

Party Politics and Radical Right Populism in the European Parliament: Analysing Political Groups as Democratic Actors

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Abstract

The European Parliament's political groups have traditionally been studied using quantitative methods and roll call votes. This article expands such research agendas by applying qualitative methods and interview data to expose existing power relations not just on macro level but within and between political groups. This generates insights on the ways in which radical right populism impacts on democratic practices and their erosion in parliamentary politics. The article examines intergroup and intragroup activities as fundamental, under-researched areas of the functioning of political group. The research material consists of 123 interviews with members of the European Parliament and staff and ethnographic field notes all gathered in Brussels and Strasbourg between 2018 and 2020. The findings show that the impact of radical right populism on political group dynamics cannot be understood by focusing on formal institutions only but has to be analysed at the level of informal institutions.

Keywords: European Parliament; political groups; radical right populism; party politics; democratic practices; informal institutions

Introduction

The powers of the European Parliament (EP) and its political groups have increased over the years. The enactment of the Lisbon treaty (2007) gave the parliament more co-decision powers and leverage vis-à-vis the Council. Internal changes in the rules of the parliament and in the nature of the parliament from a debating parliament towards a working parliament have, in turn, increased the roles of the political groups as opposed to individual members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (Brack, 2018; Wiesner, 2018). Usually surveys show that there are low levels of public awareness of the role, function and leadership of EP's political groups (Kelemen, 2020). Yet the way that the established political groups came together and new ones formed after the 2019 EP elections attracted heightened attention in media. This was partly due to interest in the attempts of radical right populists to form one big political group. Radical right populism (RRP) has become one of the hotly debated issues in relation to the work and functioning of the parliament and its political groups.

Research on political groups has often been quantitative and focused on macro-level power relations, such as voting patterns, group cohesion and relations to national parties and politics to explain the significance and role of political groups in EP policy-making (Hix, 2008; McElroy and Benoit, 2010; Raunio and Wagner, 2017). However, an emerging body of literature using qualitative and mixed methods has begun to detail the ways that power works at the microlevel of politics, exploring the role of informality, meanings and actors in decision-making processes (Berthet and Kantola, 2020;

Brack, 2018; Häge and Ringe, 2020; Rasmussen, 2008; Ripoll Servent and Panning, 2019). The starting point for this article is that qualitative studies can capture existing power relations not just on a macro level but within and between political groups; including democratic practices and their erosion and conditions for equal political representation and participation at the heart of democratic functioning of these institutions.

The key objective of this article is to understand the power dynamics within and among political groups and their significance to democratic representation processes in parliament. The article is based on extensive empirical analysis of the activities and practices of all political groups in the 8th and 9th parliaments, respectively (2014–19, 2019–2024), and it builds towards an analytical framework of formal and informal institutions in the workings of these political groups. The first contribution of the article is to develop a framework of intergroup and intragroup activities and practices of political groups and expose them as fundamental, under-researched areas of political group functioning, formation and practices. We contend that focusing on them contributes to grasping how power works in the parliament in relation to coalitions and boundary building across and but also within political groups.

The issue of RRP is particularly salient for EP's democratic processes. Radical right populist political groups and MEPs have made use of the opportunities provided by the parliament, including financial resources, political groups' staff and speaking time in plenaries (McDonnell and Werner, 2019). Little is known, however, about how they shape the activities and practices of political groups internally and in relation to other groups. A second key contribution of this article is to explicate how RRP shapes inter and intragroup dynamics, focusing not just on populist groups but on all political groups during the two parliamentary terms.

The core research question then is: how has RRP shaped intergroup and intragroup activities of EP political groups in terms of both formal and informal institutions? The research material was gathered in Brussels during the final months of the 8th parliamentary term in 2018–19 and the first months of the 9th term in 2019–20. It consists of interviews of 123 MEPs and staff and of over 205 pages of ethnographic field notes and 92 hours of shadowing MEPs from different political groups and of observing political group meetings. The qualitative analysis is informed by a theoretical and methodological approach and focuses on the formal and informal institutions of inter and intragroup activities.

The findings show that the impact of RRP cannot be understood by focusing on formal institutions only but has to be analysed at the level of informal institutions. Formally, radical right populists mainly engage with other political groups in plenaries where they make interventions. Informal institutions at intergroup level, including the *cordon sanitaire*, namely the practice of excluding radical right populists from key EP positions, amplify this as they further isolate radical right populists from policy-making processes. The findings show the importance of understanding informal institutions at the intragroup level, which undermine democratic practices in both right populist groups and the established political groups. Moreover, the impact of RRP is often felt at individual level: some MEPs encounter and have to deal with hate speech and develop individual strategies to counter it, or opt out from political group meetings. The impact of RRP can thus have profound consequences on democratic representation and participation at the European level.

Setting the Context: Studying the EP's Political Groups and RRP

There is an ongoing debate as to whether the EP is a unique institution, although some scholars caution against a *sui generis* approach to EU institutions (see Hix *et al.*, 2007). Nonetheless, EP's political groups have no direct equivalents in national parliaments. Formally, political groups need to be made up of at least 23 MEPs from seven member states that share 'political affinities'. In the 8th EP the electoral performance of radical right populists was unprecedentedly successful and particular radical right populist delegations were also willing to collaborate to form political groups. Previously their political differences had prevented such cooperation (McDonnell and Werner, 2019, p. 15; Mudde, 2019). Though radical right populists' electoral success in 2019 was less than had been anticipated, collaboration made the Identity and Democracy (ID) group, the fourth largest group in the EP.

Three themes emerge from the literature on the impact of radical right populists on political groups: (1) the growing polarization of political views in the EP; (2) inclusion and exclusion to policy making and (3) political identity building in the EP. The first examines the increase in polarization of the political composition of the EP (Kantola and Lombardo, 2020; Ripoll Servent, 2019). With the reduction of the majority of the grand coalition of Group of the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) election after election there has been a need for the political groups to make alliances with groups beyond this axis and negotiate with them (intergroup coalition building). Similarly intra-group cohesion has become more important for political groups in policy-making in the EP, and for some parliamentary terms, roll call voting patterns show increasing levels of group cohesion across different policy fields for non-populist groups (McElroy and Benoit, 2010), even if political groups are 'only weakly centralized' and group leaders do not have instruments to discipline members (Roger and Winzen, 2015). The radical right populist groups have, however, different practices and motives when compare to mainstream political groups and do not even seek to obtain group cohesion and unity or shared legislative agendas, yet their presence and actions bring new friction to parliamentary work (Whitaker and Lynch, 2014, p. 242). The radical right populist political groups and national parties also differ in terms of their euroscepticism, which can be defined as hard or soft ideological euroscepticism, the latter denoting 'the idea of contingent or qualified opposition to the process of European integration' (Taggart, 1998, p. 366) or even an ambivalent stance on it (Lorimer, 2020).

Second, we identify a theme of inclusion and exclusion to policy-making in the EP in the extant literature. Nathalie Brack (2018) shows how eurosceptics' political strategies have ranged from completely withdrawing from policy-making, committees and legislative work (taking an 'absentee' role); to addressing mainly their national constituencies in EP plenaries and adopting an attitude of permanent opposition to delegitimize the EU ('public orator'); to some engaging with the policy-making opportunities provided by the EP ('pragmatist' and 'participant'). Ariadna Ripoll Servent and Lara Panning (2019) have, in turn, used this fourfold typology to capture how mainstream groups respond to the presence of these MEPs in the parliament in trilogue settings. They found that MEPs who adopted a softer tone in their opposition to the EU had more opportunities to participate in policy-making while the informal cordon sanitaire reduces the

participatory chances of MEPs in groups that adopt a harder tone against EU policy-making. From this analysis, we can discern the centrality of the *cordon sanitaire* for both intergroup relations and for the dynamics in political groups in terms of who is seen as an insider or outsider.

Third, the theme of identity-building was central in the literature. Duncan McDonnell and Annika Werner (2019) analyse the differences between radical right populist parties and their motivations in the formation of EP political groups. By seeking to be ‘respectable radicals’ some joined the British Conservatives in the European conservatives and reformists group (ECR) for national gains and to appear more trustworthy than other radical right populists (McDonnell and Werner, 2019, p. 14). In contrast the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the Five Star Movement (M5S) from Italy forged a marriage of convenience to form the Europe of freedom and direct democracy group (EFDD), putting aside their political differences to make the most of EP resources (McDonnell and Werner, 2019, p. 15), which, however, to some extent sacrificed their respectability (Ripoll Servent, 2019, p. 337). In terms of intergroup dynamics we can expect strong differentiations between mainstream and radical right populist groups, and in terms of intra-group dynamics, having populist national party delegations can put pressure on the unity of mainstream groups.

From these discussions, we identify two central dimensions of political groups’ activities that structure our empirical analysis: intergroup and intra-group activities. Intergroup activities consist of parliamentary work undertaken in the plenary, committees, inter-groups, conference of presidents and co-hosted outreach events. Plenary activities formally include voting and making speeches and interventions. Intragroup activities, in turn, which are less studied in the literature, consist of the political and administrative activities of the political groups. We conclude that the existing literature suggests that the impact of RRP in the EP can be usefully analysed in relation to activities and practices – not just policies – as their opposition to the EU is directed towards the institutions, structures and policy-making practices of the EP. This literature has mainly focused on intergroup activities – relations between groups – with less focus on the RRP impact on intragroup activities, an aspect that we include in our analysis. Furthermore, given the multiplicity and heterogeneity of radical right populists, qualitative research allows us to address the interaction with mainstream groups in a finer, more nuanced way.

Theory, Methodology and Research Material

When defining the concepts used in the article, we draw upon recent debates on populism and how to study it. At the conceptual level, Mudde (2014) provides a minimalist conception of populism as a thin ideology where populism is based on an antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. The elite is opposed with emotional language and rhetoric, and through antagonisms, and the people are represented by their charismatic populist leaders. Part of the thin ideology would be the construction of the EU as an elite project and for MEPs to question its legitimacy from within the EP. In terms of our case selection, we drew on key texts on radical right populists in the EP to conceptualize radical right populist MEPs as belonging to Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), ID, and some to the ECR (Brack, 2018; McDonnell and Werner, 2019; Ripoll Servent, 2019). We thereby also recognize that there

are populist delegations in mainstream groups, for example the Romanian Socialists, PSD in the S&D group and Fidesz in the EPP, and this is accounted for in our research material. While we focus on RRP, we acknowledge that populist left parties also increased their representation in the 8th parliament with Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) increasing its size from 35 to 52 MEPs, though this reducing to 39 in the 9th parliament.

The key objective of the article – studying the intergroup and intragroup activities – was approached through an analysis of their formal and informal institutions. Different variants of new institutionalism have developed an analytical distinction between formal and informal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004; Lowndes and Roberts, 2013; Mackay *et al.*, 2010). While formal institutions are defined as codified rules and their enforcement and legitimacy, informal institutions signify customary elements, traditions, moral values, religious beliefs and norms of behaviour (Chappell and Waylen, 2013, p. 605). They are ‘hidden and embedded in the everyday practices that are disguised as standard and taken-for-granted’ (Chappell and Waylen, 2013, p. 605). Informal institutions too involve subtle sanctions for non-compliance. In relation to political groups, formal institutions consist of parliamentary rules of procedure and group statutes that regulate everything from how the EP functions as an institution and workplace to plenaries, the formation of political groups and the values of these groups. Examples of informal institutions, in contrast, include unwritten practices such as a cordon sanitaire or power hierarchies that are followed even though they are unwritten. Like formal institutions, breaking informal institutions such as these may involve sanctions.

The relationship between formal and informal institutions is at the heart of this article. We contend that the relationship may be competitive or complementary on the basis that informal rules may subvert or reinforce formal ones (Waylen, 2014, p. 213). The interactions between formal and informal institutions are particularly pertinent when trying to explain relations of power or possibilities for institutional change. For example, the EPP group has the formal institution of the Chair, ensuring that the overall representation of members holding posts within the group are composed of at least one-third of members belonging to a gender other than the majority of members (EPP, 2013, Article 19.6). However, the informal norm of seniority curtails this rule at the level of coordinators where men remain overrepresented. We use the term ‘formal activities’ to analyse what political groups formally undertake in their intergroup and intragroup policies. We use the term ‘informal practices’ to characterize informal institutions and norms that interact with these formal activities and shape their effective functioning.

New institutionalist work has begun to show interest in studying emotions and affect: by attending to ‘actors with real human heads *and hearts*, who engage critically and strategically with institutions rather than simply playing pre-assigned roles’ (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013, p. 145, emphasis added). Focusing on affect has been argued to be particularly relevant to understanding the work that populism does in politics (Dean and Maignuashca, 2020: 11). We, in turn, propose that affective atmospheres amplify, sustain and challenge formal and informal institutions. The concept of affective atmosphere is not uncontested and has been usefully counterpoised to intra and inter-personal ‘feeling rules’ and emotional labour, whereby the affective atmosphere has seen to be ‘subjectless’ and can play down social power (Wetherell, 2013). In our view, the affective atmosphere is a useful concept to denote *some* more intersubjective, collective

dynamics at the inter and intragroup level, in particular the atmospheres that envelope participants' debates in political group meetings and the kinds of collectives and practices that are allowed to cohere and be mobilized in these atmospheres. Studying affect then adds complexity and ambiguity to the study of institutions and discourses. It allows us to attend to the specificity of populism in different environments and how it is understood and operates (Dean and Maiguashca, 2020). Parliamentary ethnography, in turn, offers unique material for studying affective atmospheres. Though representing and capturing affect is empirically complex, ethnography affords access to significant informal cues, such as changes in language, embodiments – such as snapping headphones off angrily and hitting tables, room layouts and informal discussions on the fringes of meetings.

The research material used in this article is particularly apt for studying such dynamics. It was gathered in 2018–20 inside the EP in Brussels. We used an in-depth qualitative approach, speaking with different actors situated in different locations of the political groups, including MEPs and staff members. Each interviewer followed a broadly similar interview schedule, adapted to the participant's parliamentary position (such as MEP, or assistant or group staff), but containing five broad areas: (1) national political party practices; (2) the EP's political groups; (3) the policy-making practices of the groups; (4) MEPs' life (parliamentary work and life outside parliaments and work); and (5) standards, complaints and accountability. The interview questions included one on the perceived impact of populism on everyday work in the EP.

The 123 interviews come from the eight different political groups, but the ENF/ID groups were slightly underrepresented. We reached a near balance in terms of the ratio of MEPs and staff and the gender balance. The category of staff includes the powerful (deputy) secretary-generals, whom we interviewed from nearly all political groups. We also used seven¹ group statutes as primary documents to analyse some of the formal practices of the political groups.

We identified political group meetings as pertinent forums for data-gathering and observation. We obtained access to seven out of eight meetings of political groups' and attended in person a total of 10 group meetings, one of which was held in Strasbourg. The Greens and EFA, in theory, open most of their meetings to the public, and GUE/NGL film some of their group meetings and upload them to their group website. We did not obtain access to the ENF or ID group meetings. We also collected ethnographic research material by shadowing nine MEPs: of which two were S&D (male and female), two were EPP (male and female), three were Green (two female, one male), one was ECR (male) and one was an ENF MEP (male). We also attended working groups and events co-hosted in the parliament with civil society organizations and that we were able to access because we had a long, 2-month immersive visit to the EP. The ethnographic research material gathered this way consists of over 205 pages of immersive field notes and 92 hours of shadowing.

The material was analysed using Atlas.ti for team coding. We used topical codes, such as political group organization or political group meeting, and, drawing on the literature outlined above, more theoretical codes, such as affect, populism and political group

¹At the time of writing, the GUE/NGL political group statutes were being written. It has been difficult for them to produce such a document because they are a confederation of groups. All national delegations had been invited to contribute but some had declined to do so.

identity. Political group identity referred to how participants spoke about their own political groups and then about other political groups. We coded ‘emotion’ as the use of strong language and figures, and ‘affective atmosphere’ as a more collective entity, tied to a locale, meeting or encounter, such as ‘tense’ or ‘businesslike’. Using the Atlas.ti reports we then analysed and compared the coded material in an iterative process, using concepts drawn from new institutionalism to distinguish formal and informal processes and affective atmospheres in and between the political groups. Our quotations below are typical and important illustrations of the trends and dimensions we identified in relation to intergroup and intragroup activities.

Intergroup Activities – Containing and Performing RRP

Formal Activities

In the interview data, the impact of radical right populists on intergroup activities was constructed to be most prominent in the plenaries. We suggest that these interventions can be seen as formal activities where the impact of RRP can be studied. They are the most visible face of RRP. As one staff member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) argued:

‘obviously the right-wing groups have more space in speaking time [...] You don’t see it on the actual work, because many of those members, don’t actively engage in negotiations. Most of them are actually simply not present. They don’t even come to the meetings’ (Interview 1).

EFDD members discussed this strategy in a group meeting we attended and contemplated how the number of social media hits amplifies these plenary interventions (Ethnographic fieldnote 1), presumably making them particularly visible to the general public. Despite changes in the rules of procedure of the parliament regulating the plenary speeches towards reducing its role as a platform for political debate (Brack, 2018), it is evident that the radical right populist MEPs use this as a key forum to express their views.

An MEP from the EFDD group stated that the MEPs in the group all want to ‘see fundamental radical change and the only way to do that is by changing this place and fighting structures within it’. According to him, their opponents would

‘like nothing more than for Nigel Farage or whoever who follows him after [Brexit], not to be on that front bench making nasty speeches upsetting them. They like consensus. Everyone else is very polite and says nice things to each other’ (Interview 2). The interviewee uses the popular populist strategy of building opposition between their own group and politics and that of the ‘other’s’. The woman MEP from ALDE cited above notes later in the same interview that the radical right populists table amendments on resolutions ‘to make their point’ and because ‘it’s visible and it’s a resolution, the electorate can read it’. Again the political message is directed to the national audience; not towards changing EP policies but using EP practices to make its internal functioning difficult.

Informal Practices

We contend that it is necessary to look beyond such formal activities and to analyse informal practices to understand the intergroup relations in the presence of RRP. The

interview data reveal a number of informal practices between the established mainstream political groups and the radical right populist groups. These practices often took the form of active identity politics. In other words, the practices of radical right populist groups were turned into questions about political group identity and about defining what the political groups are and what they are not.

Norms, as informal practices, for coalition building and cooperation in the parliament offered useful informal but often routinized practices for this. For instance, a woman MEP from the EPP suggested that the group stands

‘very firm against any kind of nationalism, any kind of populism’, and ‘we stay in the centre, and the centre will, and it needs to be, firm and strong’ (Interview 3).

The controversial position of Hungarian Fidesz within this group, however, shows the constructed and relative nature of ‘standing firm’ against RRP in this citation (see Kelemen, 2020). The constructions of the ‘centre’ were central to identity-building between the political groups but varied greatly in the interviews. For instance, the GUE/NGL was included in the centre by S&D in our interview material, but later on excluded by the conservative MEP cited above. The presence of radical right populists in the 8th parliament pushed the groups together and the EP culture of compromise was extended (Ripoll Servent and Panning, 2019, p. 755). This pressure to compromise has intensified since the grand coalition of the EPP and S&D lost its majority in 2019, increasing reliance on other groups for majorities.

Identity-building took place on the radical right populist side of the political divide as well. One ENF MEP suggested that the leaders of radical right populist groups were

‘very independently minded people’ while ‘the far left and the Greens’ were seen as ‘very disciplined’ (Interview 4).

There were also divisions between and within the radical right populist groups. For example, a number of MEPs in the ECR group shied away from RRP in the 8th Parliament before Brexit. A woman MEP argued that radical right populists had made their everyday work easier ‘because, the Front National, they’re way over there and we vote against them all the time’. In other words, populism had made the boundaries clearer, and, according to her, the group had benefited:

So, I think that, in my group, the people that are pro-European, are centrists, have found a lot of friends in the EPP and ALDE groups. And there is a feeling that we need to stick together... I have extremists in my view in my group and I just distance myself from them. (Interview 5).

The Nordic radical right populist parties; the Danish People’s Party, the Finns Party and the Swedish Democrats (since 2018) were examples of these ‘extremists’ within the ECR in the 8th Parliament. Their actions to polish off their anti-immigration and racist image and substantial negotiations were involved to make them appear ‘respectable radicals’ so that they could join the UK Conservatives in the ECR (McDonnell and Werner, 2019). Our interviews show that not everyone in the ECR was content with this and rather sought co-operation with MEPs from groups other than their own and sought to distance

themselves from these parties. Despite this, the UK Conservative Party MEPs were at times in an unclear and insecure position because of the *cordon sanitaire*.

The clearest informal practice discussed in our interview material is, indeed, the *cordon sanitaire* that the pro-EU political groups established towards the radical right populist groups. This barrier led to a number of informal practices among the groups. The best known of these is the exclusion of EFDD and ENF from some committee and parliamentary bureau leadership positions (discussed below). Beyond that our interview data suggests that the secretary-generals of the political groups – as administrative leaders – had started to have unofficial meetings without the groups under *cordon sanitaire* (Interview 6), among

‘what we call the democratic groups’ (Interview 7).

The key positions in parliament were divided between the political groups according to the D’Hondt system. One of our interviewees described how the *cordon sanitaire* was implemented:

And at a certain moment, in the D’Hondt system you have political groups like the ENF or like EFDD or like ECR, and then we said okay when it comes to them, to appoint somebody, we present a counter-candidate and that we handled we said okay, this time it’s up to you ALDE, that time it’s up to you EPP, that time it’s up to you GUE and Greens or it’s up to us. So, this, we said in each, beginning [...] all political groups in order to apply the D’Hondt system, who which group take which committee president and which vice-president. It’s a tough process but it works. (Interview 6).

The interviewees from the groups affected by the *cordon sanitaire* commented on it negatively (Interview 8).

Just as with any rule, and with informal rules in particular, there seemed to be room for interpreting this rule (Ripoll Servent, 2019, p. 339). For some, the *cordon sanitaire* was fixed, and their practice was always to vote against the radical right populists. For others, there was some leeway to negotiate and to support amendments and reports by these groups that are progressive. For example, the ECR held committee chair positions and there was some recognition of the position of the Five Stars Movement (M5S) in EFDD (as not among radical right populists) and who act as either ‘pragmatists’ and ‘participants’ (Brack, 2018), illustrating the need for fine-grained analyses of the delegations that comprise political groups (Ripoll Servent and Panning, 2019, p. 768). Indeed, as one ECR member of staff told us, a moderate ECR MEP became a self-appointed ‘shadow shadow rapporteur, building a majority with the EPP rapporteur against the ECR’s shadow rapporteur’ on a highly polarizing report (Ethnographic fieldnote 2). One EFDD male MEP commented on informal practice by saying that

‘they ganged up and went against their own rules to make sure we never got any chairs in the committees. That’s the last what we’re up against, okay’ (Interview 9).

An ID staff member summarized the group’s response:

‘The media is the key. Because, you might have this cordon inside the institution, but not outside’ (Interview 10)

Despite this, one interviewee from the EPP suggested that the fact that sometimes the radical right populist groups vote with them is useful:

We kind of never cooperate with them, we kind of ignore them. That’s a policy taken, policy line taken by the EPP group. Very often they however tend to vote in line with us so sometimes they actually are really helpful, because very often majorities in the employment committee are a bit uncertain depending on who comes to vote and so on so often we might win with the votes of the populists. (Interview 11).

An S&D MEP also found the presence of radical right populists useful when arguing for the need to address unemployment and make investments:

‘They help us as a group to convince the others to change the economic policy, and the fiscal policy’ (Interview 12).

Even if the radical right populists did not participate in the committee work, the concerns of the people they claimed to represent could be raised up by others to persuade groups such as the EPP to address such issues to counter RRP. This interviewee also differentiates between the groups and notes that it was possible sometimes to cooperate with the M5S from the EFDD.

The impact of RRP extended to other parliamentary practices, such as blue cards. An MEP can raise a blue card to ask to make a comment on another MEPs’ speech. It is up to the MEP speaking to decide whether they accept the blue card, listen to the comment and respond. Blue cards thereby give members an opportunity to express directly opposing views in the plenary (Corbett *et al.*, 2016, pp. 67, 232). It was felt that blue cards were harnessed by radical right populist MEPs in the plenary to enact ‘bad manners’ (Moffitt, 2016, pp. 41–5) to distance themselves from the politically correct ‘establishment’ European politics. The space given by blue cards to radical right populists was raised in group and national party delegation meetings we observed and it was felt that the system was becoming ‘corrupted’ by MEPs wishing to change the topic discussed (Ethnographic fieldnotes 3 and 4). When asked about these practices one of our interviewees described the tactic of not accepting blue cards from radical right populists. Further to that, she then was recognized by MEPs across the political groups as being innovative by *appropriating* the discursive space within the plenary to respond directly and to explain *why* she would not accept the blue card.

Affective Atmospheres

Our ethnographic field notes illustrate some dimensions of the affective atmospheres that informed and underpinned the informal practices discussed above. For instance, the cordon sanitaire was generally presented in a very matter-of-fact way in the interviews cited above. However, it was contextualized and matched with affective and embodied language elsewhere, such as in the group meetings. In an S&D group meeting, an atmosphere of uncompromising defiance was evident in phrases such as the need to ‘stand tall’ and ‘not shut our eyes’, ‘not sidestep’ RRP, and that to ‘play into the hands of populists’

because the wrong message in response to Euroscepticism would be ‘absolutely fatal’ for the EU (Ethnographic fieldnote 5). In both the S&D and EPP group meetings, a female and male MEP both became excited and expressed dissatisfaction with their groups’ quietism towards RRP. One said ‘I get really enraged when we sidestep the populists’ (Ethnographic fieldnote 3). A member who had served in the EP since the 7th parliament expressed regret that the EP plenary had become ‘a competition of rhetoric’ about ‘who could say the most virtuous things’ to respond to populists and this was counterpoised to parliamentary means, such as letter-writing and policy initiatives (Ethnographic fieldnote 6). Therefore, affective atmospheres can be experienced differently by actors at different locations of the group.

Although formally, radical right populist groups have the right to use blue cards as a parliamentary means of representation, the cordon sanitaire metaphor originated from the experience of disease, and discussions of radical right populists included descriptions such as they were ‘behaving like gangsters’ when using parliamentary means – the blue card system to filibuster (Ethnographic fieldnote 3). Indeed, one ID MEP described the conception of the ID group and their voters as ‘like rats in holes’ (Interview 13). Because of the moralism of populism, civility can be eschewed. This contrasts with characterizations of the behaviour of other groups, such as the Greens and EFA, who were critiqued in an EPP group meeting for discussing ‘sensitive’ objections to reports in the plenary and not raising these issues in shadows meetings. Yet this was framed as a matter of discourtesy, rather than using the language of gangsters (Ethnographic fieldnote 7). In this way, the harsh use of language used by populists (Moffitt, 2016) is employed about them in return and emotions can be heightened.

One interviewee gave a more detailed account of the everyday practices which she had adopted in response to the radical right populist presence in parliament. Such practices included (1) appearing *after* the populists in both committee and the plenary so she could counter what they are saying; (2) looking at the voting lists to see when they are voting, (3) carefully examining the panel invitations she receives and making sure that she does not appear on a panel with a radical right populist, and (4) avoiding travelling in the same taxi as MEPs perceived as racists. This involves asking the organizers, for instance, civil society organizations to ‘make a choice’ between who they want on the panel (Interview 14).

One interviewee described with some sadness and resignation how she would ‘never hang out with them’. Yet she had accidentally befriended some of them in a smoking alley, which she called ‘the ENF staff alley, their hallway’. She had ‘met some amazing people there’, only to discover to her shock that they worked for the ENF and that they were ‘actually okay’. ‘But unfortunately, in this house, you automatically think, okay, we don’t have anything in common. We don’t hang out together’ (Interview 15). An ENF staff member also discussed during the lunch break, friends from RRP avoid each other for fear of being found guilty by association (Ethnographic fieldnote 8). This contrasted with the informal collaboration between mainstream groups. At a civil society event held in the parliament on Hungary, a Renew MEP praised an EPP MEP: ‘see, this is what a *real* Christian Democrat looks like’ and both MEPs had fun passing a microphone among themselves from a state media channel to which they normally were denied access (Ethnographic fieldnote 9). Therefore, populism in everyday performative acts seeps into the informal area and constitutes affective atmospheres at play in the parliamentary workplace.

The findings here illustrate that there are active, rather than passive, ways of dealing with the perceived impact of RRP. This takes place both at the intergroup level, where these activities mark the differences and identities of the groups, and at the level of individual MEPs who adopt, share and assess strategies to respond to MEPs from different groups and from within their own groups. This is the issue we turn to next.

Intragroup Activities: Performing Unity in Group Meetings

Our analysis of intragroup activities is focused on group meetings, as these proved to be an under-researched yet highly significant area in terms of political group dynamics. Specifically, the meeting was a key site for exchanging views and agreeing on group lines on major political issues that had been first developed in group working groups. Our field work was conducted in the 7 months prior to the 2019 European elections, and then in the 2 months at the beginning of 2020 when the UK's withdrawal from the EU was voted on by members of the EP, followed by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the group meeting was a forum where electoral and political futures of the groups, European values and the EP were discussed.

Formal Activities

The group meeting is an example of formal intragroup activities, otherwise called the plenary assembly of political groups. It meets in the group weeks in Brussels and the plenary week of Strasbourg. Formally, political groups are given resources such as space for meetings by the parliament. Roger (2016) characterizes these meetings as a comparatively informal deliberative arena compared to the rest of the parliament. We contend that formal practices are exercised there too and can be discerned from the statutes of the political groups. In the statutes, differences between the groups are seldom formally specified. The role of the meeting is to discuss the business that will come up in the plenary and to decide upon a common voting line (ALDE, 2009, Rule 13; ECR, 2017 15–20; EFDD, 2017, Article 4; ENF, 2015, Article 6; EPP, 2013, articles 9 and 10; Greens-EFA, 2009, 3.3–3.7; S&D, 2014, Article 4).

There are some formal rules on attendance in the statutes; for example S&D 'requiring' attendance (S&D 2014, 4:1) and the ECR has stronger than other political groups rules on staff attendance and these are mentioned in their statutes (ENF FN, 070219; ECR, 2017, Article 12; Interview ECR staff member, 130319). Sometimes parallel meetings run alongside group meetings, diminishing participation in the latter. If an MEP is facing expulsion, they are offered the chance to come to the group meeting to explain themselves, which is considered to be a democratic opportunity (Interview 16). Expulsion may follow if MEPs violate specific criteria in the group's statutes, for example, in the EFDD statutes say: 'The Group rejects xenophobia, anti-Semitism and any other form of discrimination' (2014, p. 4). The group meetings are also minuted, which enhances transparency.

In theory then, the group meeting is a democratic mechanism that lends openness to political groups, as MEPs can update the group. Indeed the EFDD MEPs we interviewed found the group meeting to be open (Interviews 2 and 17). An ECR member of staff deemed the group meeting

‘the ultimate policy forum’ (Interview 18) even if some policy is made in other intra-group structures, such as the working groups. The group meeting may play a unique role for smaller eurosceptic groups because it is more intimate than in bigger political groups. Furthermore, working groups are a more supranational form of group organization, whereas the group meeting has a greater role for national delegations (Bressanelli, 2014). MEPs can ask secretary-generals to put reports on the agenda of a group meeting. In a group meeting where amendments are voted upon, a group can depart from the group line agreed upon at the beginning of a mandate (Interview 5). This suggests that the group meeting is an important forum for agreeing amendments. An ALDE member of staff suggested that the group did not shy away from addressing problematic delegations (Interview 7).

Informal Practices

However, there is also an informal side to these formalities. When scrutinizing the informal practices of group meetings, a number of interesting tensions emerge, which shed more light the ways in which the ultimate policy forum works. Getting through the agenda is practiced differently in groups and the length and nature of group meetings differ considerably. We observed a lack of democratic practices in both the radical right populist groups and the established political groups. We show below how some MEPs lamented this while others appreciated the business-like technocratic style it entailed.

The ECR and EFDD were based on a great deal of political trading and negotiations after the 2014 EP elections, where the main incentive behind their formation was to gain ‘respectability’ (ECR), or enter into ‘marriages of convenience’ (EFDD) (McDonnell and Werner, 2019). Our observations of both the ECR and EFDD group meeting supported Brack’s claim that they are ‘rather short and aimed at accommodating interests and preferences’ to reduce scope for disagreement amongst the national party delegations (Brack, 2018, p. 138). Brevity was observed in both the ECR and EFDD group meetings (Ethnographic fieldnotes 10 and 11). An ENF MEP suggested to us that both group leaders

‘try and keep business to a minimum, they don’t want arguments to escalate, they don’t want to keep (airing) disagreements, which is a good thing’ (Interview 19).

The tensions within the groups can be seen in these informal practices of the political group meetings. One staff member also told us that M5S MEPs in the EFDD engaged in ‘a lot of eye rolling’ to demonstrate their disagreement with the former UKIP members in their group meeting (Ethnographic fieldnote 11).

ECR meetings were described as ‘business-like’ to make them more welcoming for MEPs but this business-like approach to some topics may be perceived as exclusionary or technocratic. For example, when discussing access to family planning and to abortion for rape victims, an ECR MEP suggested that this

‘it’s seen as too sensitive to debate because of the religious aspect’ (Interview 20).

After describing the situation in her political group on sexual and reproductive rights with regard to the Polish Law and Justice Party, a second ECR woman MEP responded negatively that the group meeting plays ‘a smaller and smaller’ role for her:

Because the political group has brought in people with, in my feeling, diametrically opposed policies to me, I do not go to the group meeting any more. I only go if I'm trying to get support for, if there's a particular report that I want to explain, I want to get support for, then I go just for that, but otherwise I do not go. (Interview 5).

Attendance at these meetings matters because changes in the group composition affect the meetings considerably. For example, in the EFDD group meeting we observed the M5S were not present so the other large delegation of former UKIP MEPs dominated discussions, as did the topic of Brexit. In the ENF group, a staff member had an informal arrangement with her boss that she would not attend the group meeting, because she disagreed with some of the policies of the group towards her state (Ethnographic fieldnote 8). It is thus evident that radical right populists created tensions in informal intragroup practices.

Affective Atmospheres

Affective atmospheres were heightened in intergroup activities when debating how to respond to RRP. Radical right populist groups also surfaced affectively in intragroup activities. Each group meeting had its own 'affective atmosphere' that could change throughout the group meeting. Radical right populists invoked questions about electoral and political futures at the end of the 8th European parliament and potential accession states vis-à-vis rule of law concerns.

An affectively charged atmosphere can also be anticipated on highly polarized issues in the parliament. Taking his seat at an S&D group meeting, a group staff member predicted that the discussion of President Erdogan's aggression on the Greek border was going to be 'a heavy one' for the group (Ethnographic fieldnote 6). The credibility of mainstream groups to critique other groups was also affectively charged. For example, a male MEP asked the EPP group meeting indignantly, with regard to Orbán granting political asylum to former Macedonian leader, Nikolas Gruivski: 'Are we going to defend any old story?' (Ethnographic fieldnote 12). Romanian MEP Cătălin Ivan requested that the S&D group excluded their own PSD delegation and critiqued their failure to censure the Liviu Dragnea regime. The resolution on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) exclusion zones in Poland was a tense moment for the S&D group, where some MEPs voted in favour of the zones:

I got very, very upset in plenary as we were coming out ... he read out his feelings ... and we wanted to discuss it but the chair would not discuss it. And, that caused a lot of friction. And I spoke up, I said 'this is, for me, it does not matter who it is, they'll come for you. And it's about Brexit, it's about LGBT, it's about whatever, sexual and reproductive health and rights and stuff. If we as S&D group do not speak up, who the hell is left to speak up for these issues?' (Interview 21).

Populist parties, therefore, placed pressure on mainstream groups to be both credible and consistent not only in their intergroup activities but in their practices too. It caused tensions and friction between MEPs from the bigger groups that contained populist MEPs.

Brennan (2004) suggests that affect is what hits us when we walk into a room and inexplicably sense an atmosphere. One radical right populist group leader's entrance to his group meeting was notable in this respect. He was met by a weary atmosphere and roused

the group members in a direct and a jovial way by shouting at them from the floor to ‘cheer up you buggers’ (Ethnographic fieldnote 13). This not only woke up the room but reduced the distance between himself and the MEPs. This is important if populist leaders are often the ‘affective focus’ of collectives (Moffitt, 2016, p. 38). In the EFDD group meeting, familiar EP adversaries were discussed ironically in this group meetings as ‘our friends’ (Ethnographic fieldnote 13) as well as remarks about radical right populists being the target of derision in the parliament. Furthermore, the affective states of MEPs were actively surveyed and reported on and the radical right populist MEPs became vigilant about of hypocrisy from their detractors, such as the interpretation of the ‘panic’ displayed by an S&D MEP in his remarks and gestures of anxiety by hastily leaving a plenary debate after his party was criticized for being anti-Semitic. MEPs’ career behaviour was also remarked upon, and one MEP was dismissed as a ‘former bag carrier’ (Ethnographic fieldnote 13). This is in accord with Muller’s (2016) characterization of the moralistic imagination of populists.

For the ECR group, an atmosphere of disaffection – communicated indirectly was also sensed in the group meeting by members of smaller delegations when the two largest delegations had internal splits, over ‘personalities’ and ‘Europe’:

It’s like a village, some people like each other or dislike each other and then they become friends again et cetera. So you got factions here and there and there. Some of them left the group and then they came back. So it was like a train station. But with the British delegation there was really a fundamental, a political, philosophical issues about what’s our position in Europe. (Interview 22).

Understanding such disaffection is crucial to shed light on the negotiations and struggle it takes to hold some groups together, especially when polarizing topics emerge. Furthermore, affective atmospheres, though seen as collective experiences, are not undifferentiated. MEPs in smaller delegations may be positioned as mediators amidst these atmospheres. Therefore, the experience of the atmosphere may differ by social power as well as political position in the group.

This section has discussed the group meeting as a forum and has set out how RRP affected its arrangement and proceedings formally, informally and affectively. The section argues that formally, the group meeting is structured through the format of an agenda, agreeing minutes and attendance required according to the different groups’ statutes. Informally, power is wielded in the group meeting through a range of struggles, such as chairing styles and voluntary absenteeism, due to the presence of uncomfortable bedfellows in the group, as well as to internal divisions in national party delegations. In the preceding months before the 2019 European elections, the group meetings were a key site of emotional intensity. This is because the future trajectories of the political groupings into the 9th EP were at stake and the success of radical right populists was highly anticipated

Conclusions

The aim of the article has been to discuss the EP’s political groups’ intergroup and intragroup activities to understand how power works in the parliament at the microlevel when navigating the populist presence. Building on existing themes identified in the

literature of polarization, inclusion and exclusion, and identity-building practices, our analysis showed how these three lines of divisions were constantly constructed both between political groups (intergroup) and within them (intragroup). This resulted in differentiated and political patterns of polarization, inclusion and exclusion and identity-building. Some radical right populist groups, like the ENF and ID, and some parts of the EFDD, used these as opportunities for their own populist politics. In other political groups, such as ECR, they created conflict, as some MEPs who were oriented more towards co-operation were hampered by the consequences of RRP politics within their groups. Our analysis also showed how the mainstream groups S&D and EPP were not safe from the internal contradictions caused by the impact of populism in the EP.

The findings show the dynamic, ongoing and negotiated nature of intergroup and intragroup activities. First, in relation to intergroup dynamics, plenaries were the key site for the formal activities of the radical right populist groups and this is where other political groups first encountered their rhetoric and strategies. Much policy work in the EP takes place in committees where the radical right populist groups were not as active and coalitions were sought around a fluctuating notion of the centre. In terms of informal practices, we discussed the cordon sanitaire that barred radical right populist groups from EP's day to day decision-making. In this way, formal and informal institutions were intimately connected – the cordon sanitaire reduced the chance of the radical right populist groups to take part in EP policy-making should they have wished to do so. Ripoll Servent and Panning (2019) suggest that the practice of the cordon sanitaire increases informality and seclusion in policy-making and may be a problem for democracy. We added to this an analysis of the affective atmospheres which support informal practice with emotions and populist language but also point to the dissonance, unhappiness and personal cost they give rise to. If euroscepticism and nationalism increases after the Covid-19 pandemic, once its economic fallout becomes more pronounced, then the populist right will continue to use the plenary and employ social media as a key forum to galvanize support.

The findings on intragroup dynamics, in turn, illustrated the tensions between the formal activities of the group meetings and their informal practices. Formally, the group meeting is the key policy forum. From the point of view of democracy, some meetings are open, all invite visitors and the proceedings are minuted for the benefits of those absent. Our analysis revealed some informal practices which diminish the role of the group meeting as a democratic platform: some MEPs choose not to attend because of the radical right populist parties and MEPs; meetings were short and truncated and treated as vehicles for conducting business and 'strategizing', which reduced the scope for democratic debate. Affective atmospheres in the meetings ranged from distant or jovial to heated and frustrated attempts to confront as well as demarcate parties from RRP. The various ways in which political groups as democratic actors work have profound repercussions for the functioning of democracy in the EU.

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Interviews

- Interview 1: ALDE, Staff, European Parliament, Brussels (29 January 2019)
 Interview 2 EFDD, MEP, European Parliament, Brussels (29 January 2019)
 Interview 3 EPP, MEP, European Parliament, Brussels (29 November 2018)
 Interview 4 ENF MEP, European Parliament, Brussels (7 February 2019)
 Interview 5 ECR MEP, European Parliament, Brussels (21 February 2019)
 Interview 6: S&D, Staff, European Parliament, Brussels (29 April 2019)
 Interview 7: ALDE, Staff, European Parliament, Brussels (5 April 2019)
 Interview 8: EFDD MEP, European Parliament, Brussels (29 January 2019)
 Interview 9: EFDD MEP, European Parliament, Brussels (29 January 2019)
 Interview 10: ID, Staff, European Parliament, Brussels, (28 February 2020)
 Interview 11: EPP, Staff, European Parliament, Brussels (4 December 2018)
 Interview 12: S&D MEP, European Parliament, Brussels (26 February 2019)
 Interview 13: ID MEP, European Parliament, Brussels (12 March 2020)
 Interview 14: S&D MEP, European Parliament, Brussels (30 January 2019)
 Interview 15: ALDE, Staff, European Parliament, Brussels, (30 November 2018)
 Interview 16: EFDD, Staff, European Parliament, Brussels (19 March 2019)
 Interview 17 EFDD, MEP, European Parliament, Brussels (29 January 2019)
 Interview 18: ECR, Staff, European Parliament, Brussels (10 March 2019)
 Interview 19: ENF MEP, European Parliament, Brussels, (26 April 2019)
 Interview 20: ECR MEP, European Parliament, Brussels, (6 February 2019)
 Interview 21: S&D MEP, European Parliament, Brussels (20 February 2020)
 Interview 22: ECR MEP, European Parliament, Brussels, (4 March 2020)

Ethnographic fieldnotes

- Ethnographic fieldnote 1:EFDD, group meeting, Brussels (5th February 2019)
 Ethnographic fieldnote 2: ECR APA Written Communication with authors, Finland (21st August 2020)
 Ethnographic fieldnote 3: S&D National Party Delegation Meeting, Brussels (16th October 2018)
 Ethnographic fieldnote 4: S&D Group Meeting, Brussels (17th October 2018)
 Ethnographic fieldnote 5: Renew Group Meeting, Brussels (5th February 2020)
 Ethnographic fieldnote 6:S&D Group Meeting, Brussels (3rd March 2020)
 Ethnographic fieldnote 7:EPP, Group Meeting, Brussels (26th November 2018)
 Ethnographic fieldnote 8: ENF, Lunch with Staff Member, (7th February 2019), Brussels
 Ethnographic fieldnote 9: Civil Society Event, Hosted by Renew, S&D and EPP MEPs, (28th January 2020), Brussels
 Ethnographic fieldnote 10: ECR Group Meeting (4th December 2018), Brussels
 Ethnographic fieldnote 11: EFDD Group Meeting (20th January 2019), Brussels
 Ethnographic fieldnote 12 EPP Group Meeting, (28th November 2018), Brussels
 Ethnographic fieldnote 13:EFDD Group Meeting, (5th February 2019), Brussels

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