

# POLICY BRIEF

## Integrating Diversity in the European Union (InDivEU)

### Citizens support the differentiated integration of their country

#### Research Questions

Do citizens support the differentiated integration of their country?  
Does differentiated integration even improve citizens' support for the EU?

#### Background

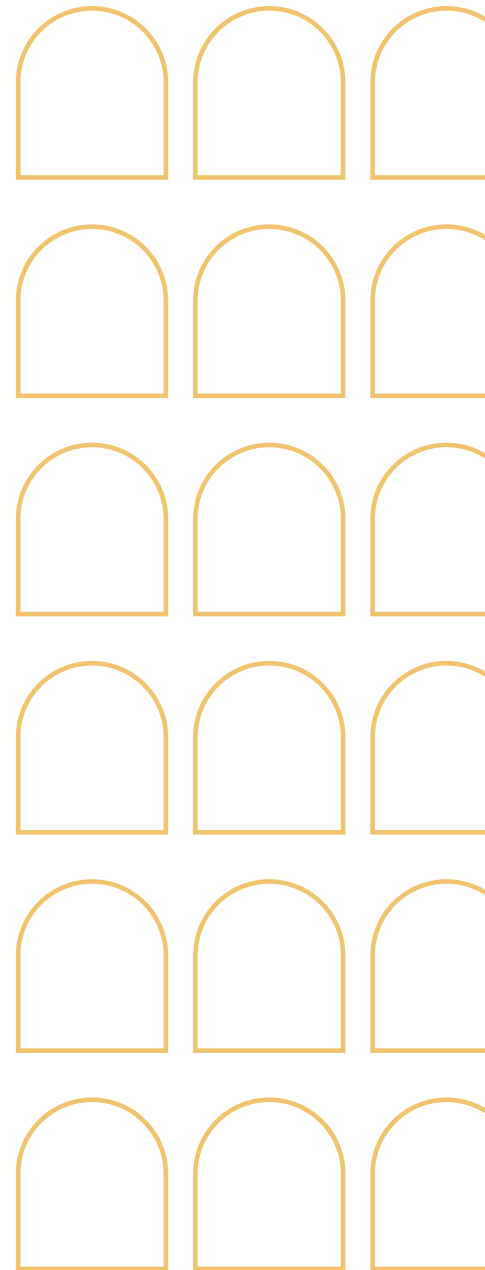
Since the 1990s, differentiated integration (DI) has become a core feature of European integration. Whereas we can infer from its widespread use that governments have found DI useful in negotiating and agreeing on further steps of integration, we know little about the perceptions and attitudes of citizens. Potentially, DI could undermine the legitimacy of European integration if citizens perceived differentiation as unfair, non-transparent or undemocratic. If citizens approved of DI, however, and if their approval was in line with the actual differentiated integration of their country, DI was not only in line with citizens' preferences, but could also serve to enhance the legitimacy of the EU more generally.

#### Study Design

This policy brief is based on two studies. The first study (Winzen and Schimmelfennig 2021) relies on the 2020 EUI-YouGov survey on Solidarity in Europe, which surveyed representative samples of the pop-

#### Author

Frank Schimmelfennig, ETH Zurich



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ulations of 14 countries from all parts of Europe (Genschel et al. 2020), which asks respondents about their agreement with opt-outs and multi-speed integration. The study tests whether agreement is correlated with the actual differentiations of their country of residence and several individual-level attributes. The second study leverages a Eurobarometer survey conducted around the time of the Danish JHA referendum of 2015 for a quasi-experimental analysis of whether opt-outs affect citizens' perceptions of the EU's democratic legitimacy (Schraff and Schimmelfennig 2020).

## Findings

Citizens tend to agree with the differentiated integration that their country has experienced. Respondents from countries with more differentiated European integration are also more supportive of differentiation. More specifically, they are also supportive of the type of differentiation they have experienced. The more a country has opted out from treaty revisions introducing deeper integration (especially in the domain of core state powers), the more supportive respondents are of multi-tier differentiation. Likewise, the experience of temporary exclusions resulting from enlargement goes together with support for multi-speed integration. These findings suggest that the variation of integration among the member states enjoys broad public support and legitimacy.

Support is high even in those member states that have experienced a high degree of mostly exclusionary and discriminatory differentiation in the context of their accession to the EU. It seems, however, that any negative assessment of differentiated integration was offset by the transitional nature of accession-based differentiation, the quick process of catching up with the old member states in the case of willing new member states, and the opportunity of avoiding full integration (especially in the Eurozone) on the part of reluctant new members states. Moreover, this multi-speed differentiation appears to be favoured by citizens with inclusive identity conceptions, left ideology, and support for European-wide solidarity in particular.

In addition, the study of the Danish opt-out referendum showed a positive effect of the vote on the perception of Danish citizens that their 'voice counts' in the EU. This effect is largely driven by the Eurosceptic part of the population. The study suggests that DI can lead to convergence

between Eurosceptics' and Europhiles' evaluations of the EU's democratic quality. Therefore, differentiated integration appears to have the potential of reconciling heterogeneous preferences on the citizen level and of narrowing the gap the EU positions of citizens and political elites.

## Recommendations

Differentiated integration does not undermine citizen support for European integration. Our results suggest that policymakers need not worry in general about popular legitimacy when negotiating differentiations to facilitate accession or EU reform. However, they should ensure that differentiation is either voluntary or temporary (if it is involuntary as is often the case in accession treaties). Differentiated integration that allows member states to join an integrated policy when they are ready, but does not force them to do so, seems to enjoy broad support among EU citizens. The possibility of opt-outs even appears to partly reconcile Eurosceptic citizens with the EU and narrow the gap between Eurosceptic citizens, on the one hand, and integration-friendly citizens and elites, on the other.

## References

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**Integrating Diversity in the European Union** (InDivEU) is a Horizon 2020 funded research project aimed at contributing concretely to the current debate on the 'Future of Europe' by assessing, developing and testing a range of models and scenarios for different levels of integration among EU member states.

InDivEU is coordinated by the Robert Schuman Centre at the European University Institute, where it is hosted by the European Governance and Politics Programme. The project comprises a consortium of 14 partner institutions and runs from January 2019 to December 2021. The scientific coordinators are Brigid Laffan (Robert Schuman Centre) and Frank Schimmelfennig (ETH Zürich).

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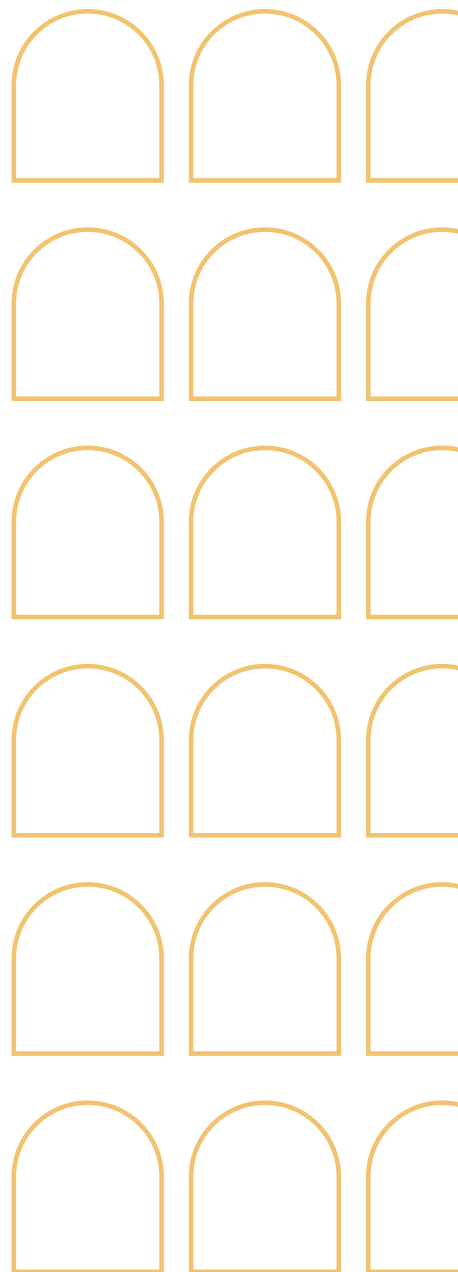
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