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Party Views on Differentiated Integration

Abstract: Research on differentiated integration (DI) has by and large ignored the views of political party actors on DI. Drawing on 35 semi-structured interviews with party actors from seven member states and situated across the political spectrum, we show them to regard DI as divisive and deeply political. We also identify two little explored dimensions affecting their views: namely the wealth of their member state (MS) and its prior experience of DI. Interviewees from richer MS generally favour DI more than those from poorer MS, and those from MS that have not experienced sovereignty or capacity DI welcome DI more than those from MS that have. While the former tend to see DI as allowing both opt outs for MS unwilling or unable to integrate further and enhanced cooperation for MS able and desirous of doing so, the latter fear their MS being excluded and relegated to a second class status.

Keywords: differentiated integration; European Union; political parties; sovereignty; domination.

Introduction

This article fills a gap in the literature on differentiated integration (DI) by analysing how political parties perceive of DI and which factors shape their assessment. Differentiated integration (DI) has been welcomed as providing a way for European integration to progress in the context of greater heterogeneity among member states (MS) and growing contestation of the integration process within them (Authors 2017). DI means that certain laws and

policies are not uniformly applied across all MS (Holzinger and Schimmelfennig 2012: 292). While it is not a new feature of European integration, it has become an increasingly permanent one arising from capacity or sovereignty concerns (Winzen 2016).

Existing works on DI have privileged conceptual mapping, normative questions, and specific case studies (e.g., Authors 2017; Eriksen 2018; Lord 2015; Holzinger and Schimmelfennig, 2012; Stubb, 1996). Most recently, research has also emerged on how governments and citizens approach DI (de Blok and de Vries 2020; Leuffen, Schuessler and Gomez Diaz 2020; Winzen 2020). However, political parties' views of DI remain little explored (for notable exceptions, see Authors 2021 and Leruth et al. 2020). The reluctance of parties to politicise EU affairs in general (de Vries and Hobolt 2012; Green-Pedersen 2012; Turnbull-Dugarte 2020) and DI in particular (InDivEU, n.d.) has made it difficult to study their views. Additionally, many consider that parties have only a limited role to play in the European integration process. Indeed, the focus on governments and DI in 'core state powers' (Gentschel and Jachtenfuchs 2016) reflects the view of executives as gate-keepers in EU affairs (Curtin 2014; Mair 2013), to the detriment of other political actors including parties.

In this paper, we contribute to filling this gap by shifting attention from government and citizens' views of DI to that of party political actors. We consider this move to be justified on two counts. First, even though the era of mass party politics is behind us, political parties continue to play important normative and representative roles in contemporary democracies. They are crucial in providing electorates with opposing policy alternatives and create representative links between citizens and decision-making by providing the leading figures in both government and opposition (Goodin 2008; Turnbull-Dugarte 2020; White and Ypi 2016). Furthermore, political parties not only reflect the views of electorates, but also contribute to shaping them. This is particularly true of complex issues such as European integration in general (de Vries et al. 2011; Hobolt 2007; Steenbergen, and de Vries, 2007) and DI specifically, as analyses of past referendums on the issue have demonstrated (e.g., Aylott 2005, Schraff and Schimmelfennig 2020, Siune, Svensson and Tonsgaard 1994). As a result, while it may be true that 'in any delegation system, it is to be expected that government policy depends, first and foremost, on government parties' preferences' (Winzen 2020: 1825), it is still worth analysing the positions of parties in general, because they shape the terms of political debate. Second, analysing political parties' views of DI allows us to capture a dimension that has remained so far unexplored, namely, the political dimension of DI. While existing academic works on DI have tended to present it is a pragmatic and

presumably uncontroversial solution that governments adopt to deal with increasing heterogeneity (Malang and Holzinger 2020: 733-744), this approach underestimates the extent to which DI is a 'deeply political process and a way of relating to conflicts. There are winners and losers, and outcomes often reflect prevailing power constellations rather than efficient solutions to policy problems' (Fossum 2015: 799). Political actors from different countries and different sides of the political spectrum may hold very different views of DI, depending on whether they consider themselves winners or losers from its implementation, and how it interacts with their political ideology and national background. Only analysing the views of governments on DI is unlikely to capture this political dimension because government participation in EU decision-making can lead a party to 'suppress' its EU position (Turnbull Dugarte 2020: 903), making DI appear less divisive than it actually is. Conversely, refocusing our attention on how political parties more generally view DI can bring its political nature into focus, and highlight its dividing lines.

To understand how political party actors perceive of DI and which factors shape their assessment, we draw on the interpretive analysis of 35 interviews with party actors in seven MS (Austria, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Portugal and Romania). Our findings challenge the assessment of DI as a purely pragmatic or uncontroversial process. They show that respondents were split, with a little over half expressing qualified support for DI, and arguing that while it entailed certain risks, it could facilitate integration and protect diversity. The remaining respondents worried that while it might prove pragmatically appealing, it could have negative implications for the principles of equality and solidarity, potentially leading to disintegration. Importantly, the views of respondents were deeply influenced by whether they came from a rich or a poor MS, on the one hand, and whether their MS had prior experience of DI or not, on the other. Highlighting how DI can produce winners and losers, and its effect on respondents' views, respondents from richer MS tended to be more positive about DI than those from poorer MS, and respondents from more integrated MS were generally more positive about DI than those from less integrated ones. While the former saw DI as allowing both opt outs for those unwilling or unable to integrate further and enhanced cooperation for those able and desirous of doing so, the latter feared being excluded and relegated to a second-class status. The paper's contribution is two-fold. First, research into the assessment of DI by political party actors reveals DI to be neither uncontentious nor unanimously (or widely) appreciated. Second, the finding that party actors' perceptions of DI

are shaped by the wealth of their MS and its experience of DI identifies two little explored sociotropic dimensions affecting views of DI.

The paper unfolds as follows. We start by discussing the literature on political parties, European integration, and DI. We then present our methodological approach which focuses on political party actors' views of DI. The empirical section of the paper analyses party views on DI and relates them to the key cleavages that shape their views. The conclusion summarises the findings and addresses their wider implications.

Political Parties, European Integration and Differentiated Integration

Existing research on the views of political parties on the EU has focused extensively on why political parties support or oppose European integration (see Topaloff 2018 for a recent review). Ideology occupies a prominent place in these accounts because while parties may shift their approach due to strategic considerations or government/opposition dynamics (e.g., Meijers 2017), their ability to do so is constrained by their voters and activists, decision-making structures, and their programmatic reputation (Hooghe and Marks 2018: 112). Two ideological cleavages are considered as particularly important in explaining party views on EU integration: the socio-economic left–right cleavage, and the socio-cultural libertarian/cosmopolitan–authoritarian/nationalist cleavage (Prosser 2016; Schaefer et al. 2020; see also Hooghe and Marks 2018: 123 for an overview of names the latter has taken). While the former appeared to be the most important in the first decades of integration, when the EU was mainly conceived of as an economic project, the latter has gained relevance as the EU has developed into an increasingly political project (Schäfer et al. 2021).

Whereas extensive research exists on political parties' positions on European integration, we still know little about how political parties approach DI and what motivates their positions in that regard. A first step towards addressing this question was taken by Benjamin Leruth, Jarle Trondal and Stefan Gänzle (2020) who observed that Nordic party families did not show a unified approach to DI, with their positions being determined primarily by domestic-level factors. Authors (2021) adopted a similar focus on parties to show how political actors in new and poorer MS in particular were concerned that DI might create domination. However, while further work is in progress concerning party views on DI (e.g., InDivEU n.d), research remains limited.

How might one expect political parties to approach DI? Expectations are difficult to arrive at given not only the two cross-cutting cleavages mentioned above, which are further accentuated by differing national contexts, but also the different forms DI can take (Winzen

2016). For example, some political parties might view sovereignty DI, which allows MS to retain certain state powers and tends to be permanent, as a positive development since it accommodates domestic preferences and diversity in the EU. However, others may be less optimistic and view it as a limitation on a country's decision-making power because it weakens or even removes their influence on EU policy-making in these areas (Adler-Nissen 2011). In a similar vein, capacity DI, which involves the temporary exemption or exclusion of a MS from a given policy area on grounds of its inability to meet the commitments it entails, may be welcomed by some as a way to foster equality by avoiding 'one-size-fits-all' policies. However, others may regard it as a tool for the exclusion of poorer MS from further integration (Chopin and Lequesne 2016; Authors 2021). Finally, enhanced cooperation, a form of integration which allows a 'coalition of the willing' (European Commission 2017) to go further with integration when there is no agreement to do so in a unitary fashion, may be viewed by some parties as a way to overcome gridlock, whereas others view it as allowing unwarranted integration in areas they regard as unnecessary or undesirable.

Developing propositions concerning who might hold positive or negative views of DI is therefore very complex. As far as positions on the socio-cultural libertarian/cosmopolitan–authoritarian/nationalist cleavage are concerned, while one might be tempted to equate cosmopolitan values and support for integration with support for DI, such a move would be misleading. As Dirk Leuffen, Julian Schuessler, and Jana Gómez Díaz (2020: 4) pertinently noted, the nexus between support for integration and support for DI is 'far from obvious.' Pro-integration parties, for example, may see DI as a threat to the unity of the European project and oppose it on those grounds. However, they might also see it as way to overcome resistance to further uniform integration in the future (e.g., Kölliker 2001). Conversely, Eurosceptics may view DI as an appealing option to opt-out of unwanted integration and protect national sovereignty, but also see it as a form of integration by stealth which will eventually pressure their country into joining projects which they may have opposed.

The relationship between positioning on the Left/Right spectrum and positioning on DI is equally ambiguous. The relevance of the Left/Right cleavage in explaining positions on EU integration has been frequently questioned (Hooghe et al., 2002: 971-972; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Prosser 2016; Schäfer et al. 2021), and one might expect doubts to extend to positions on DI. In addition, assuming this cleavage did matter, it is unclear how Left/Right positioning might affect views on DI. Consider, for example, the position of left-wing parties whose ideological core is defined by attachment to the principle of equality (Freeden 1998):

would they be expected to support DI as a way to equalise starting conditions and foster economic convergence, or would they be more likely to oppose it as potentially fostering discriminatory practices resulting in inequality between MS? Some initial research into these questions has, so far, given conflicting answers: while unpublished work by Lisanne de Blok and Catherine de Vries (2020) suggests that left/right positioning might matter to views on DI, Leruth, Trondal and Gänzle (2020) and Authors (2021) showed party families to be divided in their assessment of DI.

Differing views on DI may also arise from other, non-ideological cleavages. Recent public opinion research, for example, showed that citizens in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe tended to be more sceptical of DI than those in Northern Europe and argued that variation could be explained by sociotropic concerns relating to the anticipated effects of DI on one's own country (Leuffen, Schuessler and Gomez Diaz 2020). Specifically, it posited that popular opposition to DI in the South and East was explained by worries that DI would have negative consequences for European solidarity or be of a discriminatory rather than exemptive nature (Schimmelfennig 2014), while popular support in the North was determined by the expectation that DI would have beneficial effects. Similar concerns may motivate political party actors, with factors such as country wealth or experience of DI playing a role in influencing their views. The direction of the relationship remains nonetheless hard to predict. For example, parties from poorer countries in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe may view DI positively as a way to give their MS more time to adapt to the costlier and more complex elements of the EU acquis. However, they may also perceive it as a source of exclusion and discrimination if it leaves them out of projects they would have wanted to take part in, or if it makes it possible for richer MS to opt-out of contributions set up to help poorer MS (Chopin and Lequesne 2016; Authors 2021; Schimmelfennig 2014). Conversely, parties in richer MS may view DI positively as a way to avoid paying the price for integrating poorer MS or view it as an exemptive mechanism that makes it possible for them to stay out of unwanted integration. They may, however, also worry that DI might result in cherry-picking and rule-bending which would negatively affect them by creating uncertainty or potential additional burdens, or consider that staying out of further integration may end in them being affected by decisions they have no say in (e.g., Adler-Nissen 2011).

In light of these issues, it is worth exploring party views on DI in more depth, so as to get a sense of both how they view DI and the ways factors such as ideology and country belonging inform their assessment. Understanding these dynamics can provide a sense of the

determinants of support and opposition for DI, as well as an overview of whether DI is likely to entrench existing cleavages between, for example, rich and poor or old and new MS, or, if on the contrary, if it can bridge divides across these different groups of MS.

Studying Party Views on Differentiated Integration

Because of limited existing research on party views on DI, we opt for an exploratory and interpretive research design. To investigate the appraisal of DI by parties, we analysed 35 semi-structured interviews with party actors in seven MS (Austria, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Portugal and Romania). Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of 'the knowledge, experience, and perspectives of research subjects' (Kelly 2010: 309). They are ideal for interpretive analyses focusing on meaning-making (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 46) because they allow for pre-defined topics to be covered while also giving room to the specificities and understandings of the participant. Furthermore, because DI is a low-salience topic in publicly accessible documents such as party manifestoes and parliamentary debates (InDivEU n.d.), they were considered to be most likely to provide us with the kind of in-depth knowledge required of exploratory research.

The selected countries form a purposive sample of MS we considered uniquely well-suited to provide us with an overview of key cleavages which could be expected to influence political party actors' views and understandings of DI (Williams 2019: 54). These countries vary by wealth and previous experience of DI, two factors which based on existing research we expected might shape approaches to DI. Wealth may also offer insights into other key cleavages (Schimmelfennig 2019: 182) by, for example, capturing differences in concerns about capacity and influence between poorer, newer and primarily Eastern MS, on the one side, and richer, older and mainly Western MS, on the other.

For each country, we contacted all parties scoring above 5% in the most recent national or EU elections, considering this threshold to be high enough to give us a manageable number of parties to contact, but sufficiently low to include the most relevant actors. To gauge the role of ideology in shaping views on DI, we included parties from across the political spectrum (see appendix for a list of interviewees). Our respondents were MPs (usually members of the European Affairs Committee of their national parliament), MEPs,

and EU affairs advisors of parties. For each party, we sought to speak to two actors, however, this was not always possible.

Our selection of respondents provides us with a broad range of views, a deep understanding of how political actors approach DI, as well as a sense of how key cleavages play into their views. While the relatively small number of respondents invites us to avoid generalisations or overarching causal claims, the analysis of their positions can nonetheless present a time and context-specific understanding (Bevir and Rhodes 2006) of how party actors' (perceived) position shapes and informs their assessment of DI and indicate avenues for further research.

Interviews were conducted online or over the phone between March and June 2020.[1] Interviewees were asked general questions about their views on DI and its effects, as well as more specific questions concerning when it could be considered fair and how it should be designed. Using NVivo, interview transcripts were read to identify respondents' views about DI. As we noticed that they seemed to be divided in their views, we then manually sorted respondents into the two categories of 'supporters' and 'opponents' of DI based on whether, on balance, they appeared to have a primarily positive or negative view of it. Structuring the analysis around these categories served the dual purpose of highlighting the divisive nature of DI, and reflected how it cuts across some of the traditional cleavages mentioned above. While this binary division inevitably stylises complex positions, it facilitates the presentation of key arguments for and against DI by highlighting the specificities of each position (for a similar procedure, see Brack 2015). Following this stage, sections discussing the actors' assessment of DI were assigned codes summarising their meaning. Common arguments and patterns were identified, and similar views brought together under relevant thematic headings.

These processes made it possible to tease out the contents of party actors' positions on DI, gauge the frequency of certain arguments and identify their relevance to different actors. The following section presents the findings, highlighting both the content of the themes and how elements such as ideology and country factored in actors' perceptions of DI.

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[1] Interviews were planned to be in-person, however, the Covid19 outbreak in March 2020 prompted a shift to online and phone interviews.

Party Views on Differentiated Integration

As we noted in the last section, for the purposes of analysis we have divided our respondents into supporters and opponents of DI. Consistent with our research's focus on understanding how political party actors perceive of DI and which factors shape their assessment, this structure has the dual advantage of enabling us to highlight the divisive nature of DI while reflecting how it cuts across the ideological cleavages of left and right and Europhile and Eurosceptic.

Table 1 presents an overview of the respondents and their positions on DI. As the analysis will show, respondents were almost evenly split between the two groups, confirming that DI is a fairly divisive form of integration. However, support and opposition did not appear to be motivated by ideological factors, but rather, by ones pertaining to national belonging.

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Nineteen actors considered DI to be acceptable, while 16 tended to see it as an unsuitable option. Our material suggests no direct connection obtained between support for European integration and support for DI: pro-EU and anti-EU actors were evenly divided between the two categories, with 14 pro-EU and five Eurosceptic actors holding favourable views of DI, and 13 pro-EU and three Eurosceptic actors holding negative views.[2] Left-Right positioning also appeared to offer poor guidance to positions on DI. All party families were split on DI, with none unanimously or overwhelmingly supporting or opposing it. Left and far-left parties were moderately more optimistic about it, with 11 respondents in support and eight in opposition. Right, far-right and centre parties were more divided: six right and far-right respondents supported DI, while five opposed it, and two centre parties supported DI while three opposed it. Not only were party families split, we occasionally also found divisions within the same party concerning views on DI. In fact, in five out of ten cases where we interviewed more than one respondent, we found respondents held differing opinions, suggesting that there was no established party line on the issue.

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[2] Parties were classified as pro-EU or anti-EU based on the latest Chapel Hill expert survey (Bakker et al. 2020).

Whereas ideology generally appeared a poor guide to positions on DI, country wealth and experience of DI provided two relevant factors shaping respondents' views. Respondents from wealthier MS tended to be more favourable to DI (11 in favour, six against), while respondents from poorer MS were more divided (eight in favour, 10 against). Experience of DI presents a similar picture: respondents with no experience of DI tended to be more favourable (11 in favour, five against), while respondents with experience of DI appeared to look upon DI less favourably (eight in favour, 11 against).

Table 2 below summarises these divisions. To explore these dynamics further, the following two subsections take an interpretive turn, presenting the parties' views in qualified support for and opposition to DI respectively, and analysing how these factors informed their responses.

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(Cautious) Supporters

Out of the 19 respondents who viewed DI in a positive light, 16 mentioned pragmatic reasons to support it in its different forms. As far as sovereignty DI and enhanced cooperation are concerned, the main pragmatic reason to support them was their ability to facilitate integration and collaboration in the absence of agreement concerning the direction of the EU. One Austrian respondent, for example, viewed DI as a 'pragmatic solution to the problem that we don't know in which direction we should go' (Respondent 33, OVP), while a German respondent praised it as a way to foster 'further integration in different fields where not every member state wants to be directly involved' (Respondent 15, SPD). Enhanced cooperation was also appreciated as a way to pioneer new measures by allowing 'some countries […] to lead progress in the European Union' (Respondent 17, OVP, Austria) while also getting these measures 'on the plate of the Union in the future' (Respondent 2, LMP, Hungary).

Capacity DI was also viewed as positive and necessary, if for different reasons. For some, it was primarily beneficial for poorer MS because it provided them with necessary time to adapt, while others viewed it as a tool to protect the interests of wealthier MS. The responses of a Hungarian and a Danish interviewee are revelatory in this sense: while the

Hungarian respondent thought DI might be positive if it provided a path for integration for countries 'not able or not ready to join the caravan' (Respondent 2, LMP), the Danish respondent stressed that because hasty integration risked having negative implications for MS such as his own, exclusion on capacity grounds was necessary to prevent the rise of Euroscepticism in Denmark (Respondent 19, SD).

Overall, pragmatic support for DI appeared primarily among pro-EU actors of all ideological leanings (although it was also mentioned by three far-left Eurosceptic actors). For these respondents, sovereignty DI, capacity DI and enhanced cooperation were necessary to ensure that EU integration could proceed in spite of stalling and disintegrative tendencies. As a Hungarian respondent put it,

> Having the EU in place rather than risking fragmentation or losses like Brexit is certainly good for everyone. And doing the opposite, insisting that everything applies to everyone in the same measure, would slow down integration in a way which would be detrimental […] So I think keeping the EU alive […] is so important that it's worth some sacrifice, it's worth the complication in the legal framework, it's worth accepting some difficulties in our personal lives. (Respondent 6, DK)

This statement highlights both the tensions that DI can create and its underlying opportunities. A discrepancy between his ideological preferences and his government's behaviour coloured this respondent's view: speaking from a federalist perspective, he felt strongly that EU integration should proceed in spite of countries such as his own creating blockages. However, his position clashed with that of another interviewee from the same party, and was unusual amongst Hungarian respondents and respondents from poorer MS who tended to oppose DI insofar as they were concerned it would become a way for EU countries to leave them behind. In fact, pragmatic support was concentrated in richer MS, with only six out of 16 pragmatic supporters coming from poorer MS.

A slightly smaller number of respondents (14) presented normative arguments in favour of DI, suggesting DI is more than a purely pragmatic solution. Like pragmatic support, normative support was also spread across party families, with pro-EU and Eurosceptic respondents in parties ranging from the far left to the far right citing similar reasons to justify

their views. This form of support was also evenly spread across countries, with seven supporters coming from richer MS and seven from poorer ones.

Normative support appeared primarily in discussions of sovereignty DI. Some respondents praised its ability to protect national diversity, a point made clearly by an Austrian respondent who stated that 'a more flexible Europe […] is more in line with reality because we have 27 cultures, 24 languages, different historic backgrounds' (Respondent 33, OVP). For others, this type of DI offered an opportunity to allow for democratic self-rule. Thus, a far-left Danish respondent stressed that 'this flexibility should be there' because 'you shouldn't impose rules on countries where there is no majority in their Parliament to go that way' (Respondent 12, EL), while a centre-right Romanian interviewee argued that flexibility was useful because

> the governments and politicians of every member state should represent their citizens because those citizens […] elected that party on their agenda and objectives […] If those objectives are not hand in hand with all EU rules, and they need to represent more the needs of their particular citizens, then it's fair to respect that (Respondent 1, PNL)

In general, however, our respondents' support for DI was, for the most part, conditional and rather cautious. Twelve respondents, for example, acknowledged that sovereignty and capacity DI and enhanced cooperation could have negative unintended consequences, including the creation of an uneven playing field, opportunities for free-riding, the establishment of divisions between insiders and outsiders, disintegration, and even threats to national democracies. For several respondents, it was also clear that they accepted DI because it was inevitable, rather than because it was an ideal solution.[3] This response from a German interviewee summarises this type of argument most clearly:

> One always has to differentiate between what in theory would be the best for the European Union and what in practice is […] the only possible way. In theory I would say the best […] would be a fully integrated European Union […] But the reality […] for the time

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[3] This view is corroborated by the fact that when we asked respondents what reforms they foresaw for the EU, none of them spontaneously indicated DI as a preferred outcome.

being, does not really allow for such a scenario to be a realistic
scenario. (Respondent 15, SPD)

The risks associated with DI and its perception as a second-best solution led most respondents to view it as an instrument which should be used with caution, and within clearly established guidelines relating to the EU's fundamental principles. For example, actors frequently refrained from supporting DI in all areas, considering that one should evaluate whether DI was appropriate in a certain area of policy and take decisions on a case-by-case basis. Areas such as those pertaining to the single market and fundamental values were frequently identified as those that should remain exempt from all forms of DI. Presenting positions in line with the rules for enhanced cooperation enshrined in the Treaties, they also stressed that the views of outsiders should be heard before establishing an enhanced cooperation, as this would ensure that all MS' views were given consideration. In short, while in the absence of alternatives pragmatism frequently prevailed, it was normatively delimited.

Summing up, a little over half of our respondents expressed a mainly positive view of DI, even though for many it was a second-best solution rather than an ideal one. Pragmatically, respondents tended to see DI as a way for European integration to proceed in spite of heterogeneity of preferences and capabilities. However, respondents also brought up normative arguments to support it, confirming that DI is more than just a pragmatic solution. In particular, several respondents considered that sovereignty DI made it possible to respond to the democratic wishes of EU peoples and reflect the reality of the EU as a union of diverse MS. Whereas we could not detect any significant ideological or country trends in normative support, pragmatic support appeared mainly among pro-EU actors in richer MS, with respondents from poorer countries being generally less favourable to DI.

Opponents

Similar to supporters of DI, the 16 opponents also brought forward both pragmatic and normative arguments against DI. These respondents rarely differentiated between sovereignty and capacity forms of DI, suggesting they considered both to have similar effects.

Pragmatic reasons to reject DI were mentioned by seven respondents, who worried mainly that DI in any form would be inefficient and end up weakening EU action. With the exception of a Portuguese respondent, pragmatic arguments against DI came from respondents from countries with experience of DI. These respondents tended to draw upon

their country's own experience with DI to explain why they found it problematic. Two Romanian respondents, for example, worried about DI's negative effects on the single market, with one of them highlighting that his country's exclusion from Schengen hindered its functioning because it meant that 'physical borders still exist, and you need to spend time for your cargos to be checked and so on' (Respondent 18, UDMR).

Pragmatic concerns were frequently underpinned by normative considerations, mentioned by 15 respondents. Strong drivers of opposition were concerns with the negative effects of DI on solidarity (mentioned by 9 respondents), political equality (mentioned by 15 respondents) and the EU's unity (mentioned by 13 respondents).

As far as solidarity is concerned, respondents stressed that DI created space for free-riding, thus limiting solidarity and burden-sharing. One respondent from Hungary, for example, thought that sovereignty DI gave MS the opportunity to 'opt-out on their duties with regards to the rights of citizens in economic or social issues' (Respondent 5, DK), while another from Romania was concerned that both capacity and sovereignty DI risked deepening divisions and harm the cohesion of the EU project (Respondent 25, PLUS). While one may have expected arguments about solidarity to appear especially amongst left-wing parties, this was not the case. Arguments about solidarity also figured in our interviews with far-right Jobbik, and with the Romanian centrist party PLUS, suggesting that MS membership has played a role in influencing actors' assessments of DI. In fact, six out of the nine respondents who worried about solidarity came from poorer MS, suggesting the need for solidarity was felt most acutely there.

As regards political equality, nearly all opponents (15) worried that DI, whether dictated by sovereignty or capacity concerns, might create different tiers of membership or lead to domination of some MS by others. On the first point, most respondents worried that DI created different rights and obligations, potentially leading to the emergence of class A and class B EU citizens. A Romanian respondent, for example, expressed concerns that DI created further divisions between EU citizens, stressing his country's (capacity-driven) exclusion from the Schengen area was 'somehow dividing Europe into first-class and second-class' (Respondent 18, UDMR). In a similar vein, and revealing the close link between concerns about inequality and fears of disintegration, a Hungarian respondent argued that his concern was that by allowing some to go forward,

The others fall behind. […] By admitting that there are two groups, the core group and not so core group, we lose the opportunity to get closer and closer and therefore I think it's jeopardising the whole idea. (Respondent 4, MSZP)

Like concerns about solidarity, these worries were concentrated in poorer and newer MS: only three respondents from Austria, Germany and Denmark worried DI might create different tiers of membership, with the remaining 12 respondents coming from Greece, Hungary, Portugal, and Romania. In both cases, the discrepancy can be imputed to the fact that respondents from poorer countries were concerned they would be the losers in the process, as this had repeatedly been their experience. A Romanian respondent, for example, viewed DI as form of discrimination to the detriment of poorer MS (Respondent 31, PNL). To support this claim, he brought forward the example of migrant workers from Romania and Bulgaria, stressing that

A lot of Romanians went abroad […] to work in the agricultural sector for wealthy countries […] They are not benefiting in a concrete manner of the possibility to freely move in all the EU Member States as Schengen citizens, but when it was necessary for someone to pick up the crops […] citizens from Bulgaria and Romania went abroad and exposed themselves to work for the agriculture of other EU Member States.

Tying together concerns about equality and solidarity, the quote shows that for the respondent, citizens in poorer MS did not have the same rights as those in richer MS, but also, that the richer MS were reaping the benefits of integration without sharing them equally. Thus, he problematised the position of poorer MS, highlighting their perceived inferior status. While the respondent above came from a centre-right party, similar arguments were brought forward by respondents in party families ranging from the far right to the far left, highlighting once again the importance of country belonging for the assessment of DI.

Concerns about equality emerged also with regard to DI creating domination and were equally spread across party families. A far-left respondent from Germany, for example, expressed scepticism about enhanced cooperation, viewing it as 'an instrument of the more powerful big states' to 'introduce institutions and then get them for everyone' (Respondent 10, LINKE). Likewise, Danish respondents were frequently sceptical of their own opt-outs,

considering that they led to a situation where, as one respondent put it, 'we have no control. We just have to follow the rules that are being negotiated by the other member states' (Respondent 13, V). As was the case above for respondents from poorer MS, the main concern was being the losers of these processes. Specifically, they worried that DI, even in temporary capacity form, might create opportunities to exclude them from participating in policies on a long-term basis and based on arbitrary criteria. For example, Romanian respondents from PLUS and PNL stressed how their accession to Schengen had been halted based on strictly political, rather than objective criteria, while a Greek respondent reported a similar issue, arguing that

> For Greece, opting out historically, traditionally has been presented
> not as a matter of choice, but as a matter of punishment, being forced
> to be left out, rather than choosing to. And this is the case for all the
> South, I suppose. (Respondent 23, ND)

Finally, concerns about DI's potentially negative implications for the EU's unity also featured prominently as a reason for normative opposition and were mentioned by 13 respondents of different ideological leanings, but mainly from poorer countries. A Romanian respondent defined it as a '*faux ami*' which would 'dilute the whole idea of European identity and European integration to the point where it will break into pieces' (Respondent 25, PLUS), while a Hungarian respondent saw it as 'the first step in the direction of a weakening of the European Union or the European Union falling apart' (Respondent 8, Jobbik). A Danish respondent echoed these concerns, arguing that

> My fear is that we are ending up having a two-speed European Union
> where some members have a lot of opt-outs […] while other countries
> are fully integrated in the European Union. And my fear is […] that
> the distance between these two kinds of member countries is growing
> so big that in the end we can no longer see a common ground […] and
> we will see a break-up of the European Union. (Respondent 32, RV)

Just as supporters of DI acknowledged its limitations, so most opponents of DI accepted that it could be potentially useful in certain circumstances. Related arguments mirrored closely those brought forward by supporters of DI concerning DI's pragmatic usefulness and its normative advantages, leading some of them to see it as a 'necessary evil' (Respondent 13, Denmark, V) which they could accept if no viable alternative was available. Not unlike

supporters, their reluctant acceptance of DI appeared to be motivated by the view that in the absence of other options, DI may be a means to multiple normatively desirable ends, such as further integration or the accommodation of the democratic will of national peoples. As such, while generally against it, they were willing to consider it on a case-by-case basis.

This section has shown that for a substantial number of our respondents DI is an unwelcome development in European integration. Whereas partisanship did not seem to have a significant influence on opposing DI, their country's wealth and experience of DI clearly informed these respondents' critical views. Pragmatically, respondents from countries with experience of DI in particular questioned its effectiveness. Normatively, respondents in poorer countries were particularly worried about being left out of the process of integration against their will, as this had already been their experience. Indeed, as Schimmelfennig (2014) has noted, even though most DI at the point of accession is exemptive and meant to support MS with capacity issues, poorer countries tend to be more subject to discriminatory DI. Respondents from wealthier countries were generally less averse to DI, although some of them noted that it created domination (see Adler-Nissen 2011) or worried it might lead to disintegration. In short, these respondents highlighted DI's deeply political nature as a process that creates winners and losers.

Conclusion

While a rich literature on political parties and the EU exists, limited attention has so far been given to how these actors assess DI, and which factors shape their views. This paper has sought to address this gap by drawing on the analysis of 35 semi-structured interviews with political party actors in seven EU MS. Our findings show that DI proved to be a divisive form of integration for our respondents, who were almost evenly divided between supporters and opponents. For supporters, DI appeared as a form of integration that facilitated integration when moving together was not possible, while offering a way to include and recognise the diversity and heterogeneous preferences of European MS and their citizens. Their support for DI, however, was conditional, and for most it represented a second-best solution. Opponents of DI, while acknowledging that it could be helpful in certain circumstances, viewed it as a threat to the EU's efficacy and as a threat to key principles of solidarity, equality, and unity. As such, DI appeared as a deeply political process generating both pragmatic and normative support and opposition.

Our analysis also identified two dimensions affecting their views on DI: namely, the wealth of the MS and prior experience of DI. Indeed, most respondents who opposed DI had experience of it, and came primarily from poorer countries in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe. These opponents expressed real concerns that DI might negatively affect their position within the Union, resulting in them being left outside the core of European integration against their will. Conversely, much like support for the EU does not overlap with the traditional left-right cleavage, support for DI did not overlap with general support of parties for the EU, or with their positions on the left/right political spectrum. This can be viewed as a reflection of the fact that DI can serve different purposes, depending on whether it is driven by capacity or by sovereignty, and that it likewise can have different (perceived) effects, such as the creation of second-class citizens or free-riding. These different purposes and effects interact more with national background than they do with party politics.

Our findings speak well to recent research on political parties and DI, and on public opinion and DI. Concerning the former, they confirm Leruth et al.'s (2020) finding that party family does not seem to influence significantly views on DI and corroborate de Blok and de Vries' (2020) assertion that EU positioning and positioning on DI do not necessarily correlate. Unlike de Blok and de Vries, however, we do not find convincing evidence that left/right positioning matters. While this may be down to our small sample, recent research reports concerning the positions of government and opposition parties on DI (InDivEU., n.d.) also frequently note that positions between government and opposition parties do not vary significantly, confirming our view that country belonging may be more relevant than party ideology. Finally, in line with Leuffen, Schuessler and Gomez Diaz's findings on citizens' views on DI (2020), we also find that macro-regions seem to matter because of the relevance of sociotropic concerns to the assessment of DI: respondents from richer MS in the North were generally more accepting of DI, while those from the East and South were more concerned about its potentially discriminatory implications.

These findings suggest the need for some caution when contemplating the use of DI. As we have shown, respondents in different countries perceived DI's effects very differently depending on whether they thought they were on the winning or losing side. Because DI is a deeply political process with winners and losers and different (perceived) effects on different countries, it is unlikely to be equally welcomed by all MS and may prove to be more divisive than uniform integration. Therefore, while it may appear as pragmatically appealing, it is also

necessary to acknowledge that there is a risk that it may result in increasing conflict and distrust based on the perception that some gain and others lose from it.

Our findings pave the way for future research on DI. First, they suggest the need to pay more attention to which factors shape party positions on DI. While this article has made a first step in this direction by identifying MS wealth and experience of DI as factors that affect party positions on DI, the comparatively small number of interviewees and interpretive nature of the research caution against generalisation. Further confirmatory research could test whether political parties in richer MS are consistently more positive about DI than those in poorer ones, and to what extent parties from MS with experience of DI tend to be less favourable to it. Research of this type may also provide additional cues concerning how political parties resolve the dilemmas that DI raises for them. As we have noted, supporters and opponents alike were frequently torn between their preferences and the options available to them, and were reluctant to approve or reject DI unconditionally. Analysing their views further may help us understand when and why they take a more principled approach, and when they opt for pragmatism instead.

Second, reading our findings jointly with those of existing research on citizens' views on DI (Leuffen et al 2020) suggests that there is some congruence between voters and parties on questions on DI, insofar as both voters and parties in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe appear to be more sceptical about it than those in Northern Europe. Future research may test the relationship between parties' views and public opinion further, as it has so far remained understudied (for an exception, see de Blok and de Vries 2020).

Finally, our research invites a focus on questions of design of DI, since an intelligent design may be able to respond to some of the concerns raised by both its supporters and its opponents. Questions of design in DI have remained remarkably understudied (for exceptions, see Authors 2021, Heermann & Leuffen, 2020), whilst being key to its acceptance. We hope that the findings of this research can feed into this agenda by highlighting the critical areas of this contentious form of integration.

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