feasibility of DI (e.g. Tuytschaever 1999; Ehlermann 1984; Thym 2005; Törö 2005; Walker 1998), and a number of legal scholars continue to be active in the field today (cf. De Witte et al. 2017; Cardwell 2019; Avbelj 2013). The contributions from the social sciences and most importantly from political science, at first, were strongly concept-oriented, usually, however, with the aim of grasping some core mechanism and logic of DI (e.g. Stubb 1996, 2002; de Neve 2007; Emmanouilidis 2007; Holzinger and Schimmelfennig 2012; Frey and Eichenberger 1996; Fossum 2020). An example of non-formal explanatory work is perhaps Schimmelfennig et al. (2015), which attempts at harnessing theories of European integration with the purpose of better understanding the patterns of horizontal and vertical differentiation; in the end resulting in a synthetic model of DI. Lastly, normative accounts of DI have quite steadily been on the rise during the past five years or so; examples are Fossum (2015), Lord (2015), Bellamy and Kröger (2017), Eriksen (2018, 2019), Curtin and Fasone (2017), Heermann and Leuffen (2020) and Leuffen (2021). These works have contributed to providing normative justifications of DI; for instance, by pointing out that DI may be a suitable way to reach the EU's justification of fighting dominance in the form of negative externalities (Lord 2015). Others have critically assessed the emergence of, from their perspective, pathological forms of differentiation (e.g. Eriksen 2018).

In a highly stylized, and admittedly somewhat outdated, reading (Goertz and Mahoney 2012), the empirical literature can be subdivided into qualitative and quantitative work. As we will show in more detail below, the latter has increased more recently with new data on the market – most notably provided by the EUDIFF datasets (Duttle et al. 2017; Schimmelfennig and Winzen

2014, 2020). Partly, researchers have also linked theoretical expectations and knowledge on DI to other data sources, as, for instance, in Zhelyazkova's (2014) analysis of implementation records. Before introducing different datasets on DI research below, it is noteworthy that most quantitative work on DI uses techniques such as regression analysis, more recently, taking insights from the causal inference 'revolution' more rigorously into account (Burk and Leuffen 2019; Schraff and Schimmelfennig 2020). An innovative approach is proposed by Naurin and Lindahl (2010), who use network data retrieved from elite telephone interviews to better understand the integration of the states, which had opted out of certain EU policies, into the EU's informal decision-making structures, thereby nicely seconding qualitative work by Adler-Nissen (2009, 2011, 2014). There still is very limited work on the public opinion about DI (Leuffen et al. 2020; de Blok and de Vries 2020), but more research in this area is in the pipeline, conducted, for instance, in the context of the above-mentioned Horizon 2020 projects.

The qualitative empirical literature basically consists of (comparative) case study research, using both, co-variational and causal-process tracing logics of inference (Blatter and Haverland 2012; Beach and Brun Pedersen 2013; Rohlfing 2012; Gelhaus and Leuffen 2020). Most comparative work consists in comparing cases of DI, inside the EU, as, for example, between different policy areas, or over time (Rittberger et al. 2014; Dyson and Sepos 2010). However, there also are some examples of comparative work stretching out to comparative regionalism (Warleigh-Lack 2015; Murray and Brianson 2019; Leuffen 2013; See Gänzle and Wunderlich, chapter 4 in this volume) and to federalism (Fossum 2019; Fabbrini 2015; Bifulco 2020; Trein et al. 2019). Certainly, this approach has proven to be promising, not least by bringing the study of DI back into comparative politics, and this strand of literature will most likely grow in the years to come.

In the following, we outline the use of different methods and approaches used in the study of DI over time.

Methods of DI research over time

Using a quantitative content analysis, we here examine journal articles on the topic of DI from 1995 to 2020. For our analysis, we rely on data collected through a keyword search on the term 'Differentiated integration', using the abstract search of the powerful online search engine 'dimensions.ai'.[3] In particular, we scanned the titles and abstracts of a selection of major international journals on European integration from 1995 to 2020.[4] In a second step, we manually checked the collected articles and discarded those from our dataset that may not be associated with the field of DI.[5] We are not claiming data completeness as we miss out, for example, contributions that were published in books. Through our keyword search, we also do not register articles, which may address the topic of DI while not necessarily using the same terminology. Nevertheless, we trust that our data is able to make visible trends over time, and we have no grounds for assuming strong biases in our data (i.e. we would not expect that book publications, in principle, differ from journal articles in terms of the methodologies used).

In total, our dataset contains 88 publications from 1995 to 2020. Figure 2.1 reports the total count of publications on 'differentiated integration' for each year. As a general result, we observe a growing body of literature dealing with the topic of DI and we diagnose an increasing number of publications per year. Starting with the seminal work of Stubb (1996) only a few articles addressed the topic during the 1990s.[6] In fact, until 2007, we identified only one or two journal publications per year. Following a higher number of articles in 2007, we perceive an increasing body of literature on DI from 2013 onwards with peaks reached in 2015 and 2019.

In order to examine the methods used in the DI literature, we group the articles in our dataset according to their methodological approaches. Our primary goal with this analysis is not to

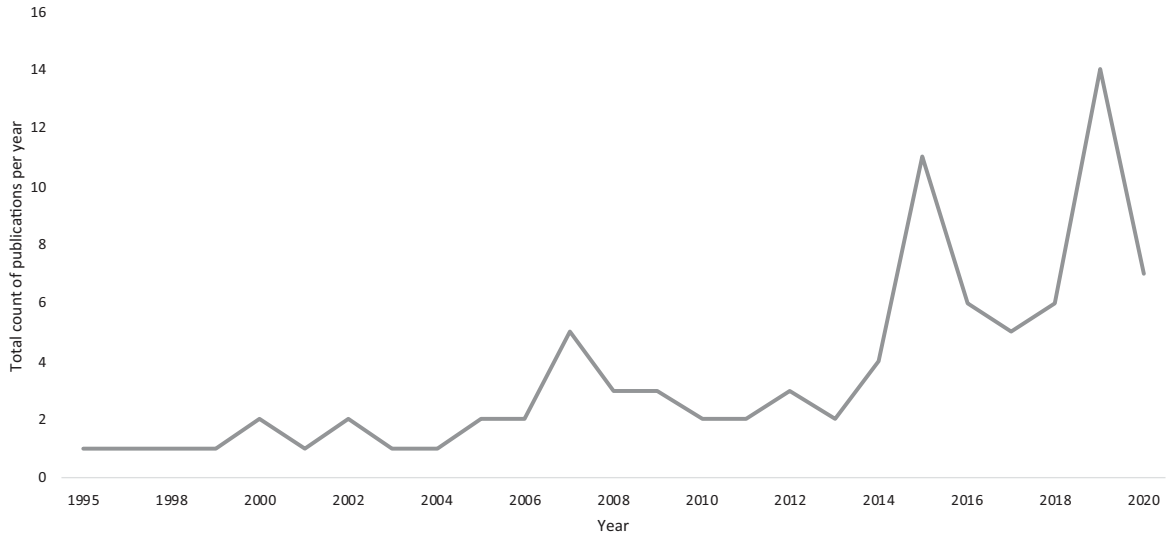

Figure 2.1 Total number of publications on DI from 1995 to 2020, as generated by a keyword search on 'differentiated integration' using the database 'dimensions.ai'

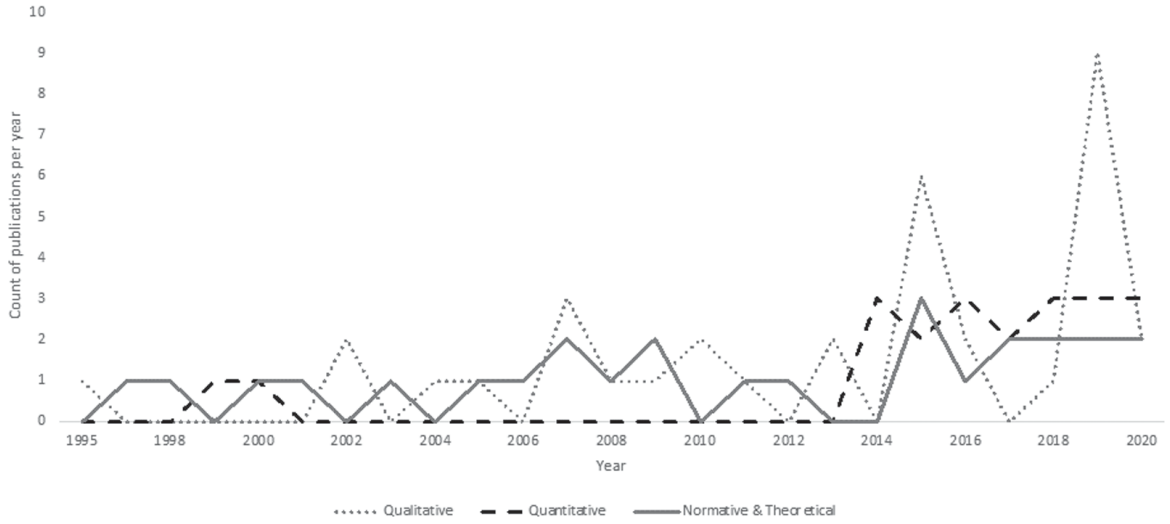

Figure 2.2 Total number of publications on DI over time, sorted by methodological approach. Own classification on 'dimensions.ai' 'differentiated integration' sample (1995–2020)

provide an exact examination of the specific methods used by the individual articles, but rather to provide an overview of the methodological trends in the literature. Taking up the general and simple framework, described above, we distinguish between *theoretical, qualitative* and *quantitative* accounts and group articles according to their methodological focus in the respective groups. For the classification, we hand-coded the articles in our sample. *Theoretical* articles include conceptual, explanatory and normative contributions, which do not have a strong empirical focus. *Qualitative* approaches, for example, use single or comparative case studies, expert interviews or process tracing, or, in other words, empirical research that is *not* quantitative. Lastly, we code articles as *quantitative* if they mainly rely on descriptive and/or inferential statistics using large-n datasets.[7] Figure 2.2 provides an overview of the different approaches, as used over time.

In general, we find that qualitative approaches make up the largest share of DI literature in the covered time period. Up until 2014, the articles mostly consist of theoretical and/or qualitative

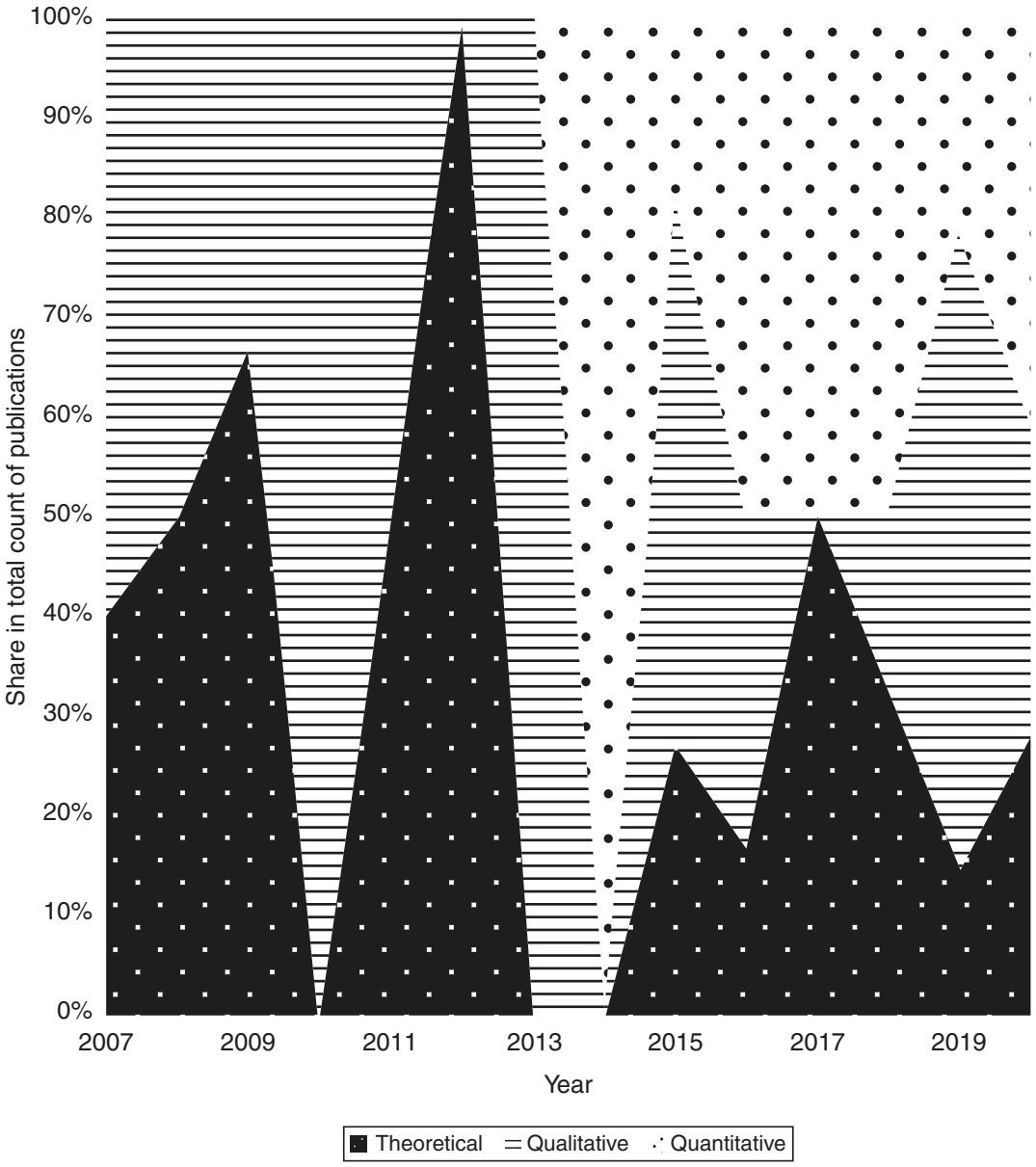

Figure 2.3 Share of methodological approaches in DI publications (period 2007–2020). Own classification on 'dimensions.ai' 'differentiated integration' sample

approaches. From 2014 onward, however, we witness a surge of contributions that rely on quantitative methods, alongside the use of qualitative and theoretical approaches. Importantly, however, qualitative accounts still hold the largest share during most years. This pattern also becomes visible in Figure 2.3, which depicts the share of each approach in the overall sum of publications.[8]

The general result here is that we observe more methodological pluralism. While still relying on a solid basis of theoretical work, and complementing the qualitative study of DI, the use of quantitative methods has surged in recent years.

Towards methodological pluralism in the study of DI

The analysis of the sampled DI articles has revealed that DI was largely a field of qualitative research in the past. However, we diagnose an increase of other approaches that complement

the qualitative approaches. This development is promising, since it allows a better understanding of DI as a multidimensional and multilevel phenomenon. In fact, at the aggregate level, the methodological pluralism brings about the advantages of multi-method approaches to the social sciences (Seawright 2016; Collier and Elman 2008; Leuffen and Puetter 2021). For instance, it combines the strength of strong internal validity, often linked to small-n research, and external validity ascribed to large-n research. Or, in other words, 'working together' (Poteete et al. 2010) pays off! Elsewhere, we have highlighted that more recent DI research has taken the direction of moving from causes-to-effects to effects-of-causes approaches (Burk and Leuffen 2019). Without wanting to open the delicate Pandora's box of causality, our claim is that, not least for practical purposes (cf. European Commission 2017), it is indispensable to get a better understanding of the workings and consequences of DI. Here, the use of new data, as well as a stronger appreciation of the potential outcome model of causal inference (Angrist and Pischke 2009; Morgan and Winship 2014) may be useful.

Datasets for DI research

While the qualitative strand of literature has mostly used 'causal-process observations', an increased use of 'data-set observations' (Brady 2010) is possible in the study of DI today. In the following, we briefly introduce a number of datasets currently employed in DI research. Moreover, we mention other datasets that have not been used extensively in the study of DI, despite their potential for it. As the field is developing fast, many of the mentioned data resources are work in progress and we hope that they will be made available to the public in the coming years; right now, only some of them meet this criterion. We here provide some examples of datasets, without claiming completeness but with the hope that those examples may serve as an inspiration to the future designers of DI research.

Most importantly, the EUDIFF1 and EUDIFF2 datasets provide the best empirical foundations for DI in primary (also termed 'treaty-based differentiation') and secondary law ('legislative differentiation'), respectively. EUDIFF2 records all legislative exemptions and opt-outs granted to member states from 1958 to 2012 (an updated version is used in Schimmelfennig and Winzen (2020)). Various forms of DI are covered – the authors distinguish temporary versus permanent, actual versus potential and general versus specific differentiation. The dataset is introduced in depth in Duttle et al. (2017) and can be accessed and downloaded in the accompanying data archive.[9] EUDIFF1 is based on article-years, EUDIFF2 on legislative act-years (Schimmelfennig 2014; Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2014). These datasets provide information on longitudinal patterns of DI and allow for comparisons across policy areas and countries. Moreover, they can be used for identifying specific instances of differentiation. In sum, they form a particularly useful foundation for the quantitative study of DI. The EUDIFF datasets have also been linked to other data in past research, an example is Zhelyazkova (2014) that links information on differentiation to implementation records (cf. also Thomann and Zhelyazkova 2017).

Interestingly, to our knowledge, the DEU I and II (Thomson et al. 2012) or EMU Choices (Wasserfallen et al. 2019) datasets so far have not systematically been used in the study of DI. That is surprising, given that their focus on preferences and saliences could provide important insights into the mechanisms of decision-making leading to, or resulting from, differentiation. DEU type of data could be merged, for instance, with data on the legislative process, as provided by the European Union Policy-Making (EUPOL) dataset, constructed by Frank Häge.[10]

There are a number of data collection projects currently in progress in the above-mentioned Horizon 2020 consortia. For instance, one Work Package in EU3D collects data on parliamentary debates on differentiation, a group around Richard Bellamy and Sandra Kröger (of

the InDivEU consortium) collects data on elite and partisan opinions about DI (Kröger et al. 2021), and there are a number of projects on public opinion (e.g. by Funda Tekin [EU IDEAS], Catherine de Vries [InDivEU] and Dirk Leuffen [EU3D]). De Blok and de Vries (2020) provide an overview of existing public opinion data about DI (cf. also Leuffen et al. 2020). In sum, there is a rich data basis emerging that will allow for a more careful investigation of the causes and consequences of DI.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed DI research with a particular perspective on methods. After typologizing and exemplifying different approaches used in the study of DI, we present a quantitative content analysis of journal articles on DI. As a first result, our data shows that the field of DI has grown especially in the more recent years. While in no way claiming completeness, the analysis has further corroborated the general impression that DI started out as a largely qualitative field of research, but in the last decade has moved towards methodological pluralism. In our view, this is a positive development highlighting the maturity of the research area, as well as the continuous curiosity created by DI. Moreover, we find that the different approaches nicely complement one another ensuring more solid understandings of the patterns and the mechanism of different forms of DI. Echoing the claim we made in Burk and Leuffen (2019), we see further scope for a more systematic taking into account of the potential outcomes model of causal inference. In the chapter, we also discuss a few examples of datasets already employed in DI research, as well as others that so far have been less used in the study of DI. These datasets can be fruitfully integrated into mixed methods approaches to the study of DI and open up the field for new research questions.

In sum, we have reason to be optimistic that the quality of research on DI is likely to improve even further in the coming years. Not least, this development may also lead to better policy recommendations on DI, as a salient and fascinating issue of present and future European politics.

Notes

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2 The most up to date information on these consortia (EU3D, EU IDEA, InDivEU) and their research output can be found online under www.eu3d.uio.no/, https://euidea.eu/ and http://indiveu.eui.eu/.

3 'Dimensions.ai' is increasingly used for such purposes, cf., e.g., Yin et al. (2021). Coevolution of policy and science during the pandemic. *Science*, 371, 128–130.

4 In particular, we searched the following outlets: Journal of European Public Policy, Journal of European Integration, JCMS Journal of Common Market Studies West European Politics, European Union Politics, Journal of European Union Studies, European Journal of Political Economy, European Journal of Political Research, Comparative European Politics, European Law Journal.

5 An example for such a *false positive* is DOIDGE, M. (2007). Joined at the hip: Regionalism and interregionalism. *European integration*, 29(2), 229–248. This article uses a perspective rooted in interregionalism and does not use the term Differentiated Integration.

6 The above-mentioned restrictions imposed by the keyword search may particularly apply for the earlier period of inquiry. However, by the year 2000, the DI terminology seems solidly established.

7 As we are interested in the applied research designs, we do not include articles such as book reviews or editorials in the methodological analysis. This reduces the count of publications to 82.

8 As the number of contributions until 2007 is comparatively low, we only depict the shares for the years from 2007 to 2020.

9 https://tandf.figshare.com/articles/dataset/Opting_out_from_European_Union_legislation_the_differentiation_of_secondary_law/4650190

10 This dataset is accessible via Dataverse: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/AZCAFA

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