



# Negotiating Power and Democracy in Political Group Formation in the European Parliament

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## INTRODUCTION

Political groups in the European Parliament (EP) were once considered less significant by the general public: their leaders were unknown figures, and their powers and roles were inconsequential to the media, politicians or citizens (Kelemen, 2020). While scholars widely recognised the increased powers of the EP and its role as the key democratic actor, in-depth analyses of organising political groups within the parliament were seldom, if ever, undertaken.

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Political groups are unique to the EP. As alliances of national party delegations,<sup>1</sup> they are distinct from parliamentary parties and party coalitions in national contexts. The formal and most cited requirements for establishing a political group include written notification from at least 23 Members of the European Parliaments (MEPs) from seven member states and demonstrable ‘political affinity’. Previously, political group formation in the EP has been explained by policy congruence (Hix & Lord, 1997; Hix et al., 2007; McElroy & Benoit, 2010), pragmatism with access to resources and office positions as motives (Bressanelli, 2012, 2014) or for achieving respectability, especially in domestic politics (Bressanelli & De Candia, 2019; McDonnell & Werner, 2019).

Recent developments in EP demand a robust re-evaluation of the role and importance of political group formation in the EP. Radical right populists formed noteworthy political groups after the 2014 and 2019 EP elections, generating attention among political commentators and academic scholars. Furthermore, the failure of the Parliament’s biggest group, the European People’s Party (EPP), to suspend Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz,<sup>2</sup> and French President Emmanuel Macron’s striving for a new liberal group after the EP 2019 elections, received high levels of coverage.

Thus, intense political struggles shape the formation of political groups well beyond the formal rules. Negotiations between parties may succeed or fail, follow well-trodden paths or take new unexpected turns. The start of the parliamentary term, the consequence of the popular vote, is only the beginning of the ongoing process(es) of political group formation, which is inevitably shaped by diverse norms and practices within different political groups.

Drawing on unique research material of 130 interviews with MEPs, political groups and parliamentary staff conducted in 2018–2020 in the 8th and 9th Parliaments, we analyse, in this chapter, how political group formation is perceived by MEPs and political staff. We reveal that pervasive informal practices and norms, adding to the formal rules of the European Parliament Rules of Procedure (EPRoP), shape political group formation processes. Moreover, we explore political group formation from the perspective of democratic requirements: its meaning for political participation in different groups; transparency of procedures and decision-making within the political groups shaped by formal and informal institutions, practices and norms. More precisely, we address the following research questions: What are the different layers of political

group formation in the EP? How are the groups formed formally and informally in practice? What are the differences between political groups?

Our findings originating from analysing how interviewees describe the process suggest a framework that encompasses four intertwined layers as important in political group formation: (1) formal political group formation after EP elections, (2) internal political group formation via core functions, (3) internal political group formation by consolidation through policies and distributing policy field responsibilities and (4) changes to political group composition during the term. This framework allows for a holistic analysis of political group formation, adding to the extant literature, which either focused on the initial stage, discrete aspects of political group formation or scrutinised selected political groups (Bressanelli, 2012, 2014; Bressanelli & De Candia, 2019; Hix et al., 2007; McElroy & Benoit, 2010; McDonnell & Werner, 2019). By proposing a holistic and dynamic framework attentive to formal and informal aspects, we show how political group formation is a process of constant negotiation, with each of the layers dependent, though not necessarily in any particular order, on others. Furthermore, the framework lends itself to the analysis of democratic practices, which can be assessed relative to each layer and to formal and informal institutions. Finally, our findings show similarities and clear differences between political groups regarding each of the four layers, giving a more nuanced view of the EP's political dynamics, struggles and differences. Collectively, these aspects affect how well the parliament functions and how democratic those functions are.

## BACKGROUND OF POLITICAL GROUP FORMATION

The first direct EP elections in 1979 doubled the number of representatives and induced the formalisation of political group structures within it (Bartolini, 2005). To keep pace with the increased law-making powers of parliament, especially since the Single European Act (1987), political groups have adapted their structures by codifying informal norms and developing structures to better monitor group members' behaviour (Bressanelli, 2014, p. 778). Previously, scholars explicated political group formation in EP through *policy congruence*, whereby national parties join political groups whose policy stances are closest to theirs (McElroy & Benoit, 2010). Also, more *pragmatic reasons*, such as political group resources and committee positions, were highlighted as motives for joining political groups (Bressanelli, 2012). Political party behaviour,

explained as either office-, vote- or policy-seeking, was used to account for these different motivations. For example, the pragmatic motivation for choosing political groups fits office-seeking parties, and policy congruence may be more important for policy-seeking parties, while vote-seeking provides unclear results at the EP level (Whitaker & Lynch, 2014).

Names and compositions of political groups have fluctuated significantly over time, with two major factors impacting their formation.<sup>3</sup> First, European Union (EU) *enlargements* to Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) in 2004 and 2007 increased the total number of MEPs from 626 in 1999 to 751 in 2014 and brought more than 50 new national parties to the EP. The national CEEC parties integrated into the existing political groups with profound effects (Bressanelli, 2014). Initially, the sizes of the three biggest groups, EPP, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE),<sup>4</sup> grew significantly after enlargement, while the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) or the Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL)<sup>5</sup> was unaffected; their relative size saw a de facto reduction (Bressanelli, 2014, p. 782). The impact on the functioning of the groups was also substantial. Organisational adaptation across the groups induced more effective coordination mechanisms to guarantee voting cohesion and ensure functioning decision-making processes in the post-enlargement dynamic (Bressanelli, 2014, p. 777).

Second, Euroscepticism and radical right populism (RRP) have fundamentally impacted political group formation. Unlike the CEEC enlargement, the emergence of the RRP resulted in the establishment of new political groups in the EP (Gómez-Reino, 2018; Startin, 2010). Whitaker and Lynch (2014) showed how the presence of Eurosceptics in the EP induced different motivations underlying political group formation in the 7th Parliament (2009–2014). The British UKIP, for example, reluctantly formed the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) group ‘to gain specific practical advantages while policy-seeking behaviour and party management explain’ the Conservatives’ desire to form the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group (Whitaker & Lynch, 2014, p. 242). In the 8th Parliament (2014–2019), some RRP parties in seeking to be ‘respectable radicals’ (McDonnell & Werner, 2019, p. 14) joined the British Conservatives in the ECR to appear more trustworthy nationally. Meanwhile, the UKIP Party and Italian M5S undertook a ‘marriage of convenience’, forming the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), putting aside their political differences to optimise their

access to EP resources (McDonnell & Werner, 2019, p. 15). Likewise, the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group illustrates how RRP parties attempted to create one united political group in the 8th legislature to maximise their political influence (McDonnell & Werner, 2019, p. 15). The formation of the bigger Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the 9th legislature was the next step in this strategy.

Political group formation is driven by incentives to increase group size. Larger groups receive more positions (and more powerful ones) in the EP (e.g. Presidency, Committee Chairs) and more resources, including increased plenary speaking time. As Bressanelli (2014, p. 779) stated, ‘The application of voting power indexes to the EP shows that the size of a party group may determine its ability to influence legislation’. This also explains why the EPP kept the radical right populist Hungarian party, Fidesz, within its ranks (Kelemen, 2020), until Viktor Orbán announced Fidesz’s leave in March 2021. Furthermore, changes in group composition—whether due to enlargement or other factors—give *formal rules* greater salience. As groups expand, personal ties and informal structures are gradually replaced by formal structures and procedures; this ‘formalisation’ is generally justified by the desire for more efficiency and is then motivated by functional reasons (Bressanelli, 2014, p. 780).

In this chapter, we explore these issues in greater detail by analysing how our interviewees describe what contributes to political group formation. Engaging with their perspectives allows us to differentiate them by political groups and attend to how they differ across the four layers of group formation we propose.

## THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The democratic quality of the EU can be assessed through the efficiency and quality of its policies and decision-making processes, including its democratic accountability (Eriksen & Fossum, 2000; Innerarity, 2018). As the only directly elected EU institution, the EP is central to the EU’s democratic accountability. Its political groups—like national political parties—are central democratic actors in these processes and should be assessed as such. Open and transparent, participatory and inclusive political processes fulfil democratic principles and provide legitimacy to the EP and its political groups. Likewise, political group formation processes can be far removed from the electorate and the public, closed off from

parliamentary scrutiny and the majority of parliamentarians, with decisions made in small circles involving deals and trade-offs. This, in turn, diminishes the democratic legitimacy of political groups.

Parliamentary practices for political group formation—and the extent to which they enhance democracy and democratic legitimacy—can be formalised or remain informal. Exploring the interplay between formal and informal institutions is a key objective of our empirical analysis. Different variants of new institutionalism, influenced by rational choice, historical, sociological and feminist methodologies, have developed the analytical distinction between *formal* and *informal institutions* (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). Formal institutions are those governed by codified rules with clear enforcement mechanisms and legitimacy, while informal institutions embody one or more customary elements, traditions, moral values, religious beliefs and norms of behaviour that are ‘hidden and embedded in the everyday practices disguised as standard and taken-for-granted’ (Chappell & Waylen, 2013, p. 605; see also Kantola & Lombardo, 2017). The relationship between formal and informal institutions may be competitive or complementary, given that informal rules may subvert or reinforce formal ones (Waylen, 2014, p. 213). We contend that analysing the interaction between formal and informal institutions is necessary to develop a more comprehensive account of political group formation.

The insights provided by our interviewees facilitated the analysis of the informal institutions surrounding political group formation. In a field often characterised by studies of formal rules and their significance, we used material gathered from interviews with MEPs and EP staff (e.g. assistants, political group staff) from all political groups, including non-attached MEPs. A total of 130 interviews were conducted over two stages: 53 in Brussels during the final year of the 8th legislature (2014–2019) and a further 77 in Brussels, MEPs’ home countries, and through Skype in the first year of the 9th legislature (2019–2024). Political group formation appeared as a topic in both interviews but was more explicitly and systematically addressed in the second set of interviews. Seniority, and functions such as (deputy) secretary generals, played a crucial role in reporting organisational issues such as political group formation (Bresnanelli, 2014). We interviewed six (deputy) secretary generals during the first set of interviews before the EP elections and two (deputy) secretary generals afterwards. However, the views of all other MEPs and staff added substantial details about the dynamics around political group

formation and organisational and political coherence. We also analysed political group statutes as primary documents regarding provisions for membership and decision-making procedures.

Building on grounded theory, the research team coded interviews deductively and inductively with Atlas.ti. Grounded theory is an originally micro-sociological approach enabling to generate metatheoretical explanations grounded in coded interview data (Creswell, 2013), a ‘unified theoretical explanation’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 107). It allowed us to simultaneously capture practices, their institutional context and how actors construct meanings, thereby generating a single case ‘thick description’. For this chapter, we analysed mainly the code ‘PG formation’ supplemented by ‘PG organisation statutes’, ‘leadership’ and ‘SG role’ (Secretary General). The approach was particularly effective in identifying underlying power relations and (un)democratic practices that would remain concealed if only focusing on formal institutions.

## FOUR LAYERS OF POLITICAL GROUP FORMATION

In the following analysis, we discuss political group formation regarding the four layers discerned from our research material. Layer 1 comprises the formal steps needed to assemble a political group after EP elections and negotiations within established and newer political groups. Both Layers 2 and 3 satisfy some goals of national delegations and thus secure their loyalty and continued association. In Layer 2, political groups distribute leadership positions between national delegations, acquire EP resources and continue attempts, sometimes even throughout the legislature, to increase group size by approaching national delegations, particularly small ones with one to two MEPs. In Layer 3, substantial decisions for policy-making are made, a process whereby the size of national delegations and policy positions come into play, especially by negotiating committee and policy field responsibilities. In Layer 4, MEPs or national delegations shift their allegiances to and from political groups, while political groups take measures to secure the integrity of their group or, in some cases, discuss the expulsion of national delegations.

*Layer 1: Formal Political Group Formation After EP Elections*

We argue that the first layer shapes all the others because political groups decide upon their potential composition, impacting inter- and intra-group democratic practices and power relations (Kantola & Miller, 2021). Before EP elections, and with the final results published, ‘head hunting’ begins for all groups, including established groups who will look for potential new members. Only Europarty members can automatically become political group members and thus constitute the core, while the remaining national delegations are either approached or can seek group membership themselves. Becoming a group member is a complex negotiation process guided by informal practices and power plays. As the political group leaders’ fate fluctuates in elections, Secretary Generals—the administrative leaders of the political group secretariat—play a central role in political group negotiations and ensure continuity between different parliaments (Kantola & Miller, 2022).

Formally, political group formation is determined by Rule 33 of the EP Rules of Procedure (2020), requiring at least 23 MEPs from seven member states to form a group. It further states that ‘Members may form themselves into groups according to their political affinities’ whereby the principle of ‘political affinity’ avoids the formation of purely technical groups, a principle held up by the European Court of Justice, confirming the EP’s right to dissolve purely technical groups (Ripoll Servent, 2018, pp. 38–39; Settembri, 2004). Interestingly, an interviewee challenged the assumption of political affinity for older groups, since ‘more mature groups, they have this kind of collection of people who historically have sat together, (...) over time, their values have diverged a lot and they have very different views within them, so I often do not know where the EPP’s line will be’ (ECR MEP F 060219). Many of our interviewees noted that political affinity is ‘difficult’, ‘political’ and ‘impossible to define objectively’. Further, the openness to political debate and lack of transparency potentially challenge democratic principles.

Next to the EPRoP, all political groups have statutes with varying degrees of formulating formal membership rules and political affinity requirements, excluding GUE/NGL, who due to their confederal nature struggle to formally adopt statutes (GUE/NGL MEP M 010419). The EPP statutes mention ‘principles such as freedom and democracy, and the rule of law, respect for human rights and subsidiarity’ (EPP, 2013). As in its name, the EFDD emphasised direct democracy and its statutes



state that it ‘rejects xenophobia, anti-Semitism and any other form of discrimination’ with a footnote of the Italian M5S rejecting ‘all forms of discrimination’ following the Italian constitution (EFDD, 2017).

We discerned three different strategies from our interview material for political group formation in this first layer. The first strategy is to get as many seats as possible, regardless of its potential impact on shared policy positions. The EPP, ECR, EFDD and ID are representative of this.

Maximising group size may result in intensive power struggles, with the example of EPP and ECR illustrating how attracting additional national delegations can include actively impeding other groups. When forming the ECR in 2009, the UK Conservatives attempted luring other EPP parties to join them to fulfil the EPRoP (Whitaker & Lynch, 2014). Simultaneously, the EPP tried to obstruct ECRs’ attempts to secure the required seven nationalities by promising undecided national delegations with only one MEP better condition (ECR MEP M 040320). For the EPP, UK Conservative MEPs who changed groups in 2009 dramatically shifted the EP’s power balance(s). Although ECR was dominated by two big delegations—UK Conservatives and Polish Law and Justice—they needed the single MEP national party delegations to ensure group survival.<sup>6</sup> Individual MEP’s choices thus matter for new groups.

RRP parties reveal sizeable differences regarding negotiating political group formation (McDonnell & Werner, 2019), with some radical right populists considering the whole issue of political group formation as ridiculous and simply as another structure imposed by the EU, which they opposed:

Oh, the EFDD. We don’t recognise the EFDD. As far as we’re concerned these names European Parliament give us, we don’t really care about that. We have to fit into a group, so we do, but quite frankly we don’t believe in it, we are elected as UKIP and we consider ourselves to be UKIP. (EFDD MEP M 290119\_3)

Simultaneously, other UKIP MEPs were happy to overcome the political differences between national delegations in the EFDD for the bigger cause:

I’m very happy to serve alongside Five Star people and other people from other parties who, on a domestic level I would be arguing a lot with.

But here, the most important thing is anti-establishment. (EFDD MEP M 290119\_2)

While the citation supports EFDD critics who regarded it as a purely technical group formed to leverage the EPs' financial and administrative support (see also McDonnell & Werner, 2019), it further illustrates clearly the strategy to maximise seats, regardless of its meaning for political affinity.

Aiming to increase their group size after the 2019 elections, the newly created radical right group ID attempted to convince the British Brexit Party (founded in 2019) to join but was unsuccessful because some national delegations, such as the German AfD, were considered too racist (NI MEP M 220120). Overall, for the ID group, size continuously mattered (see also Layer 4) with hopes that Fidesz was either expelled or left the EPP of their accord:

If they're coming to the ID, that will actually be great. It means that the ID will have over 90 MEPs. Now we are the fourth biggest, and if we are getting more, so we are getting closer to the third biggest group. So, hopefully it's possible to actually, to grow, even bigger. (ID MEP M 130320)

The challenges created by many numbers regarding different national delegations and MEPs were recognised but ignored: 'So to hold it together and, to make it functioning, I think this is really a new thing' (ID MEP M 130320).

Juxtaposed is the second strategy at work in political group formation: conditioning new members to share core policy positions. The most principled were the Green/EFA group, which negotiated with other parties or individual MEPs without dropping their principles on gender equality, LGBTI rights, and sexual and reproductive rights:

Yes, if they're ready to follow the Green line or position (...) for instance on ethical issues, on sexual and reproductive rights, are the main issues at stake. Sometimes when new members want to join they are very much in line with us on all the social, economic and climate issues, but then, sometimes there might be other issues at stake, LGBT rights, gender issues sometimes and so on. (Greens/EFA MEP F 130320)

Greens/EFA see increasing group size as an important matter, too, but considerations about the lack of policy congruence on important values trump the desire to grow (see also Layer 4).

Finally, the third strategy draws on elements from the first two: groups try to maximise seats but are unwilling to achieve that goal at the expense of the group's image. S&D, GUE/NGL and ALDE/Renew are typical representatives. A GUE/NGL staff member explained:

After the elections it is a race between political groups because each group has as many votes as you have members. So of course, each one of us tries to maximise the impact and influence. It does not mean that we would accept anybody into our group just to have numbers but of course we try to. After the last election, our group opened up to new parties and movements, so in that way it was a historical moment. (GUE-NGL Staff F 150519)

Group size is multidimensional and involves many trade-offs. Power gains made by larger groups often come at the loss of a 'family atmosphere' with CEEC enlargement cited as having been a particular 'culture shock' (ALDE Staff M 050419). However, the formation of Renew Europe as a differently composed liberal political group after the 2019 elections was described as a gathering of 'natural partners', as one interviewee explained: 'we constituted a group very quickly. And it has formed into a very close and natural grouping, I think' (Renew MEP M 131219). Others cautiously revealed that heterogeneity and new dynamics were at play:

It's four groups now together in one group, which obviously will take time to find what is now exactly the common ground. We have, of course, our principles together because otherwise you couldn't form a group. But you need to go through some legislative files over a period of time to really find where the fault lines are. (Renew Staff M 050320)

Turning the ALDE group into Renew Europe after the 2019 EP elections was not merely a name change but illustrates further the role group size considerations play. The French La République en Marche, with its large seat share, outnumbered other national party delegations in the group. However, it is not a member of the ALDE Europarty, the major political group basis. Changing an established name is quite rare and confirms the concessions the previous ALDE group was ready to make

to increase its size, although matching policy positions played a major role, as the quotes above show.

Overall, in the first layer of political group formation, formal criteria such as ‘political affinity’ created political struggles, while informal norms and values, such as maximising group size, influenced political group decisions to some extent.

### *Layer 2: Internal Political Group Formation Through Core Functions*

In the second layer, political group formation continues as a corollary to decisions on EP and political group leadership positions and the acquisition of EP resources. According to our interviewees, the distribution of both is an important aspect of eliciting loyalty from national delegations. Group size and previous practices impact this layer and reveal interesting power relations and priorities by national delegations within political groups.

The EPRoP stipulate in Rule 15: ‘When electing the President, Vice-Presidents and Quaestors, account should be taken of the need to ensure an overall fair representation of political views, as well as gender and geographical balance’. However, no rules are specifying how political groups shall distribute EP and political group leadership positions among their party members, and interestingly, all group statutes also lack provisions. Thus, negotiating leadership positions and resources often relies on informal, although well-established practices allow for political negotiations, informal practices and differences between political groups. EP resources, including the secretariat, budget, personnel, rooms, plenary seating and speaking time, are distributed following political group size; budget can be spent for parliamentary activities but not for national parties. Non-attached MEPs receive limited resources but, for instance, no plenary front rows, making it harder to ‘catch-the-eye’ of the speaker for interventions in debates.

The informal rules governing this layer of political group formation manifest themselves in two significant ways. First, older political groups such as EPP, S&D, Greens/EFA and, to some extent, ALDE/Renew and ECR, have standardised practices for distributing leadership positions, while new or less politically homogenous groups decide almost on an ad hoc basis how they will proceed. With typical changes to leadership positions after 2.5 years, this layer continues throughout the legislature because national delegations can strategically wait for a second

round to position certain MEPs in the spotlight. Second, group size and representation across member states play a dual role. Some political groups approach it predominantly to distribute power following national majorities, while others weave in specific aspects, such as gender parity (Kantola & Miller, 2022). Moreover, changes to numbers and composition affect staff, rooms, time and which national delegations can rely on these resources.

Political groups commonly distribute leadership following national delegations and their size. S&D leadership is usually reserved for the largest national delegation and, thus, has switched from the German Udo Bullmann to the Spanish Iratxe Garcíá Pérez after the 2019 elections. Other leadership positions are distributed to satisfy the power interests of different delegations. ECR recognises the importance of leadership negotiations in political group formation, and nationality is regarded as a major criterion. Negotiations between the delegations are prepared by the Secretary General and the process can be ‘difficult’ because ‘the delegations are responsible for appointing a representative, so it is not even our [the bureau] function’ (ECR Staff M 180319).

ALDE statutes stipulate ‘fair representation’ originating from early internal power struggles between the two Europarties constituting the core of the ALDE group: ‘a phrase referring to the constitution of the first ALDE group, in which we had two components: the ALDE Party and the EDP, and none of the two parties wanted to be dominated’ (...) (ALDE Staff M 050419). Since both Europarties need to first agree on leadership positions, especially for their national delegations, a staff member explained that the ‘rest falls in place slowly, slowly, slowly’ and that ‘strategic thinking’ drives top job selection (ALDE Staff M 050419).

Generally, competition is fierce and by offering EP and group leadership positions, political groups still aim to grow, which can threaten the existence of other groups if they fail to provide similar conditions. Therefore, some political groups deviate from rewarding big national delegations and offer prestige positions even to non-members of the Europarty to secure the membership of small delegations or individual MEPs. An ECR MEP reported that the EPP employed a similar strategy during the 2009 legislature, stating the following:

One of our previous MEPs even got a position as a vice-chairman of the Parliament, vice-president. So he was rewarded by the group because they started trying to buy people out, buy them away, with a nice job, so that

we would have fewer members, and then we would have fewer nationalities because initially we only had seven nationalities and seven were needed. (ECR MEP M 040320)

Negotiations over EP resources revealed similar patterns. Previous legislatures granted older political groups a comparative advantage, and interviewees from these groups rarely commented on how resources were distributed between delegations, thus taking procedures and processes for granted. New groups such as Renew and ID needed to invest more time and energy to establish their offices and distribute resources, and increasing group size played a decisive role:

We had something like 60 MEPs and now we have over 100. (...) We have new places to fill. And, of course, it gave us a possibility to restructure the party a bit, to open more positions, to strengthen some specific areas, (...) a methodology on how to hire people, how to keep the balances. Of course these are always quite sensitive [issues]. (Renew MEP F 060220)

Basically, there are a lot of people that we took over from the EFDD (...) we have more positions now; there will be lots of new people. But that is up to the bureau to decide and there are discussions about (...). (ID MEP F 110320)

Some interviewees suggested that resource aspects become amplified when groups are formed during the legislature rather than immediately after the elections (Layer 1).

If you make your group right from the beginning of the term, you will be better off in terms of staff (...). There's a gentlemen's agreement (...) to make it a bit balanced. But we were not there as a group at the beginning of the term, so we were not involved in these negotiations. (ENF Staff M 260419)

For smaller groups, balancing (limited) staff numbers with a high number of national delegations is another sensitive issue. Changes to national delegations after EP elections may induce exchanging 'unfitting' languages with 'fitting' ones, which pressures previous staff (Renew Staff F 240320). Allocating resources to ensure a minimum for every national delegation also raised concerns about democratic practices, particularly

from Eurosceptic and populist parties, because, as a Green/EFA MEP stated,

they cheat on the money and on the expenditure (...) and part of the money is just distributed equally to each party regardless of size or electoral success, and under those rules, it makes sense to split yourself into as many tiny bits as you can because you always get the minimum equal amount. (Greens/EFA MEP M 030320)

### *Layer 3: Political Group Formation and Consolidation Through Policies*

In Layer 3, political group formation progresses to substantial decisions for policy-making during the parliamentary term. This is a delicate process requiring simultaneously satisfying interests of national delegations for policy fields and related positions and—in those groups that strive for group cohesion—committing them to a group line. Political groups mainly focus on negotiating committee and policy field responsibilities, with the size of national delegations and different policy positions coming into play. The EPRoP only stipulate political group proportionality for committee membership and regulate cases where political groups leave seats unoccupied (Rule 209); rules for distributing positions within political groups are absent. However, an analysis of our interview material revealed that MEPs perceive selection procedures for policy field responsibilities as an element of political group formation. Engaging with them reveals internal rules and procedures. While much research exists on the selection of committee (and vice) chairs, coordinators and committee members (Bowler & Farrell, 1995; Daniel & Thierse, 2018; McElroy, 2006; Treib & Schlipphak, 2019), a fine-grained analysis of different group practices is often lacking in these accounts (for exceptions, see Mamadouh & Raunio, 2003; Whitaker, 2011).

Comparable to Layer 2, informal institutions dominate Layer 3. Interviewees across all political groups emphasised the necessity to satisfy national delegations when forming the group with allocations of committee positions, either as (vice) chair, coordinator or committee member. This, however, meant different things for different delegations. The Greens/EFA group and large national delegations, such as the Germans, must coordinate ‘in order to not have seven Germans for seven seats in one committee’, while smaller delegations ‘just say what

they want' (Greens/EFA MEP F 300919). Here, the Secretary General, in her administrative leadership role, distributes people to the committees (Kantola & Miller, 2022). In contrast, one ENF interviewee used more confrontational language, saying that 'there's arguing about committees' and everyone wants the same thing (ENF MEP M 070219). Potential workload also influences who enters which committee, and large national delegations can manage a comparatively higher workload compared to small delegations since they can compensate for it by redistributing within their delegation (Greens/EFA MEP M 030320).

As seen in previous literature on policy congruence (McElroy & Benoit, 2010) and on pragmatic reasons underlying group formation (Bressanelli, 2012), forming common policy positions is important, as group cohesion secures the power to influence EP policies. Furthermore, united positions may help build and maintain political affinity, which, in turn, may increase the likelihood of continuing the political group after the next elections.<sup>7</sup>

Political groups, however, were divided on the question of grounding their formation in common policy positions (see Elomäki et al. in this volume). Interviews with left-leaning political groups illustrated the importance of forming joint policy positions for their group identity, and some specifically described the significance of shared values as the basis for policy positions (GUE-NGL MEP F 160320). Staff also emphasised how it helped them 'to be more effective' and 'to have – you know – rules, so you feel secure and safe as an MEP and as staff' (GUE-NGL Staff F 160320). For S&D, the unity achieved in this way is core. The citation below illustrates how group cohesion on key issues is prioritised for policy-making purposes.

We are not always united, but this is for us very important. Being united in the big fights, and we are therefore decisive. Being united and able to negotiate with parts of other groups. So we have many, many examples where our group was decisive in law-making. (S&D Staff M 290419)

On the other side of the political spectrum, the ECR ensured the groups' survival by solving policy position-related conflicts early on:

Political groups are artificial creations in many ways, (...) in fact there's some kind of marriages of convenience that are required. (...) And they will have certain things in common, but will have lots of differences as well.



And you have to try and help the process of them getting over that. You have to try and stop disputes from escalating before they get to the stage where people feel they cannot climb down (...). (ECR Staff M 200219)

The RRP groups ID, ENF and EFDD, in contrast, emphasised the importance of accepting differing national positions and a preference for open-voting, with no incentive to increase policy congruence. In the 8th Parliament, the EFDD interviewees said they were allowed ‘a lot more freedom than, maybe, the other ones’ and prioritised ‘changing this place and fighting structures within it’ (EFDD MEP M 290119\_2), unlike finding shared policy positions. As illustrated for Layer 1, the UKIP perceived the political group structure as one imposed by EP rules and adopted a distinctly instrumental position (EFDD MEP M 290119\_3; see also McDonnell & Werner, 2019). For the new ID group, reaching common policy positions occurred at the level of national delegations, rather than at the political group level:

Decision-making? Hmm, that’s... [utters a laugh] That’s something that we currently still work on. How we find decisions, which everybody is okay with. So normally we do decisions on the delegation level, so in the German delegation we decide which type of resolution for example we table for the plenary. (...) So, and an MEP would like to do a resolution (...), we go and give it to the head of our delegation, and then they give it back to us after they spoke with the secretary of the group, so that’s the normal way of doing things here. (ID Staff M 110320)

For democracy, negotiated, written and commonly understood policy positions are in many ways more democratic than untransparent and informal ones: they are agreed upon by the group, and the group can then be held accountable for those agreements. The RRP groups demonstrated greater flexibility on this and had little compulsion to achieve common policy positions. The political groups called it ‘openness’, but it also increased the instances of negotiating decisions with only a select few.

#### *Layer 4: Changes to Political Group Composition During the Legislative Term*

Layer 4 illustrates the dynamic character of political group formation throughout the legislative period, with individual MEPs or national

delegations switching groups, or conversely, groups expelling MEPs or delegations (McDonnell & Werner, 2019; Whitaker & Lynch, 2014). Historically, external factors like CEEC enlargement rounds changed political group composition and EP power balances (see Bressanelli, 2014), and in the 9th legislature, Brexit constituted a major critical juncture.

M5S in the 8th parliament is illustrative of national delegations re-negotiating their affiliations. M5S had originally joined EFDD despite having considerably fewer policy differences and markedly higher voting accord with ECR, GUE-NGL and Greens/EFA (Bressanelli & De Candia, 2019, p. 36). After winning the Italian elections, M5S negotiated in 2017, despite low policy congruence, with ALDE about joining because the EFDD appeared too ‘radical’ for a ‘respectable’ government party that wanted to appeal to moderate voters (Bressanelli & De Candia, 2019, pp. 40–42).

M5S’s struggle to enter a suitable political group continued in the 9th Parliament, and Greens/EFA was one option. Greens/EFA recognised the need to ‘keep the group as big as possible to have the influence’; however, while M5S ‘had actually voted similarly to the Greens on so many issues, their reputation around refugees particularly is not aligned with our policies on freedom of movement and welcoming refugees’ (Greens/EFA MEP F 250220). Thus, value considerations played a central role (see also Layer 1) and resistance was amplified because of:

concerns on the funding of the party, the party internal democracy and so on were given that they aren’t a party, but some sort of movement that is closely intertwined with business interests, that is, particularly for a transparency a big issue. (Greens/EFA MEP M 030320)

British MEPs leaving after Brexit shifted power balances between political groups and within groups between national party delegations and required reallocating key leadership positions (Layer 2) between remaining MEPs and groups. Notably, political groups traditionally dominated by British MEPs lost a significant number after the traditional parties failed badly in the 2019 elections, thereby decreasing UK Conservatives in the ECR from 20 to four MEPs. Although the group had already adjusted with view to Brexit, the diminished UK delegation caused a reorientation on issues other than immigration (Layer 3) (ECR MEP M 191219).

Brexit also significantly impacted the Greens/EFA who lost 11 out of 75 MEPs, thereby lifting the ID group as the fourth largest in the EP before them. In Greens/EFA, the German and French delegations became proportionally more powerful, with the potential to shift the politics of the group (Layer 3): ‘I think the Germans tend to be more centrist and less radical than, less left-wing than the rest of the group. So, you get slightly different positioning politically, I think as a result’ (Greens/EFA MEP F 240220; also Greens/EFA MEP M 030320).

ID becoming larger was considered a significant blow to the Greens/EFA. A number of MEPs lamented that they now had to ‘speak after ID which is unpleasant’ in committees and plenary (Greens/EFA MEP M 030320), with some finding it ‘very bad’ and ‘traumatising’ (Greens/EFA MEP F 100320). This resulted in ‘a race to replace people’. Yet the group held to its principles, as an interviewee remarked: ‘But the majority of the group basically said no, we’re not going to replace, at any rate, it’s not about just being fourth group, it’s also being coherent between ourselves’ (Greens/EFA MEP F 100320). The negotiations with M5S illustrated this point.

The ID group perspective was different and the slow pace of forming the group administratively was explained by Brexit and the hostile attitude from other groups.

Since we founded a new group, we had a six-month (...) period where you couldn’t basically build up. We didn’t have the funds yet. Then Brexit of course. So these different positions could not have been allocated to our group yet because the other groups were still sitting on them. They were basically waiting for Brexit because if Brexit didn’t happen, they would not have to give up these positions to be reallocated to us. But no, Brexit did happen, so they said, ‘Okay fine, we have to relinquish those positions’. (ID MEP F 110320)

Layer 4 illustrates how the lack of formal rules and critical junctures affects political group formation and potentially challenges democratic practices between and within competing political groups. If, due to changes in group composition, powerful EP leadership positions need to be redistributed, they invite inter-group conflicts and may thus undermine input legitimacy.

## CONCLUSION

We showed that political group formation can be better understood and studied as dynamically intertwined four layers. This analytical perspective demands going beyond the studies that focus almost exclusively on political group formation regarding the formal procedures after the EP elections—what we describe as Layer 1. Future analyses should consider our proposed additional layers: political group formation through core functions (Layer 2), formation through shared policy positions and distributing policy field responsibilities (Layer 3) and changes throughout the legislative term (Layer 4). Furthermore, our analysis illustrates that while there are formal institutions such as the EPoP and political group statutes that may guide these processes much happens at the level of informal institutions: unwritten norms and practices. Some—such as the importance of pleasing national delegations—are strong informal norms and shared among many groups. Others are more hidden, involving hard negotiation and power plays.

Each of these layers can be assessed regarding its democratic practices with more openness, transparency and participation as indicators of democratic functioning within an institution. There are surprisingly few formal institutions to ensure transparency and participation. In Layer 1, EPoP criteria such as ‘political affinity’ leave ample room for interpretation and political struggle. Informal norms and values, such as maximising group size, could be argued to act against core democratic norms. In Layers 2 and 3, informal institutions played a significant role vis-a-vis the size of national delegations and guided MEP selection to different key positions in the parliament, committees and political groups. Despite the informality of the norm, it need not necessarily be undemocratic if it were systematically and openly followed. Our interview material provided examples of flexibility towards this norm: both large and small national delegations could be disadvantaged in different ways.

Finally, different practices between political groups were evident. Tensions appear particularly regarding increasing political group size in Layers 1 and 4. In Layer 1, some political groups (EPP; ECR, EFDD; ID) strategically aimed at getting as many seats as possible; others rejected MEPs, or national party delegations, violating their core principles (Greens/EFA), and others still were willing to negotiate a path between these two positions (S&D; ALDE/Renew; GUE/NGL). In contrast, in Layer 2, we showed how political groups such as EPP, S&D,

Greens/EFA and, to some extent, older and more established groups, ALDE/Renew and ECR, had standardised practices for political group formation through distributing core functions, while new (EFDD, ID) or differently composed political groups (confederal GUE/NGL) decided in a quasi-ad hoc manner how to proceed. Here, it was not political ideology that divided groups but, rather, the age of the group or its organisational structure. In Layer 3, we traced distributing policy-related positions as another important step in creating political affinity and group cohesion. Green and left political groups in particular, including the ECR, deemed joint policy positions important, while the RRP groups placed little or no emphasis on this. Thus, holding on to shared principles and policy priorities and formalising political group practices materialised as key questions from the perspective of democratic practices distinguishing political groups in Layers 2 and 3. In Layer 4, we noted again the strongly principled position of the Greens/EFA in responding to sudden changes; in this case, the decreased group size and dropping behind the ID group in size were because of Brexit. The discussion highlights how political group formation—as so many other issues discussed in this book—needs to be understood not only in terms of the EP framework, but also in terms of the political dynamics at the political group level.

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## NOTES

1. Political groups overlap but are not identical with so-called Europarties. The latter are transnational party organisations comprising national parties from European states. For further details, see Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín (2021) and the introduction by Ahrens, Elomäki and Kantola to this volume.
2. In March 2021, Fidesz left the EPP group in the EP, and the EPP Europarty started an exclusion procedure.
3. For an overview of political groups formed after the 2019 elections and the impact of Brexit please see introduction by Ahrens, Elomäki and Kantola to this volume.
4. The ALDE group changed its name to Renew Europe after the 2019 elections to include the French La Republic en Marche.
5. Until January 2021 named European United Left-Nordic Green Left.

6. McDonnell and Werner (2019) illustrated that next to increasing size, considerations about ‘respectability’ made ECR wait for the Danish People’s Party, and the Finns Party to clean up their public profile before allowing them to join.
7. We are indebted to Anna Elomäki for pointing out this important aspect.

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