



Turbulent Times for the European Parliament's Political Groups? Lessons on Continuity and Change

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) has faced turbulent times especially over the past decade. It has been confronted with the economic, financial and Eurozone crisis since 2008; the so-called migration crisis since 2015; Brexit since the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016—and its eventual departure in 2020; and a rise in radical right populism, illiberalism and authoritarianism in member states (Zeitlin et al., 2019). These crises

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were topped with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which shut down member state economies and societies and closed their borders. The turbulent times of the continent and the EU have also impacted the work of the European Parliament (EP) (Costa, 2019). The EP has played varying roles in relation to these crises. At times, it has been pushed aside, as in the Eurozone crisis, with the Council of the European Union and the European Commission dominating decision-making (Bressanelli & Chelotti, 2016). Other times, it has exercised the powers granted to it or sought to maximise its powers beyond those formally granted to it, as in becoming a ‘quasi-negotiator’ in the Brexit process (Bressanelli et al., 2021; Meissner & Schoeller, 2019). The crises and crisis response policies have been extensively debated in the parliamentary plenaries. They have also impacted the dynamics within the parliament by changing power relations between the political groups and within them.

Fulfilling the formal requirements for political group formation, 23 MEPs from at least seven member states and shared political affinities, the seven political groups formed in the 9th Parliament (2019–2024) illustrate well the changes and continuities the EP faced. While some groups have existed since the 1950s, others were formed or renamed more recently. Political groups vary greatly in size, which influences their relative power in EP decision-making and policy-making, while the size of national party delegations shapes power relations within the political groups (see Ahrens and Kantola in this volume). Political affinities matter internally for political group identities and policy positions and also allow for distinguishing groups and their politics along various axes: along socio-economic left versus right cleavages (Hix et al., 2007), as either pro or anti-EU integration (Otjes & van der Veer, 2016) or the GAL (Greens, Alternatives, Libertarians) versus TAN (Traditionalists, Authoritarians, Nationalists) dimension (Brack, 2018; Hooghe et al., 2002; see Brack and Behm; Börzel and Hartlapp; Ripoll Servent in this volume). Nevertheless, policy cohesion, and with it, voting cohesion, continued to remain high for the most established groups (Lefkofridi & Katsadinou, 2018; Warasin et al., 2019; Whitaker & Lynch, 2014) although changes occurred due to cleavages between debtor and creditor countries (Vesan & Corti, 2019) or due to specific national politics encouraging national parties to counter the political group line (Ahrens et al., 2022; Cavallaro et al., 2018; Mondo & Close, 2018; Rasmussen, 2008).

Providing innovative inroads into studying political groups as the key political actors in the EP was thus the key aim of this edited volume. This

specific focus was propelled by the turbulent times the EP and its political groups are subjected to, most of them still unresolved. Against this background, the chapters in this volume analysed the political groups' multiple functions, powers and practices both in terms of their *formal* institutional aspects and in terms of *informal* practices interacting with and shaping formal rules. Drawing on (new) institutionalism to define formal and informal institutions, many chapters engaged with political groups' activities and practices at inter-group, intra-group and inter-institutional levels. The *cordon sanitaire* closing off radical right populists from important EP functions and negotiations, is, for instance, a well-known informal *inter-group* practice (Kantola & Miller, 2021; Ripoll Servent, 2019; Ripoll Servent in this volume). Likewise, despite the turbulent times and changes in political groups, consensus-seeking and compromising characterise EP negotiations (Ripoll Servent, 2015; Roger, 2016), often to the detriment of smaller political groups (Elomäki, 2021; Kreppel, 2002). As for *intra-group* activities, these have become more formalised and centralised over the years (Bressanelli, 2014; see Bressanelli in this volume), and some chapters in this volume began to fill research gaps regarding formal and informal intra-group activities (see Ahrens and Kantola; Elomäki et al.; Miller in this volume). Moreover, several chapters engage with *inter-institutional* activities of the political groups, be it the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), rule of law procedures or trilogues (see Johansson and Raunio; Morijn; Ripoll Servent in this volume). Unquestionably, these turbulent times affect the internal decision- and policy-making processes of the EP and its political groups.

In this conclusion, we compare lessons to learn from the chapters of this edited volume regarding core aspects of change and continuity: Euroscepticism and radical right populism, democracy and democratic practices and formal and informal practices by and within the political groups.

EUROSCEPTICISM, RADICAL RIGHT POPULISM AND POLITICAL GROUPS

Euroscepticism, as well as right-wing populism, has become a core characteristic of EU integration in recent years; this is also true for the political groups in the EP (Brack, 2018; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021a; McDonnell & Werner, 2019). The impact has been, thus far, mainly discursive and rhetorical, with strong visibility in EP plenaries, yet with

almost no effect on substantive policy-making in committees or trilogues (Brack, 2018; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021a; Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019). With the Identity and Democracy Group (ID) becoming the fourth-largest group after Brexit, the EP faces a new situation. It seems unlikely that the absenteeism of Eurosceptic MEPs (see Brack, 2018) will continue; rather, we can likely expect more attempts to influence policy outcomes.

A significant number of the chapters of this volume have discussed the impact of Euroscepticism and radical right populism on the political groups. The strengthening of Euroscepticism and the rise of radical right populism are symptoms of the multiple crises the EU has faced, including especially the economic crisis and the so-called refugee crisis. The concern about Eurosceptic and radical right parties within the EP undermining EU integration, EU decision-making and EU core values is shared by all authors of this volume.

One specific contribution of the chapters has been to deepen the understanding of the engagement and disengagement of the Eurosceptic and radical right groups in EP policy-making. The chapter by Börzel and Hartlapp found that Eurosceptic groups' ability to form a coherent opposition depended on the policy field: it was higher in policy fields related to new political cleavages—such as gender equality and non-discrimination—than policies appealing to national interests or structured on the left–right axis. Brack and Behm's chapter, in turn, showed that soft and hard Eurosceptics favour parliamentary activities related to scrutinising other EU institutions, and channelling the discontent of citizens, instead of engaging in policy-work, not least due to the *cordon sanitaire*. These findings charted quite normal functioning of the parliament despite the rise of Euroscepticism.

A new research agenda emerging from the chapters is the cooperation and competition of Eurosceptic and radical right political groups with mainstream political groups. The respective chapters by Börzel and Hartlapp, as well as by Ripoll Servent, pointed out that there is policy congruence and shared discourse between the Eurosceptic groups and the mainstream parties. Their findings illustrate the limits of the *cordon sanitaire* and the difficulties in keeping radical right ideologies out of the mainstream in the EP. As the chapter by Ripoll Servent shows, of the mainstream political groups, the EPP in particular faces difficult trade-offs in terms of whether and how to engage with the 'respectable' radical right groups. However, Börzel and Hartlapp found behavioural

affinity between the Eurosceptic groups and the left as well—for instance, regarding economic nationalism and welfare chauvinism. These findings imply that studying the patterns of cooperation and competition between Eurosceptic and mainstream groups is all the more important for the ongoing legislature (9th EP) where the mainstream groups are more squeezed from the edges.

The chapters of this volume also drew attention to the turbulent times that the rise of radical right populism has caused for some core EU values that the EP normally upholds. Of EU values, gender equality is becoming particularly contested, which is especially relevant for the EP, a promoter of equality and non-discrimination. The impact of such opposition to the core value of equality was analysed in Kantola's chapter. It is, indeed, striking that nearly one third of the MEPs in the EP are opposed to gender equality. Radical right populism then leads to increased polarisation in the parliament. This chapter showed that there are groups that support equality strongly and those that build their identity on opposing this.

The chapter by Morijn illustrated that the political groups have been unable to protect EU values against the increasing presence of illiberal elements within the political groups. While the majority of political groups hold no issue in criticising member states for rule of law violations, they forgo addressing problems related to the political groups; in other words, to themselves. As Morijn shows, national party delegations violating EU basic values are represented in many political groups, including the mainstream political groups EPP, S&D and Renew, yet political groups' track-record of enforcing the tools available to protect these values within the EP is rather disillusioning. Moreover, the existing rules are formulated in a way that, according to Morijn, 'almost certainly serves to protect "values violators" who sit inside mainstream Europarties and political groups—a rather disappointing perspective with view to Eurosceptic and radical right political groups'.

POLITICAL GROUPS AS DEMOCRATIC ACTORS

Democracy is one of the core values on which the European Union was founded (Article 2 TEU). Yet, democracy and challenges to it have been at the heart of the multiple crises the EU has faced. For example, the financial, economic and Eurozone crises have been argued to de-democratise EU decision-making by shifting powers from democratically

elected bodies to fiscal bureaucracy (Crum, 2018). Radical right populism has resulted in democratic backsliding in member states, which has taken the form of idealising illiberal democracy, curtailing the freedom of the press, attacking courts, concentrating power in the hands of the executive and attacking minority rights (Galston, 2018; Gora & de Wilde, 2020). The European Parliament, as the only directly elected body, is the key democratic institution of the EU, and its political groups are seen as embodiments of the competition of political ideas required by democratic politics. As an institution, the European Parliament has taken an active role in scrutinising member states' rule of law situations and in calling the Commission to act on member states no longer adhering to liberal democracy. The EP upholds democracy and representation as important topics in inter-institutional negotiations (see Johansson and Raunio in this volume), and concerns about the democratic deficit and legitimacy of integration give a central role to the parliament. At the same time, scholars have called for scrutiny of the EP and its political groups as democratic actors (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021b; Kelemen, 2020; Morijn, 2019; see Morijn in this volume). This volume has provided a number of insights on these issues from the perspective of political groups.

Starting with the extent to which the political groups can be seen as expressing the will of the citizens and facilitating citizen participation (as in input legitimacy, see, e.g. Schmidt, 2020; Kantola et al. in this volume), the findings are ambivalent. Bressanelli's chapter suggested that established political groups are becoming more independent from national member parties. An interesting question to explore then becomes whether this leads to better representation of citizens or, rather, to a growing distance from citizens in the EU member states when national parties start losing their control. Johansson and Raunio, in turn, show that Europarties and the EP's political groups can enhance the legitimacy of European integration, particularly if they facilitate citizen participation in EU constitutional processes. The CoFoE, which has been seen as a way to address democratic deficits and increase the democratic legitimacy of EU integration, is a good case for assessing the extent to which political groups succeed in this task. As Johansson and Raunio showed in this chapter, even if the EP tried from the beginning to claim ownership of the Conference, and if the biggest political groups (EPP, S&D and Renew) were strongly engaged in the important agenda-setting phase, the main Europarties and political groups hardly attempted to reach out to the citizens and grass roots party members. The groups' approach to

the Conference was in line with the criticism of the CoFoE as elitist and top-down.

The lack of political contestation, and the large majority coalitions dominated by the EPP and the S&D, has been seen as another sign of the lack of citizens' representation in the EP. Brack and Behm's chapter suggested that even if the EP has been governed by a 'cartel' of mainstream parties, this has not led to the elimination of opposition. Rather, opposition actors—smaller, non-Eurosceptic groups that have not been part of the Grand Coalition and the Eurosceptics—play a key role in channelling conflicts within the EP and fill different democratic functions. While non-Eurosceptic opposition has aimed at shaping EU policies and providing alternatives to the Grand Coalition, soft Eurosceptics tend to act as watchdogs of EU institutions. Hard Eurosceptics, in turn, channel the claims of dissatisfied citizens within the EP and the EU. In Brack and Behm's words, 'a better understanding of opposition in the EP allows for a more nuanced view of their input and function for the institution and the EU as a whole'. Similarly, Börzel and Hartlapp's analysis of Eurosceptic contestation within the EP concluded that such contestation does not necessarily undermine the working of the EP, but may support responsiveness to citizens' concerns and contribute to more differentiated European integration. Analysing patterns of opposition and coalition building remains crucial in the 9th EP, where the Grand Coalition of S&D and the EPP has given way to more flexible and inclusive coalition building and left more room for opposition actors.

Adding to these discussions about input legitimacy, Morijn's chapter raised the question of how to balance the increasing representation of illiberal, anti-democratic political parties and their voters' interests in the EP with the protection of EU values. The EP and the EU have tried to protect EU values such as human rights and the rule of law through restricting illiberal political parties' access to and participation in the EP, but with limited effect. It is relevant to ask how limiting access of parties supported by voters at the national level might affect the support of 'the people' for the EU, or how representative and democratic the EP is if certain parties are excluded. Yet, as Morijn argues, such compromises might be necessary for EU values and liberal democracy in general to be protected.

Many of the chapters have added insights to the *democratic practices* of the political groups. A focus on the democratic practices of the political groups places the responsibility for ensuring democracy on the groups

themselves and draws attention to what the political groups are and could be doing to ensure that the goal and value of democracy is met. Several others illustrate how political groups are differently positioned in relation to this issue. For example, Ahrens and Kantola analysed the issue of political group formation in the parliament after EP elections and throughout the legislative terms. They showed how for some groups practices that supported democracy, such as fairness and openness, were important and upheld in this process, whilst for others it was a power struggle where concerns for political group size pushed aside values such as democracy. Similarly, in some political groups the political group formation practices were formalised, thereby supporting democratic functioning rather than ad hoc, as in radical right populist groups.

The chapters also provided insights in relation to democracy and decision-making within the political groups. Bressanelli's chapter described, on one hand, the centralisation of power in the political groups, and on the other hand, the bottom-up approach to decision-making. The chapter suggested that both the EPP and S&D groups operate in a bottom-up rather than a top-down manner. Arising conflicts are negotiated within the group, and cohesion is not imposed by the group leadership. However, the chapter identifies that the national party delegations have more influence on MEPs (in the EPP and S&D) than the group leadership.

Adding to this understanding of how cohesion is negotiated within groups, the chapter by Elomäki, Gaweda and Berthet mapped important trends in intra-group policy-making, such as the decreasing role of the political group plenaries and the increasing role of the political group presidencies when conflicting issues are referred to horizontal working groups chaired by vice-presidents. This chapter suggested that this can be interpreted in different ways: on one hand, a shift away from group plenaries decreases transparency. On the other hand, horizontal working groups provide a new deliberative arena. Analysing these shifts from the point of view of democratic practices, as well as shedding light on the differences between political groups—as done in the chapter by Elomäki, Gaweda and Berthet—remains crucial. Also, the chapter by Johansson and Raunio echoed the findings about the important role of group leadership in policy-making. In the CoFoE process, the balance of power within the groups shifted towards the group leaders and 'seasoned veterans of constitutional processes'.

Kantola's chapter broadened the common understanding of democratic practices by arguing that practices for promoting gender equality are practices for democracy. Here, a left–right, GAL-TAN distinction prevails, with conservative and radical right populist groups lagging behind left-green groups. Gender equality is a fundamental principle to two political groups and a flexible norm for two, but contradictory or dangerous to the rest. This sends some worrying signals about the current legitimacy of gender equality as a crucial facet of EU and EP democracy. Finally, Miller's chapter on using ethnography to explore political groups provides insight into how scholars can find new inroads to identify and study democratic practices. Miller argues that ethnographic inquiry is perfectly placed to study democratic practices; it can help to identify critical actors, address subjective, daily conceptions of group democracy and reveal contrasts between formal democratic indicators and lived experiences of democratic spaces. In sum, the chapters make a strong case that intra-group democratic practices—which differ from group to group—matter for the democratic legitimacy of the EP's decision-making, and thereby for the legitimacy of the EU legislative process.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE POLITICAL GROUPS

Getting at these dynamics discussed above, for example, in relation to democracy and democratic practices, has benefitted from the chapters focusing—in line with (new) institutionalism (cf. Gains & Lowndes, 2021)—on both formal and informal institutions and on their complex interplay. For example, Kantola's chapter showed how gendered inequalities in political groups, such as unequal division of speaking time or allocation of committee positions according to gendered expectations, have become institutionalised as informal institutions and have thereby been normalised as ways of doing things in the EP. This makes it harder to change inequalities and turns them into questions about democracy and democratic practices. Gendered structures can undermine individual politicians' agency and place them in pre-existing categories which have very little to do with their expectations or desires about political work in the parliament.

Bressanelli's chapter also addressed the complementarity and competition between formal and informal institutions—and the need to analyse

both to understand the political groups. Bressanelli showed how the political groups' formal rules have become more detailed and specific over time. Institutionalisation has made the groups stronger as organisations, and more differentiated and centralised. Yet, analysing formal rules only takes one so far. As Bressanelli notes, 'much of what is happening within the groups takes place informally [...] thus limiting the value of what can be inferred from the groups' "official stories"'. One crucial issue that cannot be addressed through formal rules is how group cohesion is achieved. Moreover, despite the increasingly detailed formal rules that have empowered supranational bodies over national party delegations, the power to sanction members remains within delegations.

The interplay between formal and informal institutions and its significance for intra-group dynamics and democracy is also at the centre of the chapters by Ahrens and Kantola and by Elomäki, Gaweda and Berthet. Ahrens and Kantola found that there are surprisingly few formal institutions to ensure transparency and participation in the different layers of political group formation; for example, the formal criteria about 'political affinity' leave ample room for interpretation and political struggle. Instead, informal norms and values that were often applied flexibly, such as maximising group size, played a significant role. Similarly, Elomäki, Gaweda and Berthet emphasised the importance of informal everyday practices and norms in groups' internal policy-making processes. For instance, although most groups had a formal rule about deciding on policy issues through majority voting, in practice, the groups differed significantly in terms of how often issues were put on vote, what kind of role was given to deliberation, and what kind of role the group leader took in brokering an agreement.

It is clear, therefore, that scholars should pay more attention to informal institutions within the political groups, as well as in intra-group and inter-institutional processes, in order to better understand how the political groups respond to the turbulent times and how they function as democratic actors. Miller's chapter provides some concrete tools for EP scholars interested in analysing both formal and informal institutions. Ethnographic practices—such as shadowing, meeting ethnography and hanging out—utilised in Miller's parliamentary ethnography of the EP conducted in the context of the EUGenDem project are effective ways to 'get underneath the skin' of political groups and shed light on informal dynamics.

POLITICAL GROUPS, EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND NEW RESEARCH AVENUES

Although the EP political groups stand out as unique organisations, they hold importance beyond their function, their internal practices and their role in parliamentary policy-making. They are core actors of European integration, and understanding their role in supranational politics beyond the EP will certainly become of growing interest. All three aspects discussed above—Euroscepticism, democracy and democratic practices and formal and informal institutions—are also relevant in regard to inter-institutional politics and relationships with member states.

By forming the EP positions through consensus-seeking negotiations, political groups constitute a cornerstone of EU decision-making vis-à-vis other EU institutions and can also offer inroads for other (transnational) stakeholders, such as business interests and civil society organisations, to express their political positions. The inter-institutional agreement from April 2021 between the Commission, the Council and the EP on a mandatory transparency register, which was supported by an overwhelming EP majority (645 votes in favour, five votes against, 49 abstentions), speaks to the democratic difficulties with transparency thus far encountered in organised interest representation. Negotiated under the lead of the two biggest political groups (Danuta Hübner for EPP and Katarina Barley for S&D), the EP also included indirect lobbying activities, which increased in importance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic considerably changed the supranational parliamentary as well as the inter-institutional setting and deserves sufficient attention regarding its impact on democracy, democratic practices and the formal and informal institutions that have thus far shaped policy- and decision-making. Early analyses illustrate the impact of sudden digitalisation and different treatment of committees, but also of different opportunities for political groups to participate in the established procedures (Braghiroli, 2021; Elomäki & Kantola, 2022; Ripoll Servent, 2021). How this will affect the relationship between the political groups and their formal and informal working procedures is an open question.

More generally, the crucial back-office of the EP with its Bureau, administration, committee secretariats and political group staff is still understudied regarding its facilitating role for negotiations and policy-making. How exactly is each political group supported? Supranational

administration is ascribed to neutrality, yet it still needs to deal with political positioning of political groups, not least the Eurosceptic ones. Similarly, multilingual and multicultural aspects of political group organisation have barely been explored, and with them, potential institutional racism and other exclusionary practices originating from stereotyping countries or national party delegations.

Then again, by constituting the building block of transnational party politics, political groups uphold important connections with their national (or sometimes regional) parties and thus play an important role in EU multilevel governance next to member states' governments represented in the Council. With parties considered essential for democracy and 'partyiness', the formal and informal relationship between Europarties and political groups is still under-researched (but see Almeida, 2012; Calossi & Cicchi, 2019). Yet, deciphering the black box of Europarties and political groups and their role in supranational governance can provide important insights into supranational party politics and the future of supranational democracy. Equally under-researched are the relationships between the EP and national parliaments and the role political groups play therein, and vice-versa, how EU politics are debated in national parliaments (see, for an exception, Wendler, 2016). If we then add to the picture the Council of the European Union with the member states' governing parties represented, the connections become even more complicated; another constellation as of yet unaddressed from a party politics angle.

Finally, given the strong commitment of the European Commission and its president, Ursula von der Leyen, on rule of law conditionality, sustainability and combating climate change, and protecting fundamental norms and values, research on the EP's political groups will probably become even more exciting. These topics will most likely divide political groups along various axes: geographical location, left–right and pro- and anti-EU integration, as well as along the GAL-TAN spectrum. Whether each political group will be able to close its rank and forge consensus within the EP and towards the other EU institutions is a subject all authors of this edited volume certainly have a vested interest in.

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