

# Making the Club Stronger: Enlargement and the Legitimacy of International Organizations

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January 11, 2026

## Abstract

The rise of populist nationalism has fueled skepticism about international organizations (IOs), raising concerns about their legitimacy and future viability. Yet despite widespread backlash against multilateralism, many IOs continue to enjoy substantial public support. What explains this resilience? We argue that IO enlargement — whether through admitting new members or integrating existing ones more deeply — can enhance institutional legitimacy under certain conditions: by homogenizing member interests through conditionality and by expanding and reinforcing the in-group under conditions of external threat. We test this general framework in the context of the European Union (EU) using four original survey experiments fielded in Italy, Germany, and Switzerland, focusing on Croatia’s 2023 accession to the Eurozone and Schengen areas. This case constitutes an instance of “broadening of the deepening” that allows us to assess how incremental enlargement shapes citizens’ perceptions of an IO and of new member states. Our results suggest that, far from undermining legitimacy, the expansion of an IO’s constituent systems can improve perceptions of both the organization and the entrant state. Multilateralism can expand, even amid a populist backlash against global governance, under the right conditions.

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# 1 Introduction

International organizations (IOs) today face a profound legitimacy crisis. Although these institutions remain central actors in efforts to address pressing contemporary global challenges—including geopolitical conflict and ongoing trade wars—publics, often cued by political leaders, increasingly question their authority and utility (Tallberg and Zürn, 2019; Dellmuth et al., 2022). Populists and nationalists around the world have cast doubt on the value of multilateral cooperation, openly criticizing and contesting IOs that are foundational to the international order (Copelovitch and Pevehouse, 2019a; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023; Meyerrose and Nooruddin, 2025), and in more extreme cases even withdrawing from them altogether. In Europe, the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union (EU) in 2020, which was fueled by widespread populist attacks against European integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2018), raised concerns over the EU’s ability to sustain its exceptionally high levels of integration and pursue future enlargement.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, the second Trump administration has withdrawn from core international institutions, such as the UN Human Rights Council and the World Health Organization, while openly questioning the value of multilateral cooperation. In his September 2025 speech to the UN General Assembly, Trump bluntly asked: “What is the purpose of the United Nations?”<sup>2</sup>

Yet despite this backlash, global public opinion overall remains surprisingly favorable toward IOs. A 2025 Pew survey finds that respondents across 25 countries hold positive views of the United Nations, including 57% of respondents in the US, which marks a modest but significant increase from 2024.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, a 2025 Eurobarometer poll finds that trust in

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<sup>1</sup>“Judy Asks: Is the EU Ready for Further Enlargement?” *Strategic Europe*, May 4, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2023/05/judy-asks-is-the-eu-ready-for-further-enlargement?lang=en>.

<sup>2</sup>“Trump tells UN in speech that it is ‘not even coming close to living up’ to its potential.” Associated Press, September 23, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-unga-trump-global-feb243ecb979d53317dfb1cad9968038>.

<sup>3</sup>“United Nations seen favorably by many across 25 countries.” Pew Research Center, September 5, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/09/05/united-nations-seen-favorably-by-many-across-25-countries/>.

the EU is at 52%, its highest level since 2007. Support for the EU’s economic and monetary union is even stronger: 74% among EU citizens and 83% among Eurozone residents.<sup>4</sup> What explains these high levels of public support for international organizations in an era dominated by populist, nationalist rhetoric and skepticism toward international integration?

We argue that one understudied answer lies in the ways in which IOs expand their membership. IO expansion—whether through admitting new members or further integrating existing ones—can reshape how citizens perceive an IO and its member states. On the one hand, IO enlargement can generate material and reputational gains by expanding the organization’s ability to provide public goods (Haas, 1964; Keohane, 1984). Broadening participation can also increase input legitimacy and highlight the organization’s continued relevance (Johnson, 2011; Stephen and Zürn, 2019). On the other hand, enlargement can reduce output legitimacy if growing stakeholder diversity increases the risk of gridlock (Konig and Brauning, 2004). Enlargement may also raise identity-based concerns: admitting members perceived as different or of lower quality can diminish the status of the IO and its existing members (Johnson, 2011; Gray, 2013; Davis, 2023; Ferry and O’Brien-Udry, 2024), raise concerns regarding economic or identity-based costs for existing members. Translating the breadth versus depth tradeoff (Downs, Rocke and Barsoom, 1998; Gilligan, 2004; Gray, Lindstädt and Slapin, 2017), which previously has largely focused on how bureaucrats weigh these concerns, to the citizen level raises an important question: under what conditions does enlargement enhance, rather than undermine, public perceptions of institutional legitimacy?

We argue that enlargement can increase institutional legitimacy—or, the degree to which the public believes an IO has the right to rule (Keohane, 2011)—in two ways. First, membership requirements (conditionality) can reassure citizens by homogenizing interests and reducing the procedural and reputational risks associated with enlargement. Second, above and beyond mitigating public backlash, enlargement can even strengthen legitimacy under

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<sup>4</sup>“Trust in European Union at highest since 2007, poll shows.” Reuters, May 28, 2025.  
[https://www.reuters.com/world/trust-european-union-highest-since-2007-poll-shows-2025-05-28/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.reuters.com/world/trust-european-union-highest-since-2007-poll-shows-2025-05-28/?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

conditions of external threat. Research shows that international crises —such as interstate wars or economic uncertainty— make citizens more likely to feel directly affected by IO policies and to view IOs more favorably when they anticipate benefits ([Schlipphak, Meiners and Kiratli, 2022](#)). Enlargement and further integration, by expanding and reinforcing the in-group, can amplify this solidarity effect and strengthen perceptions of IO legitimacy.

We test this framework in the context of the EU. As a highly integrated organization, EU-level processes have tangible and consequential effects for EU citizens; therefore, enlargement should be both highly salient but also deeply contentious. If closely-managed enlargement can improve public perceptions of legitimacy in such a highly integrated context, it is likely to be similarly effective in less consequential IOs. Furthermore, the EU regularly engages in incremental shifts in membership composition. For example, while Croatia first joined the EU in 2013, it did not accede to the Eurozone or Schengen area until 2023. These accessions do not constitute classic cases of IO enlargement, but can rather be thought of as a “broadening of the deepening”: the expansion of an IO’s more highly integrated institutional sub-components to a larger number of existing member states. This setting allows us to isolate how expansion of an IO’s most deeply integrated institutions affects citizens’ attitudes toward both the IO itself, and toward new entrants. We focus on how subtle shifts, rather than full upheavals of membership composition, impact public opinion.

To assess these legitimacy effects, we field four original survey experiments on nationally representative samples of Italian, German, and Swiss citizens. In a pilot survey, fielded in Italy, respondents exposed to information about Croatia’s recent accessions expressed higher perceptions of EU legitimacy, compared to the control group. Perceptions of Croatia, the new member, also improved. At baseline, without priming our theorized mechanisms, the impact of EU enlargement is positive. In additional surveys, fielded in Italy, Germany and Switzerland, we test whether conditionality and external threat — the two mechanisms we posit linking enlargement to increased IO legitimacy — drive these perceptions. Results support both mechanisms.

Our results suggest that, far from fueling a backlash, the expansion of IOs’ constituent systems can bolster rather than undermine public perceptions of institutional legitimacy. These findings contribute to debates on IO institutional design ([Tallberg and Vikberg, 2025](#)) and the future of multilateral cooperation ([Lake, Martin and Risse, 2021](#)). Normatively, these results indicate that both widening and deepening levels of integration between states, in some circumstances, can strengthen public support for ongoing and future integration. By building on research on citizens’ preferences for enlargement ([Hobolt and De Vries, 2016](#)), we show that the process of enlargement itself can shape public opinion in a positive way. Multilateralism can expand, even amid a populist backlash against global governance, under the right conditions.

## 2 IO Legitimacy in an Era of Populism

The rise of populist nationalism has raised pressing questions about the legitimacy of international organizations (IOs). In democracies around the world, populist leaders and movements have framed IOs as unaccountable, overly technocratic, and disconnected from and unresponsive to citizens’ preferences ([Copelovitch and Pevehouse, 2019b](#); [Hooghe, Lenz and Marks, 2019](#); [Pevehouse, 2020](#); [Meyerrose, 2025](#)). This rhetoric has fueled politicization of international institutions and the international system they underpin among domestic publics ([Walter, 2021](#)).

These challenges speak directly to scholarly debates about the basis of IO legitimacy. Legitimacy represents a relevant audience’s beliefs about whether an IO’s authority is exercised appropriately ([Tallberg and Zürn, 2019](#)). As [Buchanan and Keohane \(2006, 407\)](#) state, “the perception of legitimacy matters, because, in a democratic era, multilateral institutions will only thrive if they are viewed as legitimate by democratic publics.” Legitimacy affects whether IOs remain relevant as focal areas for international cooperation ([Morse and Keohane, 2014](#)). Furthermore, IOs that are viewed as legitimate are better able to attract

resources, gain policy support from national legislatures, and secure compliance from their member states (Putnam, 1988; Sommerer and Agné, 2018).

An IO's legitimacy is a function, first, of its institutional features, and rests on two core factors: procedures (input legitimacy) and performance (output legitimacy) (Scharpf, 1999; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2015; Anderson, Bernauer and Kachi, 2019). Procedural features refer to the quality of its governance and decision-making processes (Schmidt, 2020). IOs with a broad range of stakeholders involved in transparent and democratic decision-making are perceived as more legitimate, whereas organizations with biased or undemocratic decision-making lack legitimacy (Johnson, 2011; Stephen and Zürn, 2019). IOs also derive legitimacy from their performance, or their ability to provide public goods and other beneficial policy outputs for their member states (Gabel and Palmer, 1995), regardless of how these outcomes are achieved. An organization perceived to have a positive impact on members' economies, or ones that provide protections in the face of external threats or crises (Yang, 2021; Schlipphak, Meiners and Kiratli, 2022), will be viewed as more legitimate. Because citizens often lack the time and ability to understand the intricacies of global governance, they may rely on elite or media cues to form their legitimacy beliefs (Spilker and Bernauer, 2020; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023).

IO legitimacy also has an identity-based component: the identities of member states shape perceptions of the organization and, in turn, influence the reputations of both new and existing members. The addition of new members alters the composition, identity, and perceived quality of an IO and, by extension, the reputations of its existing members, reshaping the legitimacy of both individual states and the IO as a whole in the eyes of both insiders and outsiders (Gray, 2013; Ferry and O'Brien-Udry, 2024). New entrants send important signals about the standards and values of the group, and thereby influence how the IO is understood. Perceptions of the IO, in turn, can impact the reputation and status of existing member states.

IO membership thus becomes a highly visible form of group affiliation and impacts a

state’s international reputation, or status (Davis, 2023). States value a high status because it confers economic (Gray and Hicks, 2014; Brooks, Cunha and Mosley, 2015), security (Boehmer and Nordstrom, 2004), and psychological benefits (Pratt, 2018; Kelley, 2017; Wolf, 2011), and they are willing to take costly steps – including international organizations – to improve their position relative to others (Dafoe, Renshon and Huth, 2014).

In short, IOs derive legitimacy both from their institutional functions —their procedures and policy outputs— as well as from the identity of their member states. Yet, the legitimacy of institutions and their members is not static. The process of legitimation, whereby the authority of IOs is purposefully justified or challenged, leaves room for strategic actors to affect others’ beliefs. IOs, and their critics, can take discursive or behavioral actions to change the way they are perceived by international audiences. Enlargement, in particular, is a recurring reform and one that, we argue, can affect public perceptions of an IO’s legitimacy.

### 3 Enlargement as a Legitimacy-Shaping Process

Membership composition has long been a central feature of IO institutional design (Koremenos, Lipson and Snidal, 2001). Enlargement entails both supply- and demand-side considerations: the economic and geopolitical interests of both existing and potential members interact with formal accession requirements to determine whether or not enlargement occurs, and debates persist regarding the costs and benefits of admitting additional states into an organization (Downs, Roake and Barsoom, 1996). These dynamics have been particularly well-studied in organizations including the World Trade Organization (Pelc, 2011; Davis and Wilf, 2017), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Kydd, 2001), and, perhaps most prominently, the European Union (Gray, 2009; Schneider, 2009; Kelemen, Menon and Slapin, 2014; Schneider, 2014).

While extensive research has examined elites’ preferences and strategic calculations regarding enlargement, citizens’ perspectives were long considered peripheral to processes of

international integration (Hobolt and De Vries, 2016). Yet growing contestation and backlash against international institutions have recently brought public opinion to the forefront. Scholars have identified a range of economic (Down and Wilson, 2013; Hakhverdian et al., 2013), identity-based (Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Hobolt et al., 2011), and elite cue-taking (Hellström, 2008) factors shaping individual preferences toward international integration more broadly. However, these explanations rely on relatively static individual-level characteristics—such as income or political ideology—and offer less insight into public attitudes toward specific IO policy decisions, including enlargement. With some notable exceptions (Torreblanca, 2008; Boomgaarden et al., 2011; De Vries and Steenbergen, 2013; Hobolt, 2014; Hobolt and Rodon, 2020), far less attention has been paid to whether and how perceptions of IOs and their members can be changed by IO-level processes.

### 3.1 Perceptions of IOs

Enlargement alters the composition of IOs and thus, we argue, has implications for the organization’s input, output, and identity-based legitimacy. On the one hand, functionalist perspectives argue that expansion increases an IO’s capacity to provide public goods through more extensive cooperation (Haas, 1964; Keohane, 1984), thereby improving its output legitimacy. Broadening participation can also increase input legitimacy by incorporating a wider-range of stakeholders in policy decisions, while also highlighting the organization’s continued relevance as a desirable club, particularly if new members are of a high quality (Johnson, 2011; Stephen and Zürn, 2019).

Yet enlargement also entails potential costs. Incorporating additional member states risks increasing heterogeneity of preferences among member states in ways that can hinder consensus and generate policy gridlock (Konig and Brauninger, 2004) and, by extension, make it more difficult for IOs to provide public goods to their members (Olson, 1965; Stone, Slantchev and London, 2008). If new entrants are perceived as lower quality, enlargement may further erode perceptions of IO effectiveness (Johnson, 2011). In other words, IO enlargement



can either increase or decrease an IO’s legitimacy in the eyes of its publics. Translating these tensions – which are often captured by the classic ‘breadth versus depth’ trade-off (Downs, Rocke and Barsoom, 1998; Gilligan, 2004) – from the perspective of bureaucrats to the perspective of citizens implies two competing hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1a:** *Information about the expansion of IOs decreases individuals’ perceptions of IO legitimacy.*

**Hypothesis 1b:** *Information about the expansion of IOs increases individuals’ perceptions of IO legitimacy.*

Yet, we argue that certain conditions make it more likely that enlargement increases IO legitimacy in the eyes of domestic publics. First, scholars have emphasized that the tradeoff is not automatic and organizations have developed institutional solutions to offset the costs of enlargement (Pahre, 1995; Schneider, 2002; Heidbreder, 2014; Kelemen, Menon and Slapin, 2014; Schneider, 2014). Sequential liberalization —admitting new members only if or after they have adopted preferences and institutional structures similar to those of existing members— can offset the risks associated with membership heterogeneity (Downs, Rocke and Barsoom, 1998; Gray, Lindstädt and Slapin, 2017). Enlargement can make it more difficult for states to provide public goods and generate policy output when members’ preferences are too diverse, thereby undermining an IO’s output legitimacy. It also risks reshaping the identity of the institution in ways existing members may view as threatening or undesirable. Institutional design choices, such as membership conditionality or, in some cases, varying policy requirements to allow step-wise integration among both candidate and existing members, thus perform a homogenizing function that mitigates these legitimacy costs associated with enlargement. The publics’ awareness of these homogeneizing factors should increase the likelihood that they view enlargement as legitimizing.

**Hypothesis 2:** *Information about the expansion of IOs and associated conditionality requirements increases individuals’ perceptions of IO legitimacy.*

Second, above and beyond mitigating public backlash, we argue that enlargement can even strengthen IO legitimacy, particularly under conditions of external threat. Research shows that international uncertainty —such as ongoing territorial disputes or exposure to economic uncertainty— make citizens more likely to feel directly affected by IO policies and to view IOs more favorably when they anticipate benefits (Schlipphak, Meiners and Kiratli, 2022). Psychologically, the external threats hypothesis further implies that threats from foreign adversaries should increase cohesion and solidarity (Giles and Evans, 1985). This is consistent with research linking threats from foreign adversaries to increased cohesion and decreased polarization at the domestic level (Mueller, 1970; Oneal and Bryan, 1995). It also fits with work in international relations which finds that the external threat of war increases public support for international security cooperation (Becker et al., 2024). We thus hypothesize that external threats can enhance an IO’s output legitimacy by increasing the salience of IO action and linking institutional performance more directly to their positive impact on citizens’ daily lives.

**Hypothesis 3:** *Information about the expansion of IOs amid a common external threat increases individuals’ perceptions of IO legitimacy.*

## 3.2 Perceptions of New Member States

IO expansion should not only shape perceptions of the organization itself, but also perceptions of the new member states in the eyes of existing members. This identity-based dimension of IOs —the status implications that enlargement entails for both old and new members— remains understudied. In particular, enlargement changes the meaning of the group, which in turn alters perceptions of all its members (Dafoe, Renshon and Huth, 2014). Even when membership requirements are formulated to uphold the quality of the group, new entrants are often aspirational and may benefit from status gains through association with long-standing higher-status states. As such, enlargement can generate a “rising tide” effect that boosts the reputation of newer members by virtue of joining the prestigious in-group

(Gray, 2013; Gray and Hicks, 2014; Brooks, Cunha and Mosley, 2015; Davis, 2023).

These positive perceptions of new members are by no means a given, however. If expanding membership changes the perceived character of the IO, existing members' status may be harmed by comparison to a broader and potentially lower-status pool of states. In this view, admitting states with lower reputations can create a "sinking ships" effect, diluting the average standing of the group and diminishing the status of existing members (Johnson, 2011). Relatedly, these older members may expect that the admission of new members will generate economic or other costs, either through the reallocation of resources to newer member states or through increased immigration inflows due to closer ties to those states. The status-, economic-, or identity-based concerns could, in turn, lead existing members to view new members in an unfavorable light. Similar to Hypotheses 1a and 1b, we therefore articulate competing baseline hypotheses regarding how enlargement affects citizens' perceptions of new member state reputations.

**Hypothesis 4a:** *Information about the expansion of IOs worsens individuals' perceptions of the new entrant.*

**Hypothesis 4b:** *Information about the expansion of IOs improves individuals' perceptions of the new entrant.*

A final implication of our argument is that, like perceptions of IOs, perceptions of new member states should also depend on the conditions of enlargement. Membership requirements—such as political, economic, or institutional conditionality—should make new members look more similar to existing ones, thereby reducing potential status gaps. Likewise, enlargement undertaken amid a shared external threat should strengthen group cohesion (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and foster a sense of common purpose (Giles and Evans, 1985; Brewer, 1999), decreasing concerns about reputational dilution or potential economic or identity-based costs. Thus, the presence of either mechanism—membership conditionality or the presence of a common external threat—should enhance individuals' perceptions of

new members. We articulate two final hypotheses about citizens' views to enlargement states that are similar to hypotheses 2 and 3 above about perceptions of organizations.

**Hypothesis 5:** *Information about the expansion of IOs under conditionality improves respondents' perceptions of the new entrant.*

**Hypothesis 6:** *Information about the expansion of IOs amid a common external threat improves respondents' perceptions of the new entrant.*

In what follows, we test our argument in the context of the European Union (EU). The EU is the most highly integrated IO in the world, exercising authority across a wide range of policy domains. This extensive integration should make EU citizens particularly sensitive to changes in membership composition, as such shifts are more likely to affect their daily lives. Put differently, if citizens are inclined to oppose IO enlargement, they should do so in a context where supranational institutions directly shape domestic policy outcomes and where changes in membership composition carry real economic and distributive consequences. This makes the EU a hard test for our argument that enlargement can improve perceptions of an IO and its member states among domestic publics.

Moreover, enlargement of any IO is a relatively rare event, limiting opportunities to study how shifts in membership affect public attitudes. The EU, however, given its extensive institutional structure, engages more regularly in incremental forms of enlargement, for example by expanding access to deeply integrated subsystems such as the Eurozone and Schengen. These incremental changes allow us to isolate how subtle shifts in membership composition, rather than major accession rounds, shape public perceptions of IO legitimacy.

With this in mind, we briefly outline how these incremental forms of enlargement occur within the EU context. We then turn to our experimental design.

## 4 Broadening of the Deepening in the European Union

The European Union, which was officially created when the Maastricht Treaty was signed in 1993, has strict rules and extensive requirements for accession. Maastricht transformed the former European Community—which was primarily an economic institution—into a more highly integrated IO in which states increased their levels of both economic and political integration in areas including foreign and security policy, justice and home affairs, shared European citizenship, and a common economic monetary union including, eventually, a single currency. Reflecting this increased integration and policy coordination between member states, in 1993 the EU published the *acquis communautaire*, an over 100,000-page document detailing the laws, norms, and regulations in force in EU member states. Today, in order to join the EU, all prospective member states must first adopt and implement the institutions and policies outlined in the *acquis* (Grabbe, 2002).

The *acquis* is intended, at least in part, to prepare states for membership in the Schengen Area and the Eurozone, which are themselves foundational to European integration. The European Single Market is predicated on the free movement of goods, capital, services, and labor. To this end, the Schengen Area was created to eliminate border controls between member states, making it easier for both goods and people to cross national borders (McCormick, 2020). Accession to the EU requires states to implement Schengen. While today all but two of the EU’s twenty-seven member states have implemented Schengen,<sup>5</sup> the two processes are not necessarily concurrent because of additional “Schengen rules” (*Schengen acquis*) that need to be fulfilled. Countries must implement common rules surrounding border control, visa issuance, policy cooperation, and protection of personal data. They then undergo a series of evaluations before additional approvals from existing member states can be granted. Given these requirements, the time between EU accession and Schengen implementation can vary significantly. While in some cases, implementing Schengen occurs only

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<sup>5</sup>The two hold-outs are Cyprus and Ireland. Cyprus is legally required to join Schengen in the future, whereas Ireland has negotiated an opt-out option with the EU.

several years after EU accession,<sup>6</sup> in other cases the gap is much longer. For example, as we discuss below, although Croatia joined the EU 2013, it did not implement Schengen until ten years later; similarly, Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007, and only became full members of the Schengen area in 2025. It is also important to note that Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland are considered part of the Schengen area even though they are not EU members. Thus, Schengen represents a constituent system that requires deeper levels of commitment beyond those that EU accession entails.

The situation with the Eurozone is similar. EU economic policy is broadly encompassed by its Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), which consists of a series of policies designed to facilitate further economic integration among EU member states. Upon EU accession, all member states commit to implementing these policies, and are required to adopt the euro as their currency once they have completed the final stage of the EMU.<sup>7</sup> The economic criteria for Euro adoption, like Schengen, represent a deeper level of integration. Countries must meet the “convergence criteria” set out in Article 140(1) of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union. The economic convergence criteria focus on price stability, public finances, exchange rate stability, and long-term interest rates. Countries must also make legal changes, notably those governing their central bank and monetary issues. To-date, twenty of the twenty-seven EU member states have met the requirements for and joined the Eurozone, with Croatia as the newest member that joined in 2023. Bulgaria, which joined the EU in 2007, became the twenty-first member of the Eurozone in early 2026.

In short, the broadening and deepening of the EU occurs in stages that vary across prospective and current member states. Whenever the EU admits new member states, it expands (broadens); however, additional systems within the EU periodically undergo further enlargement as existing member states become more deeply integrated, for example, by im-

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<sup>6</sup>For example, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, all of which joined the EU in 2004, implemented Schengen in 2007.

<sup>7</sup>Denmark is the exception; it negotiated an opt-out clause with the EU in favor of maintaining its own currency. Technically, all remaining EU members are required to eventually join, though to-date this requirement has not been enforced.

plementing the Schengen agreement and adopting the euro as their domestic currency. This multi-staged expansion of deeper European integration to a larger number of already-existing member states provides the opportunity to disentangle the effects that more incremental changes to the breadth and depth of the EU have on perceptions of EU legitimacy, as well as perceptions of EU member states themselves.

## 5 Research Design and Results

We test the hypotheses outlined in Section 3 using four online survey experiments administered to Italian, German, and Swiss respondents. Survey experiments are ideally suited to determining individual-level responses to changing information and have played an increasing role in both the legitimacy (Bernauer and Gampfer, 2013; Ecker-Ehrhardt, Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2024) and status literatures (Morse and Pratt, 2022; Powers and Renshon, 2023; Ferry and O’Brien-Udry, 2024). As the experimental treatments vary across surveys, we discuss each survey individually and Table 1 outlines the relevant dimensions.

### 5.1 Survey 1: Italy

All four surveys were fielded with Bilendi & Respondi, with the first enumerated between December 8th and 29th, 2023, using a nationally representative sample of Italians, based on age, gender, and region. A total number of 1,302 respondents completed the survey, and 1,104 respondents passed the attention check.

	Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3	Survey 4
Respondent country	Italy	Italy	Switzerland	Germany
Accession into	Schengen/Euro	Schengen	Euro/Schengen	Schengen
Joining member	Croatia	Croatia/Bulgaria	Croatia	Croatia/Bulgaria
Requirements treatment	No	Yes	No	Yes
External threat treatment	No	No	Yes	Yes
Number of respondents passing attention check	1,104	1,374	1,119	3,418
Date fielded	December 2023	March 2025	August 2025	August 2025

Table 1: Overview of surveys

Italy, as a member of both the Eurozone and Schengen area is an ideal case to test our hypotheses. First, it is geographically proximate to EU members, like Croatia, who are integrating more deeply into the EU’s constituent systems.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, it is also a country where historically high support for the EU has waned over time, particularly in the wake of the Eurozone crisis.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the Italian government is currently led by the far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, a politician whose party is characterized by Euroskeptic and anti-immigrants attitudes. As such, Italians may be expected to be somewhat skeptical toward new, less wealthy member states joining the Eurozone and Schengen, potentially posing risks to the stability of the euro and prompting higher levels of migration into Italy. These factors make Italy a case where we should expect Croatia’s accession to the Eurozone and Schengen to be particularly salient and the potential for backlash to be high.

In all our surveys, we provide respondents with information on countries’ accession to either the Eurozone, Schengen or both. In our pilot survey, we focus specifically on information about Croatia’s accession, as, at the time of the survey’s fielding, they were the most recent country to join the Eurozone and Schengen in 2023. Participants in the study were randomly assigned to one of three groups: Eurozone treatment, Schengen treatment, and the control group (see Table 2). The experimental conditions appear as follows:

***Eurozone Treatment:*** “Croatia formally adopted the euro as its currency this year. This means Croatia became the 20th member of the euro zone. Many European Union member states, including Italy, use the euro as their official currency.”

***Schengen Treatment:*** “Croatia joined the Schengen area this year, becoming the 27th member. This means border controls, including passport checks, have been removed for people traveling between Croatia and the other 26 countries in the Schengen area, which includes Italy and most other European Union member states.”

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<sup>8</sup>“Croatian Emigrants in European Countries and Overseas and Their Descendants.” Republic of Croatia Central State Office for Croats Abroad. Accessed August 22, 2024. <https://hrvatiizvanrh.gov.hr/croats-abroad/croatian-emigrants-in-european-countries-and-overseas-and-their-descendants/2464>.

<sup>9</sup>Balfour, Rosa, and Lorenzo Robustelli. 2019. “Why Did Italy Fall Out of Love With Europe?” Istituto Affari Internazionali, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/why-did-italy-fall-out-love-europe>.



Both experimental treatments are designed to expose participants to information that Croatia joined an IO of which Italy is an existing member. We used two different treatments to account for potential differential effects between Eurozone membership and Schengen membership on individuals' attitudes, given that the expansion of the Schengen area is strongly associated with immigration, a highly salient and politicized issue across Europe. Control group participants received no relevant information; instead, in all four surveys, they were exposed to a statement of a similar length regarding diet.

It is of course possible that respondents were already aware of Croatia joining the Eurozone and Schengen before the survey was fielded. We do not see this as a strong threat to inference, however. For respondents who were aware beforehand, the treatments are likely to remind them of the accessions and bring this information to the front of their minds when answering questions about the EU and Croatia. In addition, open-ended responses to the treatments (collected as part of the attention check in all surveys) suggest that many respondents were indeed unaware of Croatia's accession to the Eurozone and Schengen prior to reading the treatment information.

After being exposed to the treatments, all participants were asked a series of questions regarding their perceptions of the EU, its legitimacy, and their attitudes toward Croatia and other member states. In all four surveys, we focus on three main outcome measures. First, in measuring the EU's legitimacy, we note that there is no standard question to proxy for legitimacy perceptions. Some researchers ask about whether an organization is justified (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006), others ask about confidence in an organization's decisions (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2015; Dellmuth, Scholte and Tallberg, 2019). We opt to follow Anderson, Bernauer and Kachi (2019), who acknowledge that legitimacy involves both the deference of authority and social affinity. Rather than prioritizing one aspect of IO legitimacy over another, we ask respondents whether they *strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree or disagree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree* with the following five statements, which

are adapted from [Anderson, Bernauer and Kachi \(2019\)](#).

- I think the EU plays an important role in society
- I think the EU should continue to make decisions in the future
- The principles of the EU match my own
- I sympathize with the goals of the EU
- I believe that the EU is necessary

Participants receive all five statements in a randomized order. We construct an additive index based on equal weighting of responses to each of the five statements.<sup>10</sup>

To measure perceptions of the EU member states, we turn to the status literature, which builds on work in psychology. As status is also a multidimensional concept, we invoke a specific definition and ask about the respect respondents accord to Croatia, and a number of existing EU member states.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, we ask, “How much respect to you think people in general have for the following countries?” on a scale from 1 (low respect) to 100 (high respect). The wording prompts respondents to proxy second order beliefs, not about how they personally view the countries but rather how they think the countries are viewed by others.<sup>12</sup> The benefit of rating multiple countries in the same survey item is that it facilitates comparisons in a controlled international context. Finally, as an additional measure of perceptions of members, we ask respondents to what extent they believe other countries’ interests align with their own country’s interests. Specifically we ask respondents how several countries’ “basic interests are similar or different to Italy’s [Switzerland’s/Germany’s] basic interests” on a four-point scale from *very similar* to *very different*.

### 5.1.1 Results

As preregistered, to estimate the effects of Eurozone and Schengen expansion on perceptions of EU legitimacy (H1), we regressed our measure of the EU’s perceived legitimacy on each

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<sup>10</sup>Results by component available in Appendix.

<sup>11</sup>We randomize the order of countries.

<sup>12</sup>The question wording follows [Carnegie and Dolan \(2021\)](#) and [Ferry and O’Brien-Udry \(2024\)](#).

Expansion Treatment	N
Eurozone Expansion	381
Schengen Expansion	374
No Information	356

Table 2: Treatment Assignments in Survey 1 (Italy)

treatment variable.<sup>13</sup> We report results for models both with and without the preregistered control variables (age, gender, region, urban or rural area, self-placement on a left-right ideology scale, education, employment status, and voting behavior, knowledge about the EU, and whether the respondent was born in Italy). Figure 1 shows that both the Eurozone and Schengen treatments increase the level of perceived EU legitimacy in most of the model specifications ( $p < 0.05$ ). The size of the coefficients indicates an effect size of approximately 16% to 18% of a standard deviation. These results suggest that information about Croatia’s accession to Schengen and the Eurozone improved respondents’ perceptions of the EU’s legitimacy.

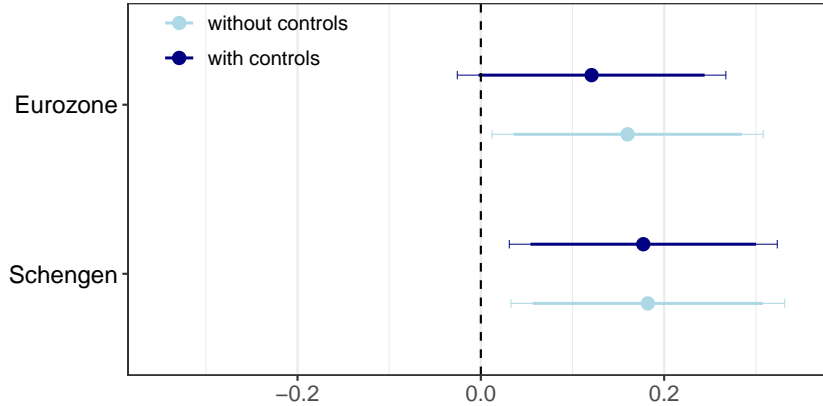


Figure 1: Effect of treatments on EU legitimacy index in Italy. Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

To test the effects of IO expansion on individuals’ perceptions of new member states (H4), we examine how information about Eurozone and Schengen expansion affects respondents’

<sup>13</sup>OLS regression is used for all results in the paper.

perceived respect for Croatia. Figure 2A shows that information on these IO expansions increases perceived respect for Croatia by around 4 points on 0-100 scale ( $p < 0.05$ ). Similarly, figure 2B shows that that exposure to information regarding the Eurozone and Schengen expansions increases the perceptions of shared interests between Italy and Croatia ( $p < 0.1$ ). Together, results from the pilot survey suggest that, in contrast to fears about negative consequences of further EU integration, the expansion of the EU’s constituent systems can bolster its legitimacy among the public and improve perceptions of new members.

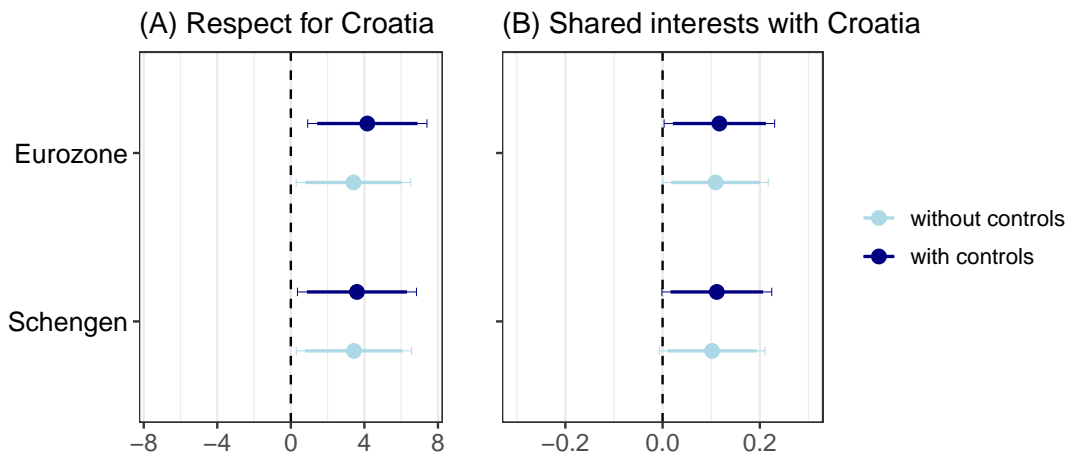


Figure 2: Effect of treatments on the level of respect for Croatia (A) and perceived shared interests between Croatia and Italy (B). Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

## 5.2 Survey 2: Italy

An important question regards the mechanisms driving our initial findings, particularly the role of membership requirements and external threat. We thus turn to a second survey experiment in March 2025. The survey was again fielded on a representative sample of Italians, with 1,374 respondents passing the attention check.

While many details are the same as the pilot, there are three key differences. First, to preserve statistical power with additional treatment arms, we focus only on information about countries’ accession to the Schengen area. Second, accession to Schengen is a highly

Expansion Treatment	New member States	Requirments for admission	N
Schengen Expansion	Croatia	Yes	289
		No	269
	Bulgaria	Yes	253
		No	290
No information	N/A	N/A	273

Table 3: Treatment Assignments in Survey 2 (Italy)

technical process that requires states to adhere to a wide range of EU policies. As we hypothesize in H2 and H5, the resultant policy alignment can signal higher levels of congruence between new and existing members and, as a result, reduces citizens’ concerns about any potential negative consequences of membership heterogeneity. We thus randomize the inclusion of additional information about countries’ adherence to additional requirements. The additional text appears as follows:

**Requirements Treatment:** [-/“To join the Schengen area, countries must undergo a series of evaluations to determine whether they fulfil the necessary conditions. They must adhere to rules about border controls, issuing visas, police cooperation, and protection of personal data. They must also cooperate with law enforcement agencies in other Schengen countries.”]

Third, while our pilot experiment exposed respondents to information about Croatia’s accession to the Eurozone and Schengen, an important question remains as to whether findings can be generalized beyond Croatia. To answer this question, we modify our experiment to randomly name Croatia’s accession in 2023 or Bulgaria’s accession in 2025. This allows us to determine if accession is driving the observed positive relationship, or if instead Italians simply have some sort of affinity for Croatia specifically.

Our second survey thus has 5 treatment groups to which respondents are randomly assigned: Croatia joins Schengen, Bulgaria joins Schengen, Croatia joins Schengen with conditionalities, Bulgaria joins Schengen with conditionalities, and the control (see Table 3). After being exposed to treatment, respondents were asked a series of questions and we focus on the same three outcome measures from the pilot: IO legitimacy, member state respect,

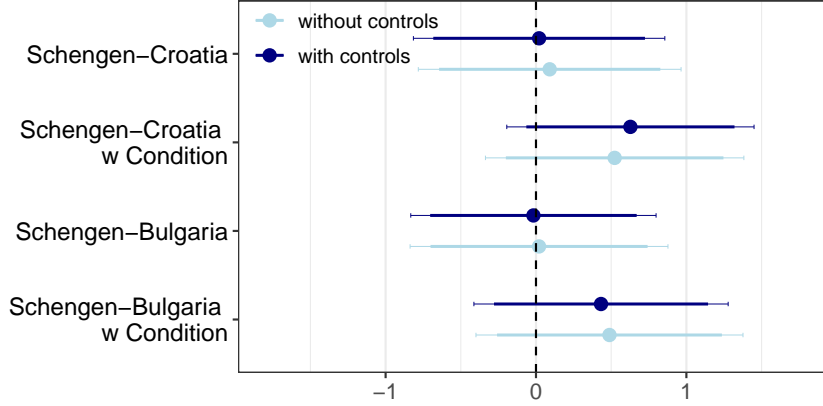


Figure 3: Effect of treatments on EU legitimacy index in Italy (Survey 2). Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

and interest alignment.

### 5.2.1 Results

Unlike Survey 1, the results from Survey 2 in Italy show no statistically significant differences in perceived EU legitimacy between respondents in the control group and those who received relevant information about Schengen expansion (H1). Figure 3 shows that the expansion treatment, especially when combined with the requirements treatment, leads to positive and slightly larger coefficients, yet these effects are shy of conventional significance levels.

However, while treatment groups show less significant differences in regards to perceptions of EU legitimacy, they do report higher respect for new member states (H4). Figure 4A shows that when respondents receive information about Croatia joining Schengen, their respect for Croatia increases by 3 points on a 0–100 scale. For Bulgaria, information about Bulgaria joining Schengen alone does not increase respondents’ respect for Bulgaria significantly. Yet, combined with the requirements treatment, Bulgaria’s accession to Schengen increases respect for Bulgaria by 4 points on a 0–100 scale (Figure 4B). We find little effect of our treatments, with or without additional information on requirements, on our measured of shared interest (Figure 5).

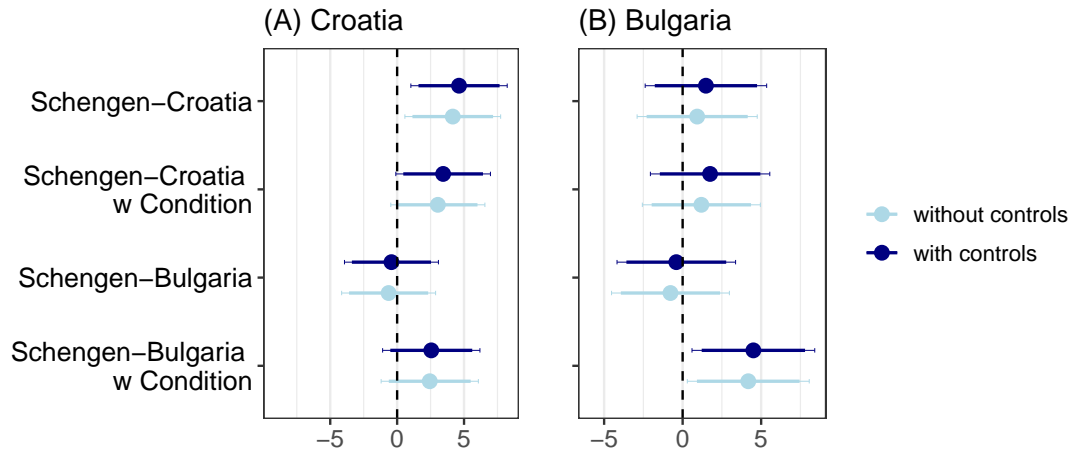


Figure 4: Effect of treatments on the level of respect for (A) Croatia, and (B) Bulgaria. Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

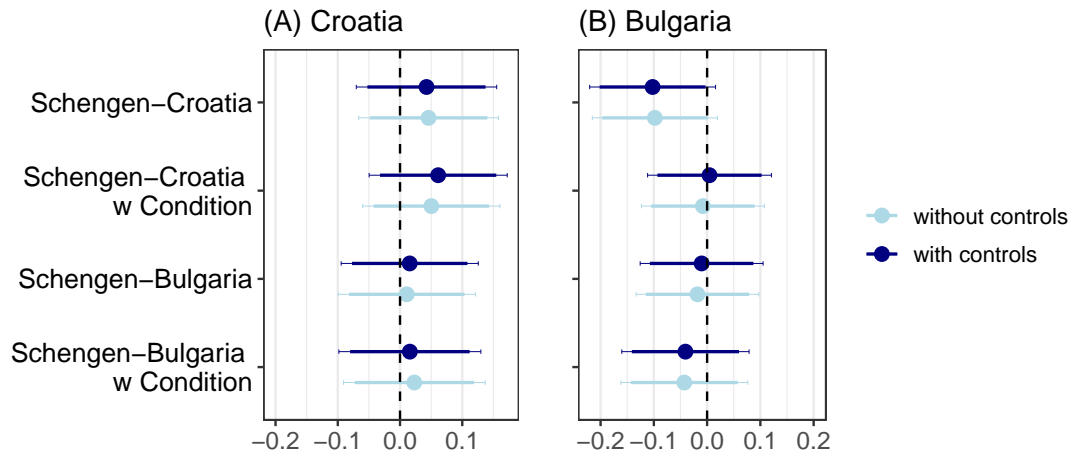


Figure 5: Effect of treatments on perceived shared interests with (A) Croatia, and (B) Bulgaria. Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

### 5.3 Survey 3: Switzerland

While the results of Survey 2 reiterate the lack of backlash – a normatively positive finding – the role of our theorized mechanisms remains indeterminate. Among Italians, information on membership requirements had a positive but insignificant impact. What about the role of external threats? To test hypotheses 3 and 6, we fielded a third survey experiment in August 2025.

There are two notable features of the third survey. First, according to the external threats hypothesis, threats from foreign adversaries should increase both solidarity and the salience of IO policymaking. We thus draw on rising economic tensions between the United States and Europe during the second Trump administration to argue that the relationship between Schengen and Eurozone accession and increased legitimacy should be stronger as Europeans unify against the threat of American isolationism. As our primary treatments are information about Croatia’s Eurozone and Schengen accession, similar to Survey 1, this implies a factorial design, where we further randomize over the provision of information on confrontational American trade policies.<sup>14</sup> We include the following information:

***External Threat Treatment:***[-/“Recently, American president Donald Trump has increased trade tariffs on imports from Europe and taken a more aggressive stance against European countries. There are concerns that the US is no longer a reliable partner and that, in the future, Europe will have to face more challenges on its own.”

But what about the generalizability of our initial findings from Italy? Are Italians, as a net EU beneficiary, more amenable to expansion? While we believe that Italy is a hard test, does accession increase participants’ perceptions of organizational and member state legitimacy in all respondent populations? Fielding additional surveys allows us to speak to the applicability of our results and the second notable feature of Survey 3 is its enumeration on a sample of 1,119 Swiss citizens in August 2025.<sup>15</sup> This case thus plays an important role

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<sup>14</sup>We randomize the order of the external threat and Eurozone/Schengen accession treatments.

<sup>15</sup>Survey instruments were available in English, French and German.



Expansion Treatment	External Threat	N
Schengen Expansion	Yes	179
	No	188
Eurozone Expansion	Yes	198
	No	184
No Information	Yes	182
	No	185

Table 4: Treatment Assignments in the Survey 3 (Switzerland)

in our research design. Although not a member of the EU, the EU is Switzerland’s largest trading partner, and the EU and Switzerland have signed over 100 bilateral agreements to facilitate economic exchange and cross-border movements of goods and people. Although Switzerland is not a member of the Eurozone, it *is* part of Schengen; therefore, further integration directly impacts Switzerland. In short, an additional survey in Switzerland allows us to capture how accession impacts legitimacy perceptions in non-EU states as well. It also allows for in-survey variation on membership since Switzerland is a member of Schengen but not the Eurozone.

Our design yields 6 treatment groups: Croatia joins Schengen, Croatia joins the Euro, Croatia joins Schengen under external threat, Croatia joins the Euro under external threat, external threat without any information regarding the IO expansion, and the pure control (see Table 4). Important to comparing our results across contexts, we continue to focus on identical measures of legitimacy, respect, and shared interests across all of our surveys.

### 5.3.1 Results

As preregistered, we show results for analyses that include and exclude control variables (age, gender, education, region, urban or rural area, employment status, ideology, and voting behavior). Figure 6 shows that only the treatment arms that combine information about Croatia’s accession and the external threat increase perceived EU legitimacy significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ). These results indicate partial support for the external threat mechanism: when the public feels that they are under threat, enlargement leads to more positive perceptions

of IO legitimacy. Either threat treatment or expansion treatment alone did not significantly improve the perceived legitimacy of EU. Only when combined with enlargement did information about external threat result in significantly higher perceived EU legitimacy than among the baseline group.

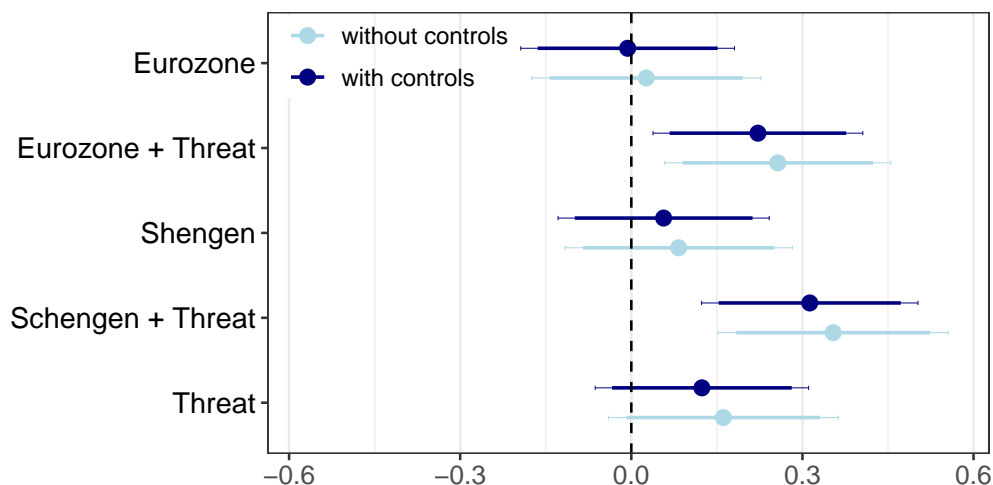


Figure 6: Effect of treatments on EU legitimacy index in Switzerland. Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

On the other hand, the expansion treatments do not have statistically significant effects on perceptions of new member states in Switzerland. Exposure to information that Croatia joined either the Eurozone or Schengen may not evoke the same sense of solidarity with a fellow member of the same international organizations, with or without the presence of the external threat treatment.

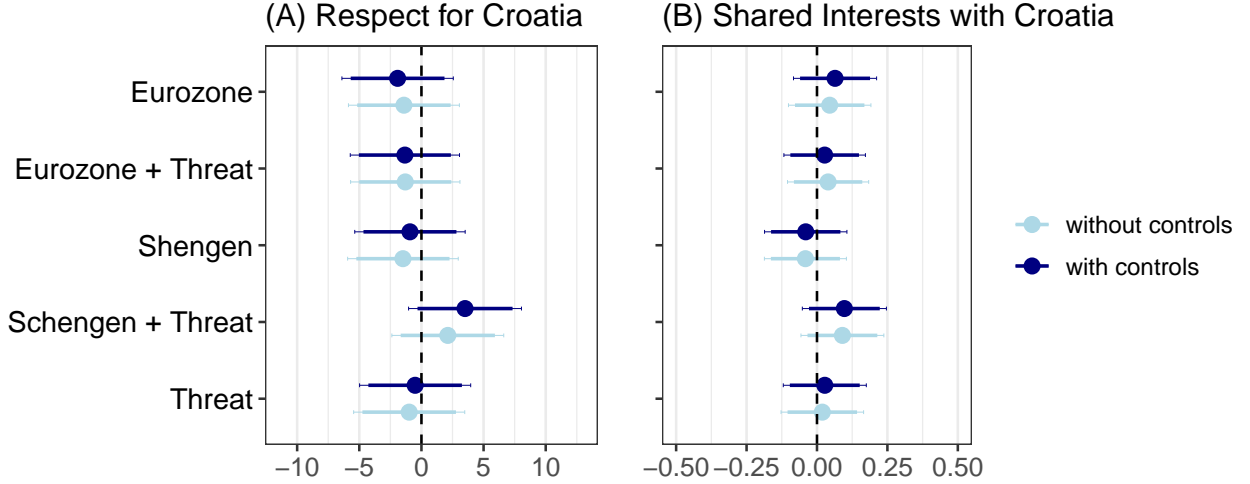


Figure 7: Effect of treatments on perception of new member states (Croatia) in Switzerland. Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

## 5.4 Survey 4: Germany

Our final survey combines elements of the three previous experiments. Specifically, our fourth survey is fielded on a sample of 4,943 German citizens in August 2025.<sup>16</sup> While Swiss respondents (survey 3) aren't EU citizens and Italians (surveys 1 and 2), on average, demonstrate low trust in the EU, Germans' trust in the EU mirrors the bloc's average. As the EU's largest economy and a net contributor, Germany has been both a key advocate and principle stakeholder in enlargement debates. This suggests that German citizens are likely to be aware of enlargement dynamics, holding consequential views, and that German public opinion carries particular weight in understanding support for and backlash from increased integration.

In addition to demonstrating generalizability, the fourth survey's research design plays an important role in simultaneously randomizing (1) information on Schengen expansion, (2) which member is acceding, (3) information on accession requirements, and (4) information on external threat. Given the number of experimental manipulations, we limit our focus to

<sup>16</sup>In the main analysis, we report the results based on the sample of 3,418 who passed the manipulation check. See SI for more details.

countries' accession to the Schengen area. Then, we randomly name either Croatia (2023) or Bulgaria (2025) as recently joining. We then randomize the provision of the *Requirements Treatment* from Survey 2, which includes information on rules a country must follow and the additional approvals it must get before joining Schengen. We finally randomize the provision of an additional screen providing the *External Threat Treatment* from survey 3.<sup>17</sup> Including a control group who receives information on diet, this yields 10 treatment groups (see Table ??).<sup>18</sup> As in prior surveys, we follow experimental treatments with a battery of outcome measures including those about IO legitimacy, respect, and shared interests between Germany and joining states.

Expansion Treatment	Accessing Country Treatment	Condition Treatment	External Threat Treatment	N
Schengen Expansion	Croatia	Yes	Yes	263
			No	259
		No	Yes	270
			No	292
	Bulgaria	Yes	Yes	275
			No	284
		No	Yes	314
			No	274
Control	N/A	N/A	Yes	308
			No	304

Table 5: Treatment assignments for Survey 4 (Germany)

### 5.4.1 Results

We start by examining the treatment effects on perceived EU legitimacy. Coefficients from these analyses are shown in Figure 8. For both Croatia and Bulgaria, when respondents are exposed to information that there are requirements that must be met to join Schengen, their perceptions of EU legitimacy improve ( $p < 0.1$ ). The conditionality treatment increases perceived EU legitimacy by approximately 4% relative to the baseline. This pattern

<sup>17</sup>We randomize the order of the external threat and Schengen accession treatments.

<sup>18</sup>In the full survey, we have a total of 12 treatment arms, including arms about NATO expansion with and without the external threat. For presentation, we highlight only the EU related results here, but we report the NATO results separately in Section 6. Full results are also available in the SI.

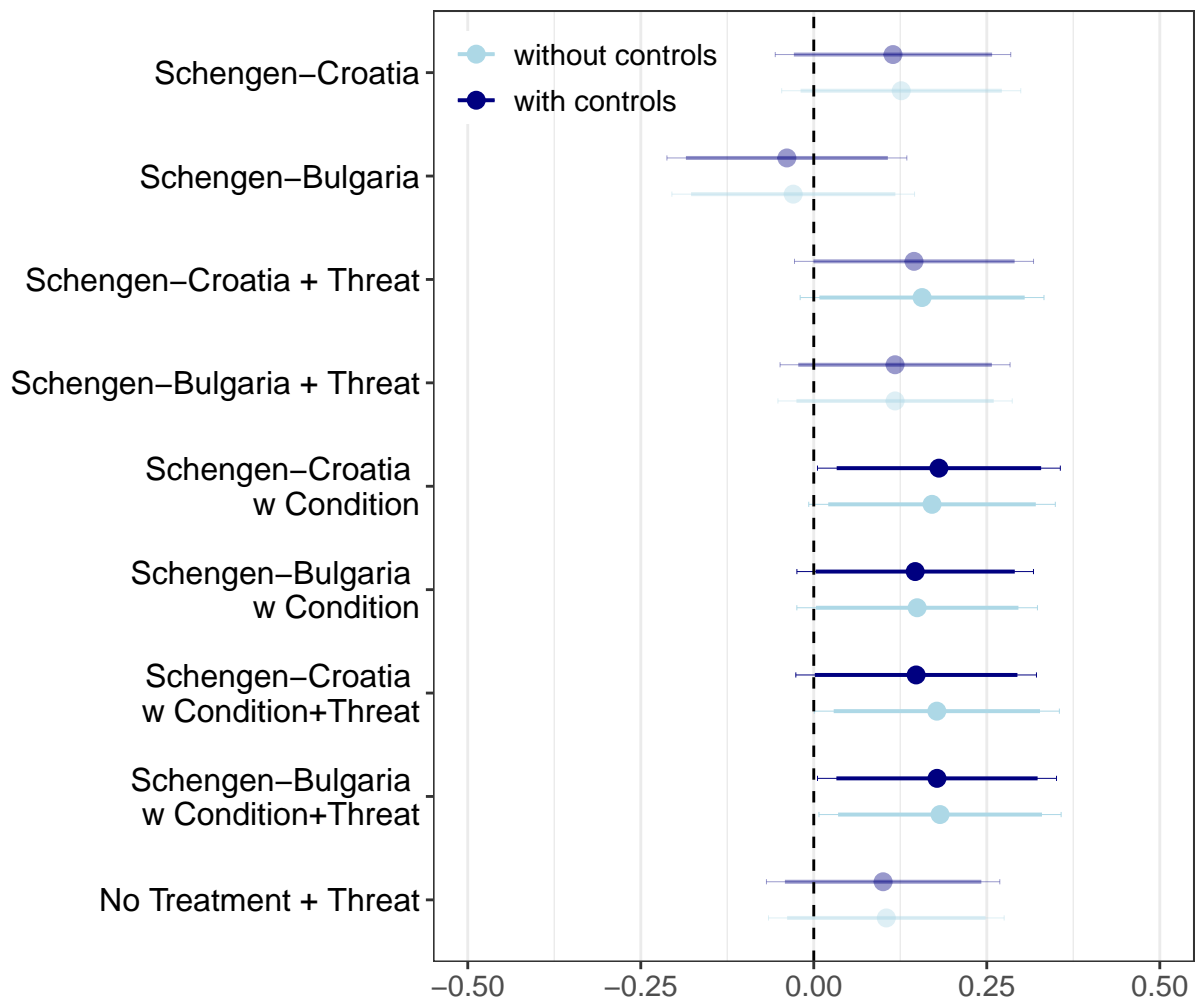


Figure 8: Effect of treatments on EU legitimacy index. Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

holds when the conditionality treatment is combined with the external threat treatment as well. Despite the positive coefficients, exposure to information about expansion or the presence of an external threat alone does not lead to a statistically significant improvement in perceived EU legitimacy. Overall, these results are broadly consistent with our hypotheses that enlargement of the Schengen area will improve perceptions of EU legitimacy especially when the public feels under threat and when enlargement is accompanied by conditions for membership (H4).

We also regress our post-treatment measures of perceptions of Croatia and Bulgaria on

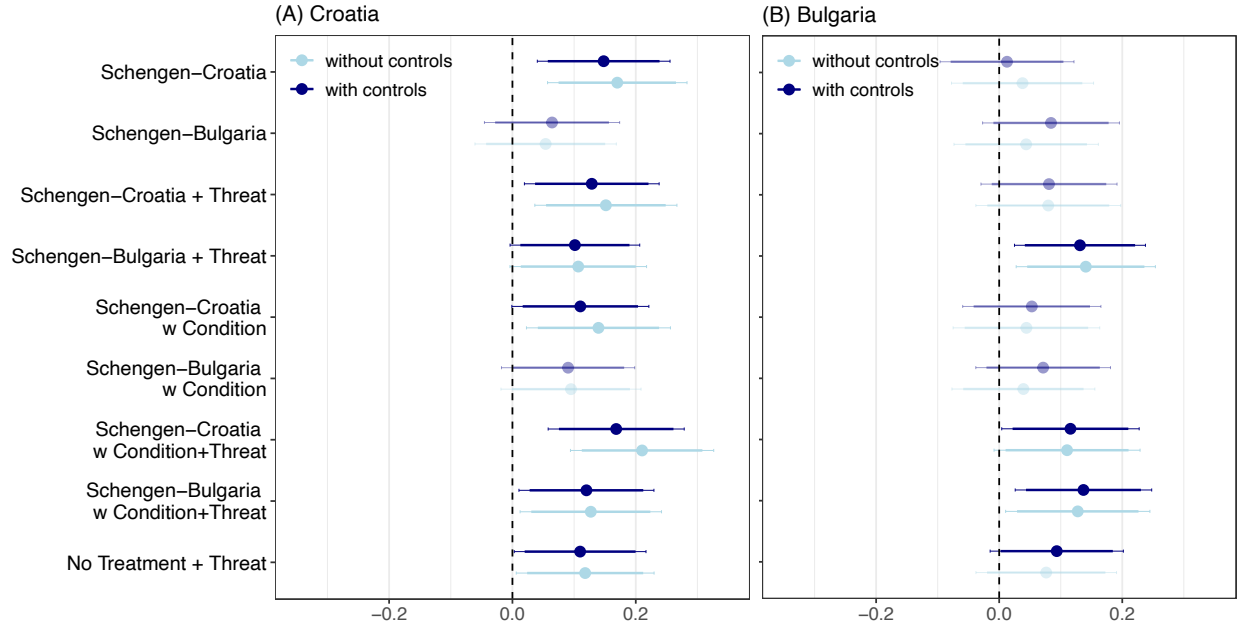


Figure 9: Effect of treatments on shared interests with new member states: (A) Croatia, and (B) Bulgaria. Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

our set of treatments (H4). Figure 9 shows the results from the analysis using the sense of shared interests between Germany and new member states (Croatia, Bulgaria) as the outcome variables. Any treatment that includes information about Croatia's accession, with or without conditionality or the external threat, increases perceived shared interests with Croatia compared to the control group ( $p < 0.1$ ). Also, all treatments that include the external threat increase perceived shared interests with Croatia, even without the information regarding Croatia joining Schengen. This points to the role of external threat in shaping cohesion and solidarity. The treatment effects show a similar pattern for Bulgaria, though the results are weaker. The direction of the coefficients is very similar for respect for new member states as well (Figure 10), although the results are less robust.

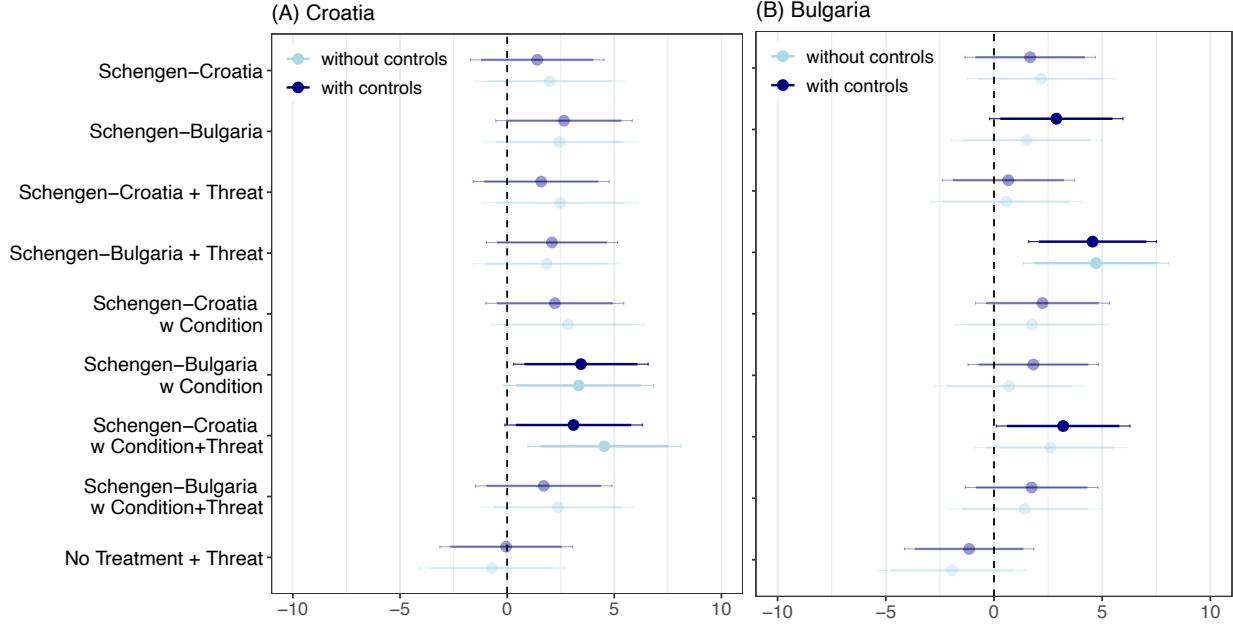


Figure 10: Effect of treatments on respect for new member states: (A) Croatia, and (B) Bulgaria. Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

## 6 Additional Analyses

### 6.1 Open-ended Responses

In addition to the quantitative results presented above, we also conduct a qualitative analysis of open-ended responses to gain deeper insight into respondents' thought processes with regard to enlargement. In particular, we included open-ended questions in Surveys 2, 3, and 4, asking respondents what effect they thought Schengen or Eurozone expansion would have on their country (Italy, Germany, or Switzerland, respectively) and on the EU. The responses to these questions are analyzed below.

Substantive responses to these question generally fall into one of three categories: no anticipated effects; negative effects; and positive effects.<sup>19</sup> For respondents who anticipated no large effects from enlargement, the most commonly stated rationale was that the acceding

<sup>19</sup>A significant number of respondents also failed to answer the questions or simply responded that they did not know.

countries were too small or economically insignificant to have significant effects (“Croatia doesn’t have a large enough population to affect the European Union.”). Others noted that the new members had already been EU member states for a significant period of time (“I don’t anticipate any effects, since Bulgaria has already been in the EU for a while.”). Some respondents also mentioned conditionality as a factor (“I hope that Bulgaria sticks to the rules and there will be no consequences.”).

Respondents who anticipated negative effects primarily focused on an expected increase in migration and in cross-border crime and illegal goods traffic (“Illegal things like drugs, weapons will be imported. People without the right to asylum will immigrate.”) Others expressed concern about the new members requiring further funding (“The German taxpayer will be forced to pay even more money.”). In addition, some responses also reflected ideas in the literature about the costs of IO expansion, fearing greater difficulty in reaching agreement and a loss of cohesion (“More countries is a problem if they have to vote unanimously.”). Some of these concerns were couched in the language of different values that respondents attributed to the new member states (“Another member that doesn’t share European values.”).

Finally, among respondents who anticipated positive effects, most stressed that expansion strengthened the EU (“The more we are, the better.”). Some explicitly noted the importance of expansion in building a stronger club to address external threats (“Positive strengthening of the alliance against the US and Russia.”). Others perceived expansion as a means of reinforcing European integration (“I think it’s a good thing, it increases the solidarity that has to exist between European countries.”). Other respondents anticipated positive economic consequences due to increased cross-border movements of goods, people, and services (“Trade with Croatia will be facilitated.”) Some German and Swiss respondents in particular noted potential advantages due to more labor migration from Bulgaria and Croatia (“Positive effects: immigration of needed workers”). Other respondents anticipated easier opportunities for tourism (“I see the expansion of Schengen principally as a positive thing. Bulgaria is a beautiful tourist destination with a wonderful culture.”). Finally, some respondents expressed



hopes that new member states would present a political counterweight to current members (“It will be useful to create a varied group that can counter European powers such as France and Germany.”).

In sum, respondents expressed a variety of perspectives on Schengen and Eurozone expansion. Some of these related specifically to functions of these systems—such as facilitated freedom of movement—whereas others reflected broader ideas about the costs and benefits of IO expansion, in general. Respondents expressed a number of concerns about the ways in which expansion could undermine performance and cohesion. Importantly, however, the analysis of open-ended responses also sheds light on potential motivations behind respondents’ improved perceptions of the EU: many respondents appear to perceive (carefully managed) expansion as a reinforcement of the IO and its objectives, particularly in the face of external threats.

## 6.2 Support for EU Enlargement

In our first survey in Italy, we also tested the effects of Croatia joining the Eurozone and Schengen on support for further enlargement of the EU as a whole. While respondents’ perceptions of the EU’s legitimacy may be bolstered by information about the successful integration of new member states, it could also make them warier of further enlargement requiring further processes of integration. To explore this possibility, we included survey items measuring support for EU enlargement. In particular, respondents were asked how supportive they were of the following countries joining the EU: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Norway, Serbia, and Türkiye.

Figure 11 indicates that information about Schengen expansion increased support for Norway joining the EU, and both treatments increased support for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but there is little evidence of an effect on support for Serbia or Türkiye acceding to the Union. Interestingly, therefore, the treatments appear to have had the clearest effect where Bosnia and Herzegovina—arguably the country that is most similar to Croatia of the four—

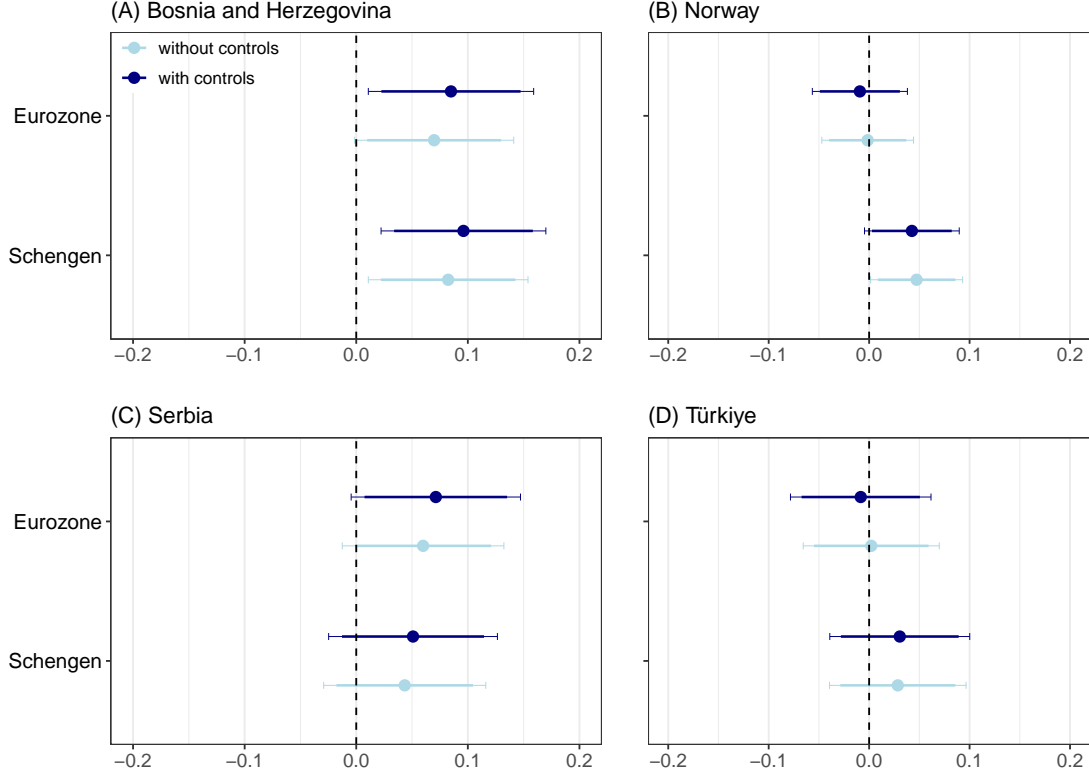


Figure 11: Effect of treatments on support for enlargement by: (A) Bosnia Herzegovina, (B) Norway, (C) Serbia, and (D) Türkiye. Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown.

is concerned. Respondents may therefore be using information learned about Croatia as a heuristic to estimate the likelihood of successful European integration for countries they consider similar.

### 6.3 NATO Enlargement

Finally, while the results presented above indicate fairly consistent improvements in perceptions of the EU and new member states when respondents are informed about Eurozone and Schengen enlargement in combination with information about accession requirements or external threats, we conduct an additional test in our survey in Germany using a different IO. This test helps us determine to what extent our findings are generalizable beyond the context of the Eurozone and Schengen. In particular, one of our treatment arms in this

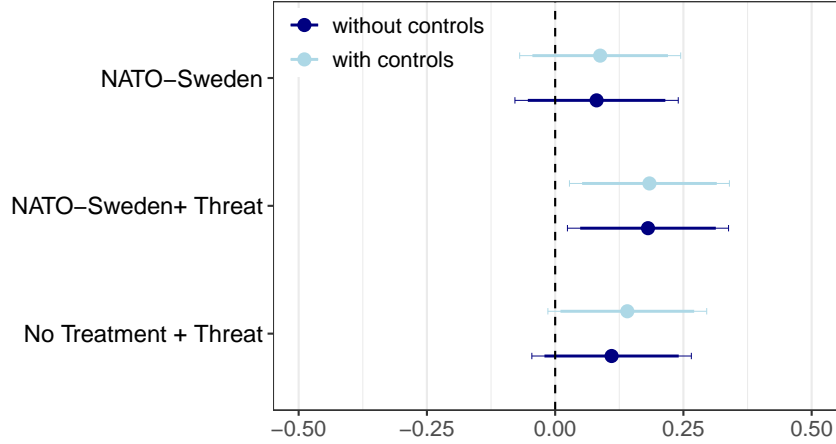


Figure 12: Effect of treatments on NATO legitimacy. Coefficients from OLS regression with 90% and 95% confidence intervals are shown. Full regression is available in the SI.

survey assigns respondents to receive information about Sweden’s accession to NATO in 2024. This case is useful as it is a further example of a recent enlargement of an IO that is likely to be relatively salient to publics in existing member states. Following the treatment, respondents completed a similar battery of IO legitimacy items for NATO as described above for the EU. In addition, they were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed Germany and Sweden shared fundamental interests. Importantly, assignment of this treatment was orthogonal to assignment of the external threat treatment, allowing us to test for the combined effect of the two treatments in addition to the individual effects of each.

Comparing respondents who only received the NATO enlargement treatment to respondents in the control group, we find that those in the treatment condition perceive NATO’s legitimacy to be higher, though the difference between the groups is not statistically significant. Respondents in the NATO enlargement treatment group also view Germany and Sweden as having more similar fundamental interests, with the difference to the control group being statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. For those receiving the external threat treatment only, the results are reversed: for both outcomes, the coefficient on the treatment is positive, but it is only statistically significant for the NATO legitimacy index. Finally, respondents receiving both treatments—NATO enlargement and external threat—

perceive NATO to be more legitimate and Sweden to have more similar interests to Germany compared to the control group, with statistically significant coefficients for both outcomes. These results broadly reflect our findings related to the Eurozone and Schengen enlargement, suggesting that IO enlargement is unlikely to generate backlash but instead may enhance public perceptions of the IO and new member states, particularly in circumstances of external threat.

## 7 Discussion

IO enlargement is often perceived to bring both risks and opportunities. Findings from the four survey experiments discussed above suggest that when it comes to public opinion the opportunities outweigh the risks. We find no evidence of backlash against either the expanding IO or the new member states. By contrast, we find that publics in existing member states perceive IOs to be more legitimate and new members to be more similar to their own countries when they are informed about IO enlargement. These results are particularly robust when information about enlargement is paired with information about the conditions new member states are required to fulfill and with information about an external threat. IO enlargement therefore does not seem to carry a penalty when it comes to public opinion, and may even enhance positive perceptions of the IO and new members, under the right circumstances.

We test the effects of IO enlargement in three different countries (Germany, Italy, and Switzerland), for two different entrants (Bulgaria and Croatia), and across several different IO contexts (eurozone, Schengen, and NATO). Broadly similar results across these different contexts suggest that the findings are not specific to a particular set of circumstances. However, further research could help more precisely delineate the contexts to which these results may apply. For instance, enlargement of IOs with near-universal membership or those with limited political salience may not significantly affect public opinion. Similarly,

while we tested the effects of IO enlargement in both member and non-member countries (in particular, Switzerland with regard to the eurozone), it is unclear whether our findings would generalize to the publics of more recent member states, who may want to differentiate themselves more clearly from newcomers.

Our findings are particularly relevant to the case of the EU, in which debates about enlargement of both the Union itself and its constituent systems are actively ongoing. Bulgaria and Romania became full members of Schengen in 2025, and Bulgaria officially joined the eurozone in 2026. Kaja Kallas, the EU’s head of foreign policy, recently suggested that the EU could admit new member states as early as 2030.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to fears about negative consequences of further EU enlargement, our research suggests that the effect of these accessions on attitudes toward the EU and the new member states are more likely to be positive than negative. While the public in older member states may be wary of enlargement (Hobolt, 2014), the demonstration of successful integration of new members into the EU may in fact increase their support for further enlargement, especially during a time of high external threat to European countries. As such, enlargement can be a source of strength rather than weakness for the EU in the eyes of the public.

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<sup>20</sup>“EU could admit new members by 2030, says its foreign policy chief.” Guardian, November 4, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/04/case-for-eu-enlargement-very-clear-cut-says-its-foreign-policy-chief>.

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