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Politics of expertise in the European Parliament: discursive constructions and contestations of expertise by party-political actors

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ABSTRACT


This article analyses the politics of expertise in the European Parliament (EP). We aim to understand how MEPs and political group staff discursively construct expertise, its role in parliamentary work, and how expertise is politicized in the EP. The qualitative analysis is based on an extensive interview dataset ($n = 133$) from the 8th and 9th legislative terms. It builds on a constructivist approach that sees expertise as constructed, legitimized, and institutionalized in discourses and practices and shaped by struggles and power relations. The article shows that expertise in the EP is a political rather than a technical question. Understandings of expertise and its role are constituted and contested, and political ideologies shape understandings of expertise. Although the role of technical policy expertise in the EP is broadly accepted, it is approached through a political lens, and political groups value and use expertise in different ways in internal policymaking.

KEYWORDS

European Parliament; expertise; MEPs; interest groups; political groups

Introduction

The European Union (EU) and its institutions have been founded on ideas about technical expertise, and technocratic governance has been the cornerstone of the polity since the initial phases of European integration. Expertization, namely the extensive reliance on science and professional expertise, has been further enhanced in at least some policy fields in the past decades (Góra, Holst, and Warat 2018). At the same time, the role of scientific and professional expertise in EU policymaking has become more contested by academics, elected actors, and civil society (Abazi, Adriaensen, and Christiansen 2021). The increased contestation reveals the political character of expertise that, in our view, requires further investigation in the EU context. To this end, we mobilize the concept of *politics of expertise* to argue that the role, content, and providers of expertise in EU policymaking are subject to constant discursive and procedural struggles within and outside the different EU institutions.

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This article analyses the politics of expertise in the EU's representative institution, the European Parliament (EP), and it takes the point of view of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) as well as the political groups as EP's key internal actors (Ahrens, Elomaki, and Kantola 2022). Focusing on the EP allows us to approach politics of expertise from the perspective of elected and party-political actors and show its links to political ideologies. This is a new perspective to the research on expertise in EU decision-making that has largely focused on the uses of expertise by different EU institutions and has stressed the technocratic character of expertise. Expertization and technical and specialized expertise have also been shown to shape EP policymaking. This has been seen to apply to the external experts used by the EP's standing committees, internal actors within the EP administration, and MEPs themselves, even if the lines between technical and political are often blurred (Alexander 2022; Coen and Katsaitis 2019; Lord 2018). As the EP adapts to its new competencies given by the Lisbon Treaty, the political struggles related to the role, content, and providers of expertise in this representative institution require further examination. Our research objective is to understand how the party-political actors in the EP discursively construct expertise and its role in parliamentary work and examine the contested and political character of these constructions.

We operate on a constructivist and open understanding of experts and expertise, which extends beyond scientific and specialized expertise. We build on the idea that expertness is not a quality of certain individuals or forms of knowledge but something constructed by the audience – in this case, the MEPs and the EP political groups. This understanding allows us to focus on contestations and competing constructions. We address expertise in the EP as a three-dimensional issue consisting of MEP expertise, expertise of EP administration and political group staff, and expertise external to the EP. These three dimensions are intertwined. By combining these three dimensions of expertise crucial for EP policymaking, we broaden our understanding of what constitutes expertise in the EP and shed light on the political dynamics related to the role of expertise in this representative EU institution.

Our research questions are: How do MEPs and political group staff discursively construct expertise and its role in parliamentary work, and what hierarchies of expertise shape these constructions? How is expertise politicized in the EP, and what differences emerge between the political groups? We answer these questions through a qualitative, constructivist analysis of an extensive interview dataset from the 8th and 9th legislative terms. Our contribution to research on the role of expertise in EP policymaking is to approach the issue from the perspective of party-political actors and their constructions. This allows us to shed light on the political contestations around expertise and nuanced understandings of the EP as an efficiency-oriented parliament focused on gathering technical expertise.

From a new perspective, the article confirms the importance of expertise in the EP while drawing attention to the conflicts and contestations (or lack thereof) that shape the role of expertise within political groups and at the EP level. We argue that EP party-political actors largely accept the expertization of EP policymaking and that their discursive constructions further institutionalize and legitimize the role of specialized policy expertise in the EP in ways that undermine the representative work of some MEPs. However, technical expertise is only part of the equation: policy expertise intertwines with policymaking expertise and knowledge about political group positions, allowing the MEPs to advance their issues and the groups to stay cohesive. Challenging technocratic

interpretations, the party-political actors construct specialized policy expertise, whether provided by internal or external actors, as political and view it through their political ideologies. In particular, legitimate external expertise is a politically contested issue, and the conflicting views shape groups' own engagement with external actors and affect the EP's formal channels for engaging with external experts, such as committee hearings and commissioned studies. Moreover, the way political groups value and use expertise in their internal decision-making varies, with differences between large and small and hierarchical and non-hierarchical groups.

Based on previous research, we start by outlining our three-dimensional approach to expertise in the EP, which consists of external, internal, and MEP expertise. We then discuss our theoretical framework focused on a constructive approach and politics of expertise and describe our data and methods. In the analysis, we first address constructions of MEP expertise. We then broaden the discussion to the constructions of the expertise of EP's bureaucratic-administrative actors and political groups' staff and, finally, the expertise provided by external actors.

Three dimensions of expertise in EP policymaking

The EP can be seen as a 'normal parliament in a polity of a different kind' (Ripoll Servent and Roederer-Rynning 2018). Previously referred to as a talking shop, the Lisbon Treaty significantly increased the powers of the EP. The EP now adopts, together with the Council, directives from the European Commission, acts as a budgetary authority, and approves the nomination of the President of the Commission and the Commissioners (Bressanelli and Chelotti 2019; Héritier et al. 2019; Rittberger 2012). Previous literature has suggested that expertise has been important for the EP's efforts to develop political autonomy vis-à-vis the Commission and the Council (Lord 2018). To assess the Commission's legislative proposals, amend them, and negotiate with the Council, the EP requires technical knowledge. Therefore, 'information is a highly valued good in [EP] legislative politics' (Ringe, Victor, and Carman 2013, 25, quoted in Landorff 2019, 135). Expertise has been a common theme in EP research, even if this research has not always explicitly engaged with theories of expertise. We identify three main themes in this literature: i) involvement of external experts and knowledge producers in EP policymaking, ii) role of internal expertise in EP policymaking, and iii) MEPs as experts.

Regarding the first theme that echoes the approach to expertise in EU studies, scholars have pointed out that a large part of the information and expertise required by the EP comes from interest groups, civil society organizations (CSOs), academics, think tanks, government officials, and other external actors. MEPs, political groups, and EP committees seek information from these actors to produce legislative outputs and engage in a form of deliberation where policymakers receive and process information to make policy choices (Chalmers 2013; Coen, Lehmann, and Katsaitis 2021).

Committee hearings are the most important formal channel for expertise-seeking within the EP (Coen and Katsaitis 2019, 2021). Coen and Katsaitis (2019) have shown that technocratic expertise is favored in these hearings: think tanks are overwhelmingly the most common actors involved. While the committee hearings establish an image of inclusiveness, the emphasis on think tanks, research institutes, and universities technocratizes and depoliticizes deliberation by crowding out actors without the requisite

expertise. These findings indicate that as EU policymaking becomes more complex, the EP increasingly turns to epistemic expertise. Beyond committee hearings, the expertise of external actors is acquired through lobbying (e.g. Coen, Lehmann, and Katsaitis 2021; Dionigi 2017; Marshall 2015; Rasmussen 2015). The extensive literature on the topic has shown, among other things, that some political groups and committees are more open to business interests than others to trade unions and civil society (Dionigi 2017; Rasmussen 2015). Lobbying is not a one-way street: MEPs rely on the information and expertise provided by organized interests (Chalmers 2013; Dionigi 2017).

Also, actors internal to the EP and political group administration feed expertise to EP policymaking. MEPs in charge of specific legislative files often rely on committee secretariats for information on EP's earlier positions and background knowledge on the subject matter, as well as for filtering the information received from lobbyists (Alexander 2021; Egeberg et al. 2013; Pegan 2022; Winzen 2011). The European Parliament Research Service (EPRS), established in 2013, has stepped up the EP's in-house expertise, equipping committees, political groups, and MEPs with independent assessments and background research (Greenwood and Roederer-Rynning 2020, 123). Political group secretariats and MEPs' assistants take a more political role and provide explicitly political advice in line with the group's political ideology (Egeberg et al. 2013, Pegan 2017; Winzen 2011). The line between technical expertise and political advice is often fluid, and all staff groups provide both kinds of information (Egeberg et al. 2013; Winzen 2011).

Scholars have also argued that the EP and the inter-institutional policymaking process pressures individual MEPs to become policy experts themselves (e.g. Lord 2018; Navarro 2009). Decision-making in the EP is characterized by a division of labor. MEPs specialize in specific committees and issues, such as fisheries, employment, social policies, or gender equality (e.g. Wodak 2009). Specialization occurs even within committees, as the complex and technical character of many files excludes most members from the detailed deliberations even if they possess general expertise related to the policy area (Ringe 2009, 54–55). The policy or professional expertise of the MEPs gained through committee membership has been seen as a key factor in effective legislative work (Alexander 2022). Apart from participating in committee work and meeting with interest groups, MEPs acquire expertise through informal EP forums, such as intergroups, which provide MEPs with informational capital (Landorff 2019).

Scholars have also drawn attention to other types of MEP expertise. Due to the characteristics of EP decision-making (e.g. broad coalitions, no government/opposition), 'knowledge about the position and thinking of others and about how to convince parliamentary colleagues is as necessary as substantial knowledge' (Landorff 2019, 136–137). MEPs also need to be 'good at explaining, persuading and negotiating' (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2011, 9). Different concepts have been used to describe this type of expertise. Wodak (2009) has discussed *organizational knowledge* about EP rules and procedures and *political knowledge* related to tactics or strategies to influence decision-making. More recently, Alexander (2022) coined the term *policymaking expertise* to refer to understanding the legislative system gained through committee work.

Drawing on previous research, we address expertise in the EP as a three-dimensional issue consisting of external, internal, and MEP expertise. These dimensions are intertwined: MEPs build their own expertise by engaging with the EP's administrative-bureaucratic staff and political groups staff and with external knowledge providers. Our

contribution to previous literature is two-fold. First, by combining the three dimensions often discussed separately, we provide a more holistic picture of the role of expertise in EP policymaking and how these dimensions intertwine. Second, we approach questions about expertise in the EP from a new methodological and theoretical perspective by analyzing MEPs' and political groups' discursive constructions of expertise and its role in EP policymaking. By taking the perspective of the EP's party-political actors and focusing on competing constructions, we shed light on the political character of expertise in the EP.

Analyzing politics of expertise in the EP

In political science and EU studies research, the terms expertise and experts have been defined in different ways. Often, the definitions have revolved around specialized communities of experts. For instance, Weible (2008, 615–616) defines expertise as 'content generated by professional, scientific and technical methods of inquiry,' while experts encompass 'policy analysts, scientists and researchers in government and nongovernmental organizations.' Others have suggested that expertise and expertness are not given categories; rather, they are contestable and malleable (Newman and Clarke 2018) and that there is 'inherent subjectivity' in what constitutes legitimate knowledge in policymaking and who is seen as an expert (Wood 2019, 19).

Aligning ourselves with this latter position, we take a constructivist approach (cf. Ingram, Schneider, and DeLeon 2007; Kantola and Lombardo 2017). This means that we see expertise and expertness not as something objectively 'out there' but as subject to discursive and procedural struggles informed by power relations. Formations of expertise are always context-specific, and they are 'constructed, acquire their legitimacy and become institutionalized in assemblages of agents, practices, and technologies' (Newman and Clarke 2018, 41). Analytically, this approach means shifting the focus from the participation of experts and uses of expertise to how experts and expertise are constructed in discourses and practices, and how these constructions shape the way people think and act (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009, 10). Importantly, the constructivist approach does not constrain expertise to specialized or scientific knowledge. Rather, expertise comprises any form of knowledge that key actors deem legitimate and important in policymaking, including tacit knowledge acquired through practical experience in real-world environments (cf. Fischer 2009, 223, Polanyi's concept). The constructivist approach also considers a broad range of providers of information, including interest groups, citizens, and other 'experience-based experts' (Collins and Evans 2002, 238).

Treating expertise as constructed means paying attention to conflict and contestation. Scholars have shown that researchers, elected officials, and civil society have contested the role of (scientific) expertise in EU policymaking on epistemic, political, and structural grounds (Abazi, Adriaensen, and Christiansen 2021, 225–228). The constructivist approach takes an even wider lens. It suggests that what knowledge and information are counted as expertise, who is seen as an expert, and what their role and processes of inclusion are, result from discursive and practical processes of inclusion, exclusion, and prioritization. They are open to constant interpretation and contestation.

We suggest that coming to see some forms of knowledge as expertise or some actors as experts entails the discursive construction of hierarchies of experts and expertise and the constitution and maintenance of such hierarchies through

policymaking practices. The most prominent of such hierarchies in EU policymaking concerns the priority given to technical, specialized knowledge provided by bureaucrats, academics, and think tanks often seen as neutral and value-free (e.g. Góra, Holst, and Warat 2018). The prioritization of such knowledge may result in the expertization of stakeholder organizations and exclusion of some societal actors and citizens from policymaking (Gornitzka and Krick 2018, 64). Hierarchies related to expertization shape EP policymaking too: technocratic actors have crowded civil society organizations (CSOs) out of committee hearings (Coen and Katsaitis 2019), and MEPs themselves have become specialized policy experts (Ringe 2009).

We use the concept of politics of expertise to refer to the processes through which ideas about expertise are constituted, institutionalized, and contested. Scholars have used the term in different ways, typically to discuss how the significant role of (scientific) experts that often benefits political elites depoliticizes policymaking, how politicians use expertise selectively, and how politicians manage the experts/politics nexus (e.g. Fischer 1990; Radaelli 1999; Wood 2019). In this article, we use the concept to draw attention to the constituted, contested, and contingent character of expertise and experts that is at the heart of the constructivist approach. Discourses and practices of everyday policymaking are part of the politics of expertise in the sense that they institutionalize or challenge specific understandings of expertise. The concept also helps us to shed light on political power struggles and the party-political dimension of these contestations in the EP. The contestation of expertise that has surfaced in recent years in the EU is connected to political power struggles, including the rise of populism and the increasing polarization of politics (Abazi, Adriaensen, and Christiansen 2021, 232–234; Newman and Clarke 2018). Analyzing politics of expertise in the EP thus entails examining competing constructions of expertise and whether and how such constructions follow party-political lines of conflict.

Based on these theoretical starting points, we make two expectations to guide our analysis. First, we expect the EP's party-political actors to put forward different discursive constructions of expertise and its role in the EP, whether external, internal, or MEP expertise, and we expect these constructions to differ across political group lines. Second, we expect these contestations to center around the role of specialized knowledge in EP policymaking, with some actors further legitimizing and others challenging the prominent role of technical, specialized expertise in the EP.

Table 1. Interviews by category.

	MEP	Staff	Total
EPP	14	5	19
S&D	16	14	30
Renew Europe (ALDE)	6	10	16
ID (ENF)	5	3	8
Greens/EFA	10	8	18
ECR	9	2	11
GUE/NGL	4	9	13
EFDD and NI	10	2	12
EP Secretariat	-	6	6
Total	76	58	133

Data and methodology

Our data consists of 133 semi-structured interviews conducted during the 2014–2019 and 2019–2024 parliamentary terms (see [Table 1](#)). The interviews were conducted in the context of the EUGenDem research project focused on the gendered policies and practices of the EP political groups. The interviewees mainly consist of MEPs, political group staff, and MEP assistants (both categories of staff are labeled as ‘staff’ in [Table 1](#)), and they cover all EP political groups. In the 2019–2024 term, the political groups were, in order of size: the center-right, conservative Group of the European People’s Party (EPP); the center-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D); the center-right, liberal Renew Europe (previously Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe, ALDE); the radical right, Eurosceptic Identity and Democracy (ID) (previously Europe of Nations and Freedom, ENF); the Greens/EFA; the increasingly radical right, moderately Eurosceptic the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR); and the moderately Eurosceptic Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL). The interviewees also include MEPs who are not part of any political group (in [Table 1](#), these so-called non-inscrit (NI) members are grouped together with the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group that dissolved after the 2019 elections). The interview data also covers some officials working in the EP secretariat. As the article focuses on how the EP’s party-political actors construct expertise, these interviews are only used to the extent that they discuss political groups and MEPs’ information needs and approaches to expertise.

The general interview guideline contained two direct questions about external expertise: ‘What kind of outside expertise do you use in your work,’ and ‘To what extent do you engage with civil society organizations in your work?’ The general interview guideline also prompted answers related to MEP expertise with the question, ‘What makes an effective MEP?’ In addition, the guideline for the more policy-oriented interviews contained a direct question about MEP expertise: ‘What makes an MEP be seen as an expert in your policy field?’ Most interviewees talked about expertise spontaneously when they described policymaking within their political groups or in the EP, illustrating the importance of the theme. The interview data was team-coded in Atlas.ti. For this article, we selected the codes ‘expertise’ (references to someone knowledgeable or competent or lacking relevant knowledge), ‘external expertise’ (references to input from different external actors), ‘political group staff,’ and ‘EP administration’ for further analysis. In addition, we searched the full interview data with selected keywords (e.g. ‘expertise,’ ‘expert,’ ‘information,’ ‘knowledge’) for relevant data not included in the initial coding. The selected data was recoded thematically along the three dimensions of expertise addressed in this article (MEP expertise, internal expertise, external expertise), deductively and inductively developed subcategories related to our theoretical framework, and by a political group.

In line with constructivist approaches (e.g. Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009), we approached the coded data as narratives and perceptions of the interviewees rather than as objective descriptions of reality. We analyzed the coded data qualitatively, paying attention to discourses and framings rather than quantified occurrences of certain codes. This way, we shed light on actors’ conflicting and competing ideas around what constitutes expertise across the three dimensions and how they understand the role of this expertise in EP policymaking.

Constructions of MEP expertise

Based on the interviews, MEP expertise is a relational and multifaceted issue. Rather than constructed as an objective quality connected to individuals' knowledge and skills, MEP expertise was seen to depend on the judgment of others. This observation corresponds well with our analytical approach. In other words, to be an expert was to be seen as one by one's peers. As put by one interviewee, 'it depends on the way people are understood by the others' (Interview 4). Although interviewees' constructions of MEP expertise differed, which illustrates the subjective character of expertise and expertness, three aspects emerged across the interviews: policy expertise, policymaking expertise, and rank/experience.

Specialized knowledge about policy issues, which we call policy expertise, was the most often mentioned form of MEP expertise, reflecting the findings of previous research on the importance of technical expertise for MEPs (e.g. Lord 2018). Policy expertise was often understood as relating to MEPs' background (cf., Daniel and Thierse 2018). Different backgrounds gained expert status in different committees (cf., Yordanova 2009). For instance, in the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL), a background as a trade unionist opened doors (Interview 26). In the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON), a background in economics or banking was valued (Interviews 5, 14). Others constructed policy expertise as something acquired through EP committee work (cf., Alexander 2022). Interviewees described how MEPs could gain policy expertise 'step by step' through the files they followed and through building knowledge of technical details (Interviews 13, 15, 21). In line with previous literature (e.g. Ringe 2009; Wodak 2009), our interviewees also stressed that in order to become a policy expert, one had to specialize, and they connected specialization to political influence, as shown in the following quote from an EPP MEP: 'Bringing change in European policies from the Parliament takes a lot of time, a lot of expertise, a lot of in-depth knowledge of the files, and it's better to just select some of them' (Interview 29). However, specialization was not always an option for MEPs from small political groups or small national party delegations, where one MEP often had to cover a range of issues, including those that fell beyond their personal policy expertise (Interview 15).

Overall, the interviewees emphasized or at least accepted specialized technical expertise as a core element of effective parliamentary work and of MEPs' ability to amend the Commission's proposals. The focus on specialized knowledge legitimized and further institutionalized the expertization of EP policymaking. Only one interviewee explicitly challenged the idea that MEPs should become policy experts. As the following quote shows, this interviewee did not, however, reject expertization altogether, as his understanding of the role of external expertise was remarkably technocratic:

I would say overall, parliamentarians should rather listen to experts than being experts themselves. That's my first, let's say, overall and philosophical approach, so to speak. Due to the job description of a parliamentarian, he or she has to remain with a broader overview but then listen to evidence-based information from the side of experts. (Interview 26.)

While policy expertise was seen as indispensable for representative work, it was not the only aspect of MEP expertise that counted. Confirming the findings of earlier literature (cf., Alexander 2022; Wodak 2009), our interviewees described the

importance of being knowledgeable about acting within the EP and the political group. We use the concept of policymaking expertise coined by Alexander (2022) to refer to this form of expertise. Policymaking expertise entailed an in-depth understanding of the political positions of one's own political group and a willingness to stick to this position (Interview 5). The willingness and skills to collaborate, negotiate, and compromise were constructed as another key aspect of policymaking expertise. The MEPs found it useful to know how to gain support for their ideas within their own political group and in other groups, including through informal networking (Interviews 1, 6, 7, 20, 22). It was important to 'show that you can get results in the negotiations with other groups' (Interview 4) but also 'understand the parts where you have to be ready to be flexible and look for compromises' (Interview 20). Policymaking expertise also involved knowing when and how to put oneself forward, for instance, asking to speak in group meetings, even before knowing what to say, to show one's expertise to others (Interview 7). The interviewees' emphasis on policymaking expertise provides a counter-narrative to expertization.

Policymaking expertise was understood as something acquired and demonstrated to others through EP legislative work (cf., Alexander 2022). One EPP MEP described how, as a newcomer MEP, he had gone through a long process of learning how to follow and defend the group line in negotiations and demonstrating his increasing policymaking expertise to his committee coordinator. He had started with overseeing opinions to other committees, then worked as a shadow rapporteur and eventually as a rapporteur for non-important, technical reports, and only then did the coordinator allow him to work on politically sensitive files (Interview 5).

Besides these forms of MEP expertise also identified in earlier studies (Alexander 2022; Wodak 2009), our analysis shows another element crucial to perceptions of MEP expertise: rank and experience. In the EP's relatively hierarchical system, to be seen as an expert by others was linked to past rapporteurships, positions as coordinator or committee chair, and time served in the EP. The need to demonstrate what one ALDE interviewee described as a 'track record' (Interview 30) made it sometimes difficult for new MEPs to have their voices heard, even when they knew the issues better than their colleagues (Interviews 5, 16). However, newcomer MEPs could, under certain circumstances, gain expert status in the eyes of their peers, even in big and hierarchical groups (Interviews 5, 13, 31). This entailed, among other things, being active and dynamic (Interview 13), building good relationships with the coordinators, being open about one's preferred issues (Interview 16), and finding one's own niche where no one else in the group was specialized in (Interview 5). Constantly proving oneself through doing 'good work' and 'showing that you are working' was valued particularly in the Greens/EFA group (Interviews 25, 32).

The relationship between the different elements of perceived MEP expertise – policy expertise, policymaking expertise, and rank/experience – was constructed as dynamic and interconnected. Firstly, in policymaking between and within the groups, policy expertise and policymaking expertise intertwined. As described by one MEP assistant, to push her policies through in the group plenary, her MEP needed both kinds of knowledge: she needed to 'know it all' about the policy content, but she also had to 'have the right language, understanding of what goes on' (Interview 18). Moreover, policy and policymaking expertise were seen as the requisite for gaining experience in the form of reports

and positions (cf., Daniel and Thierse 2018; Hermansen 2018). Conversely, reports and leadership positions helped to acquire more policy expertise and policymaking expertise, get speaking time on one's issues, and solidify one's position as an expert in the eyes of others.

Politics of expertise manifested itself in the hierarchies between those MEPs constructed as experts and those seen to have less expertise. Reflecting the importance of policy expertise and specialization in the EP, several interviewees constructed a hierarchy between policy experts and 'non-expert' MEPs. Some suggested that policymaking should be left to MEPs with policy expertise and described the knowledge of other MEPs as 'superficial' (Interview 18). The idea that one must be a policy expert or a specialist to contribute to policy formation limits democratic deliberation within the political groups and makes it difficult for MEPs who are not members of specific committees to represent their voters on matters falling in the remit of those committees (Lord 2018). That specialization limits representation was acknowledged by some interviewees, too. One Greens/EFA MEP reflected the difficulty of speaking about issues that were important for her voters: 'I tried to comment on stories that were relevant to my constituents, like fisheries and agriculture and that sort of thing. But then there was always the threat that other people would say, oh but that's my area of expertise; why are you making comments in the press about that' (Interview 10).

Hierarchies of expertise also emerged within committees. Strict understandings of relevant policy expertise limited the range of issues that could be discussed and shut out committee members who did not fit the narrow expert profile. One interviewee reflected on how the narrow understanding of policy expertise within the ECON Committee impacted her work: 'So it's economy, economy with a capital E, as opposed to anything to do with social economy. [...] I wanted to do a bit of work on women and finance, and the sort of automatic response was, well, it's not that well suited to the [ECON] committee' (Interview 14).

Fewer hierarchies emerged in relation to policymaking expertise. Our main finding in this regard was a hierarchy between MEPs seen as moderate or pragmatic versus MEPs seen as ideological. The former ones were constructed as more competent and more desirable partners in intra-group and inter-group negotiations, as the following quote from a Renew MEP about inter-group negotiations illustrates: 'There are some members we know we can work quite well with on a personal basis or, they're pragmatic or something, versus very ideological' (Interview 15). Similarly, the ideologically left-wing GUE/NGL MEPs could raise their credibility in the eyes of others by demonstrating preparedness to compromise (Interview 33). It seems, then, that the EP's consensus- and compromise-oriented decision-making (e.g. Ripoll Servent 2018) favors MEPs whose ideological stances do not come in the way of the necessary compromise and who are willing to exhibit this kind of policymaking expertise.

Constructions of MEP expertise did not significantly differ between the political groups. Despite the challenge that populism has posed to dominant formations of expertise (e.g. Newman and Clarke 2018), also interviewees from the populist and radical right groups saw policy expertise as important for MEPs (Interviews 34, 35). What constitutes MEP expertise was thus not a politically polarizing issue. However, there were differences between the groups regarding the extent to which policy expertise helped MEPs gain influence. Policy expertise was seen to provide more

possibilities for MEPs in non-hierarchical groups that tried to find consensus. For instance, a first-term Greens/EFA MEP named the group's deliberative culture as one of the reasons she had been able to change the course of the group on an issue she knew well (Interview 7). In contrast, in the larger and more hierarchical groups, the importance put on seniority and nationality was seen to diminish the MEPs' expertise-related influence. This shows how explicitly political concerns such as nationality limit the role of expertise in MEPs' representative work.

Constructions of internal expertise

MEP expertise interacted closely with other expertise internal to the EP, namely the expertise of EP administration and the expertise of political group secretariats and the MEPs' own staff. The narratives of the interviewees emphasized the expertise within the political groups and MEP offices over that of the EP administration. In the constructions of internal expertise, hierarchies between different types of expertise or between experts and non-experts did not play a role. Instead, in line with the findings of previous research that has pointed out the political role and tasks of the unelected EP and group staff (Egeberg et al. 2013; Neuhold and Dobbels 2015; Winzen 2011), the interviewees drew attention to the political and politicized character of this expertise. This shows how the EP's internal policy expertise is rarely perceived as technical only and how it is viewed through political ideologies.

In the interviews, the expertise of political group staff and MEP assistants was constructed as a combination of policy expertise and knowledge about the political group and EP policymaking, focusing on the latter. The political group staff and assistants were seen as crucial for MEPs' policy and policymaking expertise. Political group staff familiarized new MEPs with how the EP and the political group work, starting from how to make amendments to what a coordinator is. It explained the political positions of the group and those of other groups on various issues. The group policy advisors allocated to different committees and MEP assistants also supported the MEPs with sectoral policy expertise, and press and communications officials helped MEPs shape and disseminate their messages to the broader public.

A recurrent narrative about the expertise of the political group and MEP staff was its explicitly political character. Despite constructing the policy expertise of the group advisors superior to that of the MEPs, only a few interviewees saw this expertise in technical terms. Most emphasized advisors' political know-how and knowledge of group positions. In line with the findings of previous research (Egeberg et al. 2013), group advisors were portrayed to influence policies in small fringe groups and large mainstream groups. For instance, in the EFDD group active in the 2014–2019 term, policy advisors drafted voting lists (Interview 36). Similarly, several EPP interviewees reflected on advisors' role in drafting parliamentary reports. One EPP MEP noted how this role was emphasized when MEPs and their offices did not take an active role (Interview 14). Another described how the group policy advisor had put a 'group stamp' on his draft report, influencing its content. The advisor had brought the MEP's initial draft in line with the group's priorities by suggesting adding new text and removing parts not in line with the group's previous positions (Interview 5). The policymaking expertise of the advisors was also constructed as important for group cohesion. For instance, a Renew advisor

described her role in ensuring group cohesion and unity within and across committees through knowing where each national party delegation stood on potentially divisive issues and what positions Renew MEPs in other committees took on the issue (Interview 37).

The interviewees rarely reflected upon the expertise provided by the EP administration, even if previous research had underlined its importance for the EP legislative process (e.g. Alexander 2021; Neuhold and Dobbels 2015; Winzen 2011). The expertise of the committee secretariats and EP research services was constructed mainly in terms of policy expertise. However, these constructions were dominated by political considerations and challenged the idea of policy expertise as neutral and technical. For instance, an official working in an EP policy department described the tiptoeing that his unit had to do to ensure that the background knowledge produced for MEPs in the ideologically polarized field of economic policy would be acceptable for all political groups. Particularly, the selection of topics for studies to be commissioned from external experts and hearings was a politicized process influenced by political ideologies. Sometimes, political groups voted against proposed study topics they considered too ideological, and the unit had to ensure that the selected experts were not leaning too much to the left or right and that there was a balance between them. Despite these precautions, some groups treated the studies with suspicion and even questioned the capacity of the unit to provide neutral information detached from party-political biases (Interview 34). Smaller groups tended to be more favorable towards the knowledge provided by EP administration, whereas big groups relied more on their internal expertise and networks. Overall, the EP officials felt that getting the MEPs to read the knowledge that they produced was a challenge.

Constructions of external expertise

The importance of external expertise for the EP was a recurrent theme in the interviews across political groups. One interviewee emphasized how the lack of government/opposition setting in EU decision-making meant that the EP had to be 'doubly critical' of the Commission's proposals and 'look for its own sources' and was therefore 'much more strongly reliant on external input' than national parliaments (Interview 27). Engagement with external expertise was also constructed as a means for the MEPs to build their policy expertise, as it helped MEPs to gain knowledge about their files and the subject matters of their committees (Interview 25). External actors were also seen as helpful for policymaking expertise, although, to a somewhat lesser extent, by providing information on positions of other EU institutions and other key actors (Interview 39). Overall, the interviewees constructed external actors and the knowledge produced by them as political rather than technical. While the interviewees regularly mentioned academics and think tanks among the external experts they worked with, the MEPs particularly emphasized EU-level and national interest groups. This shows how external expertise used by the MEPs and political groups has a political character as it connects to diverse interests, illustrating the importance of lobbying as a channel for acquiring information (cf. Chalmers 2013; Dionigi 2017). Politics of expertise was at play at two levels. On the one hand, competing constructions emerged regarding the role of expertise in parliamentary work and the rationale for engaging with it. On the other hand, constructions of legitimate external expertise and experts differed.

Firstly, the interviewees constructed the role of external expertise in parliamentary work and the building of MEP expertise differently. These constructions ranged from pluralist to collaborative and technocratic. Some interviewed MEPs constructed their engagement with external knowledge providers as a question of listening to and balancing different viewpoints and societal interests. These pluralist constructions implicitly acknowledged that external expertise always comes from a specific viewpoint and stressed the importance of listening to everyone equally, including those with whom one disagrees. The following quote from an EPP MEP illustrates this approach:

In my office, and that is a bit my own understanding of politics, we organize it so that I basically speak with everyone that wants to speak with me. Because my task is to equalize. When I feel that a perspective is missing or that I have heard too much from one perspective, then it is my responsibility to equalize, to actively look for institutions and organizations from whom I have not heard anything yet and where I think they have something relevant to say. (Interview 27)

Pluralist constructions of external expertise were often normative: interviewees represented listening to different perspectives as a democratic thing to do, reprimanding colleagues who acted differently. For instance, one MEP suggested that ‘it is part of good governance and culture and the whole functioning of democracy that one listens to different groups who have different insights. But apparently, it is not so in all countries’ (Interview 11).

The second prominent construction equally acknowledged the political character of external expertise but emphasized collaboration with ideologically like-minded interest groups or researchers. The interviewees described, for instance, accepting direct input on draft reports and amendments. These interviewees rarely framed engagement with external knowledge providers as a question of democracy. Rather, collaboration was justified in terms of a shared worldview or simply managing the workload (Interview 18).

Very few interviewees portrayed knowledge provided by external actors in technical terms as neutral evidence or information. One EPP MEP constructed the EP as more ‘evidence-based’ than national parliaments and suggested that in his own work, he engaged with groups that ‘can provide evidence-based information’ (Interview 26). Similarly, an assistant to a GUE/NGL MEP mentioned ‘good information’ produced by environmental CSOs as a key reason to talk with them (Interview 7). These constructions are reminiscent of the technocratic understandings typical of EU policymaking, where technical, specialized expertise is valued and seen as important for effective policy output (Abazi, Adriaensen, and Christiansen 2021, 9). Technocratic constructions of external expertise that frame the knowledge provided by interest groups and CSOs as evidence hide the political character of this knowledge and the interests tied to it.

There were no significant party-political differences in how interviewees constructed their engagement with external expertise. Rather than being shaped by political ideology, MEPs’ constructions relied on individual preferences, sometimes influenced by national policymaking cultures. Conversely, all political group staff constructed engagements with external expertise in collaboration with ideologically like-minded actors, whether think tanks, academics, or interest groups.

Secondly, what constituted legitimate and policy-relevant external expertise was a highly contested and politicized issue within the EP. MEPs and political groups

engaged in politics of expertise by prioritizing certain knowledge providers and through practices of inclusion and exclusion. Overall, interviewees from right-leaning political groups, particularly the EPP and ECR, were partial to business organizations and government bodies as sources of information (cf., Marshall 2015). In contrast, S&D, GUE/NGL, and Greens/EFA interviewees constructed CSOs as their most important partners. A GUE/NGL interviewee explained this to be ‘part of the group’s DNA’ (Interview 17), and a Greens/EFA interviewee constructed CSO engagement as something that ‘differentiates our group from the other groups’ (Interview 20). Also, some interviewees from the EPP and Renew mentioned CSOs as opposed to private interests as the prioritized external knowledge providers, but this was represented as an individual choice related to the professional background of the interviewee rather than a partisan preference (Interviews 18, 23). In contrast, citizens were rarely constructed as providers of external expertise. The silence around citizens and their experience-based knowledge shows how the prioritization of specialized knowledge poses challenges for external actors unable to provide the required technical and professional expertise (Gornitzka and Krick 2018).

Practices of inclusion and exclusion took place in MEP offices, group secretariats, and EP committees. At the MEP level, members and their assistants had different practices to engage with external expertise in line with the pluralist, collaborative, and technocratic approaches discussed above. These included trying to speak with everyone who contacted the office and purposefully looking for missing perspectives (Interview 27), signaling that stakeholders were welcome to contact the office anytime (Interview 8), and working with specific stakeholders seen as useful (Interviews 18, 28). Individual MEPs also shaped their groups’ practices. They initiated events or asked the group to commission research from external experts on a specific topic. MEPs could also push the group to work with experts it might not include otherwise. For instance, the EPP MEP had pushed the group to work more with trade unions (Interview 24).

Practices for engaging with external expertise existed at the group level, too. The S&D and Greens/EFA interviewees described engaging with interest groups and academic experts at the group level, including through commissioned research and direct consultation when drafting position papers (Interviews 11, 12, 13). Going beyond the EU bubble, these groups have also initiated collaboration with civil society in different member states, thus expanding the often very Brussels-centered group of experts who engage with the EP. Hearings organised by political groups emerged as another way to include external expertise. S&D, Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL often invited the CSOs that were sometimes excluded from the official committee hearings (Interview 25). Similarly, radical right groups used hearings as a tool to invite openly anti-gender or anti-democratic actors that would not have been accepted to formal committee hearings. The interviews thus provide examples of strategies at individual and group levels to broaden the range of external expertise formally heard in the EP.

At the EP level, the competing understandings of legitimate external expertise among the political groups and related practices of exclusion and inclusion influenced the formal procedures for engaging with external actors. Our data suggests that party-political differences are one of the explanations behind the technocratization of committee hearings (Coen and Katsaitis 2019, 2021). The interviewees described committee hearings as a politicized process, where the committee coordinators decide on topics, after which

the political groups are sometimes invited to suggest speakers. Often the decision about speakers is made by the coordinators, but the biggest groups get to propose the most experts or have more votes (Interviews 25, 3, 34). This procedure sometimes led to excluding CSOs from the hearings. In one case, the Greens/EFA group had proposed inviting a human rights CSO to a trade-related hearing. However, the coordinators of big groups on the political right refused to include them, going for chambers of commerce instead (Interview 25).

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have analyzed the politics of expertise in the EP from the perspective of the MEPs and political groups, with the aim of understanding how the EP's party-political actors construct expertise and its role in EP policymaking. We have analyzed expertise in the EP as a three-dimensional issue consisting of MEP expertise, internal expertise in the EP administration and political groups, and external expertise, and suggested that the three dimensions intertwine in parliamentary practices. By taking a constructivist and qualitative approach focused on competing discursive constructions of expertise and their institutionalization in policymaking practices and taking the perspective of party-political actors, we have nuanced and deepened the findings of earlier studies about the role of expertise in EP and EU policymaking more broadly. Whereas previous research has often emphasized the technical and technocratic character of expertise, we have argued that the role of expertise in the EP is an inherently political question shaped by competing constructions, contestations, and political ideologies.

Firstly, our analysis has confirmed the importance of expertise in the EP. Based on our extensive interview data, MEPs and political group staff considered the EP to be characterized by a strong reliance on expertise in comparison to national parliaments. By embracing the idea that MEPs must become specialized policy experts to be influential and effective, the interviewees legitimized and institutionalized the EP's reliance on professional expertise. Constructed and institutionalized hierarchies between policy experts and non-experts sometimes limited MEPs' abilities to represent their constituencies.

Our analysis also revealed counter-narratives to expertization and challenged technocratic interpretations of this process. On the one hand, in the constructions of MEP and staff expertise, policy expertise intertwined with policymaking expertise, where knowledge about ideological positions and how to advance one's issues played a key role. Moreover, in the EP's hierarchical setting, rank often played as big a role in perceptions of MEP expertise as knowledge and skills. On the other hand, expertise was constructed as a political rather than a technical or technocratic issue. Although specialized policy expertise was seen as important, it was rarely seen as detached from political ideologies and interests. For instance, political groups treated the studies produced by the EP administration on contentious issues with suspicion, seeing them lean too much on the left or the right.

Secondly, by focusing on the constructions of party-political actors, our analysis showed that beneath the technocratic discourse that has dominated public and academic debates about the role of expertise in EU policymaking, including the EP, expertise is a politically contested and politicized issue. Understandings of MEP expertise were similar

across the groups. Unexpectedly, these groups included the populist and radical right groups, illustrating that the central role given to MEPs' policy expertise was accepted across the political spectrum. However, visible differences emerged around legitimate external expertise, as left and right MEPs and political groups favored expertise provided by different actors. Party-political contestations around legitimate external expertise affected the EP's formal channels for engaging with external expertise: large groups could block topics of hearings or commissioned studies and influence who was invited to committee hearings. Finally, we perceived differences in the way political groups valued and used expertise in their internal decision-making, with differences between large and small groups and more and less hierarchical groups. Regarding MEP expertise, in less hierarchical groups, notably the Greens/EFA, the policy expertise of MEPs could significantly improve their influence within the group, whereas in more hierarchical groups, other factors, such as nationality and rank, trumped policy expertise.

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Ethics approval

The research has received the approval of the Ethics Committee of Tampere Region on 10.8.2018 (Decision 51/2018).

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- Interview 3: EP staff 20.02.2019
- Interview 4: S&D MEP 26.02.2019
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- Interview 6: Greens/EFA staff 01.04.2019
- Interview 7: Greens/EFA MEP 30.09.2019
- Interview 8: GUE/NGL staff 07.02.2020
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- Interview 10: Greens/EFA MEP 25.02.2020
- Interview 11: S&D MEP 02.03.2020

Interview 12: S&D staff 02.03.2020
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