

We in Europe? How European integration divides the Europeans¹

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For a long time, European integration has not been an issue that voters inherently care about. In recent decades, however, the issue has become salient, or “politicized” (e.g., Hooghe and Marks 2009). Today questions of European integration are of much greater importance to voters in general. Elections can be won and lost on European issues. The British withdrawal from the European Union illustrates that questions of European integration can be highly controversial, dividing whole societies into supporters and opponents of European integration. In this project, we explore the extent to which European integration is not only an issue on which people have different attitudes *politically*, but also the extent to which this issue causes *social* divides. Specifically, we explore to what extent the question of European integration motivates hostility at the personal level. We show that European integration has become an issue based on which people define in-group and out-group, where they reserve sympathy and trust for like-minded citizens while discriminating against the camp with different attitudes on European integration. In a joint project at the DFG-funded Collaborative Research Center (Sonderforschungsbereich) 884 at the University of Mannheim (Hahm, Hilpert and König 2021), we explore the question whether people distinguish between people who share the same attitude on European integration (“us”) and people who have different attitudes (“them”) based on a representative survey of the adult populations of 25 member states of the European Union (EU).

Three key findings of our project can be summarized as follows: **First**, European integration is not only an issue on which people have different opinions, but also something that leads them to form personal sympathies and antipathies and that is relevant for camp-building and in-group/out-group discrimination. **Second**, this conflict is shown to be carried by both sides, that is by people opposed to European integration, who have lost from the advances that European integration has already made, but also by people who support European integration, who have profited from the integration steps made thus far. Integration-winners are even shown to be more willing to discriminate against integration-losers than vice versa. **Third**, this conflict does not soften with higher education: people with higher education often feel even more intensely about European integration and are more willing to discriminate against the other camp. Together, these findings pose important question about the dialogue between opponents and supporters of European integration. In particular, proponents of European integration need to engage in further self-reflection regarding how to respond to the challenge of Eurosceptics.

These findings were obtained by implementing a survey experimental design in an EU-wide online survey that invited responses from 29,827 adults in 25 EU member states, with on average 1193 respondents per country. (We did not recruit respondents in Cyprus, Luxembourg, and Malta for reasons of cost-efficiency). The online survey was conducted around the European Parliament election in May 2019 (Hahm, Hilpert

¹ This talk derives from joint work (Hahm, Hilpert and König 2021) conducted in a collaborative research project funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

and König 2021). We let people play so-called dictator games (Forsythe et al. 1994). The rules are as follows: First, we give our respondents an initial endowment of play money, that is 10 “tokens”. We then tell respondents that they can share these tokens with another, fictitious person, the characteristics of whom are summarized in a short table. In order to estimate the effect of personal characteristics of a (fictitious) person on sympathy and antipathy (and thus on the allocation of tokens) for that person, the person’s social characteristics and the political viewpoints are randomly varied. We randomized social characteristics, or dimensions, including age, gender, class and religion, but also their attitudes on European integration. On each dimension, the fictitious person is classified as a member of the in-group or out-group from the respondent’s perspective, based on whether the fictitious person shares the respondent’s age, gender, class, or religious affiliation. We also classify the fictitious person as in-group or out-group depending on whether that person’s attitudes on European integration are similar to or different from the respondent’s attitudes. We captured the respondent’s attitudes on European integration through a question that asks for their level of EU attachment. The scale ranges from 1 (low attachment) to 5 (high attachment). Similarly, the fictitious person was randomly assigned to “feel that he or she is a citizen of the EU” or “feel that he or she is not a citizen of the EU”. Respondents with low EU attachment are more likely to identify with a person who states that s/he does not feel as an EU citizen, while respondents with high EU attachment are more likely to identify with someone who does. The general expectation is that people are willing to share more resources if the fictitious person is similar to themselves and less tokens if the person is dissimilar. Personal dislike is expressed in reducing the number of tokens. Different dimensions can be of different importance for judging similarity and dissimilarity, and thus might or might not motivate differences in the allocation of tokens. For example, when people do not care much about European integration, there is little reason for them to feel antipathy towards a person who articulates a different opinion than they do.

Figure 1 shows some first results. “In-Group” here refers to a setting where the fictitious person is similar to the respondent on all dimensions considered, including age, gender, class, religion, and attitudes on European integration (this is referred to in the figure as “EU attitudes”). When a person shares the respondent’s characteristics, respondents allocate 4.06 tokens on average. (To simplify the presentation, estimates of statistical uncertainty are largely omitted from this presentation.) When the fictitious person differs from the respondent on important dimensions, this can motivate differences in the allocation of tokens. When the fictitious person is similar to the respondent in all respects but has an attitude concerning European integration that is different from the respondent, respondents allocate only 3.62 tokens. This constitutes an average difference of 0.44 tokens. (Due to estimation uncertainty, our best estimate for this difference, that is the 95% confidence interval, is somewhere between 0.50 tokens and 0.38 tokens.) In other words, respondents subtract 10.8% of the tokens upon learning that another person has a different attitude on European integration. To assess the substantive meaning of this difference, the effect of EU attitudes can be compared to the effect of class or religion. Consider class first: When a person is similar to the respondent in all respects but has a different social class, respondents allocate 3.89 tokens on average. This implies a difference of 0.27 tokens, which is substantially smaller than the difference induced by EU attitudes. When a person is similar to the respondent in all respects but has a different religion, respondents allocate 3.57 tokens on average. This implies a difference of 0.49 tokens, which is slightly higher than the

estimate for discrimination based on EU attitudes. (Note, however, that the estimate still falls within the 95% confidence interval for the estimated effect of EU attitudes.) Overall, the conclusion here is that different EU attitudes motivate in-group/out-group discrimination at substantively important levels. The discrimination based on EU attitudes is higher than that based on social class and comparable to that of religion. (Age and gender lead to relatively small and unimportant differences which are omitted here for reasons of brevity.) People have different attitudes on the question of European integration. These differences are also a meaningful motivator of in-group/out-group thinking and thus a meaningful marker of societal divides. (While these findings are omitted here for reasons of brevity, this divide can be shown to exist in virtually all of the 25 countries under examination.)

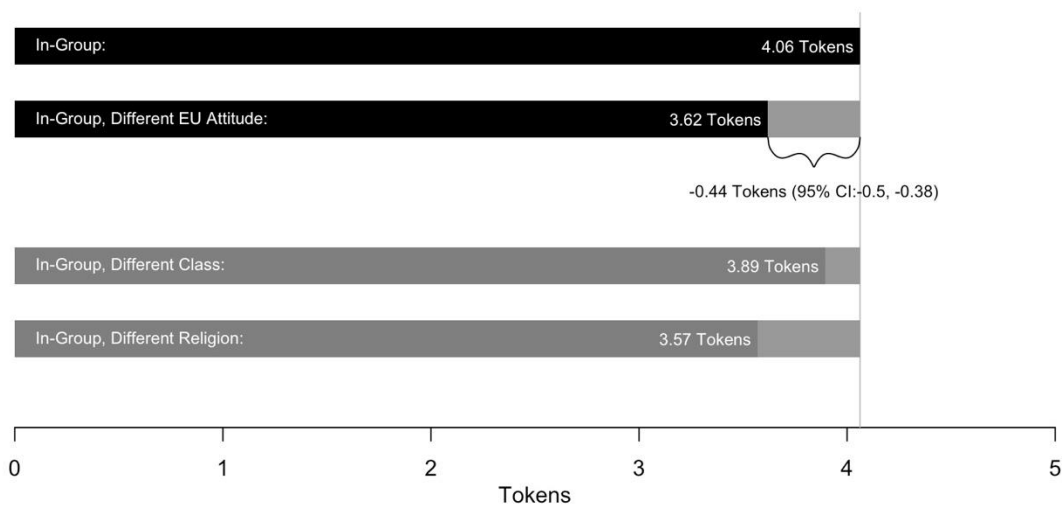


Figure 1: Allocation of tokens depending on EU attitudes. 95% CI refers to the 95% confidence interval.

In the following, I further explore the effect of EU attitudes. While the previous figure has established that differences in EU attitudes motivate in-group/out-group thinking, the subsequent question is whether such societal divisions are one-sided or two-sided. One might expect that it is primarily opponents to European integration who feel antipathy towards the camp of supporters of European integration rather than vice versa. It is the opponents of European integration who experience frustrations from subsequent treaty revisions pursuing an “ever closer union”. By contrast, the supporters of European integration, who have benefited from the integration steps already taken, have relatively less reason to show animosities towards people not sharing their opinion. Counter to such expectations, Figure 2 shows that both sides, that is both opponents and supporters of European integration, engage in in-group/out-group discrimination. Opponents of European integration allocate 3.53 tokens on average to a person that is similar in all respects, including the attitude on European integration. When that person has a different EU attitude, however, they allocate only 3.08 tokens. This means a difference between 0.45 tokens (12.7%). In comparison, supporters of European integration allocate 4.34 tokens on average to a person that is similar in all respects, including the attitude on European integration. When that person has a different EU attitude, however, they allocate only 3.63 tokens. This means a difference between 0.70 tokens (16.1%). In summary, not only do both opponents and supporters of European integration show discriminatory behavior against the respective out-

group; also, it is the supporters of European integration who show higher levels of discrimination against the out-group, both in absolute and in relative terms. In sum, opponents and supporters of European integration form distinct camps that are characterized by substantial levels of hostility between each other. Opponents show dislike towards supporters of European integration and vice versa.

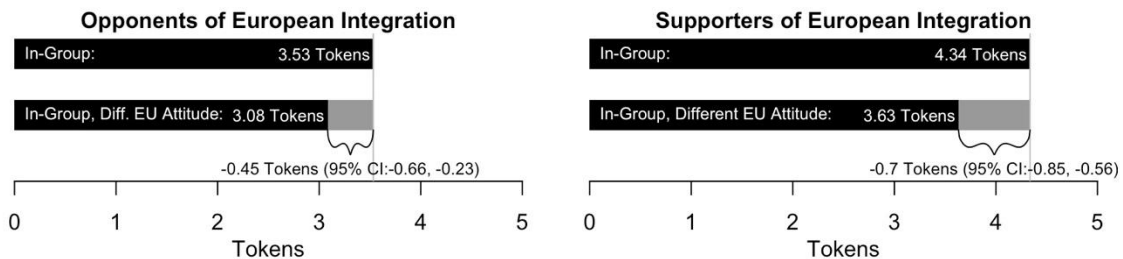


Figure 2: Allocation of tokens depending on EU attitudes, distinguishing between opponents and supporters of European integration. 95% CI refers to the 95% confidence interval.

Does the level of discrimination depend on the level of education of our respondents? One reasonable expectation is that more educated respondents are less prone to discrimination against others. Higher education is often considered to convey democratic norms, such as the toleration of different political standpoints. From this perspective, one would expect that highly educated respondents are less willing to discriminate against other people based on their EU attitudes.

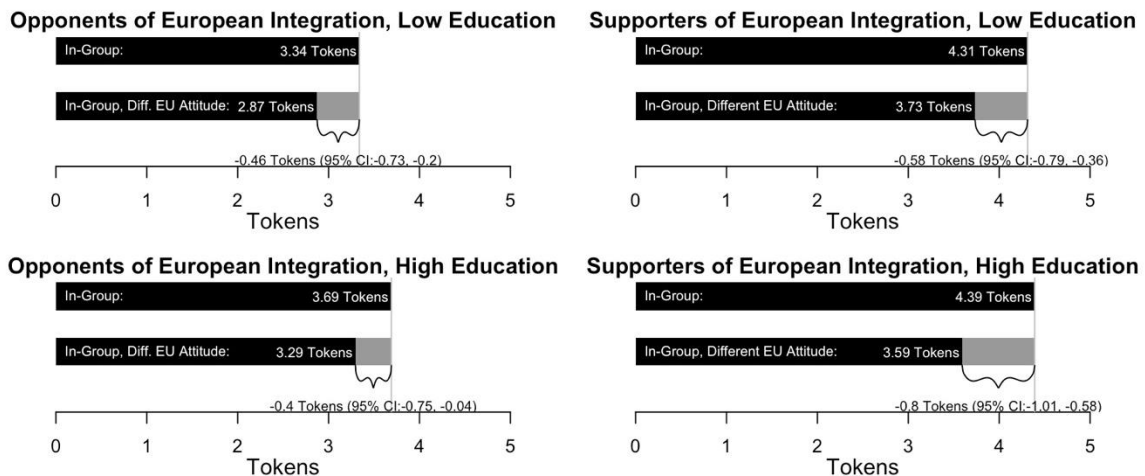


Figure 3: Allocation of tokens depending on EU attitudes, distinguishing between opponents and supporters of European integration, and between low and high education. 95% CI refers to the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 3 shows that there is little evidence to support this claim. In this figure, I adopt the distinction between opponents and supporters of European integration. Also, to distinguish low from high education, I distinguish between respondents without university education from people with such education. For these different groups, we can again examine the allocation of tokens and how it is affected by differences in attitudes

on European integration. Opponents of European integration with low education subtract 0.46 tokens, or 13.8%, when another person has a different attitude. Opponents of European integration with high education show slightly less discriminatory behavior, subtracting 0.40 tokens, or 10.8%, compared to a person that is similar on all dimensions considered. Supporters of European integration with low education subtract 0.58 tokens, or 13.5%, when another person has different EU attitudes. Finally, supporters of European integration with high education subtract 0.80 tokens, or 18.2%, upon learning that another person has a different attitude on European integration. Overall, this does not produce definite evidence that education moderates the level of discrimination against people with different political standpoints. Among supporters of European integration, higher education is associated with more discriminatory behavior rather than less.

In summary, the evidence presented here demonstrates that European integration is not only an issue on which people have different attitudes. European integration also causes camp-building and personal hostility, constituting not only a political, but also a social divide. **First**, our data shows that respondents are willing to discriminate against people with different attitudes on European integration. The level of discrimination is higher than discrimination based on class differences and comparable to the religious divide. **Second**, the division between opponents and supporters of European integration is carried by both sides. Even though opponents of European integration feel the frustration of a decade-long process of European integration, supporters of the European integration show even higher levels of discrimination, both in absolute and relative terms. **Third**, discrimination is not necessarily moderated by the respondents' level of education. While education is often considered important for conveying tolerance of different political viewpoints, there is little evidence that in-group/out-group building is reduced among the highly educated. Overall, these findings suggest that European integration is a cause of social divisions that run right through European societies.

These findings also have important implications for current debates on institutional reform in the European Union. The success of Eurosceptic parties all over the continent reflects the fact that proponents of European integration have failed to convince considerable segments of the domestic electorates. This failure calls for more dialogue in order to understand and address the concerns of opponents of the EU. Rather than the willingness to engage in dialogue, however, the findings here suggest that supporters of European integration show high levels of dislike and discrimination against people with different attitudes. This dislike translates into a lower allocation of tokens to people who oppose European integration. While the experimental design aims at the identification of causal effects at the price of a highly artificial setting, the analogy to financial transfers to groups and regions "left behind" by European integration is suggestive here. As recent years have exposed a variety of global challenges calling for supranational answers, proponents of European integration need to reconsider their stance if they want to construct stable domestic majorities. From the perspective of the study here, recent advances such as the Corona Recovery Fund represent important strides forward. In the future, the proponents of European integration need to think harder how the benefits of European integration can be shared more equally, including with groups who do not perceive benefits so far.

References:

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