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Citizen Support for a European Defense Union: An International Conjoint Experiment on Security Cooperation in Europe

RESEARCH NOTE

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Even in the face of rising security threats, European regional security cooperation is fraught. The issue strikes at the heart of national sovereignty that citizens and governments can be jealous to preserve. Political support for European security integration is arguably sensitive not only to financial and sovereignty costs, but also to specific design choices—its scope and level of military commitments, its governance and sources of financing. To explore these issues, we carried out a conjoint experiment in five Western European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain) in November 2022 focused on public support for alternative designs of European defense union. The results show that these Western European publics are most supportive of policy packages requiring EU-level governance, joint procurement of military equipment, and repurposing of existing national expenditure as the preferred form of financing. Citizens in different Western European countries have generally aligned preferences regarding such security cooperation. The results suggest that European citizens support creating joint institutions and policies that substantially pool sovereignty even in the security realm—provided such pooling stays within a range of particular policy designs.

Incluso ante las crecientes amenazas a la seguridad, la cooperación europea en materia de seguridad regional es tensa. Esta cuestión supone un golpe importante contra la soberanía nacional, que los ciudadanos y los Gobiernos pueden estar celosos de preservar. Podría decirse que el apoyo político a la integración europea en materia de seguridad no solo es sensible a los costes financieros y de soberanía, sino también a las opciones de diseño específicas: su alcance y nivel de compromisos militares, su gobernanza y sus fuentes de financiación. Con el fin de estudiar estas cuestiones, en noviembre de 2022, llevamos a cabo un experimento conjunto en cinco países de Europa Occidental (Francia, Alemania, Italia, Países Bajos y España) centrado en el apoyo público a los diseños alternativos de la Unión Europea de defensa. Los resultados muestran que estos ciudadanos de Europa Occidental son más partidarios de los paquetes de políticas que requieren una gobernanza a nivel de la UE y de la adquisición conjunta de equipos militares, así como de la reorientación del gasto nacional existente como forma preferida de financiación. Los ciudadanos de los diferentes países de Europa Occidental tienen preferencias generalmente alineadas con respecto a dicha cooperación en materia de seguridad. Los resultados sugieren que los ciudadanos europeos apoyan la creación de instituciones y políticas conjuntas que compartan sustancialmente la soberanía, incluso en el ámbito de la seguridad, siempre que dicha puesta en común se mantenga dentro de una serie de diseños de políticas particulares.

Même face à une augmentation des menaces de sécurité, la coopération régionale européenne en matière de sécurité s'avère tendue. La question touche au cœur de la souveraineté nationale que les citoyens et gouvernements peuvent souhaiter jalousement préserver. Le soutien politique à l'intégration européenne sur le plan de la sécurité est sans doute fonction des coûts financiers et des coûts pour la souveraineté, mais aussi de choix de conception spécifiques : sa portée et son niveau d'engagement militaire, sa gouvernance et ses sources de financement. Pour analyser ces questions, nous avons mené une expérience de sondage conjointe dans cinq pays d'Europe occidentale (France, Allemagne, Italie, Pays-Bas, Espagne) en novembre 2022 concernant le soutien public aux conceptions alternatives d'union de défense européenne. D'après les résultats, ces publics d'Europe occidentale soutiennent davantage des ensembles de mesures nécessitant une gouvernance à l'échelle de l'UE, une acquisition conjointe d'équipements militaires et une réorientation des dépenses nationales existantes comme mode de financement privilégié. Les citoyens des différents pays d'Europe occidentale présentent généralement des préférences semblables concernant une telle coopération de sécurité. Les résultats suggèrent que les citoyens européens sont favorables à la création d'institutions et de politiques conjointes qui mettent largement en commun la souveraineté, même dans le domaine de la sécurité, à condition toutefois que cette mise en commun se cantonne au cadre de certaines conceptions de politique.

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Introduction

Member states of the European Union (EU) have long discussed how to cooperate on military security. This has generated intergovernmental forums to enact security decisions (Hofmann 2013) and the building of EU-level capacities of some defense organizations and a mutual-defense clause, yielding a meaningful EU Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Yet, any creation of EU capacities to adopt actual core state powers, including coercive force, has remained very limited (Kelemen and McNamara 2022). Indeed, the EU's role in defense remains largely subordinated to individual member states and to bilateral or multilateral cooperation initiatives like NATO.

This might well be changing with recent geostrategic shifts, including the US's hegemonic decline, China's geopolitical rise, and Russia's revanchism (Tocci 2017). Most salient have been Trump-era US foreign policy priorities calling into question US security commitments to NATO and European security and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Such geopolitics have sparked stepped-up calls for more European defense cooperation, but also opened up divisions about security goals and national sovereignty. The result is that political possibilities surrounding EU security cooperation are in flux, making the form and degree of cooperation fundamentally unclear.

Political debate on such possibilities of EU security cooperation involves elite and expert interactions, but also finds expression and is rooted in citizen attitudes about EU security cooperation. Public opinions in democratic settings can impel and constrain policy development in the military, perhaps particularly in times of crisis (Tomz 2007). In any event, understanding such opinions, including the impact of different policy designs on public support (or opposition), clarifies the legitimacy of Europe's military-related integration (Wagner 2005).

Unfortunately, existing survey research has supported contrasting, even inconsistent, conclusions about support for such EU security cooperation. On the one hand, many studies, mostly based on observational rather than experimental research, suggest that significant majorities of Europeans support deeper EU security cooperation (Schilde et al. 2019; Moland 2023; Hoffman and de Vries 2024). On the other hand, other studies have complicated this picture. Some have found that national strategic cultures and favored defense missions of citizens constrain their support for European security cooperation (Meyer 2011; Irondelle et al. 2015). Others have shown that support for EU security policy is conditional on the presence of real or perceived crises where the EU is presented as under threat (De Vreese and Kandyla 2009; Graf 2020; Mader et al. 2024). Still others have found that scare campaigns about EU military capabilities can also spur Euroscepticism (e.g., Stoica and Voina 2023) that might militate against deeper regional defense cooperation.

A more important limitation of existing studies is that they tend not to explore policy details of EU defense cooperation, even though experts and policymakers prominently debate policy designs not captured by the broad security realm or mission. A few exceptions have considered opinion differences across broad policy elements, such as common foreign policy versus a European army (Peters 2014; cf. Moland 2023). But these categories of integration are themselves too broad. Actual proposals on security and defense cooperation vary substantially in scope and level, form of governance, and sources of financing. Outside the defense realm, public opinion studies have developed experimental tools to understand how publics might view distinct policy designs (Bechtel and Scheve 2014; Hahm and Konig 2019; Schäfer, Treib, and Schlipphak 2023), including EU policy designs (Beetsma et al. 2021; Burgoon et al. 2022; Nicoli et al. 2023; Bremer et al. 2024). However, to date very little experimental public opinion research has explored European defense cooperation. In short, opinion studies focused on EU security cooperation have hitherto said little about how publics judge varying EU-level design features, while opinion studies suited to studying such policy-design judgments have hitherto not considered the EU security realm.

To address this gap, this research note clarifies which types of European security cooperation citizens prefer. It does so using an original randomized conjoint experiment on samples of individuals from French, German, Italian, Dutch, and Spanish populations fielded in November 2022. In each sample, we administered a repeated conjoint experiment exploring support for different defense-union designs—including spending amount; source of funding; possibility of opt-outs; decision-making rules; and preference for an EU pact building military capacities of national member states or strengthening an EU-level military form. Such different policy dimensions are randomly combined to form policy packages that respondents judge, allowing us to gauge the causal link between specific policy features of a potential EU defense union, on the one hand, and respondents' support for such policy features (or their combination), on the other.

Revealing such causal links clarifies as an inductive-empirical contribution what Europeans want from EU security cooperation in times of turbulent geopolitics. Our results show that sample publics supported full-throated EU-level security cooperation. They proved most supportive of EU security cooperation involving higher levels of ambition, joint EU-level governance, joint procurement, and progressive taxation for financing. The results also show generally converging preferences on the actual design of such policy in the surveyed countries—suggesting that a compromise policy may be politically feasible. Such results align with previous work suggesting European citizens are willing to support joint defense institutions (De Vreese and Kandyla 2009; Graf 2020). This may apply especially in periods of heightened risk, such that crises like the Ukraine war and the wavering US security umbrella open up wavering windows of opportunity to deepen EU-level defense union.

We develop this research in four steps. Section 2 discusses the key features of potential defense-union designs. Section 3 details our conjoint experiment. Section 4 presents overall and country-specific results, and Section 5 briefly concludes, clarifying the main lessons and limitations of the experiment.

The Multidimensional Policy Debate on a European Defense Union

While the European Union does not have a supranational army or large defense sector, it has made substantial advances in the last decade. Rather than a single, coherent EU-level policy, European defense initiatives remain fragmented across programs, covering multiple dimensions and mechanisms of collective action. This dispersion means that the preferences for alternative designs of a potential European defense union are particularly important to clarifying the politics of regional international security integration.

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Among the many dimensions of alternative EU-level designs, six loom large in public and expert debate in recent years.

A first design issue in debates on EU security cooperation concerns enhancing national forces on the one hand and developing EU-level supranational forces on the other. While some member states established ad-hoc, intergovernmental military units usable for EU and NATO defense; these remain fully under intergovernmental control. And joint European capabilities have included European Battlegroups, assembled from voluntary national contributions but under EU control (through the Council) in case of emergency. The EU has discussed whether to reform these structures to commit member states to the allocation of domestic forces to European Battlegroup formations. The March 2022 launching of the "European Strategic Compass" introduced new European-level capabilities, proposing construction of genuine EU-level military force, named *Rapid Deployment Capacity* (EEAS 2022), and expanding the size and powers of EU military headquarters. While such initiatives expand EU-level capacities, most still aim to consolidate national forces, like the European Peace Facility's financing of national weapons restocking.

A second important design issue concerns how to finance EU defense cooperation. The EU has several options in this regard, including repurposing of funds in the context of overarching EU budgeting negotiations. But such reshuffling may be insufficient to permanently finance an expansion of EU support for existing national assets or a proper EU-level military force, no matter how limited in size. Hence, many have called on the EU to establish a fund, involving new tax financing, to further joint defense initiatives, parallel to the Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF) (Palacio et al. 2022).

Third, decision-making procedures constitute crucial elements of contention about the design and use of supranational military assets. Under the current EU constitution (simultaneously intergovernmental, confederal, *and* federal, depending on the policy field at hand), the majority of foreign policy and defense decisions require, at the political level, unanimity of member states in the Council. While unanimity protects member states' interests, it exposes common policies to potential scuttling by certain member states, compromising the efficiency and timeliness of EU-level decisions (Flers et al. 2011). Such concerns have led to calls for relaxing unanimity rules (Koenig 2022), such as allowing subgroups of member states to act by using Art. 44 or initiating majority-rule voting on some military issues (e.g., procurement).

A fourth element of debate among policymakers concerns whether certain opt-outs should be allowed with respect to particular EU security policy actions. Opt-outs have a long history in EU policy design, both at the constitutional level (e.g., Schengen, the euro area, or Foreign and Security Policy) and for specific policies. In the EU defense realm, opt-outs have been critical. For instance, Denmark had for many years a nominal opt-out from CSDP, though this was ended by referendum in June 2022. More extensive EU military forces can be expected to involve more opt-outs, such as contributions on an ad hoc basis, particularly from countries with neutrality as cornerstone of their foreign policy.

A fifth element of debate is whether the EU should engage in joint purchases of armaments. The European Commission has pursued two parallel avenues, covering both "negative" and "positive" integration on procurement (Hoeffler 2019). The former ensuring that free-and-fair competition rules apply to national defense procurement to create a genuinely European defense market and industrial base. But the Commission has also strategically invested in narrowing the gap between different national industries by focusing on R&D and technical standards relevant to high-value, advanced, or strategic defense technologies. For instance, the "Collaborative Procurement of Ammunition" project acts as a pilot for EU procurement outside traditional R&D domains, and represents genuine, though controversial, movement toward joint procurement (Nicoli and Beetsma 2024).

Finally, a major issue concerns the potential size of any EU-level (or EU-supported) armed formation. The current debate on EU armed forces discusses a range of options proposed by different actors, all falling well short of a typical nation-state's army. Among more ambitious alternatives are proposals for a proper European "rapid reaction force," currently labeled the Crisis Response Operation Core, or CROC, to include up to 60,000 troops on a nonpermanent basis. Whatever the geostrategic value-added of such a force, this counts as ambitious relative to the *status quo ante*.

Empirical Strategy

Public preferences for these various and debated design features of the EU defense union are *ex ante* uncertain, making inductive empirical study of such opinions worthwhile. To explore such support, we carried out an original conjoint survey experiment that allows us to assess support for multidimensional defense policy, identifying the specific causal impact of certain features on support for a given policy package as a whole. The EU defense policy packages judged by respondents are characterized by particular values on various design dimensions. Critical to this (or any) setup is finding a balance between fidelity to actual policy debates and feasibility of survey tasks for respondents. We find such balance by focusing on a limited number of dimensions representing simplified options discussed in actual policy debates but in terms that survey respondents can easily understand (see Vandenbroucke et al. 2018; Beetsma et al. 2021). This provides leverage to experimentally explore support for disparate design elements more fully than single-item survey questions [in our experiment, we test nearly 200 possible] defense union designs[1]).

Simplifying a conjoint design still leaves out some design issues entirely from analysis or introducing them as "fixed" characteristics in the experiment's introductory text. An example of the latter is the relationship between EU-level defense and NATO, where modeling options in the experimental conjoint would substantively complicate the design while contributing little to the realism of the experiment. Hence, we specify in the introductory text that any EU defense scheme would complement existing NATO cooperation. Similarly, we do not randomly vary the presence or absence of mutual defense clauses, since these are covered both by NATO Art. 5 and by the EU's solidarity clause. The full text of the introductory framing, in different languages, is presented in online appendix A1. Support for such features—unlike those presented as varying design dimensions—can only be surmised observationally on the basis of the average level of support across all packages.

The dimensions of the conjoint experiment. The choice dimensions of European defense policy design on which our study focuses are sixfold *scope and level*, *financing*, *governance*, *opt-outs*, *joint procurement*, and *size*. Table 1 provides descriptions

[1]Given an effective n of 22,500 and 192 packages, each package is on average seen about 117 times.

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Table 1. The design dimensions of the conjoint experiment on EU defense union

Dimensional questions	Attributes/levels:
Program level: **What is the goal of the security pact?**	Jointly finance the improvement of the national armed forces of the member states, each separately; Put together some parts of national armed forces, into a novel European army.
Financing: **How is the security pact financed?**	By increasing taxes by 0.5 percent, for everyone in the EU; By increasing taxes by 1 percent, only for the rich in the EU; By increasing EU public debt, to be repaid in the future; By reallocating national spending on national armed forces.
Governance: **How are decisions on common security taken?**	All countries must agree, i.e., one country can block any decision on its own; A majority of countries must agree: no country can block a decision on its own; Both the majority of countries and a majority of members of the European Parliament must agree.
Opt-outs: **Is it possible to opt out from certain decisions?**	No: all countries must participate if this is the common decision; Yes: a country can always refuse to participate if it so wishes.
Joint purchases: **Are there joint purchases as part of the security pact?**	Yes: the EU countries procure and jointly purchase common military equipment; No: every country procures and purchases military equipment on its own.
Size: **What is the size of the security pact?**	Enough to support a small unit: about 5,000 servicemen and their equipment; Enough to support a large force: about 50.000 servicemen and their equipment.

of each dimension and alternative option shown (randomly) to respondents in our study. These dimensions and alternative values per dimension exist in real debate and are presented as features for all policy packages that respondents are asked to judge. The rationale for each dimension and their values deserves some explanation and justification.

First, we consider a *scope-and-level dimension*, either EU-level instruments or instead national instruments. We show respondents packages containing these two alternatives: either constituting a new *European* military force or co-financing the improvement and expansion of *national* military forces. These alternatives do not reproduce the details of the policy debate but rather simplify such debate into two "ideal-typical" alternatives to explore which orientation respondents prefer. The two ideal-typical alternatives are different balances between the establishment of supranational capabilities and support for bettering and coordinating national capabilities.

Second, we model a broadly worded *opt-out dimension*, focused on whether a country has the right to opt out from specific decisions within the proposed program's framework. This dimension contains two alternatives: Countries are allowed to opt out from specific common decisions, or countries are not allowed to opt out and must follow the common framework each time a decision is taken.

Third, we consider a *size dimension* to test support for differing amounts of troops and materiel of the proposed program. The 2022 European Strategic Compass, the EU's official strategy released to setup the bases of a common European intervention force under the European Commission, calls for a common force of 5000 troops and their equipment, either in a package prioritizing an EU-level force or national ones under the scope-and-level dimension. This rapid reaction force, indicated as a goal in 1999, was formally launched as a Permanent Structured Cooperation, and it is, at the time of writing, still in development. When deployed, it should include up to 60,000 troops on a non-permanent basis.

Fourth, we consider a *governance dimension*, capturing preferences over modes of governance and decision-making. When modeling governance options, particular care is to be given to striking a balance between respondents' comprehension, fidelity to the public debate, and responsiveness to the different understandings about who should decide. So we assign to a given package to be judged one of three simplified modes of governance representing the key ways the EU works, as modeled by theorists: a pure intergovernmental governance mode requiring the unanimous consent of states to take a decision, a confederal model requiring a majority of the member states to take a decision, and a federal model requiring both a majority of states and a majority in the European Parliament.

Fifth, we consider preferences toward a *joint procurement dimension*. We simplify this complex issue by focusing on the fundamental principle of joint procurement, since other dimensions already capture other aspects of policy (for instance, size, financing, and governance) that are relevant to procurement, as well as other military matters. Our focus, hence, is on two alternatives: one including joint procurement and one leaving procurement to countries. The difference in support between these levels speaks directly to the efficiency argument.

Finally, we consider a *financing dimension* of defense-union design. Both EU-level and national capabilities require investment that must and can be financed in different ways. Our experiment considers several ideal-typical sources of financing that can be easily understood while being faithful to political debate (e.g., Beetsma et al. 2021). The alternatives capture both substantive policy and redistributive preferences related to who pays: a progressive 1 percent taxation increase paid by the rich, a 0.5 percent flat taxation increase paid by everyone, resource reallocation from other public spending areas, or increased European-level debt (via Eurobonds) to be paid in the future.

The fielding of the conjoint experiment. We tested preferences with respect to these six dimensions of policy design in a conjoint experiment administered to 750 respondents in each of France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain.[2]

[2]This corresponds to half of the total sample. The other half (750 respondents) are allocated to a energy security experiment with similar characteristics.

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These countries capture variation in West European positions with respect to military-projection capabilities (high for France, moderate for Italy and the Netherlands, and low for Spain and Germany) and net contributor/recipient position toward EU-level financial instruments (France, Germany, and the Netherlands as net contributors, and Italy and Spain as net recipients[3]). These countries also reflect Western and Southern European settings, but not Central-Eastern and Northern member states that play distinct roles in security (e.g., proximity to Russia). Hence, results from our sample may reflect well Western European but not EU-wide attitudes.

IPSOS carried out our survey, drawing a representative sample of individuals using their running opt-in panels for each country. The sampling, while opt-in from this large panel, is recruited through targeted invitations and adjusted using quotas to be representative of population proportions. Hard quotas were used for four main criteria: gender (divided into two categories), education level (divided into three categories), NUTS-1 region, and age (divided into three categories). To generate representative samples for two additional categories—income level (divided into three categories based on actual household income) and profession (divided into ten categories)—IPSOS used "soft quotas," privileging invitations to those falling within the required brackets without requiring a particular percentage to complete surveys. This adjusted opt-in sampling renders survey results broadly representative of the population, with sample weights contained within the 0.7–1.4 range.[4]

The survey's timing potentially shapes attitudes. It was fielded in November 2022, several months after the February 2022 Russian invasion and between Trump presidencies. This likely means that the salience of EU defense issues for Europeans in the sample was higher than at many moments in recent politics. Whether and in what direction that might bias the survey are hard to know. Threats may increase citizen willingness to develop or strengthen measures to promote EU-wide collective security against a palpable security threat (Graf 2020; Mader et al. 2024). But the same threats may foster "rally-around-the-flag" effects militating toward national-level military structures and against EU-level integration that might raise uncertainty about national capacities (Lai and Reiter 2005).

Respondents were first given an introductory text describing the policy and then shown two policy packages side-by-side, each manifesting particular attributes on the six dimensions of policy design. The levels (or attributes) of each dimension were those exactly as worded in Table 1. For each policy package, a level was chosen at random for each dimension, resulting in two randomly generated policy packages displayed side-by-side. Upon seeing two packages at a time, respondents completed three tasks: First, they indicated which of the two packages on the screen they preferred; next, they indicated, separately, their level of support or opposition for each package on a five-point Likert scale (strongly against, somewhat against, neutral, somewhat in favor, strongly in favor).[5] This process was repeated three times, resulting in a total of six packages evaluated in two ways by each respondent. To avoid ordering biases, the order of dimensions was randomized over respondents. But to avoid confusing a respondent, for a given respondent that order remained constant across the three pairings. A screenshot of the survey tasks is provided in online appendix A2.

The analysis of the conjoint experiment. We analyzed the experimental data as a long-form panel dataset, with the unit of observation being the respondent-policy-package (six packages per respondent). Individuals rate six packages and choose between pairs of them independently. To account for within-individual effects, for our baseline analyses we cluster the standard error by respondent. The experimental quality of the setup leverages causal inferences about the impact of (hypothetical) policy characteristics on preferences for EU defense union design.

Our analysis considers descriptive patterns of support and opposition to defense cooperation, but the focus is on estimating support for particular policy features of such cooperation and for packages combining particular policy features (both aggregated and per country). While we consider many estimation approaches, our baseline models use OLS estimators with package choice (whether a package has been chosen) as the dependent variable and (experimentally varying) dimension values of a given package as key explanatory variables (see online appendix A3 for model details). This captures the causal effect of hypothetically having (or not) a certain policy feature on package preferences and is a reliable, frequently used method for analyzing conjoint experiments (e.g., Bansak et al. 2023, 5). Baseline models also control for country "fixed" effects.[6] We summarize all the main results by presenting marginal means (MMs) and average marginal component effects (AMCEs): The former estimate average likelihood of choosing a package (for choice measure) or the average level of support (for Likert-scale measure), keeping all else constant; the latter estimates how switching from one attribute to another within the same dimension affects preferences, keeping all else constant. We note the results of many alternative models below, and report them more fully in the tables and figures of online appendix A5.

Results

The results of our analysis can best be summarized in three steps. The first uses descriptive statistics to clarify the level of support for cooperation, averaging across all possible design features. The second step focuses on which policy-design features foster more or less support for defense cooperation, both with respect to a pooled five-country sample and with respect to separate country samples. The third step then considers patterns of support for different packages of cooperation, combinations of such policy-design features, among our pooled and per-country samples. We summarize these key results in several figures, relegating full results and sensitivity and robustness tests to appendices.

See Nicoli et al. (2023) for a discussion. Respondents are randomly allocated to each condition.

[3]Italy is a net recipient of RRF grants and receives a larger share of financial support through European Central Bank asset-purchase programs, making it a net recipient despite being a nominal net-contributor in standard EU budgeting.

[4]Our baseline models are unweighted, but estimates using random iterative sample weights are virtually identical to the baseline with respect to MMs or average component marginal effects for the pooled and per-country samples.

[5]The methods literature is divided on the value of a middle-ground "neutral" option in rating variables for conjoint experiments, but we side with the view that giving respondents the option to express neutrality is valuable, since neutrality can be justified on substantive and ethical grounds.

[6]Controlling for the specific policy features of the alternative package provides additional robustness checks, at a cost of halving the sample. Online appendix, Figure A5.2, shows that doing so leaves the results largely unchanged.

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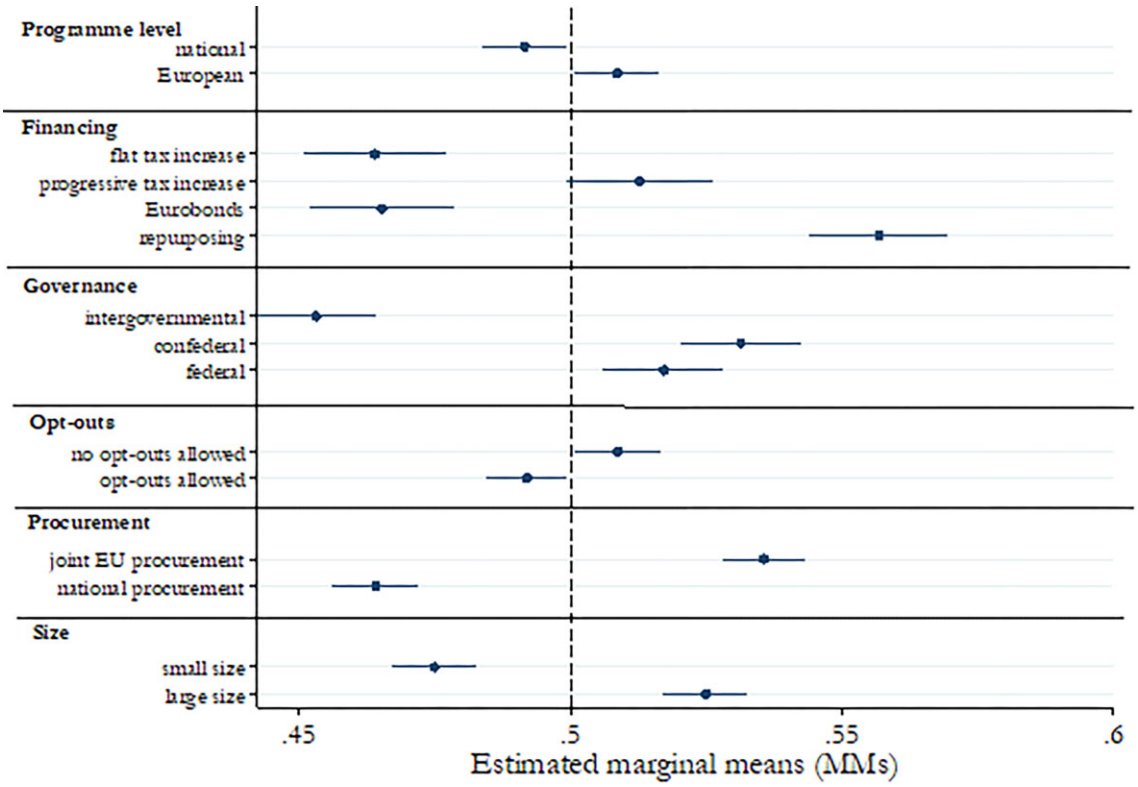

Figure 1. Marginal means (MMs) of dimensions on choice. *Note*: Estimates are plotted with 95 percent confidence intervals. Country fixed effects are omitted in this figure.

Support and Opposition in General

A crucial first step in our analysis involves general attitudes toward defense cooperation among our sample polities—that is, support and opposition to defense cooperation regardless of the specific policy dimensions the experiment varies in characterizing possible cooperation. One way to judge this is to focus on respondents' evaluations of each package (based on the five-point Likert scale from strongly against to strongly in favor) and whether or not a respondent preferred one or another of these packages in the pairing. Of all the packages seen and judged by respondents, approximately 22 percent were evaluated as something respondents were strongly or somewhat against; roughly 37 percent were evaluated as something respondents somewhat or strongly favored; and around 41 percent were judged as something respondents neither favored nor were against (see Figure A4.1 in the online appendix).

Another way to gauge general support or opposition to cooperation is to focus on respondent-specific patterns of support or opposition to the packages judged. We can consider, in particular, the share of respondents rejecting a given number of the six packages they evaluated (Figure A4.2 in the online appendix). The more packages a respondent rejects, the more fundamental his or her opposition is to the idea of a proposed EU security cooperation, regardless of specific policy characteristics. Our data suggest that fundamental opposition among Western European respondents to a defense union was, in November 2022, quite limited. Only 4.3 percent of respondents were against five or six of the six packages they were shown. Conversely, the large majority of respondents were somewhat or strongly in favor of at least three—that is, half—of the packages shown. These findings suggest that, even though 22 percent of the *packages* evaluated are disliked by respondents, few respondents express fundamental opposition to an EU security union. Instead, opposition appears to be qualified and dependent on policy content. Such conditional opposition is unlikely to embolden Eurosceptic politicians, with over 80 percent of respondents being either neutral or in favor of some proposed European security cooperation.[7]

Support or Opposition for Defense Union Alternatives

While the descriptive patterns in our data suggest that respondents in our sample countries tend to favor defense cooperation of some sort, the experiment's most important results concern *which kind* of cooperation receives more or less support. This begins with making sense of how each aspect of policy design commands more or less support. We do so with baseline models estimating the causal effect of the various dimensional attributes on the probability of a package being chosen or rejected, controlling for individual-level patterns with clustered standard errors (by respondent).[8] Figure 1 visually presents the purely experimental, baseline model supporting inferences regarding the effect of a given policy feature. The experiment randomly assigns one specific variant for each dimension, making each indepen-

[7]These results also comport with earlier conjoint studies of support for EU capacities. Respondents display more pro-EU attitudes when confronted with actual policy alternatives, as opposed to questions about broad policy areas. Conjoint experiments may force respondents to reason on policy design, beyond gut reactions on a policy institution, and may allow more precise depiction of prepoliticized policy preferences (Vandenbroucke et al. 2018; Burgoon et al. 2022).

[8]Table A5 in the online appendix provides detailed estimates for the baseline experimental models.

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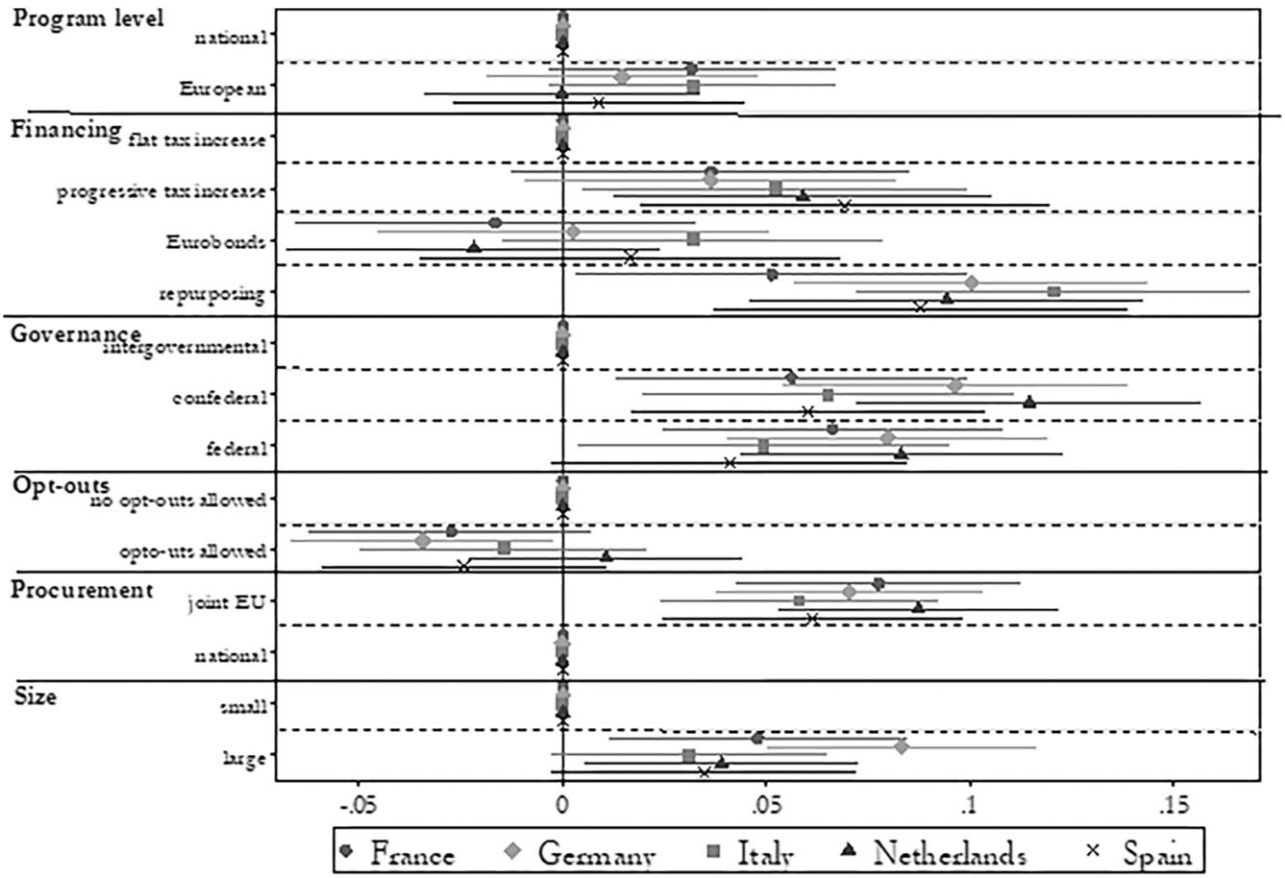

Figure 2. Country-specific policy effects. *Note*: Estimates are plotted with 95 percent confidence intervals. The *x*-axis represents the change in probability of supporting a package having the given dimension-value. Full results are tabulated in online appendix, Table A5.3. Note that country-level results are slightly underpowered, especially for dimensions 1, 2, and 6.

dent from another by construction. Figure 1 reports an MMs estimation of a given dimension value, holding all other dimension values at their means (following Leeper et al. 2020): This clarifies how each dimension contributes to generating support or opposition to European defense cooperation.[9]

As shown in Figure 1, respondents prefer packages that are at the EU level, larger in size, with joint weapons procurement, council-level or even federal governance, and financing provided either by repurposing existing expenditure (hence, moving national expenditure on military matters, or perhaps even directly moving some military units at the EU level) or increasing taxation using a progressive tax increase. Respondents are negative toward country opt-outs, and indifferent about expanding the EU's borrowing capacity, although opinion on Eurobonds varies across countries. Such results are stable, again, across many alternative specifications.[10] Even when we drop half of our observations to directly compare half of the packages against the specific alternative against which each kept package was pitched, results remain largely unchanged, with only one dimension—opt-outs—dropping below conventional thresholds of significance (Figure A5.2 in the online appendix).

These pooled results capture patterns that are broadly consistent across the surveyed European countries. We can see this by running our baseline model on each country-specific sample, 750 respondents per country, and an effective sample of 4,500 assessed packages in each country. Figure 2 summarizes the result, here visualized using AMCEs (rather than MMs) to better see the extent of consistency between countries for each policy dimension. Respondents in all countries tend to prefer larger rather than smaller forces and clearly support repurposing of existing military expenditure, confederal governance, and joint procurement. They also tend to agree in their support for progressive taxation relative to flat-tax increases, although in France and Germany such preferences are statistically insignificant. Italy is the only country to significantly prefer an EU-level instrument over national instruments, while the other countries are not significantly so and can be seen as more indifferent. Similarly, preferences for more debt are strongest in Italy but statistically insignificant even there. Finally, the Netherlands is the only country marginally but statistically insignificantly favoring opt-outs.

The proximity of country-specific treatment effects signals a generalized convergence of preferences between sample polities. However, these differ somewhat in their "base"

[9]Figure A5.1 in the online appendix reports the AMCEs for the same models. The AMCE coefficients can be interpreted as changes in probability of choosing a policy package characterized by the specific attribute *relative to* the baseline alternative, controlling for all other characteristics of a policy package (Hainmueller et al. 2014; Bansak et al. 2023).

[10]Online appendix A5 shows that baseline estimates are insensitive to models where we adjust for random iterative method (rim) weighting and where we explicitly control for characteristics of each opposing pair of policies.

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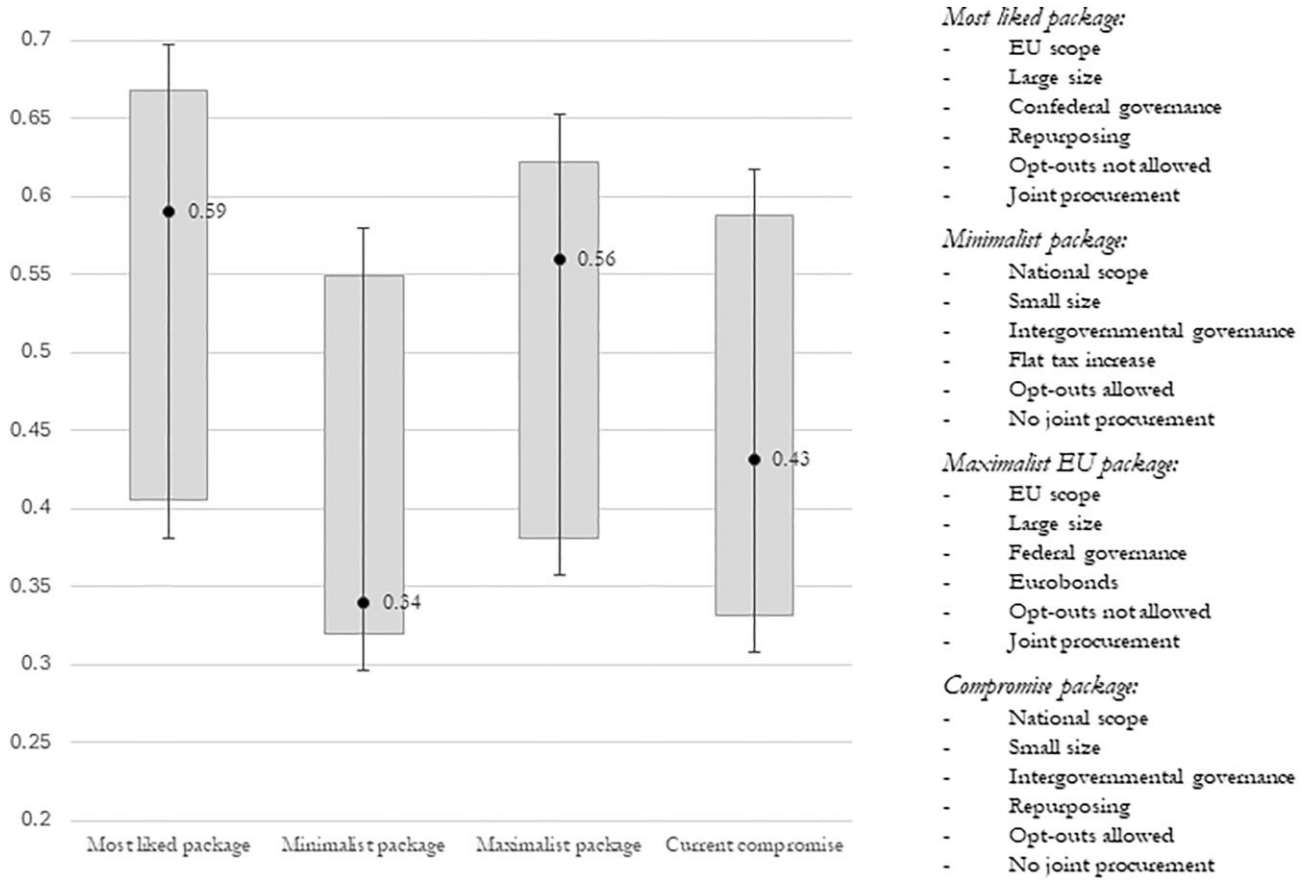

Figure 3. Level of support for selected packages. *Note*: The four plots summarize support for four distinct policy packages among respondents passing the attention check (see online appendix A7). Each plot combines results from three distinct estimates of percent support for a given package: a shaded bar and confidence intervals summarizing upper-end and lower-end estimates based on Likert-scale valuations of each package; and a dot summarizing binary-choice valuations. See text for details.

(dimension-agnostic) level of support for some kind of EU defense union, with more baseline support in France and Spain (regardless of policy design) at about 38 percent, Italy and Germany at about 35 percent, and the Netherlands at about 33 percent.

Support for Specific Policy Combinations

Finally, the survey allows judgment of overall and country-specific support for selected policy *combinations*. Since some 200 differentiated policy combinations are possible, we focus on specific combinations that are politically salient and theoretically interesting. We identify four such packages: (1) the *most-preferred package* overall; (2) a *minimalist package*, entailing the minimal alterations to the pre-2022 setup; (3) a *maximalist package* that would expand EU-level capabilities the most; and (4) a *compromise package* closest to the existing agreement under the EU's Strategic Compass and joint procurement plan agreed to in March 2023.

Figure 3 specifies each of these four packages with respect to their specific policy content and summarizes levels of support for each package. Each of the four plots in Figure 3 summarizes support for each package, based on the pooled five-country sample of respondents passing the attention check (see online appendix A7). Each of the four plots combines results from *three* distinct estimates of percent support for a given package: a shaded bar and confidence intervals summarizing upper-end and lower-end support, made using two estimates both focused on Likert-scale valuations of each package; and a dot summarizing support based on binary-choice valuations. In particular, the bottom of each bar is estimated with a model recoding neutral judgments of a given package as being against that package, with the lower whisker being the low end of this estimate's confidence interval. The top of each bar is estimated with a model treating neutral responses as missing, focusing hence on being in favor of or against a package, the upper whisker being the high end of this estimate's confidence interval. Finally, the dots on the plots for each package represent a third estimate based on the binary-choice measure of support: The probability of each specific package category to be chosen against a random alternative combination.

The support patterns suggest that respondents strongly prefer ambitious EU security cooperation packages over less ambitious ones. The *minimalist* package has a floor of support of 32 percent of respondents and a ceiling of 55 percent (when neutral assessments are excluded), translating into about a 35 percent likelihood of being chosen over the alternatives when we estimate the probability of choice. The *current compromise* has a floor of support of about 33 percent, an upper ceiling of support of about 58 percent, and a 43 percent probability of being chosen vis-à-vis a random

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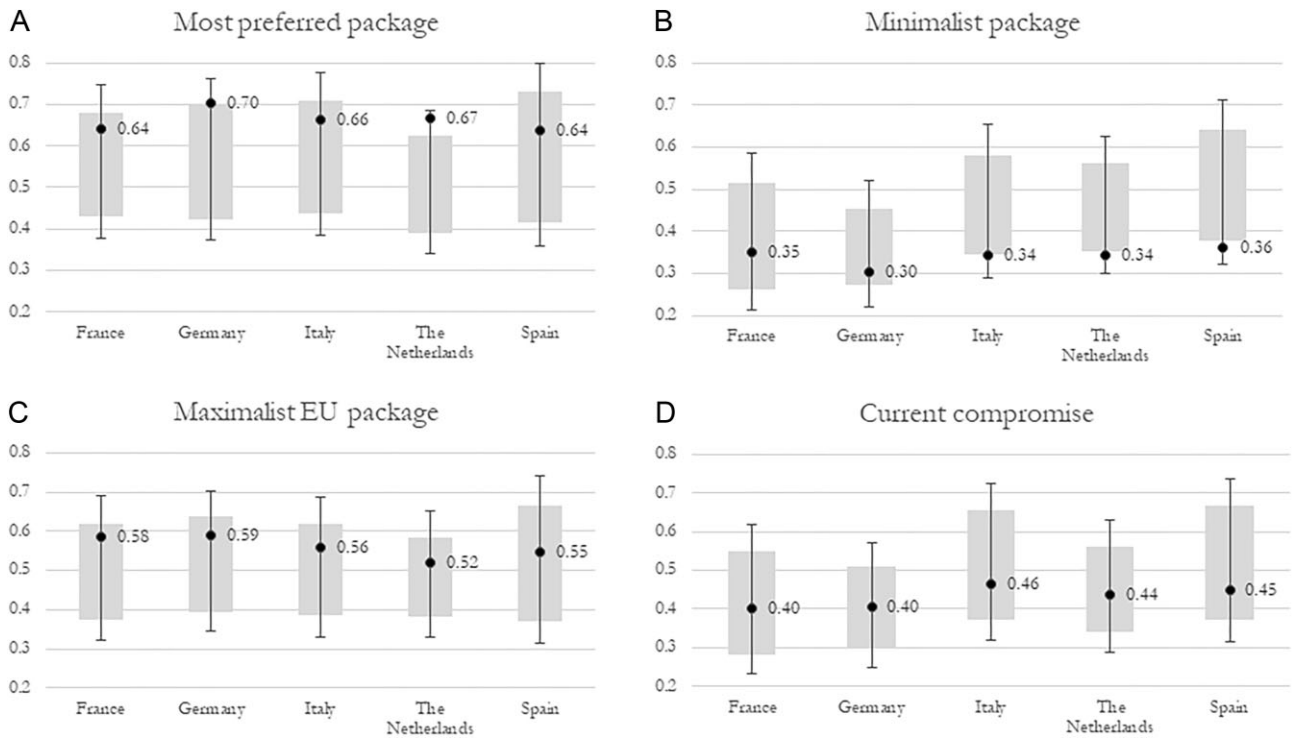

Figure 4. Support and probability of choice for selected packages, by country. *Note*: Each of the twenty plots (five country-specific results for each package category) combines results of three separate models, all captured on the *y*-axis's percent of support (as described in the text).

alternative, while the *maximalist* package has a support floor of 38 percent, a ceiling of 62 percent, and a 55 percent probability of being chosen relative to alternatives. The maximalist EU package performs closely to the *most preferred* one, commanding a 41 percent floor and 66 percent ceiling of support and a 59 percent chance of being chosen against random alternative.

These results are consistent across the five sample countries. Figure 4A–D show the level of acceptance for these packages within each country. All countries display the same generalized pattern of preferences, supporting ambitious packages and being less supportive of minimalist compromises. Across all countries, a broader scope, removal of veto powers, and the widespread use of joint procurement are all policy features that meet public preferences. This said, the Netherlands remains the country least supportive of such an ambitious combination (Figure 4C), with the probability of that choice clearing the 50 percent threshold being statistically insignificant.

Preferred packages by country. Finally, we assess how the preferred packages in each country perform in the other countries. We select these based on the *choice* model, that is, the package most likely to be chosen against alternatives. Germany, Italy, and Spain share the same preferred combination, which is also the most preferred package overall: large size, EU scope, confederal governance, repurposing of existing defense expenditure, no opt-outs, and joint procurement (Figure 5A). As discussed earlier, this package performs well also in the two countries—French and the Netherlands—whose most preferred package is slightly different (Figure 5B and 5C, respectively). The only difference between the Germany's, Italy's and Spain's combination on the one hand, and the French preference on the other (Figure 5B) is that the French respondents have a slightly higher probability of choosing a package with a federal rather than a confederal option. This package, as shown, still performs very well across all countries. Finally, the package that is most likely to be chosen by the Dutch includes national rather than EU scope, confederal governance, and crucially allows for opt-outs (Figure 5C). Still, the only country that displays significantly lower support for this package is France, with support likelihood being 58 percent (compared to 65 percent for its preferred package). These country differences are small, as suggested also in Figures 3 and 4: Countries share similar preferred designs; support or oppose similar solutions to a similar extent; and even when their preferred options are different, differences are not enough to sway respondents from supporting to opposing integration in the field of defense.

Conclusions

Geostrategic threats to Europe—Russian aggression, wavering US security umbrella, and Europe's meager military preparedness—have raised questions of what Europe should and can do to deepen EU security cooperation. Proposals to revamp European defense cooperation have varied widely, some advancing the idea of developing genuine European armed forces, others suggesting pooling of funds to reform national armies. Proposals also vary with respect to governance, scope, financing, solidarity, and opt-outs for member states. Judging by elite policymaker and media discussions, many combinations of such policy elements can be seen as politically viable. However, whether European citizens, the broader public, support such political

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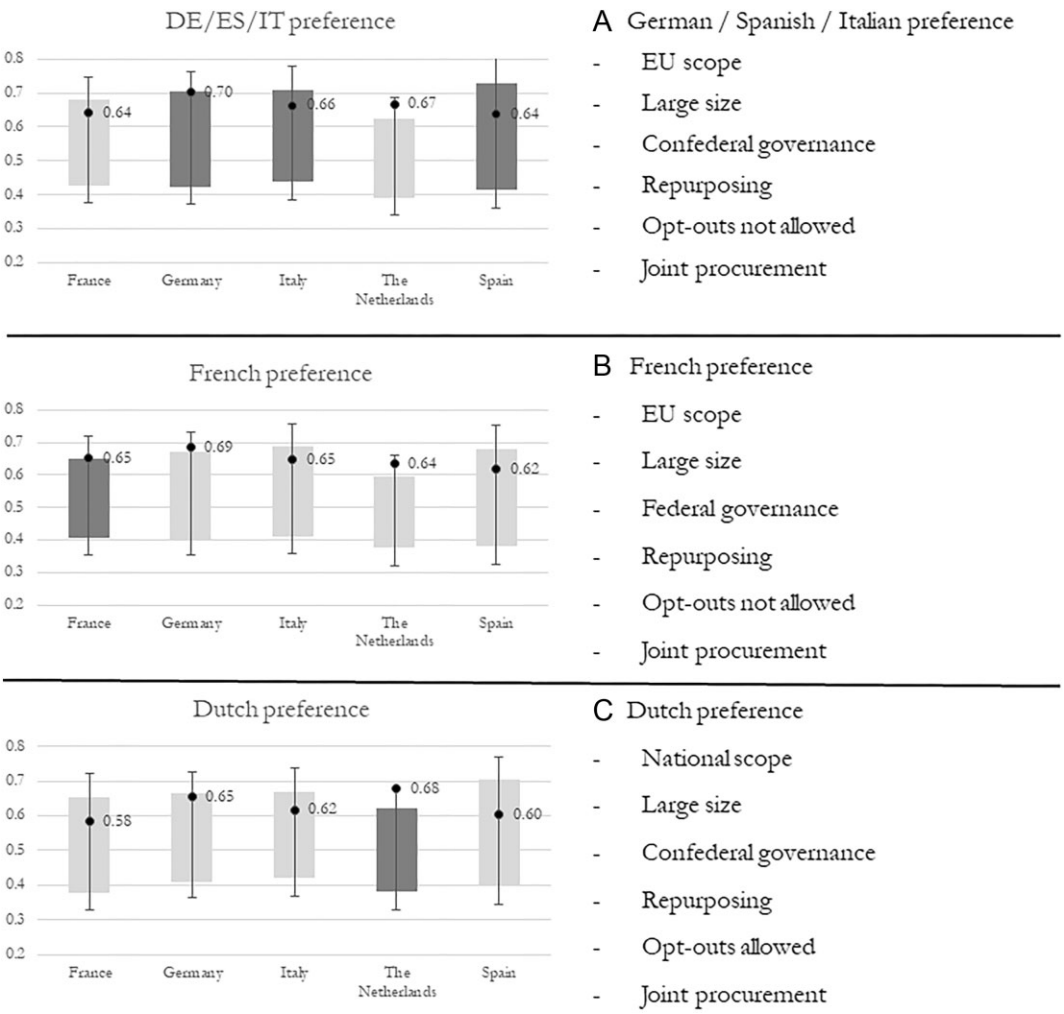

Figure 5. Preferred packages for each country, in all countries. *Note:* Each of the 20 plots (five country-specific results for each package category) combines results of three separate models, all captured on the *y*-axis's percent of support (as described in the text).

possibilities has been harder to read. This research note has tried to better read such public support for EU security cooperation, exploring the political feasibility of different design possibilities among publics on the basis of a preregistered conjoint survey experiment fielded in late 2022 in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain.

The results suggest that creating EU-wide defense union would likely be welcomed by Western Europeans, facilitating expansion of existing CSDP initiatives. Fundamental or principled opposition to a defense union shows up in our data as quite limited, in that fewer than 5 percent of respondents reject two-thirds or more of the proposals they see. Instead, the data suggest that citizen support for defense union is conditional, with respondents being skeptical about unambitious, half-baked solutions that would only marginally change the state of play; indeed, about 20 percent of all designs assessed are disliked by respondents. Most importantly, the results show that our sample of West European respondents preferred more ambitious policy packages at the EU level, inclusive of joint military procurement, without veto rights or opt-outs, and with financed through repurposing of existing national military expenditure or by increasing progressive taxation.

We offer such experimental findings, of course, mindful of several key limitations of the study on which they are based. First, our samples are not ideal to fully clarify political traction for EU security cooperation. We surveyed a modest number of "only" Western European countries, making it unclear whether the patterns reported would hold in, say, Central-Eastern European countries that might be more (or differently) critical of European cooperation. And our sample sizes are modest enough that they yield slightly underpowered country-specific analyses; larger sample sizes in well-designed experimental survey instruments would help more fully identify different country positions.

Second, the survey was fielded when security concerns were high among the population, due particularly to the very visible Ukraine-Russia war. While our study provides evidence that crises open opportunities for EU integration by depowering "constraining dissensus" toward integration, it remains unclear whether such effects would withstand shifts in salience and public mood. But the direction of such possible selection bias might make our experimental results understate support: compared to more recent observational surveys finding support for EU security integration (European Union 2023; Hofmann and de Vries 2024), our

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experiment detects a somewhat lower level of average support, more strongly conditional upon actual policy design.

Third, we acknowledge that the language used to represent some dimensions—especially procurement, but to a lesser extent size too—might be somewhat leading the respondents, as there is a clear advantage in one of the two options. Even though our chosen wording helped keep the treatment conditions simple for respondents, future work will need to test how sensitive these preferences are to different formulations. Furthermore, the introductory text to the conjoint asks respondents to compare and choose different designs, presenting them with hypothetical negotiations as a given, i.e., not offering respondents the opportunity to simply reject the entire policy if they fundamentally disagree with it. This might somewhat underestimate fundamental opposition, nonetheless revealing that even negative attitudes are very often qualified and modulated by specific policy choices.

Fourth, and relatedly, as with most conjoint experiments, our results presume a modicum of deliberative choice-making by publics, with opportunities and time to assess and compare alternatives without being immediately bombarded by politicized arguments. In the real world, policy discussions are shaped by political leaders, parties, and media queues that have been shown to matter in security issues (Alley 2023) and more broadly in EU high politics (Meijers et al. 2025). Hence, it remains to be seen whether the preferences identified here would hold during a heated political campaign or referendum.

These limitations notwithstanding, our results provide the first experimental evidence regarding public support for the construction of alternative European defense designs. They point toward public preferences for more ambitious EU-level action to improve Europe's long-term security.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material is available at *International Studies Quarterly* online.

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