

Is differentiated integration democratic? Taking stock of the views of political party actors

Differentiated integration has become an important feature of the European integration process, but are there potential democratic pitfalls that come with some EU member states pursuing closer cooperation than others? Sandra Kröger, Marta Lorimer and Richard Bellamy present findings from a new study assessing the views of political party actors in seven EU member states.

Differentiated integration is frequently approached as a pragmatic way of accommodating political and economic [differences](#) among EU member states. By allowing some member states to go further with integration while others stay behind, differentiated integration makes it possible for European integration to proceed even when not all member states want to join a policy, or when some of them are unable to do so.

While it already existed in the early days of the EU, this approach [has become](#) an increasingly prominent aspect of European integration. The Eurozone, Schengen, and the recently created European Public Prosecutor's Office are among the most familiar examples and have been welcome as ways for the EU to respond to growing heterogeneity of preferences and abilities.

However, scholars have questioned the democratic legitimacy of differentiated integration. They have suggested that it may harm the principle of political equality and [generate domination](#). Domination [entails](#) the capacity of an agent or agency to arbitrarily impose or influence another agent(s) or agency(s) to do their will, without having to consider the reasons and interests of the dominated.

Differentiated integration and democracy

In a [recent study](#) we investigate the democratic credentials of differentiated integration. Drawing on interviews with political party actors in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Portugal and Romania, we address two questions: do political party actors think differentiated integration creates domination, and how do they consider its dominating potential might be mitigated?

We consider that there are several ways in which differentiated integration might harm political equality. *Sovereignty differentiated integration*, which allows member states to opt out of unwanted integration, for example, may lead to a member state still being affected by an EU policy they have no say in determining.

Capacity differentiated integration, which exempts a member state from joining a policy because they are unable to comply with its demands, can lead to a member state being excluded from a policy against its will.

Finally, *enhanced cooperation*, a form of differentiated integration which allows a 'coalition of the willing' of at least nine member states to integrate further, may generate domination if it is used to bypass the objections of those who do not think it appropriate for EU integration to proceed in a certain area.

The views of political party actors

Our empirical findings paint a mixed picture of political parties' assessment of domination in differentiated integration. Whereas most respondents thought it did not create domination, several worried that it could become a source of arbitrary exclusion.

Different forms of differentiated integration posed different issues. For example, most thought that sovereignty differentiated integration and enhanced cooperation created few problems. Our interviewees highlighted that these forms of differentiation could accommodate the diverse wishes and needs of member states and their citizens. They also considered that they had the advantage of facilitating integration when some member states did not want to integrate further. As one Portuguese interviewee put it, 'it's perfectly acceptable that some countries don't want to go further in integration, but that decision cannot block [...] the others that want to go further.'

However, some worried that undemocratic governments could use sovereignty differentiated integration to justify violations of the Rule of Law. As a result, they insisted that certain core areas of law should be mandatory. Others were concerned that enhanced cooperation would end up 'forcing' everyone to join policies they did not want to be involved in or create a two-tier Europe in which some member states would have more rights and power than others.

Our interviewees were generally more critical of capacity differentiated integration. Political actors from Southern and Central and Eastern Europe were most concerned that this form of differentiated integration could be used to exclude them from policies they may have wanted to join. As one respondent from Greece put it, he worried that differentiated integration would result in his country being 'forced to be left out'. Only a few respondents viewed capacity differentiated integration as a bulwark against domination and as a way to facilitate the integration of poorer member states.

Making differentiated integration work

To address these issues, our interviewees thought that it was important that differentiated policies remain open for all to join on the basis of transparent and achievable criteria. They supported the fact that in the Council all members are consulted but only member states taking part in a policy are given the right to vote.

However, they thought that even in differentiated policy areas, it was important that all MEPs be able to vote in the European Parliament because they represent all EU citizens, and not just citizens in specific member states. As one Danish interviewee put it, 'there is a difference between the Council and the Parliament. The Council is where the countries represent themselves [...] In the European Parliament, I don't argue that Denmark wants this, or Denmark wants that, so I think we should have one Parliament for the whole of Europe.'

What do our findings mean for differentiated integration going forward? First, they suggest that because differentiated integration is perceived to have dominating potential, attention should be paid to mitigating that risk. Second, they indicate some elements of design that could help address domination. Specifically, many actors thought that differentiated policies should remain open to all and subject to clear and transparent criteria for accession; be voted for (as is currently the case) by the European Parliament in full but only by affected member states in the Council; and be subject of genuinely inclusive consultation and voting processes to ensure that they remain non-dominating.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in the [Swiss Political Science Review](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
